Journal of
COMMUNITY SAFETY & WELL-BEING

Mistreatment matters: Risks of unmitigated employee mistreatment from the public

Evan Richard Worman*, Candace I. J. Nykiforuk*

INTRODUCTION

Society faces an unprecedented epidemic of unkindness and mistreatment, against which we constantly struggle to avoid being desensitized to. It also feels that while this gyre spins ever-faster, none are prepared to push back against this problem meaningfully. When we consider how numb we have become to the daily onslaught of rude and aggressive comments in our front-line work, it caused us to wonder what conditions have led to this point.

Concerning mistreatment in work environments specifically, there appear to be some notable gaps that could hinder further research or mitigation efforts. Definitions and practice lack coherence and standardization, particularly as definitions of mistreatment are often created in isolation by institutions or researchers. As well, most research focuses primarily on intra-employee sources of mistreatment (i.e., how employees treat each other), resulting in a dearth of research on the occurrence of mistreatment of employees from the public specifically. As a result, varied definitions can miss important aspects of mistreatment or, perhaps more significantly, could lead to situations of equipoise, outright contradiction, and general confusion on the topic. This disempowers anyone who may seek to improve conditions on the matter.

Though these gaps exist, it does not justify delaying action to address mistreatment of employees by the public, nor does it mean that the issue needs to wait to be reified as a substantive workplace health and safety problem. On the contrary, any gaps in research and practice that do exist can benefit from preceding efforts to mitigate and raise the profile of this issue.

As such, this commentary seeks to promote a shared understanding on the importance of both further researching mistreatment of employees by the public and clarifying that it should be a subject of greater attention by employers as a health and safety concern. Although this article focuses on why investigating mistreatment matters from a perspective of supporting employees experiencing mistreatment from the public, the findings and definitions are also relatable to employer responsibilities for preventing and responding to mistreatment in occupational environments more generally. Focusing on the workplace is but one facet to addressing the issue of unkindness and mistreatment that pervades society overall. Yet, it is a critical facet given how much of the population's daily lives are spent in the workplace.

WHY MISTREATMENT RESEARCH MATTERS

The impacts mistreatment can have on employees are well known and can be expressed in practical terms of how mistreatment negatively impacts individual well-being and costs to employers. For one, receiving mistreatment from the public may lead to a psychological injury, a condition with lasting impacts on individuals including depression, emotional exhaustion, anxiety, psychological distress, and job dissatisfaction (Campbell et al., 2021; Cortina et al., 2013; Delaurier, 2001; Workers' Compensation Board of Alberta, 2022). Business outcomes are also affected by psychological injuries among workers, including lower safety outcomes, poorer quality service, absenteeism, and extreme turnover (Campbell et al., 2021; Cortina et al., 2013; Delaurier, 2001; Northington et al., 2021). There is also a risk of the "incivility spiral" (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), where a durable and unstoppable cycle of negative behaviour becomes infused in a workplace's culture, employees, and customers. Should such normalization of negative behaviour occur, a correction could cost more financial, human, or social capital than an employer has available to them.

In addition to the well-known impacts of mistreatment, there are several factors that likely lead to front-facing employees experiencing mistreatment (and potentially, at greater rates than before). First, front-line roles are often at greater risk to receive mistreatment from the public due to excessive employer tolerance for bad public behaviour, "customer is always right" attitudes, exaggerated customer service expectations, and the structure of service roles leading to the public feeling that they have more control than they actually do (Fine et al., 1999; Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Yagil, 2008). As well, employer expectations of employees are becoming stricter or more complicated (Dixon et al., 2017). A lack of (or insufficient) resourcing in workplaces can exacerbate these issues and change the experience of members of the public.

For example, investment in new technology such as customer self-serve kiosks often comes at the expense of investment in employees (Dixon et al., 2017). This can lead to a

less-prepared workforce to address challenging situations but also means that this less-prepared workforce receives more challenging situations from customers (as positive, simple situations would have been completed through the self-serve resources) (Dixon et al., 2017). One example where systems replacing employees led to problems is when Air Canada's chatbot provided incorrect guidance to a grieving customer and required human correction. The customer prevailed in the subsequent lawsuit against the company (Proctor, 2024).

Regardless of why an interaction is challenging, the challenging nature alone is a risk for exposure to mistreatment. In complex social interactions the need for civility becomes heightened (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). However, while adherence to expected civil behaviour is of greater importance, the complexity of the interaction means that there are greater possibilities for expectations between parties to differ. In turn, this creates more opportunities for involved parties to become negative. This can exacerbate issues of differing expectations as additional layers are added and no longer is it simply about a service outcome, but also about perceptions of how an employee is supposed to react to an upset customer. These additional layers can be a difficult intersection of social norms, particularly where social status and gender may confound the roles in the interaction (for example, where a customer believes one class or gender should be subservient to another while an employee is unable to accommodate what the customer is asking for). This can mean that not only is the original expectation of the interaction not being met, but now expectations that draw on personal beliefs and behaviours may also be challenged due to the added complexity.

Such unmet or differing expectations are understood to be a common precursor of mistreatment (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Sayers et al., 2011; Turnley & Feldman, 2000; Yagil, 2008). Similarly, in Robert Agnew's (2012) general strain theory, strains (particularly including the failure to achieve an expected outcome) can lead to frustration, anger, and resentment. Thus, there is a risk that a situation could escalate if a smaller issue is not able to be quickly resolved to the expectation of the client, frustrating them and potentially leading to mistreatment of the employee trying to help them.

In addition, the online disinhibition effect could lead to greater negative interactions for employees in distance settings. The online disinhibition effect describes how individuals are more willing to behave in ways with social distance (such as on online platforms) that they would have restrained themselves from in person (Suler, 2004). There are several factors that contribute to this such as anonymity, lack of social or body-language cues, and less formality or more "conversational style" minimizing the authority of employees (Suler, 2004).

For example, a welfare recipient may become agitated that they are not receiving their payments due to a technical banking error and call into a government contact centre for assistance. Because of this technical error at a financial institution, a call-centre agent must navigate a complex complaint that is outside their area of expertise to assist the member of the public. The caller is likely expecting their issue to be resolved when they call, although there is in actuality little the call-centre agent may be empowered to do. Should the call-centre agent be unable to fix the technical error, the caller may become irate and accuse the agent of being worthless and guilt them about what is going to happen because they cannot receive their welfare benefits. As this is happening online, the caller is not hindered by concerns that others will hear what they say or a line of impatient clients forming behind them, so they may be more willing to take their time in the interaction and say more hurtful things to the employee.

CONCLUSION

The negative impacts that mistreatment can have on employee health and well-being are clear, as are the risks that workplaces face should it remain unmitigated. Further, front-line employees are likely to proportionately experience more negative and complex interactions in the future while having less resources or training available to manage such situations. As noted, the implications of this include a wide range of potential negative employee and employer outcomes from mistreatment (Campbell et al., 2021; Cortina et al., 2013; Delaurier, 2001; Northington et al., 2021). This demonstrates an excellent area of opportunity for intervention, research, or development of workplace policy to protect the well-being of employees. While the topic of mistreatment of employees by the public may have gaps in existing academic and grey publications, reifying it as an important issue and something that employers will endeavour to mitigate can be the catalyst to grow coherent research and literature. If we do not act on mistreatment, the new baseline of rude and aggressive behaviour will necessarily mean its escalation in the future. It is incumbent upon us to seek understanding of this phenomena rather than succumb to complacency.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES
The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

ETHICS APPROVAL AND INFORMED CONSENT
Not applicable.

DETAILS OF POSSIBLE PREVIOUS OR DUPLICATE PUBLICATION
None.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS
*School of Public Health, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada.

REFERENCES
Agnew, R. (2012). Reflection on "a revised strain theory of delinquency". *Social Forces*, *91*(1), 33–38. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sos117

Andersson, L., & Pearson, C. M. (1999). Tit for tat? The spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace. *The Academy of Management Review*, *24*(3), 452–471. https://doi.org/10.2307/259136

Campbell, L. A., LaFreniere, J. R., Almekdash, M. H., Perlmutter, D. D., Song, H., Kelly, P. J., Keesari, R., & Shannon, K. L. (2021). Assessing civility at an academic health science center: Implications for

employee satisfaction and well-being. *PLoS One*, *16*(2), e0247715. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0247715

Cortina, L. M., Kabat-Farr, D., Leskinen, E. A., Huerta, M., & Magley, V. J. (2013). Selective incivility as modern discrimination in organizations: Evidence and impact. *Journal of Management*, *39*(6), 1579–1605. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206311418835

Delaurier, G. F. (2001). Dying to serve you: Violence in the retail workplace. *Dollars & Sense*, *237*, 27–29.

Dixon, M., Ponomareff, L., Turner, S., & DeLisi, R. (2017). Kick-ass customer service. *Harvard Business Review*, *95*(1), 110–117.

Fine, L. M., Shepherd, C. D., & Josephs, S. L. (1999). Insights into sexual harassment of salespeople by customers: The role of gender and customer power. *The Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, *19*(2), 19–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/08853134.1999.10754169

Gettman, H. J., & Gelfand, M. J. (2007). When the customer shouldn't be king: Antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment by clients and customers. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *92*(3), 757–770. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.3.757

Northington, W. M., Gillison, S. T., Beatty, S. E., & Vivek, S. (2021). I don't want to be a rule enforcer during the COVID-19 pandemic: Frontline employees' plight. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *63*, 102723. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102723

Proctor, J. (2024, February 22). *Air Canada chatbot lawsuit: What travellers should know*. CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/air-canada-chatbot-lawsuit-1.7116416

Sayers, J. K., Sears, K. L., Kelly, K., & Harbke, C. R. (2011). When employees engage in workplace incivility: The interactive effect of psychological contract violation and organizational justice. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, *23*(4), 269. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10672-011-9170-6

Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, *7*(3), 321–326. https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295

Turnley, W. H., & Feldman, D. C. (2000). Re-examining the effects of psychological contract violations: Unmet expectations and job dissatisfaction as mediators. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *21*(1), 25–42. https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-1379(200002)21:1<25::AID-JOB2>3.0.CO;2-Z

Workers Compensation Board of Alberta. (2022). Psychological injuries. https://www.wcb.ab.ca/treatment-and-recovery/specialized-injury-support/psychological-injuries/

Yagil, D. (2008). When the customer is wrong: A review of research on aggression and sexual harassment in service encounters. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *13*(2), 141–152. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2008.03.002