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# Situating service work in action: A review and a pragmatist agenda for analysing interactive service work

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## Abstract

Research on interactive service work has paid close attention to how organizations and frontline employees deal with the inherent complexity of the customer–employee–employer triangle. This raises questions about the agency of interactive service workers with respect to the indeterminacy of service interactions. Our meta-narrative review finds that the theorization of worker agency in service interactions remains underdeveloped in the two dominant research streams of mainstream management and labour process theory studies. Implicitly or explicitly, these streams either subsume agency under managerial prescription or view it through the binary polar of control and resistance. There has been less focus on service workers' efforts to overcome practical difficulties in everyday service interactions. To address this lacuna, we offer a conceptual framework that draws on a less prominent, third research stream, which we label pragmatist. This stream includes scholarship largely unfamiliar to the international English-speaking community, published mainly in French and German academic journals. We propose three contributions in this paper. First, we contribute to the interactive service work literature by mapping the theoretical plurality within and beyond the English-speaking community. Second, we problematize established streams of research by articulating the intellectual axes of the field; this allows us to present a new research area to account for the concrete dynamics of service interaction and to capture frontline employee agency. Third, we propose a pragmatist research framework coupled with a future research agenda more attentive to the embeddedness and materiality of frontline workers' situated actions. This way, we address the indeterminacy of interactive situations.

## INTRODUCTION

Practitioners (Carlzon, 1987) and scholars (Balogun et al., 2015; Leidner, 1993; Macdonald & Sirianni, 1996; Schneider, 2004; Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016) widely agree that in contemporary service societies, customer-facing interactions

are crucial to service delivery, quality and organizational performance. The behaviour of contact employees with customers is a constant concern for service organizations, and explains why they seek to manage these relationships carefully (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016). Notwithstanding managerial efforts, our daily experiences as customers remind

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us that the service encounter does not always proceed as smoothly as organizations might wish. A bored child accompanying his or her mother to the supermarket rips the price tag off a pack of smoked salmon and the cashier finds herself unable to complete the transaction until a colleague, interrupted in her own work, provides the information. Meanwhile, other shoppers, unhappy with the delay, start complaining about the cashier's incompetence and the supermarket's poor organization.

Such difficulties illustrate the inherent complexity of service interaction, and preoccupy all service work scholars, regardless of their discipline. As Gabriel (2008, p. 186) noted, 'attempts to theorise [the service] interface must address this unpredictability and unmanageability'. This raises wider questions concerning the manageability of the interaction, the indeterminacy of interactive situations and the response of contact workers, or in other words, the exercise of their agency. Dealing with the issue of indeterminacy (i.e. the practical difficulty of maintaining service provision standards, as neither employees nor customers are fully manageable; Gabriel, 2008; Gabriel & Lang, 2015; Korczynski, 2002) is a challenge not only for service organizations and their contact employees, but also for service scholars. With this in mind, we aim to address the following research question in this review paper: how do employers and contact employees strive, albeit in different ways, to manage the indeterminacy inherent to the service interaction? By doing so, we shed light on the crucial question of how workers exercise agency during the course of their everyday activities.

The purpose of this paper is to examine critically how different literature streams address these key issues characteristic of the service interaction. The long-running debate, involving scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, has led to the development of a significant body of knowledge. Nevertheless, we believe that theoretical contributions from other research traditions beyond the English-speaking international debate can help to further refine our understanding of the unique features of service work. We identify, review and compare three main research streams: mainstream management studies, labour process theory studies and pragmatist studies. This third stream includes scholarship largely unfamiliar to the English-speaking community, published mainly in French and German-language academic journals.

This review reveals that there is scope in the dominant debate to develop greater systematic theorization of contact worker agency. Implicitly or explicitly, worker agency is either subsumed under managerial prescription or viewed through the binary polar of control and resistance. Understanding how contact workers devise

solutions to overcome practical difficulties in their everyday performance of work remains underdeveloped in both the mainstream management and labour process literature. This has essentially to do with the fact that these two dominant streams advance a rather deterministic and *a priori* conceptualization of employee agency that leaves little room for empirical investigation.

In contrast, by scrutinizing daily interactions closely, pragmatist scholarship highlights the complexity of service interaction and is more attentive to the embeddedness and materiality of frontline workers' situated actions. We therefore offer a conceptual framework that foregrounds the pragmatist approach to interactive service work and emphasizes the key foundational concepts of *sensemaking* (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2013; Weick, 1995) and *resourcing* (Feldman & Worline, 2012; Schneider et al., 2020) underpinning this approach. This enables us to account for contact employee agency in situated action in service organizations.

Our research contributes to the service work literature in several ways. First, it takes stock of current scholarship and illustrates the theoretical plurality within and beyond the English-speaking international academic debate. We present an up-to-date and consolidated overview of interactive service work research over the past 35 years; in the process, we enrich the theoretical plurality of the field by emphasizing new scholarly perspectives, especially from outside the English-speaking community. Second, we problematize established streams of research as we distil the key intellectual axes of the field, which allows us to propose a new pragmatist research area. Our theoretical contribution consists of elaborating a pragmatist research framework aiming to capture theoretically and analyse empirically frontline employee agency within the context of everyday service interaction. Third, we offer several fresh research avenues for service work, more attuned to the embedded and material dimensions of frontline workers' situated actions, so as to address the indeterminacy of interactive situations. Doing so should enable scholars to better understand 'how things work' (Watson, 2011, p. 202) on the frontline.

The paper is structured as follows. Following the methodology section, in the next three sections we successively review the mainstream management, labour process theory and pragmatist bodies of literature. The final section explores the theoretical and empirical potential of this pragmatist perspective to enrich our understanding of service work. It provides a detailed description of the pragmatist conceptual framework which our research mobilizes before proceeding to outline a future research agenda which places the concrete dynamics of service work centre stage.

## SCOPE OF THE REVIEW AND METHODS

### Defining interactive service work

In this review, we concentrate on interactive service work beyond the professional level (Korczynski, 2002; Shamir, 1980). Such workers comprise, for instance, taxi/bus drivers, waiters, front-desk and retail employees. In this sense, interactive service work includes jobs typically characterized as lacking in professional sovereignty and autonomy (compared to professionals such as teachers, lawyers or management consultants; for an overview of these professions, see e.g. Mosonyi et al., 2020; Stewart et al., 2000) and are heavily dependent on reaching organizationally predefined performance goals. These jobs share an imperative for customer satisfaction in interaction, resulting in a subordinate role (Shamir, 1980) for service providers when facing their often-demanding customers. Metaphorically speaking, the workplace, site of direct interaction between the service organization (in the form of its employees) and its customers, is often described as the ‘frontline’ (Korczynski, 2002). Therefore, we use the terms ‘frontline employees’, ‘interactive service workers’ and ‘contact employees’ synonymously.

### Literature screening and analysis

For this review, we combined a meta-narrative (Wong et al., 2013) (or semi-systematic; Snyder, 2019) approach with an integrative approach (Torraco, 2005, 2016). Combining the two approaches allows us to review interdisciplinary research, in particular, how specific ‘research traditions have unfolded over time’ (Wong et al., 2013, p. 2), and to integrate research whereby ‘new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated’ (Torraco, 2005, p. 356). Our social-constructionist viewpoint, covering both qualitative and quantitative research, enables us to explore the conceptual foundations (Breslin et al., 2020; Jones & Gatrell, 2014) of disciplines with different paradigmatic assumptions. This in turn makes it possible to overview the knowledge base, to critically review and synthesize findings and to conceptualize research analysing the nature of service interaction. Consonant with previous studies (e.g. Trullen et al., 2020; Tweedie et al., 2018), and as opposed to systematic literature reviews, we intend to build on a broad and diverse range of studies to advance knowledge and facilitate further theory development on this topic. Nonetheless, as described next, we strove to be as comprehensive as possible to identify the main themes.

We selected, reviewed, compared and synthesized the literature (Macpherson & Jones, 2010) on interactive service work in an iterative process among the authors that

alternated between searching and reviewing literature. Our review maps three key research traditions. Each of them advances different ontological and epistemological assumptions, resulting in different methods and, sometimes, conflicting findings. We first address the two dominant streams, namely, mainstream management studies (Table 1) and labour process theory studies (Table 2). Table 3 illustrates the pragmatist approach on interactive service work, foregrounding academic French and German literature.

We used several interlinked techniques to find relevant studies. To initially broaden the scope of the literature to be considered, each of the authors explored one of the key research traditions depending on her/his language abilities (some of the authors being native French or German speakers) and research background. Adopting informal methods (e.g. browsing libraries and the web, individual databases and building on our own knowledge), two of us engaged with mainstream management studies literature, two researched labour process theory studies, while three investigated French literature and one investigated German scholarship. We created an initial database of 62 sources: besides journal articles in English, French and German, we also integrated a number of relevant books and chapters such as the *Oxford Handbook of Work and Organisation* (Ackroyd et al., 2005) and the *SAGE Handbook of Human Resource Management* (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Regarding the sampling of French and German literature, we included key academic outlets in these language-based communities, such as *Sociologie du Travail* in French and *Handbuch Arbeitssoziologie* (Böhle et al., 2010) in German.

In a next step, we systematically searched the EBSCO Business Source Complete database covering the last 35 years (1983–2019), employing keywords such as ‘interactive service work’ and ‘service work’ (in title, abstract, topic and author-supplied keywords). This search yielded 303 articles. We then compared this list with our initial database and eliminated duplications, resulting in a total of 333 sources.

In line with our definition of interactive service work, we filtered out articles which mention in their abstracts either research on professional service work (65 articles), or research that does not theorize interactive service work, viewing it instead as a research setting for theorizing other domains (e.g. retail) (32 articles). From the remaining sources, we selected scholarship covering two interrelated issues: (1) management of employees in interactive service work settings; (2) employees’ perspectives on and experiences of interactive service work. We thus excluded another 58 articles, leaving 187 sources of research on the topic. From these remaining 187 sources, we sought to identify the most relevant studies making a core

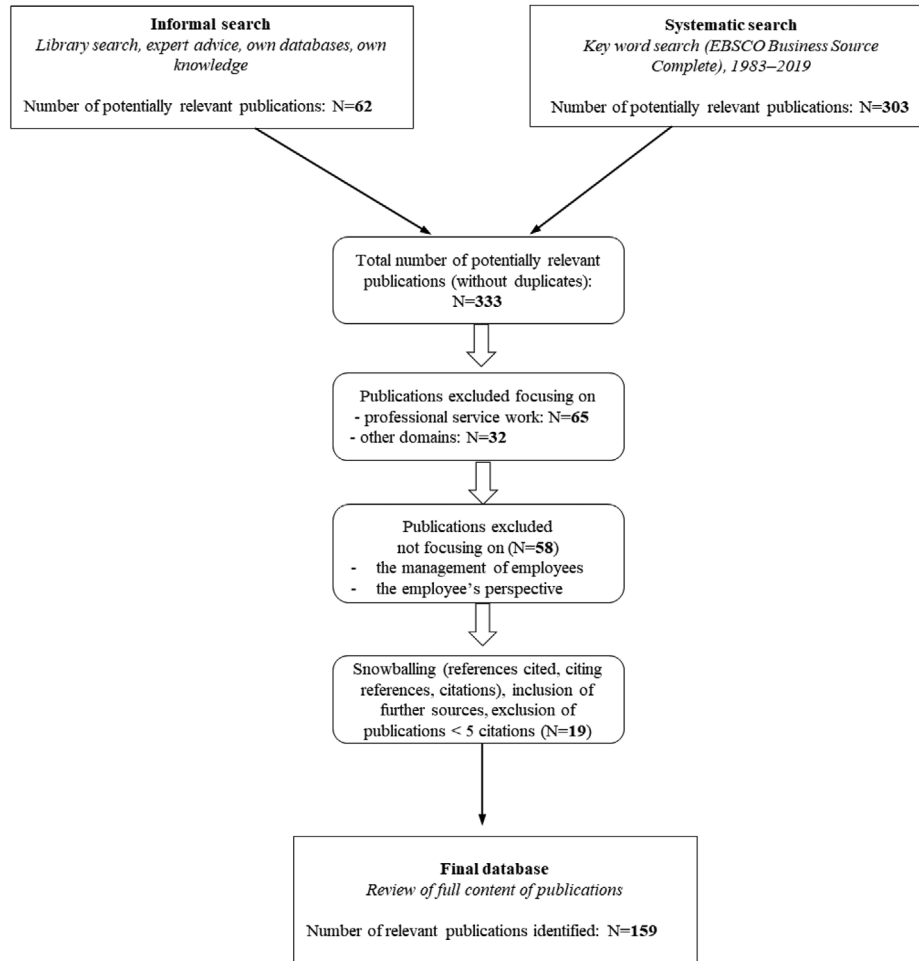


FIGURE 1 Overview of article selection process

contribution, either conceptually or empirically. Through team consensus, we selected some seminal papers (22 articles) and elaborated a heuristic list of 11 core topics and themes (see Tables 1–3).

The definition and identification of a core topic or theme embedded in one of the three key research traditions, and the related publications, were interdependent processes conducted on a consensual basis. We then applied a snowball selection method from these articles—following the references cited, citing the references and the number of citations—and compared them with those in our database to create a narrative for each stream of literature. This way, we double-checked whether any relevant source was missing and excluded sources from our database cited less than five times but older than 5 years ( $n = 19$ ). The final database includes 159 sources, consisting of 107 papers, 23 books and 29 book chapters, of which 15 sources are written in French and 18 in German. Figure 1 illustrates the literature sampling and selection process.

To map out the findings across multiple disciplines, we analysed the texts according to core themes, theories and methodologies, and aligned with the guiding research

question, namely, the understanding and role of indeterminacy and agency (see columns in Tables 1–3). We draw on the notion of indeterminacy to capture how the three research traditions conceptualize and answer the coordination requirements underlying each service interaction.<sup>1</sup> Indeterminacy stems from the uncertainty intrinsic to service interaction. It entails coordination because the object of the interaction (i.e. which kind of service), as well as the procedure for its provision (i.e. form of service delivery) must be jointly defined and produced by the organization, employee and customer during the service interaction. Consequently, indeterminacy refers to both the employer–employee relationship and the employee–customer relationship, as neither employees nor customers are fully manageable (Gabriel, 2008; Gabriel & Lang, 2015; Korczyński, 2002). Reviewing and analysing the literature through this lens enables us to describe how each research tradition

<sup>1</sup> We draw on the notion of ‘indeterminacy’ to refer to the not entirely manageable customer and employee. Research from various traditions has engaged with these issues (see *inter alia* Selznick, 1949; Sewell, 2005; Smith, 2006).

unfolds, as well as to compare and contrast them. Reflecting upon our analysis and synthesis of the literature, we do, however, recognize that drawing boundaries might be arbitrary at times, given the interrelated nature of customers, employees and employers.

## INTERACTIVE SERVICE WORK IN MAINSTREAM MANAGEMENT STUDIES: THE IDEAL OF SERVICE PROVISION

In this section, we review the writings of the ‘new’ service management school (Heery & Noon, 2008). As the prefix suggests, these scholars sought to distinguish themselves from an earlier generation of researchers who advocated the implementation of scientific management principles to service operations (Taylor, 1947). We summarize the arguments advanced by the ‘old’ service management school and the subsequent three core themes developed by the ‘new’ school in Table 1.

### The ‘old’ service management school

The ‘old’ school’s core premise stands on embracing the applied rationality of manufacturers (Levitt, 1972, 1976) to the service encounter, thereby thoroughly routinizing it and minimizing worker discretion and initiative. By implementing Taylorist principles embodied in standardized operating procedures, occurring errors are explained by employee infringement of organizational prescriptions. A logical corollary of the old service school’s mechanistic approach to service work is the focus on task control and supervision; consequently, the overall work environment can be described as one of low trust–low involvement.

### The ‘satisfaction mirror’ concept

In contrast to the ‘old’ service school focus on technology and process, the ‘new’ service management school firmly believes that contact employees and customers should be the centre of management concern (Heskett et al., 1994; Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991a). The satisfaction mirror concept (Bowen & Schneider, 1985; Schneider & Bowen, 1985) assumes that job redesign and rewards for employees should generate greater work satisfaction and lower turnover rates. This, in turn, translates into good service (Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991a), satisfied customers and, ultimately, stronger financial performance, thus creating a ‘cycle of success’ (Heskett et al., 1994, p. 168). To trigger this virtuous cycle, scholars (Bettencourt & Gwinner, 1996; Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991a) emphasize well-

designed recruitment policies, performance-linked payments, intensive training and communication, and recognition of employees’ contributions. Bowen and Schneider (1985) and Bowen et al. (1999) advocate fair managerial practices to foster organizational citizenship behaviour (i.e. workers’ willingness to voluntarily go the extra mile) and clear performance appraisal criteria. While these studies draw on quantitative data, Bitner et al.’s (1994) often-cited qualitative study is a rare example of examining employees’ first-hand viewpoints of customer satisfaction.

### Service climate and empowerment

The notion of service climate (Bowen & Schneider, 2014; Schneider et al., 1998) refers to contact employees’ positive perceptions of management practices that create a climate for service excellence. The existence of such a climate presupposes the stimulation of employee wellbeing (Schneider & Bowen, 1993), which entails meeting staff needs and facilitating its work. This approach strives to tackle the uncertainty inherent in service interactions upfront by shaping contact employees’ attitudes. Scholars (Bowen, 1996; Bowen & Schneider, 2014; Schneider, 2004) also stress the importance of providing the necessary tools and instruments to enable employees to deliver superior service quality. However, they remain unclear about what these tools actually consist of, or how they concretely assist employees in their everyday work. Related to the satisfaction mirror concept, the idea of empowerment (Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991b) provides contact employees with the freedom and responsibility required to achieve high service quality (Bowen & Lawler, 1992, 1995). Therefore, Bowen and Schneider (1985) suggest expanding the scope of employee involvement beyond their immediate tasks to the overall planning process, supported by specific training initiatives (Lashley & McGoldrick, 1994).

### Critical appreciation of mainstream management studies

During the 1980s and 1990s, both service management and service marketing research stressed the contact employee’s central role in driving customer-service outcomes. But the absence of new theoretical directions in the service management field has seen interest in contact employees ‘plateauing’ (Bowen, 2016, p. 8). Information technology-led changes in the very nature of service delivery (e.g. self-service airport check-in) has shifted the attention from provider to customer, where the latter can presumably be fully managed thanks to the correct programming of customer applications. Nevertheless, more recent accounts of

TABLE 1 Analytical underpinnings in mainstream management studies on the nature of interactive service work

Approach/themes	Main proponent/s	Main theoretical influences	Main methodologies	Main argument	Role and understanding of indeterminacy and agency
'Old' service management school	Levitt (1972, 1976)	Scientific management (Taylor)	Anecdotal and case evidence	Service firms need to adopt manufacturing principles.	Service encounters can be fully determined by design protocols; employees viewed as interchangeable; residual indeterminacy stems from human failure.
Satisfaction mirror	Bowen and Schneider (1985); Schneider and Bowen (1985)	Positivism (Durkheim); Behaviourism (Skinner)	Survey data	Frontline employees' positive perception of work environment correlates directly with customers' experience of service quality.	Indeterminacy resolved prior to service interaction thanks to HR practices. Employee behaviour and satisfaction oriented by HR policies and practices.
Service climate	Schneider et al. (1998)	Positivism; Behaviourism	Survey data	Management supports and rewards good customer service practices, procedures and behaviour.	Indeterminacy resolved prior to service interaction thanks to HR practices. Employee behaviour and satisfaction oriented by HR policies and practices.
Empowerment	Bowen and Lawler (1992, 1995)	Contingency theory (Chandler, Woodward)	Anecdotal and case evidence; survey data	Granting discretion and responsibility to frontline employees can yield significant competitive advantage; but this does not apply to all businesses.	Indeterminacy implicitly acknowledged due to increasing customer power, but responsibility for managing it is transferred to contact employees. Employee behaviour and satisfaction oriented by HR policies and practices.

platform-based collaborative consumption in service triangles (Benoit et al., 2017) suggest promising avenues to re-conceptualizing interactive service work of the 21st century.

To conclude, new service management writings have contributed greatly by drawing attention to the vital role contact employees play in the service production process and how service organizations and managers can meet the challenges inherent in service interaction. This is evident in the human resource (HR) research on 'relational coordination' in challenging settings such as airports (Gittel, 2000), postsurgical care (Gittel, 2002) and nursing homes (Gittel et al., 2008). All these studies stress the interdependence and time constraints shared by many services, and quantitatively analyse how employers can organize work environments designed to cope with the uncertainties of service settings.

However, when it comes to everyday work activities, we are left with a disembodied and abstract portrayal of the employee. Absent are the concrete and detailed analyses of how 'satisfied', 'empowered' employees avail of their firm's tools to actually go about serving customers and achieving quality service. Generally, the new service management school takes a unitary approach to the employment relationship (Budd & Bhawe, 2019), presuming a convergence of interests between managers, employees and customers. The idea is that organizations can limit the indeterminacy of service encounters and employees' idiosyncratic actions by establishing predefined scripts and protocols to almost fully manage the interactions in an ideally designed environment. Any residual uncertainty can be overcome by hiring the 'right types' (Bowen & Schneider, 1985, p. 137; see also Lam et al., 2018) and training them to act in the 'right way'. The difficulties and power relations involved in everyday work are neglected. In distinct contrast to this stream, the critical management stream, which we discuss next, stresses the fluid, complex and shifting everyday clashes of interest underlying service provision.

## **INTERACTIVE SERVICE WORK IN LABOUR PROCESS THEORY STUDIES: POWER AND RESISTANCE ON THE FRONTLINE**

We now turn to research whose primary focus lies in revealing the power relations at the core of the service economy. The themes in this section range from the demands firms impose on workers in the name of the customer, to the contradictions of work organization on the frontline, to patterns of worker resistance. Table 2 summarizes the topics covered in this section.

## **McDonaldization and the routinization of service work**

Ritzer's (1996, 2004) McDonaldization thesis provides an excellent starting point for an examination of critical management scholarship on interactive service work. Drawing on Weber's theory of bureaucracy, he argues that managerial legitimacy derives primarily from effectiveness and profitability. Apparently similar to Levitt's (1972) production line approach, Ritzer asserts that the rationalization process has manifested itself at the heart of contemporary society (for a review of Ritzer's work, see Korczynski, 2002).

The McDonaldization thesis goes along with the use of tightly defined scripts in service work (Leidner, 1993). Embracing classic labour process theory and building on Braverman (1974), several authors (e.g. Bain & Taylor, 2000; Callaghan & Thompson, 2002; Frenkel, 2005; Leidner, 1993; Sallaz, 2014) witness a 'de-skilling' dynamic in service jobs, in which interchangeable, low-paid employees enjoy little autonomy or responsibility. Scholarship on call centres (see Lloyd, 2016 for an extensive review) reveals how technology-based work process rationalization in service settings shapes labour and addresses its indeterminacy. Organizations control the workforce using panoptical surveillance techniques (Bain & Taylor, 2000), recruitment, selection, training (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002) and permanent (pressurizing) pedagogy (Sallaz, 2014).

## **Worker–manager–customer relationship in the service triangle**

With the development of the service sector, sociology of work research has shifted from a dyadic to a triadic conceptualization of employment relationships encompassing workers, managers and customers (Bolton, 2005a; Bolton & Houlihan, 2010; McCammon & Griffin, 2000). Integrating customers in the labour process, they are theorized at once as a key source of legitimacy and as a potential source of control (du Gay & Salaman, 1992; Fuller & Smith, 1991; Harris & Ogbonna, 2010). Authors like Leidner (1993, 1996) emphasize the shifting alliances between the three parties depending upon their contingent interests. For instance, Rosenthal (2004) reveals how management control can operate as a support for workers engaging with customers, such as customer-orientation programmes (Peccei & Rosenthal, 2000) that enable worker agency. Others have suggested a more fragmented view of relationships unfolding within the so-called 'triangle of power' (Lopez, 2010), such as the ever-present-even-if-absent customer (O'Riain, 2010).



TABLE 2 Analytical underpinnings in labour process theory studies on the nature of interactive service work

Approach/themes	Main proponent/s	Main theoretical influences	Main methodologies	Main argument	Role and understanding of indeterminacy and agency
McDonaldization/Routinization	Bain and Taylor (2000); Callaghan and Thompson (2002); Leidner (1993); Ritzer (2004); Sallaz (2014)	Bureaucracies (Weber); LPT (Marx); Post-Structuralism (Foucault)	Interviews, observation	Service organizations tend to be rational and control workers tightly. HR practices, surveillance and permanent pedagogy contribute to worker consent.	Employee indeterminacy is acknowledged and hence constrained. Organizations attempt to limit worker agency as much as possible.
Worker-manager–customer relationship in the service triangle	Bolton (2005a); Bolton and Houlhian (2010); du Gay and Salaman (1992); Fuller and Smith (1991); Leidner (1993, 1996); McCammon and Griffin (2000)	Bureaucracies (Weber); LPT (Marx)	Interviews, observation	Integration of customer in triadic analysis of employment relationship; shifting alliances in triangle; customer as ideology.	Indeterminacy of both customer and employee is explicitly acknowledged and accentuated by logic of customer sovereignty; consumer culture as driver for employees' actions and beliefs ('Enterprising self').
Emotional/aesthetic labour	Bolton (2005a, b, c); Bolton and Boyd (2003); Bolton and Houlhian (2007); Hochschild (1983); Lloyd and Payne (2009); Lopez (2006); Warhurst et al. (2000)	Symbolic interactionism (Goffman)	Interviews, observation	Commodification of emotions and physical appearance; should they be regarded as skills and recognized and managed accordingly?	High customer indeterminacy; appropriation of employees' subjectivity by managerial discourse and behavioural/feeling rules; employee agency is highly debated; customer incorporated in the commodification of employees' emotions and aesthetics.
Customer-oriented bureaucracy	Frenkel et al. (1998); Korczynski (2002, 2005b); Korczynski and Ott (2004)	Bureaucracies (Weber)	Conceptual meta-analysis	Service organizations respond simultaneously to a rationalization and a customer-orientation logic. They promote the myth of customer sovereignty to cope with this basic contradiction and fashion a fragile social order. This results in a structural contradiction experienced by workers in their daily work.	The two contradictory logics render the interaction outcome uncertain. Employees are exposed to managerial pressure and customer expectations; they are left alone to resolve structural contradictions.
Communities of coping—resistance	Gould (2010); Jiang and Korczynski (2016); Korczynski (2003, 2007); Taylor and Bain (2003)	Communities of practice; LPT (Marx); Identity work	Interviews, observations, document analysis	Workers develop various ways to deal with the difficulties of service work, which are rarely used during the interaction and which mostly target symbolic or economic goals.	Customer indeterminacy has negative implications for workers. Given their weak agency when performing tasks, the focus is on employee agency outside actual work situations.

## Emotional and aesthetic labour

Simultaneously, scholarly attention has turned towards the emotional and aesthetic demands employers make on service workers (Bolton, 2005a, b, 2009; Bolton & Houlihan, 2007; Brook, 2009; Gabriel, 2008; Gatta, 2011; Hochschild, 1983; Nickson et al., 2011; Thompson & Warhurst, 1998; Thompson et al., 2001; Vincent, 2011). Hochschild's (1983) ground-breaking work on emotional labour considers emotions an integral part of service work; employees' emotions have to fit the 'feeling rules' governing the workplace, which customers have the power to set. A widely discussed theme in the critical literature, emotional labour has also attracted criticism for its one-sided and negative depiction of service work. Bolton (2005a) reminds us of labour's indeterminacy, noting that despite capitalism's hegemonic sway, its success in transmuting employees' feelings must remain incomplete. She rather considers frontline employees as capable of managing their emotions (Bolton & Boyd, 2003), acknowledging this as a 'skill' in terms of the locus of satisfaction, reward, imperfection and humour in customer service (Jenkins et al., 2010; Lopez, 2006), but also in terms of economic recognition and remuneration (Vincent, 2011).

An extension of Hochschild's emotional labour is the concept of aesthetic labour introduced by Warhurst et al. (2000). The employee's body is viewed as being organizationally produced to represent the aesthetics required for the employer's benefit (Nickson et al., 2001, 2005, 2012). Aesthetic labour highlights the importance of the outward appearance of service workers based on embodied dispositions (Warhurst et al., 2009). As in the emotional labour debate, embodied aesthetics are theorized as both organized commodities and a set of skills (Gatta, 2011).

But the skills debate has become controversial. Scholars defending the uniqueness of service skills and advocating for their recognition (Bolton & Boyd, 2003; Korczynski, 2005a) have faced resolute opponents (Lloyd & Payne, 2009; Payne, 2009), for whom the term 'skill' calls for more careful use. This debate reveals how service work structures inequalities among workers, notably gender differences. For example, the unrecognized emotional skills involved in care work are assumed to be female attributes (Bolton, 2005c). Such gender stereotypes then frame recruiting and selection decisions (Abrantes, 2014).

## Customer-oriented bureaucracy

Drawing on insights from research on call centre service work (Frenkel et al., 1998), Korczynski (2002) elaborates

the notion of 'customer-oriented bureaucracy'. In his comprehensive work, Korczynski (2002, 2004, 2005b, 2007, 2009) highlights the inherent contradiction in the broader structural condition of consumer capitalism and the need for service organizations to remain competitive. Employees experience this contradiction as they are simultaneously pressured by 'the requirement for the organization to be formally rational' in line with a bureaucratic logic, and the requirement 'to be formally irrational – to enchant – responding to the customers' desire for pleasure' (Korczynski, 2002, p. 64). The service interaction being the site where production and consumption can 'clash' (Korczynski & Ott, 2004, p. 576) leads management to promote the 'myth' of customer sovereignty. However, despite (or because of) the 'myth' of being sovereign, customers may become disenchanted or even irate and hence 'unmanageable'. Consequently, employees are trapped between two contradictory demands, requiring them to find ways to handle the tension in interactive situations. How they actually do so remains unclear, with Korczynski (2002, 2009) framing the question merely as an HR issue.

## Communities of coping—resistance

Against this background of the contradictory nature of interactive service work, scholars have focused on frontline workers' responses (Good & Cooper, 2016), tactics (Reynolds & Harris, 2006) and practical judgement (Echeverri et al., 2012) to deal with the situations they encounter. Korczynski's (2003) concept of a community of coping captures the collective informal practices of coping with the suffering that customers generate. Sayers and Fachira (2015) extend this perspective to the use of social media, even as other studies demonstrate how a shared culture provides workers with mutual help akin to emotional resistance (Sandiford & Seymour, 2011, 2013) or subversive humour (Taylor & Bain, 2003).

Frontline employees also seek to fashion their identity by defending their expertise in high-profile hairdressing salons (Yeadon-Lee, 2012) and assimilating themselves to a 'labour aristocracy' (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007; see also Bolton, 2005c on gynaecology nurses). Identity, however, can be instrumentalized to aggravate workers' economic conditions. Williams and Connell (2010) show how retail managers trigger their workers' consumerist interests to persuade them to accept low wages. To counter deteriorating employment conditions (Gould, 2010), Sallaz (2010) suggests status enhancement, while other scholars (Jiang & Korczynski, 2016; Korczynski, 2007) observe that organizing collectively through communities of coping could provide a platform for trade union organization.

## A critical appreciation of labour—process theory studies

Critical management perspectives draw attention to the indeterminacy of an interaction caused by the presence of the customer. Service work's structural contradiction between serving customers' interests and those of the firm leads to a fundamentally adversarial view of the employment relationship. While organizations seek to script, routinize and rationalize work by prescribing emotional and aesthetic rules, employees display certain forms of coping strategies and resistance. This provides us with a comprehensive understanding of how control is simultaneously exercised by organizational devices, cultural frames and job markets.

Critical management scholars pay close attention to the workplace. However, the picture of interactive service work that emerges leaves little room for conceptual or empirical engagement with questions of employees' agency, and especially of how they deal with the inherent tensions of daily work to accomplish service delivery (Subramanian & Suquet, 2018). Self-realization manifests itself only through collective resistance and communities of coping, that is, mainly outside actual work performance. Given this stream's primary theoretical interest in power dynamics and resistance, it focuses on the social order in which the interaction is embedded. The service interaction *per se* is seldom considered the unit of analysis. As a result, these scholars tend to neglect the interaction order embedded in the social order and do not fully grasp the concrete, practical dimensions of work as a situated activity. 'Work in all its practical details' (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2013, p. 1404) is typically given short shrift, which is why we turn next to pragmatist accounts of interactive service work.

### INTERACTIVE SERVICE WORK IN FRENCH AND GERMAN PRAGMATIST STUDIES: HOW WORK GETS DONE ON THE FRONTLINE

We have argued that mainstream and critical management studies do not deal directly with how things actually get done on the frontline, glossing over the micro-level exchanges at the heart of interactive service work. Therefore, we engage with other theoretical perspectives that shift the focus of analysis to the unfolding interaction and the sociomaterial conditions structuring the encounter between customers and employees. We successively review two such perspectives and account for their respective development in specific national, intellectual and institutional contexts and linguistic areas (see also Table 3). While evolving in very different ways, both call for

a more situation-centred approach, privileging the interplay between action and situation.

### French 'front-desk' sociology

'Front-desk' sociology emerged in French sociology (mostly published in French) during the 1990s and early 2000s. The growing scholarly interest in interactions at the 'front desk' coalesced with the increasing proportion of service jobs and with attempts by French public services to modernize by switching from bureaucratic to user-oriented organizations. For sociologists (e.g. Borzeix, 2000; Joseph, 1995; Weller, 1998), these trends raised questions of what it takes for workers to deliver service quality, hence paying close empirical attention to service interactions as they unfold in practice. Drawing on Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucracy metaphor, researchers sought to show how service quality plays out in the most mundane of interactions, while shedding light on the activity undertaken by workers at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder. Conceptually, this stream relies on the sociology of professions (Gadrey, 1994) and on symbolic interactionism—in particular, Goffman's (1971) triangular approach to service, Suchman's (1987) situated action, Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodology, or Sacks et al.'s (1974) conversational analysis.

More generally, the intellectual climate in France during the 1990s witnessed a shift from Marxism and Bourdieu's thinking towards theories acknowledging the significance of individual and collective actions. The pragmatic turn (Schatzki et al., 2001) was embodied in the French context by emerging theoretical currents, such as the economics of conventions (Boltanski & Thévenot, [1991] 2006; Salais, 2001), also referred to as 'French Pragmatism' (Brandl et al., 2014; Cloutier et al., 2017). It addresses questions related to action and coordination and the underlying sociomaterial conditions.

These theoretical developments also provided the basis for a renewed methodological toolbox. Scholars drew on video and audio recording, ethnographic observation and detailed narrative to probe the fine details of what really happens in contact workers' interactions, and how they tackle customers' demands (Borzeix & Fraenkel, 2001; Grosjean & Lacoste, 1999; Lacoste, 1995, 1998). Doing so has made it possible to challenge conventional understandings of unofficial practices that deviate from standard rules, as either arbitrary, illegitimate or signalling resistance to domination. 'Front-desk' sociology studies depict service work, like at the reception desk, as complex, requiring a considerable degree of improvisational talent to make up for the lacunae and contradictions of organizationally prescribed responses to customers (Lacoste,

TABLE 3 Analytical underpinnings in French and German pragmatist studies on interactive service work

Approach/themes	Main proponent/s	Main theoretical influences	Main methodologies	Main argument	Role and understanding of indeterminacy and agency
French 'front-desk' sociology	Borzeix and Fraenkel (2001); Gadrey (1994); Grosjean and Lacoste (1999); Ughetto (2002, 2013, 2018); Weller (1999a,b)	Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel); Symbolic interactionism (Goffman); Conversation analysis (Sacks); Sociology of professions (Freidson); Street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky)	Ethnography; audio and video recording	Interaction has to be studied in itself to reveal the singularity and complexity of frontline employees' work in interactive situations.	Embodied and socially embedded customers make the unfolding of service interactions uncertain. Hence workers have to adapt to make sense of and subsequently deal with, the practical problems of service provision. Their agency lies in their ability to mobilize and deploy relevant sociomaterial arrangements in specific situations.
German 'interaction-work' approach	Böhle (2011); Böhle et al. (2015); Dunkel and Wehrich (2010, 2012, 2013); Wehrich and Dunkel (2003)	Symbolic interactionism (Goffman) Negotiated orders (Strauss)	Participant and non-participant observation; narrative interviews	Interacting, as part of service provision, is work in itself; interaction is treated as a discrete unit of analysis.	Customers and frontline workers have to cooperate actively to face the inherent uncertainty of service transactions. Frontline workers mobilize competences under institutional constraints (e.g. organizational and cultural) to overcome the difficulties they encounter and achieve organizational goals located beyond the interaction itself.

1995; Weller, 1999a). The degree to which contact employees follow a predefined script is likely to vary (Borzeix, 1995), as they interpret the demand by mobilizing relational, organizational and cognitive skills, such as the ability to categorize customers (Lacoste, 1995), constantly making trade-offs between contradictory expectations (Joseph, 1995). Employees also perform skilled coordination work (Ughetto, 2002, 2018) to guarantee effective service delivery by relying largely on their agency to interpret and act.

How this agency is 'equipped' is central to front-desk sociology. Scholars stress the role of objects and artefacts to support action in the context of everyday work problems (Conein et al., 1993; Dodier, 1995). Borrowing from 'ecological psychology' and Gibson's (1979) concept of affordances, they argue that individuals rely on their sociomaterial environment to act, coining the French term 'équipement' (Dodier, 1995; Thévenot, 2001). 'Équipement' goes beyond the notion of technology (Frenkel et al., 1998), encompassing a broader set of sociomaterial artefacts from high-tech devices (i.e. an application that performs technical diagnoses) to daily furniture (such as a desk) or organizational rules (materialized in a handbook). For instance, the counter (i.e. the 'front desk') is viewed as both a technological and social device, simultaneously permitting and constraining action, and serving as a resource available to workers in their spatial environment (Weller, 1999b). Front-desk sociologists share an emphasis on the role of the collective dimension of 'équipement' as a resource for action (Caroly & Clot, 2004). Informed by communities of practice (Mebarki & Oiry, 2009), 'équipement' is realized through communication and coordination with colleagues and in the stream of interactions (Caroly & Trompette, 2006; Grosjean & Lacoste, 1999).

## The German 'interaction-work' approach

Compared to French front-desk sociologists, the German-speaking sociology of work and sociology of service community (Dunkel & Wehrich, 2010, 2012, 2013; Wehrich & Dunkel, 2003) explicitly emphasizes that interacting is itself work. For Dunkel and Wehrich (2013, p. 50), interaction work 'is demanding because cooperation has to be established and maintained under conditions that can be very tricky'. The concept of 'Interaktionsarbeit' (Böhle et al., 2015, p. 37) ('interaction work', our translation) combines notions of sentimental work (Strauss et al., 1982) and emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; see also Dunkel, 1988), even as it integrates gut feeling (Böhle, 2011; Böhle et al., 2015) and coordination efforts (Dunkel & Wehrich, 2018).

From the early 2000s, a group of German work sociologists (Böhle, 2006; Böhle et al., 2015; Dunkel, 2015; Dunkel

& Wehrich, 2006, 2018; Wehrich & Dunkel, 2003), emancipating themselves from Habermas's (1973, 1981) distinction between work (as instrumental rationality) and interaction (as communicative rationality), pushed for theorizing service work as the intertwinement of interaction and work. Following the work of scholars (Gross, 1983; Gross & Badura, 1977) who first described the particularity of service in terms of its simultaneous production and consumption, Wehrich and Dunkel (2003) position the relationship between customer and frontline staff centre stage. Drawing on the roots of American pragmatism, especially symbolic-interactionism (Corbin & Strauss, 1993; Strauss, 1978; Strauss et al., 1982), they systematically focus on the recursive interplay between the concrete interaction situation and actors' agency. Researchers (Böhle, 2006; Böhle et al., 2015; Dunkel, 2015; Dunkel & Wehrich, 2006; Wehrich & Dunkel, 2003) describe how the establishment of rules, trust or power to achieve stable and shared agreements in the course of interaction are key to understanding service work.

Through in-depth qualitative studies of workers in hotels, elderly care and ticket counters (Dunkel & Wehrich, 2012), the 'interaction-work' approach illustrates that customer interactions entail negotiations about the kind of service to be provided. Frontline employees can never be entirely sure if the outcome of the service interaction will match the customer's initial expectations, yet employees must handle this uncertainty to achieve successful service delivery. Congruent with French front-desk sociology, the 'interaction-work' approach highlights that service workers establish trust, and balance diverging interests by drawing on not only individual interactive skills, but also institutional coordination mechanisms like social conventions and norms (Dunkel & Wehrich, 2006, 2014), and gender roles (Wehrich & Dunkel, 2007). Like their French counterparts, the German stream asserts that frontline workers perform highly demanding tasks under difficult conditions and that through their interactions with customers, they develop invaluable knowledge collectively about the latter's behaviour. This enables them to alter institutional and company rules that constrain the actions of employees, managers and customers alike (Dunkel & Wehrich, 2012).

## Critical appreciation of French 'front-desk' sociology and German 'interaction-work' scholarship

What French and German studies share is the intention to revisit the analysis of service work from a pragmatist perspective. To various degrees, both lines of research draw on symbolic interactionism (Strauss, 1978), conver-

sation analysis (Sacks et al., 1974) and ethnomethodology and workplace studies (Luff et al., 2000; Rawls, 2008). Building on this theoretical background, French and German scholars empirically explore frontline employees' agency, underscoring service interactions' indeterminacy and the resulting complexity and unpredictability. Asserting that organizationally defined prescriptions tell us only part of the story of how a service interaction proceeds, the French and German bodies of literature make two important contributions. First, by taking into account the extent to which contact employees improvise during interactions, these scholars highlight the need for mutual understanding, coordination requirements and trade-offs between conflicting demands. Second, by seeking to understand how frontline employees tackle mundane problems, researchers illustrate how employees mobilize the artefacts at hand, transforming their environment into resources.

In essence, both streams regard frontline workers as competent actors who exert agency by the wide range of sociomaterial resources they harness to address the complex and contradictory nature of service interactions. Interactions are studied as work *per se*, as the moment when employees' competences take centre stage, thus highlighting the conditions that enable people to act in a given situation. Privileging micro-level practices, though, comes at the expense of the macro-level dynamics that perforce shape and orient the former. Power not only seldom tends to be directly visible, but these studies' stress on the local and immediate contexts of interaction, together with their methodological approaches, suggests that agency is favoured over structure (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). However, the German and French debates also share this shortcoming with the international literature on interactive service work that we describe next.

### **Practice-based, interactionist and ethnomethodological echoes in the contemporary international debate on interactive service work**

Developed in the 1990s and 2000s, the French and German contributions preceded or grew in parallel with the affirmation of the practice turn (Schatzki et al., 2001) and the sociomateriality perspective on the international scene (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). Yet, international research has only recently started to deploy such perspectives to examine interactive service work. Scholarship from a practice-based standpoint highlights the relevance of service work by uncovering its dimension of craft (Holmes, 2015), or by demonstrating that frontline workers, albeit in their subordinate hierarchical positions, help an organization to

meet its strategic goals (Balogun et al., 2015; Rouleau, 2005; Smets et al., 2015).

Drawing on a symbolic-interactionist stance, Hampson and Junor (2005, 2010, 2015; Hampson et al., 2009; see also Subramanian & Suquet, 2018) view the interactional competences structuring service interactions as 'articulation work', which should be recognized as an essential skill in customer-facing activities. Similarly, ethnomethodological accounts (Llewellyn, 2015; Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2013) delineate how employees mobilize these skills in different ways to successfully perform everyday activities. For instance, Best and Hindmarsh (2019) show how tour guides make sense and use of organizational space, while Yamauchi and Hiramoto (2016) illustrate how coordination between employees and customers works by aligning service routines in a sushi bar. The central contribution of this emerging international debate on interactive service work is to emphasize not only that daily frontline employee practices matter, but that these practices also need to be unpacked and made visible to fully grasp how frontline employees accomplish their jobs.

However, barring Hampson and Junor's (2005, 2015) work, Hampson et al. (2009) and that of Llewellyn and Hindmarsh (2013), these studies harness the interactive service work setting to develop theoretical contributions on strategizing (Balogun et al. 2015), or on workplace studies/ethnomethodology (Best & Hindmarsh 2019; Llewellyn, 2015); they do not seek to advance theory on interactive service work *per se*. Consequently, outside the mainstream and critical perspectives, endeavours to theorize interactive service work remain both punctual and dispersed within the international debate. To date, we lack a coherent, well-structured and relatively sizeable body of work united in common purpose and methodological ambition. It might therefore be fruitful to develop a programmatic vision for the international debate on interactive service work by importing a pragmatist lens and drawing on the French and German scholarship to spotlight the specificities of service work.

### **DISCUSSION: A PRAGMATIST FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH AGENDA TO ACCOUNT FOR THE SITUATED NATURE OF INTERACTIVE SERVICE WORK**

#### **Building theory from the review: Advancing service work research through a pragmatist perspective**

In line with Breslin and Gatrell (2020), in this review we seek to advance service work theory, first by 'organizing

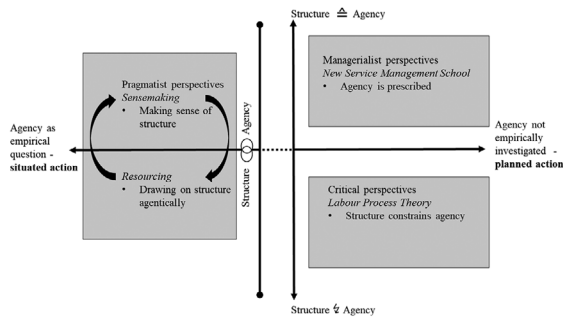


FIGURE 2 Theorizing for future research in interactive service work

and categorizing’ two dominant streams of literature, then by ‘problematizing’ each of these streams and finally by ‘setting out new narratives and conceptualizations’, as we synthesize literature that adopts a pragmatist perspective on interactive service work. These three steps along the ‘miner–prospector continuum’ (Breslin & Gatrell, 2020) parallel Post et al.’s (2020) suggested building blocks of theorizing from literature reviews, such as identifying, challenging and advancing through examining a body of prior work. To further theory development and set out a new narrative, in this section we aim at integrative and generative theorizing (Post et al., 2020) by ‘futurizing a research agenda’ (Hoon & Baluch, 2020b). In doing so, we aim to carve out new avenues for service work research (Breslin & Gatrell, 2020; Hoon & Baluch, 2020a). This includes distilling the central intellectual axes of the field, envisioning a range of alternative futures and offering a set of future research approaches. Figure 2 illustrates our approach to theorizing and projecting future research from our literature review, which we explain in this discussion section.

In the previous three sections, we had identified and grouped managerialist (*New Service Management School*), critical (*Labour Process Theory*) and pragmatist studies (*French and German literature*). In Figure 2, we organize and categorize these streams of literature on the basis of their ontological and epistemological underpinnings with regard to agency, as we critically reflect on each stream’s stance towards the interrelation of indeterminacy, structure and agency in the service situation. This process of distilling the key concepts of a field has led us to develop the horizontal and vertical axes in Figure 2.

On the right side of Figure 2, we find the established and dominant research streams, namely the managerialist and critical perspectives. Turning to the vertical axis, we see that the two streams differ in terms of conceptual stance towards the interrelation between structure and service workers’ agency. The managerialist stream tends to approach agency from a prescriptive and normative angle (symbolized as ‘Structure  $\hat{=}$  Agency’ in Figure 2;  $\hat{=}$  stands

for structure corresponds to/is subsumed by agency), while considering the indeterminacy present in the service interaction as almost fully manageable. The object of scholarly analysis is not the exercise of worker agency in itself. Rather, it is situated further upstream on the HR mechanisms, whereby organizations dispose of employees who are both ‘fit to serve’ (Lam et al., 2018) and capable of smoothly coordinating with each other (Gittell, 2000; Gittell & Seidner, 2009). As a result, frontline employees exert agency in predefined ways, via the figure of the ideal worker who conforms to the given structures and rules.

In contrast, from a critical perspective, structure mostly constrains frontline service workers’ agency, limiting their scope for action within these structures. Service interaction’s indeterminacy is considered not fully manageable, leaving the employee caught between the unpredictable customer and the strict employer-prescribed rules and scripts. These structural contradictions challenge employees’ agency (symbolized as ‘Structure  $\zeta$  Agency’ in Figure 2;  $\zeta$  stands for the tension between structure and agency). Critical management studies fundamentally contest the idea of shared interests interlinking customers, workers and management which, according to the mainstream literature, drives service quality. Viewing service work through the lens of domination, they focus primarily on how frontline workers find themselves trapped between incompatible expectations (McCann et al., 2015), while nevertheless consenting to participate in the service economy labour process (Sallaz, 2014).

Concerning the horizontal axis (Figure 2, right side), what unites both literature streams is their rather determinist stance, which leaves little room for an empirical investigation of agency. Instead, what stands in the foreground of empirical interest in both streams is managerially planned action in a given service interaction, with mainstream scholarship interpreting any deviation as ‘bad’ management, and critical scholarship as employee resistance. Even though the daily contradictions of service work logically entail some degree of agency at the frontline, when the critical management stream scrutinizes such workplaces, it does so mainly to underline structural employment issues such as industrial relations, skill recognition, worker employability and discrimination. While each stream has a different take on the interrelation between structure and agency, both are inclined to focus empirically on managerially planned action in service interactions and its eventual incompleteness or contradictions, leaving under-explored the question of how frontline employees exert agency to get their job done.

Such an approach, we argue, misses out on what is actually going on in service interactions. It also explains why we propose to shift our attention towards the notion of

situated action and to apprehend frontline service workers' degree of agency as an empirical phenomenon for future research to investigate (Figure 2, left side). Because interactive service work is performative by nature (e.g. service is consumed even as it is produced), this focus on situated action becomes extremely relevant. Drawing on a pragmatist perspective, we propose an alternative conceptual framework to probe what is actually going on in service interaction, given that a pragmatist stance emphasizes action. As prospectors, capitalizing on the intuition and creative leaps of former miners to identify sources of new mines (Breslin & Gatrell, 2020), we thereby introduce a new, emergent perspective that borrows and translates from French and German pragmatist service work literature.

Embracing a pragmatist approach has prompted us to propose *sensemaking* (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2013; Weick, 1995) and *resourcing* (Feldman & Worline, 2012; Schneider et al., 2020) as two foundational concepts, different yet intertwined, to capture situated action in service organizations (see Figure 2, left side). Such a pragmatist framework allows us to keep in the foreground the nitty-gritty and the dynamics of the 'moment of truth' when frontline workers interact with customers. As we have shown in the preceding section, pragmatist service scholars have combined rich empirical observations of the daily activities of frontline employees and of how their interactions with customers unfold, with a strong theoretical interest in the critical role of workers' agency in service provision. We devote the subsequent discussion session to a detailed description of this pragmatist research framework and an outline of our proposed evolving research agenda. Before doing so, let us briefly comment on how the framework clarifies our understanding of the structure–agency interrelation in service interactions (symbolized as 'Structure  $\infty$  Agency';  $\infty$  stands for the intertwinement of structure and agency) illustrated by the vertical axis on the left side of Figure 2.

## A pragmatist view on situation, structure and agency in service work

The notions of situation, structure and agency do not only appear prominently in French and German research on service work. They also constitute an integral part of pragmatism, both in the American (Lorino, 2018; see also Dewey and Bentley, 2008; Kilpinen, 2009) and French currents (Brandl et al., 2014; see also Jagd, 2011; Thévenot, 2014). Building on these elements, we use 'pragmatism' as an umbrella term, which is informed by distinct yet interlinked theoretical currents featuring in French and German service work scholarship, such as symbolic inter-

actionism, sociomateriality and ethnomethodology. We share with all these currents an interest for situated action and the sociomaterial conditions of action, including the acts of *sensemaking* and *resourcing*. This echoes the notion of a 'constitutive entanglement' (Orlikowski, 2007, p. 1437), where the social and the material are treated as inseparable elements in everyday work and organizational life (Jarzabkowski & Pinch, 2013; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). For pragmatist scholars, action in a given situation is inherently linked to actors' experience of their interactions with their environments (Lorino, 2018).

Situated action (Lave, 1988; Suchman, 1987) refers to the pragmatist focus on situations, thereby placing the situation centre stage for analysis (Cloutier et al., 2017). Any given service interaction situation embeds social and material structures and is characterized by indeterminacy (i.e. the uncertainty of the outcome of the interactive process), consequently requiring situated action to facilitate coordination with other actors. We share this situationalist stance with Strauss (1978) and Goffman's (1971/1983) work on rules for interaction in public where speech, conduct and material objects stand out as defining aspects of analysis (see also Clarke et al., 2018 for methodological considerations).

Making service workers' degree of agency an empirical phenomenon for future investigations suggests focusing on how these actors make sense of and draw on sociomaterial situations (resourcing). From a pragmatist perspective, we regard structure as both enabling and constraining the agency (Giddens, 1979; see also Whittington, 2015) of service workers (see Figure 2, vertical axis left side). Structure (e.g. other actors, norms, values or objects) and agency are reciprocal and tightly intertwined (James, 1907; see also Joas & Knöbl, 2009) in the form of *sensemaking* and *resourcing*. Examining the concrete performances of actors as situated action in which they must solve everyday problems on the frontline captures their ability to act in the face of the complex nature of social interactions. We regard actors as competent (Pernkopf-Konhäsner, 2014), as they can link, justify and reflect on their actions (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991; Cloutier et al., 2017), both within and beyond the here-and-nowness of interaction. These competent actors dispose of reflexive capacities, formed by past experiences, shaping their assessment of 'situational circumstances as enabling or constraining' (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013, p. 941).

In sum, building on our pragmatist stance, we assume frontline employees are capable of assessing and transforming situations by drawing on their social and material environment, with the twin notions of *sensemaking* and *resourcing* making it possible to conceptually encapsulate all these actions. In the context of service work, we conceive of social interactions as frontline workers' *sensemak-*



ing of the human and non-human cues (e.g. customers, service rules, cashier desk) in a given situation, which in turn prompts them to engage in *resourcing*, that is, making decisions and acting.

### **A pragmatist research framework: Researching agency in interactive service work through sensemaking and resourcing**

A pragmatist stance is especially relevant for service work research, since service interactions are by definition performative (e.g. service is produced while consumed) and situated. Stating this not only challenges the field's current assumptions (Hoon & Baluch, 2020b) about frontline employees' agency; it also facilitates the shift from a rather determinist stance where researchers concentrate on managerially planned action, towards a pragmatist perspective where structure and agency are intertwined in situated action (see Figure 2, vertical axis left side). The two key concepts of *sensemaking* (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2013; Weick, 1995) and *resourcing* (Feldman & Worline, 2012; Schneider et al., 2020) serve to empirically comprehend situated action (see also Lave, 1988; Suchman, 1987) by analysing the way contact employees negotiate structure and agency in service situations. This allows us to investigate how these employees succeed in dealing with everyday problems on the frontline to get their job done. We now proceed to elaborate on both these concepts and their interrelations, thus fleshing out the framework presented in Table 4. While we have chosen to separate them for reasons of analytical clarity, in the actual and concrete context of everyday work, demanding split-second decisions, the two concepts are closely interwoven.

*Sensemaking* in service situations implies that throughout the course of the interaction, employees keep decoding the structure surrounding them, which is critical to adopting an often improvised path of action. While concepts such as sensemaking and meaning making are commonplace to grasping strategic and managerial activity (Rouleau, 2005; Weick, 1995), they are equally fruitful when accounting for the tasks of interactive service workers (Balogun et al., 2015). The idea of sensemaking not only features prominently in French and German pragmatist service work research as reflected in the notion of interaction work as gut feeling (Böhle, 2011; Böhle et al., 2015) and the use of conversational analysis to seize frontline employees' thoughts (Borzeix & Fraenkel, 2001; Lacoste, 1995). It is also evident more generally in French pragmatism, as attested to by references to actors' reflexive capacities (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991; Cloutier et al., 2017). Such scholarship brings pragmatist analyses to bear on service workers' interpretation of the situation and their sense-

making of what needs to be done. This is because interactive situations require individuals to decode the trajectory of events so as to adapt to them (Strauss, 1978) and develop a shared narrative of the situation with customers (Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1978).

*Resourcing* (Feldman & Worline, 2012; Schneider et al., 2020) entails drawing on structure agentically to support and legitimize situated action. In service situations, it refers to the competent manner in which frontline workers mobilize 'équipement' (Dodier, 1995; Thévenot, 2001) which in essence is sociomaterial (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). By turning structure into resources in the context of situated action, workers are in a position to pursue a certain goal and/or reconfigure the situation. Attending to the sociomaterial context and how service workers make use of it (Schneider et al., 2020) cannot be overemphasized, relying as they do on rules, standards, technology and artefacts, etc. to complete their tasks. We also suggest that *resourcing* be conceived as collective action, so that scholars can probe the interactive processes through which resources are enacted, rather than the entities or resources themselves.

Most importantly, in this pragmatist perspective *sensemaking* and *resourcing* are interrelated. While frontline employees endeavour to interpret the structures for *resourcing* in their environment, the resources (or *équipement*; Dodier, 1995; Thévenot, 2001), comprising technical and social devices, enable them in turn to interpret a given situation. Such forms of resources (e.g. tools, procedures, discourses, rules, technological processes) 'find their meaning in their conceivable capacity to transform situations' (Lorino, 2018, p. 70). These situations are also constantly evolving as a result of continuous collective (re)elaboration of categories and shared understandings of what is right or appropriate in a given situation.

For service workers, *sensemaking* and *resourcing* are fundamental: the two notions enable them to anticipate the most likely situations and opt for the most appropriate interpretation of the situation amongst an array of possibilities. It is also through sensemaking and *resourcing* that workers manage to forge a repertoire of legitimate and proven ways for situated action, so as to tackle the problem they are confronted with. Paying attention to both concepts allows us to grasp how frontline employees exert agency to get their job done, because 'work practices are constituted by an array of sociomaterial agencies', where 'work is [finally] made to work' (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008, p. 466). In sum, situated action in service interactions entails deploying individual and collective sensemaking and *resourcing*, thus paving the way for agency. When actors seek to transform a given situation to address everyday problems, they also generate

TABLE 4 Researching situated action in interactive service work through sensemaking and resourcing

Key analytical concepts	Dimensions of pragmatist analysis	Theoretical background	Overarching research questions
<i>Sensemaking</i>	Workers' interpretation of the situation's meaning and potential resources for situated action	<i>Sensemaking</i> (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2013; Rouleau, 2005; Weick, 1995) <i>Interaction work</i> (e.g. gut feeling) (Böhle, 2011; Böhle et al., 2015) <i>Conversational analysis</i> (Borzeix & Fraenkel, 2001; Lacoste, 1995) <i>Reflexive capacities</i> (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991; Cloutier et al., 2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the main categories service workers try to make sense of? What are the key resourcing practices service workers draw on to support situated action?</li> <li>• To what extent can service workers adapt their sociomaterial resources and what levers do they deploy for this purpose?</li> <li>• To what extent is the service situation embedded in long-term/larger collective processes of sensemaking and resourcing?</li> </ul>
<i>Resourcing</i>	Workers' mobilization and adaptation of their environment for situated action	<i>Socio-material resourcing</i> (Feldman & Worline, 2012; Schneider et al., 2020) <i>Équipement</i> (Caroly & Trompette, 2006; Dodier, 1995; Grosjean & Lacoste, 1999; Thévenot, 2001)	

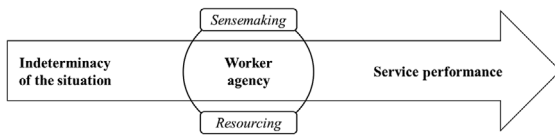


FIGURE 3 A pragmatist narrative for service work research

new meanings (Lorino, 2018) and usages for particular resources.

### Research agenda: A set of future research approaches to service work from a pragmatist perspective

In this section, we raise a certain number of research questions to account for situated action during service interactions, which can then be related to the actual performance of service work. Figure 3 illustrates the pragmatist narrative as applied to service work research. Based on the premise of indeterminacy, this narrative revolves around the question of how frontline workers deal with indeterminacy in a given situation through sensemaking and resourcing. Our framework thus opens up new possibilities to explore empirically frontline activities in action and provides us with fine-grained descriptions of work situations. Hence, we are better able to capture the exercise of individual agency as service workers skilfully navigate between customer demands and managerial prescriptions.

Based on our review of French and German pragmatist studies and the emerging international pragmatist literature on interactive service work, we have identified four forms of indeterminacy that contact employees are likely to face during their work. For each of these forms, we show how sensemaking and resourcing might unfold from the frontline employee's (FLE's) perspective. Table 5 offers a synthesis of the avenues that the pragmatist approach opens up to service work.

The first form of indeterminacy results from contradictory situational demands between either organizational rules or managerial and customer prescriptions. Various streams have drawn attention to situations where frontline workers find themselves obliged to simultaneously deal with (and make trade-offs between) incompatible rules or scripts (Dunkel & Weihrich, 2013, 2018; Joseph, 1995; Korczynski & Ott, 2004). While workers might have the discretion to do so or not (see Lipsky, 1980), nonetheless, they first need to figure out the possible practical and moral tensions between the prescribed rules; then, they need to find relevant arguments to back up their decisions about which rule should be privileged over the other. The analytical spotlight reflects the tension of situated action versus

managerially planned action, as frontline employees must enact the rules during the course of service interaction. In work contexts where conflicting rules proliferate (see the transformation of health care; McCann et al., 2015), a combination of direct observation of interactions plus subsequent employee interviews can help scholars account for service workers' situated action and how they exercise agency.

The second form of indeterminacy relates to the uncertainty of service recipients' characteristics, expectations and skills (Dunkel & Weihrich, 2012; Llewellyn, 2015). As vividly illustrated in Llewellyn and Hindmarsh's (2013) study, frontline employees keep playing guessing games throughout the interaction about all sorts of customer features (e.g. their age). In terms of agency, this process sheds light on how workers interpret the situation and come to understand what is expected by customers. In service contexts where customers might have difficulties clearly expressing their demand (e.g. elderly care) or lack appropriate behavioural skills for want of experience (see the sushi bar studied by Yamauchi & Hiramoto, 2016), successful service performance will strongly depend on staff interpretive skills. To study workers confronted by such customer-related indeterminacy calls for detailed observations of even the most mundane and simple interactions.

A third form of indeterminacy in service work concerns frequently recurring situations. Here, we are confronted with two sets of questions: first, how do frontline employees collectively elaborate upon and share these situations (Mebarki & Oiry, 2009), which might sometimes occur outside of the customer interaction (a good example is Korczynski's, 2003 communities of coping); second, how do they decide between multiple institutionalized frames (Lacoste, 1995) to interpret the situation. The analytical focus bears on the ability of employees to anticipate the difficulties to be overcome during the interaction. Thereby they try to make sense of, and ascribe customers and problems to, pre-existing categories before relating them to legitimate and proven reactions. Of course, several frames and sources of legitimacy can coexist (e.g. managerial productivity standards versus empathy for a helpless elder), which raises the question of how workers negotiate between them. In the process, worker agency comes to acquire a collective meaning, as it concerns the groups and communities where the categories and practices of interactive work are crafted. Analysing the role of worker collectives necessitates an extension of the scope of observation beyond direct interaction, both in terms of space and time (see Sayer & Fachira, 2015). Ethnographies attentive to the backstage of service performance (breaks, online forums, etc.) can prove particularly helpful here in yielding insights into the development of bottom-up shared understandings.

TABLE 5 Pragmatist research avenues for service work

Indeterminacy faced by the FLE	Sensemaking from FLE perspective	Resourcing from FLE perspective	Analytical focus to probe FLE agency	Key empirical research questions
<p><i>Contradictory demands in situation</i> (Dunkel &amp; Wehrich, 2013, 2018; Joseph, 1995; Korczyński &amp; Ott, 2004)</p>	<p>Question (mis)alignment of prescriptions/demands in situation. <i>Example:</i> Is it possible to carefully listen to a customer within the prescribed duration of a phone call?</p>	<p>Prioritize prescriptions (trade-off) given situational specifics. <i>Example:</i> Decide that it is worth taking more time to solve this very important customer's problem—ask customer for good rating in return.</p>	<p>Managerially planned action versus workers' situated action.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is prescribed to workers (by managers and customers)?</li> <li>• What are the formal and informal managerial instructions about service delivery: productivity, quality, operating procedures, possible behavioural/emotional scripts?</li> <li>• What kind of tensions/contradictions do they generate in front of the customer?</li> <li>• How do employees make trade-offs between what is officially required, what customers demand and what they morally and practically consider to be a valuable service?</li> </ul>
<p><i>Uncertainty of service recipients' characteristics, expectations and skills</i> (Dunkel &amp; Wehrich, 2012; Llewellyn &amp; Llewellyn &amp; Hindmarsh, 2013)</p>	<p>Look for clues/signs throughout interaction with customer. <i>Example:</i> What do a customer's age, expressed confidence and language tell us about his/her eligibility for a special ticket fare?</p>	<p>Rely on (in)formal scripts to specify these customer features. <i>Example:</i> A typical sequence of informal questions to elucidate customer eligibility.</p>	<p>Workers' tactics to elucidate the situation and to justify their actions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through what means do employees try to understand customers' expectations and try to be understood by customers?</li> <li>• How do they seek to make their action accountable?</li> <li>• How do they manage to receive confirmation from the customer that they have rightly and legitimately understood the situation?</li> </ul>
<p><i>Plurality of likely situations and institutionalized frames</i> (Lacoste, 1995; Mebaraki &amp; Oiry, 2009)</p>	<p>Frame the situation through typical organizational and/or social categories. <i>Example:</i> Anticipate common reasons for complaints by elderly customers about hotel rooms (noise, dust, etc.).</p>	<p>Mobilize, discuss and adapt the framing repertoire. <i>Example:</i> Sharing a story with reception desk colleagues about elderly guest's preference for room overlooking street.</p>	<p>Workers' collective elaboration of meaning to anticipate difficulties to be overcome in a situation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do employees fit the situation into (practical and moral) categories (of people, acts, roles) that they consider objective and legitimate?</li> <li>• How do employees categorize customers in order to anticipate and/or decode the problem?</li> <li>• What is the role of frontline employees' collectives to develop bottom-up shared understanding of customers and practices to cope with difficult situations?</li> </ul>
<p><i>Gap between standard tools and situational specificities</i> (Bowen &amp; Lawler, 1992; Dunkel &amp; Wehrich, 2012; Hampson &amp; Junor, 2005; Ott, 2016; Weller, 1999b)</p>	<p>Confront situational contingencies and generic tools. <i>Example:</i> The card-payment system has broken. The cashier is therefore only supposed to use the given change but is soon going to run out of it.</p>	<p>Adapt organizational tools to meet situational requirements. <i>Example:</i> Cashier negotiates with colleagues to borrow some change for next customers until problem is fixed.</p>	<p>Workers' mobilization and adaptation of their environment for service performance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the main tools and instruments provided for service provision (e.g. machines, procedures, rules, colleagues, language, information systems)?</li> <li>• How do employees (learn to) mobilize some of these tools to support their actions and enlarge their scope of action?</li> </ul>

The fourth form of indeterminacy stems from the standardized nature of tools and instruments issued by management to service workers. Tools, scripts and processes necessarily tend to assume a somewhat generic quality. Hence, they must be tailored to accommodate the specificities of the situation, as the managerialist (Bowen & Lawler, 1992, 1995), critical (Korczynski & Ott, 2004) and pragmatist perspectives (Dunkel & Weihrich, 2012; Hampson & Junor, 2005) all underline, albeit in different ways. Frontline employees experience the organization's limits through the discrepancy between generic tools and processes and *ad hoc* situational requirements. Facing such indeterminacy, they actively engage in resourcing, deploying their agency to adapt organizationally provided tools and instruments to the exigencies of the situation (Weller, 1999b). For empirical analysis, visual methodologies coupled with interviews and field observations may best help to depict how workers enact their environment, as Best and Hindmarsh (2019) demonstrate in the case of tour guides' embodied spatial practices.

## CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper highlights the distinctive features of the different research streams devoted to interactive service work. Mainstream management scholars celebrate the contribution that contact employees make in delivering high service standards, while critical management studies seek to uncover the power relations involved in service work. However, both of these dominant streams have overlooked the actual performance of work on the frontline. They neither consider the situation of service interaction as the unit of analysis, nor accommodate service workers' agency as a question for empirical exploration. In contrast, the pragmatist perspective we put forward in this review places the accent squarely on the complexity of interactive work, and on how workers find ways of dealing with this complexity. By engaging with the specific content of the service interaction, pragmatism's micro-sociological register makes it possible to capture how frontline workers skilfully exert agency during the performance of their work.

Our study contributes to the service work literature in three fundamental ways. First, it takes stock of current research and characterizes different streams within and beyond the English-speaking international academic debate. We offer an up-to-date and consolidated overview of interactive service work research that identifies recent shifts and emerging trends over the past 35 years. We highlight distinct approaches towards the conceptualization of service worker agency and the indeterminacy of service work. By drawing attention to this plurality of theoretical

perspectives, we enhance understanding of the field's overall dynamics and seek to stimulate a reflexive approach to its further development.

Second, we go beyond description, and critically assess the bodies of literature examined (Breslin & Bailey, 2020). We problematize established streams of research as we distil the theoretical concepts of the field and find that the established streams of research conceptualize employee agency in a rather deterministic and *a priori* manner, leaving little scope for empirical investigation. This allows us to then propose a new pragmatist research area. Our review of French and German-language scholarship, which emphasizes both the embeddedness and materiality of the interactive process and frontline employees' experiences of tackling practical problems reflexively, provides us with a robust conceptual foundation for building a pragmatist approach. Integrating the burgeoning international scholarship (Hampson & Junor, 2005, 2010, 2015; Hampson et al., 2009; Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2013) that explores similar issues has helped further sharpen our argument.

Our third contribution consists in opening up fresh avenues for studying the concrete dynamics and substance of service interactions. We present a future agenda for service work research that is grounded in the premise of indeterminacy. We have identified four such forms of indeterminacy that contact employees are typically confronted with during the course of their everyday activity. From this, we derive a series of empirical research questions attentive to the embeddedness and materiality of employees' situated actions to address the indeterminacy of interactive situations. Such an agenda, we believe, can enable scholars to better understand 'how things work' (Watson, 2011, p. 202) on the frontline.

Finally, we acknowledge the limitations in our own pluralism. The stimulating insights gleaned from French and German research on interactive service work enrich a predominantly Anglo-centric focus. Nevertheless, we must also concede a Euro-centric bias; despite introducing a range of complementary sources, we reference only French and German scholarship. More generally, the vast majority of our sources stem from just a handful of countries (i.e. the UK, USA, France and Germany). We are convinced that examining the lifeworlds of interactive service workers in Vietnam, Peru or Uganda will reveal not only differences to the narratives of their colleagues in the Western world (e.g. power imbalances in interactions between customers, staff and colleagues situated in different national contexts), but also patterns of convergence (e.g. service employees' professional self-perception thanks to global retail chains). All of this should allow us to portray a much more multi-layered, detailed and complex picture of the field. Future research should therefore also prioritize extending *both* the

linguistic and geographic boundaries of interactive service work.

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