



CITIZENS MISTREATMENT AMONG PUBLIC SERVANTS IN SOCIAL PUBLIC SERVICES

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Abstract

Public servants' decisions that are inconsistent with citizens' interests can lead to the mistreatment of public servants. The purpose of the research was to found out how the HRM practices in public organizations are related to the perception of fairness (procedural and distributive justice), and how the positive and negative moods of public servants are related to the citizens' mistreatment. The research was made in local government, public schools, health centres and hospitals. A total of 1,729 respondents answered all the questions. Reliability as the questionnaire's internal consistency was measured by Cronbach α for each multi-item scale. Four linear regression models were built. The results show that HRM is positively and statistically significantly associated with the perception of procedural justice. Furthermore, public servants' negative affect is positively and statistically significantly associated with all four dimensions of citizen mistreatment (ambiguous citizen expectations, dealing with a disliked citizen, citizen verbal aggression, and disproportionate citizen expectations).

Keywords

Mistreatment, Citizen, Public Servant, Health Centre, Local Government

I. Introduction

One of the corporate clichés is that employees in the service sector should treat customers as “queens or kings”. According to Yagil (2008), customers perceive the allegedly unsatisfactory service as a lack of respect, and they feel a threat to their identity. Citizens are often aware of the fact that they will receive compensation if they complain about poor services, and are increasingly aware of their influence. They, more often than in the past, complain to inspectorates and other supervisory authorities. Many studies (e.g. Lindbloom et al., 2007, Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, Aguiar-Quintana and Suárez-Acosta, 2013, Wong, 2019, Auslender and Fleury, 2017, Loeffler and Bovair, 2020) on mistreatment in service

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organizations were therefore focused on employees mistreatment of citizens, but as it stands in personal relations where usually “other side should be blamed”, also citizens try to avoid responsibility for their own (in)actions, and blame employees. In such cases, inappropriate citizens’ behaviour occurs that can include customers’ complaints without a valid reason, quarrels with employees, verbal abuse, setting excessive (unfair) demands or treating employees in a disrespectful, impolite, demeaning, unreasonable, aggressive way. Researchers used different terms for mistreatment of employees: the problem customer behaviour (Bitner et al., 1994), deviant customers’ behaviour (Bennett and Robinson, 2000), inappropriate customers’ behaviour (Dormann and Zapf, 2004), abusive customers’ behaviour (Kong and Kim, 2017) and dysfunctional customers’ behaviour (Fisk et al., 2010). Bies (2001) and Wang et al. (2011) define such behaviour as “*customer mistreatment*”, and/or low-quality interpersonal treatment that employees receive from their customers. According to Grandey et al. (2012), Skarlicki and Walker (2008), Sliter et al. (2010), Dudenhöffer and Dormann (2013), Li and Zhou (2013) customer mistreatment is a deviant, dysfunctional, disrespectful, unethical behaviour that disapproves socially accepted standards and can be viewed as a social hassle that customers cause to employees in the workplace.

In this paper customer mistreatment of public sector employees (public servants) is named “citizen mistreatment” and represents *low-quality interpersonal treatment that public servants receive from citizens*. Such mistreatment can be very different in comparison with the relationship between customers and employees in the private sector. Because public servants work in the public interest and follow legal regulations, principles and other provisions, they cannot always fully comply with the citizens’ demands and desires. In such cases, citizens cannot be treated as “queens or kings” due to the respect of equality and impartiality in the first place. Their official (public) power can have different consequences for citizens as they are in the private sector. In contrast to the latter, the mistreated public employees cannot choose another competitive organization where they could easily proceed with their work. Public employees often have the difficult task of ensuring their job done with appropriate quality and be at the same time friendly, show goodwill, despite circumstances and responses of difficult citizens. Connected with this, Beitler et al. (2016) warn on health implications caused to employees, which can emerge in cases of imbalance and restrictions, due to the low control of employees and restrictions of organizational demands on customer interactions.

Citizens judge public servants’ decisions according to their interests; decisions inconsistent with their interests usually lead to tension, bad will, anger, inappropriate behaviour and mistreatment of public servants, so the latter can respond inappropriately towards the same or other citizens. As public servants work in the public interest, it is important to know, what they feel when they are mistreated by citizens and how they react to such mistreatment. Citizens’ behaviour can sometimes be inappropriate, so – given the presence of citizens’ rights in official proceedings – it is relevant to establish how public employees react to such mistreatment. There are no available researches in the public sector on citizen mistreatment (most researches of mistreatment in the public sector are focused on workplace aggression, victimization, bullying, discrimination and well-being at work [e.g. Plimmer et al., 2017,

Cortina and Magley, 2003, Bradbury et al., 2010, Haque, 2000]). Due to the mentioned lack of such research, this paper intends to fill this gap.

A key premise is that citizen mistreatment has an impact on public servants. The purpose of the research is to found out 1) how the knowledge about the HRM in public organizations is related to the public servants' perception of fairness (procedural and distributive justice) and 2) how the positive (PA) and negative (NA) mood of public servants relate to the citizens' mistreatment. The research was made between employees (public servants') in different organizations that provide social public services (at the state level – public schools, health centres and hospitals; and at the lowest tier of administration – local government) where public servants do not have coercive competences. Citizens are hence probably less afraid of retaliation, while public servants are on the other hand more “exposed” to mistreatment. In Slovenia, employees in the public administration have a formal status of public servants, regardless of their specific competencies; due to the survey's anonymity, it is not possible to determine a special status of public servants, who completed the survey. The survey's intention was also to include police officers, as typical representatives of official coercion (understood as daily use of official powers, which can harm citizens) to analyse differences with public servants in social services (where coercion is more the exception than the rule – e.g. compulsory psychiatric treatment, vaccination, expulsion from school), but the top management of the police did not permit to carry out the survey. Based on the existing theory we theorize the relationship among these groups and specifically, predict that (a) public servants working in local self-government or education perceive procedural justice higher than their colleagues from the healthcare sector; (b) distributive justice is evaluated better by public servants with higher education, and who work in municipality rather than in healthcare; and (c) citizen verbal aggression is more present more on the local level than in healthcare, which is nevertheless higher than the educational sector. These relationships were examined in the context of a study of 1,729 public servants, finding the knowledge of public servants on human resource management is associated with their perception of procedural and distributive justice, and that citizen mistreatment occurs regardless of public servants who have (only) positive feelings. The paper is divided into five sections. In the next section theoretical backgrounds on citizen mistreatment and its structural factors and on mistreatment latent within a person are given, after which the research and its methodology follow in the third section. In the fourth section, results are presented and hypotheses tested after which discussion and conclusion follow in the fifth section with the theoretical and practical implications, and the paper's limitations and future directions.

II. Theoretical Background

Citizen Mistreatment Related to Organizational Factors

Citizens are often aware of Customers in the private sector have different customer experiences (Kacprzak and Dziewanowska, 2019) and different factors influence the intensity of inappropriate customer behaviour.

Citizens' relationship with public servants

To Yagil (2008) the intensity of inappropriate customer behaviour in the private sector is greater if the level of danger (e.g. avoiding interaction with certain employees, risks of retaliation and penalties) felt by customers is lower. Customers often have anonymous contact with employees, which allows them to behave inappropriately without any shame or visible consequences for them. Furthermore, citizens are also less responsible for their behaviour if they feel their relationship with employees is not visible to other people. Also, public servants' behaviour can be influenced by the so-called personal billing when citizens, due to their complaints and misunderstandings or self-affirmations, "calculate" their "public opponents". Dormann and Zapf (2004) classified customer mistreatment in the private sector into 1) disproportionate customer expectations (refer to customers' behaviour and attitudes, which challenge acceptable service expectations from the service employees' point of view), 2) verbally aggressive customers (criticize and verbally attack service employees), 3) disliked customers (refer to unpleasant, humourless and hostile customers), 4) ambiguous customer expectations (it is unclear to the service employee what the customer wants). Bitner et al. (1994) categorized four groups of problem customers in the private sector: 1) drunkenness (an intoxicated customer who creates problems such as harassing other customers nearby, giving an employee a hard time, disrupting the atmosphere of the establishment), 2) verbal and/or psychological abuse (either the employee or other customers), 3) breaking organization policies or laws (and the employee attempts to enforce compliance), 4) uncooperative customers (the customer generally rude and is unwilling to be satisfied, no matter what is done for him or her). Despite such behaviour service organizations place high self-regulation demand for service employees to behave in a friendly and professional manner (Grandey, 2000). There are different strategies for employees to control their emotions, but not all are equally effective. According to (Yagil, 2008) these are the problem-solving strategies, escape-avoidance strategies, and support-seeking Strategies. Grandey (2000) focuses on emotional responses, divided into deep acting and surface acting strategies. Kozjek and Pečarič (2018) proposed a strategy of building a solid personal attitude of civil servants (a collection of virtues, values and personal beliefs that influence the behaviour, cooperation, interpersonal relations or decision-making) that is important when they are facing difficult citizens. The more public servants are solid in their attitude, the better they react to citizens' mistreatments. In this regard, Wang et al. (2011) analysed customers' mistreatment in the private sector concerning job tenure (which is the length of time an employee has worked on a specific job) and employee commitment to organizational rules (which is a person's intention to extend effort toward displaying organizationally

desired emotions, persist in displaying these emotions over time, and not abandon the display rules under difficult conditions). The results show that employees who have longer job tenure have higher automaticity in performing their jobs and allocate more resources to regulating service-related emotions and behaviours in the face of resource loss due to customer mistreatment. Employees with lower (vs. higher) rule commitment are less likely to invest effort into regulating their job-related emotions and behaviours, which leads to a higher likelihood of exhibiting customer-directed sabotage behaviours. Similarly, Johnson et al. (2013) analysed citizen-facing employees working in a national retail organization in the UK and found older service employees are less likely to experience citizen stressors. According to Beitler et al. (2016), this is so because they contribute less to conflicts and they see potential conflict situations with citizens as less threatening. Egeberg and Stigen (2018, 2021) investigated the relative importance of public employees' current organizational position, their educational backgrounds, former job experience, geographic background, gender, age and political attitudes for their actual behaviour in the job situation, and under which conditions these explanatory factors matter. Their research shows that organizational position, former job experience and educational background stand out as the overwhelmingly most important factors to understand government officials' actual behaviour and priorities in the job situation. According to the officials' assessment, organizational position ranks clearly above the others, while classic demographic background factors such as gender and age seem to be of rather minor importance. The same holds for the officials' political attitude. Organizational socialization does not seem to be prerequisite for bureaucratic role compliance, not for weakening the impact of early (extra-organizational) socialization. Their key observation on the superior role of (formal) organizational position was a behaviour-shaping variable.

The organization's structure

Public servants' reactions to citizens' mistreatment can be different in different situations. It thus matters how systems and/or the circumstances or working conditions are arranged, because a *system* documents information only if the latter's *structure* is compatible with the system's structure. Some scholars intuitively considered this similarity *in institutions*, like the stable, valued, recurring patterns of behaviour (Huntington, 1968), as the persistent rules that shape, limit and channel human behaviour (Fukuyama, 2014) or decide what looks the same/different: "[s]imilarity is institution" (Douglas, 1986, p. 55). Institutions decide what is similar, different, complex and chaotic. "The institution works as such when it acquires... the harnessed moral energy of its members" (Douglas, 1986, p. 63). The law thus comes to life in institutions (Waldron, 2011), not only in the general legislation, regulation and adjudication, but every day in relations between public servants and citizens. In these and similar frames public servants, as the institutions' most intimate members, think in their daily operations; they – as institutions, direct citizens' perceptions into forms that are compatible with operations they formally authorize or informally practice (Pečarič, 2020). Civil servants represent "the eyes and ears of the law" as, due to their numbers and exercise of public authority, they can *detect* or inflict irregularities that are – if we replace the word "beauty" from the novel *Molly Bawn* (1878) by Margaret

Wolfe Hungerford – “[...] in the eyes of the beholder”. Creating situations that shape the system is largely in the hands of public servants as they co-shape the conditions and circumstances of how public administration works. Bark and Bell based on 340 surveys of presidents of public and private not-for-profit universities in the United States, established the significant influence of organizational structure over the individual characteristics of public employees. Their findings suggest that “structure plays the dominant role in prioritization, with individual managers playing a less influential role. More specifically, selectivity, administrative capacity, per cent of revenue received from state appropriations, and location in the public or private sector substantially shifted the indicated priorities of competing issues by bureaucratic leaders” (Bark and Bell, 2018, p. 28). Egeberg and Stigen (2018, 2021) based on responses from 2,322 ministry bureaucrats and 1,963 agency bureaucrats established that government bureaucrats’ (formal) organizational position are by far the most important explanatory factor, while classical demographic factors like geographical background, gender and age play a rather minor role.

According to Ambrose et al. (2002) employee sabotage is most often an act of retaliation motivated by perceptions of injustice. Adams (1965) focused on intra-organizational sources of fairness, consisting of the outcomes one receives; they defined it as *distributive justice*. Additionally, Thibaut and Walker (1975) focused on the organization’s procedures; they defined it as *procedural justice*. Following the citizens’ mistreatment of public servants, a managers’ role is important too. Namely, through different human resource management (HRM) practices at the manager/team level, they could help public employees deal with citizens’ mistreatment. Chi et al. (2018) found that public employees perceived service training buffered the negative effects of citizen mistreatment on their emotions, deviant behaviours, and work-family conflict. The research of Wang et al. (2011) showed that team-level supervisory support climate did not significantly relate to employees’ behavioural reactions to customer mistreatment in the private sector. Hu et al. (2018) examined the linkage between perceived service training at the individual level and service employees’ responses to customer mistreatment in the private sector and found out that customer mistreatment was less negatively related to performance in teams where employees received more training, and that different types of HRM practices could effectively buffer the negative impact of customer mistreatment on different work outcomes for service employees.

The idea for research of the citizen mistreatment related to organizational factors

Literature review shows citizen mistreatment with “many faces” of Janus; it is reflected in the various psychological and physical harassment of public servants, which deviates from the established, well-integrated behaviour in society. Among factors that can contribute to the public servants’ good reactions to citizen mistreatment, are the organizational position, former job experience and educational background. The crucial importance lies also in a formal organization’s structure that acts as a frame of predispositions that employees daily use, but on the other hand, they also create or contribute to situations, which are good/bad for them. While a single public servant can also inflict deleterious effects on a citizen, the greatest danger is in their multiple habits and/or relations that viewed in their

individuality are not so harmful, but taken as connections they can even non-intentionally lead to devastating consequences, i.e. to Arendt's rule of nobody ('s fault) as perhaps the most formidable form of a dominion of man over man. It is thus relevant how individual public servant perceives the distributive and procedural justice and how these individual perceptions are shown as a whole. Accordingly, a prediction of the research was:

Hypothesis 1: Knowledge of public servants about human resource management (HRM) is associated with the perception of procedural justice of public servants.

Hypothesis 2: Knowledge of public servants about human resource management (HRM) is associated with the perception of distributive justice of public servants.

Mistreatment Related to Individual Factors

While the former section was focused mainly on the external factors (citizens, organizational structure), the internal ones (i.e. public servants' feelings) are important also to present a whole situation. To fully understand the nature of mistreatment, a focus of the research is thus also oriented to the role of personal behaviour.

The individual's identity

According to Greenberg and Barling (1999), the interaction of personal behaviours and workplace factors is apparent in actual incidents of workplace mistreatment in the private sector. They stress that studies mostly address three approaches 1) customer or client-perpetrated violence, describing elements of jobs, or characteristics of employees, which increase susceptibility to violence by-non employees, 2) demographic and psychological correlates, attempting to isolate employee attitudes, 3) personal characteristics associated with perpetrators of workplace violence. Funder (2009) warns that people are different from each other, but they also differ with themselves, in the sense that every individual varies how he/she acts and feels, to some degree, depending upon the situations in his/her life. According to Stets (2015), it is important to understand three dimensions of the self: the cognitive aspect (how individuals see themselves), the behavioural aspect (how individuals act), and the emotional aspect (how individuals feel). He stresses that internal dynamics occur when a person's identity is activated in a situation; when activation occurs, the meaning that defines the identity serves as the standard for individuals and a feedback loop is established. This loop has five components 1) the identity standard (the meaning contained in an identity), 2) output (behaviour that implies certain meanings), 3) input or perceptions in the situation (individuals' interpretation of others' responses to them in the action), 4) the comparator (the process in which persons relate the input with the identity standard to determine the degree to which there is a correspondence between these two sets of meanings), 5) emotion that results from the comparison process (Stets, 2015). Personal engagement is, along with using reason, connected with *emotion*; in fact, "there is no inner contrast between emotion and reason: emotion is the main source of motivation steering us towards certain goals; it can steer a considerable power of reason towards the goals that it gives rise to" (Simon, 1997, p. 91). Emotions are formed in *the amygdala*, a small, two-sided structure in the temporal lobe of the brain. It plays an important role in emotional learning and evaluation, particularly in provoking emotional responses to fear

or aggressive stimuli (Adolphs et al., 1998). People do not make decisions solely based on reason. An objective connection and scientific proof of the interconnectedness between emotion and (rational) decision-making was confirmed by the magnetic resonance (fMRI) of brain function, establishing that both parts are located in the same area of the brain (the decision-making center or the neocortex and the amygdala as the emotion center are located in the temporal lobe of the brain) and that a signal comes to the amygdala before it reaches the neocortex (Goleman, 1996, Pečarič, 2020). In simpler terms, this involves reactions that people have even before realizing what is good in terms of their self-preservation instinct and evil in terms of maintaining stereotypes and discrimination that are located in the amygdala (Phelps et al., 2000). Grandey (2000) and Pečarič (2020) points out that the work environment and certain events at work can cause employees' emotional response (e.g. anger, anxiety, sadness) and therefore their behaviour can also be inappropriate (e.g. verbal attack, crying, complaining).

Measurement of the individual's mood

Watson et al. (1988) developed a reliable, valid and efficient 10-item mood scale (PANAS scale) to measure the two primary dimensions of mood – positive (PA) and negative (NA) affect. The scale consists of several words that describe different feelings and emotions (interested, distressed, excited, upset, strong, guilty, scared, hostile, enthusiastic, proud, irritable, alert, ashamed, inspired, nervous, determined, attentive, jittery, active, afraid) that can be measured at five-point Likert scale (1 = very slightly or not at all, 2 = little, 3 = moderately, 4 = quite a bit, 5 = extremely) in the seven different time instructions (at the present moment, today, during the past few days, during the past few weeks, during the past year or on the average [generally]). They pointed out that when the scale is used with short-term instructions, the results are sensitive to fluctuations in mood, whereas they exhibit trait-like stability when longer-term instructions are used (e.g. past year or general). The PA scale (but not the NA scale) is related to social activity and shows significant diurnal variation, whereas the NA scale (but not the PA scale) is significantly related to perceived stress and shows no circadian pattern.

When customers mistreat employees in the private sector, according to Wang et al. (2011), the customers' violation of the service interaction norm imposes more demands on employees' resources for regulation of their behaviours in the line with organizational customer service rules. Employees with higher levels of self-efficacy for emotional regulation are more willing to invest the effort to regulate negative emotions (e.g. anger and frustration) than those with lower levels of self-efficiency for emotional regulation.

The idea for research of the citizen mistreatment related to individual factors

Public policies often ignore the principal psychological delimitations, such as our innate inclination to treat actions one way and omissions another; when these delimitations are clear, they are often in conflict with our moral intuition; and when the policy and intuition are in conflict, it is the policy that is in trouble (Hauser, 2007, p. xix). Everyone, both the ruling and the ruled, are, first and foremost, people and therefore inclined to avoid exertion and give in to pleasure (*ex labore proclives ad libidinem*). After clearly understanding

the meaning of information, the reasons what and how it works, it can be systemically placed within the existing system to be improved by encouraging communication and the appropriate action. Top-down control is impossible in increasingly large and complex organizations and this ever-changing and challenging environment. The use of information that is available within the organization is increasingly becoming *conditio sine qua non*; this is mostly information that employees are willing to share with others. Each of us has an answer to this condition. Accordingly, the next two predictions of the research were:

Hypothesis 3: Positive affect is associated with citizen mistreatment.

- * *H3a: Positive affect is associated with ambiguous citizen expectations.*
- * *H3b: Positive affect is associated with having to deal with a disliked citizen.*
- * *H3c: Positive affect is associated with citizen verbal aggression.*
- * *H3d: Positive affect is associated with disproportionate citizen expectations.*

Hypothesis 4: Negative affect of a public servant is associated with citizen mistreatment.

- * *H4a: Negative affect is associated with ambiguous citizen expectations.*
- * *H4b: Negative affect is associated with having to deal with a disliked citizen.*
- * *H4c: Negative affect is associated with citizen verbal aggression.*
- * *H4d: Negative affect is associated with disproportionate citizen expectations.*

Results of the literature review show that perception of fairness (procedural and distributive justice) and citizens' mistreatment were researched separately up to today. Unfortunately, little is known also about the mistreatment in social public services. Therefore, to fully understand the perception of fairness and the nature of mistreatment in social public services the decision to orient the hypotheses to external (citizens, organizational structure) and the internal factors (public servants' behaviour) together was made, which shows also the originality of the hypotheses.

III. Empirical Research Design

The research in different social public services was made to test hypotheses and found out 1) how the HRM in public organizations is related to the perception of fairness (procedural and distributive justice) and 2) how the positive (PA) and negative (NA) mood of public servants are related to the citizens' mistreatment. The research was held on from October 2019 till December 2019 among public servants in a Central European country – Slovenia. The link to the online questionnaire, with a request to forward the link to all *employees (public servants)* (in the main and the support activities), was sent to the official e-mail addresses of all public primary and secondary schools, health centres and hospitals (psychiatric hospitals were not included in the research to exclude potential patient-related social stressors caused by patients with mental disabilities), and municipalities, where public servants do not have coercive competences. Researchers were not notified if the workers that read official e-mail addresses indeed forwarded the link to all employees therefore it was not possible to determine an exact response rate. Due to the survey's anonymity (participants did not provide an answer in which primary/secondary school, health centre/hospital, or municipality they work), it is not possible to determine a special

status of each public servant, who completed the survey, but due to the complete number of 5,276/20,371/44,900 public servants in the local municipalities/education/health care *vis-à-vis* 379/834/516 of servants who completed the survey, the latter *is* representative for each mentioned sector.

Measurement

A questionnaire used for testing whether citizens' mistreatment differs in different public organizations was prepared following the literature review. It was prepared in English and then translated into a native language using a standard back-translation process (Brislin, 1980). For measurement of citizens' mistreatment, Dormann and Zapf (2004) variables were used. The instrument was originally used for measuring potential stressful aspects that may occur in employee-customer interactions between three different occupations (flight attendants, travel agency employees, and sales clerks). As Dormann and Zapf's (2004) presented research also wanted to exclude potential patient-related social stressors caused by patients with mental disabilities, psychiatric hospitals were not included in the research. Since the research is more general, the results are comparable to previous research.

Variables were measured at five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true, 2 = not true, 3 = it is neither true nor not true, 4 = it is true, absolutely true). For measurement of public servants' mood, Watson et al. (1988) 10-item mood scale (PANAS scale) for measuring the two primary dimensions of mood – positive (PA) and negative (NA) affect was used. These variables were measured at five-point Likert scale (1 = very slightly or not at all, 2 = little, 3 = moderately, 4 = quite a bit, 5 = extremely). For measurement HRM practices in the field of organizational justice, variables for measurement distributive and procedural justice from Skarlicki et al. (2008) were used. Variables were measured at a five-point Likert scale (1 = I strongly disagree, 2 = I disagree, 3 = I neither disagree nor agree, 4 = I agree, 5 = I strongly agree). For measurement organizational decision-making process these variables were added: "I can express my views in our organization", "I think I can influence to the process of decision making in our organization", "generally, employees follow (prescribed) procedures in our organization", "decisions in our organization are made impartially", "decisions in our organization are made based on accurate information", "in our organization there are options for appealing (some) decisions", "procedures in our organization are carried out following ethical standards". HRM practices in the field of employee training for an appropriate relationship with citizens were measured with variables that Hu et al. (2018) used. Variables were measured at a five-point Likert scale (1 = I strongly disagree, 2 = I disagree, 3 = I neither disagree nor agree, 4 = I agree, 5 = I strongly agree). One of the questions was also "assess, how often your work involves working with citizens". Variable was measured at five-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = several times a year, 3 = once to three times a month, 4 = once to three times a week, 5 = every working day). Demographic variables were gender, age, organization, workplace, years of service, region.

Procedure

Reliability as the questionnaire's internal consistency was measured by Cronbach α for each multi-item scale. The average on each scale was computed forming a composite variable for each measured construct. These were included in further statistical analysis. Categorical variables were described as frequencies and percentages and numerical by means and standard deviations. Two multiple linear regression models were built to study the relationship between HRM and perception of procedural and distributive justice while controlling for demographic variables, organization size and type and frequency of working with citizens. Additionally, four multiple linear regression models were built to study the relationship between employees' affect and each dimension of citizen mistreatment, while controlling for demographic variables, organization size and type and frequency of working with citizens. From demographic variables, age was not included in the regression models as an independent variable as it correlated highly with total years of service and years of service with the current employer. From the three, only years of service with the current employer was included in the regression model to avoid multicollinearity. All statistical testing was performed at the significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. SPSS v. 26 software was used for statistical analysis.

Results

Sample description

Overall, 2,563 respondents started to fill in the questionnaire, but there was a significant drop-out rate after the first question, resulting in 2,033 respondents. The sample size was dropping throughout the questionnaire resulting in 1,729 respondents that answered all the questions. Socio-demographic and organization-related characteristics of respondents are described in Table 1. The sample is dominated by women, mainly because of structural reasons, like the feminization of teachers or some medical professions in Central Europe, which is often an indicator of women's relatively lower social status (see e.g. Shannon et al., 2019, Rouprêt et al., 2011, Sheelagh et al., 2005) and may also have a link with mistreatment.

Table 1: Socio-demographic and organization-related characteristics of respondents

Gender	<i>n</i> = 1729
Male	272 (15.7)
Female	1457 (84.3)
Mean (SD) age	43.9 (10)
Education	
Lower or middle school	180 (10.4)
Higher	1549 (89.6)
Mean (SD) years of service in the current organization	13.7 (10.6)
Mean (SD) years of service in total	19.4 (11.1)
Type of organization	
Municipality	379 (21.9)
Education	834 (48.2)
Healthcare	516 (29.8)
Organization size	
Up to 49 employees	427 (24.7)
50–249 employees	922 (53.3)
250 employees or more	380 (22)
Work with citizens weekly	1,671 (96.6)

Source: own research (2019)

The majority of respondents were females (84.3%) and had higher education (89.6%). The average (SD) age of respondents was 43.9 (10) years. On average (SD) they have been employed in the current organization for 13.7 (10.6) years. Mean (SD) overall years of service equals 19.4 (11.1) years. Almost half of the respondents (48.2%) works in education, 29.8% in healthcare and 21.9% are municipality workers. Almost one fourth (24.7%) of respondents work in an organization with up to 49 employees, about half (53.3%) in a middle-sized organization (50–249 employees) and the remaining (22%) in larger organizations. The majority of respondents (96.6%) works with citizens weekly.

Descriptive statistics and psychometric properties

Composite variables, calculated as averages of multi-item scales are described in table 2, along with their psychometric properties. All scales demonstrated adequate reliability with Cronbach's α values that exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). The lowest value of the coefficient was found in Disliked citizen scale (Cronbach α = 0.72) and the highest in the Distributive justice scale (Cronbach α = 0.93) and HRM scale (Cronbach α = 0.92). Regarding citizen mistreatment, respondents in average agreed most that citizens have disproportionate expectations (M = 3.8; SD = 0.6) and that they deal with disliked citizens (M = 3.7; SD = 0.7). Respondents on average evaluated that ambiguous citizen expectations are less expressed (M = 3; SD = 0.7). The

least expressed citizen behaviour is verbal aggression ($M = 2.5$; $SD = 0.9$). Distributive justice was evaluated as being less present in the organization respondents are working for ($M = 2.3$; $SD = 1$) than procedural justice ($M = 3.5$; $SD = 0.7$). The assessment of HRM is in the middle point of the used 5-point scale ($M = 3$; $SD = 1$). Organizations, where respondents work does not promote or encourage education or training on HRM. Respondents display positive effect ($M = 3.7$; $SD = 0.5$) to higher extent than negative affect ($M = 2.1$; $SD = 0.6$). In general, and in daily conversation with citizens, public servants in the sample show more positive than negative feelings.

Table 2: Composite variables and their psychometric properties ($n = 1729$)

	M (SD)	Cronbach α
HRM	3 (1)	0.92
Procedural Justice	3.5 (0.7)	0.84
Distributive Justice	2.3 (1)	0.93
Ambiguous citizen expectations	3 (0.7)	0.75
Disliked citizen	3.7 (0.7)	0.72
Citizen verbal aggression	2.5 (0.9)	0.88
Disproportionate citizen expectations	3.8 (0.6)	0.85
PA	3.7 (0.5)	0.78
NA	2.1 (0.6)	0.88

Source: own research (2019)

Regarding citizen mistreatment, respondents in average mostly agreed that citizens have disproportionate expectations ($M = 3.8$; $SD = 0.6$). Respondents also agreed that they disliked citizens ($M = 3.7$; $SD = 0.7$). The above results are given to all survey participants. Cronbach α shows the results as valid because a sufficiently large percentage of variance is explained.

Hypotheses testing

The first hypothesis (H1) presupposed the relationship between the knowledge of public servants about human resource management (HRM) with the perception of procedural justice of public servants. Within H1 the relationship between HRM and procedural justice (organization's procedures) was investigated. A linear regression model was built with HRM as the independent variable, procedural justice as the dependent one and the gender, education, years of service in the current organization, frequency of working with citizens, organization size and organization type as control variables. The results show that, when controlling for other independent variables, HRM is positively and statistically significantly associated with the perception of procedural justice ($b = 0.3$; $p = 0.01$). Hypothesis H1 is therefore accepted. From the control variables, education, work experience in current organization and organization type are statistically significantly associated with procedural justice perception. Public servants with higher education perceive procedural justice as being more present in the organization than those with middle or lower education ($b = 0.21$; $p < 0.001$). Those that have been employed in the current organization

for a longer time, more critically evaluate the procedural justice in the organization ($b = -0.01$; $p < 0.001$). Public servants working in the municipality ($b = 0.34$; $p < 0.001$) or education ($b = 0.08$; $p = 0.044$) perceive procedural justice in their organization higher than their colleagues working in the healthcare sector.

Table 3: Relationship between socio-demographic and organization-related characteristics, HRM and procedural and distributive justice

	DV: Procedural justice		DV: Distributive justice	
Independents:	B (SE)	P	B (SE)	P
Constant	2.27 (0.1)	< 0.001	1.29 (0.16)	< 0.001
Male gender	0.04 (0.04)	0.283	0.2 (0.06)	0.001
High education	0.21 (0.05)	< 0.001	0.42 (0.08)	< 0.001
Years of service in current organization	-0.01 (0.001)	< 0.001	-0.01 (0.001)	0.003
Work with citizens on weekly basis	0.02 (0.08)	0.798	-0.28 (0.13)	0.025
Organization size				
< 50 vs > 250	0.06 (0.05)	0.191	0.16 (0.07)	0.024
50–249 vs > 250	0.05 (0.04)	0.223	0.18 (0.06)	0.005
Type of organization				
Municipality vs. healthcare	0.34 (0.04)	< 0.001	0.24 (0.07)	< 0.001
Education vs. healthcare	0.08 (0.04)	0.044	-0.1 (0.06)	0.103
HRM	0.3 (0.01)	< 0.001	0.22 (0.02)	< 0.001
R ²	24%		10%	

Source: own research (2019)

The second hypothesis (H2) presupposed the relationship between the knowledge of public servants about human resource management (HRM) with the perception of distributive justice (intra-organizational sources of fairness, consisting of the outcomes that one receives) of public servants. Distributive justice was evaluated better by men ($b = 0.2$; $p = 0.001$), public servants with higher education ($b = 0.42$; $p < 0.001$), those working in municipality rather than in healthcare ($b = 0.24$; $p < 0.001$), that work less time for the current employer ($b = -0.01$; $p = 0.003$), that do not work with citizens on weekly basis ($b = -0.28$; $p = 0.025$) and have better HRM ($b = 0.22$; $p < 0.001$) in the organization. The hypothesis H2 is therefore supported by the obtained results. Despite almost, all statistically significant associations between the independent variables and the dependent variable, the percentage of explained variance in the evaluation of distributive justice by the studied predictors are rather low (10%), while in the evaluation of procedural justice equals 24%.

The third hypothesis (H3) presupposed a relationship between the positive affect of a public servant and each dimension of citizen mistreatment (H3a – H3d). The fourth hypothesis (H4) presupposed the relationship between the negative affect of the public servant and each dimension of citizen mistreatment (H4a – H4d). Four linear regression models were built to test the relationship between the positive and negative affect of the public servant

and each dimension of citizen mistreatment. The gender, education, years of service in the current organization, frequency of working with citizens, organization size and organization type were included as control variables in the regression models.

Regarding the H3, from all four dimensions of citizen mistreatment, positive affect is associated only with having to deal with disliked citizens ($b = 0.18$; $p < 0.001$). The relationship is positive, which means that public servants that show more positive feelings daily still have to deal with citizens who are difficult, overall unpleasant and that interrupt their work. The hypothesis H3b is therefore supported by the regression model, while H3a, H3c and H3d are rejected. Regarding the H4, public servants' negative affect is positively and statistically significantly associated with all four dimensions of citizen mistreatment, when controlling for other independent variables in the model. Hypotheses H4a to H4d are therefore supported by the regression model. Results are presented in Table 4.

Regarding the control variables in the models, higher education is negatively associated with having to deal with ambiguous citizen expectation ($b = -0.16$; $p = 0.001$), verbal aggression ($b = -0.38$; $p < 0.001$) or disproportional citizen expectations ($b = -0.18$; $p < 0.001$). Those public servants that work with citizens on weekly basis meet more citizens that are verbally aggressive ($b = 0.27$; $p = 0.009$) or have disproportionate expectations ($b = 0.29$; $p < 0.001$). Public servants that work in smaller organizations have in comparison to those working in large organizations less experience with disliked citizens ($b = -0.14$; $p = 0.01$) or citizens that are verbally aggressive ($b = -0.15$; $p = 0.01$). Less experience with verbally aggressive citizens has also those who work in middle-sized organizations ($b = -0.13$; $p = 0.011$).

Citizen verbal aggression is to a higher extent met by the municipality employees than in healthcare ($b = 0.24$; $p < 0.001$). It is present to a lower extent in the educational in comparison to the healthcare sector ($b = -0.17$; $p < 0.001$).

The share of explained variance by the independent variables included in the regression models range from 7 to 23%. Although some statistically significant relationships between predictor variables and each dependent variable were found, the low R^2 value suggests that the low percentage of variance of each dependent variable is explained by the predictors included in the regression model. The low percentage of explained variance indicates also that some important independent variables were omitted from regression models.

Table 4: Relationship between socio-demographic and organization-related characteristics, positive and negative affect and citizen mistreatment

	DV: Ambiguous citizen expectation		DV: Disliked citizen		DV: Citizen verbal aggression		DV: Disproportionate citizen expectations	
	B (SE)	P	B (SE)	P	B (SE)	P	B (SE)	P
Independents:								
Constant	2.36 (0.17)	< 0.001	2.42 (0.19)	< 0.001	1.84 (0.21)	< 0.001	2.78 (0.16)	< 0.001
Male gender	0.03 (0.04)	0.461	0.06 (0.05)	0.208	-0.06 (0.05)	0.246	-0.07 (0.04)	0.068
High education	-0.16 (0.05)	0.001	0.07 (0.06)	0.242	-0.38 (0.06)	< 0.001	-0.18 (0.05)	< 0.001
Years of service in current organization	-0.01 (0.001)	0.329	-0.01 (0.001)	0.176	-0.01 (0.001)	0.528	-0.01 (0.001)	0.261
Work with citizens on weekly basis								
Organization size	0.13 (0.08)	0.117	0.11 (0.1)	0.269	0.27 (0.1)	0.009	0.29 (0.08)	< 0.001
< 50 vs > 250	-0.08 (0.05)	0.075	-0.14 (0.05)	0.011	-0.15 (0.06)	0.01	-0.06 (0.04)	0.187
50–249 vs > 250	-0.06 (0.04)	0.167	-0.07 (0.05)	0.112	-0.13 (0.05)	0.011	-0.06 (0.04)	0.128
Type of organization								
Municipality vs. healthcare	0.07 (0.04)	0.115	-0.08 (0.05)	0.099	0.24 (0.06)	< 0.001	0.03 (0.04)	0.448
Education vs. healthcare	0.03 (0.04)	0.486	-0.04 (0.05)	0.427	-0.17 (0.05)	< 0.001	-0.02 (0.04)	0.648
PA	-0.06 (0.03)	0.073	0.18 (0.04)	< 0.001	-0.05 (0.04)	0.247	0.05 (0.03)	0.082
NA	0.39 (0.02)	< 0.001	0.26 (0.03)	< 0.001	0.51 (0.03)	< 0.001	0.35 (0.02)	< 0.001
R ²	17%		7%		23%		16%	

Source: own research (2019)

IV. Discussion and Conclusion

Theoretical Implications

The research contributes to the discussion on understanding the relationship between citizen mistreatment and organizational and personal dimensions in public sector organizations. In this paper a new definition “citizen mistreatment” was listed; it represents *low-quality interpersonal treatment that public servants receive from citizens*. Also, for measurement organizational decision-making process new variables were used. A new linear regression model, with HRM as an independent variable, procedural justice as a dependent one and the gender, education, years of service in the current organization, frequency of working with citizens, organization size and organization type as control variables, was built. Results of the research show that the relationship between HRM and procedural justice *exists*. HRM is positively and statistically significantly associated with the perception of procedural justice. More specifically, *public servants who receive comprehensive citizens service training, have sufficient access to citizens’ service training program, and citizens service issues give a high priority in a training program and better express their views in an organization, influence decisions in an organization, think that procedures in the organization in general, tend to be applied consistently, decisions are free of bias and base on accurate information*. They also think that opportunities exist to appeal certain decisions and that procedures comply with ethical and moral standards. Also, *public servants with higher education perceive procedural justice as being more present in the organization* than those with middle or lower education. Those that have been employed in the current organization for *a longer time, more critically evaluate* the procedural justice in the organization. Public servants working in the municipality or education perceive that procedural justice in their organization is higher than their colleagues working in the healthcare sector. According to the results of the research that Hu et al. (2018) made citizen mistreatment was less negatively related to performance in teams where employees received more training.

Results of the research also show that *the relationship between HRM and distributive justice exists*. More specifically, public servants who receive comprehensive citizens service training, have sufficient access to citizens’ service training programs and citizens service issues give a high priority in training programs, think that rewards they get reflect the effort they have put into their work, rewards are appropriate for the work they have completed, rewards reflect their contribution to the organization. Also, distributive justice in the organization was evaluated better by men, public servants with higher education, those working in the municipality rather than in healthcare, that works less time for the current employer, that do not work with citizens on weekly basis and have better HRM in the organization. According to the results of the research that Hu et al. (2018) made, different types of HRM practices could effectively buffer the negative impact of citizen mistreatment on different work outcomes for service employees.

Furthermore, another four new linear regression models were built with the positive and negative affect of the public servant as independent variables, each dimension of citizen mistreatment as dependent variables and gender, education, years of service in the current

organization, frequency of working with citizens, organization size and organization type as control variables. Results of the relationship between the positive and negative affect of the public servant show that public servants with more positive feelings daily still have to deal with citizens who are difficult, overall unpleasant and that interrupt their work.

The results also show that positive affect is not associated with ambiguous citizen expectations, citizen verbal aggression and disproportionate citizen expectations. Most likely, this could be related to the country's more/less highly accepted value system.³ According to Watson et al. (1988), "positive affect (PA) reflect the extent to which a person feels enthusiastic, active, and alert; high PA is a state of high energy, full concentration, and pleasure engagement whereas low PA is characterized with sadness and lethargy". On the other hand, public servants' negative affect is positively and statistically significantly associated with all four dimensions of citizen mistreatment. Higher education is negatively associated with having to deal with ambiguous citizen expectations, verbal aggression or disproportional citizen expectations. According to Watson et al. (1988), "negative affect (NA) is the general dimension of subjective distress and unpleasable engagement that subsumes a variety of aversive mood states, including anger, contempt, disgust, guilt, fear and nervousness, with low NA being a state of calmness and serenity".

In sum, results show that citizens' mistreatment is latent within structural dimensions *and* within a person. Following structural dimensions' results show that public servants that receive comprehensive citizen service training highly perceive organizational procedures – they highly express their views, influence the process of decision making, follow (prescribed) procedures and think that procedures are carried out following ethical standards. More specifically, public servants with higher education, longer working experiences in current organizations highly evaluate organizational procedures, which also proves that. Results show that public servants working in the municipalities or education perceive organizational procedures in their organization higher than their colleagues working in the healthcare sector. Under training, results prove that public servants in the healthcare sector do not receive comprehensive citizen service training. Therefore, training programs should not be oriented just to professional healthcare content but also to citizen relationship management content.

Public servants that receive comprehensive citizen service training highly evaluate outcomes that they receive; they think their rewards are appropriate and reflect the effort they put into their work and organization. More specially, results show that distributive justice in the organization is better evaluated by public servants that have better HRM in

³ The UN's World Happiness Report 2020 ranks Slovenia (2017–2019) on 33th place among 153 nations (Helliwell et al., 2020). Slovenia has high scores in secular-rational (less emphasis on religion, traditional family values and authority) and self-expression (a tolerance of foreigners, gays and lesbians and gender equality, and rising demands for participation in decision-making in economic and political life) values: Sweden, Norway, Japan, Benelux, Germany, France, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, and some English speaking countries (Inglehart et al., 2014). Slovenia's residents are also among the most satisfied in the EU in terms of inter-personal relations, a survey by Eurostat released on Thursday shows. The average mark for satisfaction in Slovenia on a one-to-ten scale is 8.6, well above the EU average of 7.9. (STA, 2020). For further research read Pridham, 2006, Ekiert and Ziblatt, 2013, Toš, 2016).

the organization and do not work with citizens on weekly basis, which might be associated with fewer citizens' mistreatment that public servants receive.

Results indicate that public servants who have more positive feelings still have to deal with citizens who are difficult, overall unpleasant and that interrupt their work. Those with negative affect (with a variety of aversive mood states) more often feel citizen mistreatment (*i.e.* the unpleasant, humourless and hostile citizens, their behaviour and attitudes, critics and verbal attacks, and unclear citizens' demands). Results prove that public servants who work with citizens should not react negatively. Public servants' training should be thus oriented to appropriate dealing with citizens.

Practical Implications

The results show that public servants who work with citizens weekly meet more citizens that are verbally aggressive or have disproportionate expectations. Public servants who work in smaller organizations have – compared to those working in large organizations – less experience with disliked citizens who are verbally aggressive. Less experience with verbally aggressive citizens has also those who work in middle-sized organizations. Citizen verbal aggression is to a higher extent met by the municipality employees than in healthcare. It is present to a lower extent in the educational in comparison to the healthcare sector. According to the results, public sector organizations should pay attention that public servants get comprehensive citizens' service training according to the size of the organization and its field. Training should be oriented to content that includes appropriate citizens' relationship management and appropriate personal relationship with citizens.⁴ The results of the research also show that procedures in an organization comply with ethical and moral standards, and, in general, are applied consistently. That could also help public servants to better deal with citizens' mistreatment, which could better understand citizens' needs and react appropriately. Because public servants have to deal with disliked citizens, they should also get appropriate knowledge in the field of positive and negative emotional reactions, along with the regulation on internal organization, systematization, workplaces, titles in public administration bodies and the system for civil servants' pay that could be accordingly modified. However, these changes may not necessarily occur.

Limitations and Future Directions

A limitation of the research is a small share of explained variance by linear regression model that was built with HRM as an independent variable, procedural justice as dependent variable and gender, education, years of service in the current organization, frequency

⁴ Not only training, enhanced activities in the whole field of human resources management (planning, attracting, selection, introduction, developing, evaluation, rewarding, and promotion) can contribute to the development of professional competencies by public servants – it is important also to have “the right person in the right position”. Good case in the field of HRM is also the project “Establishment of a uniform model for civil service competency”, which's purpose was “to establish a tool for effective human resources management within the state administration by developing a competency model for civil servants and thereby expanding the awareness that skills, attitudes, beliefs, motives and values are also important for successful job performance in addition to formal education” (see European Commission, 2020).

of working with citizens, organization size and organization type as control variables. The share of explained variance by the independent variables included in the regression models range from 7 to 23%. The low percentage of explained variance indicates that some important independent variables⁵ were omitted from regression models and therefore should be analysed during further research activities. The mentioned limitation is also seen by four linear regression models that were built to test the relationship between the positive and negative affect of the public servant and each dimension of citizen mistreatment. Gender, education, years of service in the current organization, frequency of working with citizens, organization size and organization type were included as control variables in the regression models. Despite almost, all statistically significant associations between independent variables and the dependent variable, the percentage of explained variance in the evaluation of distributive justice by the studied predictors are rather low (10%), while in the evaluation of procedural justice equals 24%. Due to the excessively, relational-level factors (the relationship between teachers, pupils and parents or medical professionals and patients) are not considered in the paper, and should be studied later. For further research in this field, citizen mistreatment in association with the organizational decision-making process and problem-solving strategies (see Yagil, 2008, Grandey, 2000, Kozjek and Pečarič, 2018) should be studied. Besides, the relationship between distributive and procedural justice with citizen mistreatment should be analysed.

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⁵ E.g. relational-level, self-regulation demand, problem-solving strategies, employee commitment to organisational rules, organisational position, former job experience, educational background, cognitive, behavioural, emotional aspect of the individual.

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