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7 **The customer is *not* always right:**
8 **customer aggression and emotion**
9 **regulation of service employees**
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19 **Summary**

20 Research on work aggression or anger has typically focused on supervisors and co-workers as
21 the instigators of aggression; however, aggressive *customers* are also likely and may have
22 unique consequences for the employee. We explore this phenomenon with a sample of 198
23 call center employees at two work sites. The employees reported that customer verbal aggres-
24 sion occurred 10 times a day, on average, though this varied by race and negative affectivity.
25 Using LISREL, our data indicated that both the frequency and stress appraisal of customer
26 aggression positively related to emotional exhaustion, and this burnout dimension mediated
27 the relationship of stress appraisal with absences. Stress appraisal also influenced employees'
28 emotion regulation strategies with their most recent hostile caller. Employees who felt more
29 threatened by customer aggression used surface acting or vented emotions, while those who
30 were less threatened used deep acting. Job autonomy helped explain who found these events
31 more stressful, and implications of these results are discussed. Copyright © 2004 John Wiley
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34 **Introduction**

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37 According to recent researchers and the popular press, people are less able to treat each other in a
38 courteous and respectful way at work (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Daw, 2001; Grimsley, 1998;
39 Marks, 1996). In the study of this phenomenon, work behaviors such as yelling, rudeness, and threats
40 have been studied under multiple labels, including interactional injustice (Bies & Moag, 1986), work
41 aggression (LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002), workplace bullying (Leyman, 1996), incivility (Andersson &
42 Pearson, 1999), and interpersonal conflict (Spector & Jex, 1998). In general, these behaviors are
43 related to deleterious work reactions such as stress and health problems, retaliatory behaviors, and
44 turnover, making it a critical topic for study.

45 The theory, research, and scale development on these forms of work aggression has generally
46 focused on intra-organizational members as the source and targets of these behaviors (e.g., Andersson
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& Pearson, 1999; Donovan, Drasgow, & Munson, 1998; Frone, 2000; Spector & Jex, 1998). A missing piece from the existing literature is the recognition that such antisocial behaviors may come from the very people the organization is trying to help, namely, the customers. Furthermore, researchers have been more likely to study rare violent episodes from ex employees or the public (e.g., Barling, Rogers, & Kelloway, 2001) than the effects of the more common verbally abusive customer. In fact, aggression from customers is critical to understand due to the potential frequency and challenge of responding to aggression from this source (Grandey & Brauburger, 2002; Maslach, 1978).

In this paper we extend the literature on work aggression by: (1) outlining reasons why customer aggression should be studied in its own right; (2) examining psychological and behavioral consequences of employees' experiences with customer aggression; and (3) exploring how employees regulate emotions when dealing with aggressive customers.

Defining Boundaries: Customer Verbal Aggression

The increased attention to the 'dark side' of workplace behavior in the last decade has led to the need to disentangle many similar concepts (Glomb, 2002; O'Leary-Kelly^{Q2}, Duffy, & Griffin, 2000; Neuman & Baron, 1998). Below, we define our focal behaviors.

Verbal aggression

We wanted to focus on behaviors that occur frequently, rather than extreme or rare situations. Though intense events like physical violence are certainly highly stressful, the more mundane daily hassles have also been implicated as causes of stress and health symptoms by themselves (Lazarus, 1984). Since verbal forms of aggression (e.g., yelling, insults, and cursing) are the most frequently experienced forms of aggressive behaviors (Barling et al., 2001; Diaz & McMillin, 1991; Glomb, 2002), we were particularly interested in these types of behavior.

Several terms are related to our behaviors of interest, though none are a perfect fit. *Interactional justice* (Bies & Moag, 1986) refers to perceptions about how one is treated during decision-making or allocation processes, typically in terms of rudeness from intra-organizational members (Donovan et al., 1998). The term *interpersonal conflict* refers to negative treatment that may be verbal or behavioral (e.g., being rude or 'nasty'; Spector & Jex, 1998). *Workplace bullying* is defined as persistent and long-term exposure to psychologically aggressive behaviors in which the targets have difficulty defending themselves (Leyman, 1996; Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002), typically referring to repeated interactions with the same people. *Incivility* refers to behaviors that violate interpersonal norms with ambiguous intentions, such as rudeness or ignoring someone (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), and its uniqueness revolves around its ambiguous intentions.

In this study, we focus on a behavioral term that refers to verbal communications of anger that violate social norms: *verbal aggression*, or *hostility* (Glomb, 2002; Neuman & Baron, 1998). This term is clear about the behaviors of interest, avoids the fuzzy boundaries associated with the different terms noted previously, and is not necessarily associated with intra-organizational members as the previous terms have been. Consistent with this variable of interest, in the current study we focus on call center employees who only engage in voice-to-voice service interactions, allowing verbal aggression to be the primary method of communicating anger or hostility.

Customer verbal aggression

Why would customers as a source of aggression be important to study? First, customer aggression is likely to be a common hassle of work life for boundary-spanners who are the intermediaries between the company and the public. Such a job requires high frequency of interpersonal contact, a characteristic associated with the frequency of work aggression (LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002). Furthermore, the mantra 'the customer is always right' communicates the unequal power in the customer–employee transaction, which is also a key aspect of being a target of aggression (Allan & Gilbert, 2002; Hochschild, 1983). Research has supported, though not focused on, the occurrence of verbal aggression from customers. For example, Spratlen (1995) found that 21 percent of university staff reported an interpersonal mistreatment event from someone categorized as 'other' (i.e., not a co-worker, supervisor, or subordinate). In a diary study of part-time service workers, the majority of anger-inducing interpersonal events reported over a 2-week period were due to customers (43 percent), and most of these were verbal aggression behaviors (Grandey, Tam, & Brauburger, 2002).

Second, the experience of customer aggression may have unique consequences. With the growth of the service economy, there are high expectations on boundary-spanners to maintain customer satisfaction (Bitner, Booms, & Tretrault, 1990). Supervisors are often monitoring service employees to ensure organizational control over emotional expressions with 'service with a smile' as the goal (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987)^{Q3}. If customers do verbally attack employees, a 'spiral of incivility' (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) may occur where the hostile customer arouses anger in the employee, who must regulate his or her response or risk venting at the customer. Thus customer verbal aggression may be particularly stressful for the employee and problematic for the organization.

A Model of Customer Verbal Aggression

Following the lead of other work aggression researchers, (Rogers & Kelloway, 1997; Schat & Kelloway, 2000), we drew on the traditional stressor–stress–strain framework for our hypotheses (Kahn & Byosiere, 1992; Lazarus, DeLongis, Folkman, & Gruen, 1985). In this model, objective stressors in the environment evoke cognitive appraisals about the situation and coping responses. The stress appraisal of the situation induces a strong state of emotional and physiological arousal. Chronic levels of this state can result in psychological and behavioral signs of strain. In our model, the frequency of customer aggression is the work stressor, and we were interested in the extent that employees feel threatened by customer aggression (stress appraisal), while emotional exhaustion and absences represented psychological and behavioral forms of strain, respectively (see Figure 1).

Customer verbal aggression and stress appraisal

Stress appraisal refers to the individual's perception of a stressor as being stressful or threatening (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), typically accompanied by a negative emotion (e.g., fear, anger) and physiological arousal. Given our human discomfort with being the target of anger, and the fact that this behavior communicates that the goal of satisfied customers is not being met, it is likely that verbal aggression is highly stressful (Averill, 1983). The more often such an event occurs, the more likely

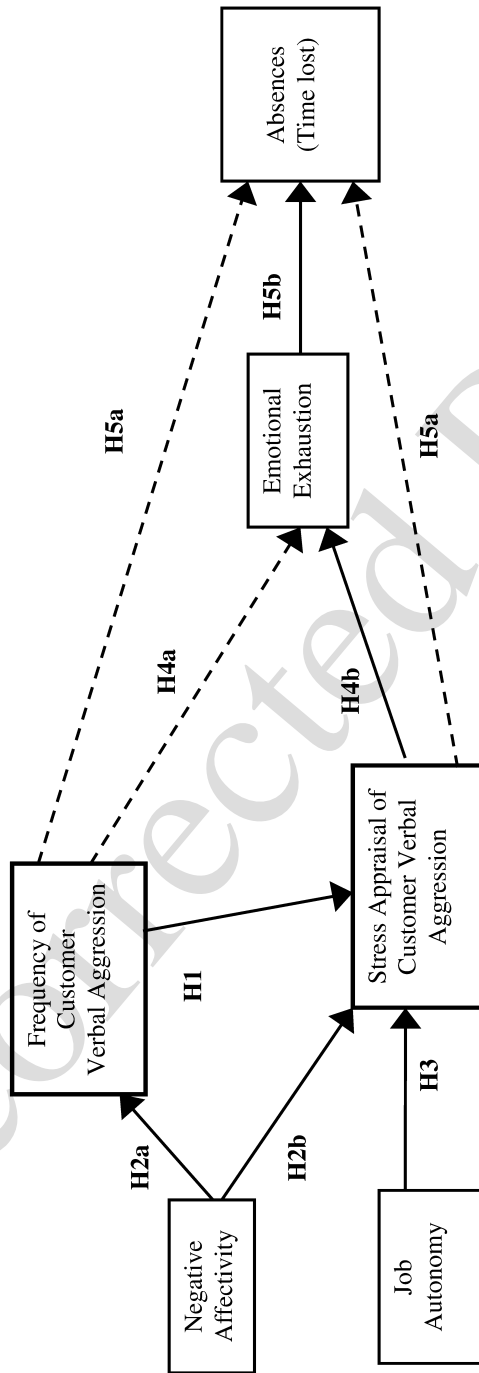


Figure 1. Hypothesized direct and indirect relationships. Dashed lines indicate that this path is hypothesized to be mediated by another variable

that the event may be found to be stressful due to heightened states of arousal and apprehension. For instance, prior research has found that targets of frequent aggression are likely to experience more fear at work (Barling et al., 2001; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002). Those who regularly interact with hostile customers may be 'primed' for the next call to be another yelling person. It should be acknowledged that an alternate possibility is that higher frequencies may induce habituation to the negative stimuli; however, people seem to be hard-wired to react strongly to such potentially threatening events (Frijda, 1988). Therefore, we expected that a higher frequency of verbally aggressive customer is likely to be associated with a stronger appraisal of threat from such an event.

Hypothesis 1: Frequency of customer aggression positively relates to stress appraisal of customer aggression.

Negative affectivity and customer aggression

An individual difference that is likely to contribute to increased frequency and stress appraisal of customer aggression is the negative affectivity (NA) of the service provider. Surprisingly, NA's role in self-reported work aggression has been omitted from recent research (Barling et al., 2001; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002; Schat & Kelloway, 2000). A person high in NA is more likely to have a negative world-view and to interpret ambiguous comments as negative (Spector, Chen, & O'Connell, 2000; Watson & Clark, 1984; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). These tendencies may mean high-NA persons evoke more aggression from a customer (Buss, 1987). For example, a customer may make an ambiguous comment and someone with high NA may respond more defensively, evoking hostility in the customer. Similarly, someone high in NA has fewer coping resources and thus may perceive the event as more threatening (Spector et al., 2000). Therefore, we expected NA to correspond with both the reported frequency and stress appraisal of hostile customers.

Hypothesis 2a: Negative affectivity positively relates to the reported frequency of customer verbal aggression.

Hypothesis 2b: Negative affectivity positively relates to the stress appraisal of customer verbal aggression.

Autonomy and customer aggression

Call center employees may objectively have low levels of job autonomy (e.g., calls are monitored, encounters are scripted), but differences in their *perceptions* of control at work should influence how stressful they find customer aggression. Stress research has long pointed out the importance of a perceived sense of control on stress reactions to stimuli (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986; Friedland, Keinan, & Regev, 1992); similarly, a sense of autonomy has been associated with less stress in the workplace (Karasek, 1986^{Q3}; see Spector, 1986, for review). Employees who feel that they have control at work should feel more empowered in customer encounters, including aggressive ones, and research has supported job autonomy's relationship with the stress response to work aggression (Schat & Kelloway, 2000).

Hypothesis 3: Perceived job autonomy negatively relates to the stress appraisal of customer verbal aggression.

Customer verbal aggression and emotional exhaustion

Burnout has long been established as a likely outcome for service workers and caring professionals, due to the boundary-spanning nature of the job tasks (Singh, Goolsby, & Rhoades, 1994). Being the target of frequent hostility from the same people for whom you are supposed to be providing 'service with a smile' requires constant emotion regulation that may eventually deplete one's resources (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Hochschild, 1983). The experience of verbally hostile customers may thus 'take an emotional toll' (Neuman & Baron, 1998, p. 397), resulting in a state of burnout (Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002; Maslach, 1978). LeBlanc and Kelloway (2002) did not find that 'public aggression' predicted health outcomes beyond other work factors, though their measure included violent (less common) behaviors as well. We expected that more frequent interactions with verbally aggressive customers would relate to emotional exhaustion.

Stress emotions have a unique effect on health and organizational outcomes beyond the frequency of work aggression (e.g., Schat & Kelloway, 2000), and thus may explain the relationship between the frequency of events and outcomes (Lazarus et al., 1985). As the frequency of customer aggression increases, so should the resulting state of burnout due to the enhanced states of stress arousal. We assessed these relationships with emotional exhaustion while allowing negative affectivity to also predict emotional exhaustion (see Figure 1). Since NA has also been found to be a strong predictor of emotional exhaustion (e.g., Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002), we conduct a conservative test of our variables of interest on emotional exhaustion by controlling for NA (Spector, 1994).

Hypothesis 4a: Frequency of customer verbal aggression is positively related to emotional exhaustion.

Hypothesis 4b: Stress appraisal to customer verbal aggression mediates the relationship of frequency of customer verbal aggression with emotional exhaustion.

Customer verbal aggression and absences

Regular hostility from customers creates an unpleasant working environment that employees may seek to avoid whenever possible. Withdrawal is a form of mood control—regulating emotions by avoiding situations that create negative mood states (George, 1989; Hackett, Bycio, & Guion, 1989). In support of this, Hackett et al. (1989) found that a 'mental health day' was almost as common a reason for absence as minor illness among nurses. Surprisingly, frequency of conflict has a weak relationship with self-reported withdrawal behaviors (Donovan et al., 1998; Spector & Jex, 1998), and no studies were found that linked the frequency of verbal aggression to actual absences. We expect that the frequency of customer aggression predicts hours absent from the workplace as a form of avoidance. Stress appraisal of customer aggression may result in absences as a form of mood regulation—high appraisal of work events as stressful may mean more arousal and negative emotions at work and thus the desire to remove oneself to stabilize internal arousal (George, 1989).

Another explanatory mechanism for why customer aggression may relate to absences is through its influence on burnout. There are costs to avoiding work, and the desire for mood regulation or avoidance may not be strong enough motivation to be absent (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998). However, if customer aggression predicts an employee's state of burnout, then they may need a day off from work to restore lost resources (Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). A few studies have shown a link between burnout and work absences (Firth & Britton, 1989; Saxton, Phillips, & Blakeney, 1991). Another study with call center employees found only a marginal relationship of burnout to absences (Deery et al., 2002), but information about absences was gathered prior to the survey

administration, making interpretation of the relationships difficult. Our study tested a mediation relationship of emotional exhaustion between customer verbal aggression and *subsequent* absences.

Hypothesis 5a: Frequency and stress appraisal of customer aggression is positively related to subsequent absences.

Hypothesis 5b: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship of the frequency and stress appraisal of customer aggression with subsequent absences.

Emotion regulation with an aggressive customer

Lazarus et al.'s model of stress also proposes that emotion regulation, or emotion-focused coping, follows a stress appraisal (Lazarus et al., 1985). Though employees may be trained in how to do problem-focused coping (i.e., how to technically help upset customers), there may be uncertainty in how to handle their internal emotions with customers. We were interested in how call center employees regulate emotions in response to customer aggression, given the demands for friendly service. In our study, a specific event is used to cue reports of regulation rather than asking about general responses, as suggested by Lazarus (2000). Since this information is at the acute, rather than chronic, level of analysis, it was analyzed separately from the hypothesized model above.

Two general ways that service workers can emotionally regulate is through surface acting (i.e., engaging in behavioral change) and deep acting (i.e., engaging in cognitive change) (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Surface acting entails modifying behaviors by *suppressing* or *faking* expressions (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Grandey, 2000). Deep acting refers to internal change: changing cognitions through *perspective taking* (reappraising the situation by taking another's point of view) or *positive refocus* (focusing attention on positive things to regulate feelings) (Gross, 1998). We also examined *venting* emotions—a dysfunctional response to customers (Bitner et al., 1990; Grandey, 2003) that happens when the individual does *not* regulate emotions. Surface acting has been linked to burnout and lower service performance, while deep acting has been positively related to service performance (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Grandey, 2003; Totterdell & Holman, 2003). Thus, the type of regulation matters.

A person's stress appraisal (e.g., 'How threatening is this to me?') is considered an antecedent of coping strategies (Lazarus et al., 1985; Lazarus, 2000). Surface acting is likely to be frequently used during customer aggression by employees who appraise hostile customers as very stressful, because the negative emotions will need to be masked when interacting with these customers (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). In experience-sampling studies, service employees responded to highly negative events with surface acting (Grandey et al., 2002; Totterdell and Holman, 2003). Those employees who appraise aggressive callers as highly stressful may also be more likely to vent their frustration than those who find them only mildly stressful; intense emotions may only be 'bottled up' for a limited time. When negative events are viewed as less stressful, deep acting is more likely to be reported; attentional resources are more available for modifying cognitions about the situation (Gross, 1998).

Hypothesis 6a: Surface acting is more likely for those who appraise customer aggression as highly stressful in comparison with those who view them as mildly stressful.

Hypothesis 6b: Deep acting is more likely for those who appraise customer aggression as mildly stressful in comparison with those who view them as highly stressful.

Hypothesis 6c: Venting is more likely for those who appraise customer aggression as highly stressful in comparison with those who view them as mildly stressful.

Organizational Context

Service Industry

With the continued growth of the service sector in the United States, it has become increasingly important for for-profit organizations to differentiate themselves from the competition by going to great lengths to accommodate customer demands and maximize service efficiency. The rise of Internet technology has enabled self-service in many sectors of the economy, while also exacerbating the demands for efficient and customer-centric exchanges of information during face-to-face and telephone service encounters. Providers of service in the United States are expected to be swift, thorough, and accommodating. Customers, however, are frequently impatient, angry, and argumentative.

The Rise of Call Centers

Call centers are a multi-billion dollar industry in the United States. Customer representatives are the 'face' of the organization displayed one-on-one to consumers over the telephone, and are essential to many organizations, even in an Internet economy, for exchanging information, generating revenue and ensuring customer satisfaction and retention. Call center employees usually have the opportunity to interact with a diverse, geographically large population, and to provide services and support to large numbers of individuals each day. Although satisfying customers can provide substantial intrinsic rewards, the work often takes the form of an assembly line of telephone calls, frequently with customers who are calling to resolve a problem. Difficult or angry customers are encountered often, and absenteeism and burnout are common.

Employees

Study participants were customer service associates who worked full-time and had long tenures with the organization. They spent all of their working time on the phone with customers, while finding and recording account information at a computer in a small space surrounded by other employees. The employees were union-represented and could bring issues or concerns to a local union representative.

Employees answer inbound telephone inquiries about account services and billing, working at one of two large call centers in a large, successful for-profit services organization. High accountability for customer service quality is the norm. Supervising managers can monitor any call, lengths and numbers of calls are generally tracked and monitored, and continued customer satisfaction with service representatives is essential to the company's brand.

Time

The study took place in mid 2001, during a fairly strong economy with low unemployment and many job opportunities in the U.S. labor market. The study was completed prior to the decline of corporate revenues in the technology sector, the Internet sector and elsewhere, and prior to concerns about corporate health associated with accounting practices and terrorism. There were no substantial changes in the company workforce (e.g., lay-offs, promotions) prior to the study.

Method

Approval was obtained from a major utility company to interview and survey call center employees at two sites.

Call center context

As is typical of call centers, the service encounters involved frequent monitoring, strict emphasis on efficiency and timeliness (e.g., a risk of poorer performance evaluations for being 1 minute late from a break), and the expectation to field calls in rapid succession. The service representatives answered calls from small workstations situated closely together and within sight of the supervisor, who would routinely listen to calls and evaluate the subordinates' performance (e.g., how well they worked with difficult customers and how effectively they solved customers' problems). Other sources of evaluation included ratings of live and recorded calls from: (i) quality monitors, who specialized in quality control and performance assessment; and (ii) customer surveys. All of these evaluations affected the official appraisal rating that a customer service representative received. Management wished to learn about and improve the call center employees' work experience, while retaining the overall culture of monitoring and efficiency that is typical of the industry and a key element in customer satisfaction.

Interview participants and procedures

To assess the appropriateness of a study on customer aggression with this sample, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews (20–30 minutes) by phone with 12 customer service representatives from the target organization. They had been selected from the work floor by a site supervisor with the goal of having a wide range of demographics and experiences represented. Eight individuals (67 per cent) were female. The interviewees had been with this organization for an average of 4 years (range = 2–9 years).

All 12 interviewees said that yelling, threatening, and insulting behaviors from callers occurred daily, and their description of events was used in the content of the survey. The frequency varied by interviewee from one a day, to 20 a day, to 'a majority of our calls' (50–60 calls per day is typical). When asked about the most stressful part of their job, half (six) of the interviewees said hostile, difficult, or angry customers. In fact, one female employee told us that she was quitting that day because she 'just can't take it anymore.' Low autonomy was another commonly mentioned stressor. When asked how they responded to an aggressive caller, they had a variety of responses, including distracting themselves with pictures or desk toys, putting the caller on mute and talking to co-workers, and just recognizing that the caller is mad at the company and not the employee. Two admitted to 'losing it' and yelling at a customer. Four mentioned that the only training was being told 'Don't TIP,' meaning 'Don't Take It Personal.' Three stated that there was a need for training sessions for handling aggressive callers.

Survey participants and procedure

Management at two call centers in one state in the southwest agreed to help administer the survey to their call center employees. Jobs at the two sites were the same, and the training, management, organizational structure, and company policies were identical. Thus, the work context was the same, though as can be expected of different offices with different sets of employees, work attitudes and habits may vary. The employees were all full-time, unionized, and generally long-term employees who handled incoming calls regarding questions about or problems with bills and/or service. All respondents had the same job title.

Management randomly selected employees from the work floor and offered them the opportunity to participate in an independent research study during work hours, and all who were offered this option

accepted. The survey carefully explained that this was an independent research study, and they were provided with a separate legal-sized envelope that allowed them to seal their responses inside. About 10 people at a time completed the survey (20 minutes duration) in a conference room, and once 100 people per site completed the survey the administration ceased. This period was during a fairly slow time such that this study did not adversely affect non-participants. In addition to completing the survey, participants were asked to voluntarily provide their human resource identification (ID) number in order to match the survey data to personnel data. To minimize concerns about confidentiality of responses and social desirability bias, participants were assured that only the researchers would view the surveys. Participants sealed their survey into envelopes that were sent to the first author.

There were a total of 198 fully completed surveys returned (98 from one site, 100 from the other). Demographics were representative of this organization's call center employees for this region. The participants were 60 per cent female, and 65 per cent identified themselves as Hispanic, with the remainder as Caucasian, African American, Native American, or 'other.' All were full-time employees who worked 40 hours a week and had long job tenure (mean = 9.8 years). About half of the participants (97) voluntarily provided their identification number, and we gathered absence data for the 3 months following the survey administration from their files. No significant differences existed between participants who did not provide their ID number and those who did except that emotional exhaustion was slightly higher for those who did not provide identification data ($p < 0.05$). If our theory is correct, those who were less likely to respond also had higher absences and were too tired to bother with this additional request or did not wish the researchers to have access to their personnel data. Thus, the true relationship of emotional exhaustion and absences is likely truncated. The path model analyses used the full sample with the harmonic mean ($N = 174.37$) (Viswesvaran & Ones, 1995).

Instruments

Control variables

Race was included as a control variable with a path to the frequency of customer aggression (Hispanic = 1, Non-Hispanic = 0), since the racial majority may have a different work experience than the minority group members. *Sex* was included as a predictor of the stress appraisal to customer aggression, since women typically report higher levels of anxiety. *Work site* (coded 0 or 1) was included as a predictor of the frequency of aggression, to control for possible differences in the customer base.

Individual differences

Negative affectivity was measured with the PANAS (Watson, 1988; Watson et al., 1988), which has a list of 10 negative emotion terms with trait instructions: 'To what extent do you feel the following, on average, while at work?' The typical 5-point intensity scale was used, and the alpha coefficient was 0.85. Two job autonomy items (alpha = 0.70) from the Job Diagnostic Survey requested agreement on a 5-point scale about the extent of independence and opportunity to use initiative at work (Hackman & Oldham, 1975).

Frequency of customer aggression

Based on our interviewees' descriptions of aggressive callers they had experienced, we designed a behaviorally based description to prime employees' memories and maintain consistency about the target behavior across respondents. The following statement was used on the survey: 'Think about the last time a caller was upset about his or her bill and became very angry and verbally attacked you.'

Participants were asked to estimate the number of these calls on a typical day to assess average frequency. Daily occurrence was used based on the frequencies reported by our interviewees.

Stress appraisal of customer aggression

After recalling the last time such an event occurred, participants were asked, 'How stressful do you find these types of events when they occur to you?', which were reported on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = 'Slightly or Not at all,' 5 = 'Extremely').

Emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion was obtained with a six-item measure (e.g., 'I feel emotionally drained from my work') by Wharton (1993) and had an acceptable alpha coefficient of 0.82. This was asked prior to the customer aggression variables, to minimize response bias that might occur if they guessed what the study was about.

Withdrawal behavior

Withdrawal was measured as the total hours absent from work for the 3 months directly following the survey administration. This 'time lost' measurement of absence was how absences were recorded in personnel files by supervisors. Time lost also refers to the number of hours a temporary employee is compensated to fill the missing worker's position; thus, it has real value to the organization. The archival data used in this study specified that the absences were due to illness, and the majority (98 per cent) were paid absences (six were unpaid). The company's absence policy permitted employees to take paid sick days, which were counted separately from vacation days. Employees could take days off for personal illness only, as long as the number and frequency were regarded as reasonable, as determined by the local manager. Sick days could be taken consecutively, and an absence period less than 5 days required only a notification to the supervisor. Longer absence periods required medical documentation. The mean time lost for absences for the 3 months was 3 days ($M = 23.27$ hours), with a median of 1 day (8 hours). As is typical for withdrawal data, the distribution of responses was non-normal with a positive skew. Archival withdrawal behaviors typically have such psychometric issues (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998; Hulin, Rosnowski, & Hachiya, 1985). For these analyses, we used the transformation of the square root of the hours absent ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 3.58$).

Emotion regulation

After being asked to recall their most recent customer aggression event, the participants were asked to indicate whether they did any of the listed behaviors during this call. Eight items represented the emotion regulation strategies of interest, embedded in a list of other coping items. Surface acting, venting, perspective taking, and positive refocusing were each tapped with two items, and similar to the scales used in related research (Totterdell & Holman, 2003). The wording of the instructions avoided referring to 'coping' with the caller's call to avoid participants reporting only effective reactions (Lazarus, 2000). A checklist rather than a Likert-style scale was adopted, since researchers have questioned the meaning of the *extent* of coping and encouraged asking about use or non-use instead (Stone, Greenberg, Kennedy-Moore, & Newman, 1991).

To check the psychometric properties of these items, a pilot study with 150 working students was asked to recall a stressful interpersonal event at work and indicate to what extent they used each item in response on a 5-point scale. The items were subjected to a principal components analysis with varimax rotation. Four factors emerged with eigenvalues greater than 1.00 and loadings were consistent with intentions (see Appendix). For the current study, a composite was formed for each regulation type by giving each checked item a value of 1.00. Thus, scores ranged from 0 (neither item selected) to 2 (both items selected) for all four scales.

Results

Descriptives

When asked about the typical *frequency* per day that they experienced a hostile caller, responses ranged from zero to 50 (mean = 7.02, SD = 8.59). The average number of customer aggression events per day was 10 (about 15–20 per cent of total calls per day), and 60 per cent reported that such an event had occurred already that week or that day. Due to the non-normal, positively skewed distribution of the reported frequency of these events, frequency was transformed using the square root, which was used in subsequent analyses. The *stress appraisal* of these types of calls was rated as moderately to very stressful on average ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.13$). Thus there is a fair amount of variability in both the frequency and stress appraisal to these types of interactions. Bivariate correlations (see Table 1) show that all hypothesized paths were significant except that frequency of customer aggression was not related to absences.

Path Modeling

In order to simultaneously test the multiple proposed relationships, LISREL (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993) was used to test path models with manifest indicators (see Table 2). Four nested models were compared to test the relative fit when certain paths were constrained or freely estimated. The first model tested the hypothesized paths and had a good fit with the data according to multiple indices (see Table 2). Figure 2 shows the path coefficients. Frequency of customer aggression was positively related to stress appraisal (Hypothesis 1). Negative affectivity was positively related to frequency and stress appraisal (Hypotheses 2a and 2b), and job autonomy negatively related to the stress appraisal of customer aggression (Hypothesis 3). Both the frequency of hostile calls and stress appraisal of hostile calls had significant paths with emotional exhaustion, beyond negative affectivity (Hypothesis 4a).

In order to test the proposed mediation hypotheses (4b and 5b), the nested models were compared. First, to test the direct relationship of frequency with emotional exhaustion, the stress appraisal–emotional exhaustion path was constrained, revealing a significant link between frequency and emotional

Table 1. Bivariate correlations of path model variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Sex (M = 1, F = 0)	0.36	0.48								
2. Race (Hispanic = 1, Non-Hispanic = 0)	0.79	0.41	0.22*							
3. Work site	0.51	0.50	0.01	-0.40*						
4. Negative affectivity	1.87	0.71	-0.15*	-0.22*	0.16*					
5. Autonomy	2.54	1.17	0.05	0.03	-0.14*	-0.37*				
6. Frequency of customer aggression	2.32	1.34	0.05	0.08	0.11	0.15*	-0.22*			
7. Stress appraisal of customer aggression	3.55	1.13	-0.07	-0.05	0.09	0.46*	-0.39*	0.25*		
8. Emotional exhaustion	3.00	0.97	-0.07	-0.01	0.18*	0.56*	-0.43*	0.30*	0.52*	
9. Absences	3.19	3.58	0.08	-0.12	0.20*	0.27*	-0.18	0.05	0.20*	0.30*

Note: Frequency of customer aggression and absences are both transformed using the square root.

* $p < 0.05$.

Table 2. Fit indices for manifest path model

Model specification	χ^2	d.f.	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δ d.f.	GFI	CFI	NNFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Model 1: Frequency and stress appraisal \rightarrow EE	26.06*	15	—	—	0.97	0.96	0.91	0.05	0.066
Model 2a: Remove frequency \rightarrow EE	34.74*	16	8.68*	1	0.96	0.94	0.87	0.06	0.084
Model 2b: Add frequency \rightarrow Absence and Appraisal \rightarrow Absence	25.29*	13	0.77	2	0.97	0.96	0.89	0.05	0.075
Model 3: Remove EE \rightarrow Absence	35.34*	14	10.05*	1	0.96	0.93	0.83	0.07	0.095

Note: Each model is compared to the model preceding it, except Model 2b is compared with Model 1. Model 1 is preferred as the best-fitting model.

* $p < 0.05$.

exhaustion ($b = 0.22$, $p < 0.05$). To test for mediation, the direct path from frequency to emotional exhaustion was constrained to zero, in order to determine if this path added significantly to the model or if the relationship was mediated by stress appraisal. This model, Model 2a, was significantly worse than Model 1, thus not supporting mediation Hypothesis 4b, and the path was freely estimated for the remaining models. For Model 2b, direct paths from frequency and stress appraisal to absences were added to test a model with these direct and indirect effects. This resulted in a non-significant decrease in the chi-square statistic, supporting the more parsimonious Model 1 without the direct paths. To ensure that the frequency and stress appraisal were related to absences so that mediation could be demonstrated, Model 3 removed the path from emotional exhaustion to absences. The model significantly decreased in fit, and the stress of hostile calls had a significant path to absences ($b = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$) though frequency of hostile calls did not ($b = -0.002$, n.s.) (Hypothesis 5a partially supported). Since frequency of aggression was not related to absences, mediation could not be supported for this predictor (Baron & Kenny, 1986); however, the mediation hypothesis for stress appraisal was supported (Hypothesis 5b).

Emotion regulation with a verbally aggressive customer

We were also interested in how employees regulated emotions with hostile customers at a specific level. In particular, we hypothesized that those who appraised customer aggression as more stressful would use different techniques during such an event than those who found it less stressful. To examine Hypotheses 6a–c, we asked employees to recall their most recent aggressive customer, and we compared the regulation used by the high stress appraisal group (≥ 4.00 , the median) with the low stress appraisal group (< 4.00). Within-person analyses also examined the highest use strategy compared to other strategies. Table 3 lists the full results.

As predicted in Hypothesis 6a, surface acting was significantly more likely to be performed by the high stress appraisal group than the low stress appraisal group ($t = 2.12$, $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, within the high stress appraisal group, surface acting was significantly more likely than any other regulation response according to paired t -tests ($p < 0.05$). Hypothesis 6b was supported: deep acting was more likely during customer aggression for those with low stress appraisal than high. Positive refocusing was significantly more likely for the low stress appraisal group than the high stress appraisal group

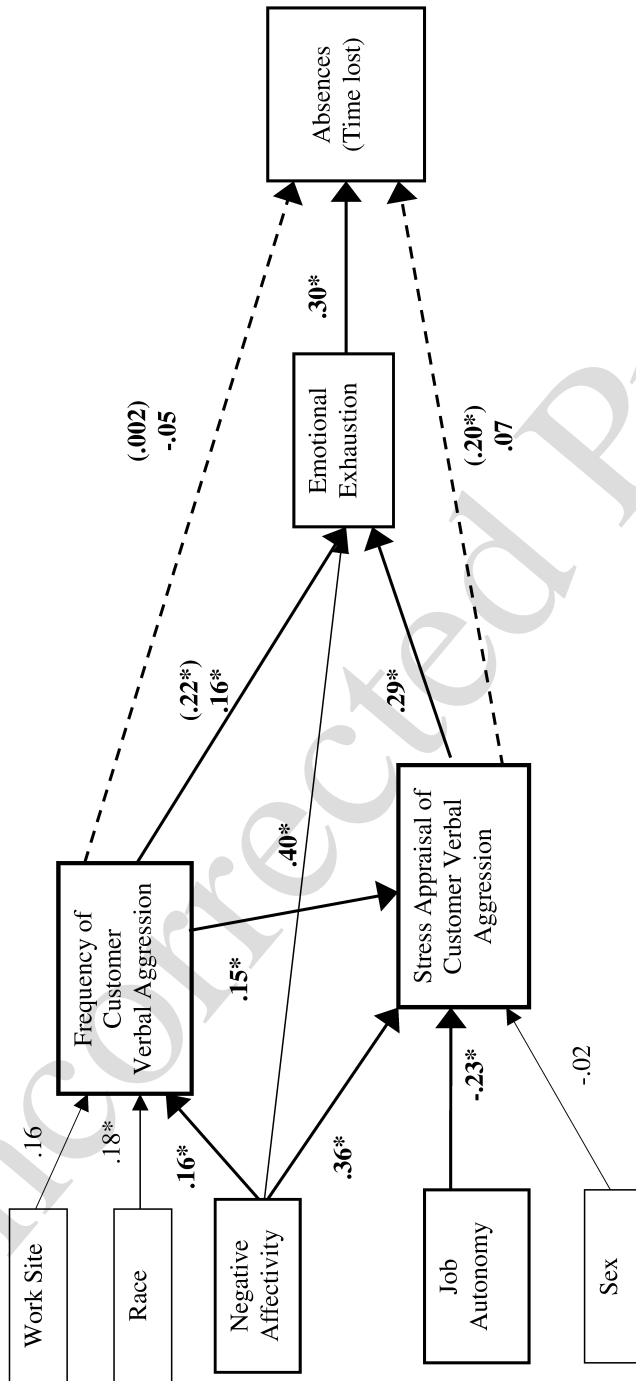


Figure 2. Path coefficient results from LISREL analyses. Standardized path coefficients are shown. Dashed lines indicate paths added in alternate models to test the mediation hypotheses. Values in parentheses are the coefficients for the direct path without the mediator added. All tested paths are shown. * $p < 0.05$

Table 3. Comparisons of regulation type and stress appraisal during a recent customer verbal aggression event

	Surface acting: faking/suppressing	Deep acting: positive refocusing	Deep acting: perspective taking	Venting
High stress appraisal ($n = 108$)	1.42 ^a (0.64)	0.61 (0.65)	1.08 (0.69)	0.41 (0.63)
Low stress appraisal ($n = 85$)	1.21 (0.76)	0.87 (0.79)	1.53 ^a (0.57)	0.20 (0.40)
<i>t</i> -statistic	2.12*	2.51*	3.03**	2.74**

Note: Values represent the average number of items (0–2) checked for each regulation type, with standard deviations in parentheses.

^aValues with a superscript are the most frequently reported type of regulation within-person (by row) according to pairwise comparisons ($p < 0.05$).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

($t = 2.51$, $p < 0.05$), and the same held true for perspective taking ($t = 3.03$, $p < 0.01$). Employees with low stress appraisal were also significantly more likely to engage in the deep acting tactic of perspective taking rather than the other regulation approaches. Finally, Hypothesis 6c was supported: venting was more likely to occur for the high stress appraisal group than low stress appraisal group during the call ($t = 2.74$, $p < 0.05$), though the frequency of venting was the lowest in comparison to the other strategies for both groups (see Table 3).

Discussion

The current study extends the literature on work aggression by: (1) introducing the importance of verbal aggression from *customers* as part of a service employees' workday; (2) testing the impact of customer aggression on emotional exhaustion and absences; and (3) examining the strategies of emotion regulation during these unique aggression encounters.

Customer verbal aggression: frequency and stress appraisal

Previous research on work aggression and incivility has focused on intra-organizational members and has tended to ignore the role of customers in influencing the socio-emotional experience at work (e.g., Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Frone, 2000). The current study provides grounds for such pursuits. The majority of full-time call center employees reported that they received calls from verbally aggressive customers daily, with the modal response being about 15–20 per cent of interactions with customers (10 per day); however, some people reported zero, and others reported 50 per day. People who were more likely to feel hostile and anxious (high NA) were also more likely to report higher numbers of hostile customers. This may be a self-reporting bias, but it could also demonstrate the poor person–job fit of these people whose interpersonal style may engender angry customers. Comparing self-reported aggression with others' reports, or with more objective measures (e.g., archival recordings of calls), would be a worthwhile next step that was not possible here. Hispanic call center employees (the majority of employees at these sites) reported more hostile callers, on average, in comparison to non-Hispanic employees. This may be related to social psychology research on aversive racism, where people who have the opportunity to 'punish' someone do so to a greater extent if the person seems to be a minority member (Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). This racial difference warrants greater attention in future research.

There was also variability in the extent that employees found verbal aggression from customers to be stressful. Interestingly, sex was not related to the stress appraisal of customer aggression; males found verbally aggressive customers just as stressful as females did. The variation seemed to be a function of dispositional affectivity and perceived job autonomy. The less negative the employee, and the more that these call center employees felt that they had freedom over their work tasks, the less stressful they found the hostile callers. The effect of job autonomy supports the power of feeling in control while coping with an inescapable stressor.

Consequences of customer aggression

The second contribution was to demonstrate the relationships of customer aggression with emotional exhaustion and absences. We supported that frequency of customer aggression was related to both the intensity of stress appraisal and burnout beyond negative affectivity. Previous workplace aggression literature has often omitted negative affectivity; our findings support that self-reported aggression predicts burnout beyond this disposition. Despite predictions based on the Lazarus stress model, stress appraisal did not mediate this relationship; the reported frequency and the perceived threat of customer aggression had unique and independent influences on burnout. It is possible we would have found the proposed mediation relationship if we measured the objective frequency of customer aggression, as ideally proposed by the stress model. Alternatively, the fact that the frequency of angry customers relates to burnout regardless of its appraised threat supports that chronic unpleasant events are fatiguing and that cognitive awareness of threat is not necessary to have that outcome.

Those employees who found aggressive calls particularly stressful took more time off work for the 3 months following data collection. As predicted, the relationship between stress appraisal of customer aggression and absences was mediated by emotional exhaustion. Taking a day off is one way that customer service employees can restore lost energy resources (George, 1989; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). This suggests that decreasing the appraised stressfulness of customer aggression (perhaps through increased autonomy) may minimize not only burnout but also lost hours at work. This data cannot address whether absences were effective in handling hostile customers, but that is an interesting question to pursue in future studies (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998). Frequency of customer aggression did not have a significant relationship with absences, which was consistent with previous weak findings about aggression and self-reported absences (e.g., Spector & Jex, 1998). It may be that employees at service jobs are aware that customer aggression is part of the job—while it is stressful, their occurrence does not result in withdrawal because it matches expectations.

Emotion regulation during customer aggression

The third contribution was to examine how service employees regulated their emotional responses to a verbally aggressive customer encounter. During our interviews, employees gave us examples of surface acting, deep acting, and venting. The survey allowed us to understand which employees were more likely to engage in these behaviors. Call center employees who appraised aggressive customers highly stressful reported engaging in surface acting and venting to a greater extent than those who find them mildly stressful. Faking expressions in single encounters has been linked with stress and poor work attitudes (Grandey et al., 2002; Gross & Levenson, 1997; Totterdell & Holman, 2003). Thus, surface acting by these call center employees to hostile customers may be an adaptive response for the company but not for employees. Venting anger during the call was seldom reported by these employees, but when it was it was more likely to be reported by a person with high stress appraisal.

Such a response has critical effects on customer satisfaction (Bitner et al., 1990; Grandey, 2003), arguing for the importance of modifying the stress appraisal. Those who had found aggressive callers less stressful focused on modifying their cognitive appraisals of the callers and engaged in mood regulation, forms of deep acting. This response may have been a sign of well-ingrained training—according to the interviews, most employees readily said that the way they coped was to not ‘take it personal.’ Either way, the results support that engaging in deep acting is effective for service performance (Grandey, 2003; Totterdell & Holman, 2003).

Overall, these results suggest that helping employees view hostile customers in a less threatening way—perhaps by enhancing their sense of autonomy—could improve responses to these customers and decrease emotional exhaustion and absences. Though this data is cross-sectional, the presumed direction was based on the appraisal processes proposed by Lazarus and colleagues (1985). Furthermore, a causal flow from general (appraisal of customer aggression) to specific (regulation with certain customer) is more likely than the reverse. Future laboratory or experience sampling research is needed to examine when emotion regulation occurs and whether the regulation strategy actually causes subsequent performance and stress.

Limitations

This study focused on the experience of call center employees. Their encounters are voice-to-voice, thus minimizing the possibility that an aggressive customer may physically harm them. Hochschild (1983) has suggested that emotional labor that was done voice-to-voice may be less stressful than face-to-face, since fewer emotion outlets must be regulated. This seems to suggest our results are conservative; however, it may be that voice-to-voice contact makes customer aggression more likely since the customer feels detached from the social encounter and does not get the facial cues from the employee to desist. Clearly, comparison studies with face-to-face service encounters are needed.

In order to sample these full-time employees during company time, the survey had to be short: some of the measures used were one- or two-item measures, which typically have less stable psychometric properties than multi-item scales. However, most of the hypothesized relationships were supported, suggesting robust findings despite these limitations. Future studies should use broader measures than we were able to in this study—our single-item measures may have limited the potential relationships by focusing too narrowly on a certain type of aggressive behavior and one way of asking about appraisal.

The study was mainly dependent on self-reported surveys, which means shared method variance is a potential explanation for relationships. We could not gather the objective quantity of the aggressive calls in order to verify the reported frequency; it may be that some employees were inflating the number to complain about their jobs, while others may be lowering the number to manage impressions. We attempted to minimize this problem by asking about a set of behaviors within a short time frame and ensuring confidential responses by providing sealable envelopes and making the provision of their identification (ID) number voluntary. ID numbers were provided by half the sample for whom objective absence data from personnel records were gathered. However, those who did not report their ID number had higher emotional exhaustion on average, and thus the range of responses was truncated. This would likely result in a smaller relationship than actually exists, but we did still support two-thirds of our predictions between the self-reported and objective measures.

We tried to minimize inflation due to overlap of item content, another methodological problem of self-reported data (Spector, 1987), by using different response formats for the frequency, stress appraisal, and emotional exhaustion scales and placing them in different places in the survey. Since negative affectivity affects reporting of stress-related variables (Spector, 1994), it was controlled to minimize

the inflation of relationships spuriously. Finally, the direction of causality is suspect given the cross-sectional data—it may be that emotional exhaustion creates more frequent hostile callers, for example; however, we relied on a simple, well-validated model of stress that suggests the order of relationships tested. We also gathered absences subsequent to the collection of the predictor variables, which is at least stronger evidence of a directional relationship than if they were gathered at the same point in time.

Implications

Future researchers who are examining aggression from supervisors and co-workers should measure its occurrence from customers as well and examine the comparative stress of aggression from intra- and extra-organizational sources. Helping boundary-spanners feel like they have control in their jobs may aid in decreasing the stress of abusive customers. This may be as simple as telling employees they have the freedom to take a break if they need one after a rough customer or to tell customers when they have crossed the line. When customer aggression was viewed as less stressful, emotional exhaustion was lower, and there were subsequently fewer absences, thus related to call centers' bottom line. Furthermore, engaging in deep acting was also associated with lower stress appraisal. The results of this study demonstrate that hostile customers are part of work life for boundary-spanners. Management is encouraged to enhance the sense of job autonomy for service representatives so that such events are less stressful, and provide employees with training in emotion regulation for responding to customers who are *not* always right.

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Appendix: Items of Surface Acting, Deep Acting, and Venting in Response to a Specific Event in a Pilot Study

Think of a time in the last two weeks when someone was extremely rude or personally attacking you: to what extent did you do the following?	Surface acting	Deep acting: positive refocus	Deep acting: perspective taking	Venting
I faked my feelings.	0.85			
I tried to keep my feelings from interfering too much.	0.78			
I generally tried to look at the positive side of things to change how I feel.		0.86		
I attempted to focus on happier things.		0.81		
I tried to see things from the other person's point of view.		-0.36	0.76	
I tried to reinterpret what people said or did so that I don't take their actions personally.			0.87	
I let my feelings out somehow.				0.84
I expressed anger to the person(s) who caused the problem.				0.75

Note: N = 150 working college students. Four factors explained 72.5 per cent of the variance. Only factor loadings above 0.25 are shown.

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Q1: Author: Please provide location.

Q2: Author: First author is O'Leary on ref. list.

Q3: Author: Not on ref. list.

Q4: Author: Not found in text.

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