CUSTOMER MISTREATMENT: A REVIEW OF CONCEPTUALIZATIONS AND A MULTILEVEL THEORETICAL MODEL

Jaclyn Koopmann, Mo Wang, Yihao Liu and Yifan Song

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we summarize and build on the current state of the customer mistreatment literature in an effort to further future research on this topic. First, we detail the four primary conceptualizations of customer mistreatment. Second, we present a multilevel model of customer mistreatment, which distinguishes between the unfolding processes at the individual employee level and the service encounter level. In particular, we consider the antecedents and outcomes unique to each level of analysis as well as mediators and moderators. Finally, we discuss important methodological concerns and recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Customer mistreatment; customer interactional injustice; customer incivility; customer aggression; affective work event; multilevel model
Customer mistreatment, which refers to the low-quality interpersonal treatment that employees receive from their customers during service interactions (Bies, 2001; Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008; Wang, Liao, Zhan, & Shi, 2011), is a shared experience among service workers (Boyd, 2002; Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004; Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Customer mistreatment may take the form of derogatory behavior, verbal aggression, or unreasonable demands (e.g., Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Skarlicki et al., 2008) and can have serious ramifications for service employee well-being, such as emotional exhaustion (e.g., Grandey et al., 2004) and physical health symptoms (e.g., Sliter, Pui, Sliter, & Jex, 2011), and work behaviors, such as service performance (e.g., Rafaeli et al., 2012; Sliter, Jex, Wolford, & McInerney, 2010) and sabotage behavior (e.g., Wang et al., 2011).

Whereas the majority of previous studies have focused on the general tendency to experience customer mistreatment (i.e., between-person differences), new emphasis has been placed on the study of specific customer mistreatment events and employees’ daily exposure to customer mistreatment. Indeed, recent experimental (e.g., Rupp & Spencer, 2006) and experience-sampling studies (e.g., Wang et al., 2013) have provided some insights into the more immediate affective and behavioral outcomes of customer mistreatment. However, customer mistreatment research would benefit from improved conceptual clarity as well as methodological rigor because these advancements are needed to more fully understand the breadth and strength of customer mistreatment’s effects on service employees, customers, and organizations. Moreover, previous studies have largely treated customer mistreatment as a given component of service work without much attention paid to the employee-related, situational, or environmental causes of customer mistreatment. Therefore, we aim to contribute to the customer mistreatment literature in several ways in this chapter.

First, we synthesize the multiple conceptualizations of customer mistreatment, including customer mistreatment as interactional injustice, affective work event, signal of goal failure, and resource-depleting event, and emphasize the need for research design and research questions to align with the chosen conceptualization. Second, integrating these conceptualizations, we propose a multilevel model of customer mistreatment that summarizes previous empirical studies and provides additional avenues for future research on customer mistreatment. In particular, our multilevel perspective helps distinguish customer mistreatment as a phenomenon at the individual and service encounter levels. Specifically, we highlight that whereas individual characteristics, organizational policies, and job conditions may
affect how regularly a service employee is mistreated, employee and customer states (e.g., mood and regulatory resources) may directly or indirectly (through service quality) impact the occurrence of customer mistreatment during a specific service encounter.

Furthermore, our model depicts the possible mechanisms by which customer mistreatment experiences influence short-term employee outcomes (e.g., emotional labor and stress), customer outcomes (e.g., service performance and sabotage), and potential outcomes for coworkers, family, and friends outside of the service interaction (e.g., the spillover of aggression). Our multilevel perspective also addresses the individual-level boundary conditions that may serve as important moderators of the multilevel theoretical relations specified in the model. Finally, we consider the methodological issues present in previous research and offer concrete suggestions, such as improving construct measurement, using multisource data, incorporating longitudinal and multilevel designs, as well as including additional control variables, to improve future research.

CONCEPTUALIZING CUSTOMER MISTREATMENT

Although previous research agrees on the definition of customer mistreatment (i.e., customers’ low-quality interpersonal treatment of employees), studies have used different conceptualizations to understand customer mistreatment’s implications. As such, we synthesize and review the four major conceptualizations of customer mistreatment in the current section.

Customer Mistreatment as Interactional Injustice

Previous literature has identified customer mistreatment as a specific type of interactional injustice, which involves interpersonal and informational justice perceptions (Bies, 2001; Rupp, McCance, & Grandey, 2007; Rupp, McCance, Spencer, & Sonntag, 2008; Rupp & Spencer, 2006; Skarlicki et al., 2008; Spencer & Rupp, 2009), because both customer mistreatment and interactional injustice involve norm violations in workplace social interactions. Specifically, interpersonal injustice is perceived when an employee is subject to disrespectful, ignominious, or interpersonally insensitive behavior from another organizational party, such as a coworker or supervisor. Informational injustice is perceived when an employee is
provided unclear, dishonest, or insufficient communication or communication that is inappropriately timed (Bies & Moag, 1986; Colquitt, 2001). These perspectives suggest that employees will feel that they have been unjustly treated when a customer talks down to them, speaks out of turn interjecting with new demands for them to handle (interpersonal forms of injustice), intentionally omits crucial information, or is reluctant and ill-natured about extending additional information when prompted (informational forms of injustice).

The general justice literature suggests that when employees perceive interpersonal or informational injustice, they give poorer appraisals of transgressors, experience lower work attitudes, and engage in withdrawal and retaliatory behaviors, such as theft and sabotage (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). However, in the customer service interaction, employees are often not allowed to take their frustration out on their coworkers or supervisors (Yang & Diefendorff, 2009). Moreover, general work attitudes and behaviors directed toward the organization seem less likely consequences of customer mistreatment than retaliation toward customers. Indeed, recent conceptual work on deontic justice (Croppanzano, Goldman, & Folger, 2003; Folger, 2001; Folger, Cropanzano, & Goldman, 2005) and multifoci justice (Croppanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001; Lavelle, Rupp, & Brockner, 2007; Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002) suggests that injustice reactions are commonly directed toward offending parties.

In particular, the deontic perspective contends that for evolutionary reasons injustice will trigger judgments of moral wrongdoing, engender negative emotions, and result in retaliation against the transgressor (e.g., Folger, 2001; Folger & Skarlicki, 2008). For example, Reb, Goldman, Kray, and Cropanzano (2006) observed that terminated employees perceiving interactional injustice favored punitive treatment for the managers they held accountable. Reb et al. reasoned that terminated employees desired to punish their transgressors because doing so helps to recalibrate the moral convention and need for moral meaning. Thus, when employees are mistreated by customers, they are likely to make judgments about whether their fundamental moral right to be treated fairly has been violated (Spencer & Rupp, 2009) and are likely to “even the score” through retaliation.

Likewise, multifoci justice emphasizes that the source of injustice matters because employees assign culpability to transgressors as an inherent part of justice perceptions. In other words, the source is an important piece of injustice experiences because the source determines at whom employees
direct their responses. In fact, there is a robust literature which documents that the perceived source of injustice is the target of revenge-motivated behavior by the wronged employee (Rupp & Spencer, 2006). For instance, Rupp, Shao, Jones, and Liao (2014) used meta-analysis to demonstrate that transgressor-specific justice perceptions are more strongly related to transgressor outcomes than they are to non-transgressor outcomes.

Consistent with the broader justice literature, customer mistreatment has been linked with emotional and retaliatory consequences, such as employee sabotage (Skarlicki et al., 2008), counterproductive work behavior (Yang & Diefendorff, 2009), and negative emotions (Rupp et al., 2007; Rupp et al., 2008; Rupp & Spencer, 2006; Spencer & Rupp, 2009). Given its underlying quid pro quo mechanism, the interactional injustice conceptualization of customer mistreatment is particularly useful for studies examining transgressor-specific (i.e., customer-directed) outcomes.

Customer Mistreatment as an Affective Work Event

Previous research has also conceptualized customer mistreatment relative to its affective consequences because such mistreatment elicits negative emotions and reduces positive emotions (Rupp & Spencer, 2006). Specifically, affective events theory contends that work events elicit affective responses which in turn drive work attitudes, motivation, and behaviors. Through primary and secondary appraisal processes, employees first acknowledge personally relevant events (e.g., events that endanger individual well-being) and then react to them with discrete emotions (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Thus, affective events theory suggests that customer mistreatment may be relevant to employees’ affect when customer mistreatment is personally or professionally significant to the employee. That is, if an employee feels that customer mistreatment is a hindrance to his/her work or threatens his/her self-image, the employee will subsequently experience negative emotions.

Accordingly, previous research has associated customer mistreatment with anger (e.g., Rupp et al., 2008; Spencer & Rupp, 2009) which is easily induced by moral or social norm violation (e.g., Folger, 2001; Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzano, 1999). Anxiety has also been linked with customer mistreatment because customer mistreatment creates ambiguity about how employee performance and well-being will be affected (Wegge, Van Dick, & Von Bernstorff, 2010; Zhan, Wang, & Shi, 2013). Furthermore, an array of other negative emotions, including sadness, fear, frustration,
disappointment, hurt, guilt, and shame (Groth & Grandey, 2012; Rupp et al., 2007; Volmer, Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Niessen, 2012; Wegge, Vogt, & Wecking, 2007; Yang & Diefendorff, 2009) have also been examined as affective consequences of customer mistreatment.

Affective events theory further suggests that whereas acute negative events elicit discrete and intense negative emotions, over time and with continued exposure, negative events are likely to result in low-arousal negative moods among employees (Morris, 1989; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Thus, instances of customer mistreatment are more likely to result in negative emotions, such as anger, whereas accumulated customer mistreatment is more likely to result in sustainable impairment to well-being, such as depression. For example, Baranik, Wang, Gong, and Shi (2014) observed that when employees constantly experienced high levels of customer mistreatment, they tended to have lower levels of well-being.

In addition, the affective work event conceptualization aligns well with research documenting that employees and customers share similar emotions due to emotional contagion (Barger & Grandey, 2006; Elfenbein, 2014; Kim & Yoon, 2012; Tan, Der Foo, & Kwek, 2004), which can be thought of as the “tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally” (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994, p. 5). Recent conceptual work (Van Kleef, Homan, & Cheshin, 2012) also posits that emotions have interpersonal affective consequences, which in turn drive individuals’ behavioral responses. Affective reactions to others’ emotional displays occur when observers adopt a similar or complementary emotion based on physical or verbal cues or when observers develop positive or negative feelings about someone based on that person’s emotions. Based on these mechanisms (i.e., emotional contagion and emotion-based impression), it is conceivable that customer mistreatment leads service employees to feel similar emotions such as anger; complementary emotions such as fear; or disdain toward the customer. Consequently, the employee may return the mistreatment, interacting in a discourteous manner with the customer.

In sum, an affective work event conceptualization can be valuable when studies consider customer mistreatment’s impact on employee well-being because well-being is commonly linked to affective experiences (e.g., Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Additionally, this conceptualization may shed light on both the short-term emotional consequences of customer mistreatment in a service encounter (e.g., anger) and the long-term
cumulative effect of customer mistreatment on employee well-being (e.g., depression) at the individual level.

**Customer Mistreatment as a Signal of Goal Failure**

Previous research has also conceptualized customer mistreatment as a goal failure signal. Service employees’ task goals involve working with customers to address their specific problems and demands (Dormann & Zapf, 2004). In addition, service employees’ personal goals entail satisfaction of affiliation and achievement needs because these needs are essential to maintaining positive self-image (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Skarlicki et al., 2008). Customer mistreatment may signal goal failure because it indicates that the customer is dissatisfied, which is incongruent with the task goal (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Customer mistreatment may also place additional job demands on the employee, increasing the resources needed to complete the service task and reducing employee expectations of effectively meeting the service task goal (Wang et al., 2011). Likewise, customer mistreatment may signal goal failure because it limits the relatedness, accomplishment, and positive self-regard employees can experience in the service interaction (Skarlicki et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2013). Thus, customer mistreatment can be viewed as a signal to service employees that their efforts toward pursuing task and personal goals are unsuccessful.

In turn, the signal of goal failure induces a goal blockage experience (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008) and leads to cognitive and social reactions such as rumination and social sharing (Baranik et al., 2014). As one example, rumination involves recurrent thoughts that are focused on individuals’ perceptions of goal failure but not how one could achieve goal success. Ruminative thoughts about goal failure occur voluntarily without provocation when individuals are not otherwise engaged in alternative activities. Goal blockage triggers rumination because it may increase the availability of the goal failure experience (e.g., customer mistreatment), facilitating the ease with which it is remembered (Martin & Tesser, 1989, 1996; Martin, Tesser, & McIntosh, 1993; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008; Smith & Alloy, 2009). Unless the goal is achieved or abandoned, thoughts of the unattained goal may repeatedly interrupt individuals’ lives. Consequently, individuals may re-experience the failure and its negative emotion over time, because rumination increases negatively biased thinking and pessimism while reducing efforts toward goal completion and
mood-enhancing behaviors (e.g., Moberly & Watkins, 2008; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Accordingly, previous research has conceptually or empirically linked customer mistreatment with rumination and lasting negative mood states (e.g., Rafaeli et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2013). For example, Wang et al. (2013) found that customer mistreatment was related to greater rumination up to one day later and higher negative affect up to two days later. Moreover, Volmer et al. (2012) demonstrated that civil services employees engaged in greater levels of negative work reflection on days when they experienced more customer mistreatment.

The goal failure conceptualization is consistent with Diefendorff and Gosserand’s (2003) control theory of emotional labor, which suggests that service employees consider their expressed emotions in light of organizational requirements for personable service (i.e., emotional display rules). When employees perceive a discrepancy between their current emotions and the task-based emotional goal, they partake in emotion regulation, either changing the way they think to elicit authentic and compliant emotional displays or the way they are acting to fake desired emotional displays. Thus, when customer mistreatment occurs, a service employee will perceive a large discrepancy signal between their current emotions and the emotions dictated by company display rules, resulting in perceived service goal failure and emotion regulation to reduce the discrepancy. Thus, the goal failure conceptualization of customer mistreatment is particularly useful for studies examining emotional labor and other self-regulatory outcomes.

Customer Mistreatment as a Resource-Depleting Event

Previous research has also adopted a resource-based conceptualization of customer mistreatment because service employees may gain resources from cooperative customer interactions or lose resources from poor customer interactions, such as those involving customer mistreatment (e.g., Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Goldberg & Grandey, 2007; Wang et al., 2011). Specifically, the conservation of resources theory (COR, Hobfoll, 1989, 2002) defines resources as the sum of an individual’s means to achieve his or her important needs. Because individuals invest current resources in behavioral regulation, they must interact with their environment to accumulate new resources for satisfaction of valued needs (i.e., the accumulation mechanism, Hobfoll, 2002). When facing direct or primary resource loss, such as when personal possessions, self-esteem, or social relationships are threatened, individuals reinvest existing resources
hoping to offset the loss (i.e., the protection mechanism). If these resources are not recouped, secondary resource loss will occur, resulting in unsuccessful loss control strategies and loss spirals (i.e., configurations of exponential resource depletion; Bacharach & Bamberger, 2007; Hobfoll, 2002) and subsequently inferior stores of resources available for regulating other work behaviors (Vohs & Heatherton, 2000).

During customer mistreatment, customers breach the norms of social interactions, placing greater claims (i.e., the interpersonal and emotional demands of the job) on employee resources while blocking employees’ opportunities for resource gains. In particular, when mistreated, service employees engage in emotional and behavioral regulation to comply with organizational service rules that stipulate handling customers with professionalism, respect, and positive emotions (Goldberg & Grandey, 2007; Grandey, Kern, & Frone, 2007; Sliter et al., 2010). Therefore, in addition to causing employees to experience primary resource loss by imposing more job demands, customer mistreatment incites efforts to counteract resource loss via further resource investment (e.g., additional attentional and emotional energies directed to conforming to and fulfilling prescribed service goals). In turn, service employees may experience secondary resource loss and a loss spiral (Grandey, Foo, Groth, & Goodwin, 2012). All in all, employees are subsequently less capable of conforming to customer service rules and regulating their behavior (Wang et al., 2011).

Consistent with previous empirical studies documenting the effects of resource depletion, customer mistreatment has been linked with employee sabotage (Shao & Skarlicki, 2014; Wang et al., 2011), incivility toward customers, job demands (van Jaarsveld, Walker, & Skarlicki, 2010), withdrawal (e.g., absences, Grandey et al., 2004), reduced performance (e.g., Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012), and burnout (e.g., Ben-Zur & Yagil, 2005; Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Grandey et al., 2007; Greenbaum, Quade, Mawritz, Kim, & Crosby, 2014). For example, Wang et al. (2011), using a sample of call center employees, reported that customer mistreatment was positively related to employee sabotage and this positive association was mitigated by job tenure (i.e., cognitive resource) and service rule commitment (i.e., motivational resource). Furthermore, in a series of experimental studies, Rafaeli et al. (2012) observed that customer mistreatment impaired employee task performance through the depletion of cognitive resources, namely working memory and recognition memory.

Notably, resource depletion and self-regulation impairment may be a mediating mechanism between previously discussed conceptualizations and employee outcomes because injustice perceptions, negative affective work events, and signals of goal failure are all likely to deplete service employees’
resources and we more fully address this idea in a later section. From a practical standpoint, the resource-based conceptualization of customer mistreatment can be particularly impactful because studies in this paradigm often consider the individual or contextual resources that protect individuals from mistreatment’s negative effects.

**Concluding Comments on Conceptualizations of Customer Mistreatment**

With several conceptualizations available in the existing literature, it is important to understand the appropriate use of each conceptualization in future research efforts. We suggest researchers choose their theoretical lens based on the nature of their research question. For instance, if researchers are interested in examining how customer mistreatment leads to employee retaliation toward their transgressors, then a justice-based conceptualization may be more appropriate. If researchers are interested in customer mistreatment’s short-term emotional or long-term well-being consequences, then an affective work event conceptualization can be utilized. When researchers study how customer mistreatment influences self-regulatory processes, such as emotion regulation, the goal failure conceptualization is likely most suitable. The resource-based conceptualization may be applied alone to understand maladaptive behavior and coping strategies resulting from customer mistreatment or in conjunction with the other three conceptualizations to further explicate how customer mistreatment affects employees.

In addition, researchers need to be aware that to study customer mistreatment at different levels (e.g., individual level vs. service encounter level), they also have to be careful in choosing their theoretical conceptualization. Specifically, all four theoretical conceptualizations may fit, if the researchers are interested in phenomena at the service encounter level. However, if the researchers are interested in phenomena at the individual level, they need to select the theoretical conceptualization that would allow clear articulation of the emergence process of the key constructs from the service encounter level to the individual level. For example, if the affective work event conceptualization is chosen, an emotional climate-based emergence process needs to be used to connect event-based negative emotions to individual-level phenomena, such as job dissatisfaction and poor well-being. To contrast, if the goal failure conceptualization is chosen, a chronic goal blockage-based emergence process needs to be used to make a similar connection.

Based on these notions, we next develop a multilevel theoretical model to understand and differentiate the unfolding processes of customer
mishandling at the individual employee level and service encounter level (see Fig. 1). In this model, we also consider important boundary conditions of these unfolding processes. In the sections that follow, we first explain a multilevel view of customer mistreatment, which allows us to focus on unique antecedents and outcomes at different levels of analysis. We then provide more details regarding the specific relationships described in our theoretical model.

**A MULTILEVEL MODEL OF CUSTOMER MISTREATMENT**

**Service Encounter-Level Customer Mistreatment versus Individual-Level Customer Mistreatment**

An important intent of this chapter is to introduce a multilevel view to examine customer mistreatment at different levels, namely the service
encounter level and the individual level. To study customer mistreatment from this multilevel view, it is critical to distinguish customer mistreatment experienced at the service encounter level from the average customer mistreatment experienced at the individual level. Specifically, at the service encounter level, customer mistreatment refers to the low-quality interpersonal treatment an employee receives during a particular service encounter. In other words, customer mistreatment at the service encounter level represents the fluctuations in or the within-person experience of customer mistreatment, which can vary from service encounter to service encounter. At the individual level, however, customer mistreatment refers to how frequently or commonly an employee receives low-quality interpersonal treatment when interacting with customers. In this sense, individual-level customer mistreatment emphasizes the between-person mean differences among employees in experiencing customer mistreatment.

Conceptualizing and distinguishing customer mistreatment at these two different levels are important because they provide us ways to theorize unique antecedents at corresponding levels of analysis. In particular, at the service encounter level, the nature of the specific customer service interaction, the psychological states of the service employee, and those of the customer, may all contribute to the occurrence of customer mistreatment. In contrast, at the individual level, customer mistreatment is likely to be determined by more stable individual characteristics, job conditions, and organizational policies. For example, employees are typically assigned to customers at random (to the extent that customers appear at random). Therefore, fluctuations in customer mistreatment received by the same customer service employee should even out when aggregated over multiple service encounters. However, if such aggregation reveals a general tendency for a particular employee to be mistreated across various customers, this general tendency can only be attributed to factors that are relatively stable and manifest meaningful differences between employees, such as the service ability of the employee, the quality of the product represented by the customer service employee, or the strategic importance that the company attaches to the customer experience, but not factors that change at the service encounter level. Building upon this logic, for two employees who have the same job in the same company, when one of them in general receives more customer mistreatment than the other, it is likely that the stable individual differences between these two employees drive the differences in the propensity to be mistreated, rather than factors associated with any specific service encounters.
Following this level-based distinction, we next describe a theoretical model that considers the unfolding processes of customer mistreatment at both the service encounter level and the individual level. This model summarizes previous findings but also builds upon theories that describe general principles underlying social interaction as well as service performance. This model also reflects the various theoretical mechanisms we reviewed earlier underlying the key conceptualizations of customer mistreatment.

**Service Encounter-Level Customer Mistreatment — Antecedents**

**Employee States as Distal Antecedents**
At the service encounter level, we expect that employee mood states and regulatory resources could potentially lead to customer mistreatment. Although employees’ mood states may have a direct impact on perceived customer mistreatment (Dudenhöffer & Dormann, 2013), we expect that mood states and regulatory resources are more distal antecedents to service encounter-level customer mistreatment through their effects on service quality. For example, using daily objective productivity and service quality ratings and an experience-sampling design, Rothbard and Wilk (2011) showed that call center employees’ start-of-day positive mood positively predicted and negative mood negatively predicted employee performance. Medler-Liraz and Kark (2012) also demonstrated that service employee hostility was negatively associated with employees’ service performance, which in turn led to more customer mistreatment.

Moreover, we expect that employees’ state regulatory resources could potentially lead to poor service quality and customer mistreatment in a service encounter. Specifically, when employees have fewer regulatory resources, such as when experiencing state burnout or reduced sleep quantity during the previous night, they may not be able to fully participate in the work role or exercise the self-control needed to regulate their service behaviors (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998). Additionally, employees with fewer regulatory resources may also fear further resource loss and thus are hesitant to invest their limited resources (Hobfoll, 2002). For example, in a field experiment, Chan and Wan (2012) found that employees with fewer regulatory resources were less capable of handling customer complaints. In addition, Lanaj, Johnson, and Barnes (2014) have demonstrated that when employees did not get enough sleep the previous night they felt depleted in the morning and were
subsequently less engaged at work. Following these findings, it is conceiva-
ble that service employees are more likely to be mistreated if they have fewer resources available to adequately deliver customer service. Indirect evidence in the customer mistreatment literature supports this argument. According to Winstanley and Whittington (2002), state burnout may make service employees more likely targets of customer mistreatment.

Finally, we expect that job demands, which can be defined as the “physi-
cal, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychologi-
cal costs” (Bakker, Demerouti, de Boer, & Schaufeli, 2003, p. 344), may lead to service encounter-level customer mistreatment. Job demands, such as workload and time pressure, can vary on a daily basis (e.g., Teuchmann, Totterdell, & Parker, 1999) and create psychological strain on employees over time (e.g., Totterdell, Wood, & Wall, 2006). Such strain distracts employee attention away from work tasks and may drain their performance capacity (e.g., Hockey, 1993). Thus, service employees experiencing greater job demands are less likely to deliver high-quality service (van Jaarsveld et al., 2010). For instance, Wegge et al. (2007) observed that service employees under greater time pressure experienced more strain and spent less time talking to customers.

Service Encounter Quality and Customer States as Proximal Antecedents
As stated above, we expect that poor service quality could lead to customer mistreatment. Empirical and conceptual work has suggested that service failure in particular makes employees susceptible to customer mistreatment due to negative customer responses and behaviors (e.g., Groth & Grandey, 2012; Medler-Liraz & Kark, 2012; Reynolds & Harris, 2009). For instance, McColl-Kennedy, Patterson, Smith, and Brady (2009) identified customer rage-related emotions and behaviors incited by service failure; they found that retaliatory and rancorous rage were linked with verbal and physical forms of customer mistreatment. Groth and Grandey (2012) explained that customers are likely to react to dissatisfaction in negative ways, because they may feel that their service expectations have gone unmet (e.g., they may experience negative emotions or they may feel unjustly treated). When studying the service recovery experiences of airline customers, Grégoire and Fisher (2008) reported that customer-perceived justice violations resulted in feelings of betrayal and retaliation. The service recovery litera-
ture has further explained that perceived injustice may motivate customers to “teach the service provider a lesson,” ensure the injustice does not
happen to another customer in the future, or make the service provider understand what it feels like to be ill-treated via retaliation (Funches, Markley, & Davis, 2009). Thus, customer mistreatment is not necessarily unreasonable or unfounded and may stem from poor service quality (Harris & Reynolds, 2004).

Mirroring the effects of employee moods and regulatory resources on customer mistreatment, customer moods and regulatory resources may also lead to service encounter-level customer mistreatment. In particular, customers in negative moods may perceive their interactions with service employees as more hostile whereas customers in positive moods may experience more pleasant interactions (cf., Rothbard & Wilk, 2011). Thus, customers in negative mood states may be more likely to mistreat service employees. In addition, depleted customers, such as those lacking adequate sleep, may not possess the quantity of resources necessary to follow the social norms inherent in customer service interactions and the self-control needed to regulate uncivil or disrespectful behavior toward employees (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). To our knowledge, research addressing customer states and their influence on customer mistreatment is very rare. However, using trained independent observers, Agasi, Decelles, and Rafaeli (2014) studied factors in the airport service environment that might impact customer negative emotions, resource depletion, and subsequent customer mistreatment at the flight level of analysis. They found that walking time to the gate, crowdedness at the gate, and temperature at the gate were all positively related to customer mistreatment intensity and the presence of babies crying at the gate was positively associated with customer mistreatment frequency. Agasi et al. suggest that these features may have drained customer resources and aroused negative emotions, making customers more likely to mistreat airline employees.

Service Encounter-Level Customer Mistreatment — Outcomes

Psychological Responses
As we reviewed earlier, extant research has conceptualized customer mistreatment from multiple perspectives, studying customer mistreatment as interactional injustice, affective work events, signals of goal failure, or resource-depleting events. Accordingly, when experiencing customer mistreatment, employees tend to have multiple immediate psychological responses, among which negative emotions, injustice perceptions, and goal blockage experiences are likely to be the three most proximal outcomes of
customer mistreatment. In turn, these negative states are likely to result in resource depletion and self-regulation impairment at the service encounter level because resource depletion involves an immediate with-person comparison of available resources (e.g., within-person fluctuations in resources).

Self-regulation impairment is one of the core concepts in self-regulation theories (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Baumeister & Vohs, 2003; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Self-regulation theories define self-regulatory resources as individuals’ mental capacity to control and alter naturally occurring emotions, behaviors, and mental states (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003; Beal, Weiss, Barros, & MacDermid, 2005; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). They propose that individuals exercise control over their attitudes and behaviors with regulatory resources and demands from the external environment impair individuals’ regulatory resources. In the context of customer mistreatment, employees’ experiences with rude customers are likely to create demands that consume regulatory resources (Beal et al., 2005; DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007). This resource consumption devoted to regulating one’s mental states following customer mistreatment is essential, because it helps employees to override aversive emotion (e.g., reduce negative emotions; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), redirect their attention back to work (e.g., suppress injustice perceptions; Beal et al., 2005), and to refocus on meeting work-related goals (e.g., recover from goal failures; Grandey, Fisk, & Steiner, 2005); otherwise, employees would be stuck in maladaptive mental states (e.g., rumination) or lose effective regulation of their behaviors (e.g., customer sabotage). Although research has shown that regulating mental states is important for individuals to achieve desirable outcomes, individuals only have a finite amount of resources that are available for the regulation of undesirable mental states (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003; Beal et al., 2005). Therefore, employees are likely to experience resource depletion induced by demanding work events such as customer mistreatment and consequently suffer from self-regulation impairment.

Affective Criteria as Distal Outcomes
We categorize the distal outcomes of service encounter-level customer mistreatment as affective and behavioral in nature. In this section, we review affective outcomes of customer mistreatment at the service encounter level which include emotional labor and stress appraisal.

Previous studies have examined emotional labor and stress as outcomes of customer mistreatment and its negative emotions. For example,
Goldberg and Grandey (2007), Rupp and Spencer (2006), and Spencer and Rupp (2009), using call center simulations, reported causal evidence in support of the emotional labor consequences of customer mistreatment. For example, Rupp and Spencer (2006) manipulated customer mistreatment, finding that participants who were mistreated admitted to taking part in more emotional labor and were rated by others to have engaged in more emotional labor as compared to participants who were not exposed to customer mistreatment.

Some indirect evidence exists at the service encounter level for the effect of customer mistreatment on employee stress. Previous studies have conceptualized customer mistreatment as a daily hassle at work that may be stressful for employees (Sliter et al., 2010; Zhan et al., 2013). In particular, Dormann and Zapf (2004) categorized customer mistreatment as a social stressor because it may threaten service employees’ self-efficacy, goal success, and resources (see also Penney & Spector, 2005). For example, Wegge et al. (2007) manipulated customer behavior toward call center employees and showed that employees serving unfriendly (vs. friendly) customers reported higher levels of psychological strain.

**Behavioral Criteria as Distal Outcomes**

In this section, we consider the behavioral outcomes of customer mistreatment, including service performance, employee sabotage, and aggression. Specifically, when examining the service encounter-level relationship between customer mistreatment and service performance, research has relied on self-regulation impairment as a mediating mechanism. Regulatory resources may be expended following mistreatment experiences as employees seek to assuage related discomfort and figure out why they were mistreated (Porath & Erez, 2007; Stoverink, Umphress, Gardner, & Miner, 2014). This self-regulation impairment should be particularly consequential to service performance because employees will be less able to regulate their service behavior to address customer demands in a particular service encounter. Indeed, Rafaeli et al. (2012) found that compared to participants in the neutral control condition, even one to two customer mistreatment encounters diminished participants’ capacity to remember customer information and impaired their general working memory. They also found that compared to the control condition, participants handling aggressive customer requests had lower performance accuracy and this effect was mediated through working memory when high status customers were involved. Furthermore, Miron-Spektor, Efrat-Treister, Rafaeli, and Schwarz-Cohen (2011) found that participants exposed to customer anger,
as compared to those who were not, had lower creative performance. Miron-Spektor et al. also showed that customer anger reduces an employees’ ability to engage in complex thought processes. Finally, Goldberg and Grandey (2007) manipulated customer hostility and demonstrated that participants in the hostile customer condition (vs. the control condition) made more service performance mistakes during demanding calls, explaining that customer hostility took attentional resources away from task performance.

Self-regulation theories have also argued that resource depletion and the resultant impairment on self-regulatory capacity may make it difficult for individuals to regulate their behaviors to conform to social norms (Baumeister, 1998; Baumeister et al., 1998; Vancouver, 2000). For example, it can become difficult for individuals to inhibit their aggressive impulses and to prevent themselves from acting aggressively (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; DeWall et al., 2007; Wang, Sinclair, & Deese, 2010). Thus, self-regulation impairment triggered by customer mistreatment may make employees less likely to effectively regulate and suppress their negative behavioral intentions toward rude customers. Consequently, mistreated employees may be more likely to violate their service rules by seeking revenge on those customers (i.e., customer-directed sabotage, Wang et al., 2011).

Employees whose self-regulatory capability is impaired may also take out their frustration with a particular customer on targets that are not the source of their original frustration. This phenomenon constitutes displaced aggression (Bushman, Bonacci, Pedersen, Vasquez, & Miller, 2005; Marcus-Newhall, Pedersen, Carlson, & Miller, 2000). Displaced aggression is more likely to occur when the source of initial provocation is unavailable (e.g., not present in the current environment; Bushman et al., 2005), more powerful (e.g., one’s boss; Hoober & Brass, 2006), or intangible (e.g., undesirable temperature and noise level; Baron & Bell, 1975). Although displacing one’s anger onto others violates desirable social norms and expectations (e.g., the principle of reciprocity; Bordia, Restubog, & Tang, 2008) and the impulse to displace one’s anger ought to be regulated and inhibited (e.g., Bushman et al., 2005), this regulation process may become less effective when employees suffer self-regulation impairment after customer mistreatment. Consequently, employees may find it difficult to regulate their aggressive impulses and may be more likely to lash out at others (i.e., exhibit more displaced aggression), including other customers, coworkers and supervisors at work, and family members at home (e.g., Liu et al., 2015). As such, displaced aggression may serve as a bridge between work life and home life. For example, it is conceivable that displaced aggression
directed toward family members may have interesting implications for work—family conflict and family relationship quality. In sum, we expect that customer mistreatment in any particular encounter could lead to displaced aggression. However, to our knowledge, previous studies have not examined customer mistreatment’s effects on displaced aggression.

Distal Criteria and Employee States
It is important to note that the service encounter level affective and behavioral criteria may also serve as inputs into the same or subsequent service encounters (as we illustrated in Fig. 1). For instance, a service employee’s mood and work stress subsequent to a customer mistreatment encounter can influence the service employee states for ongoing or future customer encounters. In addition, the service employee’s performance or sabotage toward a customer has an inherent link with service quality and may also affect the customer state (e.g., mood) in the current or future encounters (if future customers witnessed the previous customer’s experience); thus, these distal criteria can subsequently impact other instances of customer mistreatment. Although a full consideration of this potentially cyclical process is beyond the scope of this chapter, we note that there are complexities to the service encounter-level process that may not be adequately captured by a simple recursive model.

Individual-Level Customer Mistreatment — Antecedents
Several aspects of the service job are likely to influence the typical customer mistreatment experienced by service employees. Specifically, we highlight formal organizational policies, job design, and informal aspects of the work environment and the reasons why we expect that they may influence customer mistreatment.

Organizational Policies
In general, we suggest that formal organizational policies, such as organizational display rules and organizational service delivery strategies, could be relevant to customer mistreatment. Organizational display rules outline the particular emotions service employees should and should not convey when interacting with customers (Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003; Grandey, 2000). Compliance with display rules may be evaluated and rewarded because it is a part of service employees’ performance requirements (e.g., Diefendorff, Richard, & Croyle, 2006). Thus, employees are more
motivated to deliver appropriate emotions during service interactions when display rules exist in an organization (Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003). Consequently, we suggest that customers will be less likely to mistreat employees operating under display rules because positive emotional displays contribute to more satisfying customer service experiences (Barger & Grandey, 2006; Pugh, 2001).

Organizations providing customer service also make important policy decisions regarding service delivery strategy, such as the extent to which service relationships are formed between customers and employees, which may influence customer mistreatment (Gutek, Groth, & Cherry, 2002). According to Gutek, Cherry, Bhappu, Schneider, and Woolf (2000), service relationships exist “when the customer expects to interact again in the future with the same service provider (and vice versa)” and “the two become interdependent” (p. 320). Whereas longer-term service relationships foster mutual investment in the relationship and cooperative behavior, the lack of service relationships provides little incentive to collaborate or develop a rapport. As such, it is conceivable that employees from organizations that emphasize building service relationships are less likely to be mistreated by customers because they face more certainty, gain more personal knowledge, and enjoy higher levels of trust with their customers (Grandey et al., 2007; Gutek et al., 2000). In fact, using three separate samples, Gutek et al. (2000) found support for higher trust in service relationship building across three service jobs (hairstylists, physicians, and auto mechanics).

Job Characteristics

We also expect that job characteristics can influence customer mistreatment due to their effects on work performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). For instance, job autonomy, which reflects the freedom employees have in completing their tasks, may allow service employees to cater their customer service behaviors to customer demands. Additionally, skill variety (i.e., the degree to which employees use various skills during task performance) and task significance (i.e., the influence employees have on others by completing their tasks) may provide service employees enhanced meaning, felt responsibility, and motivation to perform. In turn, employees with more autonomy, variety, and significance are likely to provide higher-quality service and be treated well by their customers (e.g., Thakor & Joshi, 2005). In contrast, job complexity concerns the intricacy of the job and how hard the job is to perform (Humphrey et al., 2007). As such, the more complex the job, the more
likely an employee is to receive customer mistreatment because there are more opportunities for failures during service performance.

**Informal Work Environment**

The informal work environment may impact customer mistreatment as well. For instance, perceived organizational support makes employees feel respected and indebted to the organization and they are likely to reciprocate with commitment to organizational identification, positive job attitudes, and in-role and extra-role performance (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). As such, in customer service jobs, employees perceiving greater levels of organizational support may go above and beyond in service interactions and display more positive emotions (Grandey, 2000), leading to more satisfying customer experiences and lower instances of customer mistreatment.

As another component of the informal work environment, service climate is defined as “employee perceptions of the practices, procedures, and behaviors that get rewarded, supported, and expected with regard to customer service and customer service quality” (Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998, p. 151). Better service climates have been suggested to enhance employee motivation and service rule compliance (Wang et al., 2011), which likely drive customer loyalty and positive appraisals of service performance (Liao & Chuang, 2004; Salanova, Agut, & Petrò, 2005). As such, it follows that employees working in organizations that emphasize high-quality customer service are less likely to be mistreated by customers. In fact, preliminary support for this argument is provided by Kao, Cheng, Kuo, and Huang (2014) who reported a negative correlation between service climate and customer-related stressors (e.g., perceptions of working with difficult customers).

**Individual Characteristics**

*Cognitive.* Certain individual attributes, such as general mental ability, job tenure, education, and emotional intelligence (EQ), are likely to create cognitive resources that enhance job knowledge, learning, and task expertise and increase employees’ capacity to engage in desirable behaviors beyond those associated with the task (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998). For instance, customer service employees with longer job tenure may have mastered the task-specific aspects of their jobs and have more resources to expend displaying the appropriate emotions and behaviors in customer service interactions (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989; Wang et al., 2011). Similarly, employees with higher levels of EQ may be better
able to detect and monitor their emotions and their customer’s emotions. In turn, they can tailor their behaviors and emotional displays to meet customers’ emotional needs and demands (e.g., Brackett & Mayer, 2003). Therefore, we expect that employees with beneficial levels of these cognitive attributes will be more likely to deliver satisfying service experiences and less likely to experience customer mistreatment.

**Interpersonal.** Furthermore, we suggest that individuals’ personality traits could influence the tone of their interpersonal interactions and therefore customer mistreatment. On the one hand, personality traits, such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, other orientation, and perspective taking, evoke a stronger desire to cooperate with others in order to achieve professional, social or relational goals, help out of concern for others’ needs, and understand others’ perspectives, empathizing with them (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1991; Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997; De Dreu & Nauta, 2009). As such, employees possessing higher levels of these traits tend to have more positive interactions at work (e.g., Morgeson, Reider, & Campion, 2005). On the other hand, personality traits, such as neuroticism and trait aggression, have been linked with greater hostility, negative mood, stress perceptions and emotional unpredictability, leading to reduced attentiveness to others’ needs, cooperation, and more negative interactions (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1991; LePine & Van Dyne, 2001).

Based on these characterizations, we offer three explanations for why we expect these personality traits to be related to customer mistreatment. First, the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) suggests that individuals should motivate similarly valenced treatment from their interaction partners. For instance, neurotic individuals have been shown to experience greater daily interpersonal conflict events (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995), perhaps due to the hostile nature with which they engage with others. Alternatively and second, personality traits create biases in recall such that they influence the extent to which interpersonal events are remembered and interpreted in a positive or negative light (cf., Aquino & Thau, 2009). For instance, an employee high in perspective taking will be better able to understand how the customer feels and why they feel that way, making them less likely to ascribe negative or ambiguous customer behaviors to employee-directed mistreatment (Rafaeli et al., 2012; Rupp et al., 2008). Third, personality traits have also been associated with performance in a service context (Liao & Chuang, 2004). Indeed, Liao and Chuang found that conscientiousness and extraversion were positively related to service performance, which should contribute to respectful treatment from satisfied
customers. Previous research has offered some support for the links between personality traits and customer mistreatment. In particular, Milam, Spitzmueller, and Penney (2009) showed that agreeable employees were less likely and neurotic employees were more likely to receive uncivil treatment from coworkers due to these traits’ effects on inflammatory behaviors. In the customer mistreatment literature, Yang and Diefendorff (2009) observed negative correlations between customer mistreatment and both conscientiousness and agreeableness. Finally, in a cross-sectional field study of German bank tellers, Rupp et al. (2008) reported positive correlations among perspective taking and interpersonal and informational customer justice.

**Individual-Level Customer Mistreatment — Outcomes**

Similar to the service encounter level, we summarize previous empirical findings distinguishing between affective outcomes and behavioral outcomes of individual-level customer mistreatment. Individual-level affective outcomes may include job attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction, customer orientation) and health and well-being (e.g., emotional exhaustion, physical health complaints). Individual-level behavioral outcomes include performance (e.g., task performance, CWB, citizenship behavior) and turnover. We conclude by discussing the theoretical mechanisms that may explain individual-level customer mistreatment’s effects.

**Affective Criteria**

**Job Attitudes.** Previous studies have looked at the attitudinal consequences of customer mistreatment. For example, both Holmvall and Sidhu (2007) and Walsh (2011) demonstrated that customer mistreatment was negatively related to job satisfaction. Similarly, in a sample of employed Canadian university students working in retail services or restaurants, Wilson and Holmvall (2013) also found a negative association between customer mistreatment and job satisfaction. Moreover, Harris (2013) found that customer mistreatment was negatively associated with affective commitment. These findings are also consistent with recent meta-analytical work by Hershcovis and Barling (2010) on the effects of outsider aggression on employees. Specifically, their findings revealed a negative relationship between outsider aggression and job satisfaction and affective commitment. Finally, previous studies have also examined job attitudes unique to customer service work. For example, Stock and Bednarek (2014) demonstrated
that customer mistreatment negatively affected employees’ customer-oriented attitude. However, most primary studies, including those involved in the meta-analysis, have relied on self-reported cross-sectional data. Thus, it is conceivable that employees unhappy with their jobs are mistreated more often or that an unmeasured variable, such as job skills or neuroticism, is causing a spurious relationship. As such, the causal relationship between customer mistreatment and job attitudes remains debatable.

**Emotional Exhaustion.** It has been suggested that customer mistreatment is harmful to employee physical and psychological functioning. Indeed, Harris and Reynolds (2003), using a qualitative research design, concluded that consistent customer mistreatment experiences were associated with long-term mental health consequences, such as feelings of degradation, stress, and anxiety. Empirical research has focused primarily on the relationship between customer mistreatment and emotional exhaustion, but this research has also documented the impact to self-reported health symptoms and well-being to some extent.

In regards to emotional exhaustion, Grandey et al. (2004) studied call center employees and showed that customer mistreatment was positively associated with emotional exhaustion. Moreover, using a sample of flight attendants, travel agents, and shoe sales employees, Dormann and Zapf (2004) showed that employees perceiving greater customer mistreatment reported more burnout symptoms, namely emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment. Using both a convenience sample of customer-contact employees and a random sample of U.S. employees, Grandey et al. (2007) found that customer mistreatment explained incremental variance beyond coworker and supervisor mistreatment in employee emotional exhaustion. Typically, previous studies have proposed emotional labor, which includes surface acting, as one reason why customer mistreatment results in emotional exhaustion. For example, Grandey et al. (2012) observed that Australian health care workers, including nurses, speech therapists, clinical psychologists, and surgeons, who were exposed to more patient mistreatment were more likely to regulate their emotions via surface acting, which partially mediated mistreatment’s effects on emotional exhaustion. However, it is critical to emphasize that most field studies have relied upon cross-sectional self-reported data, providing limited evidence that customer mistreatment causes emotional labor and subsequently emotional exhaustion.

**Physical and Mental Health.** Furthermore, there is mixed empirical evidence regarding the relationship between customer mistreatment and
self-reported physical health, mental health, and well-being. Using a sample of nurses and a sample of public service workers, Merecz, Drabek, and Mościcka (2009) reported positive relationships between customer mistreatment and mental health problems, psychosomatic health complaints, and anxiety and insomnia. As another example, Wilson and Holmvall (2013) found that customer mistreatment was positively associated with job-related psychological strain. Yet, Sliter et al. (2011) did not find a significant relationship between customer mistreatment and physical health complaints reported three months later. Research on customer mistreatment and well-being is much less common, but one study has shown that customer mistreatment is negatively related to life satisfaction (Karatepe, 2011). In addition, using a sample of call center employees in China, Baranik et al. (2014) found that customer mistreatment was negatively associated with well-being (measured three months later) through cognitive rumination. Given the cross-sectional nature of most of the studies finding significant relationships between mistreatment and ill health and well-being, these findings could be attributed to individual differences, such as neuroticism, that affect perceptions of customer mistreatment and health and well-being. These findings may also be interpreted in the reverse causal direction (i.e., poor health results in customer mistreatment). Thus, longitudinal studies are warranted in further exploring the long-term effects of customer mistreatment on health and well-being. It would be especially enlightening if these studies controlled for previous health and well-being conditions, modeling change over time.

**Behavioral Criteria**

Consistent with the broader literature on workplace mistreatment (e.g., Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008) and components of job performance (e.g., Rotundo & Sackett, 2002), we consider counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), citizenship behaviors, and task performance as behavioral outcomes of customer mistreatment.

**CWB.** Previous research has consistently linked customer mistreatment with increased CWBs. For example, both Harris and Ogbonna (2002) and Harris and Reynolds (2003) interviewed hotel, restaurant, and bar employees across multiple hierarchical levels and identified a link between exposure to rude customers and engagement in service sabotage. From an empirical perspective, Walker, van Jaarsveld, and Skarlicki (2014) reported a statistically nonsignificant correlation between entity civility and employee civility at the individual level, indicating that insurance call center employees who did and did not feel they were typically mistreated by
customers were not rated differently by independent judges in regards to their customer-directed disrespectful behavior. Additionally, using a sample of Canadian call center employees providing service in several different areas (e.g., parcel delivery, credit cards) and controlling for internal sources (i.e., supervisors, coworkers) of interpersonal justice, Skarlicki et al. (2008) found that employees who more commonly experienced customer interpersonal injustice were more likely to have sabotaged customer phone calls. Furthermore, Shao and Skarlicki (2014) conducted a field study of Chinese and Canadian hotel employees, finding that customer mistreatment elicited customer-directed sabotage behaviors. However, Canadian employees were more likely to respond with sabotage than Chinese employees. Thus, there may be important boundary conditions for the customer mistreatment-CWB relationship and we will address potential moderators in a later section.

Previous research has also explored the withdrawal forms of CWB as a result of customer mistreatment. For instance, whereas Grandey et al. (2004) observed a positive relationship between the stressfulness of customer mistreatment and absences (hours absent across the three months following measurement of customer mistreatment), they did not find a significant relationship between frequency of customer mistreatment and absences. Moreover, averaging objective withdrawal data from the three months following data collection, Sliter et al. (2012) demonstrated that mistreated employees were absent from more shifts and were more likely to show up to work more than 15 minutes late. All in all, these findings are also consistent with Hershcovis and Barling’s (2010) meta-analytic correlations between outsider aggression and interpersonal and organizational deviance. Although some of these previous studies have used independent sources (e.g., raters, objective data) for the dependent variables, others have relied upon cross-sectional self-reported data for establishing the relationship between customer mistreatment and CWB.

Customer Service Performance. In the customer service context, task performance includes sales and service skills (e.g., Batt, 2002). Previous research has demonstrated a negative relationship between customer mistreatment and employee performance. According to Totterdell and Holman (2003), employees who report more customer mistreatment may not have the capacity or motivation to help their customers and could exhibit reduced performance. For example, Skarlicki et al. (2008), who showed that employees more unjustly treated by customers were more often saboteurs, found that employees engaging in higher levels of sabotage received
worse performance ratings of customer service quality (courtesy, competence, decision quality, and sales skills) relative to their peers (supervisors and trained raters assessed employee performance in randomly chosen calls). Because Skarlicki et al. (2008) incorporated performance scores for the two months following the measurement of customer injustice, concern that poor performance actually caused customer injustice is somewhat alleviated. In addition, Sliter et al. (2011) reported that employees more regularly experiencing customer mistreatment were less productive (spent more unsanctioned time off computer and phone calls over the three-month period following mistreatment survey responses). Sliter et al. (2012) collected bank teller successful referrals (i.e., tellers referred customers to a bank product and customers then pursued that product) to measure sales performance and found that employees perceiving greater customer mistreatment had fewer successful referrals (averaged across the three months following data collection). Finally, Sliter et al. (2010) found that customer mistreatment negatively predicted a three-month average of customer service quality (scored based on customer reports of employee sales efforts, professionalism, transaction efficiency, and appreciation).

Citizenship Behavior. Citizenship behaviors are extra-role behaviors that can facilitate organizational functioning (Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983). Mistreated employees may be too depleted and lack the resources necessary to help out their coworkers or the larger organization (Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Mojza, 2009; Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2011). In addition, customer mistreatment may also reduce the extent to which service employees help out their coworkers or organization because it results in unfavorable job attitudes, which are one driver of citizenship behavior (e.g., Bateman & Organ, 1983). Unfortunately, previous studies have focused on customer mistreatment’s relationship with citizenship behaviors directed at customers but not at coworkers or the organization (e.g., Shao & Skarlicki, 2014). However, indirect evidence suggests that customer mistreatment is negatively associated with organizational and interpersonal citizenship behaviors. For example, in a lab experiment, Porath and Erez (2007) demonstrated that compared to participants in the control condition participants in the rudeness condition displayed less helping behavior; control participants were also nine times more likely to help than participants experiencing the rudeness manipulation. In their meta-analysis, Hershcovic and Barling (2010) also found that outsider aggression was positively related to interpersonal deviance and organizational deviance.
**Turnover.** Using a sample of call center employees in China, Li and Zhou (2013) showed that customer mistreatment was positively related to turnover intentions. Based on a sample of over 2,000 nurses in England, Deery, Walsh, and Guest (2011) demonstrated that nurses mistreated by clients or their families were almost twice as likely to intend to leave their jobs within the next year or sooner. Finally, Wilson and Holmvall (2013) reported that working university students who were mistreated more often expressed stronger intentions to leave their jobs. Corroborating these findings, Hershcovis and Barling (2010) reported a positive association between outsider aggression and turnover intentions in their meta-analysis. Unfortunately, these studies cannot rule out the reverse temporal sequence of customer mistreatment and turnover intentions or important individual differences that may affect turnover intentions and mistreatment simultaneously. On top of these limitations, studies have yet to link customer mistreatment with actual turnover. Nonetheless, given the concern for high turnover rates and the associated costs in the customer service industry, organizations would likely benefit from taking steps (e.g., through appropriate selection processes and greater organizational support) to reduce customer mistreatment and turnover intentions in turn.

**Mechanisms Linking Individual-Level Customer Mistreatment and its Outcomes**

At the individual level, we contend that the effects of customer mistreatment on behavioral outcomes are distal, largely via its associations with affective outcomes. As such, it is likely that the affective outcomes serve as mediating mechanisms that transmit the effects of customer mistreatment to behavioral outcomes. Previous studies have also adopted this view. For instance, van Jaarsveld et al. (2010) demonstrated that employees subject to more customer mistreatment were more uncivil toward their customers and this relationship was partly due to employee emotional exhaustion. Moreover, Deery, Iverson, and Walsh (2002) surveyed telecommunications call center employees in Australia and found that employees perceiving customers as more disrespectful experienced greater emotional exhaustion, which positively related to absences in turn (number of one or two day absences associated with sick leave from the previous 12 months).

In addition, it is important to recognize that between-person differences in the experience of negative emotions, injustice, goal blockage, and resource availability at work may serve as more proximal mechanisms that link individual-level customer mistreatment to its outcomes. In particular, employees who experience more negative emotions, injustice perceptions,
goal blockage, and have fewer available resources are more likely to exhibit affective and behavioral issues than those who have fewer such experiences. This is in contrast to the service encounter level, where the above-mentioned experiences are temporary in nature and capture the ebbs and flows within the same person, which do not immediately translate into robust between-person differences.

**Individual-Level Boundary Conditions**

**Justice-Based Moderators**

Because customer mistreatment has been linked with interactional injustice perceptions and moral outrage, it follows that individuals’ traits affecting the salience of moral issues could impact how strongly employees react to customer mistreatment. For instance, moral identity involves the ease with which an individual’s moral compass is activated (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Moral identity can be further delineated into internalization (i.e., the importance of morality to one’s self-image) and symbolization (i.e., the extent to which individuals outwardly express their opposition to moral violations via other-observable behaviors). On the one hand, individuals high in moral identity internalization are likely to empathize and forgive wrongdoers because they consider the moral ramifications of their responses (Reed & Aquino, 2003). On the other hand, individuals high in moral identity symbolization react more strongly to mistreatment, engaging in retaliation, because they feel their identity-based moral goals have been thwarted. For example, Skarlicki et al. (2008) demonstrated that participants high (vs. low) in moral identity symbolization engaged in more customer-directed sabotage but only when moral identity internalization was also low. Thus, employees high in moral identity symbolization and low in moral identity internalization will experience stronger negative reactions (behavioral and affective) as a result of customer mistreatment.

In addition, justice orientation or sensitivity reflects the degree to which individuals espouse justice as a moral virtue and are sensitive to moral and social norm violations (Liao & Rupp, 2005). Individuals high in justice orientation are thus more likely to pick up on justice cues in the work environment and more strongly respond than individuals low in justice orientation. For instance, Liao and Rupp (2005) showed that supervisor procedural justice climates yielded more positive evaluations of commitment and satisfaction among employees high in justice orientation. Moreover, Liu, Luksyte, Wang, Zhou, and Shi (2014) found that perceived
overqualification was negatively related to organization-based self-esteem and positively associated with employment-related anger only when justice sensitivity was high. Similar to moral identity, we expect justice orientation to moderate the relationships between individual-level customer mistreatment and its outcomes such that employees high in justice orientation will experience stronger negative effects to their well-being, job attitudes, and task performance and stronger positive effects to their CWB and withdrawal behavior.

**Emotion-Based Moderators**

Previous research has suggested that emotion-based variables may influence the strength of service employees’ reactions to customer mistreatment (e.g., Baranik et al., 2014; Ho & Gupta, 2012; Walker et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2011; Yang & Diefendorff, 2009; Zhan et al., 2013). In general, it has been suggested that whereas some emotion-based traits, such as emotional regulation self-efficacy and empathy, facilitate regulation of negative emotions, other emotion-based tendencies, such as negative affectivity and maladaptive emotion-based coping (e.g., rumination or social sharing), make employees more susceptible to or prolong negative emotions and contribute to stronger negative reactions. In other words, emotion-based moderators can buffer or exacerbate employees’ responses to customer mistreatment. To illustrate, for example, employees high in negative affectivity are prone to view ambiguous interpersonal treatment as more spiteful and unfair (Penney & Spector, 2005; Skarlicki, Folger, & Tesluk, 1999). Similarly, employees high in negative affectivity are more susceptible to the ill effects of such negative events at work, and thus feel greater negative emotions (e.g., Yang & Diefendorff, 2009). Further, employees high in negative affectivity utilize inadequate coping strategies to deal with heightened negative emotions (e.g., Liu, Wang, Zhan, & Shi, 2009), impairing their ability to regulate service behavior. Thus, mistreated employees who are higher in negative affectivity are more likely to respond to customer mistreatment with retaliatory behaviors. Indeed, Wang et al. (2011) found that negative affectivity moderated the positive effects of customer mistreatment on employee sabotage, such that the positive relationship was stronger when employees had higher levels of negative affectivity.

On the positive side, for example, emotional regulation self-efficacy has been defined as the extent to which individuals feel they can engage in effective emotional regulation (Wang et al., 2011). Emotional regulation self-efficacy should induce individuals to devote more attention toward their emotional display rule goals (e.g., show positive emotions to customers)
even when challenges to emotion-based goals arise (cf. Bandura, 2001). Therefore, mistreated employees with higher emotional regulation self-efficacy are more likely to work through their resultant negative emotions. That is, employees exposed to customer mistreatment and higher in emotional regulation self-efficacy may be less prone to retaliate against their transgressor. Wang et al. (2011) showed that self-efficacy for emotional regulation moderated the positive effects of customer mistreatment on employee sabotage, such that the positive relationship was weaker when employees had higher levels of emotional regulation self-efficacy.

**Resource-Based Moderators**
Consistent with the resource-based conceptualization of customer mistreatment, it is conceivable that individuals’ available cognitive (e.g., job tenure), social (e.g., support), and motivational (e.g., service rule commitment, internal attribution) resources impact employee reactions to customer mistreatment. Similar to COR theory (e.g., Hobfoll, 2002), self-regulation theory proposes that resource gain and loss in the working context could influence how effectively individuals regulate themselves in response to stressful events such as customer mistreatment (Baumeister, 1998; Baumeister et al., 1998). Specifically, we expect employees with greater resources to react less strongly than employees with fewer resources, because resource-rich employees are better able to regulate their emotions and behaviors even when mistreated (Wang et al., 2011). In particular, employees with greater access to resources may suffer less resource loss or recover resources faster when mistreated by customers. For instance, Wang et al. (2011) showed that the relationship between customer mistreatment and employee sabotage was weaker for employees high in service rule commitment, a motivational resource which focuses employees’ efforts on the service task. Given the importance of these resource-based moderators for mitigating the negative consequences of customer mistreatment, continued research is needed in exploring the variety of workplace resources that may intervene in the process by which customer mistreatment influences employee and customer outcomes.

**Service Encounter-Level Boundary Conditions**

*Moderators of the Employee States-Service Quality Relationship*
Similar to the individual-level unfolding process of customer mistreatment, the service encounter-level process also has several important
individual-level boundary conditions. Adopting a multilevel perspective, we posit that the service encounter-level relationship between employee states (e.g., mood, regulatory resource depletion) and service encounter quality is moderated by individual characteristics, organizational policies, and job conditions. Because we hypothesized that these individual-level variables may directly lead to the general tendency for an employee to be mistreated by customers, it is conceivable that they may also influence the extent to which employees’ daily states impede service quality and thus contribute to service encounter-level customer mistreatment. First, we expect that individual characteristics associated with better interpersonal skills (e.g., agreeableness, prosocial orientation) and task competence (e.g., GMA, job tenure) should mitigate the effects of state mood and depletion on service quality. We expect these mitigating effects because the characteristics are likely to make service performance (e.g., friendly service in addition to task fulfillment) more automatic and less demanding of cognitive and attentional resources. Thus, service employees with more of these traits may have more resources available to devote to regulating behaviors associated with their depleted states or unpleasant moods (cf., Wang et al., 2011). In contrast, other individual traits (e.g., neuroticism) may exacerbate the association between employee depletion, negative mood, and service encounter quality because they make employees more prone to anxiety, stress, and irritability. Thus, neurotic individuals are likely to experience amplified negative emotions when in negative moods and react more negatively to depleted states, which results in reduced ability to provide high-quality service.

Furthermore, organizational policies and aspects of the informal work environment (e.g., display rules, service climate) that engender compliance to service quality expectations may buffer the relationship between state mood and regulatory resources and service quality, because employees will strive to meet the organizational service goals even when mistreated. As such, it is conceivable that service employees in organizations with service rules invest more attention and effort into regulating their emotions and task-related behaviors; in turn, this results in a higher likelihood that the employee will deliver high service quality. Likewise, certain organizational features (e.g., service relationships, organizational support) may buffer the relationship between employee states and service quality because these features provide employees with important social and motivational resources that can replace resources lost by employees in depleted states or foul moods. However, the customer mistreatment literature has yet to explore many of these relationships in conjunction with the proposed boundary conditions.
Moderators of the Psychological Response-Self-Regulation Impairment Relationship
In addition, we expect that the degree to which the proximal service encounter-level outcomes of customer mistreatment (e.g., negative emotions, injustice perception, goal failure) lead to self-regulation impairment is contingent upon individual-level justice-based (e.g., moral identity), emotion-based (e.g., emotion regulation self-efficacy), and resource-based (e.g., service rule commitment) moderators. As we previously discussed, certain individual traits make employees more susceptible to the negative effects of injustice (e.g., justice orientation) and negative emotions (e.g., maladaptive emotion-based coping). Thus, we expect employees with higher justice orientation and maladaptive emotion-based coping to experience even more self-regulation impairment from injustice and negative emotions, respectively, because regulating their stronger emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions may monopolize employee resources. Alternatively, contextual or personal resources (e.g., social support, job tenure, service rule commitment) should buffer the positive relationship between employees’ mistreatment-related negative emotions, injustice perceptions, and goal failure and self-regulation impairment. We expect this protective effect because these moderators may provide employees the resource gains that allow employees to repair or counteract resource loss from these proximal negative outcomes of customer mistreatment, leading to a lower likelihood that self-regulation is compromised. In sum, justice-based moderators can alter the relationship between injustice perceptions and self-regulation impairment and emotion-based moderators are most likely to affect the relationship between negative emotions and self-regulation impairment. Resource-based moderators are unique in that they can protect against the influence of injustice, negative emotions, or goal failure on self-regulation impairment.

METHODOLOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS
In our review of the customer mistreatment literature, we identified several methodological issues and we discuss these issues in this section. Specifically, we stress the importance of enhancing construct measurement, incorporating multisource data, using longitudinal and multilevel design, and modeling control variables.
We suggest that research on customer mistreatment can be strengthened by adopting certain measurement practices, including utilizing validated customer-specific measures of mistreatment, considering frequency and intensity of mistreatment, mitigating memory bias concerns, and exploring the multidimensional nature of customer mistreatment. First, previous studies of customer mistreatment seem to use a variety of measures. Because customer mistreatment has been conceptualized in numerous ways, researchers have operationalized customer mistreatment via customer aggression measures (e.g., Grandey et al., 2004), interpersonal conflict measures (e.g., Sliter et al., 2011), interactional injustice and workplace incivility measures (e.g., Kern & Grandey, 2009), among others. Whereas some studies on customer mistreatment have modified previously validated scales (e.g., interactional injustice scale, Colquitt, 2001), other studies have developed their own scales (e.g., Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Skarlicki et al., 2008). To our knowledge, research on the relationships among the various scales that measure customer mistreatment has been limited. Likewise, there have not been many studies providing comparative criterion-related validity evidence. One study of note is Wilson and Holmvall (2013), which provided discriminant validity evidence of a developed customer incivility scale, customer psychological aggression, and customer interpersonal injustice. Moreover, Wilson and Holmvall demonstrated that their developed customer incivility scale predicted employee outcomes above and beyond a workplace incivility scale adapted to the customer context. However, it is still unclear whether one overall construct (customer mistreatment) has been tapped by these various measures and whether the various measures have incremental predictive value. As such, meta-analytic efforts to summarize the current literature and advance future theory and research may be limited without greater understanding of the relationships among the different measures of customer mistreatment.

Second, current research has asked employees how often customer mistreatment has occurred to them (i.e., frequency) or the extent to which customers have mistreated them (i.e., intensity). For example, Grandey et al. (2004) demonstrated that customer mistreatment frequency and perceived stressfulness of customer mistreatment were positively associated with emotional exhaustion. However, only the stress associated with customer mistreatment influenced employee absences through emotional exhaustion. Moreover, although more frequent than supervisor or coworker mistreatment (Grandey et al., 2007), customer mistreatment has a low
base rate (Grandey et al., 2012) and researchers may limit the variance they can capture when using a frequency response scale. For example, Grandey et al. (2007) reported that on average participants were verbally abused by customers less than once a month in their first study and less than one to three days a month in their second study. Thus, the intensity of customer mistreatment might have stronger ramifications than the frequency of customer mistreatment for employee outcomes. We suggest that researchers consider whether frequency or intensity matches their theorizing and research questions and the extent to which their sample context will exhibit meaningful variation in customer mistreatment frequency and intensity.

Finally, most previous studies have measured and operationalized customer mistreatment as a unidimensional construct (e.g., Skarlicki et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2011). Since customer mistreatment ranges in intention and severity, it is possible that customer mistreatment can be represented by several types or sets of behaviors (Zhan et al., 2013). For example, Dormann and Zapf (2004) conceptualized customer interactions as social stressors and distinguished between four kinds of customer-related social stressors (CSS). Drawing from the CSS framework, Zhan et al. (2013) conceptualized customer mistreatment as either aggressive (e.g., verbal attacks on the employee) or demanding (e.g., making unreasonable requests of the service employee). Zhan et al. argued that this distinction is important because whereas aggressive mistreatment might more strongly impact employees’ emotions, demanding mistreatment might more strongly deplete employees’ cognitive resources. Thus, examining the multidimensional nature of customer mistreatment could further clarify the relationships within customer mistreatment’s nomological network.

Multisource Data

We also recommend that researchers collect data from service employees as well as other sources, such as coworkers, customers, and independent raters. First, multisource data that comes from first-hand observers other than the focal employee can be useful for assessing congruence in judgments of customer mistreatment. For example, one can assess the similarity between employees’ perceptions of customer mistreatment and the independent coding of objective customer service call recordings. In doing so, multiple ratings of customer mistreatment can provide validity evidence for self-reported customer mistreatment. In addition, obtaining data from
multiple sources can pinpoint more objective measures of customer mistreatment, enabling the examination of how much focal service employee tendencies (e.g., interpersonal characteristics) or states (e.g., mood) influence their perceptions of the extent to which their customers have mistreated them. Second, the congruence (i.e., interaction) between employee ratings and others’ ratings of mistreatment could have important downstream effects on workplace outcomes. For example, if an employee perceives greater customer mistreatment than his or her coworker observed as a third party, the employee may behave in more conflictual ways with that coworker or experience amplified negative emotions because his or her mistreatment has gone unrecognized.

Second, multisource data may also facilitate the examination of third-party effects. Specifically, coworkers or other customers may observe customer mistreatment of a service employee and behaviorally or emotionally react (Groth & Grandey, 2012). Additionally, third parties may influence whether or not the employee perceives customer mistreatment. For instance, an employee may not have interpreted a curt exchange with a customer as mistreatment, but upon discussing the situation with other coworkers, conclude that the customer mistreated them. Similarly, because employees may engage in social sharing of their customer mistreatment to assuage their negative emotions (Zhan et al., 2013), employees’ family members or friends may be pertinent third parties. In addition to their potential influence on employees’ mistreatment perceptions, family and friends may also suffer ill effects as listeners in the social sharing interaction. For instance, family members may subsequently experience negative emotions and have difficulty sleeping that evening. Finally, although focal employees’ reactions to customer mistreatment might be more selfish in nature, third parties’ reactions might be more evolutionary in nature. In particular, whereas mistreated employees may retaliate because a customer violated their right to be treated respectfully, third parties may retaliate because the moral order of society has been violated. Thus, the unfolding process for third-party reactions to customer mistreatment may be phenomenologically different and thus requires further inquiry (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004).

Third, multisource data is important because it may facilitate the direct operationalization of the underlying mechanisms specified in conceptualizations of customer mistreatment. For example, to operationalize goal blockage, customer service records could be utilized to assess the degree to which the customer service employee met productivity goals (e.g., time on call) when exposed to customer mistreatment. As another example,
self-regulation impairment may be operationalized via objective measures, such as blood glucose levels (e.g., Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007). Finally, customers may be a useful source for operationalizing service employees’ emotional displays as complementary or supplementary.

Longitudinal and Multilevel Design

Previous research has suggested that the customer mistreatment literature should move beyond cross-sectional research designs and incorporate longitudinal and multilevel data (e.g., Goldberg & Grandey, 2007; Walker et al., 2014; Zhan et al., 2013). We further contend that a longitudinal, multilevel research design is the only way to directly test the comprehensive theoretical model presented in this chapter because the cross-sectional design that has been typical practice in previous research on customer mistreatment does not match the research questions suggested by this model. Therefore, cross-sectional data cannot be used to meaningfully evaluate our multilevel model. That is, to accurately represent this model, data that captures multiple service encounters over time must be collected. In particular, only a multilevel, longitudinal approach can disentangle the unique antecedents, mechanisms, and consequences across the individual and service encounter levels; facilitate a comparison of the unique processes at the individual and service encounter levels; and allow for examination of higher-level boundary conditions that strengthen or weaken the effects of service encounter-level customer mistreatment (e.g., Walker et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2013). However, we recognize that while it would be a commendable research effort it may not be realistic or feasible for the entire multilevel model to be tested simultaneously.

Furthermore, longitudinal multilevel designs, such as experience-sampling methodology, can provide unique insight into how long the negative effects of customer mistreatment persist over time. For instance, experience-sampling data can be used to examine whether and how customer mistreatment at an initial time point (Day t) influences employee rumination and negative mood in the following days (Wang et al., 2013). In addition, other important research questions that have yet to be explored in the customer mistreatment literature necessitate longitudinal, multilevel data. For example, based on COR theory’s description of resource loss and loss spirals, the consequences of customer mistreatment at one point in time and changes in customer mistreatment might not be the same. Specifically, employees’ reactions to customer mistreatment could depend
upon the rate of exposure. For example, Taylor, Bedeian, Cole, and Zhang (2014) found that changes in workplace incivility were positively associated with changes in burnout one week later, controlling for current and prior levels of incivility. By analyzing longitudinal data via latent change score modeling, researchers can separate the effects of customer mistreatment levels and trajectories in customer mistreatment and their implications for employee outcomes, such as performance, turnover intentions, and well-being, over time.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Customer mistreatment is a well-documented phenomenon that can harm customer service employee performance and well-being. Our chapter summarized the four major conceptualizations of customer mistreatment. Drawing on these conceptualizations, we developed a multilevel model that specifies the unique antecedents and outcomes of customer mistreatment at the service encounter and individual levels. Further, we presented mediators of the effects of service encounter-level customer mistreatment and boundary conditions that may impact the unfolding process of customer mistreatment at both the service encounter and individual levels. Finally, we discussed ways to enhance the methodological rigor of future customer mistreatment research.

**REFERENCES**


