Enhancing customer service: Perspective taking in a call centre

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We propose that an important prerequisite of helping customers is the capacity to take the customer's perspective. If this is the case, then it is also important to consider the factors that might facilitate perspective taking. To investigate this, 347 customer service agents in a UK call centre were surveyed on the antecedents and outcomes of customer-oriented perspective taking. Managers also supplied ratings of helping behaviour for 141 of the service agents. Structural equation modelling showed a positive relationship between perspective taking and self-reported helping, and this relationship was partially mediated by empathy. Perspective taking was also positively related to managers' ratings of helping but this relationship was not mediated by empathy. In turn, service agents' perspective taking was predicted by the perceived reciprocity of customers and by having a positive customer role orientation (which was itself predicted by job enrichment). Predictors of helping customers included perspective taking, empathy, and having an integrated understanding of the call centre's services. Enhancing employees' perspective taking and their integrated understanding of the organization's services might thus be hitherto neglected avenues for enhancing the quality of customer service.

Providing high quality customer service is crucial if organizations are to attract and retain customers (du Gay, 1996; Schneider & Bowen, 1995). An understanding of what factors contribute to service quality is therefore important. One significant factor is perspective taking by front-line staff, as their ability to take the perspective of the customer appears essential if customer's needs are to be properly understood and the service adapted to suit those needs (Heskett, Earl Sasser, & Hart, 1990; Peccei & Rosenthal, 2000;

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Strug et al., 2003; Witkowski & Wolfinbarger, 2002). Furthermore, research in social psychology suggests that perspective taking is a precursor of other responses and behaviours that can contribute to service quality, such as empathy, improved interpersonal relations, and helping (e.g., Batson, 1991; Brief & Motowidlo, 1986; Underwood & Moore, 1982).

Given the proposed importance of perspective taking to the provision of service quality, it is surprising that it has received so little empirical attention in the literature on service organizations. The aim of this article is to test a model that examines some important outcomes and antecedents of customer-oriented perspective taking (see Figure 1). Thus, we investigate the role of customer-oriented perspective taking in promoting empathy and helping behaviours towards customers. We also investigate antecedents as it is important to know what factors organizations should focus on in order to improve perspective taking and, hence, customer service.

An employee's ability to perspective take is likely to depend somewhat on the situation he or she is in, and thus, rather than adopting a dispositional approach (which has dominated much of the existing literature on perspective taking and empathy, e.g., Davis, 1983; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1991; Okun, Shepard, & Eisenberg, 2000), we focus on situation specific perspective taking. So, instead of examining whether employees take the perspective of others "in general", we consider the propensity to take the perspective of a particular type of person (in this case, the customer) in a particular situation (in this case, a call centre). We therefore focus on manifestations of perspective taking (and its associated empathic response) that can vary between situations (or jobs). The assumption here is that in addition to dispositional influences, perspective taking and empathic
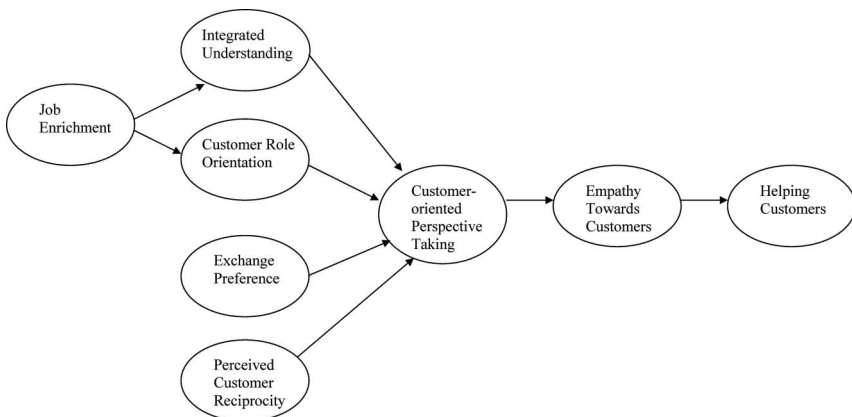

Figure 1.   Hypothesized relationships between antecedents, perspective taking, and helping.

experience will vary as a function of the situation (Batson & Coke, 1981; Duan & Hill, 1996; Parker & Axtell, 2001). In other words, organizational and other situational factors can alter the likelihood that employees will engage in perspective taking during the course of their work. By examining the potential outcomes and antecedents of perspective taking within a specific organizational context, we expand previous work on perspective taking (e.g., Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978; Okun et al., 2000; Parker & Axtell, 2001) and also expand understanding of how to enhance customer service.

PERSPECTIVE TAKING AND ITS OUTCOMES: EMPATHY AND HELPING BEHAVIOUR

We propose that an employee's ability and willingness to take the perspective of the customer underlies many customer-oriented behaviours, and is crucial to the delivery of service quality. Indeed, perspective taking and empathy have long been associated with prosocial behaviours such as helping (e.g., Batson, 1991; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Underwood & Moore, 1982). Perspective taking can be conceptualized as the cognitive act of imagining oneself in another's position and adopting his or her viewpoint (e.g., Piaget, 1932). There is evidence to suggest that perspective taking initiates an empathic process and is a precursor to feelings of empathy (e.g., Coke et al., 1978; Karinol & Shomroni, 1999; Stiff, Dillard, Somera, Kim, & Sleight, 1988). Empathy involves understanding or identifying with another person's experiences (Egan, 1990) and feeling concern for them when things go wrong (e.g., Betancourt, 1990). Consistent with the notion that empathy is an immediate manifestation of perspective taking, Hoffman (1982) argues that empathic affect is most likely to develop when people imagine how they would feel if the stimuli impinging on another person were impinging on them. In this way, empathy can be considered an affective mechanism through which perspective taking has its effect on helping.

We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Customer-oriented perspective taking will have a positive relationship with helping behaviour towards customers, and this relationship will be mediated by empathy. That is, perspective taking will be associated with greater empathy, which will in turn be positively associated with helping customers.

ANTECEDENTS OF PERSPECTIVE TAKING

It is particularly important to understand the antecedents of perspective taking in call centres because such processes are likely to need extra

facilitation due to the remoteness of customers and the use of the telephone as the primary communication medium. Communicating remotely rather than face-to-face means that many helpful visual cues (e.g., body language) are missing, which makes it harder to understand the needs and feelings of the other person, and thus impede relationship development (e.g., Hinds & Weisband, 2003; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Therefore, it is important to know what factors can be altered to enhance perspective taking in these (as well as other) environments.

The literature suggests that an observer's motivation and ability to take the perspective of another is likely to be affected by a range of factors. Factors that can vary between situations include the individual state or orientation of the observer within that situation (e.g., Brickson, 2000), the context in which the observation takes place (e.g., Dougherty, 1992), and the nature of the target (e.g., Ickes, Bissonnett, Garcia, & Stinson, 1990). Stable attributes of the observer (such as their disposition, e.g., Davis, 1983) will also play a role. For customer service agents, factors that are likely to affect their customer-oriented perspective taking include: their role orientation towards customers and their understanding of the broader work place (both of which are individual states that are likely to be affected by the situation); the design of their job (an aspect of the context); the responses of the customer (nature of the target); and the agent's own preferences (stable attributes). However, to our knowledge, the relative contribution of these antecedents has not so far been examined within the work place, and certainly not within a call centre environment. We explore these potential antecedents in turn below.

Individual state: Customer role orientation

A role orientation involves beliefs about the important aspects and boundaries of one's role (Parker, Wall, & Jackson, 1997) and as such is influenced by the nature of the job. Specifically of relevance in the service industry is customer role orientation, which can be considered as internalized beliefs about the importance of customer-oriented behaviour in one's job. The need for sensitivity towards the perspective and emotions of the customer is high within call centre work (Zapf, Isic, Bechtoldt, & Blau, 2003) and so a customer role orientation is likely to be important within this context. It is likely that employees with a belief in the importance of being sensitive to customers' needs will put effort into taking the customer's perspective. Consistent with previous research in which an association was found between having a broad role orientation and perspective taking (Parker & Axtell, 2001), we propose that the reason for this relationship is that employees are less likely to be concerned solely with their own immediate set of goals (in this case, to achieve call or sales targets)

and will feel more responsibility towards taking account of customer needs and putting effort into taking their perspective. Our hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 2: Customer role orientation will be positively associated with customer-oriented perspective taking.

Individual state: Integrated understanding

Having an integrated understanding of the work place (i.e., knowing how the different parts of the organization work and fit together) is likely to promote greater perspective taking (Parker & Axtell, 2001). This is because such understanding is concerned with having a broad outlook on the work environment beyond one's immediate job and viewpoint. Indeed, the literature suggests that employees who possess a more complex, differentiated, and integrated understanding are more able to take on the perspective of others (Devine, 1989) as their viewpoint is not narrow and self focused. Thus, we propose that, in the context of a call centre, those who have a more complex knowledge of the organization and its services are going to be more sensitive to customer needs and what can be done to help them, as this is the focus of the call centre's business. Therefore they are more likely to be able to see things from the customer's perspective. Our hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 3: Integrated understanding will be positively associated with customer-oriented perspective taking.

Context: Job enrichment

Contextual factors such as the characteristics of the job are likely to have an impact on the outlook an employee adopts and thus have an indirect effect on perspective taking and empathy by changing the state or orientation of the observer. For example, broader and more responsible roles, where employees are encouraged to consider factors outside the narrow remit of their own tasks and perspective, are likely to enhance the ability of employees to adopt another's perspective, whereas narrow roles with limited relationships are likely to inhibit perspective taking (Dougherty, 1992). Job enrichment might have its effect on perspective taking by changing employee role orientations and understanding. For instance, Cummings and Blumberg (1987) argued that autonomy enables employees to gain a greater insight and understanding into the overall organizational process. Thus, as a result of having broader and more autonomous roles through job enrichment, employees are more likely to gain a broader appreciation of the work environment (integrated understanding) and feel greater responsibility for

aspects of their work beyond their narrow, self-focused tasks and goals (i.e., through broadening their role orientation—Parker et al., 1997). Given this evidence, and consistent with the findings of Parker and Axtell (2001), we therefore expect that job enrichment is likely to promote perspective taking indirectly via its effect on customer role orientation and integrated understanding. Our hypotheses are therefore as follows:

> **Hypothesis 4:** Job enrichment will be positively related to customer-oriented perspective taking and this relationship will be mediated by customer role orientation. That is, job enrichment will be associated with greater customer role orientation, which in turn will be positively associated with perspective taking.
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> **Hypothesis 5:** Job enrichment will be positively related to customer-oriented perspective taking and this relationship will be mediated by integrated understanding. That is, job enrichment will be associated with greater integrated understanding, which in turn will be positively associated with perspective taking.

Nature of the target: Perceived customer reciprocity

Perspective taking is likely to be affected to some degree by the notion of exchange or reciprocity between the agent and customer. Indeed, the concepts of social exchange (Blau, 1964) and reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) are often used by researchers when referring to the motivational basis for relationship-oriented behaviour within organizations. With regards to helping behaviour, people may be more helpful and generous towards others who have previously helped them, or those who might reciprocate in the future (e.g., Dreman, 1976; Staub & Sherk, 1970). Similarly, as perspective taking is a likely precursor to helping, the notion of reciprocity may play a role in this earlier step of whether people make the effort to take another's perspective. For instance, employees may be less likely to go out of their way to take the perspective of customers whom they perceive to be rude, unfriendly, or confrontational in return for the help employees try to give them. Indeed, it has been found that doctors who constantly have to deal with demanding or threatening behaviour from patients and who gain little in return (by way of gratitude or deference) for their attention, effort, and empathy, are likely to experience depletion in the energy they are willing or able to invest in the relationship (Bakker, Schaufeli, Sixma, Bosveld, & van Dierendonck, 2000). However, if customers generally reciprocate the help they receive by being pleasant and courteous then employees may be more likely to try seeing things from their point of view. Certainly, although not explicitly testing the notion of

exchange, an association has been found within a call centre environment between perceived pleasantness from customers and employees thinking about how customers feel (Totterdell & Holman, 2003). The perception of customer reciprocity is likely to vary within a call centre depending on the nature of the customer interaction (e.g., in a customer complaints department, customers may be less likely to reciprocate the help they receive from employees by being pleasant). Our expectation is that:

Hypothesis 6: Perceived customer reciprocity will be positively related to customer-oriented perspective taking.

Stable attributes: Exchange preference

Some individuals may only act if they receive something in return and feel they are fairly rewarded for their efforts (Blader & Tyler, 2000; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004). Exchange preference is seen as a relatively stable characteristic of the observer (in this case the customer service agent). It is concerned with whether employees reciprocate the customer's friendliness, politeness, and appreciation, by being helpful. Exchange preference, as conceptualized here, relates particularly to Coyle-Shapiro and colleagues' work on exchange ideology (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004), which is seen as a disposition reflecting the expectation of exchange in a relationship. Those whose exchange ideology is strong prefer higher outcomes for themselves and feel that others are in their debt. They are more likely to feel they are owed something and are less likely to contribute to the other party. This implies that individuals who have a strong preference for exchange in a relationship may be less likely to put cognitive effort into seeing another person's point of view because they do not think the recipient is entitled to receive it. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 7: Exchange preference will be negatively related to customer-oriented perspective taking.

In summary, we propose a model of outcomes and antecedents of customer-oriented perspective taking (see Figure 1). Specifically, with regards to outcomes, we hypothesize that customer-oriented perspective taking will be positively related to empathy, which in turn will be positively related to helping customers. With regards to antecedents, we propose that customer role orientation, integrated understanding, and the perceived reciprocity of the customer will be positively related to perspective taking and the exchange preference of the service agent will be negatively related to

perspective taking. In turn, job enrichment will be positively related to customer role orientation and integrated understanding.

ALTERNATIVE MODELS

The above hypothesized model assumes full mediation of empathy between perspective taking and helping and this is the most parsimonious model that the literature supports. However, the mediating effect of empathy is not always found (cf. Underwood & Moore, 1982) and the instruction to take the target's perspective in experimental studies does not always result in an empathic response (cf. Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Thus, although perspective taking is likely to have its effect on helping via empathy, there could also be a direct effect of perspective taking on helping. To verify that full mediation of empathy is the best fit to the data (as in our hypothesized model) we compare our hypothesized model against a partially mediated alternative.

The literature also suggests that some forms of empathy can be a more automatic response to the other person that does not involve the motivation to take their perspective (e.g., Eisenberg, 2000; Kelly & Barsade, 2001). In other words, perspective taking may be bypassed and empathy itself may occur without the person consciously trying to imagine how they would feel in the other's shoes. For instance, it is plausible that the behaviour of the customer may have a direct effect on the agent's empathic response. Moreover, some people (e.g., those with a lower exchange preference) may have a greater predisposition to empathize with others as they are less "self-oriented" and more "other-oriented". It is possible that they respond empathically to customers in a more unconscious way, without needing actively to try to take their perspective. Thus, in order to test for the full mediation of perspective taking between the antecedents and empathy (which is the most parsimonious model), it is necessary to compare our hypothesized model against an alternative that includes partial mediation of perspective taking (i.e., by adding direct paths from the antecedents to empathy).

METHOD

The organizational context

The two call centres in the current study dealt with loans and mortgages for a large bank within the UK. Loan-call contained the online banking department where customer service agents dealt with incoming calls and had two main tasks: to deal with enquires from existing customers regarding online banking, and to sell loans to potential customers. The need to take

the perspective of the customer was particularly important in complex queries, and when selling.

Mortgage-call contained two key call centre departments, namely, the customer service and customer assistance departments. The main task in both was to deal with customer queries which could be quite complex and could be particularly difficult in the customer assistance department where customers were likely to complain. Perspective taking was clearly needed in order to understand the needs of customers with complex queries and complaints.

Across both sites, agents spent about 80 – 90% of their time answering incoming calls. The remaining time was spent in offline team meetings and doing administrative work. Service agents were usually divided into teams under one manager. Team size varied but was typically around 10 – 15. All calls were recorded and managers regularly monitored a selection of these from each customer service agent for developmental and quality assurance purposes. Thus, through listening to their interactions with customers, managers were able to gain an appreciation of how helpful the agents were being.

Participants and procedure

A survey was completed by 347 customer service agents employed at the two call centres. This figure represents a response rate of 79%; 25 managers also returned ratings of helping behaviour for 166 service agents, 141 of whom had also completed the main survey. Employees completed the surveys within work time and returned them directly to the researchers on site. Questionnaires were administered by the researchers and participation was voluntary. Just under two thirds of the service agents (62%) came from one site (Loan-call) and the rest worked at the other. The mean age of the service agents was 32 years ($SD = 8.62$), 70.5% were female, and mean company tenure was 44.58 months.

Measures

Although the manager's survey was administered specifically for this study, the measures completed by the service agents were included as part of a larger opinion survey that was conducted at the call centres.

Helping behaviour

Helping behaviour towards customers. The extent to which customer service agents go out of their way to help customers was measured with a four-item scale, which was based on other measures and conceptualizations

of helping and interpersonal citizenship performance (e.g., Borman, Penner, Allen, & Motowidlo, 2001; Motowidlo & van Scotter, 1994; Wittig-Berman & Lang, 1990) and represented proactive helping responses desired from service providers. The behaviours measured were the extent to which customer service agents: "go beyond what is normally expected in order to help customers", "persist to overcome obstacles in order to help customers", "help customers with a problem or enquiry even when it is personally inconvenient", and "anticipate and try to prevent problems that might arise for a customer". This scale was measured on a five-point response scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*) and was rated both by customer service agents themselves ($\alpha = .90$) and their managers ($\alpha = .94$) on separate questionnaires.

Helping behaviour towards colleagues.   In order to test the differential validity of the perspective taking variables (see Results section), we included in the managers' questionnaires ($n = 141$) a measure of the extent to which service agents help their colleagues. The measure was based on an altruism scale used by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, and Fetter (1990). The items were: "helps others when they have heavy work loads", "is always ready to lend a helping hand to those around him/her", "helps others who have been absent", and "willingly helps others who have work related problems". This scale was internally reliable ($\alpha = .89$) and was measured on a five-point response scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

Perspective taking and empathy

The measures of perspective taking and empathy were only included on the service agents' questionnaire.

Customer-oriented perspective taking.   The extent to which employees tend to take the perspective of the customer was measured with four items. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they felt it was true that they: "imagine how things look from the customer's perspective", "think about how you would feel in their situation", "try to see things from their viewpoint", and "try to imagine yourself as a customer in a similar situation" ($\alpha = .95$). The response scale ranged from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*a very large extent*). These items are adapted for a specific situation and target (i.e., the customer) from more general, dispositional measures of perspective taking (e.g., Davis, 1983) and are similar in content to instructions used to induce perspective taking within experimental studies (e.g., Coke et al., 1978; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Toi & Batson, 1982).

Empathy towards customers.   The extent to which the customer service agent empathizes with the customer was measured with three items based on the measure of empathy used by Parker and Axtell (2001). Respondents were asked how true it was that they: "feel concerned for customers if they are experiencing difficulties", "understand when customers get frustrated", and "identify and empathize with the problems customers experience" ($\alpha = .87$). Responses were given on a five-point scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*a very large extent*).

Antecedents

Measures of antecedents were only included on the service agents' questionnaire.

Customer role orientation.   Customer role orientation refers to whether employees see it as an important part of their role to identify with and take the viewpoint of customers. Two items, based on Zapf, Vogt, Seifert, Mertini, and Isic's (1999) sensitivity requirements measure, were used to assess customer role orientation. Employees indicated the extent to which they felt it was important to "know how a customer feels" and to "put oneself in the customer's position". This method of assessing customer role orientation is similar to Parker et al.'s (1997) method of assessing employees' orientation towards their role, which asks employees to rate what competencies, problems, or tasks they consider to be important parts of their role. This scale had acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .79$) and was answered on a five-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Integrated understanding.   Employees rated on a five-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*) the extent to which they understand the context of their work. The three items were "do you understand all of the services that are provided by [the call centre]?", "do you understand most of the services that are offered by other [this bank] call centre services?", and "do you understand the work of others in your own call centre?" Internal reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = .81$). This measure was adapted from the measure of integrated understanding used by Parker and Axtell (2001).

Job enrichment.   Twenty-one items were used to measure job enrichment. Respondents were asked the extent to which they get involved in a range of autonomous and responsible activities, many of which in traditional, low control jobs would be considered the role of the supervisor and beyond the core tasks of the subordinate. Such tasks and decisions include, "allocating jobs amongst team members", "organizing break times", "coaching other

team members'', ''monitoring customer satisfaction'', and ''investigating or implementing new ideas''. This scale was considered a more complete and appropriate measure of job enrichment for the service industry than other measures of autonomy that simply measure the method and timing of work, and was based on a measure of autonomous role-breadth which has been used in previous research (e.g., Axtell, Holman, Unsworth, Wall, Waterson, & Harrington, 2000). This scale was answered on a five-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). For inclusion in the analysis, the number of items was reduced by packaging three lots of seven items together. Each package included items that represented a range of autonomous activities that agents might undertake so that each became a mini-measure for job enrichment. The internal reliability of this packaged scale was acceptable ($\alpha = .72$).

Perceived customer reciprocity. The extent to which respondents felt that customers reciprocated the service they received with pleasant and courteous behaviour was measured using two items: ''customers are more pleasant to me if I put myself out to help them'', and ''customers respond in more positive ways if I am particularly helpful''. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*a very large extent*) and internal reliability was good ($\alpha = .91$).

Exchange preference. The extent to which respondents prefer an exchange relationship with customers was measured using three items: ''I tend to be more helpful towards customers who are polite'', ''I tend to put myself out more for customers who are pleasant to me'', and ''I am more likely to go out of my way to help customers who are friendly'' ($\alpha = .95$). These items were based on some of the items in Blader and Tyler's (2000) exchange orientation measure but adapted for the exchange between customer and employee. Responses were given on a five-point scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*a very large extent*).

Background measures. A range of other background factors might also have an impact on the main study variables and so therefore need to be controlled for. For instance, age and gender have been found to be related to perspective taking and empathy, with older people and women tending to score higher on such measures (e.g., Davis, 1983; Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983). Moreover, those who have been in the organization longer may have more experience with customers and so be more likely to take their perspective. Departmental membership may also impact on perspective taking, as some departments may have more pleasant interactions with customers than others, which might affect their willingness to take the customers' perspective. The number of customer calls handled per day may

also affect perspective taking as greater interaction with the target is likely to enhance the ability to see their viewpoint (Parker & Axtell, 2001). We investigated these possible confounds by including age, gender, tenure, departmental membership, and the number of customer calls in the service agents' questionnaire.

Thus, employees were asked to indicate their age (in years), gender (male $= 1$, female $= 0$), company tenure (in months), department (each of the three main departments was subsequently dummy coded) and estimated average number of calls per day. Although site was recorded, we did not use it as a control variable because site and department were highly intercorrelated/confounded (particularly because Loan-call contained only one main department) and the inclusion of site in the analysis made no difference to the results. Therefore, in the reported results we control for department only.

Analysis

In the following sections we test our hypothesized model (Model 1) against two competing models (Models 2 and 3). Model 2 includes an additional direct path between perspective taking and helping (to test for partial mediation of empathy). Model 3 includes additional paths between the proximal antecedents (customer role orientation, integrated understanding, perceived customer reciprocity and exchange preference) and empathy (to test for partial mediation of perspective taking). We tested these using the employees own ratings of helping as the model is too large in its entirety to test using the small sample size gained with managers' ratings of helping (after listwise deletion, $n = 137$). However, the managers' ratings of helping (and helping colleagues) are used to validate this helping measure, as well as for providing an additional test for the mediating role of empathy.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (with the full self-rated sample) was carried out to establish whether the study variables would form a good basis for further structural equation analysis. The CFA (and subsequent SEM) was conducted using Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2004) and was based on covariances as the input matrix. Maximum likelihood estimation methods were used, which assumes multivariate normality of data, and although some of the variables are negatively skewed, transforming these and running the CFA (and SEM) analyses again, did not change our main findings. Therefore, for ease of interpretation, the results using the nontransformed variables are reported throughout. The measurement model for the eight study variables completed by call centre agents showed a good fit to the

data, $\chi^2(224, n = 305) = 336.4$, $p < .001$, χ^2/df ratio $= 1.5$, RMSEA $= .041$, SRMR $= .035$, and CFI $= .98$, with standardized factor loadings of $\lambda = .60$ or above (all but one were above $\lambda = .70$) and all factor loadings were significant ($p < .001$). Most of the factors were significantly correlated with each other (between $\beta = -.12$, $p < .05$, for exchange preference and perspective taking; and $\beta = .64$, $p < .001$, for customer role orientation and perspective taking). However, perceived customer reciprocity was not significantly correlated with job enrichment or integrated understanding, and exchange preference was not significantly correlated with integrated understanding, customer role orientation, or perceived customer reciprocity.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the observed variables used in the study.

Validity of helping outcomes

The mean level of helping customers as rated by employees was 3.86 ($SD = 0.71$). The mean level of helping customers as rated by managers was similar ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.86$). For both measures, there was a negative skew (more responses at the positive end) but there was a broad spread of scores overall (ranging from 1.75 to 5 for agents and from 1.5 to 5 for managers). This suggests that agents were willing to rate themselves as low on helping to a similar level to managers, which reduces concern about the social desirability of the self-ratings.

Evidence for the validity of the helping measure comes from the positive and significant correlation between manager and self-ratings of helping customers, $r = .43$, $p < .01$ ($n = 137$). This level of correlation is similar to that reported in other studies comparing self and manager-ratings (see Harris & Schaubroeck's, 1988, meta-analysis where the mean correlation between blue-collar/service employees and their managers was .42). As one would expect, this correlation between manager and self-ratings of helping customers was stronger than that between manager ratings of helping colleagues and self-ratings of helping customers, $r = .22$, $p < .05$ ($n = 137$). However, it must be noted that the correlation between both the managers' ratings (helping customers and helping colleagues) was higher still, $r = .65$, $p < .001$ ($n = 137$), which suggests that there could have been an element of "halo" bias in the manager's ratings, or that employees tend to be helpful (or not helpful) in both contexts.

Further evidence for the validity of the helping measure can be seen when we look at the differential relationships between ratings of helping customers and ratings of helping colleagues with perspective taking and empathy.

TABLE 1
Means (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*), and intercorrelations of study variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1. Age	32.19	8.62	1.00																
2. Gender	0.30	0.46	−0.27**	1.00															
3. Company tenure (months)	44.50	42.52	0.45**	−0.20**	1.00														
4. No. calls	48.72	24.54	0.04	0.10	0.17	1.00													
5. Customer assistance dept.	0.04	0.19	0.06	0.06	0.20**	−0.04	1.00												
6. On-line dept.	0.46	0.50	0.03	−0.19**	0.07	−0.24**	−0.17**	1.00											
7. Customer Services dept.	0.21	0.41	0.07	−0.05	0.22**	0.58**	−0.10	−0.50**	1.00										
8. Job enrichment	1.78	0.38	0.02	0.08	−0.02	−0.08	0.13*	0.09	−0.20**	1.00									
9. Integrated understanding	3.03	0.82	0.16**	0.02	0.17**	0.16**	−0.01	−0.06	0.20**	0.21**	1.00								
10. Customer role orientation	4.05	0.54	0.20**	−0.22**	0.06	−0.11	−0.09	0.16**	0.04	0.18**	0.19**	1.00							
11. Perceived customer reciprocity	4.13	0.80	0.08	−0.01	0.00	−0.00	−0.11†	0.03	−0.01	0.08	0.07	0.24**	1.00						
12. Exchange preference	3.13	1.25	−0.24**	0.10	−0.02	0.09	0.12*	−0.16*	0.06	−0.22**	−0.07	−0.10	0.11	1.00					
13. Perspective taking	3.98	0.79	0.20**	−0.15*	−0.01	0.11*	−0.07	0.06	0.10	0.13*	0.18**	0.48**	0.27**	−0.13*	1.00				
14. Empathy	3.78	0.80	0.21**	−0.06	0.02	−0.04	−0.13*	0.15*	0.05	0.14*	0.15*	0.44**	0.35**	−0.18**	0.55**	1.00			
15. Helping customers (emp)	3.86	0.71	0.27**	−0.05	0.10	0.01	−0.17**	0.11	0.05	0.20**	0.32**	0.48**	0.29**	−0.14*	0.58**	0.50**	1.00		
16. Helping Customers (mgr)	3.76	0.86	0.17	−0.20*	−0.09	0.16	−0.24**	−0.03	0.18*	0.05	0.21*	0.28**	0.01	−0.11	0.33**	0.13	0.43**	1.00	
17. Helping colleagues (mgr)	3.33	0.85	0.08	−0.28**	0.04	−0.03	−0.09	−0.04	0.03	0.10	0.22**	0.15	0.05	−0.02	0.13	0.03	0.22*	0.65**	1.00

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, †$p < .10$.
Listwise deletion, $n = 305$ (137 for manager ratings of helping), emp = employee rated, mgr = manager rated.
Spearman's rho correlations are calculated for dichotomous variables.

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As seen in Table 1, customer-oriented perspective taking and empathy were both positively correlated with employees' ratings of helping customers, $r = .58$, $p < .01$; $r = .50$, $p < .01$, respectively ($n = 305$). Customer-oriented perspective taking was also significantly positively associated with manager ratings of helping customers, $r = .33$, $p < .01$ ($n = 138$), but, showing evidence of differential validity, was not associated with manager ratings of helping colleagues, $r = .13$ ($n = 137$). This points to the validity of the situational perspective-taking measure because we would not expect perspective taking with customers to be related to helping anyone other than customers. Although in the hypothesized direction, the positive correlation between empathy and managers' assessments of helping customers was not significant, $r = .13$ ($n = 137$), and so evidence for the situational validity of this variable is not provided by the manager's ratings (perhaps because empathy is an internal response that is not visible to managers, or because the low sample size does not provide enough power to detect an effect). However, Table 1 shows that perspective taking and empathy were positively correlated, $r = .55$, $p < .01$ ($n = 305$), as expected.

Testing the hypothesized model

In order to establish the unique paths between constructs after controlling for any potentially confounding variables and to allow tests of the mediating hypotheses, we used structural equation modelling, which has the added advantage of correcting for unreliability of measures when relationships between latent variables are examined (as is the case here). We used the larger sample for these analyses (rather than the smaller subsample of employees who had manager ratings of helping) because the model has a large number of parameters to be estimated and therefore required this larger sample size. With regards to testing for full mediation, the SEM approach (James & Brett, 1984) was used which tests the relationship between the initial variable (perspective taking), mediator (empathy), and outcome (helping) simultaneously.

The *hypothesized model* (Model 1) had the following path coefficients: from perspective taking to empathy and from empathy to helping (i.e., full mediation of empathy, Hypothesis 1); from customer role orientation and integrated understanding to perspective taking (Hypotheses 2 and 3, respectively); from job enrichment to customer role orientation and integrated understanding (Hypotheses 4 and 5, respectively); and from perceived customer reciprocity and exchange preference to perspective taking (Hypotheses 6 and 7, respectively). In addition, to control for their influence, path coefficients were included between the control variables (length of service, age, gender, number of calls per day, customer assistance department, online banking department, customer services department) and

the endogenous variables with which they correlated (as in Table 1). So, for instance, for perspective taking, we included gender, age, and call volume as control variables. The exogenous variables on the far left of Figure 1 (job enrichment, exchange orientation, and perceived customer reciprocity) were allowed to intercorrelate with each other and the control variables. To test our hypothesized fully mediated model (Model 1) we considered it against plausible competing models, which involved partial mediation of empathy between perspective taking and helping (Model 2) and partial mediation of perspective taking between the antecedents and empathy (Model 3), with each new path between antecedents and empathy added one at a time.

The model was tested using the Mplus programme (Muthén & Muthén, 2004), which uses covariances as the input matrix. Multiple indices of fit were used to assess the hypothesized model. When using maximum like-lihood methods, as was the case here, Hu and Bentler (1998) recommended using the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; Joreskog & Sorbom, 1981), for which values of less than .08 are indicative of good fit. They further recommended supplementing the SRMR with one of several indices. An index suitable for small sample sizes (the current sample is relatively small after listwise deletion, $N = 305$) is the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; Bentler, 1990). CFI values greater than .95 are considered to indicate a good fit. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) takes model complexity into account and is generally considered as one of the most informative fit indices. Values of less than .06 are indicative of good fit. We therefore report the CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR fit indices. When testing competing (or nested) models it is also necessary to examine the change in chi-square (by subtracting the chi-square value of one model from the other to see if there is a significant reduction in the score).

The hypothesized (fully mediated) model (Model 1) provided a reason-ably good fit to the data, $\chi^2(373, n = 305) = 690.28$, $p < .001$, χ^2/df ratio $= 1.85$, RMSEA $= .05$; SRMR $= .09$, and CFI $= .94$. However, Model 2 with partial mediation of empathy provided a better fit, $\chi^2(372, n = 305) = 642.33$, χ^2/df ratio $= 1.73$, $p < .001$, RMSEA $= .05$, SRMR $= .07$, and CFI $= .95$, and was a significant improvement on the fully mediated model, χ^2diff(1, $n = 305) = 47.95$, $p < .001$. This makes sense because Model 1 is nested within Model 2. For Model 3, adding the path from perceived customer reciprocity to empathy (in addition to the path from perspective taking to helping) significantly improved the fit to the data in comparison to Model 2, $\chi^2(371, n = 305) = 623.08$, χ^2/df ratio $= 1.68$, $p < .001$, RMSEA $= .05$, SRMR $= .07$, and CFI $= .95$, χ^2diff(1, $n = 305) = 19.26$, $p < .001$. However, adding the path from exchange preference to empathy did not significantly improve model fit and nor did paths from integrated understanding to

empathy or customer role orientation and empathy, and so these additional pathways were rejected and not included in the final model.

Finally, the modification indices suggested that adding a pathway between integrated understanding and helping would significantly reduce the chi-square value. Making changes based on modification indices should be done with caution, however, given that a theoretical rationale can be provided for such a path (i.e., that those who have a more integrated understanding of the organization and its services are likely to be more sensitive to customer needs and what can be done to help them), this modification was incorporated. The final model including this path showed the best fit to the data, $\chi^2(370, n = 305) = 606.12$, χ^2/df ratio $= 1.64$, $p < .001$, RMSEA $= .05$, SRMR $= .06$, and CFI $= .96$, χ^2diff(1, $n = 305) = 16.96$, $p < .001$.

In sum, Hypothesis 1 regarding the full mediation of empathy was not supported as the model that tests the partial mediation of empathy fits the data better. Inspection of the standardized path coefficients on the final model (Figure 2) reveals the strength of these pathways, with empathy predicting helping ($\beta = .27$, $p < .01$) and perspective taking predicting both empathy and helping ($\beta = .51$, $p < .01$; $\beta = .41$, $p < .01$, respectively). Not all of the hypotheses regarding the antecedents of perspective taking were supported. In line with Hypotheses 2 and 6, customer role orientation and perceived customer reciprocity predicted perspective taking ($\beta = .61$, $p < .01$; $\beta = .17$, $p < .01$, respectively), but neither integrated understanding or exchange preference significantly predicted perspective taking, thus failing to support Hypotheses 3 and 7 ($\beta = .03$; $\beta = -.08$, respectively). Job enrichment did predict customer role orientation and integrated
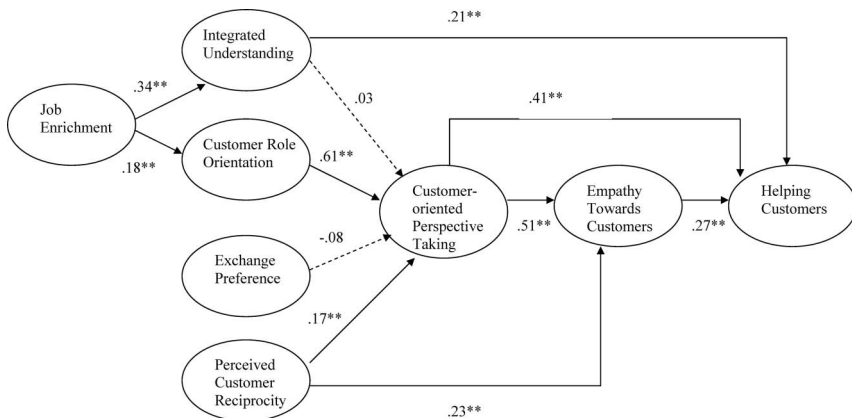

Figure 2. Final model, showing the relationships between the latent variables. **$p < .01$.

understanding ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$, $\beta = .34$, $p < .01$, respectively), but, as seen above, job enrichment was only related to perspective taking via customer role orientation (supporting Hypothesis 4) and not via integrated understanding (thus not supporting Hypothesis 5). However, job enrichment is related to helping via integrated understanding, as the latter variable has a direct path to helping ($\beta = .21$, $p < .01$). Model 3, which tested for a direct and more automatic route to empathy from the antecedents, revealed that customer reciprocity was directly related to empathy, suggesting that perspective taking is not always a prerequisite to empathic responding ($\beta = .23$, $p < .01$).

With regard to the effect of the controls on the endogenous variables, significant parameter estimates were found between helping customers and age ($\beta = .09$, $p < .05$) and helping and the customer assistance department ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .05$), which shows that older people and those not in the customer assistance department rated themselves as most helpful. Empathy was significantly related to age ($\beta = .10$, $p < .05$), which suggests older people were more empathic towards customers, and perspective taking was related to call volume ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$), which suggests that the more calls the agents take (i.e., the more contact with customers) the more likely they are to try to take the customers' perspective. With regards to the endogenous antecedents, gender and age were both related to customer role orientation ($\beta = -.22$, $p < .01$; $\beta = .19$, $p < .01$, respectively) suggesting that women and older people are more customer oriented. Finally, those in the customer services department had a higher integrated understanding ($\beta = .30$, $p < .01$), which may be due to the wide range of queries they receive. The path coefficients from control variables are not shown on Figure 2 for simplicity.

The test for mediation of empathy (Hypothesis 1) was repeated using the smaller sample that had ratings of customer helping from their managers ($n = 137$) using only the three variables perspective taking, empathy, and helping (plus controls) in the analysis. First, the fully mediated model was tested with path coefficients between empathy and helping, and perspective taking and empathy (as well as from the control variables correlated to empathy and helping shown in Table 1). This showed a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(86, n = 137) = 133.49$, ratio $= 1.55$, $p < .001$, RMSEA $= .06$, SRMR $= .07$, and CFI $= .97$, but the path from empathy to helping was not significant. The addition of the direct pathway between perspective taking and helping improved the fit of the model, $\chi^2(85, n = 137) = 121.47$, χ^2/df ratio $= 1.43$, $p < .01$, RMSEA $= .06$, SRMR $= .04$, and CFI $= .97$, $\chi^2 \text{diff}(1, n = 137) = 12.02$, $p < .001$, and the parameter estimates between perspective taking and helping and perspective taking and empathy were both significant ($\beta = .40$, $p < .01$; $\beta = .61$, $p < .01$, respectively). Thus, using the managers' ratings of customer helping, Hypothesis 1 (for the mediation

of empathy) is not supported. Instead, we find only a direct path from perspective taking to helping. Again, with regards to the impact of the control variables, those in the customer assistance department were rated as less helpful by the managers ($\beta = -.27$, $p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that the more employees try to take the perspective of their customers, the more likely they are to help them. The study therefore replicates previous research by Parker and Axtell (2001), which found a positive association between perspective taking activity and helping behaviour, but does so within a different context (i.e., previously in manufacturing, and currently in a call centre) and with a different focus (i.e., previously with internal suppliers and currently with external customers). The findings are also consistent with existing research within service organizations, which has found relationships between empathy and service quality (e.g., Strug et al., 2003; Witkowski & Wolfinbarger, 2002). However, the current study adds to this latter area of research by assessing the "helping" aspect of service quality and by illustrating the importance of perspective taking and empathy towards customers who are not face-to-face but are typically encountered through short, one-off interactions that are mediated via the telephone. Thus, we find that call centre employees who actively try to take the perspective of their customers, and who empathize and are concerned about their customers' feelings, are more likely to report going out of their way to help the customer. Moreover, employees who actively try to take the perspective of their customers are more likely to be rated by their managers as being helpful to customers. This finding is important as it suggests that one way to enhance service quality in call centres might be to promote greater perspective taking amongst staff. This is a relatively unexplored avenue for performance gain. Our analysis also suggests that enhancing employees' integrated understanding of the organization and its services could be another route to enhancing customer helping and therefore customer service.

With regards to perspective taking itself, this study has validated a measure of situational perspective taking, showing it to be situation (or target) specific rather than related to helping more generally. It has also provided further evidence on the proposed sequence of the perspective taking process through analysing mediated effects. The results suggest perspective taking can have a direct effect on helping customers without promoting empathy. Thus, people do not necessarily have to experience empathy in order to help others. In contrast to some previous research (e.g., Coke et al., 1978; Karinol & Shomroni, 1999), our findings also imply that perspective taking is not necessarily a precursor to empathy. Instead, we find that

perspective taking does not fully mediate the relationship between one of the antecedents and empathy (specifically, the perceived reciprocity of the customer). This suggests that the behaviour of the target can enhance empathy without necessarily enhancing perspective taking. Perspective taking, it would seem, is not the only determinant of empathy. The results suggest that a person can empathize without actively trying to take the other person's viewpoint, perhaps through more automatic or unconscious processes such as emotion contagion and vicarious affect (Kelly & Barsade, 2001).

The fact that only perspective taking (and not empathy) towards customers predicts manager's ratings of agent's customer-oriented helping could mean that the tendency to put effort into perspective taking is somehow more evident or tangible for managers when listening to telephone calls between service agents and customers, and affects how helpful they consider employees to be. Empathy may be less visible because it requires the manager to know how the employee is "feeling" towards the customer, whereas they may more easily observe that the employee is trying to put themselves in the customer's shoes and understand their perspective by the things that they say (e.g., "I would recommend this product to someone in your situation" or "I can see how this might benefit you"). Even if the customer service agent "feels" empathy, they may not express it, and are perhaps less likely to talk to customers using this more emotional language (e.g., "I'm rather concerned for you"). Indeed, such emotional language towards the customer might well be considered inappropriate and be discouraged. Thus, it might be much harder for managers to recognize empathy in comparison to perspective taking in this context. Alternatively, if empathy is perceptible, then perhaps managers do not recognize it as contributing to helping behaviours, and so it does not form part of their helping assessment. It could be, however, that empathy is important to managers' assessments of helping behaviour, but that the subsample size was too small to detect an effect.

The current study also builds on previous work on perspective taking within organizations (e.g., Okun et al., 2000; Parker & Axtell, 2001) by exploring the relative impact of situational and individual antecedents that have not been tested together in such contexts before. For instance, we found that perspective taking and empathy were associated with perceptions of the exchange-related behaviour of customers (the degree to which they are perceived to reciprocate). One aspect of the state of the employee in this particular situation (specifically, their role orientation towards customers) was also found to be related to perspective taking. Integrated understanding, however, did not predict perspective taking, which suggests that having a broad understanding about the organization does not promote the effort to take the perspective of customers. This finding is actually consistent

with Parker and Axtell (2001), who found that integrated understanding was not related to empathy (although it was found to be related to the cognitive manifestation of positive "self-like" attributions about the target). Perhaps in the current case, an integrated understanding of the services offered by the organization and what others in the organization do is too general or too far removed from an understanding of the external customer to have any effect. However, the additional path found between integrated understanding and helping customers suggests that having a fuller understanding of the call centre and its services can be related to behaviours directed towards customers. Integrated understanding may be having its effects via other routes, such as through positive attributions (as in Parker & Axtell, 2001) or through some sort of moral reasoning (i.e., the more that is understood about the organization, the more employees feel that helping customers is "the right thing to do"). Either way, a practical implication of this finding is that enhancing employees' integrated understanding of the organization and its services may promote greater helping behaviours towards customers and thus better customer service.

The strongest predictor of perspective taking in the current study was the service agent's customer role orientation, which was in turn predicted by job enrichment (part of the context). This implies that aspects of the job (i.e., having responsibility for a broad range of autonomous tasks) can impact on the employee such that they internalize and appreciate the importance of factors beyond their immediate set of goals (i.e., it broadens their role orientations), which in turn enhances perspective taking. Customer role orientation is particularly relevant for the service industry and indicates a focus beyond the self towards customers. The findings imply that a service agent's work-based outlook can be broadened beyond narrow, self-focused concerns by having wider and more responsible experiences within their job. Through such a mechanism, employees are likely to recognize how important it is to take the customer's perspective in order to achieve broader organizational goals. This finding is consistent with Parker and Axtell (2001), who found that individual orientations that facilitate perspective taking were related to increased employee control over their work and their breadth of decision-making influence. Moreover, job enrichment was found to be related to integrated understanding, and so these autonomous tasks may be enabling greater insights to be gained into the overall organizational processes (cf. Cummings & Blumberg, 1987).

An important practical implication of this finding is that one way the service industry could indirectly improve perspective taking, and ultimately customer service, is to provide front-line employees with broader and more responsible jobs. This might involve, amongst other things, giving employees responsibility over when they take breaks, what shifts they work, coaching other team members, and monitoring their own service levels

(similar job enriching tasks within call centres are suggested by Grebner et al., 2003). In other words, tasks that might traditionally be thought of as the supervisor's role could be delegated to front-line staff. This approach is contradictory to much work design within call centres where employees' jobs are often narrowly defined, routine and tightly controlled (Grebner et al., 2003; Holman, 2005; Zapf et al., 2003). The results of this study suggest that such restrictive work designs might have negative consequences for high quality customer service. There might also be other antecedents of customer role orientation that have not yet been explored, such as induction and training processes, or clearly articulated values. For instance, employees could be encouraged to take a more customer-focused outlook on their work through training and education schemes that help employees become more aware of how important it is for them to be concerned with customer needs and not just their own immediate set of goals.

The behaviour of the target (i.e., perceived customer reciprocity) had a direct route to empathy as well as an indirect one via perspective taking. This suggests that customer reactions (the extent to which they are perceived as reciprocating the help they receive from agents by being nice in return) have a role to play in the employee's tendency to take the perspective and empathize with customers. The implication here is that service agents are more likely to invest cognitive and emotional effort into "stepping into the shoes of" and feeling concern for customers who display positive behaviour by being pleasant and appreciative. In the current sample, this type of reciprocity seems to occur less in the customer assistance department where customer complaints are dealt with (a t-test comparing this department against the other two main departments combined, reveals that perceived customer reciprocity is significantly lower in the customer assistance department, $t = -2.07$, $p < .05$). The relationship with reciprocity found in this study is similar to and supports the proposition that individuals are more likely to help those who have helped them or have reciprocated in the past (e.g., Dreman, 1976, Staub & Sherk, 1970) and previous findings that pleasantness from customers is associated with greater propensity to think about how customers feel (Totterdell & Holman, 2003). It is possible that pleasantness from customers could set up a virtuous cycle whereby perspective taking and empathizing with customers leads to more helping and in turn more positivity from customers. However, these findings also imply that perspective taking and empathy might be harder under conditions where the customer does not reciprocate by being pleasant or appreciative (such as in the customer assistance department where customers are complaining). Thus, employees in areas where customers are likely to be unpleasant may need more support before they will engage in perspective taking. It may be that employees will have to be encouraged (or perhaps trained) to put extra effort into perspective taking when such

conditions prevail. One way of doing this might be to highlight the personal benefits of perspective taking, as there is evidence to suggest that the use of perspective taking could serve as a coping mechanism to help employees deal with their own distress in response to unpleasant customers (e.g., Sutton, 1991).

Greater interaction with the target (through greater number of calls) may also help to improve the tendency to take the customer's perspective, although care may be needed to ensure that a higher call volume does not place undue pressure on agents. There may be a cut-off after which improvements in perspective taking are not gained.

The individual difference variable of exchange preference was not significantly associated with either perspective taking or empathy, suggesting that at least with regard to this stable attribute, job design (or having a job with nicer customers) is a better route to perspective taking, empathy, and helping customers than selection of those with a low exchange preference.

Limitations and future research

A limitation of this research is its cross-sectional design. Although the most logical direction of relationships based on previous literature have been tested in our model, longitudinal research is needed to establish the direction of causality in the relationships observed. For instance, although we can see that those who score highly on antecedents also score highly on perspective taking we have not been able to show that enhancing antecedents will enhance perspective taking. We also cannot rule out the possibility that common method variance has contributed to some of the relationships discovered. However, higher intercorrelations would be expected and differential relationships (such as those found here) would not be expected if response biases were responsible for the results. Furthermore, the fact that manager ratings of helping customers were predicted by employee's customer-oriented perspective taking (and that ratings of helping colleagues were not related to customer-oriented perspective taking), lends support to the validity of the relationships found. However, a measure of colleague helping rated by agents would have improved this differential validity check, and helped to clarify the extent to which relations could be explained by common method effects. Future research using longitudinal diary studies (e.g., Totterdell & Holman, 2003) or interventions would be desirable in order to investigate whether helping increases when perspective taking increases and, in turn, whether perspective taking changes as antecedents change.

Another limitation is that we did not assess the actual act of perspective taking but rather assessed the tendency to perspective take in this specific situation (i.e., dealing with customers). Assessing the cognitive act would

require experimental manipulation, or detailed content analysis of verbal transcripts, which we were unable to do in this case. Likewise, we also did not assess actual customer reciprocity, but instead relied on employee perceptions at a more general level, although the lesser amount of reciprocity found in the customer assistance department suggests this measure is sensitive to variations in the type of customer interaction in different departments. However, perceptions of reciprocity might well be affected by individual personality traits and, therefore, future work would benefit from using more objective measures such as ratings of recorded calls to evaluate the level of customer reciprocity and service agents' perspective taking within call centre contexts.

Future research could also examine the impact of other trait variables on perspective taking and empathy. We only considered one such variable in the current study (exchange preference), which was not found to be a significant predictor of perspective taking or empathy after accounting for other variables. Empathic personality is likely to be a stronger predictor of situational perspective taking and empathy.

Future research also needs to elucidate whether alternative mechanisms (other than perspective taking) play a role between the antecedents and empathy, in order to gain an understanding of how such emotional responses are arrived at. Moreover, there may be other processes that mediate the path between perspective taking and helping which could be explored. For instance, it is possible that the influence of perspective taking on helping operates in conjunction with emotion regulation processes. Emotion regulation is known to influence social interaction in a number of ways, and it has recently been shown that people's emotion regulation abilities are related to the quality of their social interactions, including their prosocial tendencies (Lopes, Salovey, Cote, & Beers, 2005). Finally, exploring other routes to helping via alternative mechanisms like moral reasoning (such as for the relationship between integrated understanding and helping) would also be beneficial. Thus, although the current study goes some way to highlighting the importance of perspective taking for customer service and possible ways of enhancing this process, it has also opened a fruitful avenue for further research on perspective taking within this and other organizational contexts.

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