ENACTING THE SERVICE ROLE:

Implications of "Backstage" Behaviour By Service Agents in Response to Customer Aggression

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Agenda

- Dramaturgical perspective on service work

- Managing the expression of emotion
  - Emotional Display Rules
  - On-stage emotion regulation
  - Backstage regulation - collective emotion regulation

- Study
  - Nature and correlates of collective emotion regulation

- Implications & concluding comments

All the world's a stage

And all the men and women merely players…

Dramaturgical Perspective

- Originates from Erving Goffman (1959)
  - *The Presentation of Self in Every Day Life*

- Theatrical metaphor
  - Human behaviour likened to performance
    - Actor behaves in a way that creates and maintains a view of reality to which others respond
  - Different contexts have different behaviour (role) expectations
  - "Roles" are enacted to fulfill expectations
  - Role violation represents performance failure

Dramaturgical Perspective

- Applied to service environments (Grove & Fisk, 1989)

- Service encounter as performance
  - Directed by organization
  - Service agents/employees are actors
  - Service area is the stage
  - Customers are the audience

Dramaturgical Perspective

- Physical surroundings carefully staged
  - Layout, colour, lighting, temperature, sound

- Attention to actor appearance
  - Costumes, grooming

- Actors follow / improvise scripts
  - Verbal and behavioural

- Ultimate goal is customer satisfaction
  - No matter what the customer says or does…

Onstage vs Backstage

- **2 distinct regions characterized by:**
  - Clear, physical boundaries
  - Different behavioural expectations

- **Onstage**
  - Performance occurs in front of the audience
  - Must meet audience approval
  - Use of scripts to ensure performance
    - E.g., *emotional display rules*

Emotional Display Rules

- Expectations regarding the suitability of emotional displays in one's job/role (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Diefendorff & Richard, 2003; Grandey, 2000)

  - Cashiers, banktellers, waitstaff, etc.
    - Happiness, joy – "service with a smile"

  - Bill collectors
    - Brusqueness, anger, aggression

  - Funeral directors, therapists
    - Neutrality, solemnity, sympathy

Emotional Display Rules

- Adherence to display rules is critical
  - Emphasized via socialization and training
  - Incentives - customer service awards
  - Punishment for violations

- No matter what the customer does:
  - Must not show negative emotion;
  - Must always show positive emotion and a desire to meet their needs/wants

Displaying Appropriate Emotions

- Expectations to show/suppress emotion suggest need for *emotion regulation*
  - "processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express [them]" (Gross, 1998)

  - Antecedent-focused ER
  - Response-focused ER

- When emotion regulation is required by one's work role, it is referred to as *emotional labour*

Displaying Appropriate Emotions

- **Surface Acting**
  - Displaying an emotion you are not actually feeling
  - Often involves suppressing felt emotion
  - E.g., Faking a smile with an abusive customer

- **Deep Acting**
  - Attempt to modify feelings to match expected emotional display
  - "Faking in good faith" (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987)
  - E.g., "Method acting"; cognitive reappraisal, perspective-taking

Example of Deep Acting

- "The [patients] that are rude… You tell yourself, "They're patients, they have their own pain… they have their own diseases." So you don't take it personally. Because, for a person to be acting miserable, they have to be pretty miserable themselves"

  – Health Professional (Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 28)

Health Implications of Acting

- **Surface Acting (Suppression)**
  - Does reduce emotional displays, but…

  - Experimental research shows physiological and nervous system arousal remains (Gross, 1998)

  - Suppressing the display of negative emotion does not provide relief from the experience of it

Health Implications of Acting

- Research in service settings (e.g., Grandey, 2003; Schaubroek & Jones, 2000)
  - Surface acting associated with emotional dissonance
    - -Discrepancy between felt & expressed emotion

  - Associated with burnout, physical health symptoms
  - Burnout predicts "breaking character"
    - Displaying negative emotions to customer

Health Implications of Acting

- **Deep Acting (Reappraisal)**
  - Associated with less negative emotion <u>experienced</u> and <u>displayed</u> (Gross, 1998)
  - Associated with higher life satisfaction, self-esteem (Gross & John, 2003)
  - Not associated with burnout (Grandey, 2003)

- Deep acting is more effortful, yet seems better for psychological health. Why?
  - Less emotional dissonance
  - Produces more authentic emotion which likely yields positive customer responses

The Backstage

- Outside of the audience's view

    – "Step out of the role"; "Break character"

    – "a place…where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted" (Goffman, 1959, p. 112)

    – Decompress after pressure of performance (Ashforth et al., 2008)

Types of Backstage Behaviour

- "Collective emotional labour" (Hochschild, 1983)
- "Communities of coping" (Korczynski, 2003)
- "Role relaxation" (Ashforth et al., 2008)
  - Venting, gossiping, joking, emotional support

- **2 main types of behaviour – *Collective ER***

  1. Expression of negative emotions – **Collective Venting**
     - E.g., complaining, cursing, swearing

  2. Connecting with coworkers – **Collective Sharing**
     - E.g., mutual sharing, emotional support, camaraderie

The Backstage

- If witnessed by audience, would entirely undermine the onstage "reality"

– "If you're angry, do not show it to passengers. We always go in the galley in the back and then we can scream and do whatever and tell stories about passengers, but not in front of them"

- Flight Attendant (Ashforth et al., 2008, p. 25)

Backstage Behaviour: Help or Hindrance?

- What are the implications of backstage behaviour?

  - Does it help to reduce the stress of performance, difficult customer behaviour?

  - Are there potential negative consequences?

Study - Purposes

- To examine 3 issues:

  1. Nature of backstage behaviour – collective emotion regulation
     - Do the data reflect the 2 dimensions?

  2. Antecedents
     - Customer aggression, customer sovereignty

  3. Consequences
     - Work attitudes, health (stress & burnout)

Collective Dimension

- Team of "actors"
  - Common goal is a credible performance
  - Failure by one undermines entire performance
  - Awareness of sacrifices made to achieve performance

- Unique demands of service settings
  - "Audience" is not passive
  - Interactions can be difficult
    - Unreasonable demands, incivility, aggression
  - Organizational demands to maintain service quality

  - Shared stressors foster collective interaction
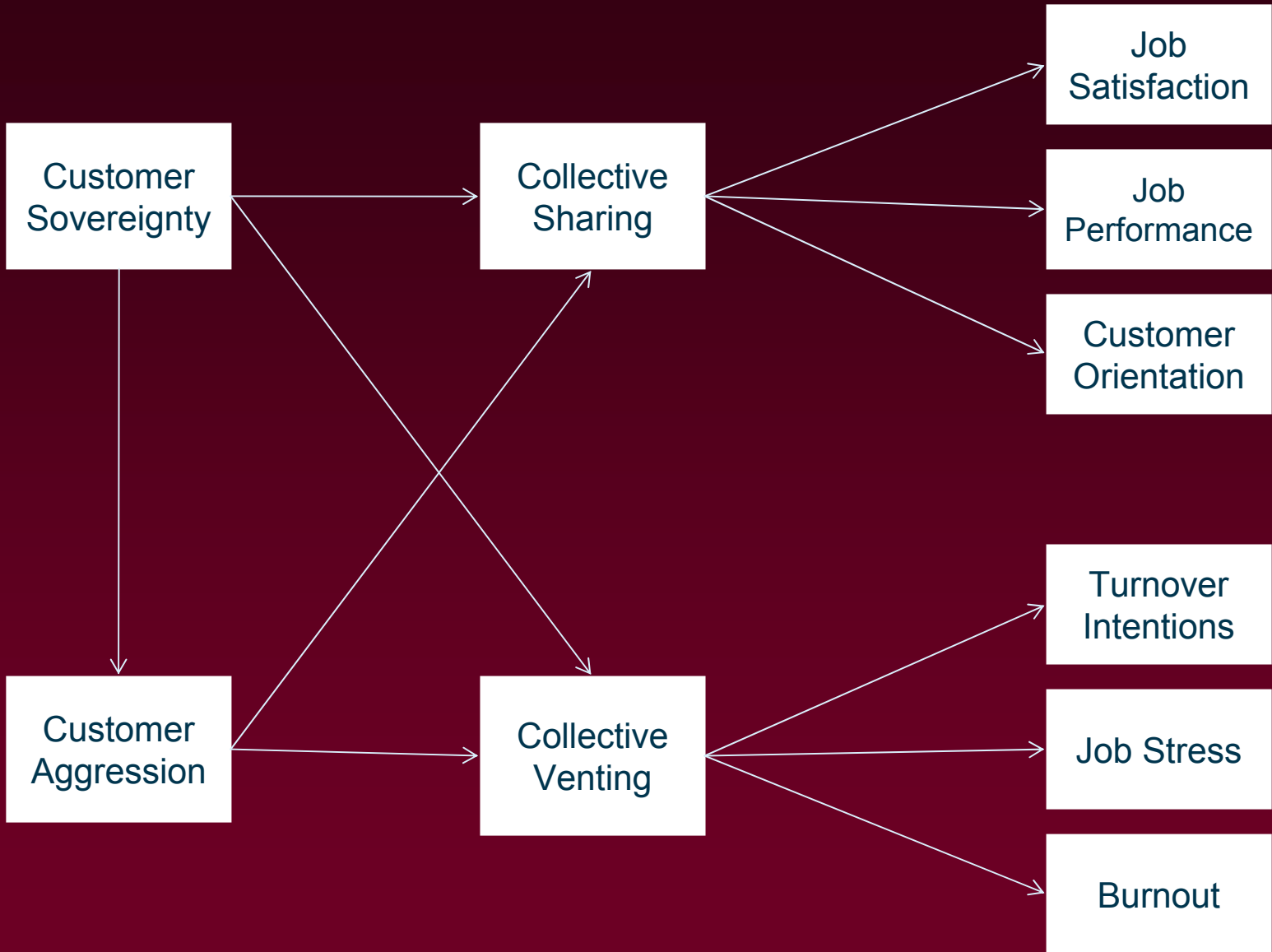
Antecedents of Collective ER

- **Customer Aggression (Incivility)**
  - Unpleasant verbal or nonverbal behaviour by customers
  - E.g., rudeness, condescension, yelling, swearing

  - 23.4% of workers experience aggression from members of public (Schat et al., 2006)

  - Customer aggression more common than aggression from coworkers, supervisors (Grandey et al., 2007)

  - Call centre workers report average of 7 hostile calls per day (Grandey et al., 2004)

Antecedents of Collective ER

- Exposure to customer aggression will predict collective ER
  - Collective venting – to "let off steam"
  - Collective sharing – to receive and provide support, camaraderie

- Rationale
  - Stressfulness of aggression
  - Demands of maintaining "service with a smile"

Antecedents of Collective ER

- **Customer Sovereignty** (Korczynski & Ott, 2004)

    – Notion that workers must behave in ways that satisfy, placate, and avoid upsetting or offending customers.

    – "The customer is always right"

    – "The customer is king"

Customer Sovereignty

- Places significant demands on service agents

- Grants customers permission to mistreat
  – Will predict exposure to customer aggression

- Will also predict service agents' collective venting and sharing
  – Agents experience organizational pressure to tolerate customer aggression – are "in it together"
  – Can't defend themselves onstage

Consequences of Collective ER

- **Collective Sharing**
  - Positive valence = positive outcomes

- **Collective Venting**
  - Negative valence = negative outcomes

Collective Sharing

- Addresses negative experiences, but more constructively
  - Discussing, debriefing, sharing information
  - Providing emotional support, camaraderie

- Distract agents from negative work demands
  - Well-being benefits (Totterdell & Parkinson, 1999)

- Provide strategies
  - Not to take it personally, cognitive reframing
  - May facilitate deep rather than surface acting

Collective Sharing

- Helpful strategies will reduce emotional dissonance and yield more positive customer interactions

- Reframing; taking customer's perspective
  - Less resentment and more genuine motivation to serve customer

- Build positive relationships with coworkers

- Therefore, will be associated with enhanced
  - Job satisfaction
  - Customer orientation
  - Service performance

Collective Venting

- Focuses on negative experiences, demands
- Is (indirectly) aggressive in nature
  - Swearing, cursing, ridiculing

- Intent is to decompress, but it actually maintains preoccupation with the stressor
  - Re-experiencing the trauma
  - Is a form of rumination

Collective Venting

- **Rumination**
  - Increases focus on negative experiences

  - Therefore, exacerbates negative emotion (Rusting & Nolan-Hoeksema, 1998)

  - "Fans the flame" rather than extinguishes it (Bushman, 2002)

Collective Venting

- Therefore, backstage is not a respite from the negative, but may be an intensifier
  - Does not distract or provide strategies

- Therefore, will be associated with higher…
  - Stress
  - Burnout
  - Intentions to quit job

Method

- Cross-sectional survey of 190 call centre workers

  - Age – 18-49 (90% between 20-29)
  - 75% men
  - 98% college/university educated
  - Job tenure – avg of 14 months
  - Work hours – 35 hrs / week
  - % of time interacting with customers – avg 67%

Data Analysis

- Exploratory factor analysis
  - To assess structure of collective ER
  - Principal axis extraction; oblimin rotation

- Structural equation modelling
  - Path Analysis (LISREL)

- Control variables
  - Gender
  - Neuroticism
  - % of time spent with customers
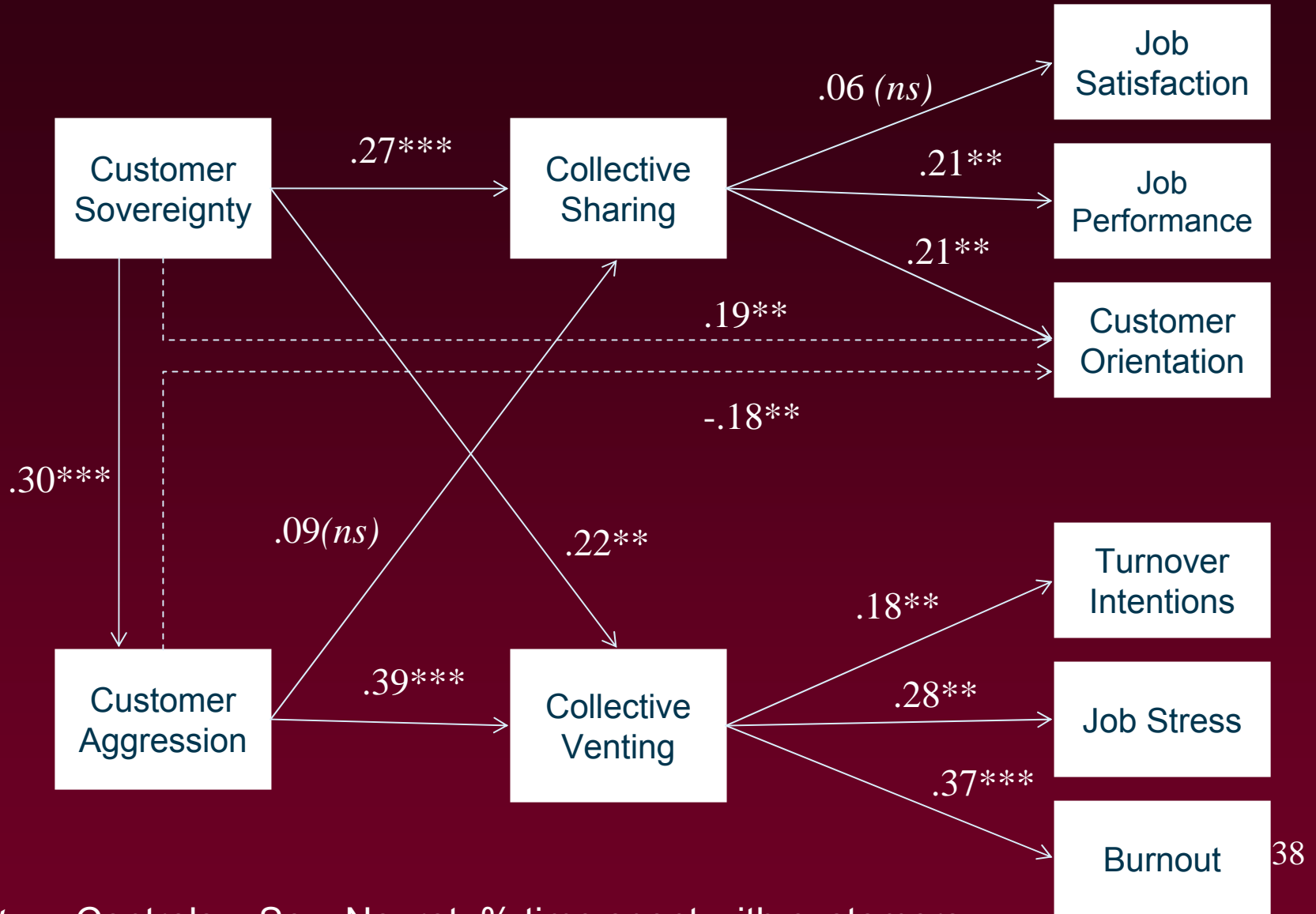
Measurement of Collective ER

- Drew on work of Hochschild (1983), Korczynski (2003), Goffman (1959)
  - Input from service workers

- Items include:
  - Complaining to coworkers about customers
  - Make fun of / joking about customers
  - Curse, swear about customers

  - Discuss difficult incidents with customers
  - Show sympathy, emotional support
  - Feel camaraderie, bonding

Results – Factor Analysis

Item	Collective Venting	Collective Sharing
Curse/swear	**0.82**	-0.14
Coworkers complain - you become angry	**0.66**	0.01
Make fun of customers	**0.55**	-0.01
Complain about customers	**0.54**	0.22
Sense of camaraderie	-0.07	**0.82**
Show sympathy	0.08	**0.66**
Provide emotional support	-0.01	**0.65**

Results – Model Tests

Customer Sovereignty → Collective Sharing: .27***
Collective Sharing → Job Satisfaction: .06 (*ns*)
Collective Sharing → Job Performance: .21**
Collective Sharing → Customer Orientation: .21**
Customer Sovereignty → Customer Orientation: .19**
Customer Sovereignty → Customer Aggression: .30***
-.18**
.09(*ns*)
.22**
Customer Aggression → Collective Venting: .39***
Collective Venting → Turnover Intentions: .18**
Collective Venting → Job Stress: .28**
Collective Venting → Burnout: .37***

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Notes. Controls – Sex, Neurot, % time spent with customers
χ2 (df = 26) = 35.47, *p*=< .10; RMSEA = .05; GFI = .97
***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05
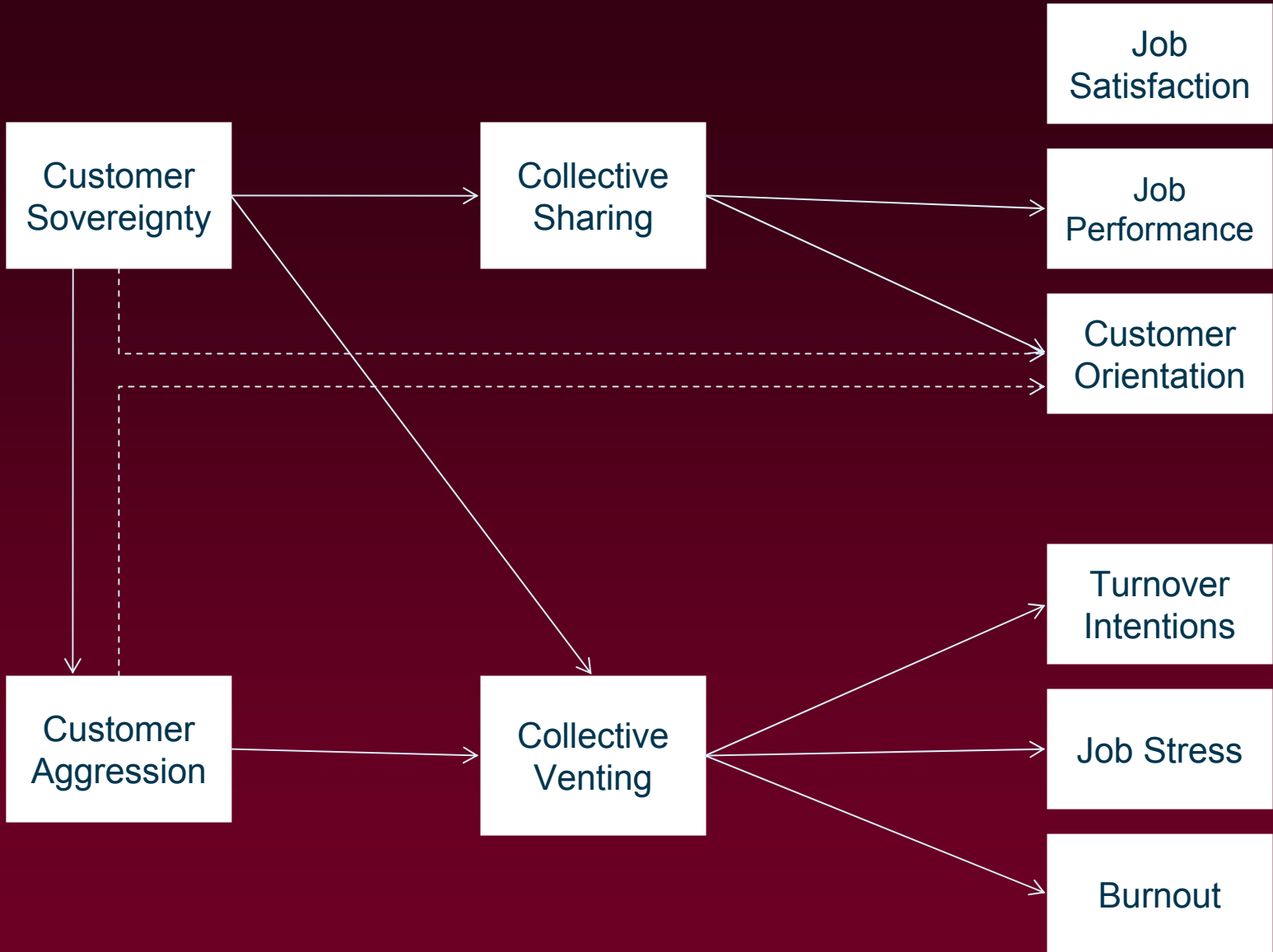
Summary

- 2 main types of backstage collective ER
  - Collective venting and sharing

- **Antecedents**
  - Collective venting predicted by both customer aggression and customer sovereignty

  - Collective sharing predicted by customer sovereignty (not aggression)

Summary

- Why did CA not predict collective sharing?
  - Power ($r = .14$, $p = .06$)

  - May be 2 effects washing out

Customer Aggression	$+$ →	Collective Sharing	— →	Customer Aggression

Collective sharing may lead to more effective strategies for interacting with customers (Grandey, 2003)
  - Need longitudinal research

Summary

- Service agents engage in collective ER to relieve tension of organizational and customer demands
  - Different types of collective ER predict different outcomes

- **Collective sharing**
  - When service agents engage in sharing, more likely to enhance service orientation and performance

- **Collective venting**
  - Associated with higher burnout, more stress and intent to quit

Practical Implications
(Tentative)

- Backstage behaviour is not benign
  - Can have important implications for work functioning, attitudes, and health

- Collective sharing is functional
  - Particularly for agents' service motivation and performance
  - No apparent downside

- Collective venting is dysfunctional
  - Should be discouraged

Practical Implications

- Potential interventions

    - Create opportunities (rest breaks, etc.)
        - Some orgs discourage interactions

    - Training in effective provision of support

    - Warning against downsides of collective venting

Practical Implications

- "Customer is always right" – is bad policy
  - Implies permission to customers to be aggressive
  - Implies to workers that org doesn't really care

- Organizations must reduce customer sovereignty
  - Policy - customer aggression not OK
  - Be willing to sacrifice satisfaction of <u>some</u> customers

- May reduce worker exposure to customer aggression
  - Indirectly reduce collective venting and its consequences

Future Directions

- How does collective sharing predict customer orientation and performance?
  - E.g., mediational role of deep acting?

- Short-term effects of collective venting
  - Does it provide temporary relief from anger (catharsis)?
  - Or does it exacerbate anger (Bushman, 2002)?

- Can changes be made to "customer sovereignty" that reduce aggression without sacrificing customer service?

Concluding Comments

- Health of service agents is a shared responsibility
  - Society
    - Higher standards of civility

  - Organization
    - Customer satisfaction not the only consideration

  - Customers
    - Service does not mean anything goes

  - Service Agents
    - Responsibility for how they handle work demands

Questions / Comments ??