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Wait! What About Customer-Based Subtle Discrimination?

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In the focal article, Jones, Arena, Nittrouer, Alonso, and Lindsey (2017) provide a review and a conceptual framework for examining subtle discrimination in the workplace. The focal article, however, mainly focuses on subtle discrimination that occurs among coworkers and only mentions customers once. The current commentary delves deeper into this notion and extends their framework by focusing on customer-based subtle discrimination. We mainly focus on research from the service industry, in part because the service industry is the largest industry in the United States, employing more than half of all employees in the United States (Lopez, 2010), and because the service industry involves frequent customer interactions. Whether it is a server in a restaurant, a front-desk clerk at a hotel, a flight attendant on a plane, or an attendant in a retail store, stigmatized service employees often face subtle discrimination. Consistent with the focal article, we argue that the subtle discrimination faced by service employees can be both interpersonal (e.g., rudeness directed toward a stigmatized service employee) and formal

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(e.g., a lower tip for a stigmatized service employee). The purpose of this commentary is to highlight the research on subtle discrimination by customers, focusing on a discussion of the reasons why stigmatized service employees are particularly vulnerable to subtle discrimination from customers during service encounters.

First, service employees depend on customers for the majority of their wages (Good & Cooper, 2016). For example––on average––tipped employees are only paid $2.13 an hour and depend on customer tips to reach the $7.25 federal minimum wage (Kline, 2016). This reliance on tips opens the door for subtle discrimination, because tips themselves are open to interpretation. There is no existing standard for a tip amount; they often range from 10% to 20%, and the customers themselves decide what to leave (Kline, 2016). For example, Lynn and Sturman (2011) found that restaurant customers tipped Black servers significantly less than White servers, even after controlling for the perceived quality of service. In a similar study, Black servers received significantly lower tips than White servers (Brewster & Lynn, 2014). However, the Black servers were rated as providing better service relative to that provided by their White coworkers. This reversal in tips and service ratings is akin to research on patronizing behaviors as forms of subtle discrimination (Biernat, Collins, Katzarska-Miller, & Thompson, 2009). Last, a female Hispanic restaurant server was left with a note stating, "We only tip citizens" in lieu of a tip, presumably because she "looked" like an immigrant to the customer (Wootson, 2016). Although this last example is not necessarily subtle, it is also not illegal.

Second, whether it is a hotel or a restaurant, most service organizations have a culture in which the customer is always right. Employees who are targets of customer subtle discrimination often feel the pressure to "put up with it" and regulate their emotions (Reynolds & Harris, 2006). Yagil (2008) argues that the pressure to "put up with it" comes from both managers and coworkers, suggesting that the nature of the service industry depends on the notion that customer service providers are expected to tolerate incivility. Additionally, management and organizational culture trivialize and minimize customer incivility, allowing service providers to turn a blind eye to it and enable customers to discriminate (Handy, 2006). For example, Yagil (2008) found that women are unlikely to complain about customer sexual harassment (both subtle and overt) because of the pressure women feel to accept harassment as part of the job. Most employees dismiss and justify sexual harassment from customers as normal or expected because flirting and attractiveness are known attributes of employee job descriptions. Consequently, incivility and harassment from customers become institutionalized parts of the organizational culture, and employees and victims often fail to complain or report these incidents.

Third, unlike coworker-to-coworker interactions, customers rarely encounter the same service employee more than once. Grandey, Kern, and Frone (2007) suggest customer service interactions are largely anonymous and unilateral, enabling customers to exercise additional power in these interactions because the customer determines whether or not there are repeat or subsequent interactions. As a result, customers can mistreat service employees through subtle discrimination, knowing they will likely not see him or her again. For example, in a study of gender differences in tipping, Parrett (2011) found that female servers received smaller tips than male servers for comparably rated service that was below exceptional quality, suggesting that female servers have to perform above average to achieve parity in tips with their male counterparts. However, these gender differences appeared only among less frequent customers, who presumably expected not to encounter the same server again.

Fourth, in service encounters, customers often have a sense of entitlement and know there are few repercussions from subtly discriminating against service employees (Yagil, 2008). Customers often engage in incivility in order to exercise their authority and power in customer service situations. Most service organizations promote the importance of service, and customers often take advantage of their power involved in this relationship. For example, research in the service industry has illustrated the reality and high frequency of customer incivility and bullying behavior (Korczynski & Evans, 2013). Not only is the incivility harmful for the service employee, but it also reinforces customer subtle discrimination as a social norm in service organizations. Entitlement and anonymity within the customer and employee relationship further support a lack of negative consequences for customer subtle discrimination (Schaefers, Wittkowski, Benoit, & Ferraro, 2016).

Fifth and last, women, ethnic minorities, immigrants, and other stigmatized group members are often perceived as having less power and status and are more likely to "fit" the stereotype of service providers, which often leads customers to feel more entitled to be uncivil and abusive toward them (Wang, 2016). Subtle discrimination can involve shifting standards (Biernat et al., 2009), in which customers might evaluate and treat stigmatized employees through a stereotype-skewed lens, downgrading an employee's performance according to stereotypes. For example, in an experiment, non-White male store employees were rated lower on customer satisfaction than White male employees among raters who had high levels of implicit bias, despite the fact that the employees displayed the same scripted behaviors (Hekman et al., 2010).

Likewise, because of their lower perceived power and status, customers can have inconsistent expectations of how women, ethnic minorities,

immigrants, and other stigmatized service employees should behave, leading to subtle discrimination. For example, customers might expect more reverence or displays of servitude from women and racial minorities than from White men, leading to lower evaluations of those employees who do not meet these stereotyped expectations (Hekman et al., 2010). In two experiments, a Hispanic female employee was evaluated much lower for identical service failures than a White male employee by participants in the role of hotel customers (Wu, Han, & Mattila, 2016). More important, competence perceptions mediated the relationships between race, gender, and the customer evaluations, suggesting the participants in the role of customers had lower competency expectations for Hispanic women. These findings are consistent with the justification-suppression model of the expression and experience of prejudice (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003) in that the participants evaluated the Hispanic woman lower only under conditions that confirmed the participants' stereotypes.

Conclusions

Adding to Jones et al., we highlight the research and reasons why stigmatized service employees are particularly susceptible to subtle discrimination via customers. Although most of the research outlined in Jones et al. focused on coworker-to-coworker subtle discrimination, customer-based subtle discrimination is real, harmful, and often treated as just part of the job by the organization (Schaefers et al., 2016; Yagil, 2008). We argue that employers should be accountable for the ways in which they facilitate and benefit from customer-based subtle discrimination against service workers. Although the law protects employees from workplace discrimination, the law does not protect service employees from customer-based discrimination, regardless of the level of subtlety. Employers, therefore, must play a role in remediating customer-based subtle discrimination.

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Subtle Discrimination as Natural "Equal Reaction" to Organizational Actions, and Practical Ways To Soften It

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