

## Theorising social relations in a customer services setting via social positioning

Name & affiliation: Dr Julie Monroe, Centre for Critical Realism (Associate member)

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to empirically test a discrete aspect of social positioning theory, namely, the social relation constituted by paired rights and obligations. Drawing on an interview with my manager, this paper explores how power and occupational class intersect in relation to social phenomena in a customer services setting. To achieve a more complete causal account, and deploying realist causal explanation as the analytical strategy I respond to the challenge of theorising social relations using theory in which social relations are understood through processes of social interaction (Lawson, 2012). Moreover, this approach makes it possible to evaluate parallel, objective contextual differences in participants experiences and provides a conceptual resource for analysing qualitative data (Cardinale and Runde, 2021). And since social class has received little attention in organizational research with a moderate momentum shift in the past decade (Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2023) this paper investigates the potential for theorising social relations via social positioning theory where ‘every actor occupies several positions at every moment and over time’ such that ‘each actor’s habitus will be a stratification of dispositions attuned to those positions’ (Cardinale and Runde, 2021: 616). Therefore, ‘while some aspects of habitus are common across occupants of a given position, each actor’s habitus will to a greater or lesser extent be different from that of others’ (Cardinale and Runde, 2021: 616). In this context, this paper asks: *How can social positioning theory help us to better understand individuals’ differential allocation to class positions and differential, classed outcomes in employment relations?* Moreover, choice of class theory is important because different schemas exist and each has implications for how we conceptualise, analyse and theorise class when we set out to identify structural causes ‘relating to control over power resources attached to different occupations’ (Barone *et al.*, 2022: 2). And this potential is explored by firstly engaging the question of allocation to particular class positions where ‘sets of community opportunities’ are achieved by individuals via a ‘basic mechanism’ of ‘position construction and allocation’ (Lawson and Morgan, 2021: 206).