DELIVERING CUSTOMER-ORIENTED BEHAVIOUR THROUGH EMPOWERMENT: AN EMPIRICAL TEST OF HRM ASSUMPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Organizational initiatives to strengthen customer orientation among front-line service workers abound, and have led many commentators to speak of the reconstitution of service work. These interventions rest on managers’ assumptions about what engenders the desired customer-oriented behaviours among employees. We evaluate those assumptions in the context of a major change initiative in a supermarket firm. The logic of the programme mirrors key precepts in the contemporary management literature. These are that management behaviour, job design and values-based training can produce a sense of empowerment among employees, and that empowerment will generate prosocial customer-oriented behaviour. Using data from a large scale employee survey, we test the validity of those assumptions. Employees who perceived management behaviour in a positive light and who had participated in values-based training were more likely to feel empowered (i.e. to have internalized prosocial service values and to feel a sense of competence and autonomy on the job). Psychological empowerment was, in turn, positively related to the customer-oriented behaviour of workers. This study, therefore, provides support for key assumptions underlying HRM theory and practice in services.

INTRODUCTION

The ‘sovereign customer’ is seen to demand greater individual attention, flexibility and novelty in the provision of services, as well as goods (du Gay, 1996; Peters, 1987; Sturdy, 1998). Service quality has thus become a major management preoccupation. Increasing numbers of organizations, including those who continue to compete on price, seek also to differentiate themselves on the basis of superior customer service. A key problem for managers is how to ensure appropriate behaviours on the part of front-line workers: those employees who actually meet the customer and deliver the service (Bowen and Schneider, 1988; Carlzon, 1987).

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One route to the provision of high quality service is through redoubling the traditional mechanisms of employee control developed within manufacturing settings. Managers might opt to simplify jobs and to clarify the ‘script’: the set of rules which govern interaction between customers and employees. Supervision might be intensified, and harsher sanctions for poor performance imposed. Such a ‘production-line’ approach (Levitt, 1972) emphasizing standardization, technological and personal control is pursued by numerous service organizations, and may indeed produce efficient and reliable service which meets customers’ demands (Bowen and Lawler, 1992). However, it flies in the face of current definitions of quality service and prescriptions for its achievement. It may produce greater efficiency and reliability, goes the argument, but not the flexibility and sense of genuine concern prized by contemporary customers (Bowen and Schneider, 1988; Parasuraman et al., 1985; Quinn, 1992; Schlesinger and Heskett, 1991). Scripts, rules and close supervision can ‘straightjacket’ employees, constraining both their scope to act in customer interests and their motivation to do so. How then to attain the responsiveness, commitment, authenticity and innovation which now characterizes the ideal service worker?

In an increasing number of organizations, management’s response to this question takes the form of ‘culture change’ or ‘customer care’ programmes targeting the attitudes, orientations and behaviours of front-line staff. These programmes reflect prescriptions in the human resource management (for a review, see Legge, 1995; Sparrow and Marchington, 1998), quality management (for a review, see Dean and Bowen, 1994), excellence (Peters, 1987; Peters and Waterman, 1982), and services management (for a review, see Bowen and Schneider, 1988; Redman and Mathews, 1996) literatures. Like the interventions, these literatures vary in focus and emphasis (Harris and Ogbonna, 1999). However they share certain assumptions and precepts, for example the ‘natural’ desire of employees to do quality work, and how this can be facilitated through appropriate job design, culture and leadership, supportive supervision, hierarchical trust and normative-reeducative training.

In this paper, we evaluate the assumptions that underpin one such change initiative in a supermarket company. In the first section we set out the logic of the intervention. This entails description first, of what was done (i.e. the management and human resource practices involved in the programme). Second, and central to this paper, we address why it was done. Our focus, in other words, is the underlying logic of the initiative: the assumptions about the set of conditions that would facilitate the customer orientation of front-line staff. We explore this underlying logic and show how it reflects arguments and prescriptions in various strands of management literature. In the remainder of the paper, we test these assumptions empirically, using data from a large scale employee survey.

Evaluation of this kind is important. The partial state of human resource management (HRM) and quality theory is widely discussed (Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Guest, 1987, 1997; Hackman and Wageman, 1995; Hill and Wilkinson, 1995; Knights and McCabe, 1997; Noon, 1992; Patterson et al., 1997). Within the mainstream literature, two issues in particular are highlighted. First, is the need to develop a fuller theoretical understanding of the mechanisms linking human resource (HR) practices and management behaviour to key aspects of individual and organizational performance. And second, is the need systematically to test these theoretical links and develop a sounder empirical basis for identifying best
practice. A parallel literature engages in critique of HRM, arguing theoretical inconsistencies and (especially in its ‘soft’ version) the lack of its application in practice (Legge, 1995), with writers such as Keenoy (1997; p. 837) speaking of its ‘overwhelming empirical “refutation”’.

The present study seeks to contribute to each of these strands of the HRM and quality debate. It does so by first modelling and then testing core assumptions linking HR practices and management behaviours to the customer-oriented behaviour of front-line workers.

**THE INTERVENTION**

Shopco is one of the three largest supermarket chains in Britain. Several years ago, senior management judged that quality of customer service would join, and perhaps supersede, price as a major competitive issue within mass market food retailing. Accordingly, they decided to pursue competitive advantage through a more personalized and flexible type of service. Numerous and ongoing customer service innovations were planned, many of these technological in nature. However, it was assumed that the key to effective delivery of these innovations, and of day-to-day service, lay with front-line staff. It was also assumed that to achieve this new customer-oriented ethos, a significant ‘culture change’ was required in Shopco. To this end, a major initiative, Service Excellence, was launched in 1994.

Through a series of in-depth interviews with corporate and store management and supervisors, and analysis of documentary (including training) material, we mapped the aims, objectives and assumptions about appropriate mechanisms underlying the initiative. In the section below we look at the logic of Service Excellence, and show how themes from the literature are reflected in the programme.

**Overall Logic of the Initiative**

Service Excellence encompassed four main elements: a shift to a more supportive, participative management style; role modelling by management; job redesign to increase the discretion for front-line staff; and customer service training. It was assumed that together, these changes would create the conditions necessary for delivery of the new service ethos, namely employees who (1) understood and internalized the values of Service Excellence, (2) possessed the necessary skills and abilities, and (3) had the scope to use these competences.

We term this set of conditions psychological empowerment, given its similarity to certain conceptualizations in the literature. Writers such as Thomas and Velthouse (1990) and Spreitzer (1995) define psychological empowerment as increased task motivation manifested in employees’ cognitions about their work role. These cognitions are said to encompass meaning, or the fit between an individual’s values and his/her work role; competence, or belief in one’s ability to perform the job; self-determination, or a sense of autonomy on the job; and impact, or a sense of having an influence over job outcomes. Together, these perceptions should result in an active rather than passive orientation to a work role (Spreitzer, 1995). Within the Shopco context, the first three of these dimensions correspond to understanding and internalization of values (meaning); possession of the necessary skills and abilities (competence); and scope, or discretion, to use these competences (self-determination).
Empowerment has of course been conceptualized in a number of different ways, and no consensus on its status has yet emerged (Wilkinson, 1998). Some writers focus on 'empowering' work practices such as provision of organizational information to employees, reduction of bureaucratic controls and increased task autonomy (Bowen and Lawler, 1992; Wall and Martin, 1994). These practices are often hypothesized to increase employee motivation through greater task involvement. Another stream of writing adopts a critical perspective on empowerment, treating it as a rhetorical device to obscure an increase in management power (Parker and Slaughter, 1993; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992). In this study, we take an explicitly psychological view of empowerment, focusing on individuals' perceptions of their work role and modelling and testing certain antecedents and outcomes of these perceptions (for a parallel approach, see Corsun and Enz, 1999). We will return to conceptions of empowerment in the Discussion section of the paper.

We turn below to the four key elements of the Service Excellence initiative.

New Managerial Attitudes and Behaviour
The rather authoritarian management style traditionally practised within Shopco was judged inimical to the philosophy of Service Excellence. A new managerial ethos was 'designed', this to encompass an array of changes in attitudes and behaviour, towards both customers and employees. These new competences were transmitted to managers and supervisors through company directives, training materials and exercises, and through their establishment as explicit elements of the performance appraisal system in Shopco.

Supportive management style. The management style traditionally manifested in Shopco was seen to have resulted in an overly formal and distant relationship between store management and general staff. As an explicit part of Service Excellence, this social distance was to be lessened. For example, a company edict was issued banning the use of last names in interactions among employees, regardless of their hierarchical level. More generally, Shopco managers, from board level to first line management, were charged with the development of a more supportive, considerate style. There was to be more frequent interaction between managers and supervisors and front-line employees. The nature of this contact was to communicate support and respect for employees (e.g. mistakes were to be dealt with in a non-coercive manner) and a positive valuing of their contribution to the business.

This aim mirrors contemporary arguments, based in turn on human relations theory (Likert, 1961), that supportive behaviour on the part of management and increased informal contact between management and staff will have the effect of reducing 'them and us' attitudes and will, in turn, contribute to the high trust necessary for flexible behaviour (Pfeffer, 1998). This might, for example, translate into more upward communication from front-line staff about customer desires and ideas about improving service. A related assumption was that supportive and considerate treatment of employees by management would be directly reciprocated by employees in their dealings with customers.

Role modelling in service quality. Consistent with arguments in the literature about the importance of leadership in generating cultural change (Chin and Benne, 1985;
Schein, 1992), managers were to act as role models in regard to customer service. This meant the active involvement of management in the training exercise (see below). It also meant frequently being seen at the sharp end, for example, working on the tills or stocking shelves along with general staff. Finally, it often meant granting accommodations to customers that would have been surprising in the ‘old regime’, and then disseminating stories about these instances around the company. This can be seen as a mechanism by which stories, legends and myths are generated as a way of symbolizing and redefining the organization and the service it offers customers (Keenoy and Anthony, 1992).

Management behaviour was, in short, to act as a visible demonstration to employees of senior level commitment to Service Excellence. This aspect of the initiative reflects the assumption, consistent with prescriptions in the HRM and quality literatures that management commitment is crucial to the success of interventions such as this (Hill and Wilkinson, 1995; Oakland, 1993). It increases the likelihood that needed resources will be made available, for example. Further, and importantly, it is assumed that management’s commitment is a necessary condition to employees’ own acceptance of cultural change (Schein, 1992).

**Job Redesign**

Job redesign constituted the third main element of the programme. Front-line workers were to be given increased discretion in their dealings with customers, in two senses. First, they were allowed greater autonomy in terms of actions they could take on behalf of customers without reference to supervisors. These included granting exchanges or credit for unsatisfactory products; taking the customer’s word in event of a disputed price; granting accommodations, writing letters and offering gifts in the event of customer dissatisfaction; and removing from the selling floor any product that did not in their view meet quality standards.

Second, front-line workers were given wider latitude in how they interacted with customers. Employees were no longer bound by a company ‘script’ mandating forms of words and requisite smiles. Rather they could converse with customers in ways the employee deemed appropriate, for example, to call a customer ‘love’ if that is the natural form of address; or to be chatty and sociable, or more formal, depending upon the individual customer’s proclivities.

A key rationale for increased discretion in front-line jobs was to introduce scope for continuous improvement on the part of individual employees. It was assumed, in other words, that employees would use their increased autonomy for the benefit of customers. This increased discretion was to take place within a climate of high trust evidenced by supportive supervision and management (see above). It was espoused as vital that the inevitable mistakes made by staff should not be censured and that correct decisions should be met with ready praise.

This shift towards ‘self-management’ is consistent with prescriptions in the services management literature. The nature of services (e.g. the unpredictability arising from the participation of customers) has led many writers to argue that reliance on rigid scripts and direct controls is inappropriate to quality strategies in this sector (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Bowen and Schneider, 1988; Peters, 1987; Schneider, 1990a). This perspective suggests that self-management and latitude for self-expression are necessary conditions both for employee willingness and capacity for quality service.
The wider literature on job design (for reviews, see Parker and Wall, 1998; Wall and Martin, 1994) provides some empirical evidence from manufacturing settings of a positive relationship between job autonomy and outcomes such as motivation (Hackman and Oldham, 1980); performance (Wall et al., 1992); and more proactive role orientations (Parker et al., 1997). Few studies have been performed in service settings; however there is evidence that perceived autonomy is positively associated with a sense of authenticity in the work role (Wharton, 1993).

Staff Training in Service Excellence
Training constituted the fourth main element of the intervention. A set of modules was developed to communicate the new service values to employees, to gain their commitment to the programme and to instil the necessary confidence and interpersonal skills. It was stressed to managers that the training sessions should be based on group discussions, and that these should be unstructured, participative and fun.

Qualitative interviews and analysis of documentary material revealed the basic 'messages' presented to staff via the training sessions:

- The route to better service and their own satisfaction was not rules or a company 'script', but freedom: the freedom to 'be themselves' with customers; to respond in ways appropriate to themselves and to the customer.
- That they could and should become 'excellent', through developing their own self-confidence and drawing on their existing strengths (e.g. bringing useful styles of interacting in their personal or home life into their dealings with customers).
- That everyone could win: customers and the company, but also employees through the satisfaction of having done their job well and through personal benefits of improved self-confidence and social skills.

The training programme can be described as a normative-reeducative approach to change (Chin and Benne, 1985), offering staff a new way of looking at themselves and the world. The content of this new view is redolent of the themes and languages of excellence and enterprise culture (du Gay, 1996; Sturdy, 1998). Rules, scripts and supervisors are to give way to enterprising individuals who develop and use their own personalities and make their own decisions about how best to serve customers.

Desired Outcomes of Service Excellence
Psychological empowerment. It was assumed that the above changes would foster the right conditions for the programme's success. As noted above, we term these conditions psychological empowerment. First, employees would come to understand and internalize the principles of Service Excellence, and therefore be clear about what was expected in regard to treatment of customers. Second, they would feel they had the necessary skills and abilities to do their job well and to cope with unexpected problems. Finally, they would perceive they had the autonomy to decide how to use their abilities for the benefit of customers. These primary mechanisms would, it was assumed, deliver the customer-oriented behaviour sought by management.
Customer-oriented behaviour. The ultimate aim of Service Excellence was changes in employees' behaviour towards customers, the general nature of which has already been characterized as more personalized, flexible and receptive to individual customer demands. An essential point is that the wellspring of this service is not impersonal rules and close supervision, but employees' own commitment to customers. The creation of this commitment, and the customer-oriented behaviour it would spur, was the objective of the programme, and it was assumed that success here would realize the company's aim of enhanced service quality.

RESEARCH MODELS

The section above has outlined Service Excellence and its underlying assumptions. In the section to follow, we evaluate empirically the soundness of those assumptions. It is worth noting that we are not evaluating the impact of the programme per se. Our aim is not, for example, to trace increases in customer-oriented behaviour prior to and post the intervention. The focus of our evaluation is, rather, the underlying logic of the programme. This logic, simply stated, is that certain management behaviours and human resource practices in the work context (as experienced by employees) engender customer orientation. If these assumptions are sound, then employees within the Shopco system who more strongly perceive these behaviours and practices to be operating (e.g. who view their supervisor as supportive, or who feel they have autonomy in their job) should be more likely to engage in customer-oriented behaviour.

Against this background we now formally model the main assumptions and hypotheses underlying the programme prior to testing them against the Shopco data.

In line with the arguments of the programme outlined above, the present analysis focuses on three main sets of variables. The core dependent variable in the analysis is the extent to which staff engage in behaviour designed to satisfy customers. More generally, the core dependent variable can usefully be thought of as a form of prosocial organizational behaviour (PSOB) (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986) which is specifically directed towards customers. This type of PSOB includes direct forms of helping behaviour towards customers, as well as more indirect expressions of prosocial behaviour in the form, for example, of suggestions for improvement in customer service. We refer to this type of PSOB as customer-oriented behaviour (COBEH), which we define as the extent to which employees engage in continuous improvement and exert effort on the job on behalf of customers (Peccei and Rosenthal, 1997). COBEH is the key outcome variable in the analysis and is hypothesized to be affected by two main sets of antecedents relating to the level of psychological empowerment experienced by employees on the job, and to perceived management behaviours and HR practices in the organization.

Clearly, there are various ways in which these sets of antecedents might be linked to COBEH. Here we identify and test three alternative explanatory models which we label the simple additive, the full mediation, and the partial mediation models, respectively. The three models are shown schematically in figure 1. We start by outlining the full mediation model since, of the three models, this is the
one that most closely captures and reflects the key assumptions underlying the SE initiative. We then briefly outline the alternative models.

**Full Mediation Model**
As shown in figure 1(b), the full mediation model assumes that there is no direct relationship between the set of perceived management behaviours and HR prac-
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practices and employees' level of customer-oriented behaviour. Rather, this model hypothesizes that the impact of the management behaviour and HR practice variables on COBEH is purely indirect, being completely mediated by the level of psychological empowerment of employees. Thus, in line with the main assumptions of the programme, the model hypothesizes COBEH to be directly affected by employee empowerment which, in turn, is assumed to be influenced by the set of perceived management behaviours and HR practices in the organization.

The notion of empowerment is captured by means of three variables in the present analysis, namely, *internalization of SE*, *job competence*, and *job autonomy*. These variables, as noted, closely parallel the 'meaning', 'competence', and 'self-determination' components of psychological empowerment identified by Spreitzer (1995) as part of her four-dimensional conceptualization of this construct. Specifically, internalization of SE refers to the extent to which employees feel they have a good understanding of what Service Excellence is about, think SE is important for the future of their store, and are committed to it. Employees who exhibit a strong sense of internalization of SE are expected to place a stronger value on providing high quality service to customers and to have a greater understanding of their role requirements in relation to customers. As such, they are expected to exhibit higher levels of motivation to engage in customer-oriented job behaviour (Hackman and Oldham, 1980; Porter and Lawler, 1968).

Job competence relates to individuals' feelings of personal mastery and self-efficacy linked to the performance of their work roles (Bandura, 1989). It refers to the extent to which individuals perceive that they have the necessary training, skills and competence to do their job well and cope with any unexpected problems in their work. Job autonomy refers to the extent to which employees feel they are able to make their own decisions in their job. As such, it is closely linked to the degree of control and self-determination which individuals feel they are able to exercise at work (Deci et al., 1989; Wall et al., 1992) as reflected, for example, in their opportunity to decide about the pace and methods of work (Hackman and Oldham, 1980; Spector, 1986).

More generally, the present notion of empowerment could be said to parallel standard models of individual job performance proposed in the organizational psychology and behaviour literature (e.g. Campbell and Pritchard, 1976). These models view performance as a function of three main factors, namely individuals' motivation, competence and opportunity to use their skills at work. The internalization, competence and autonomy dimensions of empowerment identified above may be thought of as tapping employees' willingness, capacity and opportunity to engage in COBEH, respectively, and, therefore, as closely corresponding to the three main components of standard models of job performance. Hence, they represent important preconditions of customer-oriented behaviour, and in line with the assumptions of the programme, are each hypothesized to be positively related to COBEH.

Employee empowerment is, in turn, hypothesized to be affected by the set of management behaviour and HR practice variables on the left hand side of the model. These variables direct attention to the remaining set of programme assumptions, namely those relating to managerial role modelling, supportive leadership styles and customer service training as means of empowering staff and making them more customer oriented. (Note that the assumptions relating to job design have already been captured indirectly in the model through the job

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autonomy variable.) More specifically, role modelling was initially captured by means of two variables in the analysis, perceived management commitment to customer service and perceived supervisor commitment to customer service. These variables refer to the extent to which employees perceive store management and immediate supervisors to be committed to customer service and to set an example of good service in their daily job. Supportive leadership was also initially measured by means of two variables, namely perceived management concern and perceived supervisory support. The first of these variables refers to the extent to which employees perceive that they are treated fairly and sympathetically by store management, while the second refers to the extent to which they perceive their immediate supervisor to be supportive and participative in his or her behaviour.

As we explain more fully below, initial analysis of these various constructs revealed that employees in Shopco did not make a clear distinction between the perceived supportiveness and the perceived customer orientation of their immediate supervisors. Nor did they make a clear distinction between the supportiveness and customer orientation of store management. As a result, we decided to combine the perceived role modelling and leadership style variables into two composite constructs tapping individuals' overall evaluation of their immediate supervisor and of store management, respectively. These composite constructs are the ones included in the models in figure 1 under the labels of supportive and customer oriented supervision and supportive and customer oriented management. Finally, the assumptions relating to SE training are captured in the models by means of a single variable measuring whether individuals had participated in any of the SE training sessions at their store.

In line with the assumptions of the programme, the management behaviour and HR practice variables are hypothesized to be related to employee empowerment. Although the precise links involved with the different dimensions of empowerment are not spelled out in detail in the programme, different strands of research and literature suggest that the relevant links in the model are likely to be positive. More specifically, the literature on organizational training and socialization (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Cascio, 1998; Thurley and Warnenius, 1973; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) suggests that employees' internalization of prosocial customer service values and norms, as well as their acquisition of relevant customer service skills, is likely to be strongly influenced by two main factors: (1) the extent of their involvement in relevant planned processes of organizational training and education; and (2) the strength of the organizational climate for customer service. The first factor directs attention to formal processes of customer service socialization within the organization, while the second focuses on more informal processes based on individuals' day-to-day experiences and interactions.

Central to formal processes of customer service socialization within contemporary organizations, as we have seen, are systematic programmes of customer care and service training targeted at both new recruits and existing staff (Normann, 1991; Schneider, 1990a). These programmes are concerned as much with developing a strong service orientation among front-line staff, as they are with imparting relevant job skills to employees and acquainting them with new service quality standards, tools and techniques (Roberts and Corcoran-Nantes, 1995; Rosenthal et al., 1997). The success of these programmes is clearly likely to vary depending on a whole range of factors, including the nature of the programme itself, its duration, and the combination of training and socialization mechanisms employed.
(Schein, 1992; Wanous, 1980). However, other things being equal, systematic training in service quality and exposure to customer service values and norms can be expected to facilitate the development of both a strong service orientation and a strong sense of job competence amongst employees.

Participation in formal training and education programmes is, however, only one means through which employees may come to acquire relevant job skills and assimilate prosocial customer service values and norms. Equally, if not more important, is the ongoing process of learning and socialization which occurs through day-to-day experiences in the organization. Particularly important in this respect is the organizational climate for customer service (Schneider, 1990b). That is to say, the extent to which employees perceive customer service to be a major focus of concern within the organization (Peccei and Rosenthal, 2000).

Central to this are their perceptions of the extent to which management and supervisors place a high priority on customer-oriented service and behave in ways that are consistent with espoused customer service values and norms. The stronger the perceived customer service climate, the more systematic the situational cueing, validation and reinforcement of prosocial customer service values and norms is likely to be. Such ‘strong’ situations (Mischel, 1977) should facilitate the development and assimilation by employees of prosocial customer service standards and skills by signalling to them what is valued in the system and by focusing their attention on widely shared attitudes and behaviours (O’Reilly and Chatman, 1996; Peccei and Rosenthal, 2000). Hence, we expect both the perceived management and supervisory behaviour variables in the model to contribute to the development of a strong service orientation, as well as to a strong sense of job competence, amongst employees.

The management and supervisory behaviour variables in the model can also be expected to have an impact on the third and last dimension of empowerment, namely employees’ perceived degree of autonomy on the job. Clearly, the degree of control individuals are able to exercise over various aspects of their work is likely to depend, above all, on the way in which jobs are designed in the first place (Hackman and Oldham, 1980; Parker and Wall, 1998). Leadership styles, however, can also make a difference. In particular, as human relations writers (e.g. Likert, 1961) have traditionally emphasized, and as is also suggested by some of the more recent leadership literature (e.g. Conger and Kanungo, 1987; Evans, 1970), ‘command and control’ forms of supervision are likely to constrain the exercise of job autonomy by subordinates. Leadership styles that are perceived to be more supportive and participative, on the other hand, are likely to enhance subordinates’ scope for decision-making and facilitate the development of a stronger sense of job autonomy. Hence, we expect the two management and supervisory variables in the model to have a positive effect on job autonomy. We do not, however, necessarily expect job autonomy to be directly influenced by the training participation variable.

Alternative Explanatory Models

In the full mediation model outlined above, the three empowerment variables are treated as intervening variables mediating the impact of the management behaviour and HR practice variables on COBEH. This does not necessarily mean though that the latter variables, in addition to having an indirect effect on COBEH through their impact on the empowerment variables, may not also have a direct effect on customer-oriented behaviour. This would imply only partial, rather than
complete, mediation with respect to the intervening empowerment variables (Barron and Kenny, 1986), and suggest that, apart from psychological empowerment, there may also be other mechanisms linking the set of perceived management behaviours and HR practices to COBEH.

The programme assumptions are not specific on this point. Theoretical and empirical work on prosocial and organizational citizenship behaviour suggests, however, that a partial mediation model of the type depicted in figure 1(a) may well represent a plausible alternative to the complete mediation model outlined above. Central to this new model is the idea that, because of their potential impact on employee job satisfaction, commitment, and positive affect, the management behaviour and HR practice variables are likely to have a direct positive effect on COBEH. This direct effect is assumed to be above and beyond the indirect effect that these variables are hypothesized to have on COBEH through their impact on the intervening empowerment variables.

Finally a second alternative to the full mediation model discussed above, is the simple additive model depicted in figure 1(c). Although this model incorporates several of the hypotheses from the previous two models, its distinguishing feature is the absence of mediation effects. In other words it does not explicitly hypothesize any links between the set of management behaviour and HR practice variables and the set of empowerment variables. Thus, the predictor variables in this model are all assumed to be at the same level of analysis and hypothesized to have a direct additive effect on COBEH.

In summary, in this section we modelled the main assumptions underlying the SE initiative in Shopco. This includes the full mediation model outlined above and two plausible alternative models. The three models are tested below against the Shopco data.

METHODS

Data Sample and Methods
The three models were tested using data from a large-scale attitude survey covering approximately 2100 staff employed in seven Shopco stores. The stores included in the survey employed between 90 and 450 employees. The survey was conducted a few months after the launch of the SE initiative, and was part of a wider evaluation of the SE programme within Shopco (see Rosenthal et al., 1997). The research instrument used in the survey was a self-completion questionnaire which we distributed to all staff in each of the participating stores.

A 35 per cent response rate was obtained for the survey, providing a total sample of 711 respondents, including 54 supervisors and 663 general staff (e.g. till operators, stock controllers, shelf fillers). The sample was representative of the store populations in terms of a number of key demographic characteristics including age, sex, part-time/full-time status and tenure in the organization.

Measures
The individual questionnaire items used to construct the relevant scales are shown in Table I. Responses to all items were scored on five-point Likert scales measuring respondents' degree of agreement or disagreement with the item in question (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).
Table 1. Factor analysis results

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
<th>Factor 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internalization of SE</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am strongly committed to SE</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE is important for the future of my store</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel I have a good understanding of what SE is about</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Job competence</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how to deal with most problems in my job</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have had enough training to do my job well</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am always comfortable dealing with customers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job autonomy</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can make my own decisions in carrying out my job</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have the freedom to decide what I do on my job</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can use my personal judgement in carrying out my job</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% variance explained</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KMO = 0.79; BTS = 0.00000</td>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory support</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My immediate boss supports me in getting my job done</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My immediate boss praises me when I do a good job</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My immediate boss encourages me to speak up when I disagree with a decision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory commitment to customer service</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My immediate boss sets a personal example of good customer service in his/her daily job</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My immediate boss puts a lot of emphasis on giving good service to customers</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My immediate boss is genuinely committed to SE</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management commitment to customer service</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.78</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The senior management team in my store sets a personal example of good customer service in its daily activities</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management in this store is genuinely committed to SE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management concern</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The senior management team in my store is sincere in its attempts to meet the employees’ point of view</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.72</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel quite confident that management in this store will always try to treat me fairly</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.63</td>
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<tr>
<td>The senior management team in my store would be quite prepared to gain advantage by deceiving employees (Reversed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue</td>
<td>5.45</td>
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<td>% variance explained</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>13.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>KMO = 0.89; BTS = 0.00000</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Dependent variable. Customer-oriented behaviour was measured using the six-item COBEH scale developed by Peccei and Rosenthal (1997). This is designed to tap respondents' (self-reported) propensity to engage in continuous improvement and exert effort on behalf of customers. Sample items included ‘I put a lot of effort into my job to try to satisfy customers’ and ‘I often make suggestions about how to improve customer service in my department’. The full scale showing the three items designed to tap continuous improvement and the three effort items are reproduced in the Appendix. Factor analysis (all factor analyses used principal components with varimax rotation) of the six items yielded a single factor which, when scaled into an overall measure of COBEH, exhibited an acceptable level of internal reliability (coefficient alpha = 0.80). Half the sample rated themselves relatively low on this measure, scoring below four on the five-point scale.

Intervening empowerment variables. Internalization of SE and job competence were each measured with three questionnaire items developed specifically for this study. Job autonomy was measured with three items adapted from Price et al. (1992). When factor analysed together these nine items loaded on three separate factors corresponding to the three hypothesized dimensions of empowerment and were scaled accordingly. As can be seen from table I(a), however, the last autonomy item also loaded heavily on the job competence factor and was therefore dropped from the construction of the final job autonomy scale.

The results of the factor analysis indicate that the three empowerment measures represent separate constructs. As might be expected, however, these three variables are moderately interrelated. The average intercorrelation between them is 0.35. In the following analysis we will treat them as separate variables representing distinct, but related, dimensions of psychological empowerment on the job.

Management behaviour and HR practice variables. Perceived management and perceived supervisor commitment to customer service were measured with two and three items respectively, all developed specifically for this study. Perceived management concern was measured using an adapted three-item version of the ‘faith in management’ component of Cook and Wall’s (1980) interpersonal trust at work scale. Perceived supervisory support was measured with a three-item scale adapted from Price et al. (1992) (see table I(b)). Finally, participation in SE training was measured by asking respondents whether they had taken part in any of the formal SE training sessions held at the stores (no = 0; yes = 1). Overall, nearly three quarters of respondents had undergone SE training by the time of the survey.

As can be seen from table I(b), when factor analysed together the 11 role modelling and leadership items yielded only two rather than four factors. The first factor included all the items relating to respondents’ assessment of their immediate supervisor, while the second comprised all the items relating to management. As a result, we decided to recombine the items into just two composite variables. The first of these composite variables, labelled supportive and customer oriented supervision, was constructed by scaling the six items from factor one in table I(b). The other composite variable used in the analysis was labelled supportive and customer oriented management and was constructed by scaling the five items which loaded onto the second factor in the table.
Control variables. We used a number of control variables in the analysis. These were designed to capture basic structural and demographic factors that might have an impact on COBEH as well as on the predictor variables in the model. The control measures used included a series of store dummy variables, hierarchical level (1 = general staff; 2 = supervisors), age, organizational tenure, sex (0 = male; 1 = female), work status (0 = part-time; 1 = full time), and frequency of customer contact on the job measured on a five point scale.

Table II presents means, standard deviations, correlations and reliabilities (where appropriate) for all the variables used in the analysis, including the control measures. As can be seen, all multiple-item scales exhibited acceptable levels of internal reliability.

Analysis Procedures
The full mediation, partial mediation and simple additive models presented in figure 1 were tested and compared using hierarchical regression analysis. As we explain below, the procedures used to test the full mediation model also served as the basis for evaluating and comparing the three models. Central to the full mediation model is the assumption that the impact of the various management behaviour and HR practice (MB&HR) variables on COBEH will be completely mediated by the three empowerment variables of internalization of SE, job competence, and job autonomy. Following Barron and Kenny (1986) we tested for mediation in three steps. First, we regressed each of the three empowerment variables on the set of MB&HR variables. Second, we regressed COBEH on the set of MB&HR variables and on the three empowerment variables together, controlling in each case for the background structural and demographic factors. In all cases the set of control variables were entered first into the equations, followed, where relevant, by the set of empowerment and MB&HR variables respectively.

For complete mediation to be operating the following four conditions must hold. First, the MB&RH variables must significantly affect the empowerment variables in the first set of regressions so that when they are added to the control variables, they significantly add to the level of explained variation in the empowerment variables. Second, the MB&HR variables must significantly affect COBEH in the second equation so that when they are added to the control variables, they significantly add to the level of explained variation in COBEH. Third, the empowerment variables must significantly affect COBEH in the third equation so that when they are added to the control variables, they significantly add to the level of explained variation in COBEH. And fourth, the impact of the MB&HR variables on COBEH must no longer be significant in the third equation so that adding them to the set of control and empowerment variables in the analysis does not significantly add to the level of explained variation in COBEH.

Provided that the signs on individual coefficients are in the predicted direction, empirical confirmation of all four of the above conditions provides support for the full mediation model. By implication, it also provides prima facie evidence against the other two models since it indicates that the management behaviour and HR practice variables do not have a direct effect on COBEH. It would also suggest that the empowerment variables are significantly linked to the MB&HR variables. This is contrary to the assumptions of the simple additive model and
Table II. Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations among variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Store 2</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.30</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>-0.16</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Store 5</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.32</td>
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<td>-0.12</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
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<td>5 Store 6</td>
<td>0.07</td>
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<td>-0.14</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
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</tr>
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<td>6 Store 7</td>
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<td>0.39</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
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<td>7 Hierarchical</td>
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<td>-0.01</td>
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<td>4.00</td>
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<td>-0.00</td>
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<td>-0.02</td>
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<tr>
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<td>11.60</td>
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<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
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<td>-0.04</td>
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<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
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<td>-0.02</td>
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<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
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<td>-0.00</td>
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<td>0.06</td>
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<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
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<td>-0.03</td>
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<td>-0.01</td>
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</tr>
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<td>19 Customer</td>
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<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cronbach's alpha coefficients appear on the diagonal in [ ] for the multiple-item scales.
For r > 0.07 p < 0.05.
For r > 0.11 p < 0.01.
For r > 0.13 p < 0.001.

would therefore further undermine the validity of this model compared to the full mediation one.\cite{3}

RESULTS

The results of the regression analyses used to test the various hypotheses and compare the three models are shown in table III. The first three equations examined the impact of the perceived management behaviours and HR practices on the three empowerment variables of internalization of SE, job competence and job autonomy, respectively. Equation 4 examined the impact of the management behaviour and HR practice variables on COBEH, while equation 5 examined the direct impact on COBEH of both the empowerment and the management behaviour and HR practice variables together.

Before examining the results for the main variables in the study, it is worth noting that only three of the control variables in the final regression analysis (equation 5) had a significant impact on COBEH. These included employees' age and frequency of contract with customers, which were both positively related to COBEH, and organizational tenure, which was negatively associated with customer-oriented behaviour. Age and frequency of customer contact also emerged as significant predictors of some of the empowerment variables (see equations 1 to 3). None of the other control variables, including any of the store dummies, had an impact on
COBEH, although some of them (e.g. hierarchical level, sex, and work status) were significantly related to reported levels of job autonomy in our sample.

Turning to the main variables in the analysis, the results in table III provide clear support for all four of the test conditions for mediation outlined above. First, equations 1 to 3 show that the management behaviour and HR practice variables together were able to explain a significant amount of extra variance, over and above that explained by the control variables, in all three of the empowerment measures (for internalization of SE: $\Delta R^2 = 0.17; \Delta F = 54.38; p < 0.000$; for job competence: $\Delta R^2 = 0.08; \Delta F = 20.54; p < 0.000$; for job autonomy: $\Delta R^2 = 0.07; \Delta F = 19.68; p < 0.000$). Second, equation 4 shows that when the empowerment variables were not included in the analysis, the MB&HR variables together explained a significant amount of extra variance in COBEH, over and above that explained by the control variables ($\Delta R^2 = 0.08; \Delta F = 22.15; p < 0.000$). Third, the final regression (equation 5), which included both the empowerment and MB&HR variables, shows that the empowerment variables were able to explain a significant amount of extra variance in COBEH, over and above that explained by the control variables ($\Delta R^2 = 0.28; \Delta F = 108.05; p < 0.000$). And fourth, equation 5 also shows, however, that once the empowerment variables were added to the analysis, the MB&HR variables were no longer able to explain a significant amount of extra variance in COBEH ($\Delta R^2 = 0.00; \Delta F = 0.61; p > 0.05$).

Taken together these results provide strong support for the full mediation model rather than for either one of the other two alternative explanatory models of
## Table III. Multiple regression results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Dependent variables</th>
<th>I</th>
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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Internalization of SE</td>
<td>Job competence</td>
<td>Job autonomy</td>
<td>COBEH</td>
<td>COBEH</td>
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<td>0.12**</td>
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<td>12.98***</td>
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<td>Adj. R²</td>
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<td>(N)</td>
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<td>20.54***</td>
<td>19.68***</td>
<td>22.15***</td>
<td>0.61</td>
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</table>

Figures in the top part of the table are standardized beta coefficients.

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

COBEH. In particular, they indicate that while the management behaviour and HR practice variables did not have a direct impact on COBEH, they had a significant indirect effect through their impact on the three employee empowerment variables which were, in turn, found to have a significant positive effect on customer-oriented behaviour. Of the three empowerment variables, the internalization of SE had by far the strongest impact on COBEH (see equation 5).

In summary, the results of our analysis provide strong support for the full mediation model and for the main assumptions underlying the SE initiative. They
suggest that participation in SE training, as well as both perceived management and supervisory behaviour towards customers and subordinates, had a significant positive impact on employees' sense of psychological empowerment at work and that this, in turn, had a strong positive effect on their behaviour towards customers. Specifically, our results indicate a clear tendency for employees who had internalized the message and values of Service Excellence, who felt they had the skills and competence to perform well on the job, and who felt they had the freedom to make their own decisions at work, to be significantly more likely to engage in proactive forms of customer service behaviour.

**DISCUSSION**

A number of theoretical and policy implications emerge from the present research. At a theoretical and empirical level, the study contributes to the growing literature on empowerment, its nature, consequences and antecedents within a service context (Bowen and Lawler, 1992; Spreitzer, 1995, 1996; Wilkinson, 1998). Despite the emphasis placed on empowerment in the quality, services management and critical literatures (Bowen and Lawler, 1992; Hill and Wilkinson, 1995; Wilkinson et al., 1992), the concept itself remains under-researched and little is known of its antecedents and outcomes in organizational settings.

One implication of the study concerns the need for a clear conceptualization of empowerment. As noted earlier, no consensus on the concept or its operationalization has yet emerged in the literature. The theoretically grounded, multi-dimensional approach taken in this study may provide a useful way forward. As Wilkinson (1998, p. 51) notes, 'employees interpret, evaluate and (re)act towards managerial initiatives, and serve to audit in their own way the viability of managerial initiatives'. The concept of psychological empowerment as adapted from Spreitzer (1995) offers a way to capture these employee interpretations and thus move away from objectivist approaches to the concept, whether of a mainstream or critical nature. For example, operationalizing empowerment through the perceptions of workers provides a complement to critical approaches resting on a priori conceptions of rhetoric masking increased management control. Taking systematic account of employee experience offers a way of exploring the extent to which any 'rhetoric' has been accepted or rejected by workers, surely of interest in critical analyses of contemporary management (Sturdy, 1998).

Our empirical findings pertaining to empowerment also carry implications for both mainstream and critical research. As stated above, all three dimensions of the construct were related to COBEH. This suggests that conceptions of empowerment should not be reduced to notions of autonomy or self-determination. Worker discretion, in other words, may be a necessary but insufficient driver for customer-oriented behaviour. Also required are a sense of personal competence, and most importantly according to our results, an agreement with organizational goals and values about the importance of customer-oriented service. This more complex conception of empowerment as a multidimensional subjective state directs attention beyond issues of job design to the management of meaning and culture within organizations.

More broadly, the findings from our study provide support for key arguments and assumptions underlying mainstream HRM theory and practice. In particular

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they suggest that human resource management systems, as perceived and experienced by individuals at the workplace, can significantly affect employees' prosocial behaviours towards customers. Specifically, our findings suggest that the adoption by organizations of the set of management behaviours and HR practices examined here may indeed help to enhance customer-oriented behaviour amongst front-line workers. These include first, the systematic provision of customer care training that emphasizes values as well as skills. Second, the demonstration by management and supervisors of commitment to customer service and support of subordinates in their day-to-day work behaviour. And third, the design of jobs so as to give front-line employees greater control over their work decisions. These practices should positively affect the psychological empowerment associated with customer-oriented behaviour.

This is not to suggest that the contingency arguments about empowerment advanced by Bowen and Lawler (1992) are misplaced. Under certain conditions (e.g. a strategy of cost minimization, customers who prioritize speed of service, etc.), a more standardized and tightly controlled production-line approach (Levitt, 1972) to service delivery may indeed be very effective and result in high levels of customer satisfaction. Our study is important, however, in that it shows that even within the relatively routinized and low skill context of supermarket service, the adoption of less Tayloristic practices which enhance employee empowerment may have a significant positive impact on work behaviour of front-line employees.

At a more general level, the study contributes to an understanding of the mechanisms through which HR practices and perceived management conduct may affect individual work behaviour. Opening this 'black box' is crucial to the broader mainstream research agenda on the impact of HRM on organizational performance (Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Becker and Huselid, 1998; Guest, 1997). Specifically, our study suggests that employees' psychological empowerment is likely to be a core mechanism linking perceived management behaviours and HR practices to COBEH. This is not to suggest that factors such as organizational commitment, positive affect, or job satisfaction may not also have an important effect on customer-oriented behaviour. However important these other mechanisms might be though, our research suggests that a sense of empowerment is likely to form a central part of any theoretical model designed to explain the impact of HRM on this key aspect of work behaviour in a service context.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the growing emphasis placed by organizations on initiatives designed to strengthen customer orientation among front-line service workers, few systematic attempts have been made to examine and to validate the assumptions underlying such programmes. Our purpose was to address this gap through analysis of a major customer care initiative in one of the largest supermarket companies in the UK, with a view to contributing to the wider debate in the literature about the impact of HRM on employee work behaviour and performance in a service context.

To this end, we first reconstructed the main assumptions underlying the programme. These are that supportive leadership, management role modelling, job
redesign, and customer care training can produce a sense of psychological empowerment among employees, and that empowerment will, in turn, enhance customer-oriented behaviour. These assumptions were captured in three alternative models and tested using data from a large scale representative survey of Shopco employees. The results provided unambiguous support for the full mediation model of customer-oriented behaviour.

Specifically, two main findings emerged from the study. The first is the positive association between all three dimensions of psychological empowerment and customer orientation. Autonomy, internalization of service values and a sense of competence were all related to customer orientation, with internalization emerging as the strongest driver of COBEH. The second is that all the perceived management behaviours and HR practices examined were linked to COBEH, but only indirectly, through their impact on empowerment. Specifically, customer care training enhanced both the felt competence of employees and their internalization of customer service values. Supervisors who were perceived to be supportive and customer oriented contributed to all three dimensions of employee empowerment, while perceived role modelling and supportive leadership by management contributed to the internalization and autonomy dimensions of empowerment, but had no significant impact on employees’ felt job competence.

Taken as a whole therefore, the results of our research provide clear support for the idea that the adoption by organizations of progressive human resource practices and management behaviours of the type examined here, can indeed have a positive impact on the psychological empowerment experienced by employees, and that this sense of empowerment can, in turn, significantly contribute to enhancing the customer-oriented behaviour of the front-line workers involved.

Nevertheless, because of limitations in the present study, the results and conclusions outlined above are necessarily tentative in nature. Further research is clearly required to test their robustness. First, future research should address the generalizability of our findings. Although based on a reasonably large and representative sample from seven stores, the present study is still limited to a single organization. The second issue concerns the cross-sectional nature of our data. A full exploration of the causal links in the models of COBEH presented in the study requires the use of longitudinal data designed to capture changes in the parameters of relevant variables over time. Such longitudinal research is all the more important given the complex causal relationships that are likely to obtain between some of the main variables in the analysis.[5]

The third issue concerns the use of self-report measures of customer-oriented behaviour, as well as of other key antecedent variables in the analysis. As noted by Howard (1994), the use of self-reports may be less of a problem than is sometimes assumed in the literature. Furthermore, the self-report COBEH scale used in the present study exhibited satisfactory psychometric properties. Nevertheless, future studies should explore the use of non-self-report measures of customer-oriented behaviour involving, for example, supervisory or customer ratings of employees’ behaviour. This would help to minimize possible problems of common-method variance linked to the use of self-reports for both the dependent and the independent variables in the analysis (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986; Spector, 1994). It would also serve to extend the analysis to the end users of the service. This would enable researchers to explore the extent to which prosocial service behaviours actually result in customer satisfaction in different service contexts.
On a more substantive level, future research might usefully extend the present analysis in several ways. First, it can explore possible interactions between some of the main variables included in the present study. Second, it can explore additional aspects of HRM systems (e.g. payment structures, teamworking) that might influence the customer service behaviour of front-line staff, either directly, or indirectly through their impact on the different dimensions of empowerment. Third, it can examine the relative influence on COBEH of employee empowerment and of the other main mechanisms outlined in the study, including organizational commitment, positive job affect, and job satisfaction. And fourth, future research might consider the structure of empowerment itself and examine possible causal links between the different dimensions of this construct.

Finally, a number of issues raised by this study are appropriately accessed via qualitative methods. One such example concerns the concept of empowerment, in particular our finding of the relative importance of internalization of organizational values and goals as a predictor of customer service behaviour. This finding resonates with the emphasis now placed in both mainstream and critical literature on the management of meaning and subjectivity in organizations. In so doing, it raises fundamental questions about value internalization among workers and how it relates to issues of identity, indoctrination and discourse (Rosenthal et al., 1997; Sturdy, 1998).

In conclusion, this study represents a first attempt formally to model and test assumptions about the link between perceived management behaviours and HR practices, employee empowerment, and the customer orientation of front-line service workers. More research is needed to confirm the present findings and to extend and develop the analysis further. However, the study provides strong initial support for some core assumptions underlying HRM theory and practice and, in so doing, provides an important insight into the mechanisms whereby human resource management systems may be related to employee behaviour and performance in a service context.

NOTES

[1] For an evaluation of the impact of the intervention, see Rosenthal et al. (1997). Findings reported in Rosenthal et al. (1977) suggest that key elements of the intervention did in practice occur. For example, employees reported in interviews that they were in fact given more autonomy. This pertained to decisions that they could take without reference to supervisors, and to their freedom of expression with customers. Overall, qualitative and quantitative data revealed a strong endorsement of the intervention on the part of front-line staff.

[2] A detailed discussion of this literature is beyond the scope of the present analysis (for a review, see Lee, 1999). Here, it is sufficient to note two main points. First, that the available empirical evidence strongly suggests that positive affect, as well as job satisfaction and organizational commitment, have a significant positive impact on various forms of prosocial behaviour at work (George, 1991; Moorman et al., 1993; Organ, 1988; O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986; Organ and Konovsky, 1989; Organ and Ryan, 1995; Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). And second, that supportive leadership and, to a lesser extent, the systematic provision of training to employees, have consistently been found to be significant predictors of employee job satisfaction, organizational commitment and positive job affect in the organizational literature (Lee, 1999; Lincoln and Kalleberg, 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1997; Spector, 1997).
Specifically, the partial mediation model is supported, above the other two models, only if (a) conditions one, two and three hold, and (b) the impact of the MB&HR variables on COBEH remains significant in the third equation. Similarly, the simple additive model is supported, above the other two models, only if (a) condition one above is not to hold, and (b) the impact of both the MB&HR and the empowerment variables on COBEH is significant in the third equation.

In terms of individual links, the results in table III provide no support for hypotheses positing a direct link between each of the three management behaviour and HR practice variables and COBEH. None of the beta coefficients for these variables, in fact, achieve significance in equation 5. The results do, however, provide support for all but one of the hypotheses that form part of the full mediation model. This is the proposed significant positive relationship between the perceived supportiveness and customer orientation of management and employees' sense of job competence. Thus, contrary to expectations, the coefficient for this variable in equation 2 failed to achieve significance. Finally, as expected, participation in SE training was not found to have a significant impact on job autonomy (see equation 3).

Some of these links, in fact, are likely to be non-recursive in nature and involve complex patterns of mutual causation over time. One such set of relationships, for example, is that between supportive and customer-oriented supervision, job autonomy, and COBEH. In the full mediation model, the perceived nature of supervision is treated as an antecedent of autonomy which, in turn, is treated as an antecedent of customer-oriented behaviour. Here though, causation may also be operating in the opposite direction. Employees who are more helpful to customers, for instance, may well be viewed more positively by customer-oriented supervisors who, as a result, may also be more supportive towards them and trust them enough to give them greater autonomy on the job. Future research might usefully explore these more complex patterns of mutual causation among key variables using well-focused longitudinal designs.

APPENDIX: SCALE ITEMS

Customer-oriented Behaviour (COBEH)

Continuous improvement items
(1) I am always working to improve the service I give to customers.
(2) I have specific ideas about how to improve the service I give to customers.
(3) I often make suggestions about how to improve customer service in my department.

Effort items
(4) I put a lot of effort into my job to try to satisfy customers.
(5) No matter how I feel, I always put myself out for every customer I serve.
(6) I often go out of my way to help customers.

REFERENCES


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