

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Service Workers' Sensemaking Process of Customer Misbehavior: The Case of French Rail Transport

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Abstract

Drawing on Weick's sensemaking theory and based on an in-depth ethnography of a French public railway company, this article reveals the cognitive map that underlines the service worker's interpretation of customer misbehavior. It appears that this process is ground on the sensemaking of the motive of customer misbehavior, of the service workers' tolerance of the customer misbehavior, and of the customer misbehavior situations. This article also shows that this process is based on the adjustment of the meaning frame to the situation, on the construction of the framing by the service worker, on the negotiation of the framing between service workers, and on the competition between the framings in the organization. This research goes beyond a fragmented understanding of this sensemaking process, to give a more integrated understanding of it.

Keywords: *Customer misbehavior; Cognitive map; Ethnography; Sensemaking; Service workers*

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Customer misbehavior corresponds to 'behavioral acts by customers which violate the generally accepted norms of conduct in consumption situations and disrupt the consumption order' (Fullerton & Punj, 2004, p. 1239). It is a shared, systematic, and even endemic experience among service workers, ranging from mild rudeness to physical violence (Grandey et al., 2004; Reynolds & Harris, 2006). On the frontline, service workers make sense of customer misbehavior to better cope with it. As Alexandre says: '[As a service worker] you must understand the [customers'] insults, you must interpret them'. This interpretative process is permanent, structured, and unavoidable for the service workers interviewed and observed in this research. But it is not well known in the scientific literature.

Several works describe customer misbehavior from the viewpoint of service workers and clarify some outcomes and aspects of the sensemaking process that service workers deploy to make sense of it (Bitner et al., 1994; Gal et al., 2021; Harris & Reynolds, 2004; Suquet, 2010). But nothing is known about how these outcomes and aspects fit together in the

cognitive process that allows service workers to make sense of customer misbehavior. Understanding this process could have important implications for the understanding of the variety of experiences and reactions of service workers (Echeverri et al., 2012; Garcia et al., 2019; Robertson & O'Reilly, 2020), including when they are confronted with misbehavior that seems to be, from an external point of view, quite similar.

The aim of this article is to show the process by which service workers make sense of customer misbehavior. To do so, this research relies on the sensemaking perspective developed by Karl Weick (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005) and considers that sensemakers edit their organizational experiences using a unique cognitive map (Weick & Bougon, 1986). This article intends to decipher the cognitive map used by the service workers of a French public mass transit service when they interpret customer misbehavior. The results extend the literature on customer misbehavior by highlighting how service workers make sense of the customer, of themselves, and of the situation, at the situational, individual, collective, and organizational levels.

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Literature review

The service workers' perception of customer misbehavior

The perception of customer misbehavior by service workers is covered by a dedicated field of research, which initially focused on the point of view of service workers (Bitner et al., 1994; Harris & Reynolds, 2004). This first part of the field is interested in *what* types of customer misbehavior service workers experience from their point of view. Works identify different typical profiles of misbehaving customers (e.g., the drunk or the undesirable customer) (Bitner et al., 1994; Harris & Reynolds, 2004) and different presumed causes of the misbehavior (e.g., a delivery system failure) (Bitner et al., 1994), always from the viewpoint of the service workers. Based on these results, Harris and Reynolds (2004) suggested the classification of customer misbehavior according to its nature by using two axes: its covertness (overt vs. covert misbehavior) and its primary motivation (financially motivated vs. non-financially motivated misbehavior).

More recently, a second part of the literature has shed light on the phenomenon using a sensemaking approach to better understand *how* service workers make sense of customer misbehavior (Gal et al., 2021; Suquet, 2010). This part of the literature provides a better understanding of several aspects of the sensemaking process of customer misbehavior by service workers. Again, the authors identify a succession of customer profiles and misbehavior according to the service workers' descriptions (e.g., the customer who has no choice or the destructive customer behavior) (Gal et al., 2021; Suquet, 2010). Suquet (2010) also pointed out different stages (e.g., the detection of the customer profile, the negotiation of the definition of the misbehavior, and the outcome of the interaction) and occupational dilemmas (e.g., service vs. sanction) that underpin this sensemaking process. Gal et al. (2021) identified several service workers' explanations of customer misbehavior (e.g., the consumer style and power struggle or the need for empathy and understanding) and several service workers' reactions to customer misbehavior (e.g., treating the customer more positively or more negatively than usual). It finally appears that service workers refer to the degree of both controllability and malevolence of customers to categorize customer misbehavior (Gal et al., 2021).

This area of the literature explores the meaning-making of customer misbehavior by service workers. It provides many insights into the outcomes and aspects of this sensemaking process (Appendix A details the different contributions mentioned). But surprisingly, this literature does not yet capture the process underlying the sensemaking of customer misbehavior by service workers. What remains to be understood is how service workers articulate these outcomes and aspects of

customer misbehavior within their own reasoning process that allows them to make sense of them. The following Weickian sensemaking perspective (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005) represents a fruitful approach to grasp more precisely the mechanisms of the sensemaking process of service workers through exploration of the cognitive map (Weick, 1979; Weick & Bougon, 1986) they collectively use to make sense of customer misbehavior.

Toward an understanding of service workers' sensemaking process of customer misbehavior

Karl Weick suggested that the term 'sensemaking' means simply 'the making of sense' (Weick, 1995, p. 4). It refers to the process by which intentional agents, faced with equivocality, seek to 'structure the unknown': the self, others, and the situation (Allard-Poesi, 2005; Weick, 1995).

The general process of sensemaking involves ecological change, enactment, selection, and retention of cues to give a plausible frame to an equivocal situation (Weick et al., 2005). This process is grounded in identity construction (Hay et al., 2021) and emotional perception (Dwyer et al., 2023), and it is retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 1995). More concretely, in organizational settings, people are likely to engage in sensemaking when they encounter incongruity experiences at work to create and maintain coherent understandings that sustain relationships and enable collective action (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Referring to Starbuck and Milliken (1988), incongruous events are ones that violate perceptual frameworks and thus emerge as essential occasions for sensemaking. In this context, organizational sensemakers extract dedicated cues from their context and interpret these using a network of sense frames to create a plausible account of what is going on. It never takes place in isolation but is always shaped by a variety of factors implicated in the sensemaking situation. The context can highlight certain cues that will refer to a specific sense framework for the actors and vice versa. The sensemaking process draws on 'reservoirs of meaning' inherited from the past (individual and collective experiences) and by the confrontation with the collected cues that actors give meaning to situations. Frames and cues shape each other. The sensemaking process is never purely individual and always in part collective and therefore negotiated. Through everyday interactions and conversations, people develop a collective understanding of common interest that enables them to agree on decisions and actions to undertake and thus to coordinate their actions (Weick, 1995). Following Cristofaro (2022), the sensemaking process is also influenced by the

sensemaking process at the organizational and supra-organizational levels. Finally, the sensemaking process is fragile and ambiguous. The elaborated meaning can, at any time, prove to be illusory and lead to inadequate action. By acting, sensemakers verify the adequacy of the meaning created and confirm or invalidate the frameworks that will guide their future interpretations (Weick, 1995).

Weick and Bougon (1986) explained that organizational members edit their organizational experiences through a unique cognitive pattern named a cognitive map. This cognitive map takes the form of a diagram describing the 'epistemological process' (Weick & Bougon, 1986, p. 606) around which individuals organize their experience – in short, the cognitive process underlying the sensemaking at work. A group of sensemakers become organized when their cognitive maps converge (Weick, 1979). Even though cognitive mapping relies on a wide variety of uses, cognitive map always corresponds to the graphic representation made up of concepts and links (Allard-Poesi, 2005; Cossette, 2008). This research aims to describe the cognitive map underlying the sensemaking process of service workers facing customer misbehavior. From a constructivist perspective, this cognitive map is considered as a graphic representation of the researcher's mental representation made from the discursive representations that the subject elaborates from their mental representations (Cossette & Audet, 1992). The cognitive map studied is 'assembled' in the sense that it constitutes a graphic representation bringing together the visions of the service workers (Weick & Bougon, 1986).

Method

Case study

An in-depth study was conducted on the unique case (Stake, 1995) of service workers in a large French public railway company. Customer misbehavior is recurrent in the transport sector (Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Suquet, 2010), and French service workers are particularly affected according to different surveys (SUMER) commissioned and analyzed by the French Ministry of Labor (DARES) from 2009 to 2017. The service workers studied experience daily and multiple types of misbehavior in their contact with customers, although incidents are not systematically reported. In 2017, misbehavior accounted for 68% of the work-related accidents of service workers. They work for an urban mass transit service operating in several railway stations in and around Paris with particularly heavy traffic (between 100,000 and 350,000 travelers per day). The service workers' jobs consist of supporting the provision of transport services (sales, information, after-sales service) in a variety of spaces (closed/open, formal/informal) and in normal

(regular traffic) and dysfunctional (disrupted traffic) conditions. The work is carried out in small groups (two to five members) and under the direction of a first-line manager.

Data construction

The data combine interviews, observations, and documents (Ybema et al., 2009) to help the service workers interviewed recall their actions and those observed to clarify the course of their reflections (Olivier de Sardan, 2015).

The interviews (a total of 53 h over 40 sessions, see Appendix B for details) were conducted using an open guide that addressed topics such as the general life course, daily service work, customer relationships, customer misbehavior, service workers' interpretations, and reactions (see Appendix C for details). The interviewees were mainly service workers (23), managers at different hierarchical levels (10), and key informants (7). The objective was to plunge the service workers into past misbehavior situations they considered to be typical and critical by prompting them to relive them and, thus, provide the researcher with detailed recollections and analysis of their sensemaking processes (Olivier de Sardan, 2015). The observations (a total of 75 h over 22 sessions, see Appendix D for details) were carried out by active participation as a service worker (20 h over six sessions) and passive participation by following service workers in their daily work (55 h over 16 sessions). The objective was to capture customer misbehavior as it happened and analyze how it was interpreted by the service workers (see Appendix E for details). The documents (32) were provided by the service workers and their managers and/or collected during the interviews because of their significance. These were both internal (e.g., job descriptions) and external data (e.g., public testimonials). These data were recorded and transcribed (interviews), recorded in a diary (observations), and reproduced (documents) before being anonymized and analyzed.

Data analysis

The abductive analysis of the data is based on the cross-construction of three levels of codes in the analysis (see Appendix F for the data structure). The first level of codes ($n = 16$) was used to directly draw out common units of meaning from the empirical data. These codes highlight the recurring situated elements that the service workers considered when they seemed to feel their customers misbehaved and identify the salient aspects analyzed by service workers to decipher customer misbehavior. The second level of codes ($n = 15$) gathered the previous codes under more general labels, but these were still very grounded in empirical reality. These codes began to shed light on the mechanics at work when service workers

make sense of customer misbehavior. The third level of coding ($n = 4$) gave a more structured view of the main aspects of the sensemaking process within the data. These codes were adapted to the data from the Weickian approach of sensemaking. This coding process has progressively allowed the emergence of a cognitive map shared by the service workers and considered as a discourse on a generalized organization of experience, but was not initially directly accessible beyond the anecdotal stage or the analysis of a given situation (Allard-Poesi, 2005).

In compliance with the four validity criteria established by Merriam (2009, p. 186), the results proposed in this article are as sensitive to the data as possible (they are constructed from the point of view of the actors, use their language, and have been evaluated and enriched by the actors themselves). They are exhaustive (data collection and analysis ended when any new element could be integrated into the existing typologies). They are mutually exclusive (a relevant unit of data can be placed in only one type) and conceptually congruent (all types are at the same conceptual level from the service worker's perspective). More generally, the validity of the cognitive is ensured by the validation of the results by the actors (Cossette, 1994). This 'consensual validation' (Weick, 2005, p. 410) is based on the integration in the theorizing process of the sensemakers studied. Intermediate results were submitted to eight service workers after their interviews or observations. On all these occasions, the analysis was completed, nuanced, enriched, and finally validated by them (Strauss, 1992).

Results

The results describe the cognitive map used by service workers to make sense of customer misbehavior (see Figure 1). This cognitive map links constructs that emerged from the analysis of the subjective experiences of service workers. The links between the constructs reflect the way in which they fit together in a circular fashion. According to Figure 1, service workers make sense of the motive of customer misbehavior (step A) of the service worker's tolerance of customer misbehavior (step B) and of the customer misbehavior situation (step C). This framing process unfolds on situational, individual, collective, and organizational levels (arrows w, x, y, and z). Each step of this cognitive map is detailed and illustrated by empirical data (see Appendix G for additional data).

Sensemaking of others: the motives of customer misbehavior

To make sense of the motives of customer misbehavior (see step A, Figure 1), service workers try to answer the following

questions: Who is the customer? (step A1); How does this customer feel? (step A2); and finally, why does the customer misbehave? (step A3).

Who is the customer?

By asking who the customer is, service workers seek to identify the social identity of the customer who misbehaves. To do so, the service workers use their own social labeling system of typical customer social profiles which are thus 'put into boxes' by the service workers. It is these customer profiles that Karim talks about immediately after mentioning the customer misbehavior. By doing so, he brings us back to the starting point of the sensemaking of customer misbehavior by service workers: 'The question is which customer are we talking about? [The service workers] like to have "customer profiles," to put people in "boxes"' (Karim). These 'boxes' – which Karim mentions below – correspond to the following categories of customer: white-collar, rifferaff, and social case.

White-collar refers to the customers using the train to get to work. They are often in a hurry and in suits because they have managerial or administrative functions. They are described as educated, bourgeois, haughty, and condescending to service workers. They often act indirectly against service workers by putting them in submissive situations, by insulting them in a covert way, or by trying to turn other customers against them. In this way, they try to push them over the edge. According to Mehdi: 'The white-collar is in a big hurry, but when he doesn't get his train and he's willing to waste his time [to provoke us]. He has a vocabulary, so he's very careful about what he says. He stays on the edge of provocation. The objective is to make us lose our composure' (Mehdi).

Rifferaff is used to qualify young people from underprivileged backgrounds mostly living in poor suburbs. They come from a social background that is often quite like that of the service workers themselves. They are described as speaking simpler language, sometimes not very fluent, sometimes slang. They are considered as having had little education, holding a blue-collar job, or looking for one. As Sabah says, their attacks against service workers are rare but direct:

'The rifferaff comes from [modest suburbs]. It's rather the precarious people. A bit like us [service workers]. They don't always speak French well; they have a hard life. Most of the time, they speak to us in a familiar way. They are quite relaxed about the problems of transport. On the other hand, if you come and tell them about the rules, they will insult you directly.' (Sabah)

Those classed as a social case have an appearance or behavior that suggests social marginality (e.g., homelessness and social isolation), a psychological problem (e.g., mental illness and sexual perversion), and/or the temporary or

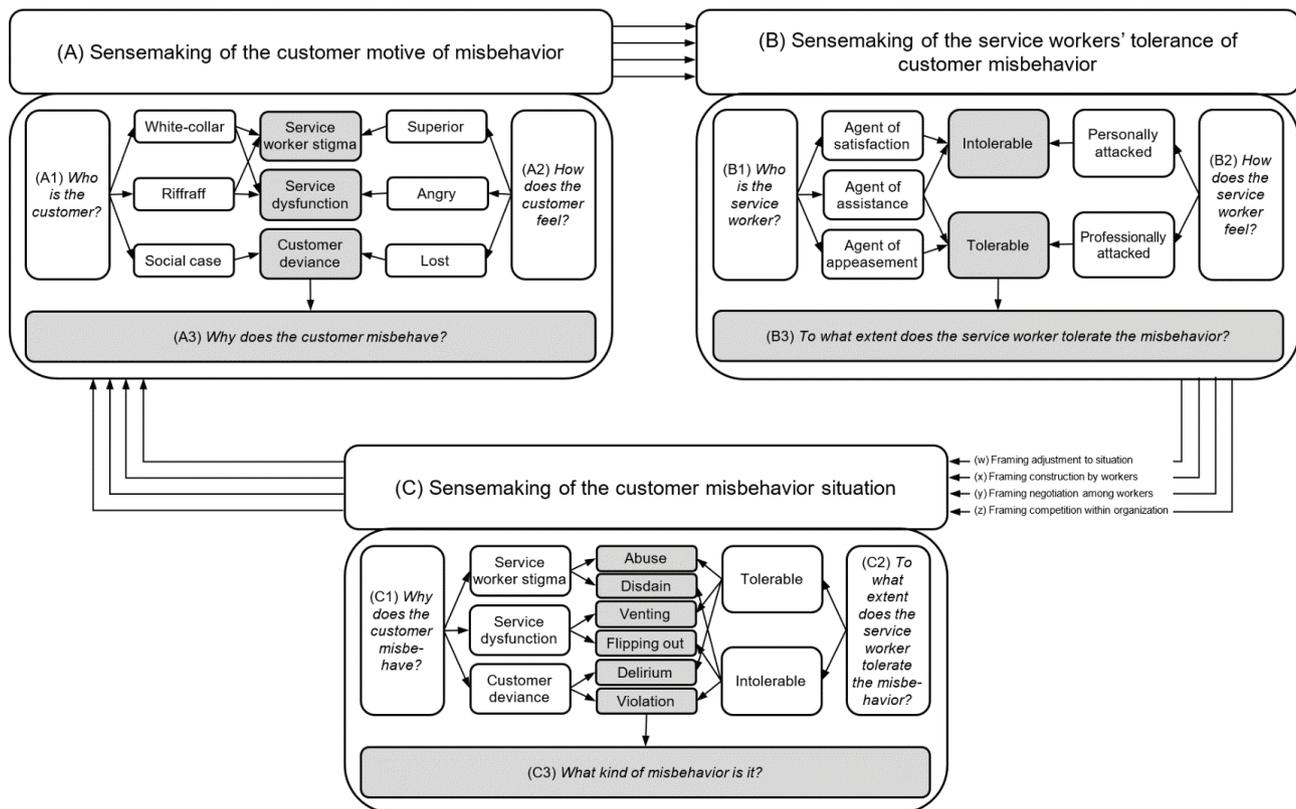


Figure 1. Service workers' sensemaking process of customer misbehavior. Source: Own elaboration.

chronic use of alcohol or drugs. They sometimes come to the station for reasons other than to get a train: for shelter, human contact, and a way to keep busy. Some social cases are identified as such by the service workers because they regularly frequent the station. Some are considered harmless, while others are considered dangerous. When they are not known by the service workers, their identification is based on their physical appearance or on their behavior which is considered particularly incoherent or insistent (for the social cases who are sexual perverts). This is what Didier notes: 'A social case is someone who will have an unusual gesture, someone who is alcoholic or potentially on drugs...' (Didier).

How does the customer feel?

By trying to understand how the customer feels, service workers seek to qualify their mood. They pay particular attention to the customer's facial expression, attitude, and tone of voice. It is about knowing what emotional state the customer is in. As described by Alexandre: 'You have to be able to distinguish it. Because a customer can be aggressive, not toward you, but because he panics. And he is going to yell at you, but that means "Help me!" As opposed to someone who is going to get upset at the counter about a fare. It's a little different'

(Alexandre). To try to understand the customer's mood, the service workers use their own emotional labeling system. They look to see if the customer misbehavior feels superior, angry, or lost.

The superior feeling relates to customers who discredit service workers because of their presumed social status, ethnicity, and/or gender. In this case, the customer patronizes the service worker to mark their social superiority in the social hierarchy. This is what Sabah describes: 'Sometimes you feel that some customers hate us [the service workers]. You feel that for them, we are really shit. We are at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and they are at the top of the social hierarchy' (Sabah).

The angry customers are very frustrated, most often by the service provided (or not provided). Their anger is the result of a great dissatisfaction with the organization, which they express to the service workers on duty. They often look agitated or, on the contrary, exhausted. Even though they know that these workers have little responsibility for the reason for their anger, they can no longer contain it. But in extreme cases, anger can turn into fierce hate. This is what Jérôme notices in an observed situation, which he clarifies afterwards:

An altercation occurred between Jérôme and a truly angry woman. She was upset that Jérôme could not reimburse her for her transportation tickets. When Jérôme tried to give the tickets back to her via the transaction tray, she deliberately trapped his fingers in the tray. A few moments later, he talks about this situation:

Jérôme → observer: 'You saw earlier, the woman who was dissatisfied, she still trapped my fingers in the transaction tray! The slut! But there, we could already feel that she had gone from anger to hate in her way of speaking.' (PO17)

The lost customers do not seem to fully understand the situation, know the social norm, and/or control their own behavior. The feeling of being lost is manifested by a discrepancy between the commonly accepted reality and that of the customer. This discrepancy challenges the service workers who thus realize that the customer is not in a 'normal state'. This is what Laurie says about a customer she nicknames 'broken record':

'Someone approaches. Laurie tells her colleagues: "It's 'Broken record'. He's not bad, but he's completely lost, poor guy!" She greets him. He asks her for a train to Chartres which has never been accessible from this station. He starts a confused diatribe, despite Laurie's explanations. Once the customer has left, she explains that he comes very regularly and gives the same speech. "That's why this customer is nicknamed broken record," says Laurie.' (OP21)

Why does the customer misbehave?

Once service workers have an idea of the social identity and dominant feeling of the misbehaving customer, they can ask why the customer misbehaves. Based on their answers to the previous two questions (who the customer is and how does he/she feel), service workers answer this third question. As Hugo explains, they form an idea of the cause of the misbehavior from the image they have of the customer: 'You spot [the customer] and you think: he's like that so he acts because of that' (Hugo). Service workers can attribute customer misbehavior to either service worker stigma, service dysfunction, or customer deviance.

Misbehavior by white-collar and riffraff customers who seem to feel superior is attributed to service worker stigma. The service relationship implies class, race, and gender relationships, which can lead to the stigmatization of service workers by their customers. In this case, the service worker is attacked by the customer because of their supposed social status, gender, or ethnic origin. This is what Leïla explains:

Leïla → observer: 'You also must understand that some people live in very closed environments and surely, they only stay with people from their world, white people, and all. And when they arrive here

at the station and they see us like you see us here, all colored and everything, they think "what the hell is going on!" They are afraid.' (PO11)

Misbehavior by white-collar and riffraff customers who seem to feel angry is attributed to service dysfunction. Service dysfunction occurs when the service is disturbed or when the normal service does not meet customer expectations. In this context, as Laura explains, the service workers bear the responsibility for organizational dysfunctions. 'Any little service problem, we know that the customers will blame us because it's regular. So afterwards, it's not easy for them, we know that. We are the only face of the company for them. So, it's also not easy for us. But they don't understand that' (Laura).

Misbehavior by social case customers who seem to feel lost is attributed to customer deviance. A customer's deviance may be a temporary (e.g., the use of psychotropic drugs) or permanent condition (e.g., mental illness), is never complete (the customer always has some consciousness in the interaction), and is sometimes overplayed (e.g., some customers, to a certain extent, pretend to be deviant). The service workers partly excuse the misbehavior of the customer who is not fully responsible for their actions. As Anne explains, 'The junky who breaks your face one morning, it happened to a colleague ... It's not our fault. It's not our fault and it's not the junky's fault either. He's a psychopath' (Anne).

Sensemaking of oneself: The service workers' tolerance of customer misbehavior

To make sense of the service workers' tolerance of customer misbehavior (see step B, Figure 1), service workers try to answer the following questions: Who is the service worker (step B1)?; How does this service worker feel (step B2)?; and finally, how does the service worker tolerate the misbehavior (step B3)?

Who is the service worker?

Asking who the service worker is involves identifying the occupational identity of the service workers. Depending on the nature of their activity, the way they are managed, their occupational culture, and, therefore, their occupational identity differ. This is what Anne explains, 'It also depends on how the service worker sees his job. Is it normal for him to be insulted by customers or not? Is it part of the job? Should we accept it or denounce it?' (Anne) Service workers can identify themselves as agents of satisfaction, agents of assistance, or agents of appeasement.

Those who work mainly at the sales counter and who are managed with commercial objectives tend to identify themselves as agents of satisfaction. They consider customer misbehavior as a breach of the sense of their occupation.

The following extract of an open letter posted by a service worker in the break room after she was insulted by a customer, underlining the gap she feels between her work and the reality of customer relations:

'I chose the job of service worker to help, assist, inform customers. I am a good employee, always serious and pleasant with my colleagues, the hierarchy, and the customers. I have never disrespected anyone. WHEN I AM FED UP, I CRACK, I AM AT THE END OF MY TETHER. [...] The customers have become accustomed to disrespecting us regularly. I can't let it go. Nobody should work in bad conditions. This is unacceptable [...].'

Those who work mostly where there is a flow of customers, helping them whether the traffic is disrupted or not, and who are managed according to their availability for the customer, see themselves more as agents of assistance. They consider customer misbehavior as an occupational risk. In this sense, even though they prefer smooth service relationships, they also accept the potential misbehavior of dissatisfied customers. For instance, Didier sees himself not only as a service worker but also as an interlocutor in the case of service problems: '[As service workers] our objective is to meet the customers, to help them, to orient them. Of course, there are negative sides when there are dysfunctions, where it's true that relationships can be less obvious, less easy. But it's also interesting to learn how to deal with this as well as possible' (Didier).

Finally, the service workers who are mainly called when traffic is disrupted and when service interactions are tense are managed with conflict management objectives. They see themselves as *agents of appeasement* in crisis. For them, the management of customer misbehavior is at the heart of their occupational identity. This is the view of Mickaël who sees the customers in the station as a 'pot' ready to overflow and for which he would act as a 'lid': 'My job is to hold on when things are not going well. It's to manage to calm customers in tense situations. To master that, to manage all the difficult customers' cases, to hold back when customers tell us everything. We [service workers] are really the lid on the pot' (Mickaël).

How does the service worker feel?

By *trying* to understand how the customer feels, service workers seek to evaluate their own emotional state regarding customer misbehavior. The emotional impact of customer misbehavior therefore depends on how it affects the service worker and resonates with their own life trajectories, weaknesses, values, and moods. Service workers may be more affected by one type of misbehavior than another, either by its nature (words or actions that affect workers) or by the context in which it occurs (misbehavior that takes place when the worker is particularly fragile). Thus, Karim is surprised when

Zineb is personally offended by a customer who called her a 'little dwarf':

'Zineb made me laugh not long ago ... She filed a complaint against a customer. We were at the police station, we're waiting, and I told her: "Go ahead, tell us what happened!" In my mind, if she wants to file a complaint, it's either because she was called a "dirty Arab" or a "dirty whore." She told me: "She called me a dirty little dwarf." I said to her: "Excuse me? Did she say something racist? Sexist? She just called you a dirty little dwarf?" And she says: "Oh yeah, but it's serious, what are you saying?" She is small indeed and she took it badly. It all depends on how you feel afterwards.' (Karim)

Thus, a service worker can feel personally attacked or professionally attacked by the customer's misbehavior.

Service workers feel personally attacked when customer misbehavior targets them and affects them personally. In this case, the customer misbehavior 'cracks' the professional border to reach the person under the uniform. This feeling of being personally attacked is the result of the relationship between a certain type of customer misbehavior and specific to each service worker. Depending on their life history and their mood, they may be sensitive to certain topics. When the customer misbehavior succeeds in intruding on one of their vulnerabilities, the attack is experienced personally. This is what Tina explains using a fictional illustration:

Tina → observer: 'For example, Sélya. I know that it doesn't usually affect her when customers insult her. They can attack her about her looks and everything, she doesn't care. But if, for example, she has just lost her mother ... I know that if someone starts insulting her mother it will hurt her more than usual, and then I will go and support her more than usual.' (PO22)

Service workers feel professionally attacked when customer misbehavior targets them but only affects them professionally. The professional attack often targets the company or its workers. It can also be an attack so common that it is trivialized by the worker on duty or so surprising that they find it ridiculous. In this case, they do not feel personally attacked because the misbehavior seems to be part of the job or at least related to the work context and not to their personal work. When they only feel professionally attacked, the customer misbehavior seems to be deflected by the uniform of service workers. This is what Khader calls 'the Goldorak effect':

'I don't know how to tell you this, but we [the service workers] are a bit schizophrenic. I call it the "Goldorak" effect.' When I put on my uniform, I'm a different person. It's harder for customers to get to me. A lot of the attacks from customers slide right off my uniform. Anything that is aimed at the company in general or the profession,

¹ Goldorak is the name of a very heavily armed machine in a famous Japanese animation.

I don't take it personally. I protect myself. And when I take off my uniform at night, I'm back to being myself.' (Khader)

To what extent does the service worker tolerate the misbehavior?

Once service workers have an idea of their occupational identity and their feelings during customer misbehavior, they can evaluate to what extent they tolerate the misbehavior. Based on their answers to the previous two questions (who the service worker is and how they feel), service workers answer this third question. As Karim explains, each worker hierarchizes the misbehavior of customers according to their own frame of reference: 'It really depends on the service worker. There is a hierarchy of insults, but it is a hierarchy that's not actually written down anywhere. Everyone has their own frame of reference. So, naturally, we rank the insults according to our own experience, our point of view in fact' (Karim).

Service workers who see themselves as agents of appeasement (whatever their feelings) and service workers who see themselves as agents of assistance and feel professionally attacked by the customer misbehavior will find this misbehavior tolerable. It is partly excused by the circumstances and what is temporarily acceptable and controllable by the service workers. Hugo, who defines himself as an agent of assistance, tolerates misbehavior that does not attack him personally:

'When the customer is hysterical, I will take a certain number of minutes because I can understand that the person is upset. I can even understand that, from a certain point of view, all the customer is looking for is to unleash on someone who represents the company. Okay. But if the customer doesn't calm down and starts to attack me personally, I'll tolerate it for a few minutes, but not more.' (Hugo)

Service workers who see themselves as agents of satisfaction (whatever their feelings) and service workers who see themselves as agents of assistance and feel personally attacked by the customer's misbehavior will find this misbehavior intolerable. Intolerable misbehavior is not excused by the circumstances and is considered unacceptable and difficult to control by the service workers. This is why Daniel, who defines himself as an agent of satisfaction, has difficulty tolerating customer misbehavior: 'We take a lot of stuff, insults, threats ... I saw one of my colleagues being assaulted [by a customer] ... To tell you the truth, I can't take these attacks anymore ... In fact, I can't put it all into perspective, I take it all for myself, I go back and think about I ...' (Daniel).

Sensemaking of the situation: The type of customer misbehavior

To make sense of the type of customer misbehavior situation (see step C, Figure 1), service workers rely on the meaning

previously given to the motives of customer misbehavior (step C1) and to the service workers' tolerance of customer misbehavior (step C2) to answer a third question: What kind of misbehavior is it (step C3)?

As Karim points out, this frame of meaning must be identified for each misbehavior situation, based on the context and history of the service interaction affected. The plausible frames of meaning and how they are applied to each situation are not written down anywhere. But they shape the way service workers make sense of customer misbehavior:

'Each situation is specific, and we must understand each situation. We don't have a user manual that tells us: in front of such and such a service worker who is confronted with such and such a customer, this is what happens, and this is what you must do. In fact, everything depends on the context of the situation, everything depends on the history of the people.' (Karim)

Service workers choose from among six different possible frames of meaning to make sense of the misbehavior situation: the abuse, disdain, venting, flipping out, delirium, or violation frames.

The abuse frame

Customer abuse is a customer misbehavior linked to the service worker stigma and considered tolerable. This is the case when service workers feel pressured by customers to perform tasks with low added value and with no signs of deference or gratitude. Alexandre explains that sometimes he feels treated like a 'slave' by customers who take him to be their 'servant': 'There are people who abuse [our services]. They come in and treat you like slaves. That's it. They think and they say, "I'm paying, so you're going to be my servant"' (Alexandre).

Most often, abuse qualifies as a lack of customer respect for service workers, who are perceived to have a low socio-economic status. As a result, service workers who consider providing a service to be a chosen and rewarding act are compelled to provide an imposed service and are subordinate to the wishes of the customers. This is the case, for example, where perfectly healthy and literate customers try to make service workers, like Bintou and Anissa, tell them information that is clearly displayed in the station.

Bintou and Anissa are positioned just below the train display panel to help customers who cannot understand it. Many customers ask them for the track number of their train even though the information is clearly available on this panel. This is the case of a customer who is on his phone with his headphones on and is tapping on the screen of his very modern phone. Without bothering to take off his headphones or look at her, he addresses Bintou:

Customer → Bintou: [On the phone: Hold on, hold on two seconds]. The next train to Nanterre will arrive where?

Bintou → customer: [sounding annoyed] Track 9.

Customer → Bintou: Okay. [On the phone: Yeah, excuse me, you were saying?] [He walks away].

Bintou → customer [already gone]: You don't know how to read!

Bintou → observer: Sometimes customers ask you for their train while they are on their iPhone X. With noticeboards, people are more independent, but also more helpless. They know very well how to do it, but they ask you. Actually, it's abused by some people like the white-collar and stuff.

Anissa → observer: But even the riffraff. You see me, my guy is a riffraff but sometimes I tell him: 'But you're actually abusing it!'

Bintou → observer: For some people, it doesn't bother me – old people, people who can't read, tourists and all ... But for others, I do it because it's my job, but I'd rather not have to do it. People are more arrogant when they don't really need us. We're not really doing them a favor: they're using us. (PO20)

The disdain frame

The customer disdain frame is used when customer misbehavior is linked to service worker stigma and is judged intolerable. In the case of disdain, no consideration is given to the service worker because of their presumed gender and/or assumed ethnic, racial, or social origins. Disdain can be classist, sexist, or racist. Classist disdain is associated with the lower classes, civil service, public service, and the state more broadly. Some customers take many stereotypes for granted, including assumptions about the incompetence, laziness, or stupidity of service workers. Anne recounts being deeply disdained by a customer who gave her a ridiculous tip:

'One day, a customer, I sell him a ticket, everything goes well, it is very cordial. And at the end, he threw me a nickel, saying "that will make your tip." Well, it's not much, but at the same time I didn't deserve better. The expression on his face had changed [his expression had become disdainful]. And then I went to cry. I didn't understand this disdain!' (Anne)

Racist and sexist disdain targets workers who are racialized or gendered by customers who refuse to interact with them or who are blatantly hostile to them for these reasons. Cases of gender-based disdain are often characterized by a refusal to be served by a service worker because of their gender (most often female). The same logic is found in the racist disdain. But it can also be characterized by racist remarks or insults. In the scene that follows, Sélya faces a situation of racist disdain. Her colleagues initially come to her defense. In doing so, they also suffer from the same type of disdain. One of them orders the customer to leave in an aggressive tone. Once the customer leaves, Sélya publicly calls her a racist.

Sélya and her colleagues serve customers at the counter. One customer in the queue seems particularly upset. When the customer arrives at the counter of Sélya, she starts to get really upset. She had planned to take a train which was finally canceled. Sélya tries to explain to her the causes of this cancellation but realizes that the customer had not yet bought a ticket for this train:

Sélya → customer: Look, madam, you're throwing a fit about a train you don't even have a ticket for. I can't help you, sorry. [Sélya walks to her seat]

Customer → Sélya: BAG OF GREASE! DIRTY NIGGER!²

Tina, Hamza and Leila leave their counter and position themselves between Sélya and the customer, forcing the latter to leave:

Tina → customer: [the service workers present surround the customer closely to prevent her from approaching Sélya] YOU LEAVE NOW!

Customer → Sélya: [showing disgust at the proximity of the service workers] GET OFF ME, ALL OF AFRICA THERE, GO HOME!!!

Hamza → customer: YOU GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT! [Sélya turns around to restrain her colleagues in turn. The customer leaves screaming]

Sélya → colleagues: I saw it straight away that she was a racist. It's written all over her face! (PO22)

The venting frame

The customer venting frame is used to make sense of misbehavior linked to service dysfunction and judged tolerable. When service workers assign a customer misbehavior to the sense frame of venting, it is because they feel they assume the role of scapegoats. In this sense, venting is a way of expressing all the resentment built up against the organization no matter how hard the workers try to serve them. As Patrick says: 'Sometimes I feel like we're the lightning rod. We're cannon fodder, as they say. They put us on the frontlines so that the clients can vent their frustrations on us. It's 'Go ahead, get shot!' and we come up behind' (Patrick). The service workers take the full brunt of it, even though they may not be responsible for the problem at all. They feel like they are 'punching bags', 'bumpers', or 'lightning rods' for dissatisfied customers unloading on an innocent but accessible target. The cathartic use of *venting* is evident in the customer's mode of expression, as Bintou makes sense of the following observed situation:

As the traffic is disrupted by a strike among the railway workers, Bintou goes near the trains to inform the customers. It is the end

² The passages in capital letters indicate shouting rather than speaking in the observed interactions.

of the day, and some customers look for their train and understand that it is canceled. Some of them find themselves without a means of getting home. One of these customers gets angry with Bintou:

Customer → Bintou: SHIT! YOU PEOPLE ARE REALLY ASSHOLES! IT'S BECAUSE OF YOUR DAMN STRIKES THAT I CAN'T GET HOME! YOU ARE REALLY FUCKING IDIOTS! IT'S YOUR FAULT THAT I HAVE NO TRAIN!

Later, the observer asked Bintou how she understood this incident.

Bintou → observer: No, but here it shows that it was not against me, that it was against [the transport company].

Observer → Bintou: How do you see it?

Bintou → observer: I don't know, it's clear here that the 'you' means the 'the workers' of [the transport company].

Observer → Bintou: But he could also be using the formal form of 'you'.

Bintou → observer: Yeah, but here it was 'you, the workers of [name of company]' [she imitates the customer by taking a step back and sweeping the space] ... with 'your strike!' you see. It shows that it's not against me personally. (PO17)

The flipping out frame

The customer flipping out frame is attributed to misbehavior linked to service dysfunction. This frame is defined by the suddenly relentless and disproportionate behavior of customers in relation to what triggered it. In this case, customers experience frustration that becomes unbearable and literally explodes with rage. Service workers then find themselves powerless when faced with customers who are angry with them without any reason. This is what happens, for example, when customers physically attack the service workers or their personal or work equipment, because of a mundane transport problem, as described by Daniel:

'I've seen people flipping out. There was work going on, and I was explaining to him that there were no trains running, but we had buses, and so he took a queue-management post and threw it against the window; afterwards, he picked it up again and banged it against the counter: [...] Doing all that for that ... I think it's disproportionate.' (Daniel)

During flipping out situations, the customer suddenly expresses anger in a very extreme and emotional way. They become emotionally unstable or unmoored. This kind of customer misbehavior is uncontrollable by the service worker because it is the customer who loses control. The scene previously mentioned by Jérôme (p. 15) is a good illustration of flipping out. A customer who is already aggressive because of a subscription problem suddenly becomes so aggressive that she voluntarily jams Jérôme's fingers in the transaction tray.

Jérôme finally explains how he understands this kind of situation:

Jérôme serves customers at the sales counter, which is equipped with glass windows, an intercom for talking to customers despite these windows, and a transaction tray to exchange tickets and money without risk of robbery. One customer is particularly aggressive toward him. She wants to be reimbursed for a ticket purchase for which she has no proof of payment. Jérôme cannot reimburse her. She starts yelling at Jérôme:

Customer → Jérôme: [shouting and gesturing loudly] YOU ARE YELLING! I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR AN HOUR AND A HALF! BUT YOU ARE REALLY ZEROS! YOU GUYS SUCK, IT'S NOT POSSIBLE!

While Jérôme's hand is in the transaction tray, the customer pulls the transaction tray to her side to jam his fingers inside. Disoriented, Jérôme reproaches the customer for her act, but she leaves. Later Jérôme talks about this episode:

Jérôme → observer: She [the customer] had 'left', once she had flipped out, it was finished. I could easily see that she was not herself anymore. She did not want to hear anything, it was irrecoverable, I think. (PO17)

The delirium frame

The customer delirium frame is used by service workers to make sense of tolerable misbehavior linked to customer deviance. During customer delirium, a customer manifests aggressive or intrusive behavior that is clearly incoherent or irrational, but with no physical contact. It can take the form of unjustified invective or unwelcome sexually determined behavior, such as verbal advances or sexually colored remarks. Alexandre talks about delirium in the following extract:

'Sometimes there are some who are in a delirium ... there is one who pulled down his pants saying "Fuck (name of the company)!" Then he went, with his pants down, to the police [of the station] to file a complaint against me, because I had not informed him as he wanted ... all naked ... at six o'clock in the morning [laughs]:' (Alexandre)

As this verbatim shows, customer misbehavior interpreted as *delirium* is experienced by service workers with a certain detachment or even a form of amusement. But, as the following situation experienced during the observation participation shows, it is also the surprise or even the incomprehension of the service worker that marks this type of situation:

'I was positioned in the flow of customers to give them information. A man came up to me as I was wearing the service uniform that day. With a very serious face, he handed me a ten-cent coin he said he had found two days earlier in the station. He asked me to find its "owner." Thinking that he was kidding, I smiled and told him he could keep it. But he didn't like my response and maybe my amused look. He left insulting me.' (OP3)

The violation frame

The customer violation frame is attributed to intolerable misbehavior linked to customer deviance. Violation comprises a deliberate infringement of the physical distance – which is social by extension – that service workers try to maintain when dealing with seemingly deviant customers to protect themselves from the danger and the ‘social dirt’ that they represent. This is exactly what Karim describes: ‘If there is physical contact ... That’s what happened with Audrey, the guy hit on her hard and finally, at one point, he came over and put a hand on her butt. She went to smoke, he found her and kissed her. He was dirty. She went crazy. Four months off work. [...] For me, that’s really a violation’ (Karim).

In violation situations, the customer is perceived to be dangerous when suspected of mental imbalance or to be ‘dirty’ when considered to be socially marginalized. The service workers thus experience a feeling of danger because they fear the gestures of madness and/or a feeling of disgust because they fear they will feel dirty when they come into contact with the customer. In the following example, the simple action of a customer’s hand being placed on the service worker’s arm is considered a violation by Julien:

Ina, Julien and Samy are walking around the station. Julien interacts with a customer: For almost ten minutes, the customer tells him about his dissatisfaction with the company. At first, the customer’s tone is not particularly aggressive, and his speech is relatively coherent. But the customer’s tone starts to become more and more aggressive and his speech less and less coherent. Samy seems to be getting worried. While he had been an active participant in the interaction until now, Julien begins to doubt the customer’s mental state and tries to stop the conversation without offending him.

Julien → customer: [moving slightly away from the client] I don’t know, sir: I’ll have to go now.

Customer → Julien: Yes, you must answer me. It concerns you, you’re French!

Samy, who is witnessing the scene, moves closer and takes Julien by the arm to try to stop the interaction.

Samy → Julien: Can you come, Julien? I need you, please.

Julien → customer: [trying to seize the opportunity provided by Samy] I must go. Have a good evening, sir:

The customer doubts the veracity of Julien and Samy’s pretext. He takes it as an offense and grabs Julien by the arm.

Customer → Julien: [firmly grasping his arm] NO, THERE’S NO ‘GOOD EVENING!’ I KNOW VERY WELL WHAT YOU’RE DOING. IT MEANS ‘GET OUT!’ YOU MUST LISTEN TO ME UNTIL I’M FINISHED, SIR, I’M A USER!

Julien → customer: [looking scared] DON’T TOUCH ME!

Customer → Julien: [does not let go] I CAN TOUCH YOU IF I WANT!

Julien → customer: [trying to disengage] LET GO OF ME, SIR!

Julien escapes from the customer’s grip and moves away with his colleagues. He mechanically wipes his forearm disgustedly.

Ina → Julien: Are you okay?

Julien → Ina: Yeah [holding his arm]. He freaked me out.

Sensemaking through levels: Framing adjustment, construction, negotiation, and competition

Making sense of customer misbehavior is a continuous and iterative process (see the arrows, Figure 1) that unfolds on situational, individual, collective, and organizational levels. It is led by the framing adjustment to service situation (arrow w), the framing construction by each service worker (arrow x), the framing negotiation between service workers (arrow y), and the framing competition within the service organization (arrow z). This recursive process is more or less rapid and efficient, depending on the experience of the service worker who is making sense of the misbehavior:

Framing adjustment to service situation

As a customer misbehavior situation unfolds, service workers act to interrogate it, identify the relevant cues, and attach the right frame to it. Indeed, each type of customer misbehavior identified calls for a specific frame and specific coping methods by the service workers. A good interpretation of a misbehavior situation is therefore a prerequisite for understanding it and reacting appropriately to it. By acting to the situation in this way, the service workers make it evolve and must therefore reframe its meaning as they go along. Each customer misbehavior situation is therefore never an exact replica of past situations, but is a similar, evolving, and potentially transformative version of what is already known. It is thus frequently the case that the form of misbehavior experienced is ambiguous and difficult to elucidate.

The ambiguity and evolvability inherent in the framing adjustment to the situation are illustrated by Tina’s comment on the research findings of this study. After having confirmed the relevance of the different frames of meaning identified, she explains how the initial frame of meaning chosen by the service worker is bound to evolve as the situation also evolves. To illustrate this difficulty, she refers to the customer misbehavior experienced by Sélya (already described in p. 26) first interpreted as flipping out, then as disdain, and finally, it is envisioned by Tina as delirium:

Sélya has just been subjected to racist insults from a customer. The police officers convince Sélya and her colleagues (Hamza and Leïla who were also present) to file a complaint at the police station against this customer that they just have arrested. We go together to the police station where the customer and her little daughter are already. The customer is questioned by the police in an office and Sélya in another one. I find myself in the waiting room with Hamza, Tina, Leïla, and the little girl who seems terrified by the situation. We hear her mother screaming, saying she is being beaten by the police. This behavior seems to us more and more incomprehensible. The door of the office is open, she is not being beaten, but that worries her daughter who starts to tremble and cry. I approach the little girl to try to reassure her (Hamza, Tina and Leïla are beside me). I ask if her mother often does that. She tells me that she does. I ask her how her mother is doing right now. She says she is not doing well. I ask her if her mother is taking any medication. She nods positively. Later, I present a chart to Tina representing the six types of meaning frames of customer misbehavior identified during my research. After reviewing these findings, Tina explains:

Tina → observer: [she refers to the situation experienced by Sélya] The problem is that at the beginning, the customer's behavior was legitimate because she didn't have a train [she points to the *flipping out* frame]. But then customers sometimes reveal their true nature: racist or sexist [she points to the *disdain* frame]. And if it turns out that this customer has lost her mind, she's on medication. You saw her at the police station with her daughter ... It's not obvious at first glance, but she may simply be a mentally disturbed woman [she points to the *delirium* frame]. You never know for sure. (PO22)

As this research shows, service workers make sense of customer misbehavior by relying on logic that combines personal characteristics (those of the customers and those of the service workers) with situational consequences. But the cues that drive a customer to a particular misbehavior frame can be misunderstood, incomplete, misleading, or even fake. As Redah says: "We think from our clichés. These clichés are real, they often work. But sometimes appearances are deceiving" (Redah).

Framing construction by service workers

In their early career, service workers are all overwhelmed by service interactions. Despite the training they underwent and the warnings of their managers and colleagues, they did not expect so much misbehavior when dealing with customers. At first, they are systematically surprised and upset by the misbehavior they experience. At this point, service workers are unable to make sense of customer misbehavior situations. They feel alone in the face of something they do not understand. But gradually, they step back, and the misbehavior becomes an object of analysis for them. They try to identify the characteristics and nuances of customer misbehavior. They gradually draw up a wider view of it. On average, it takes a year and a half for

service workers to start making sense of what they experience. This is precisely what Hugo tells us: "[In a service interaction] you have the human part, where you have to understand what's going on, adapt to the person in front of you ... It took me about a year and a half to get past the stage of: "What is going on?" (Hugo).

Service workers ask themselves a very Weickian question: "What is going on?" Through their experiences, both good and bad, they can provide an increasingly complex and precise answer to this question. This is what Karim explains: "I am referring to my experience. Experiencing things makes you learn and use a failed experience to succeed in the next one. It's like a child learning to walk" (Karim).

Framing negotiation between service workers

The sensemaking of customer misbehavior also plays out more broadly between service workers. Service workers develop and pass each other relevant cues and appropriate frames for making sense of customer misbehavior. These cues and frames are derived from the collective experience and constitute a reservoir of meaning for them. This reservoir is refined through interactions with customers and passed down through generations of service workers. This is precisely what happens in the following situation which takes place just after Laurie has dealt with a client she calls 'Broken record' at her counter (already described in p. 15). Bintou was present. The next day, when 'Broken record' comes back, she then discreetly informs her colleague Anissa of the customer's madness:

"Broken record" interacts with Anissa to "mime a venting." Her colleague Bintou immediately tries to make sure that Anissa is aware of the type of customer she is dealing with. She discreetly touches her to get her attention and tells her in a low voice that "he is crazy!" Anissa reassures her colleague with a grateful look' (PO20)

Therefore, co-workers who are present during the interaction play an important role in confirming, nuancing, or denying the diagnosis of the misbehavior. They may give their opinion about the significant cues (e.g., what they think about who the customer is and how they feel), but they may also share their own interpretive conclusions about the ongoing misbehavior situation. In this sense, when a service worker discusses a customer misbehavior situation with a colleague, they never fail to share their impressions. By doing so, they share their sensemaking and negotiate about 'what's going on'. This is precisely the case during the above-mentioned observed scene experienced by Julien, Ina, and Samy. They are dealing with the same customer, but they do not give the same meaning to the customer misbehavior situation because they do not agree about why the customer is misbehaving. Once the situation is over, they negotiate the framing of the situation:

During the interaction, Julien and Ina interpret the customer misbehavior as tolerable misbehavior linked to a service dysfunction: a venting. They listen to the customer and talk with him. But Samy interprets the customer misbehavior as tolerable misbehavior linked to customer deviance: a delirium. He tries to interrupt the service interaction, but the situation very quickly degenerates into violation (the crazy customer touches Julien). Julien realizes the customer is crazy and they escape the situation. They talk together:

Samy → Ina and Julien: I could see straight away that [the customer] was crazy, I didn't understand why you were talking to him and not just leave straight away.

Julien → Samy: I didn't realize it at first.

Ina → observer: You see, sometimes people are good and sometimes they're not. You can't always know, in fact. (PO9)

Framing competition within the service organization

Parallel to the frames of meaning mobilized by the service workers, the organization also frames customer misbehavior. Two organizational frames of meaning emerge from the study of the company's dedicated management tools. The first is that of 'incivility' and refers to minor customer nuisances directed against company property (e.g., throwing a piece of paper on the floor), its customers (e.g., talking too loudly), and, to a lesser extent, its service workers (e.g., being rude). These are mildly discourteous behaviors attributed to a 'lack of education' of the customers. For Anne, as for most service workers, the organizational frame of incivility poorly overlaps with the frames that service workers mobilize to make sense of customer misbehavior: 'The campaign against incivilities, I have never seen posters saying that we must be nice to the service workers. Incivility is you can't smoke, and you have to have a ticket otherwise you get a penalty. I didn't understand it' (Anne).

The second organizational frame of meaning is that of 'violence' and covers behaviors attributed to customers' delinquency. This is described as an attack on the physical integrity of service workers (assault, battery, and sexual acts) or a threat to that integrity (e.g., death threats) and is perceived as extreme and marginal. Customer misbehavior that does not fall into these organizational categories (i.e., incivility and violence) is most often interpreted by managers as the result of a professional failure or a personal fragility of the service worker. Regarding what service workers interpret as customer misbehavior, the organizational frames of meaning seem misaligned. Indeed, most of the situations of misbehavior experienced and interpreted by service workers do not fit with what the organization qualifies as customer incivility (rather accidental) or customer violence (purely physical). As a result, when service workers try to report customer misbehavior via the organizational tools, they run into a competition between the

organizational frames. Karim is directly confronted with this conflict of meaning when they must report a customer misbehavior:

In fact, incivilities for the company mean damage to property. But there are also personal attacks, for example, when someone insults you. But we don't talk about it. In fact, there is no middle ground: the company will always be at the extremes, and we go straight to violence [understood as physical]. And I am confronted by this when I must report 'violence' to the HR department. I don't know what to call the situation. So, I say:

'Yes, hello, I'm with the "so-and-so" worker who has endured "violence."

– Okay, I'll make a note of it. Can you give me more details?

– [so, the human being goes to what he has as a reference] She was beaten?

– No, no, no. He just said "dirty whore" to her.

– Ah, but why are you talking about "violence"?

– Well, because on my [reporting document] it says "violence." What do you want me to put it as?

– Ah, but that's okay, it's not serious!

– It's serious. The worker doesn't come to work to be called a "dirty whore!"

– Yes, but you understood me ...

– No, I didn't understand you' (Karim)

Figure 1 represents the cognitive map of service workers which allows them to make sense of the customer misbehavior.

Discussion and conclusion

The main contribution of this article is to uncover the sensemaking process that drives service workers when they interpret customer misbehaviors. It thus appears that service workers ask three main questions to make sense of customer misbehavior: (A) Why does the customer misbehave?; (B) To what extent does the service worker tolerate the misbehavior?; (C) What kind of customer misbehavior is it? These three main questions are underpinned by other questions and other issues that lead service workers to make sense of customer misbehavior from the social identity and emotional state of the customer and the service worker. This research improves our understanding of a phenomenon that has received limited research attention to date (Garcia et al., 2019; Jerger & Wirtz, 2017; Robertson & O'Reilly, 2020)

and needed further investigation (Gal et al., 2021; Suquet, 2010). While the existing literature describes certain outcomes and aspects of this sensemaking process of customer misbehavior (Bitner et al., 1994; Gal et al., 2021; Harris & Reynolds, 2004; Suquet, 2010), this article accounts for its overall functioning by uncovering the cognitive mechanics underlying the interpretative reasoning of these service workers. It also enriches the understanding of the sensemaking of misbehavior at work. This article allows us to empirically explore the importance of others and previous experiences in the sensemaking of misbehavior; two aspects highlighted by Olson-Buchanan and Boswell (2008) in their literature review. It also provides an understanding of how victims make sense of these misbehaviors, within a common story (Zabrodska et al., 2016) but also according to their own story and the story of the situation. Finally, where Ng et al. (2020) showed how the meaning given to misbehavior by bystanders influences the outcome of the phenomenon (Ng et al., 2020), this article shows how the process of making sense influences its interpretation.

Regarding the service workers' sensemaking of the customer motive to misbehave, the results show that it is based on social (white-collar, riffraff, social case) and emotional categorizations (superior, angry, lost) that allow service workers to interpret why the customer misbehaves (service worker stigma, service dysfunction, customer deviance). Regarding the social categorization of the customer, the figure of the 'social case' is partly like customer profiles already identified in the literature such as 'drunken' (Bitner et al., 1994), 'undesirable', or 'the sexual predators' customers (Harris & Reynolds, 2004). But the 'white-collar' and the 'riffraff' have not been identified until this research. These categories are consistent with the reality of customer misbehavior, which is a phenomenon partly attributable to 'usual' or even 'sovereign' customers (in the case of white-collar) (Rouquet & Suquet, 2021). Regarding the emotional categorization of customers, this has not been identified by the literature until now. However, the results of this research show that this dimension is essential for understanding 'why the customer misbehaves'. Finally, regarding the interpretation of the causes of customer misbehavior by service workers, the results, like Gal et al.'s (2021), suggest that the causes are related to power struggles, service expectations, and demographic characteristics.

Regarding the sensemaking of the service workers' tolerance of customer misbehavior, the results show that this is based on occupational (an agent of satisfaction, assistance, or appeasement) and emotional (personally or professionally attacked) categorizations by the service workers themselves. Service workers thus seek to know to what extent do they tolerate the misbehavior (tolerable or intolerable). This result helps to shed light on an understudied aspect of

sensemaking of customer misbehavior (except for Suquet, 2010): the service workers' reflection on themselves and their tolerance of misbehavior. This result shows that the meaning service workers give to themselves matters as much as the meaning they give to the customer when they make sense of misbehavior situations. These results reinforce the idea that workers' work identities (Hay et al., 2021) and emotions (Dwyer et al., 2023) are especially salient dimensions through which workers come to interpret failure in their daily work.

Regarding the sensemaking situations customer misbehavior by the service workers, the results show that this is based on the causal attribution of the misbehavior by the service workers (service worker stigma, service dysfunction, or customer deviance) and on service workers' personal tolerance of misbehavior (tolerable or intolerable). Service workers thus try to establish what kind of customer misbehavior it is (abuse, disdain, venting, flipping out, delirium, or violation). This article thus reveals a categorization of customer misbehavior that is different from the categorization of customer profiles. Indeed, in the existing literature, the categorization of misbehavior often corresponds to a categorization of customer profiles that frequently mixes individual and behavioral characteristics (e.g., Bitner et al., 1994; Gal et al., 2021; Harris & Reynolds, 2004; Suquet, 2010). This article proposes a system of six customer misbehavior frames organized according to the interpretation of their cause and tolerability by service workers. This classification enriches and nuances that of Gal et al. (2021) who found that service workers classify customer misbehavior by referring to the degree of both the controllability and malevolence of customers (Gal et al., 2021). The data analyzed show that the more customer misbehavior is considered controllable by service workers, the more tolerable they consider it. They also show that the causes attributed to customer misbehavior by service workers can be considered legitimate or not by service workers and therefore malicious or not.

To conclude, this study highlights several future research avenues. First, making sense of customer misbehavior is not an end for service workers. Their efforts to interpret the phenomenon are aimed at knowing how to deal with it appropriately. Future works could better understand how service workers deal with misbehavior according to the sense that they give to it. For a better understanding of the evolution of misbehavior sensemaking over time, a qualitative longitudinal study of service workers could be useful. More quantitative studies could more specifically measure the links between the variables inspired by the results of this research. These studies could better understand how the meaning service workers give to themselves (to their occupational identity and emotional state) influences the meaning they give to misbehaving situations (tolerable or not).

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Appendices

Appendix A. Synthesis of the field of service workers' perception of customer misbehavior

| Key concept and authors | Definition of the key concept | Main results of the article | Contribution |
|--|---|--|---|
| <i>Problem customers</i> (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994) | Customers who are 'unwilling to cooperate with the service provider; other customers, industry regulations, and/or laws' (Bitner, Booms & Mohr, 1994, p. 98) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four types of 'problem customer' behaviors categorized by the researchers from the service workers' point of view: the rule breakers, the drunken, the uncooperative and the verbally or physically abusive customer Three types of causes attributed to problem customers categorized by the researchers from the service workers' point of view: delivery system failures, constraints placed on service workers by laws or their own organization's rules and procedures, spontaneous negative employee behavior | What types of customer misbehavior service workers experience from their point of view |
| <i>Jaycustomer</i> (Harris & Reynolds, 2004) | Customers 'who deliberately act in a thoughtless or in an abusive manner; causing problems for the firm, employees, or other customers' (Harris & Reynolds, 2004, p. 333) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eight types of 'jaycustomer' behavior categorized by the researchers from the service workers' point of view: compensation letter writers, undesirable customers, property abusers, [customers who are/were also] service workers, vindictive customers, oral abusers, physical abusers and sexual predators Classification of 'jaycustomer' behavior by the researchers, according to their nature along two key axes: covertness (overt behavior vs. covert behavior) and primary motivation (financially motivated vs. non-financially motivated) | |
| <i>Customer deviant customer behavior</i> (Suquet, 2010) | Customer behavior enacted and labeled as deviant by service workers themselves (Suquet, 2010) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Six categories of deviant customer constructed by service workers: people who have no choice, gamblers, ideological opponents, dissatisfied clients, cheats, people who have no clue Three stages of the enactment process of customer deviance: the detection of offenders by using typical categories of evaders, the negotiation with the offender of a minimal definition of the legitimacy of the fraud situation, the outcome of the interaction (a fine or clemency) Three dilemmas underpinning the sensemaking of customer 'deviance' by service workers: outcome visibility vs. outcome efficiency, an offense focused perspective vs. a dysfunctional behavior management perspective, service vs. sanction | How service workers make sense of customer misbehavior |
| Problematic customer (Gal, Yagil, & Luria, 2021) | 'Customers whose behavior might seem as disrupting the service process [from the service workers' point of view]' (Gal, Yagil, & Luria, 2021, p. 322) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four categories of 'problem-related' customers according to the service workers' descriptions: misaligned behavior; communication or performance problems, destructive customer behavior; legitimate yet challenging service problems Three categories of 'problem-related' customers according to the service workers' interpretations: consumer style and power struggles, need for empathy and understanding, personal and demographic characteristics, wanting a complete solution to a real problem, negative previous experience, low trust Seven service workers' reactions to 'problem-related' customers: treating customers more positively than usual, having negative emotions, providing service as usual, treating customers more negatively than usual, making emotional labor; having positive emotions, and having mixed emotion reactions Service workers classify behaviors of 'problem-related' customers by referring to the degree of both controllability and malevolence of customers | |

Source: own elaboration

Appendix B. Details on research interviews

| Denomination | Fonction | Train station | Age | Seniority (years) | Duration | Date (dd/mm/yy) | | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------|-----------------|----------|----------|
| Service workers | Nirma | Service worker | A | 25 | 2 | 1 h 40 | 21/05/16 | |
| | Ethan | Service worker | A | 28 | 3 | 0 h 52 | 22/05/16 | |
| | Jonathan | Service worker | C | 28 | 6 | 1 h 06 | 25/05/16 | |
| | Patrick | Service worker | C | 33 | 3 | 1 h 02 | 25/05/16 | |
| | Mélia • | Service worker | F | 32 | 2 | 1 h 05 | 20/06/16 | |
| | Medhi | Service worker | F | 35 | 3 | 1 h 18 | 28/07/16 | |
| | Saad | Service worker | F | 27 | 2 | 0 h 46 | 28/07/16 | |
| | Hugo | Service worker | F | 28 | 5 | 1 h 14 | 28/07/16 | |
| | Sélya • | Service worker | F | 34 | 18 | 1 h 29 | 24/11/16 | |
| | Lucie | Service worker | F | 31 | 5 | 0 h 46 | 06/02/17 | |
| | Laura | Service worker | F | 30 | 5 | 1 h 27 | 10/02/17 | |
| | Malaiika | Service worker | F | 30 | 0.5 | 0 h 45 | 10/02/17 | |
| | Daniel • | Service worker | F | 39 | 15 | 1 h 17 | 07/02/17 | |
| | Nadia • | Service worker | F | 35 | 3 | 0 h 44 | 07/02/17 | |
| | Stéphane • | Service worker | F | 42 | 13 | 1 h 30 | 10/02/17 | |
| | Redah | Service worker | F | 23 | 4 | 0 h 56 | 10/02/17 | |
| | Mickaël • | Service worker | F | 31 | 4 | 0 h 45 | 16/02/17 | |
| | Maxime • | Service worker | F | 34 | 2 | 0 h 52 | 16/02/17 | |
| | Managers | Abdel | Service worker | F | 28 | 2 | 1 h 12 | 17/02/17 |
| | | Alexandre • | Service worker | F | 34 | 6 | 1 h 29 | 03/08/17 |
| Didier | | Service worker | F | 40 | 10 | 1 h 43 | 20/06/16 | |
| Sabah • | | Service worker | F | 30 | 4 | 0 h 52 | 10/02/17 | |
| Farid | | Service worker | F | 42 | 14 | 0 h 55 | 21/07/18 | |
| Alain | | Middle manager | A | 43 | 4 | 2 h 12 | 21/05/16 | |
| Jules | | Top manager | F | 40 | 15 | 1 h 20 | 12/06/16 | |
| Claire | | Staff manager | A | 32 | 2.5 | 1 h 56 | 21/11/16 | |
| Melissa | | Middle manager | B | 39 | 1.5 | 1 h 23 | 17/12/16 | |
| Caroline | | Former top manager | – | 57 | 3 | 1 h 43 | 19/04/18 | |
| Jérôme • | | Staff manager | F | 56 | 2 | 1 h 37 | 02/05/18 | |
| Pierre | | Middle manager | F | 35 | 4 | 2 h 19 | 08/05/18 | |
| Anne | | HR manager | F | 38 | 1 | 2 h 38 | 10/05/18 | |
| Key informants | Karim • | Staff manager | F | 37 | 1 | 1 h 55 | 14/06/18 | |
| | Élise | HR manager | F | 45 | 13 | 1 h 27 | 22/05/18 | |
| | Loubna | Intern consultant | F | 30 | 5 | 2 h 13 | 21/05/16 | |
| | Raphaël | Incivilities top manager | – | 40 | 4 | 1 h 15 | 23/03/16 | |
| | Henri | Incivilities expert | – | 45 | 3 | 0 h 58 | 30/03/16 | |
| | Sandrine | Security top manager | F | 36 | 6 | 1 h 29 | 23/01/16 | |
| | Serge | Work psychologist | – | 31 | 6 | 1 h 12 | 20/06/16 | |
| Charlotte | Work psychologist | – | 27 | 2 | 0 h 42 | 20/06/16 | | |
| Guillaume | Work safety top manager | – | 40 | 4 | 2 h 01 | 04/05/18 | | |

Notes: individuals observed •; **individuals have reacted to first results**; former service workers

Source: own elaboration

Appendix C. Main topics discussed in interviews

1. The personal and professional backgrounds of service workers.
2. The missions and daily professional activities of service workers.
3. Recruitment, training, and organization of the service workers' work.
4. The work situations considered most useful/not useful, satisfying/unsatisfying by service workers.
5. The service workers' relations with clients and the 'tensions' that may arise (the objective here is to let the interviewee name, in their own words, the customer misbehavior).
6. Typical customer misbehavior that service workers face in the service relationship (always using the interviewee's own words).
7. The ways in which service workers analyze and interpret these typical forms of customer misbehavior.
8. The reactions of the service workers to customer misbehavior (with the possible use of organizational tools).
9. The role of the context (work, service, interpersonal) in the customer misbehavior.
10. The strategies implemented by the organization to manage customer misbehavior.

Appendix D. Details on research observations

| Denomination | Individuals observed | Train station | Period | Date | Duration (h) |
|---|---|---------------|------------------|----------|--------------|
| Observations with an active participation | OP1 Louise, Léa, Nelly | A | 5 p.m.–10 p.m. | 31/05/16 | 5 |
| | OP2 Aya, Johann | F | 7 a.m.–10 a.m. | 01/06/16 | 3 |
| | OP3 Adrien, Sandra, Thierry | B | 5 p.m.–8 p.m. | 01/06/16 | 3 |
| | OP4 Romane, Omar, Alexis | C | 7 a.m.–9 a.m. | 02/06/16 | 2 |
| | OP5 Julien, Philippe | D | 4 p.m.–17 p.m. | 02/06/16 | 3 |
| | OP6 Romane, Asma | E | 6 a.m.–10 a.m. | 03/06/16 | 4 |
| Observations with a passive participation | PO7 Mélia •, Hamza, Lucas, Samy | F | 12 a.m.–3 p.m. | 01/07/16 | 3 |
| | PO8 Pascal, Lola, Lucas | F | 6 a.m.–9:30 a.m. | 12/12/16 | 3.5 |
| | PO9 Ina, Samy, Julien | F | 4:30 p.m.–8 p.m. | 12/12/16 | 3.5 |
| | PO10 Pascal, Leïla | F | 7 a.m.–10 a.m. | 14/12/16 | 3 |
| | PO11 Leïla, Luna | F | 5 p.m.–7 p.m. | 20/12/16 | 2 |
| | PO12 Véronique, Assia | F | 2 p.m.–4 p.m. | 15/12/16 | 2 |
| | PO13 Maxime •, Mickaël •, Amine | F | 5 p.m.–8 p.m. | 10/02/17 | 3 |
| | PO14 Alexandre •, Daniel •, Nadia • | F | 3 p.m.–7 p.m. | 14/02/17 | 4 |
| | PO15 Alexandre •, Daniel •, Pablo | F | 6:30 p.m.–9 p.m. | 15/02/17 | 2.5 |
| | PO16 Bintou, Ludovic, Adrien | F | 5 p.m.–8 p.m. | 01/05/18 | 3 |
| | PO17 Bintou, Élodie, Aurélie, Jérôme • | F | 7:30 a.m.–1 p.m. | 02/05/18 | 5.5 |
| | PO18 Pablo, Noah, Ludovic, <i>Sabah</i> • | F | 6 p.m.–8:30 p.m. | 02/05/18 | 2.5 |
| | PO19 Laurie, Amel, Bintou, <i>Karim</i> • | F | 5 p.m.–8 p.m. | 07/05/18 | 3 |
| | PO20 Bintou, Anissa | F | 5 p.m.–8 p.m. | 08/05/18 | 3 |
| | PO21 Gauthier, Julie, Mickaël •, Laëtitia | F | 5 p.m.–8:30 p.m. | 09/05/18 | 3.5 |
| | PO22 Sélya •, Hamza, Tina , Leïla | F | 7 p.m.–12 p.m. | 21/07/18 | 5 |

Note: individuals interviewed •; **individuals have reacted to first results**; *staff managers*
 Source: own elaboration

Appendix E. Main items documented during observations

1. Field items

- *General observation of:*
 - Service work and organization: tasks, tools, collectives, spaces, duration, management ...
 - Service interactions customers/service workers, service workers/service workers, customers/customers
- *Specific observation of:*
 - Customer mistreatment
 - Service workers' interpretations of customer misbehavior
 - Service workers' reactions to customer misbehavior

2. Methodological items

- *Researcher-field interactions:*
 - Interactions and impacts of the researcher with/on the field
 - Interactions and impacts of the field with/on the researcher
- *Reflexivity of the researcher about (and during) the fieldwork:*
 - Ideas for methodological adjustments
 - Methodological adjustments made

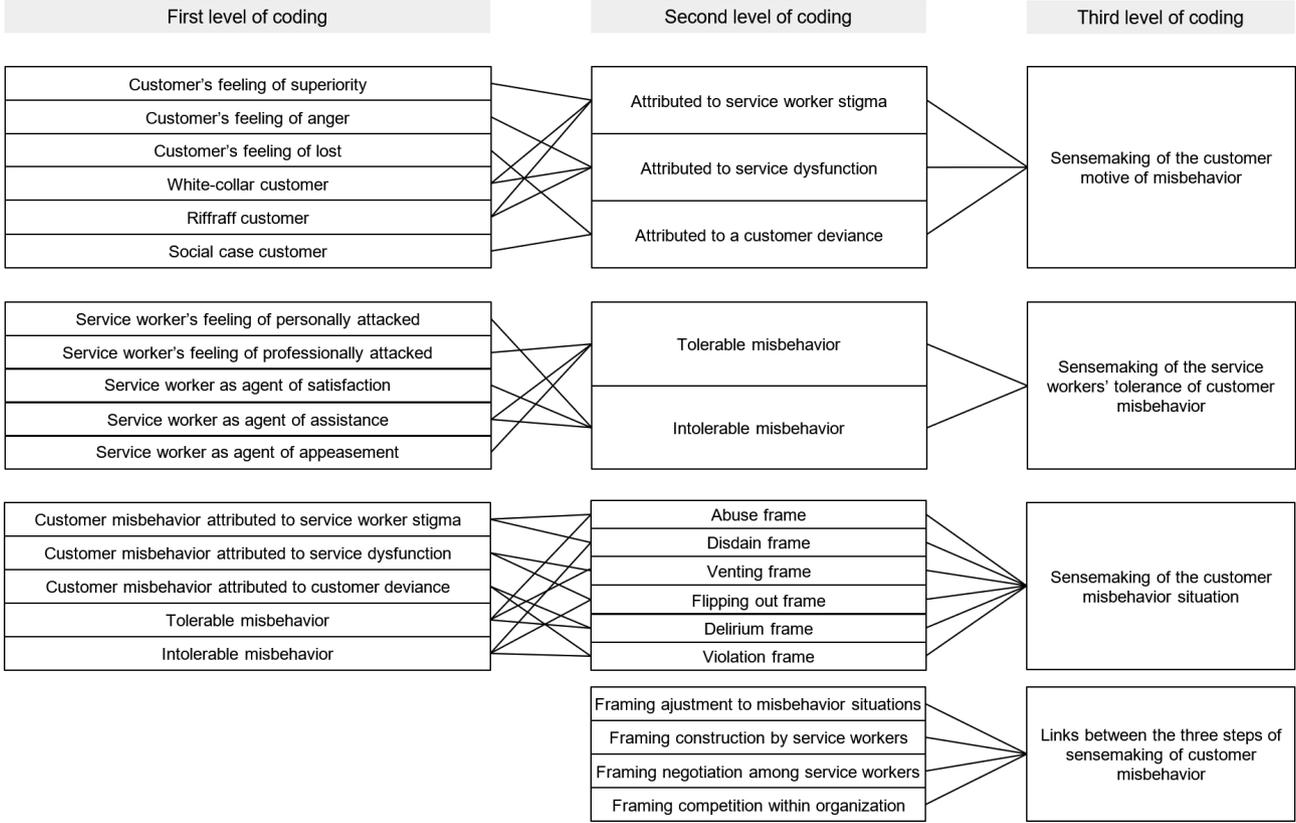
3. Analytical items

- *Intermediate analyses of the researcher:*
 - During data collection
 - During data review

Intermediate analyses of the people observed:

- During their work activity
- During an interaction with the researcher

Appendix F. Data structure



Source: own elaboration

Appendix G. Additional empirical illustrations following the progression of the article

Sensemaking of the customer motive of misbehavior

| | |
|---|---|
| <i>Who is the customer?</i> | <p>Like her colleagues, Sabah uses these categories to identify her clients. This is shown in the following observation. While attending to the arrival of a train from an upscale suburb of Île-de-France, she refers to the train customers as 'white-collars'. However, she seems worried when she understands that this research is aimed at identifying these categories of customers. After welcoming customers exiting a train from an upscale suburb, Sabah sighs:</p> <p>Sabah → observer: I can't stand these white-collar workers anymore!</p> <p>A discussion about the different profiles of customers that the service workers come into contact with then begins. As I show explicit interest in these categories, she understands that I am listing them as part of my research. At this point she seems apprehensive about having them formalized:</p> <p>Sabah → observer: Yes, it's true that we have customer categories, but we shouldn't tell the whole world! Then they'll tell us that we're creating clichés. (PO18)</p> |
| White-collar | The white-collars often come from [list of rich suburbs served by the station]. They're a bit bourgeois. They're kind of haughty people, you know, who think they're better than us and who talk down to us. (Mélia) |
| Riffraff | The riffraff is directly insulting. Afterwards it's unfortunate, but for many, they are people who live in the suburbs. They walk around with their CVs ... I grew up in a suburb and the relationship is different, they speak to me directly [in a familiar way]. (Medhi) |
| Social case | There are people who have a disability or problems ... But they are social cases in fact ... (Jérôme) |
| <i>How does the customer feel?</i> | We see according to the mood of the client. If the customer is upset or whatever, it's on their face, how they're going to talk and everything. It's easy to spot. (Malaïka) |
| Superior | There are people who think that, anyway, they are superior to a railway worker asshole, blacks, Arabs and their wives. (Anne) |
| Angry | Customers can sometimes be angry with us and we [the service workers] understand it. They must pick up their children from school, they are tired, and they don't have a train ... It's frustrating. So, they express their discontent even if they know that we are not responsible. We listen to them and try to calm them down. After that, if it turns into hate, we must stop them. (Malaïka) |
| Lost | There are people we feel that they are completely lost ... (Lucie) |
| <i>Why does the customer misbehave?</i> | It's a little bit by feel; you feel the client, it's done a little bit mechanically. (Didier) |
| Service worker stigma | According to some customers, the railway workers are always on strike, they are lazy, they work four hours a day, finally the absolute fantasy! I remember a friend of mine who put on her Facebook page: 'Frankly, the railroad workers annoy me, they should be beaten up'. I told her: 'Do you realize that you are calling for violence against people?' 'Yeah, but they piss me off, that'll get them off'. And I said: 'I can't let you say those things, well, I'm the one who's going to get my head bashed in tomorrow, or if it's not me, it'll be one of my colleagues!' (Anne) |
| Service dysfunction | The only face of the company that customers can see is us service workers. The drivers, the controllers, the repairmen, the office people, they don't see them. So, when there are delays, when there are service problems, they take it out on us. (Patrick) |
| Customer deviance | They're crazy people. I once had one staring at me from behind the glass. I told him to go home, and he kept staring at me without talking to me. |
| | Then he left. On my way out, I ran into him again and he had turned his jacket inside out. He had a reversible down jacket and he turned it inside out. How scary is that?! (Farid) |

Sensemaking of the service workers' tolerance of customer misbehavior

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>Who is the service worker?</i> | The question is whether we accept what we are experiencing. Is it normal? The management tells us that it is normal to be insulted when you are a service worker. They call it 'customer conflicts'. I don't agree. That's why I'm filing a complaint. (Stéphane) |
| Agents of satisfaction | I come here to help people and sell them train tickets. Not to be insulted. What we do has nothing to do with service work. We are not in fact service workers. This is a lie. (Nirima) |
| Agent of assistance | I'm a salesman but I don't really do any selling and I'm quite happy not to do any. In fact, we are a bit of an after-sales service. People come to us with any kind of problem, and I think it's quite normal that it happens like that. (Hugo) |
| Agent of appeasement | I really like it when it gets crazy. It's sad, but it's like a firefighter: He's happy when there's a fire, but in fact, that's when he does his job. (Jonathan) |
| <i>How does the service worker feel?</i> | You could take off the uniform and think that all the insults are on it, but there are some who know very well how to hurt you. They attack using personal stuff ... And that's a little more embarrassing. (Alexandre) |
| Personally attacked | People tell us that it's not us, that it's the professional uniform that is insulted. I'm sorry, but when I'm called a 'dirty cunt', it's not the company that is insulted, it's me. (Laura) |
| Professionally attacked | The customers really insult us; 'poor cunt', 'dirty whore', but it's not the 'you cunt' that is the hardest for me to accept. I say 'cunt' to my sister sometimes. It doesn't mean anything to me. (Sabah) |

(Continued)

Appendix G. (Continued)

Sensemaking of the customer motive of misbehavior

| | |
|---|--|
| <i>To what extent does the service worker tolerate the misbehavior?</i> | This is also the paradox of the situation. Nowadays we denounce more and more the violence done to children, to women and so on, but everybody thinks it is normal to mistreat the service workers. Even our management tells us that we must accept it. Some service workers are better at it than others. It's possible for a while, but in the end, you can't tolerate it anymore. (Anne) |
| Tolerable | Me, at the time [when I was a service worker], you could spit on me, insult me, racist insults: no problem. Frankly, it's unkind to the rest of my family, but you can insult my whole dynasty. I could handle it [...] (Karim) |
| Intolerable | But the 'fuck your mother' didn't pass. I didn't accept, you shouldn't insult my mother. I can't handle that. I'm going crazy! One day a client had the misfortune to tell me: 'Go fuck your mother'. And there, I almost threw him onto the train tracks. (Karim) |

Sensemaking of the customer misbehavior situation

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| <i>About the situation</i> | The job of a service worker is not complicated to understand. You stay for two days and I teach you, I'm sure you'll be fine. Anyone can do it. What is complicated is the customer contact. It's understanding what's going on in the service interaction and being able to understand the situation and adapt well. Not everyone can do that. And even we can't always do that. (Stéphane) |
| <i>Abuse</i> | A lady from [a city known for its well-off population] wanted help carrying her cat. Because the people of [this town] think it's their due, that we're at their disposal. So, I explained to her: 'Madam, we're here to help you and not to help your cat. You see, we're not maids here. You can't take advantage of us'. And it's a lot about how they ask. We're not dogs. There's a way to say things, to speak to people. We're not anybody's servants. (Sélya) |
| <i>Disdain</i> | <i>Amel is near the platforms during rush hour. Every time a train is about to leave, Amel takes up a position next to the person in charge of the departure of the trains, who is a man. Her objective is to prevent customers from disrupting him (he must concentrate on the management of the departure of the trains) by answering the customers' questions. A customer is waiting near the platform and seems to be looking for information. Amel then spontaneously offers help.</i> Amel → customer: Hello, sir, can I help you? Customer → Amel: [Turning to the person in charge of departures who is focused on his procedure and therefore cannot answer] No, I'll check with your colleague [he is obviously waiting for him to finish his procedure]. Amel → observer: [turning away from the customer] I hate people like that! He just won't talk to me because I'm a woman! Observer → Amel: So, you think that's why? Amel → observer: Oh yes, it happens very often. Customers who don't even want to talk to us because we're women, and they talk to the male colleague right next door. |
| <i>Venting</i> | You see, in war, the poor are put in front to cushion the blow and behind them, the king's army. It's the same for us: We are put in front of the customer, we take all the unhappy customers and then we – because we are also the king's big buffoons – we offer them: 'If you want to write to my hierarchy about your discontent, you can send it using the pre-paid envelope'. And the guy will take the sheet of paper, he will have already vented on us, he will. He'll go home, he'll calm down and he'll write. And the management will tell us: 'But it's not that complicated, but it's not as complicated as that. You complain, but in fact customers are not so bad!' Customers yell at us! (Nirma) |
| <i>Flipping out</i> | One day I had a very aggressive guy one morning who flipped out and I freaked out. He was not happy, he wanted to break the window and everything. He was insulting, threatening, and even stopped the customers from buying tickets ... All the insults that I received, the threats ... It's sometimes traumatizing, the threats, it's still scary. What I can't stand is when people are picking on me. Because there, the guy insulted me for 15 minutes. He came back, same thing, insulting, insulting, insulting ... It was too much. (Sabah) |
| <i>Delirium</i> | <i>Lola and Pascal are accompanying a customer in a wheelchair to his train. Very quickly, the customer starts hitting on Lola.</i> Customer → Lola: Hello, Lola! Lola → customer: Hello. Customer → Lola: [staring at her name tag] That's a pretty name, Lola ... <i>Lola doesn't react to the customer's remarks and begins her task over. Accompanied by Pascal, she retrieves the elevator that transports wheelchair passengers on trains. Although Lola does not react to her advances, the customer repeats them more and more explicitly. The customer is put in the elevator by Pascal. Lola waits inside the train to receive the customer. As he enters the train, the customer says loudly to Pascal:</i> Client → Pascal: Go ahead and throw me, I'll grab onto Lola! Client → Lola: [opening her arms wide and shouting, because Lola is several meters away] LOLA, YOU GRIPPED ME BY THE ARMS! I'M COMING! COME ON, IT'S GOING TO GO OVER LIKE 'DADDY IN MOMMY!' [French expression evoking a sexual relationship]. (PO8) |

(Continued)

Appendix G. (Continued)

Sensemaking of the customer motive of misbehavior

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| <i>Violation</i> | <p><i>Karim was caught in an interaction with a person wandering through the station, apparently under the influence of alcohol. As he looked for ways to quietly get out of the interaction, the customer grabbed him by the shoulder. Frightened and disgusted, Karim ordered him to let go and returned to his colleague, Amel.</i></p> <p>Amel → Karim: [ironically] Well, you didn't want him to touch you! But you like it when those sweet little old ladies take your arm, don't you?</p> <p>Karim → Amel: Yeah, but not him, not that creep! It's disgusting! (PO19)</p> |
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Links between the three steps of sensemaking of customer misbehavior

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|---|---|
| <i>Framing adjustment to misbehavior situations</i> | You can be surprised, sometimes you think what this louse is [a social case] and he will be hyper-demanding [as are white-collarers]. There are also fake crazy people [fake social cases]. People who are thought to be crazy but who only pretend to be. We have one, for example, he pretends to be crazy with my colleagues, but he talks to me normally. (Farid) |
| <i>Framing construction by service workers</i> | You get to know real human nature when you work in a train station. At the beginning you are shocked. We are in a job where people sometimes break down at 24-, 25-, 26-years-old because they discover a new world. The customers are really tough and it takes time to understand what's behind all this. And then you learn to understand people, their profile, their background, the circumstances ... yourself too. You don't become a psychologist, or a sociologist, but almost. (Mickaël) |
| <i>Framing negotiation among service workers</i> | I took the role of a service worker in an experienced team. I am confronted with a form of customer misbehavior that I am unable to interpret. I walk in the station with other service workers and a woman with a stroller calls out to me in a very aggressive tone saying that the elevator is blocked. I try to answer her. But she reproaches me by shouting. I turn toward the worker beside me who had attended the scene. He smiles at me as if to make the situation less dramatic. I do the same. Surprised by our smiles, the customer accuses me of laughing at her. She calls me 'bitch' and leaves. Sophie, a worker who witnessed the scene, explains to me why the elevator is locked. I openly regret not having been able to explain this to the customer. She says I could have, but it certainly would not have made any difference. According to her, this customer 'just wanted to vent on me'. (OP3) |
| <i>Framing competition within organization</i> | Because the difference between the organizational definition and the definition that service workers have of customer misbehavior is that they feel a form of [customer] aggression from the moment their integrity [as service worker] is violated, whether it is physical or moral. Whereas for the organization it is purely physical. Or else we go into incivility ... (Sandrine) |

Source: own elaboration