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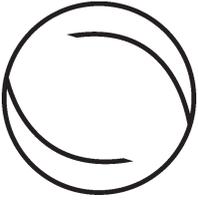
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Toxicity and the Unconscious Experience of the Body at the Employee–Customer Interface

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Abstract

While the literature on front-line service work utilizes a variety of productive images, I argue that these images do not capture certain of the more problematic experiences of front-line service employees. Drawing on words used by these workers themselves, and using concepts from psychoanalysis and its application to organizational dynamics, I therefore propose a new image, that of toxicity. I argue that — especially when under severe pressure from customers — front-line workers may have the unconscious fantasy that they have been polluted by toxic substances. The unconscious experience of the entry of toxic material is likely to result in further contagion of relationships such as those among employees and between employees and customers. This may also result in workers retaliating against customers by exacting revenge on them. A downward spiralling of relationships may follow, with the result that large parts of the work environment are experienced as toxic. The implications for theory are explored. In conclusion, I argue that the theme of toxicity helps us connect the employee–customer interface with a deep reservoir of primordial human experience that links the body with emotions.

Keywords: body, customer, employee, toxicity, unconscious

This paper focuses on the images used to understand employee experiences in a major part of the post-industrial economy, that of front-line service work. As front-line employees may have a wide variety of experiences and a range of possible relationships with customers, their work may be appropriately represented by a variety of images. While the images currently in use illuminate certain dimensions of the interchanges between staff and customers, I argue that they do not capture some of the more painful and problematic aspects. I therefore introduce a different image, one derived from certain of the words and phrases used by front-line service workers themselves; these words and phrases suggest that employees feel that they have been poisoned by toxic substances. Ideas from psychoanalysis and its application to organizational dynamics are then used to explore this image.

The aims of this paper are to deepen our understanding of the specific nature of the employee–customer relationship and to contribute to the wider debates on theories of organizational images. The key contribution of this paper is to articulate and give expression to aspects of the employee–customer interface — the employee experience of toxicity — that are missed by the existing literature on organizational images, and also to use such ideas in an explanatory way by

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showing the underlying processes and mechanisms involved in the production of their experiences.

The introduction of the new theme of toxicity needs to be set in the context of the wider debates on organizational images. While authors such as Boulding (1956) have noted the ubiquitous use of images in a range of natural and social sciences, Morgan (1986, 1997), in his classic book 'Images of Organizations', has most clearly established the area as a legitimate focus within organization studies. Morgan (1980, 1986, 1997) and Weick (1989) have argued that metaphors (a type of image) are central to theory and theory development, with Cornelissen (2004, 2005, 2006) adding that they are especially valuable in generating new meanings beyond a previously existing similarity. Tsoukas has shown further that they may help unearth the mechanisms that underpin the phenomena of organizations (1991: 572): this relates to a central quest of organization theory, the search for 'mechanisms or processes' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 20), or 'motors' (Van de Ven and Poole 1995; Pentland 1999) that drive organizational phenomena.

Connected to this are debates about the relation between literal and metaphorical language and the role of metaphors in our thinking. Tsoukas (1993) has argued that the distinction between literal and metaphorical language is much over-stated, while Foucault has called into question whether such a distinction exists at all (Foucault 1970; White 1979: 93). Whatever the status of the distinction, Morgan (1983) — following the tradition of Jakobson (1962), Ortony (1975) and Lackoff and Johnson (1980) — has argued that metaphors are unavoidably part of everyday life and our attempts to conceptualize it. Such 'metaphors we live by' (Lackoff and Johnson 1980), especially those that have unconscious framings (Marshak 2003), are of particular interest in this paper.

The empirical part of this study draws on a wide range of secondary data source articles (such as Hall 1993; Hochschild 1983; Korczyński 2003; Spradley and Mann 1975; Van Maanen 1991); many secondary data verbatim accounts from workers contained in Bowe et al. (2000) and Terkel (2004); and my own primary data (Stein 1995, 2000). The paper explores the toxicity image in a variety of employee–customer situations, where the term 'customer' is used in a broad sense to refer to anyone who is a recipient of a service of any kind, be it one delivered by private, public or voluntary sector organizations.

I present my argument in the following sequence. I begin with a discussion of some of the images from the existing literature that help us understand the nature of the employee–customer interface. While the contribution of these images is acknowledged, it is argued here that aspects of the experience of customer service workers are not captured by them. This genre is then added to by introducing and outlining the toxicity image. Following this, the paper explores a variety of types of situations in which this image may be applied: these are where customer activities and words are experienced as toxic; where employees respond to experiences of toxicity by engaging in revenge of some kind; and where feelings related to toxicity are so pervasive that one may reasonably speak of these employees experiencing a 'toxic environment' in the workplace. This is followed by a discussion and conclusions.

Images Illuminating the Employee–Customer Interface

Three images currently in use are particularly helpful in illuminating certain aspects of the employee–customer relationship. Part of the long tradition of dramaturgical approaches to the study of social and organizational phenomena (Goffman 1967, 1971; Hochschild 1983; Schreyogg and Hopfl 2004; Mangham 2005), one image depicts the employee–customer interface as a theatre in which workers are paid to perform in the presence of customers. Hochschild (1983), in particular, elaborates this dramaturgical image by exploring the various techniques employees are trained to use in the production of good theatre; these workers focus on, rehearse and perform in order to facilitate ‘moments of truth’ (Carlzon 1987) that have a pivotal influence on customer experience and decision making. Mangham and Overington (1987) argue that this image highlights the ritual aspects of organizations, Vera and Crossan (2004) believe it encapsulates the improvisational aspects, while Cornelissen (2004) suggests that it highlights the creative and emergent dimensions of organizational life. Such themes have been used to analyse the work of a diversity of front-line employees, including workers at Walt Disney Enterprises (Van Maanen 1991: 66), university teachers (Ogbonna and Harris 2004) and organizational consultants (Clark and Salaman 1998).

In some instances, the dramaturgical image may have a positive connotation: one waitress, for example, conveyed the view that being on stage was central to the pleasure she gained from the job. She declared: ‘I’m on stage. I tell everyone I’m a waitress and I’m proud’ (Terkel 2004: 297). However, in other cases it may involve a more oppressive dimension, with the customer acting as an ‘*emotional vampire* [and] a ... *thief of identity*’ (Rosenthal et al. 2001: 21; italics in original), forcing employees to act in ways that are not consistent with their inner feelings and self-perceptions.

A second, rather different image is that of the panopticon (Foucault 1977). While the architecture of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon — a prison built round a central observation tower from which inmates are observed — was found to be replicated in a range of 18th-century hospitals, factories and schools, it is seen to be present in modern organizations in a less literal sense (Burrell 1988: 226). In these organizations, core management techniques, technologies and procedures are used in the observation, disciplining and control of employees. In particular, the modern service orientation seeks to bring customers into the organization in a central role as ‘partial employees’ (Mills et al. 1983), ‘co-producers’ (Normann 1984) or ‘prosumers’ (Toffler 1980) working on behalf of management. In doing so, the customer may be required to act as a ‘spy’ (Rosenthal et al. 2001: 26) who observes and critically evaluates employee performance.

There are some occasions in which the panopticon theme has positive connotations for employees: in response to good audit results based on ‘mystery-shopper’ visits, for example, one print shop worker related that colleagues would enthusiastically jump around saying ‘I got a ninety-five [per cent] on my audit!’ (Bowe et al. 2000: 73). More often than not, however, this notion has a pejorative meaning that conveys the idea of employees feeling intruded upon, observed and judged. The panopticon image is therefore valuable because it

emphasizes the continuing presence of the customer as observer, spy or judge, where customers' feelings and views have a critical impact on the working lives of employees.

A third image portrays the employee as a whore or prostitute and the customer as a '*consumer of sexuality*' (Rosenthal et al. 2001: 22; italics in original). In some cases, such as prostitution work, the sexual aspects of the exchange may be entirely explicit; further, such relations may sometimes have an aggressive as well as a sexual component. However, in other work settings there may be a more implicit, albeit widely acknowledged, sexual dimension. In Spradley and Mann's (1975) study of 'Brady's Bar', for example, it is evident that male customers flirted a great deal with waitresses, and that, for some waitresses, such flirting constituted an important part of their enjoyment of the job. In a different study, Hall (1993) cites the example of one waitress who said '[t]here's always that sexual attraction ... there's ... a little bit of a flirting thing' (Hall 1993: 464), and another who liked joining certain male customers at their table so that they could share risqué jokes (Hall 1993: 464). Indeed, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Hall's research (1993) shows flirting to be a central part of the waitresses' work in restaurants.

There are however other occasions in which the sexualization of the employee–customer relationship has an abusive quality. On the basis of interviews with female front-line workers, Folgero and Fjeldstad (1995) argue that service organizations are prime breeding grounds for sexual harassment. Similarly, in her study Hall goes on to show that waitresses are sometimes sexually demeaned and harassed by male customers, with, for example, one waitress having reported an occasion when male customers greeted her insultingly by saying 'here comes dessert' (1993: 464). Although waitresses have some discretion over what they are prepared to tolerate, this is limited by the nature of the work and the context: as Hopfl (2002) argues, following Diderot, the employee may be required to be like 'the whore who feels nothing for the man she is with, but lets herself go into his arms anyway as a demonstration of her professional competence' (2002: 258).

Although other images are used in organization studies, the three above have been selected because of their prominence in the literature and because they further our understanding of a variety of dimensions of the employee–customer relationship. Despite the value of these images, however, I argue that various issues within this relationship are not conveyed by them. While in practice images overlap and are by no means mutually exclusive, these concern problems in the relationship that have less to do with being observed, abused, or losing a sense of identity; instead, they are more concerned with the employee's experience of being 'poisoned' and 'polluted' so that, not only is the immediate task made more problematic, but the damage is transferred to other areas of the employee's work and relationships. The new image of toxicity is thus introduced in this paper to address this lacuna.

The Toxicity Image

While the concept of toxicity has thus far not had a place in the literature on the employee–customer interface, it is on occasion to be found elsewhere. In the

psychoanalytic literature it is generally conveyed by the metaphorical idea of psychological 'poisoning' or 'being poisoned' (Klein 1981: 220), and is often unconsciously associated with faeces. In the organizational literature, Frost and Robinson argue that certain managers may take on the role of 'toxin handler', shouldering pain on behalf of others and reducing its spread (Frost and Robinson 1999; Frost 2003). In the literature on leadership, Lipman-Blumen (2005) refers to 'toxic leaders', Krantz (2006) talks about the toxicity of the betrayal of leaders (2006: 235), while Offerman (2004) refers to toxic followers. In the area of decision making, Maitlis and Ozcelik (2004) refer to 'toxic decision processes'. Despite these references, the application to customer service situations has not yet been made.

The theoretical underpinnings of the toxicity image as used in this paper are as follows. First, the service encounter is best understood if we postulate that a boundary region (Miller and Rice 1967; Stacey 2001) exists between front-line workers and customers. While the long-established concept of a boundary is a valuable one in organization studies (and will also be used in this paper), it is supplemented here by the idea of a boundary region because this indicates more clearly the notion of a space shared by customers and employees alike, one that acquires its character by virtue of being so shared. This boundary region is governed by implicitly agreed norms specific to the employee–customer relationship. Further, while being influenced by geographic space and the design of work, the boundary region refers essentially to a phenomenological, experiential dimension: as Hirschhorn and Gilmore write, 'boundaries ... aren't drawn on a company's organizational chart but in ... minds' (1992: 105), and this applies equally well to the notion of boundary regions.

Second, crucial to the healthy functioning of the organization is the degree of permeability of its boundary regions (Miller and Rice 1967; Hernes 2004; Shumate and Fulk 2004). Inadequately permeable boundary regions may thwart effective work because they restrict the contact between customers and employees; they may also lead to a rigidity — or excessive 'differentiation' (Schneider 1991: 184) — that precludes adaptation and learning. Boundary regions that are too permeable, on the other hand, risk the effectiveness of the work in a different way. In such cases, there is excessive 'integration' (Schneider 1991: 184), with contact between the two parties being too intense or too invasive. Measures such as 'buffering' (Lynn 2005) and 'thresholds' (Hernes 2004) may be used to manage the permeability of boundary regions, but getting the balance right is not always possible.

Third, excessive boundary permeability and lack of control over it may lead front-line workers to have the unconscious fantasy that they have inhaled or have been fed something poisonous, resulting in their being polluted by toxic substances. Such fantasies, which connote 'unconscious mental content[s]' (Isaacs 1952: 81), are so painful that they are often denied entry into the conscious mind. If and when these contents do become conscious this may occur only in part and with difficulty: at a deeper level these may be too threatening and may remain largely unconscious. This focus on corporeality and the unconscious is in line with the work of Anzieu (1984) and Diamond et al. (2004). Further, observing related phenomena, the anthropologist Mary Douglas has

argued that, when boundaries are permeated or become confused, the fear of pollution or contagion becomes heightened (1975: 56).

Fourth, when a front-line worker has an unconscious experience of being poisoned by an initial perforation, this may be felt to lead to further and sometimes multiple flows of toxicity. '[T]oxins', as Frost (2003) argues, 'spread and seep' (Frost 2003: 5), damaging the work environment so that people can 'barely function' (Frost and Robinson 1999: 98); Barsade (2002) describes similar phenomena using the term 'the ripple effect of emotional contagion'. Returning to body-boundary imagery, one could say that, once a lesion has formed, a variety of toxic substances may flow. For example, employees at the receiving end of toxicity sometimes find themselves influencing other employees in a negative way, resulting in further damage to the provision of service. These kinds of toxicity may be experienced as traversing a variety of boundary regions, such as those between one person and another, one department and another, and one period of time and another. In such circumstances, employees may feel that the entire work environment has become toxic.

Fifth, as toxic substances cannot be digested or easily eliminated in a healthy manner, there is a possibility that revenge will be exacted. Revenge — 'a defence against annihilation anxieties' (Sievers and Mersky 2006: 241) — may thus be understood as the expelling of undigested toxic experience back into others. It is however important to point out that revenge is neither necessarily conscious nor necessarily deliberate: in particular, harassed and beleaguered employees may find themselves exacting revenge without fully intending to, and without being entirely aware of what they are doing: as Sievers and Mersky argue, 'revenge often is wreaked unconsciously' (2006: 241). Revenge is discussed later in this paper.

The Manifestations of Toxicity

We now turn to the manifestations of toxicity and — consistent with the approach taken in this paper — draw on ideas from psychoanalysis. Central in psychoanalysis is the notion that symbols — such as words, jokes, dreams, slips of the tongue, actions or objects — may represent unconscious, hidden meanings (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 442); these meanings are unconscious and hidden because they are too painful to enter consciousness. In an organizational context, Brown and Starkey (2000) apply this by showing how certain organizational symbols may come to represent inner ideas and complexes, while Schwartz (1985) focuses on the symbolic role of myths, and Gabriel (1995) on stories; Gabriel concludes that the words to be found in 'gossip, nicknames, legends ... and ... stories ...' are 'symbolic elaborations' (1999: 199) that shed light on the unconscious experience of the organization's members. In a similar manner, therefore, employees' words and deeds are used here to support the contention of experiences that have unconscious meanings. In exploring the evidence for such interpretations, it needs to be acknowledged at the outset that there are of course other possible readings of the material.

Customers and Toxicity

One way in which employees may experience toxicity is via customer actions and words. At the previously mentioned 'Brady's Bar' (Spradley and Mann 1975), waitresses were regularly confronted by customers who they found to be 'obnoxious', a word etymologically related to 'noxious'. Indeed, the term 'obnoxo' was a key part of the waitresses' lexicon and their informal system for classifying customers (Spradley and Mann 1975: 61). As well as speaking of something noxious, such workers also referred to the related idea that they were 'given shit'; on one occasion, for example, a waitress described how a group of men became 'really obnoxious.... [and were]... *giving me shit*' (Spradley and Mann 1975: 124 – emphasis in original). This is consistent with the psychoanalytic view which, as has been mentioned, suggests that 'excreta are [symbolically] equated with poisonous substances' (Klein 1981: 220), representing something unwanted, dirty, and polluted. The imagery of excreta is also used elsewhere: a credit salesman, for example, spoke of a customer 'making me eat crap for four years, to make me collect my money' (Terkel 2004: 93).

If employees feel themselves to be subject to toxicity when in face-to-face contact with customers, such a presence is not a necessary requirement for such experiences: other cases – in which customers are not physically present – exemplify even more starkly the toxic quality that words alone can have in the customer–employee interchange. In one telemarketing call centre, for example, a supervisor described how each of his evening-shift staff would 'get sworn at and cussed out' (Bowe et al. 2000: 16) by abusive customers. He reported that very regularly – 'about ten times a night' – each employee got exposed to something 'venomous' (Bowe et al. 2000: 19), an allusion to the toxic quality of the experience. This toxicity frequently led to the employees crying, hiding in the corner, or leaving the job: '[m]ost quit by the third day' (Bowe et al. 2000: 19).

Toxicity may affect other parts of employees' work as well as their relationships with colleagues. In an extensive study of call centres, Korczynski found evidence that customers who expressed hostility over the telephone caused employees to feel distressed and dejected, which in turn adversely affected their relationships and their work. Employee comments that '[a]t the next call you're not going to say "[g]ood morning"' (Korczynski 2003: 67) or that '[t]wo bad calls can kill a day' (Korczynski 2003: 66) help us understand the enduring damage that 'bad calls' can wreak. Further, as elsewhere, some of the employee language – such as the reference to customers as 'obnoxious' (Korczynski 2003: 66) – suggests an experience of being poisoned. These problems can spread beyond the worker and affect others: as one employee put it, '[s]ometimes the customer is rude ... [and] ... will say 'fuck off'. These comments are rare but they stick. They affect us all; they rebound round the whole team' (Korczynski 2003: 66).

Such pressures can also affect relationships between employees and their bosses. One hat saleswoman, for example, related how the pressure of the job often caused her to lose her temper, which, in turn, affected her relationship with her boss. She commented: 'I've been fired many times, I've quit many times, and I've fired her a couple of times' (Bowe et al. 2000: 166). In a similar

vein, a saleswoman in a gift shop described how – in order to deal with a ‘high-maintenance customer’ – she and her mother (her boss and the store owner) spent a ‘miserable’ time working at night and ‘cussing each other’ (Bowe et al. 2000: 128); this was in contrast with other times, when the two generally got on well.

Relationships between employees and workers in other organizations may also be affected. For example, a social worker who acted as an advocate for clients in court cases frequently found herself being yelled at and mistreated by her clients and their families. She commented: ‘You have to develop a thick skin ... Still, of course, there’s times when it really hurts. It’s those few times when they get you between the cracks’ (Bowe et al. 2000: 516). Such phrases indicate not only the palpable need for a boundary that cannot easily be permeated but also the notion that such a boundary may sometimes fail. However, the social worker’s life was made more complicated by employees from other organizations that treated her as if she were the same as her clients, who they despised. In her view ‘the D.A.s [District Attorneys], the cops, the judges, all the courtroom personnel think we work for the scum, the slime. We’re closely equated with our clients’ (Bowe et al. 2000: 511). As a result, she concluded, ‘We’re shat on’ (Bowe et al. 2000: 511).

There is also evidence that such toxicity may remain with employees well after the end of the working day and that it may affect their home lives and their relationships with family and friends. One supermarket checkout clerk commented: ‘Sometimes I’m a total wreck. My family says, “We better not talk to her today. She’s had a bad day”’ (Terkel 2004: 285). In a similar vein, a receptionist who spent much of her time on the phone dealing with the public observed that ‘things happen to you all day long, things you couldn’t get rid of There didn’t seem to be any relief about going home ... Boy! Did I have a lot of garbage to put up with!’ (Terkel 2004: 31). This suggests that, like the employees mentioned above, this worker had an experience which unconsciously evoked in her the idea of being a recipient of something dirty or toxic that she had difficulty shedding.

Toxicity and Revenge

We now turn to examine the issue of employee responses to toxicity. As we have seen, what is especially problematic is that employees cannot process or absorb toxic experiences and may consequently carry the effects of such experiences for significant periods of time. A number of responses may follow, such as employees engaging in subversive forms of humour (Taylor and Bain 2003); having a run after work (Bowe et al. 2000: 510); going on ‘automatic pilot’ (Van Maanen 1991: 75); going out to ‘smoke pot in [the] Jeep’ (Bowe et al. 2000: 20); or moving on to another client (Bowe et al. 2000: 161). While many of these may be understood to involve fleeing from the problem, there may come a point when flight is no longer possible. In such cases, front-line workers feel they can neither manage nor flee, and one remaining way to deal with this is to engage in revenge and attempt to expel the toxicity into someone else. Revenge, therefore, is sometimes the only remaining option.

The concept of revenge – the retaliation for an offence or injury – has long occupied an important place in human thought and experience: versions of the principle *lex talionis* (Latin for the ‘law of retaliation’) appear as early as the code of Hammurabi and the laws of the Old Testament, and the theme of revenge is a central organizing *motif* in a wide range of stories from the bible, Greek mythology and Shakespearean tragedy. Many of these stories concern situations in which goods and services are created and exchanged: the biblical Cain murdered Abel as an act of retribution towards a brother who made a sacrifice that was more pleasing to God than his own, while Shakespeare’s Shylock literally demanded a ‘pound of flesh’ as an act of revenge from a customer who had not repaid a debt.

While the literature on organizations tends to frame revenge in a negative way, Seabright and Schminke (2002) disagree with this and suggest that it may be creative and resourceful. This exception aside, the damaging aspects of revenge have been highlighted in a range of contemporary settings: Hopfl (2004) uses revenge to frame her understanding of consumer society; Stein (2005) links retaliation with envy and jealousy in explaining the demise of the Gucci family dynasty; while Sievers and Mersky (2006) see leadership revenge as playing a key role in the fortunes of companies such as Chrysler and Ford. Andersson and Pearson further suggest that, especially when it constitutes an over-reaction to the initial offence, revenge may facilitate the spiralling and escalation of workplace problems (1999).

Psychoanalytic accounts argue that inclinations to exact revenge are likely to be stimulated by (partly or entirely) unconscious memories of earlier wounds, traumas and losses. Terms such as ‘developmental injury’ (Temple 1998), ‘narcissistic injury’ (Kohut 1972) and early ‘trauma’ (Gibb 1998; Young and Gibb 1998) give voice to the notion of emotional wounds experienced earlier in life which – often unconsciously – strengthen the desire for revenge. This would suggest that employees’ tendencies to take revenge in toxic situations are likely to be particularly intense when such situations unconsciously evoke memories of earlier wounds and traumas. Further, these acts of revenge are not necessarily successful and, on occasion, may make matters considerably worse for those who engage in them.

Employees may sometimes respond to customer toxicity by explicitly desiring revenge, but not acting this out. Conscious or unconscious fantasies of revenge or retribution are familiar, for example, to flight attendants, many of whom suffer considerable abuse (Hochschild 1983). As one airline employee put it – in response to an offending customer – she found herself wanting to engage in ‘something mean, like pouring Ex-Lax into his coffee’ (Hochschild 1983: 114). Indeed, Hochschild found that most conscious desires for revenge involve a strong oral component in which the offending customer is fed something unpleasant, poisonous or problematic in some other way (Hochschild 1983: 114). This therefore suggests that – in response to the transgression of their corporeal boundaries – employees may sometimes have a conscious or unconscious fantasy of retribution involving the transgression of the bodily boundaries of the customer.

In some examples revenge fantasies are acted out, but there is a degree of ambiguity about the extent to which employees are in control and fully conscious

of what they are doing. In one incident, a flight attendant tried her best to appease and tend to the needs of a passenger who complained about 'absolutely everything' (Hochschild 1983: 114). Already provoked, the flight attendant felt even more deeply angry when the passenger began yelling at her black colleague, calling her a 'nigger bitch!' (Hochschild 1983: 114). Shortly after this the flight attendant tripped, spilling a Bloody Mary all over the offending passenger; in the interview with Hochschild, she recalled this incident with a grin, recounting how 'that Bloody Mary hit that white pants suit!' (Hochschild 1983: 114). It could be suggested that, following the psychoanalytic view of slips of the tongue, the act of tripping may be understood to be imbued with unconscious meaning. More specifically, this boundary transgression could be seen to have involved an unconscious attack – the spilt Bloody Mary symbolizing the spilling of blood – for the defilement of the black colleague by symbolically 'cutting' the white skin – represented by the white pants suit – of the customer.

A similar ambiguity about employees' awareness of – and their capacity to control – their revenge fantasies may be found in the account of a waitress in a country bar, a workplace, which, as she put it, 'burnt me out' (Bowe et al. 2000: 236); as before, this term can be understood to allude to an unconscious fantasy of physical damage. One incident concerned a customer and his friends who kept on requiring the waitress to pour small amounts of salt on their necks so that they could do 'body shots' (whereby someone else licks the salt off the person's neck and then drinks a shot of tequila). She continued that, having served the customer and his drunken friends 'rounds of drinks and rounds of drinks' (Bowe et al. 2000: 235), and, in the absence of receiving a tip, 'I started pouring the salt on his neck, and I just suddenly lose it. Right out of nowhere, I doused his head with salt' (Bowe et al. 2000: 235–6). This can be seen as having the unconscious meaning of a toxic retaliation – the salt being likely to burn the customer's skin and eyes – in response to the waitress's feeling of being 'burnt out' by the workplace and its customers.

In yet other cases, revenge fantasies may be acted out in an apparently more deliberate manner; at Disneyland, for example, while used only rarely, various repertoires of revenge activity were mentioned by ride operators (Van Maanen 1991). These included the 'seatbelt squeeze' that leaves the customer 'gasping' for the duration of the trip; the 'break-toss' so that 'the driver flies on the hood of the car (or beyond)'; the 'seatbelt slap' involving the customer receiving a snap of the hard plastic belt across the face or body; or the 'Sorry-I-did-not-see-your-hand' tactic, a 'savagely move designed to crunch a particularly irksome customer's hand (foot, finger, arm, leg, etc.)' (Van Maanen 1991: 71–72). All of the above examples from different sectors and industries – whether involuntary or deliberate, conscious or unconscious – involve the principle of *lex talionis*.

The Toxic Environment

Problems of toxicity become particularly acute when they extend over space and time; in such cases, we may speak of the experience of a 'toxic environment'. One example emerged from my research with CapitalAirport, a state-run airport

authority (Stein 1995, 2000). Employees taking payments at the airport car park exits, for example, faced customers who were frequently in distressed states. Like workers elsewhere, car park staff repeatedly referred to customers as 'obnoxious', suggesting an experience of something polluting or poisonous being transferred to them; they also complained bitterly about the levels of pollution in the car park. One employee, especially angry that staff numbers were diminished by the requirement to use a 'car starter machine' to assist those unable to start their vehicles, spoke of the new machine as 'that bloody thing'. When he offered me a cup of coffee (I interviewed him in the small work cabin situated in the car park), his colleague said that he would have to 'scrape the carbon out of the cup' before he gave it to me. Although I accepted the offer, he never poured the cup. What this suggests is a pervasive feeling among these staff that they inhabited a contaminated world, permeated by a range of toxic substances that had dangerously transgressed their boundary regions. Like poisonous gases – where combinations of substances may vastly increase toxicity – these sources spiralled in a mutually reinforcing way. This combination of pressures, familiar to those working in a service environment (Foote Whyte 1946), contributed to the experience of a toxic environment.

Further, the inclination to exact revenge or retribution may play an important role in the development of the toxic environment. One example concerns a flight attendant who, on occasion, had been hit, spat on, and had objects thrown at her (Bowe et al. 2000: 196). In one situation, after working eight days in a row, she was faced by a plane full of skiers, many of whom were upset that they had to put their bags in the hold. Already angry about the bag problem, one passenger became quite abusive when served with a cheeseburger rather a turkey salad, which had run out. He shouted at the flight attendant: 'What the fuck is this? ... You can take your fucking cheeseburger and shove it up your ass' (Bowe et al. 2000: 197), following which he threw the cheeseburger at her, hitting her face: the flight attendant, a vegetarian, found this 'pretty gross' (Bowe et al. 2000: 196). The cheeseburger then landed in the lap of a woman passenger who sat up immediately, spilling her drink onto a third passenger, after which she began yelling at the flight attendant. The flight attendant, who could no longer cope, reports that she then 'just lost it ... I was just hanging on a thread ... I started screaming' (Bowe et al. 2000: 197). With other passengers still waiting for food and with colleagues in a state of confusion, the flight attendant refused to serve any more food until the guilty passenger apologized. However, when his apology was forthcoming it was accompanied by the accusation that the flight attendant had been 'disrespectful' and a 'bitch' (Bowe et al. 2000: 198), leading to her upping the stakes and demanding a further, unequivocal apology over the PA system. The customer eventually did this but the flight attendant lost a week's pay because of the incident. At least for a period of time, therefore, here too the work environment was experienced as toxic, with the desire for retaliation playing a key role in the spiralling of problems.

Discussion

Having explored various manifestations of toxicity, I now turn to relate these ideas to theory. I begin by examining how the toxicity theme undermines the

idea of the autonomous subject. I then argue that the toxicity concept carries implications for our understanding of the processes and mechanisms that underpin problematic front-line worker interchanges. In particular, the concept implies an underlying process of regression, while the idea of revenge as a response to toxicity may be understood to involve the mechanism of 'projective identification'. The implications for certain of the systems and dynamic phenomena of service work are then examined. Finally, noting the focus on problems of boundary *impermeability* in certain areas of the literature, I argue that – by exploring the difficulties created by excessive boundary *permeability* – this paper takes the debate into relatively new territory.

First, the toxicity theme implies an undercutting of the concept of employees as autonomous, conscious subjects who should have little difficulty controlling their feelings, and thereby influencing their fate; this concept is implicit, for example, in notions of them being 'empowered' (Moss Kanter 1983) or becoming 'winners' (Peters and Waterman 1982). Statements from managers that '[w]e own our own emotions' (quoted in Korczynski 2003: 68) and from employees that 'no-one makes you feel the way you do without your permission' (quoted in Sturdy and Fineman 2001: 139–140) are therefore necessarily grounded in illusion: employees are vulnerable to the indeterminacy and difficulty of the work environment they operate in, as well as to the shaping of that environment by their feelings and by the unconscious. The undermining of the autonomy of the subject is especially poignant when we examine the relationship between front-line workers and customers: front-line workers are expected not to defend themselves, to accept abuse, and to appease those who try to provoke them.

Second, the toxicity image helps us understand the processes underlying problematic front-line experiences; this focus on process occupies an important part of theory development (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). Specifically, the toxicity idea articulates the notion that front-line workers may become involved in processes of regression to infantile mental states (Bion 1961: 142) that involve having the fantasy of being attacked or poisoned by toxic substances. This connects with the ideas of the psychoanalyst Bick (1968) who has argued that the experience of the skin plays a central role in the formation of the infantile ego. In its most primitive form, she argues, the parts of the personality are 'held together ... by the skin functioning as a boundary' (Bick 1968: 55). Similar arguments have been formulated by Anzieu who coined the term 'Skin Ego', 'a mental image of which the Ego of the child makes use ... on the basis of its experience of the surface of the body' (1989: 40). If the skin is central to the development of the infant's boundaries and sense of self, the threatening of adult ego functioning is likely to involve a regression to sensate, corporeal experiences of toxicity. Further, as implied by the notion of the 'group ego-skin' (Anzieu 1999), these processes may occur at group level, as well as at the level of the organization (Diamond et al. 2004).

Third, the toxicity image helps us understand not only the primitive processes involved in generating employees' feelings, but also the mechanisms implicit in their reactions; the specification of such mechanisms are also a key to good theory (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Tsoukas 1991). In particular, a key feature of toxicity – that it cannot be absorbed or processed – may lead front-line

employees to react by attempting to expel it, forcing others, especially those from whom the toxicity has emanated, to absorb it. Psychologically, this sometimes translates as revenge, the forcing of others to deal with what you have to deal with yourself, or feel what you have been compelled to feel. In her formulation of the notion 'projective identification', the psychoanalyst Klein (1980) provided us with a useful idea of a mechanism that underpins the phenomenon of revenge: projective identification involves the attempt to rid oneself of unpleasant feelings by forcing someone else to feel as you do. While the concept has been used in different ways (Rosenfeld 1987: 157), central to our purpose is the notion that projective identification involves an activity undertaken in relation to a recipient who will experience – and may well be transformed by – that activity (Klein 1980); this transformation, in some cases, may lead to the recipient engaging in 'enactments' (Bott Spillius and Feldman 1989: 48). Thus, the suggestion is that employees may feel unable to contain certain experiences and therefore respond with specific enactments that involve vengefully projecting these back into customers. Revenge reactions could thus be seen as employees' conscious or unconscious attempts to unburden and detoxify themselves by returning – via projective identification – unbearable toxic experiences back into the customer.

Fourth, the toxicity image also goes further than certain of the other images insofar as it casts light on some of the systemic and dynamic phenomena associated with such subjects in their work in the service of customers. In particular, the image throws into stark relief the complex manner in which excessive permeability across one boundary may transfer and cause difficulties in other areas. Following Schneider (1991), we may posit the notion of a number of distinct levels or types of boundaries. Thus toxicity across an *employee–customer* boundary can produce problems across a range of other boundaries. It can, for example, have a knock-on effect and produce problems across the *employee–team* boundary, the *employee–external employee* boundary, the *employee–boss* boundary, and the *work–home* boundary. In extreme cases, in a manner similar to that shown elsewhere by Andersson and Pearson (1999), the systemic inter-relatedness of these boundary transgressions may lead to a downward spiralling of toxicity and the development of a toxic environment. In articulating these systemic and dynamic phenomena, the image therefore connects with, and potentially deepens, the systemic and psychoanalytic literatures that have pioneered the understanding of such matters.

Fifth, the toxicity image also contributes to the writings on boundaries within the related fields of psychoanalysis, organizational dynamics, systems psychodynamics and socio-technical systems by taking them in a relatively unexplored direction. While these traditions did much important work on the articulation of the boundary and boundary region concepts, a great deal of this work – entirely appropriately – has focused on concerns about boundary *rigidity* and *impermeability*. In outlining the principles of socio-technical design, for example, Cherns argues that 'boundaries should *not* be drawn so as to impede ...' (Cherns 1987: 156 – emphasis in original). Similar arguments are formulated in his earlier paper (1976), but nowhere in these papers does Cherns examine the converse problem of boundaries that are excessively flexible or permeable. Further, more

recent authors such as Diamond et al. (2004) have focused on organizational boundaries as 'silos' that isolate employee groups from each other in an especially problematic way. By way of contrast, therefore, this paper seeks to make a contribution by examining the opposite problem of excessive *permeability* of boundaries and boundary regions.

Conclusions

My aims in this paper have been to further our understanding of certain of the more problematic experiences of front-line workers as well as to contribute to the debates on the theories of organizational images. Having argued that some of the difficulties of employee–customer interchanges are not conveyed by the images currently in use, and drawing on a range of words and phrases used by front-line employees themselves, I thus introduce the new image of toxicity. This image encapsulates the notion of experiences that are felt to be poisonous and that cannot easily be dealt with. I have drawn on ideas from psychoanalysis and its application to organizational dynamics to explore the functioning of toxicity and understand its ramifications. I have also taken these themes further in the discussion by making a number of links with existing theories. This study makes a contribution to two areas of literature: first, it contributes to the literature on images and metaphors by articulating the hitherto overlooked dimension of toxicity; second, it adds to the literature on revenge by showing how it may occur as a consequence of toxicity in front-line service situations.

Finally, the theme of toxicity enables us to connect the employee–customer interface with a deep reservoir of primordial human experience which uses the tangible (body) to symbolize the intangible (emotions). Such uses of symbolization – which employ many 'dead metaphors' (Tsoukas 1991: 568) whose symbolic nature we are usually no longer aware of – may occur at so fundamental a level that they are barely noticed. For example, we commonly refer to emotions using the generic term 'feelings', a word that implies tactile, physical experience. Similarly, we talk of being 'touched' or 'struck' by emotion, terms that, once again, suggest sensate experiences. Positive emotions may sometimes be represented in a physical way by words such as 'warm' or 'glowing', while more negatively we may refer to 'cold' or 'hard' feelings. We also speak about 'abrasive' personalities and 'rubbing someone up the wrong way', both of which suggest something rough, uncomfortable and distinctly corporeal. It is in the context of this symbolism that the toxicity idea may be less of a surprise than at initial inspection, because, I would argue, this corporeal notion is the natural extension of these familiar ways of thinking and speaking. It is hoped that these ideas further our understanding of these matters.

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