

Client Abuse to Public Welfare Workers:

Theoretical Framework and Critical Incident Case Study

Abstract

We analyse a case study of workers' experience of client abuse in a Danish public welfare organisation. We make an original contribution by putting forward two different theoretical expectations of the case. One expectation is that the case follows a pattern of customer abuse processes in a social market economy – in which workers are accorded power and resources, in which workers tend to frame the abuse as the outcome of a co-citizen caught in system failure, and in which workers demonstrate some resilience to abuse. Another expectation is that New Public Management reforms push the case to follow patterns of customer abuse associated with a liberal market economy – in which the customer is treated as sovereign against the relatively powerless worker, and in which workers bear heavy emotional costs of abuse. Our findings show a greater match to the social processes of abuse within a social market economy.

Keywords: coping, client abuse, market economies, public welfare workers, social market economy, liberal market economy, new public management reforms

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Introduction

This article focuses on service workers' experience of abuse from customers/clients. Customer abuse is defined as forms of customer behaviour which are seen by service workers as aggressive, intimidating or insulting. The still nascent literature on customer abuse suggests that such abuse to front-line service workers appears to be a rising and important element in the social relations of many contemporary service economies (Yagil, 2008). For instance, in the hospitality sector, studies have found that 'front line employees experience endemic customer misbehaviour' (Reynolds and Harris, 2006: 95; also Karatepe et al. 2008). Korczynski and Evans (2013) conducted a form of meta-analysis of book length ethnographies of service occupations, and found abuse reported as common in studies of: fast food workers, retail workers, door staff, waiting staff, bar staff, hotel workers, call centre workers, state welfare workers, transport service staff, traffic wardens, care home workers, advice workers, ambulance workers and nurses. Further, it is notable that many labour unions whose members work in service occupations actively engage in campaigns around the issue of customer abuse. Further, customer abuse is significant not only because of its increasing numerical frequency in a central and growing part of the contemporary economy. It is also significant because it has the clear potential to cause considerable harm to service workers. Notably, Whyte's (1948), Gatta's (2002) and Erickson's (2009) ethnographic accounts of restaurant work all give instances where waitresses have cried further to customer abuse. Indeed, Whyte structures part of his analysis around the figure of the 'crying waitress'. Customer abuse to service workers, argue Korczynski and Ott (2004), represents a systemic dark side to the contemporary service economy that emerges from the inevitably fragile playing out of myths of customer sovereignty in everyday service interactions.

In this paper, we argue that the literature on customer abuse tends to be dominated by an implicit backdrop of a liberal market economy. We make a contribution to the theoretical understanding of the social processes of customer abuse by arguing that we should consider an alternative scenario of customer abuse in a social market economy. We analyse a case study of high customer abuse in a restructured Danish public welfare setting against these alternative theoretical scenarios.

Social Processes of Customer Abuse: Alternative Scenarios

Our understanding of customer abuse is at an early stage of development. In the existing literature there is a tendency to paint a monolithic pattern of customer abuse within the fabric of ‘the’ service economy. To create a more nuanced understanding of customer abuse and its consequences we must open up the analysis to situate customer abuse in different forms of service economy. The varieties of capitalism literature is suggestive here. Esping-Andersen’s classic book on three worlds of welfare capitalism (1990) suggests that we separate between social democratic, corporatist-statist, and liberal welfare models. Hall and Soskice (2001) point to two broad patterns of capitalist economies – co-ordinated market economies and liberal market economies, the latter exemplified by the USA and UK, which are countries in which most studies of customer abuse have taken place. There is a danger that our understandings of customer abuse become normalised within an implicit assumption of a structure of the liberal market economy. The other type of economy is labelled ‘co-ordinated market economy’ by Hall and Soskice, but in line with other sociologists, we use

the label ‘social market economy’ – as this better highlights the ways in which economic activity can be socially embedded (Hollingsworth and Boyer, 1998). Germanic and Scandinavian economies are examples of social market economies.

There are good reasons for expecting the social processes of customer abuse to differ systematically between workplaces in a liberal market economy and workplaces in a social market economy – as shown in table 1. The two suggested patterns are put forward as ideal-types.

» Table 1 here «

The pattern associated with the liberal market economy matches onto overviews of Yagil (2008) and Korczynski and Evans (2013), noted above. It is, therefore, only briefly summarised here. In a liberal market economy, there is potential for customer abuse to be common, underpinned, as it appears to be, by norms of consumer sovereignty. The power and status of labour tends to be low which means that workers have fewer material, cultural and symbolic resources to draw upon in addressing customer abuse. One key way in which people can address anger and abuse is through the process of distancing (Reynolds and Harris, 2006). The space for such distancing is narrowed in a liberal market economy, where the emotional labour demands position workers in proximate emotional roles vis-à-vis customers. The next dimension relates to workers’ framing of the abuse to which they are subject. Such frames represent interpretive schemas by which people make sense of and manage conflict (Beverland et al., 2010). In a liberal market economy, there is a tendency for workers to frame customer abuse in terms of deviant character typing of the individual

abusive customers. The outcome for workers tends to be that they are left to bear emotional pain, or, sometimes, they are able to protect themselves by adopting a stance of hostile indifference to all customers.

The ideal-type pattern of customer abuse in a social market economy is quite different. The starting point is that customer abuse will tend to be uncommon. Norms of customer sovereignty are less intense in social market economies, where a stakeholder sense of both society and organisation tends to prevail (Hollingsworth and Boyer, 1998), and so customer abuse is likely to be less frequent. Workers in a social market economy setting are likely to have material and cultural resources to draw upon to address customer abuse. Labour is a legitimate actor whose separate interests are to be articulated and heard. Workers can use legitimate voice mechanisms to potentially articulate grievances relating to customer abuse, and culturally and symbolically, their status is not seen as subordinate to that of sovereign customers.

The greater knowledge base of many service jobs in social market economies (Lloyd and Payne, 2016) may provide potential for workers to engage in forms of distancing, so that abuse is less likely to be experienced in a personalised manner. Because workers tend to enjoy professional autonomy (Hochschild, 1983: 153), they are less likely to frame abuse in directly personal and emotional terms. The social status and power of labour and the greater potential for distance create the conditions for workers to understand customer abuse as the unfortunate case of a relatively powerless co-stakeholder caught in conditions of system failure. When customers are not positioned as sovereigns, then it is less likely that workers position customers as deviants and treat them with hostile indifference.. The outcome of these structures and processes is that service workers are more likely to exhibit resilience to customer abuse.

Note that these are put forward as ideal-types – conceptual heuristic devices at the level of the macro to guide analysis. When we come to a situated case to analyse we must also be aware of contextual elements at the sectoral (meso) and organisational (micro) level that can inform analysis. To that end, in the following section we turn to consider specifics of the Scandinavian public welfare state as a sector. We return to this and also take up the issue of the micro organisational level factors within the discussion section.

Client Abuse in a Scandinavian Public Welfare Setting

This paper features a case analysis of public welfare work in Denmark. Denmark is a key player within the Scandinavian model of the social market economy. Client abuse to public welfare occupations has been studied in liberal market economies (Watkins-Hayes, 2009; Bishop, Korczynski and Cohen, 2005. Padyab and Ghazinour (2014) studied client abuse in the Scandinavian public welfare sector but did not focus on the social processes of welfare workers' experience of abuse. Therefore, we are addressing an important empirical gap through our case study.

There have been significant recent changes in the nature of Scandinavian public welfare work linked to the rise of New Public Management (NPM) (Klausen and Christoffersen, 2012. Jensen (1998) argues that there have been a range of NPM reforms in Denmark: “the Danish case needs a more multifaceted interpretation of the relationship between the individual and

the public that involves a plurality of roles for the individual, as user, customer, client and citizen” (Jensen, 1998: 62).

These changes, which have also affected the case study, are such that it is important to enquire whether the processes of client abuse match more to the liberal market economy pattern rather than to the social market economy pattern. Welfare states are undergoing quite significant changes – further to austerity and an ageing population informing wider fiscal strain (Pierson, 2002). Especially this is true in the Scandinavian countries since the 2008 crisis (Hansen and Mailand, 2013) and specifically in Denmark where restructuring is embedded in a significant strengthening of employers’ power over labour (Hansen and Mailand, 2013: 13).

Our data were gathered during 2008 (March-November) following a massive NPM-informed system redesign in the Danish public sector. Even though this is now 8 years ago the redesign process is an ongoing one that still has effect today since it is linked to a key reform that was started on the 1st January 2007. The main political aim for the reform was to strengthen the decentralized public sector in Denmark by making its units sustainable and efficient in a context of austerity preceding (and then exacerbated by) the 2008 financial crisis. Given the changes in the Danish public sector, the key question considered by the paper is: does the case match the liberal market pattern or the social market pattern with regard to the processes of client abuse? In terms of the potential importance of sectoral context, we are, therefore, asking whether the meso-level sectoral context of the increasingly NPM-dominated Scandinavian public sector has pushed the case away from the macro ideal-type of the client abuse within a social market economy.

Methods

We examine a case where there was a high level of client abuse. It is a form of critical incident case study such that high customer abuse can help expose the resilience or fragility of the social order. Interviews are the primary method. First, in-depth interviews were undertaken. Next, based upon a question guide derived from in-depth interview data, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to study the themes identified in in-depth interviews in more detail. Finally, focus group interview sessions were held in order to bring voices together and to examine the social definition process of participants. Data was recorded and transcribed. In a letter to participants we outlined the study, and the ethical guidelines, including preservation of anonymity and our obligation to confidentiality. All data have been anonymized. The study was approved in the health research ethics committee system of Denmark.

A total of 42 interviews took place with 25 participants overall (female N=23, male N=2) evenly divided between a head office (N=13) and a division office (N=12). They all worked within the family law unit of one State Administration in Denmark. The family law unit had two geographically distinct offices, a head office and a division office, and participants were either trained as non-academic caseworkers (N=14) or as academic caseworkers (with a university degree as lawyers) (N=11). 10 participants took part in the initial round of in-depth interviewing. 24 participants (including nine from the first wave of interviews) took part in the semi-structured interview sessions, and 21 participants (all of whom took part in the second wave of interviews) took part in eight focus groups interviews. The average age was 45 (range 27-64), and the average length of employment experience with cliental work was 20 (range 0-35). As well as looking for overall patterns among the interviewees, as part of a case analysis, we were sensitive to possible sub-patterns among the interviewees. As

such, we coded each interviewee for age, sex, length of tenure, and organizational role and considered whether there were distinct patterns against these dimensions, e.g. between new recruits and those with longer tenure. We note relevant sub-patterns when we present the findings below.

»Table 2 here«

The focus of the first wave of interviews was upon the factors causing stress at work. The theme of abuse from clients came from the respondents raising it, unprompted. After it was raised in the first wave of interviews, it subsequently became a key focus of the study.

Transcripts were analyzed, and stories and discourses relating to abuse from clients were identified using basic principles of critical discourse analysis in organization studies (Fairclough, 2005). Main plots and storylines (Gabriel, 2000) central to identifying key patterns of the data were revealed and put against the dimensions in table 1.

Case Findings

After outlining the context of the case, we present the data against the dimensions outlined within table 1.

Context

The case study took place during a large reorganization process in the public sector of Denmark. The caseworkers that participated in our study dealt with matters of family law, such as adaptation, paternity, separation and divorce, and child support. The caseworkers' job was to guide and settle matters for clients. Due to budget cuts and the longstanding re-organisation process the family law offices faced system failure of an increase in wait-time for cases to be completed. At the time of the research, the typical backlog time was 20-25 weeks (against a normal expectancy of 8-12 weeks). In response to these challenges attempts were made to re-organise work and work procedures according to Lean principles. Lean is a work task management strategy that seeks to reconfigure organisational processes to become customer-focused, to reduce waste and enhance productivity based upon the application of specialist analytical tools and techniques, coupled with creating a culture of continuous improvement (Womack and Jones, 2003).

Extent and Nature of Client Abuse

Further to the backlog of cases, caseworkers were faced with a period of high abuse and anger from clients waiting to get their case settled. Many clients expressed anger and abuse when calling for an updates on their case. Some clients showed rage and frustration in settlement meetings. Thus, client abuse was common for all caseworkers. As Christie put it, "you have to meet angry people from 10 am to 2 pm". The non-academic caseworkers had more phone duty, which was experienced negatively, as Lilly explained:

I hate having phone duty, but of course we are all do (laughs). Yes, it can irritate me, that is if you have had some really really angry and impossible citizen on the phone

where you couldn't do anything to make them comfortable. Then it affects your mood.

Lawyers had the most client face-to-face contact in settlement meetings. Even though the majority of meetings were without violence or aggression, it was perceived normal to experience episodes of violence, such as an incident which Sidney narrated:

On Tuesday we had one who was here for a meeting and he went completely berserk and threw a lot of things in the office ... and I passed by up there – there were a few of us - and then he wanted to get back in the room again and was very angry, violent and upset. And we pushed him away and then he knocks some cases out of my hand and stuff like that. But ... we got him out, and then - we think he has calmed down.... But such an episode, it is not dangerous, I don't think. That's okay because he didn't hit anyone, so he was upset and things like that. I think it was okay.

Sidney evaluated this episode as 'okay' because he did not perceive it to be dangerous. This illustrates that both the extent and the nature of abuse had become normalized. However, not all abusive behaviour was perceived as being 'okay'. As Mary explained:

A few of my colleagues have had to file complaints with the police ...

Q: That... must be uncomfortable.

It's uncomfortable! Especially for the lawyers who deal with child contact cases, they get some really ugly personal abuse sometimes!

Mary continued, "it's too much when it becomes personal. When they complain about the system and the state administration ... and 'it's just isn't good enough', that's okay, but they

shouldn't abuse me". Although individuals perceived the personal abuse as unacceptable and uncomfortable, abuse was, nevertheless, seen socially as part of the job that you soon got used to. This socialisation aspect became especially apparent when talking to Lisa, who was a newly employed caseworker. One week into her job she was interviewed, and the discussion soon turned to client abuse. When asked about having to deal with client aggression, she stated that she had been curious about it, which was why she had asked her co-workers:

Well, all they said down there when I asked was "you'll quickly become immune to being called a stupid bitch" (laughs)

Lisa's co-workers were right; it was indeed something Lisa and the rest of the caseworkers became accustomed to. Six months after the first interview Lisa was asked again about client abuse: "Oh yes, yes, yes. I have been called a stupid bitch many times."

Worker Status and Power

Overall, the caseworkers experienced management support and had high status providing them with resources and confidence in addressing abuse. Workers were positioned as able to stand their ground against client attempts to dominate. Management had provided workers with the ability to pass on to a manager any call that turned abusive. Caseworkers valued this as it provided them with a way out of impossible situations, as Lisa noted:

Those who answer the phones, they ... are very good at getting rid of people - so if someone is impossible to talk to, well, then they are passed on to [our manager], then [he] can talk to them (laughs).

This gateway out of abuse was, however, not frequently used. The caseworkers felt competent at doing their job,- as Mary stated: “it’s rare that we hang up because we listen to bad things. It doesn’t happen often that you can’t talk to them. Of course, if they continue being rude, well then we’ll tell them that the conversation ends here, right.”. If a caseworker chose to end a conversation due to abuse, she felt obliged to inform the manager in order to settle any potential complaints from the clients upfront. Mary explained: “Well I tell them that they have to change their pitch or tone or choice of words if we are to continue the conversation. If there is nothing more to say, well, then ... I hang up. And if I hang up, well, then I send a mail to the office manager and let him know.”

The caseworkers experienced great sympathy and support for their actions from management, as they were trusted as competent caseworkers who knew when to draw the line with a difficult client. Academic caseworkers adopted a different approach in face-to-face interactions. This was a strategy of expressing sympathy and understanding of the client’s point of view, particularly when first meeting the client. Letting people know at the start that the wait was unacceptable often helped ease clients’ frustrations. “It is hard to stay mad when you are faced with agreement and understanding,” Glen explained. This strategy was not a management manoeuvre, but a tactic that the lawyers through their expertise and competence themselves had developed.

The contrast with the liberal market picture of low status workers subject to abuse from the mythically sovereign customer is brought out well in a story recounted by Caroline. The story concerned a former lawyer co-worker about whom one client had complained:

And she [the client] then subsequently got [another colleague] as a social worker, who then said "well, she's not here anymore." She [the client] had just gloated; she thought that it was she who had gotten her fired! (laughs). She had been sitting in

the meeting and said "well I can also get you fired like I got [the other] fired" and I don't know what, so all [my colleague] could say was: "she was not fired, she found another job and she quit." And then she became a little tongue-tied (laughs).

Well then, you should not count on us just being fired, it takes more than that.

Here, the worker, confident of her status, underpinned by meaningful organisational practices, enjoys the moment when the client realises she is not sovereign.

Processes of Distancing

The labour process had been rationalised in ways that supported distancing. For instance, the work practices around the telephone duty had been reorganized so that the telephones were only open daily from 10am to 2pm. Also the duty was distributed such that caseworkers only had telephone duty once a week. Another key reorganisation was the introduction of Lean principles which meant that cases were moved away from individual caseworkers and instead became shared. Indeed, the perception of the Lean project changed from a process of reducing caseload to a process of removing personal responsibility of cases, as Marley stated:

That was why we introduced it: It was simply to remove the pressure from the individual case, it is not our fault that the cases are delayed... the pressure is off the individual. You don't have to feel responsible.

These processes were supported by management who "goes to great lengths to say they are State Administration cases; they are not your personal cases", Caroline explained.

Separated from a sense of individual ownership of cases, caseworkers were enabled to refer to system failure and not person failure. In addition, there was some evidence that workers

drew on their knowledge base to create a shield against being affected by abuse. Returning to Lisa, who was quoted above in relation to becoming accustomed to being called ‘stupid bitch’, the next sentence she gave after this was: “in the beginning it was tough, that even though I have all this knowledge, I’d doubt myself when people questioned me. But now there is no doubt.” Here, Lisa is articulating that her knowledge gives her a confidence that allows her to rise above the abuse.

Workers also formed communities of coping (Korczynski, 2003; Stroeback, 2013) to socialise the costs of client abuse. Sociality formed back-stage allowed the personal responsibility of performing emotional labour jobs to be transformed to a social or collective responsibility – as Lisa stated: “You’ll turn around [to a colleague] and say: ‘God, that guy there... did you hear that?’ So, you talk about it like that and then he’s forgotten”. Informal social practices, such as eating a cake, or drinking coffee, were highly valued as ‘stolen moments’ of social sharing during the tightly scheduled workday.

Processes of distancing were important for how workers coped. One worker, Kira, reflected, unprompted, on the importance of distancing and protecting:

People get used to ... a bit too much really by saying "well, these are the conditions." [A colleague] she has a theory that the brain protects us. And it might. She says that one day... she'll take a look at all those things that the brain has protected her from in order to cope with being here (laughs). It is actually a very funny theory. But it is probably true that you get used to some things and say, "well, this is how it is" even if you actually know that it could be a burden.

Rather than the brain, it was the communities of coping which provided protection. Humour was another form of social distancing used by workers. As Carol stated, “I constantly try to

put some distance to it - It's not you as a person, there is nothing wrong with you, when it fails it's because there's something wrong with the job. And I often think that you get quite far by laughing at it, right.” Indeed, Carol explained how she made a very high priority of taking the role as ‘the clown’ at the office since she found a humorous approach to the work very important in order to feel good about the job.

Worker Framing of Client Abuse

The main way in which workers framed client abuse was to see it as an almost inevitable outcome of highly stressed, and sometimes vulnerable, fellow citizens caught within system failure, i.e. the growing backlog of cases. Underpinning this framing was the ethos to undertake a worthwhile service for their fellow citizens. Lilly, for example, stated her disagreement with management policies which she saw as too dismissive towards clients:

So here I think that he [our boss] is a little tough on our clients. I don't think you can be that dismissive... We are public servants, right. And I don't entirely agree with his cold, tough and dismissive way of being.

Being public servants was a strong identity for many caseworkers, and it coloured the framing of client abuse. Indeed, Lilly even expressed surprise that tensions of the clients' position did not boil over more often.

Very few people are so angry that they complain about it. It is actually amazing that people are so understanding.

Jane expressed the main framing of client abuse held by the workers in the case:

And then the fact that...it gives people the expectation that they have rights; that they can expect something, that they have the right to, because they have paid

their taxes, and we have to deliver the goods. And we can't! So there is already a deep disappointment and frustration among clients that we have not been able to live up to what they can rightly expect from us, right.

Christie put it, succinctly: "I can certainly understand that they [clients] are angry." This framing also informed Sydney's comment that, "it is alright that clients complain. It's part of our job". It was not the image of the sovereign consumer but rather the co-citizen to whom one has empathy that informed Mary's comment: "I'd be absolutely hysterical if I was at the other end of the table [as a client]".

The framing of abuse as an expression of a co-citizen caught within a system failure even led to workers seeking to ensure that they maintained high levels of service – even to those clients who directly abused them. Here are the words of Anna:

It is very important to me that I can defend what I do, that is... when I receive a call and they [clients] scold me while I'm on phone duty and complain and things like that, then it is important that I feel that I can still give them proper treatment.

Despite the abuse, the pattern from the research was that workers overwhelmingly kept to a view of the service-recipient as a co-stakeholder. The main framing of customer abuse in terms of system failure meant that blame and antipathy from workers to abuse was not directed at clients, but rather at those who were seen as responsible for the system failure.

Kira argued:

I'm actually sometimes surprised how rarely people complain about the endless [case management] time; there hasn't been more about it in the press. Because some of them don't have the energy, and the energy they do have, they take out on

us, they don't take it further, and they tell us that we should be relieved that they don't. So I say that I would be pleased if you went to the press, then we might get more staff, right?

Although this framing of client abuse was the dominant one within the case studied, there were also indications that other framings around 'deviant clients' were present at the margins. Ida indicated that some behaviours from caseworkers involved an antagonistic response to specific clients – although she also suggested that such a response was more a back-office safety-valve than a serious framing that informed day-to-day actions:

I also think that I understand the citizens that they feel caught, a lot of them are having a crisis... Yes, but they are having a crisis, a serious crisis, you don't have to talk bad about them. But it is only in here. I assume that they are very very polite to them. But they talk about people that way. And the reason they do it, I assume is, to have a valve to let it all out, right. They are probably nice enough to them when they are here.

For some workers, like Ann, an alternative, antagonistic, framing of client abuse sometimes came to the surface, creating a position of some discomfort for her:

I could at least, well, get a little aggressive so "no, now you must simply understand that I can't, I can't help it dammit, I'm not the one who decided that it should be this way, let's end the conversation." Then I get defensive and then I sit and get angry with myself - until I become angry with the one I talked to on the phone, and then I get angry at myself that I snapped at a client who's just calling and asking when his case is being dealt with, right. It's really unpleasant. Really unpleasant.

Outcomes for Workers

Overall, despite the sustained period of high client abuse that they had experienced, the workers in this case exhibited a high degree of resilience. This resilience was shown in the continued search for satisfaction in their jobs. This is exemplified by Caroline's response to the question, 'the citizens can get you all riled up?'

Yes. And that's also why you really wonder about staying in this job because people are angry, people are frustrated, people abuse you and yet you continue to work here because you like it. You must be a masochist (laughs) when you continue to work here, you really must be, when you just think about it (laughs)

Glen also articulated how he maintained satisfaction in the job despite the current strains:

So I have job satisfaction. And that is probably what I want to cultivate, to get the balance between not being exploited and - or letting yourself be exploited - and having job satisfaction. I have a great job. That's probably why you make the effort.

Lisa spoke of a 'customer contact spirit' rather than a public service ethos in continuing to generate satisfaction in her job: "It is the nature of the cases. They are real people. You need to talk to them when they cry, when they are upset and when they are happy. You have this customer contact spirit".

The material foundations of workers' status within organisational policies were also a crucial part in how workers showed such a degree of resilience. Here is Lisa's revealing response to questions regarding her experience of abuse:

Q:: ... it's not something you dread having to deal with?

No [...] Also because when you have this solution called (whistles) “Talk to the manager”, then you just have to say: “ Sorry, I can’t talk to you when you can’t address me politely. You’ll have to call the manager.” And then we’ve been told to simply hang up.

Although there clearly was resilience at the time of the research, it is not easy to say how long such resilience could sustain. Ann talked through the delicate position of accepting that the system failure had given rise to the high abuse, but still not finding the behaviour of the clients straightforwardly acceptable:

It depends on how you understand it, you know, because when you say “acceptance of the status quo”: I accept that my work involves lots of stacks and piles and a very long processing times, and things like that - so I understand where you are headed: it can still be hard to accept that you have to talk to someone for 4 hours who thinks you're an idiot because you don't get anything done, you know - and someone who doesn't understand our situation.

Further, although the main pattern was one of resilience, there were some cases where emotional pain and exhaustion were beginning to surface. Christie expressed both a sense of resilience and a sense that this resilience was starting to crack:

I can certainly understand that they [clients] are angry. So it's doesn't not affect me, that would be incorrect, because it does, but I can't do anything about it. So I can only say, you know what, I understand that you're angry, but such and such. And then try to tell myself that I can't do anything about it. And that's how it is.

But there are times where I've been tired and where I've thought "oh boy, this guy he was surely ..." or "what he said" or something does affect me. And then I can sense that I spend a little time on it at home too, you know.

Not all caseworkers were resilient to the brutal tone of clients. Carol told us about a co-worker of hers who left her job in the public family law office because of the awful tone and behaviour of clients:

She used to be an Assistant Chief of Police, she wanted to get away because the criminals they were much nicer than the parents. She simply couldn't stand the parents, she thought they were so awful. She would much rather go back to the police, those violent criminals she usually dealt with, they were much nicer.

Kira noted succinctly some limits to resilience were appearing: "Over the years we have done a very good job [...]. So now I think it is safe to say that you're worn out".

Discussion

In the opening section of the paper we outlined two alternative scenarios for the playing out of the processes of customer abuse within the case study of restructured Danish public welfare work. In the data section above, we presented our findings against each of the dimensions within table 1. In this section, we consider whether the pattern of the data matched onto the liberal market economy pattern or onto the social market economy pattern.

The first dimension of the ideal types related to the frequency of customer abuse. The choice of this case, as a critical case of high abuse where resilience or fragility of a social order can

be exposed, by-passed the relevance of this dimension. On the dimension of worker status and power, workers in the case were positioned as legitimate stakeholders with voice – matching on to the social market ideal type. With regard to the processes of distancing, only part of these processes of distancing – namely that related to the knowledge base of the labour process - directly related to the arguments concerning the ideal type. Other important elements were the distancing created by rationalisation of structures, through the introduction of Lean, and the informal social process enacted by workers, particularly related to humour and communities of coping. Indeed, there appear to be significant overlaps between the informal social processes enacted in this case, and the social process of humour and communities of coping observed in studies of customer abuse in liberal market economies (Korczynski and Ott, 2004). On the dimension of workers’ framing of abuse, there was a strong match with the social market ideal type for the main way in which workers understood client abuse was that it was an understandable product of co-citizens caught within system failure. Alternative framings existed at the margins of the case, and tended to cause discomfort for many workers. The final dimension of the ideal type concerns outcomes for workers. Again, there was correspondence between the social market ideal type and the case. Workers tended to show a high degree of resilience to the abuse to which they were exposed, continuing to enjoy the public service ethos of their job. There was a porousness to this resilience, however, with some workers explaining that that there were costs from the accumulating abuse. Overall, we found most dimensions corresponding to the ideal type of social market economy.

Considering the findings in terms of the macro (national economy), meso (sector) and micro (organisation) levels, we find the overall dominance of the macro, the level at which the

ideal-type of the social market economy was situated. The findings show that the NPM sectoral context of the Scandinavian public welfare had not significantly altered the texture of the social relations around client abuse. The micro, organisational, level became relevant in the role that Lean had in terms of informing processes of social distancing.

Conclusion

This article has focussed on the increasingly common and important phenomenon of abuse by customers to service workers. It has contributed to the nascent literature in this area in a theoretical way and in an empirical way. First, it pointed to the danger of the literature on customer abuse becoming dominated by an implicit assumption of the operation of the liberal market economy, and argued that alternative social processes around customer abuse may be played out in social market economies. This theoretical contribution was the backdrop against which to assess the empirical case study of abuse within restructured public welfare work in Denmark. The key question was whether the NPM-informed public welfare reforms, typical of recent developments in Scandinavia, pushed the playing out of the social processes of client abuse more in the direction of the liberal market economy pattern than in the direction of the social market economy pattern.

Overall, it was found that the pattern of the social processes of customer abuse in the case matched more onto the pattern of social market economy ideal type. Rather than customer abuse being framed in terms of deviant character typing of customers by service workers, and leading either to significant emotional pain, or a hostile indifference to all customers, there

was considerable resilience to high customer abuse in the case. Deviant character typing of customers was only a marginal phenomenon. Rather, workers tended to understand abuse as the outcome of relatively powerless co-stakeholders caught within administrative failure. Workers also tended not to carry heavy emotional costs, but were still able to find satisfaction and meaning within their jobs, despite the high levels of abuse.

These theoretical and empirical contributions can help to develop our knowledge in this important aspect of the social relations of the service workplace in significant ways. First, given the initial support for the ideal type of the social processes of abuse in a social market economy, it is appropriate for further studies to be undertaken within other social market settings to ascertain the degree to which this ideal type aids analysis of the social processes of customer abuse. Such studies could investigate further the limits to the sort of resilience to customer abuse that was observed in this case – how far can the costs of accumulating abuse be held by workers? Second, perhaps the generation of two ideal types of social processes of abuse can be seen as the start of further attempts to see differences in the patterns of the social processes of customer abuse. It could be that the model of two ideal types is seen as too blunt, and that further ideal types linked to different economic contexts are required to deepen our analysis of this phenomenon.

Although the article has made a contribution in empirical and theoretical ways, it is appropriate to acknowledge limitations of the study. Only one case study was conducted relating to the framing of customer abuse, and although there was a significant correspondence between the social market ideal type and the pattern of findings in the case, we cannot claim this constitutes a conclusive demonstration of the utility of the ideal type. Another study would benefit from updated data so that we could analyse if and how the more recent reform initiated restructuring of public service work has affected the framing of

customer abuse. Further research into patterns of the social processes of customer abuse among other state and private sector occupations in social market economies would also be useful. Despite the limitations, the case represents a promising beginning to assess the utility of ideal types of service economy when exploring service work and customer abuse.

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| | Liberal Market Economy | Social Market Economy |
|---|---|--|
| Level of customer abuse to workers | Potential to be common | Likely to be uncommon |
| Worker status and power | Low, lack of voice | Workers as legitimate stakeholders with voice |
| Process of distancing adopted by workers | Emotional labour demands lessens potential for distancing | Potential for distancing linked to knowledge base |
| Workers' framing of customer abuse | Deviant character typing | Co-stakeholder caught within system failure |
| Outcomes for workers | Pain for workers, or hostile indifference to customers | Some resilience to periods of high abuse related to system failure |

Table 1 Ideal Types of Social Processes of Abuse to Service Workers within a Liberal Market Economy and a Social Market Economy

| Participant | Age | Cliental work (years) | Role |
|--------------------|------------|------------------------------|--------------|
| Ann* | 38 | 15 | Non-academic |
| Lilly* | 59 | 31 | Non-academic |
| Lisa* | 27 | 0 | Non-academic |
| Mary | 31 | 9 | Non-academic |
| Margot | 35 | 14 | Non-academic |
| Mona* | 55 | 32 | Non-academic |
| Brittany | 54 | 26 | Non-academic |
| Ida | 58 | 32 | Non-academic |
| Lesley | 35 | 13 | Non-academic |
| Caroline* | 27 | 1 | Academic |
| Cherryl | 30 | 2 | Academic |
| Lee | 50 | 22 | Academic |
| Carol* | 35 | 7 | Academic |
| Kira* | 58 | 32 | Non-academic |
| Trisha* | 58 | 34 | Non-academic |
| Maria | 54 | 35 | Non-academic |
| Christie | 33 | 15 | Non-academic |
| Beatrice | 53 | 32 | Non-academic |
| Marley* | 52 | 28 | Academic |
| Glen* | 62 | 33 | Academic |
| Anna | 64 | 35 | Academic |
| Sidney | 44 | 19 | Academic |
| Lynette | 42 | 16 | Academic |
| Tanya | 33 | 7 | Academic |
| Jane | 36 | 8 | Academic |

* Took part in in-depth interview

Table 2: Participant overview