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Taking matters into one's own hands? Addressing the relational nature of FLE autonomy

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ABSTRACT

Frontline autonomy, commonly defined as decision-making power distributed to frontline employees (FLEs), has received an increasing amount of attention from scholars and practitioners alike. Despite the many fruitful efforts within this longstanding field of study, the literature is divided on the proper conceptualization of FLE autonomy. One way to integrate extant insights may be to see FLE autonomy as a relational phenomenon. Hence, the present study suggests that research on FLE autonomy should examine the dynamic and relational interplay among management, FLEs, and customers. In this paper, I address this issue by reviewing the extant literature in order to develop a relational model of FLE autonomy.

1. Introduction

Frontline autonomy, which generally refers to decision-making power distributed to frontline employees (FLEs) (Andersen & Nielsen, 2009; Bowen & Lawler III 1992, 2006; Pedersen, 2019a), has been subjected to increasing attention from service scholars and practitioners alike (e.g., Bowen & Lawler III 1992; Chebat & Kollias, 2000; Pedersen, 2019b; Schepers, Falk, de Ruyter, de Jong, & Hammerschmidt, 2012). Notably, "human autonomy, or self-determination, has occupied philosophers, both Eastern and Western, since the onset of recorded thought" (Ryan & Deci, 2006, p. 1560).

Given the promises of FLE autonomy, both the longstanding interest in this topic and the recent increase in the amount of attention it receives are understandable. Autonomy, for instance, has been linked to reduced stress (Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2008) and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2006), which, in turn, affect work engagement and innovative work behavior (Bowen & Lawler III, 1992; De Spiegelaere, Van Gyes, & Hootegem, 2016). Moreover, autonomy is viewed as a means to ensure customer stewardship (Schepers et al., 2012), organizational agility, and responsiveness (Andersen & Nielsen, 2009). As such, FLE autonomy seems to be the ideal operating mode for service firms in an ever-evolving and increasingly competitive landscape (Felin & Powell, 2016; Gino, 2018; Hamel, 2000; Hamel, 2011; Wilson et al., 2008). Yet, research into autonomy has also been criticized for not sufficiently taking the role of management into account (Foss & Klein, 2014) and for ignoring the construct's multidimensionality (De Spiegelaere et al., 2016; Pedersen, 2019a).

Despite the many fruitful efforts in this longstanding field of study (see Table 1 for illustrative examples), research into autonomy exhibits an interesting paradox: On the one hand, the literature stream is fragmented into different definitions and perspectives (e.g. De Spiegelaere et al., 2016, see also Table 2). On the other hand, despite having definition diversity, many autonomy studies include aspects of relational elements which suggest that autonomy is inherently relational (e.g. autonomy being mandated, allowed and judged by someone else (Gulati, 2018; Pedersen, 2019b)). The latter point is particularly paradoxical, as what may reconcile the literature is that it implicitly emphasizes relational elements of FLE autonomy without being intentional about it - and despite being about individual decision making. The paradox suggests (i) that we need to synthesize the studies of FLE autonomy, (ii) that the potential for integration may lie in the overlooked, but important, topic of the relational nature of autonomy – and (iii) that doing so is important, as few conceptual advances can be made without consistency in perspectives. My main contention is therefore the counterintuitive insight that FLE autonomy should not be conceptualized solely as being concerned with individual decision making, as it is actually a multi-actor relational phenomenon. Such a (re)conceptualization is arguably substantial, as it transforms the construct from being perceived as mainly individual decision making to being concerned with collective decision making.

Drawing upon MacInnis (2011) framework for conceptual contributions, I therefore seek to conceptualize FLE autonomy through *relating*: First, by subdividing the construct into different types, i.e. *differentiating* to clarify and understand how FLE autonomy may

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Table 1
Illustrative studies.

Author(s)	Journal	Type of study	Findings relevant to FLE autonomy
Kraemer, Gouthier, and Heidenreich (2017)	JSR	Quantitative	Autonomy positively influences performance acknowledgment.
Zablah, Sirianni, Korschun, Gremler, and Beatty (2017)	JSR	Conceptual	Dyadic autonomy moderates the positive effect of the shared frontline experience on relationship-sustaining behaviors.
Oluwafemi, Mitchelmore, and Nikolopoulos (2020)	JBR	Quantitative	Leadership behaviors affect employee innovation behaviors.
Coelho, Evanschitzky, Sousa, Olya, and Taheri (2020)	JBR	Quantitative	Organizations can rely on management orientations and control mechanisms to guide the creativity of FLEs.
Du, Zhang, and Tekleab (2018)	JBR	Quantitative	Job strain, job control and POS have direct effects on in-role performance.
Wilder, Collier, and Barnes (2014)	JSR	Quantitative	Effective customer service requires management to provide FLEs with a certain amount of autonomy to respond to issues in the service encounter.
Schepers et al. (2012)	JM	Quantitative	Employee autonomy and team autonomy are positively related to customer stewardship control.
Yu, Patterson, and de Ruyter (2013)	JSR	Mixed methods	Autonomy is positively related to sales-service ambidexterity at the individual and branch levels.
Coelho and Augusto (2010)	JSR	Quantitative	To promote creative behaviors, service managers should consider increasing employee job autonomy, variety, feedback, and identity.
Marinova, Ye, and Singh (2008)	JM	Quantitative	Frontline autonomy mediates the positive impact of productivity and quality orientations on revenue and customer satisfaction and the negative impact on efficiency.

Table 2
Overview of selected definitions of autonomy.

Author(s)	Definitions of autonomy
Andersen and Nielsen (2009, p. 96)	"[A]llowing lower level responsive actions monitored by middle managers without top management approval"
Bailyn (1985, p. 129)	"This article distinguishes between 'strategic autonomy' (the freedom to set one's own research agenda) and 'operational autonomy' (the freedom, once a problem has been set, to attack it by means determined by oneself, within given resource constraints)"
Brock (2003, p. 58)	"Autonomy may be defined as the degree to which one may make significant decisions without the consent of others"
De Spiegelaere et al. (2016, p. 517)	"We distinguish between a total of four dimensions of job autonomy. First, *work method autonomy* refers to the discretion of employees on how to perform the work tasks in terms of procedures and work methods. Second, *work scheduling autonomy* refers to the discretion of employees on when to perform which work task. Third, *work time autonomy* refers to the discretions of employees on when to stop and start working. Last, *locational autonomy* refers to the discretion of employee on where to perform the work tasks"
Greenhaus and Callanan (1994, p. 11)	"Having substantial freedom to select work projects, to decide how a job gets accomplished, and to set work schedules"
Hackman and Oldham (1975, p. 162)	"[T]he degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out"
Liu, Chen, and Yao (2011, p. 3)	"[T]he freedom of choice to engage in activities"
Pedersen (2019b, p. 3)	"[T]he local self-determination of employees, i.e., employees act independently, and they do not ask management for permission to take action or to introduce new initiatives"
Ryan and Deci (2006, p. 1562)	"Within SDT, *autonomy* retains its primary etymological meaning of self-governance, or rule by the self… SDT specifically distinguishes autonomy from independence, noting that one can, for example, be autonomously dependent, or forced into independence"
Schepers et al. (2012, p. 12), based on Kirkman and Rosen (1999)	"[E]mployee autonomy refers to the degree to which an employee has the power to make decisions, plan work activities, and adapt to changing conditions"
Turner and Lawrence (1965, p. 21)	"[T]he discretion the worker is expected to exercise… in carrying out the assigned task activities"
Wertenbroch et al. (2020)	"[A]bility to make and enact decisions on their own, free from external influences imposed by other agents"
Wertenbroch et al. (2020)	*Actual autonomy*: "the extent to which a person can make and enact their own decisions." *Perceived autonomy*: "the individual's subjective sense of being able to make and enact decisions of their own volition"
Wilson et al. (2008, p. 283)	"[G]iving employees the desire, skills, tools and authority to serve the customer"

materialize itself through different forms. Second, by suggesting that the relational dimension of FLE autonomy is a way to reconcile differences in FLE autonomy, i.e. *integrating* to develop a relational model which is consistent with the different forms of FLE autonomy. Such an approach is similarly consistent with Jaakkola (2020) conceptualization of theory synthesis.

A relational understanding of FLE autonomy is furthermore consistent with seminal work in service marketing: Here, it is assumed that service episodes comprise interactions between FLEs and customers, and that management plays a key role in setting customers' expectations prior to those episodes and in enabling FLEs to deliver the service promise (Bitner, 1995; Gronroos, 1990; Kotler, 1994; Wilson et al., 2008).

A relational understanding of FLE autonomy is important for a number of reasons. First, we need a better understanding of how relational components can both create variance in FLE autonomy behavior and can tie the stream better together. Second, a better understanding of the relational nature of FLE autonomy may help shed light on the inherent complexity of FLE autonomy, which has been noted as a general blind spot in the literature (e.g., De Spiegelaere et al., 2016; Pedersen, 2019a). The theoretical implications of these shortcomings are severe, as they can result in flawed theorizing and inappropriate empirical testing, leaving us unable to understand the true nature of FLE autonomy. Moreover, without integration, the literature stream may remain fragmented, which may limit the conceptual advances moving forward. Hence, these shortcomings need to be addressed.

In this paper, I help close this research gap by reviewing the extant literature to develop a relational model of FLE autonomy. The model draws upon the services-marketing triangle (e.g., Bitner, 1995; Gronroos, 1990; Kotler, 1994; Wilson et al., 2008), deviance and conformity (e.g., Gino, 2018; Hochstein, Bonney, & Clark, 2015; Warren, 2003), and customer reactions (e.g., Eggert & Ulaga, 2002; McDougall & Levesque, 2000; Thomke, 2019). The motivation for focusing on these specific literature streams in developing the model is as follows: The services-marketing triangle (Bitner, 1995; Gronroos, 1990; Kotler, 1994; Wilson et al., 2008) is a well-established service marketing model that (i) provides a triadic, relational perspective on service episodes and (ii) is therefore consistent with the aim of developing a relational model for

FLE autonomy. The choices of deviance and conformity (e.g., Gino, 2018; Hochstein et al., 2015; Warren, 2003), and customer reactions (e.g., Eggert & Ulaga, 2002; McDougall & Levesque, 2000; Thomke, 2019) flow directly from the choice of the services-marketing triangle, as deviance/conformity is a well-established literature that is relevant for the internal component of the triangle, and customer reactions are relevant for the external and interactional components of the triangle. Moreover, all three literature streams deal with relations, making them particularly useful for developing the model and addressing the gap in research. Hence, they are mutually consistent in developing the model and pursuing the research objective.

Against this backdrop, I seek to answer the following research question: *How can FLE autonomy be (re)conceptualized as a relational phenomenon?* This paper contributes by: (i) developing a typology of FLE autonomy, which is necessary to better distinguish among different types of autonomy and concurrently tie the dispersed literature streams closer together, (ii) developing a relational conceptualization of FLE autonomy that integrates the literature and takes the different types of autonomy into account and explains related behaviors, and (iii) proposing a research agenda to guide future work in this important area.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, I review the extant literature and various definitions of autonomy. I also examine conformity and deviance in relation to autonomy as well as the various types of FLE autonomy. Thereafter, I introduce a relational conceptualization of FLE autonomy, after which I present potential avenues for future research and my concluding remarks.

2. Background

2.1. Definitions of autonomy

Autonomy is a multi-faceted concept (De Spiegelaere et al., 2016) that has been addressed in a variety of disciplines for a multitude of purposes (see Table 2). While most definitions agree that autonomy presumes that employees have self-governance privileges over the *means* in a job, they differ with respect to the degree to which employees are expected to have self-governance privileges over the *ends* in a job. Moreover, the definitions are inconclusive as to whether autonomy is *given* by managers (i.e., assigned as a formal mandate) or *taken* by employees (i.e., initiative taking due to personal or psycho-social characteristics). As a result, autonomy has been conceptualized in different ways. Moreover, little consolidation and cross-fertilization have occurred among the various approaches, resulting in dispersed conceptualizations and a tendency to perceive autonomy in rather simplified ways (Pedersen, 2019a). In the following, I present a few of the predominant ways of understanding autonomy.

One way of conceptualizing autonomy is as an individual ability to make choices and determine the path of one's life (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Individual self-determination presumes individualized decision making and agency, and as such, represents a perspective on the most fundamental level of human experience and, therefore, potentially the most abstract conceptualization for analyses in an FLE context. However, individual decision making is typically "nested" in different groups and structures.

Another stream of literature views autonomy from a group perspective. In this literature, the decision authority of teams is the focal point, and the subsequent effects are often quantified and assessed. Where the literature described above focuses on individuals' decision making and how it affects their motivation, this stream understands autonomy from a group perspective, such that decision making is viewed as collective but autonomous from a larger structure. Frontline operations are increasingly structured into self-managing autonomous teams, where "the whole team, rather than a hierarchical leader, takes responsibility for performance," which "motivates frontline employees to grow and take ownership of customer problems" (Schepers et al., 2012, p. 13). Felin and Powell (2016) provide a conceptualization in which team autonomy takes the form of polyarchy, which denotes a system in which power is widely distributed among individuals. They give the example of Valve, where employees are able to green-light their own projects in smaller teams. Another example is Spotify, which subdivides decision-making authority into smaller teams through a matrix organization that balances autonomy and accountability (Mankins & Garton, 2017). A third example is found in de Jong, de Ruyter, and Lemmink (2004), who studied the antecedents and consequences of the service climate in boundary-spanning, self-managing teams. Here, the emphasis on self-managing teams is an example of a group-level autonomy construct, which is particularly relevant for a service context.

Autonomy can also be perceived from a structural perspective. In other words, how does the organizational structure foster or limit autonomy, and how is a formal mandate for autonomous units incorporated into the organizational structure? This stream of literature draws on, for instance, ambidexterity theory, as it states that units focused on exploration must be free of structural strains and given decision-making autonomy through a structure that prioritizes exploitation. The ambidexterity literature emphasizes introducing "dual structures" in which certain business units focus on alignment while others focus on adaptation (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). Moreover, the autonomy of these business units is instrumental for their success in achieving their dual purposes.

Hence, the three levels—individuals, groups, and structure—are interrelated. Individuals can make their own decisions within autonomous teams because they have a formalized mandate to do so within the designated organizational structure. Moreover, individual choices may clash with team choices, which, in turn, may conflict with broader organizational objectives.

However, the nature of autonomy is not solely predicated upon the level at which it is viewed. For instance, there is work-method autonomy, work-scheduling autonomy, work-time autonomy and locational autonomy (De Spiegelaere et al., 2016, p. 517). In other words, autonomy varies in terms of non-managers being able to decide what to do as well as how, when, and where to do it.[1] In addition, several factors may affect autonomy, such as time (e.g., Do FLEs have time to be autonomous?), society (e.g., Do the environment and culture allow for individual freedom?), and industry (e.g., Is it a stable or dynamic industry?). All of these factors may affect the prevalence of FLE autonomy, making the topic of FLE autonomy inherently complex.

In order to determine the contours within which the different definitions may co-exist, we can distinguish between *actual* and *perceived* autonomy. According to Wertenbroch et al. (2020, p. 431), *actual autonomy* relates to "the extent to which a person can make and enact their own decisions," whereas *perceived autonomy* relates to "the individual's subjective sense of being able to make and enact decisions of their own volition." Notably, we can distinguish between deciding on the *content of work* (e.g., Bailyn, 1985; Brock, 2003) and deciding on *the process surrounding the work* (e.g., De Spiegelaere et al., 2016; Hackman & Oldham, 1975). In so doing, different scenarios for autonomy emerge within which the definitions can be placed (Fig. 1).

Despite this diversity in definitions, it can be argued that many of the definitions of autonomy include aspects of relational elements, as autonomous decisions are never made in a vacuum, but are always enacted in relation to existing contextual processes, practices and perceptions. Therefore, the commonality of the seemingly disparate understandings of autonomy is arguably the relational component. Put differently, one might conclude that autonomy is inherently relational based on the many definitions – albeit it has not been explicitly conceptualized as such. The first step in further developing such a relational conceptualization of autonomy is to review how individuals relate to others and how that is relevant for autonomy.

[1] https://cmr.berkeley.edu/2021/01/preparing-for-a-new-era-of-work/

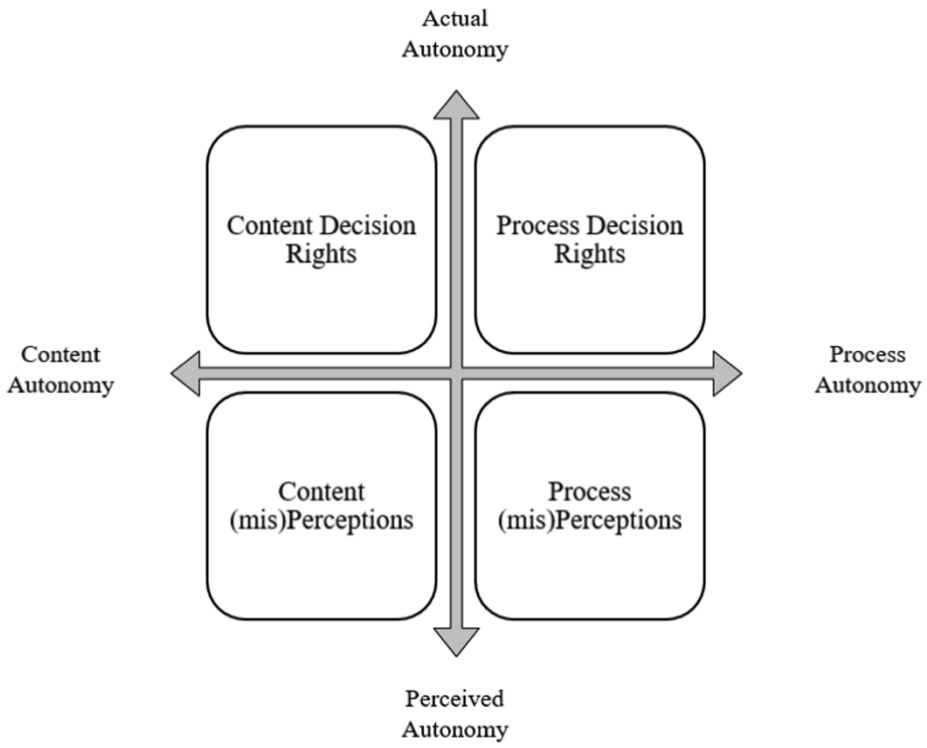

Fig. 1. Different understandings of autonomy.

2.2. Conformity versus deviance in autonomy

Conformity and deviance refer to individuals' adherence to (*conformity*) or departure from (*deviance*) the rules and norms of a reference group (Warren, 2003). As such, the constructs capture the intricate interplay among individuals embedded in groups. Hence, they highlight how individuals can influence group outcomes and how groups can influence individual behavior.

Autonomy deals with individuals making choices on their own. Such choices will either be different than those stipulated by the organization's norms, values, or rules (deviance), or within the confines of those norms, values, or rules (conformity). This distinction is important—although both conformity and deviance entail autonomy, they represent different forms of autonomy with different implications. Hence, considering autonomy from a deviance/conformity perspective helps explain the heterogeneity of the phenomenon.

The constructs of conformity and deviance are rooted in sociology. Two general approaches divide the sociological literature on deviance. One is the social-labeling approach in which deviant behavior is seen as a social construct with both positive and negative views of deviance (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Warren, 2003). In the second approach, deviance is seen as behaviors that reflect dysfunctional aspects of society (Merton, 1949; Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Warren, 2003).

Warren (2003) borrows from these two sociological traditions to develop an integrative typology of deviance, and argues that conformity and deviance can be both destructive and constructive in nature. As noted by Hochstein et al. (2015, p. 303) "deviance is a dyadic phenomenon that includes a social reaction whereby the act is judged to be against social norms." Warren (2003) posits that the act of deviating from reference-group norms should be seen in relation to adherence to "hypernorms." For instance, a whistleblower in a bank may break a reference-group norm of keeping dishonest or illegal business practices secret, but he or she arguably adheres to a global (and more ethical) hypernorm of behaving in a truthful manner. Hence, the whistleblower is constructively deviant from a societal perspective, although his or her colleagues may not see this act in the same light. Similarly, Gino (2018) posits that deviance can have positive benefits for individuals and organizations. Deviance can also be destructive, as seen in large-profile scandals in which individuals act opportunistically at the expense of their organizations' well-being.

Conformity explains how we can downplay our personal preferences in order to adhere to the social norms of a group (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Conformity can also have both constructive and destructive connotations (Sunstein, 2019). When conformity is constructive, it helps a group perform by providing social adhesiveness, alignment, and coordination in the form of shared visions, guidelines, values, and norms. Conformity is destructive when those visions, guidelines, values, and norms are not beneficial for the group as a whole but individual members still adhere to them without questions or protest (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). Hence, the constructs of conformity and deviance embody some conceptual ambiguity, as they can have different implications for the performance of a group of individuals. Therefore, when applying the constructs, we must be cognizant not only of the distinction suggested by Warren (2003) but also of the context within which autonomy takes place.

2.3. Autonomy in a service context

FLE autonomy typically takes place within a service context, although product-service hybrids are also common avenues for this type of autonomy. In the service domain, FLEs play a pivotal role in the customer experience. This role relates to the *inseparability* of a service, which arises because a service is produced and consumed at the same time (Wilson et al., 2008). Consequently, FLE autonomy may be important for providing a satisfying customer experience. Yet, due to the *variability* of services (Wilson et al., 2008), many firms seek to minimize potential variance in FLE behaviors by introducing standards and guidelines in pursuit of stability in perceived service quality (Thomke, 2019). As noted by Thomke (2019), such controls may also limit the organization's capacity to exceed customers' expectations, which is typically driven by autonomous FLE efforts, as both negative and positive outlier experiences are minimized through the use of guidelines and

standards.

The two extremes of FLE service delivery can be conceptualized as *the production-line approach to service* (comprising efforts to face the customer with standardized, procedurally-driven operations) and *the empowered approach to service* (comprising efforts to face the customer with a "free of rules" approach focused on doing whatever is necessary to satisfy the customer) (Bowen & Lawler III, 1992). In the production-line approach, service operations are made more efficient by applying a manufacturing logic with little room for variance or personal initiative, as made famous by McDonald's. In contrast, the empowered approach suggests that FLEs should be "let loose" to encourage and reward FLE discretion (Bowen & Lawler III, 1992). Rather than viewing these two approaches as two ends of a continuum, I suggest that it is possible to combine elements of the two in service delivery, as the notion of empowerment suggests that FLE autonomy is mandated and enabled through certain guidelines.

In a service context, the issues of inseparability and variability are crucial for understanding the importance of FLE autonomy. FLE autonomy cannot be separated from the service experienced by customers. Therefore, it is an important parameter on which to compete. Due to the variability in service delivery, organizations may want to minimize variance through controls and, thereby, foster conformity. However, in so doing, they may limit the likelihood of expectation-exceeding behaviors, which often originate from autonomous efforts. As a result, FLE autonomy must be seen in relation to both managerial directives and customers' expectations and perceptions, as they form the context within which FLE autonomy is effectuated to deliver services[2]. More specifically, FLEs may be caught between management's directives and customers' expectations. As a result, the loyalty of FLEs may be tested. These intricate dynamics suggest that there is a triadic relationship among management, FLEs, and customers in which promises are made and delivered, as proposed by the services triangle (Bitner, 1995; Wilson et al., 2008). As such, the dynamics of the service triangle are arguably important for our understanding of FLE autonomy, as they address how service promises are made, enabled, and delivered in the interplay among management, FLEs, and customers (Wilson et al., 2008). Hence, FLE autonomy can be conceptualized in relation to this complex interplay between conformity and deviance relative to managerial guidelines and customers' experiences.

2.4. FLE autonomy typology

Research into FLE autonomy has not closely examined the construct's heterogeneity.[3] Despite the variety of available studies, little work has focused on integrating the heterogeneous contributions in the literature (De Spiegelaere et al., 2016). Therefore, we lack an overview of the multiple types of autonomy that can be expected in an FLE context. The development of such an overview is critical for any additional theorizing on the construct, as "autonomy" currently serves as an umbrella term covering widely different forms of autonomous behavior. Autonomy can be subdivided according to whether or not it is 'allowed' in the organization (e.g. Warren, 2003). Drawing on Warren (2003) and Hochstein et al. (2015), I develop a typology by juxtaposing FLE autonomy with customer reactions (Figs. 2 and 3). The choice of dimensions that comprise the 2 × 2 matrix draws upon existing work on constructive deviance (Warren, 2003; Hochstein et al., 2015) which posits that conformity and deviance (which are closely related to employee autonomy) should be assessed in terms of their outcome (positive or negative) in relation to e.g. hypernorms or performance. In a service-marketing context, the most relevant outcome variable to utilize is arguably customer reactions. It follows, that the two chosen dimensions for the matrix are FLE autonomy (whether it is conforming or deviant) and customer reactions to this autonomy (disappointed or delighted). These dimensions are similarly consistent with the service-marketing triangle (Bitner, 1995), as discussed in the introduction, and they both entail an inherently relational perspective.

The first broad distinction is whether FLE autonomy is *mandated*, such that management issues a formal mandate that provides employees with autonomy (e.g., Andersen & Nielsen, 2009), or alternatively, if FLE autonomy is more *maverick*, such that it is taken by employees without a formal mandate (e.g., Hamel, 2000; see also Pedersen & Ritter, 2019). This distinction represents a continuum between conformity and deviance in FLE behavior in relation to company rules, processes, values, and norms (e.g., Hochstein et al., 2015). Although rules, processes, values, and norms may be directly imposed by top management, they may also originate from district or branch management – or be influenced by external forces such as the state, boards or associations. In any given case, there is a framework which stipulates how employees *should* behave and what the boundaries for FLE autonomy are. While the mandate-maverick continuum has been widely discussed in the fields of sociology (Merton, 1949; Bennett & Robinson, 2000), psychology (Gino, 2018), and general management (Warren, 2003), little work has been conducted within the services field, although studies from, for instance, psychology have often focused on service contexts (e.g., Gino, 2018). However, the mandate versus maverick dichotomy loosely resembles *the production-line approach to service* versus *the empowered approach to service* (Bowen & Lawler III, 1992).

The second broad distinction concerns the impact of FLE autonomy on the customer's experience. In a service context, it is crucial to consider the effect of FLE behavior on customer satisfaction (Wilson et al., 2008). Often, it is difficult to distinguish between the perceived service encounter and the perceived quality of the service (Wilson et al.,

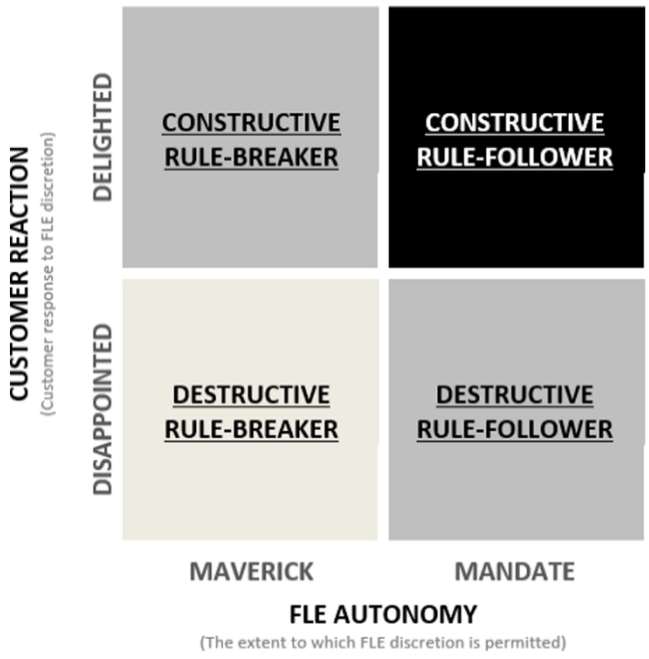

Fig. 2. Typology of FLE autonomy.

[2] It must be acknowledged that additional layers can be added to the introduction of rules to create conformity in autonomy efforts: For instance, district and branch management may have conflicting priorities relative to autonomy (including the layer above district management), and differences in policies may also be seen among franchisees vs. non-franchises. Moreover, management does not make rules/policies in a vacuum, as state, boards and associations may similarly influence these. Hence, there are additional layers of complexity that can be added. I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for raising these points.

[3] By "heterogeneity of the construct," I refer to the different kinds of FLE autonomy that may arise. Moreover, it must be noted that a non-linear relationship may exist between FLE behavior and outcome.

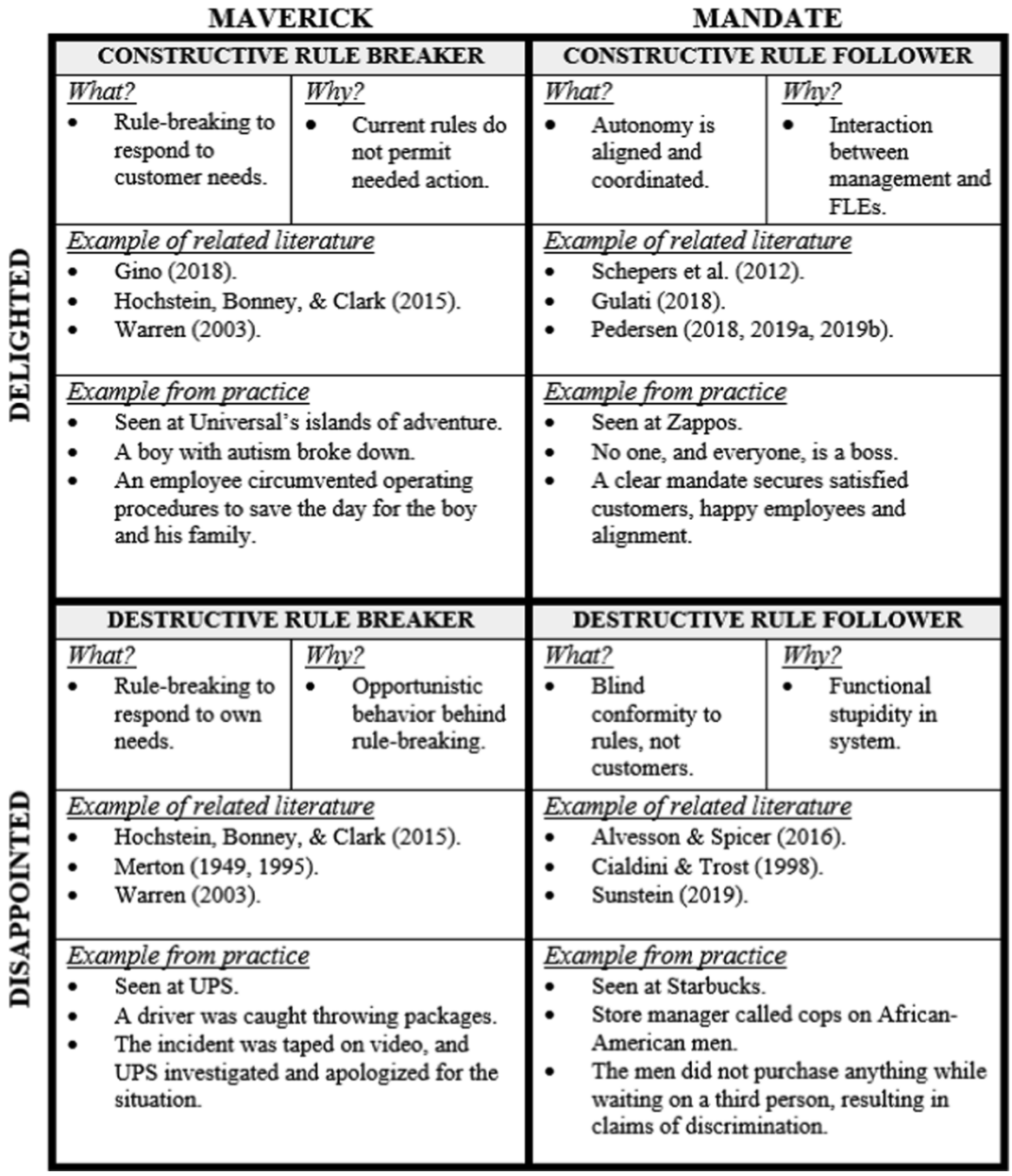

Fig. 3. Extended typology of FLE autonomy (Examples from practice are described in the following links: https://www.npr.org/2015/07/21/421148128/zappos-a-workplace-where-no-one-and-everyone-is-the-boss. https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/08/health/boy-with-autism-theme-park-trnd/index.html. https://www.mashed.com/144844/the-biggest-scandals-to-ever-hit-starbucks/. https://www.ajc.com/news/national/ups-apologizes-after-driver-caught-throwing-packages-video/lH6xEzkncWfm3crCGghuhP/).

2008). The latter relates to whether FLE autonomy results in high customer satisfaction because expectations are surpassed (e.g., Thomke, 2019) or in customer disappointment because expectations are not met (e.g., Wilson et al., 2008). As such, the distinction represents a continuum between satisfaction and dissatisfaction among customers. This continuum is well described in the service literature (e.g., McDougall & Levesque, 2000) and marketing literature (Eggert & Ulaga, 2002). However, little work has been done to integrate FLE autonomy with customer experience.

The two distinguishing features can be related to each other in a matrix (Fig. 2), which creates an overview of four forms of FLE autonomy and resultant customer experiences. As the dimensions are continuums rather than strictly binary options, the resultant cells should be seen as typological archetypes – that is, approximations of the real world. In the following, I explain each of the different forms of FLE autonomy.

Mandated autonomy resulting in customer dissatisfaction is termed "FLE as a destructive rule follower." It is defined as autonomy that takes place within predefined managerial boundaries and results in customer dissatisfaction. It has also been described as "herd behavior" or "functional stupidity" (e.g., Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). An example of this form of autonomy was seen in a case of alleged racial profiling at Starbucks in 2018. Two African-American men were arrested for not making a purchase at a Philadelphia Starbucks while they were waiting to meet a third man.[4] The store manager arguably had mandated autonomy to call the police, but a more specific mandate would likely have prevented the

[4] https://www.mashed.com/144844/the-biggest-scandals-to-ever-hit-starbucks/

ensuing escalation of events.[5]

When autonomy is maverick and leads to disappointment among customers, the phenomenon is termed "FLE as a destructive rule breaker." It is defined as autonomy that occurs outside predefined managerial boundaries and results in customer dissatisfaction. It has also been described as "negative deviance" (e.g., Hochstein et al., 2015). Examples are found, for instance, in carriers mishandling packages they are tasked with delivering.[6] As the carrier generally does not have the mandate to use autonomy in terms of how a package should be delivered and as such autonomy destroys value for customers, FLEs are destructive rule breakers in such cases.

Autonomy that is maverick but results in customer delight is termed "FLE as a constructive rule breaker," although it has also been referred to as "stealth innovation" (Miller & Wedell-Wedellsborg, 2013), "corporate insurrection" (Hamel, 2000), and "going underground" (Criscuolo, Salter, & Ter Wal, 2014). It is defined as autonomy that emerges outside predefined managerial boundaries and results in customer satisfaction. An example of this type of autonomy was seen at Universal's Islands of Adventure theme park, where a boy with autism had a meltdown and several employees circumvented the standard operating procedures by taking autonomy they had not been given to help the boy, resulting in a positive customer experience.[7]

"FLE as a constructive rule follower" denotes that FLEs have a mandate to be autonomous and that customers are pleased. It is defined as autonomy that occurs within predefined managerial boundaries and results in customer satisfaction. This approach has also been described as "rebel behavior" (Gino, 2018), "license to be defiant" (House & Price, 2009), and "permitted ambidexterity" (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2011). An example is seen at Zappos, where FLEs have the mandate to make their own judgments on how to help a customer, whether doing so entails engaging in hours of conversation or sending gift baskets to customers, without asking a manager for approval.[8] As FLEs have a clear mandate to be autonomous, and as this discretionary behavior is valued by customers, these FLEs are constructive rule followers.

While there is a contingency argument regarding which type of autonomy is optimal in certain circumstances (i.e., the situation dictates the optimal type), it is clearly more beneficial for firm performance if the autonomous behavior is constructive rather than destructive. Given these explanations of the various types of FLE autonomy, it is relevant to conceptualize a frame within which the mechanisms underlying this variety can be unfolded and explained.

3. A relational conceptualization of FLE autonomy

In this section, I introduce a conceptual model for relational FLE autonomy, which draws on the services-marketing triangle described by Bitner (1995), Gronroos (1990), Kotler (1994), and Wilson et al. (2008) (Fig. 4), and builds upon the preceding review. According to Bitner (1995), services are made up of promises that are made to customers and kept. Accordingly, the general service experience comprises a triadic relationship among management, FLEs, and customers. Management makes promises to customers (*external marketing*), those promises are enabled in the relationship between management and FLEs (*internal marketing*), and they are kept in the encounter between FLEs and customers (*interactive marketing*). Simply put, the services-marketing triangle will collapse if parts of the triangle are not fully aligned (Bitner, 1995; Gronroos, 1990; Kotler, 1994; Wilson et al., 2008).

I suggest that the phenomenon of FLE autonomy should be understood as a relational process involving these three key actors (management, FLEs, and customers). In this process, management sets the scene for FLE autonomy by making and enabling the promise, and customers assess the value of FLE autonomy by judging the extent to which it delivers on the promises made. FLEs effectuate the autonomous decisions. However, as discussed above, their discretionary decisions are predicated by others. Hence, FLE autonomy is a complex phenomenon affected by different (inter)relationships. That complexity increases when considering the individual and structural factors that may influence each of the actors involved. In the following, I examine the main components that influence FLE autonomy.

Management plays a key role in both the service triangle and the fostering of FLE autonomy to support the delivery of the service. More specifically, management makes the promise to customers by explicating the value proposition through external marketing and, thereby, sets customer expectations[9]. At the same time, management must enable the service promise. In our context, this entails giving FLEs an autonomy mandate. Different forms of autonomy can be given (i.e., formally permitted in an official mandate and/or given through supportive structural or temporal conditions). More specifically, work-method, work-scheduling, work-time, and locational autonomy can be provided either discretely or in certain combinations (De Spiegelaere et al., 2016, p. 517). In other words, managers can give FLEs autonomy to decide what work to do as well as how, when, and where to do it (Preparing for a New Era of Work). Notably, the external promise may influence the internal enablement of the promise through auto-communicative effects – that is, management may be the sender of a promise through external channels which also hits the internal employees (receivers) (Christensen, 1997). Stated differently, external communication modes "often function as auto-communicative devices by way of which corporations tell themselves what they would like to be in the future" (Christensen, 1997, p. 202). The goal of these auto-communicative efforts is often to target internal stakeholders through external media which carries higher legitimacy of the message as well as increased awareness from the employees (Christensen, 1997).

The service triangle suggests that service encounters involve three important actors (management, FLEs, customers) who interact in intricate and interdependent ways to create the customer experience. Such interdependencies suggest that the phenomenon of FLE autonomy should be seen from a relational and triadic perspective. In the following, I focus on the internal interactions that comprise the enablement of the FLE autonomy needed to sufficiently deliver on the service promise to customers.

3.1. The role of FLE autonomy in services marketing

When discussing FLE autonomy from the service-triangle perspective, the internal component of the framework is particularly relevant, as this is the domain in which an autonomy mandate can be provided to FLEs. Thus, the internal and interactional components of the services-marketing triangle can be further elaborated in a two-by-two matrix (Fig. 5) in which the enablement and delivery of the service promise (Fig. 4) are combined with the proposed typology of FLE autonomy (Figs. 2 and 3). This integration, or synthesis, of models is important, as it suggests that a relational conceptualization of FLE autonomy can help explain the emergence of different forms of autonomy. That is, the four different archetypes of FLE autonomy can be integrated into the internal component of the services marketing triangle, in terms of whether or not each type emerges from the interplay between service promise

[5] https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2018/starbucks-ceo-reprehensible-outcome-in-philadelphia-incident/

[6] http://dontthrowmypackage.com/

[7] https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/08/health/boy-with-autism-theme-park-trnd/index.html

[8] https://www.npr.org/2015/07/21/421148128/zappos-a-workplace-where-no-one-and-everyone-is-the-boss?t=1617698820337

[9] Of course, this presumes that accurate messages can be sent and understood in the same way as intended by receivers, which does not always happen, and thereby creates a service gap (see also the service quality gap model in Wilson et al. (2008)). I am thankful for an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

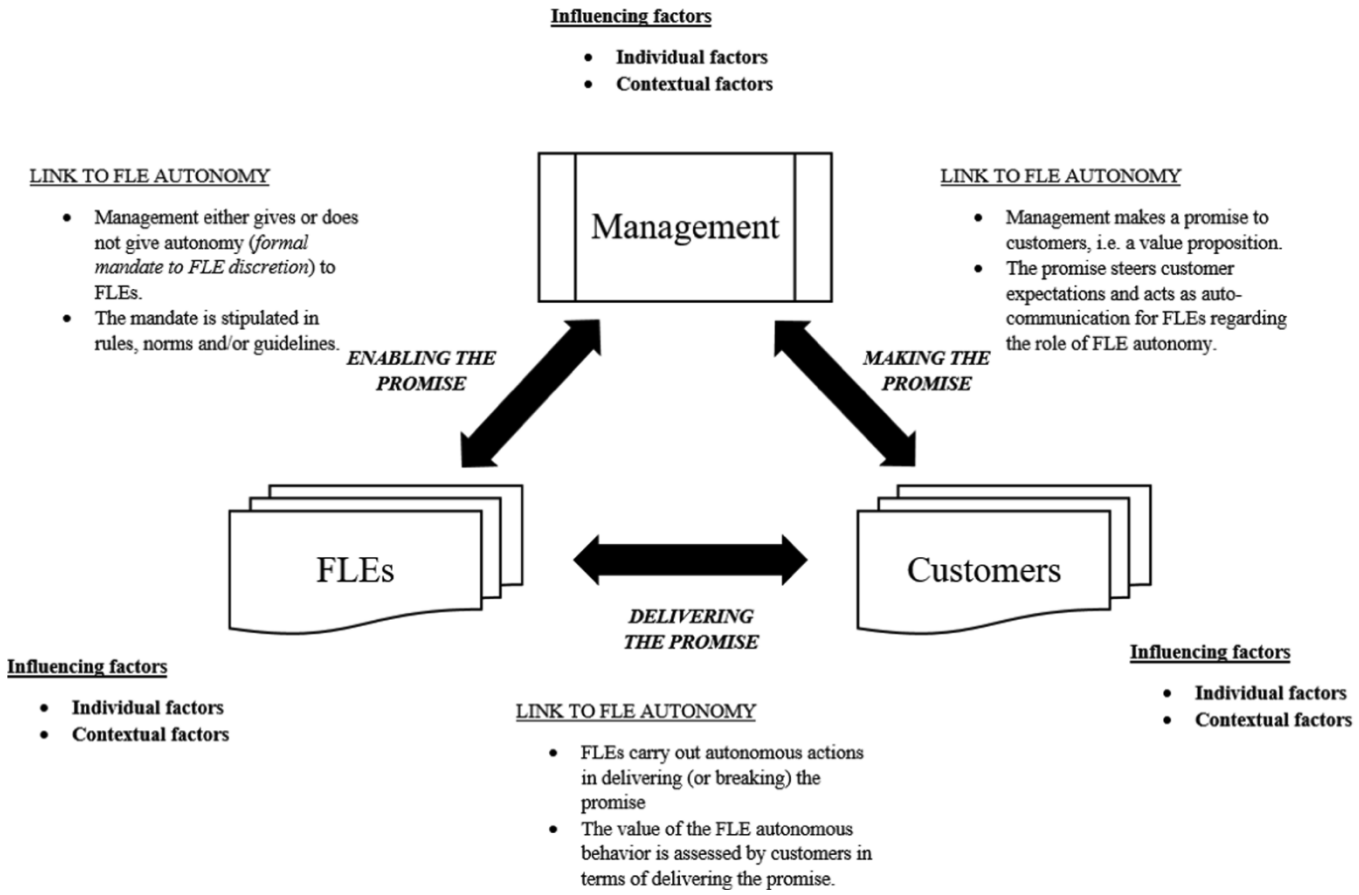

Fig. 4. FLE autonomy in the service-marketing triangle.

enablement and service promise delivery. More specifically, for FLEs to deliver on the service promise, management must enable the promise. Hence, efforts must typically be aligned to ensure a successful service experience for customers. Nevertheless, FLE autonomy can take different forms depending on the (mis)alignment, and Fig. 5 pinpoints

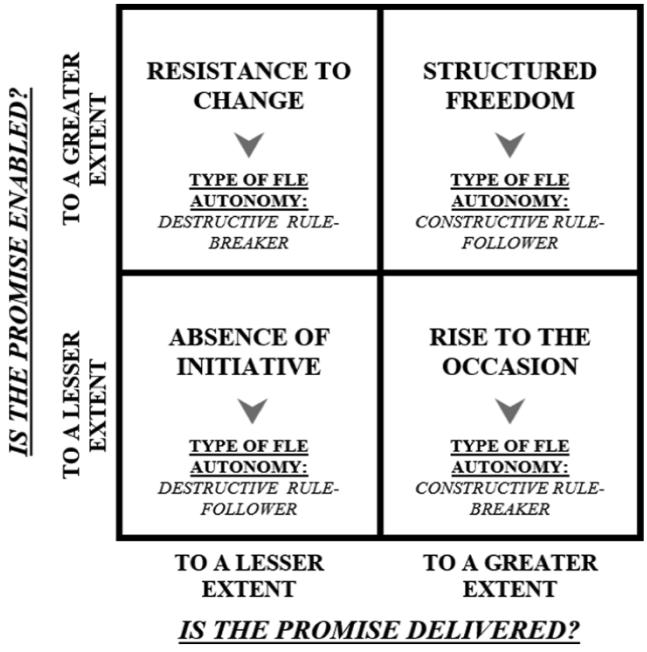

Fig. 5. FLE autonomy in the enablement versus delivery of service promises.

when the different FLE autonomy types are likely to appear due to the interplays in the services triangle.

When the enablement of the service promise and the delivery of the service promise are combined as two distinct dimensions in a two-by-two matrix, four possible scenarios emerge for which we can discuss the suitability of each type of autonomy, i.e. when it is likely to see the emergence of the different FLE autonomy types discussed in Figs. 2 and 3. Therefore, this integration explains the mechanisms underlying the variance in FLE autonomy in different service settings.

For instance, a situation in which the service promise is both enabled and delivered takes the form of "structured freedom" in which FLEs have a formal mandate to be autonomous within certain predefined boundaries. As such, this scenario fits well with the constructive rule follower, as FLEs are free to make decisions on their own as long as they follow the predefined boundaries established and enabled by management. Hence, the FLEs are simultaneously self-managing and conforming. As such, this scenario combines elements of *the production-line approach to service* and *the empowered approach to service* (Bowen & Lawler III, 1992), although there is arguably more empowerment than in the production-line approach.

When a promise is not enabled but is still delivered by FLEs, we find a "rise to the occasion" scenario in which FLEs break from daily operations to save the service experience. This scenario is in line with being a "constructive rule breaker," as FLEs break from standard operating procedures and/or their mandates in order to save the customer experience. Hence, FLEs are deviant but that deviance has a positive effect on the customer experience (Warren, 2003).

When the service promise is enabled but not delivered, the scenario represents "resistance to change." This scenario can be symptomatic of "destructive rule breakers," as FLEs (pro)actively sabotage the successful delivery of the promise. Hence, the FLEs are deviant and that deviance

has a negative effect on the customer experience.

Finally, a situation may arise in which the service promise is neither enabled nor delivered. Such a scenario fits well with "destructive rule followers" who follow the management mandate regardless of the functionality of that mandate. In other words, FLEs conform to the mandate given to them by management, even if such a mandate is missing, resulting in collective inaction. Hence, this scenario is entitled "absence of initiative."

As the four scenarios illustrate, FLE autonomy can take different forms depending on the specific circumstances of the service episode. More specifically, three actors play key roles in forming FLE autonomy: management (which makes and enables the promise), FLEs (who deliver on the promise), and customers (who form expectations based on the promise and evaluate the service delivery in this context). Ideally, management should enable the promise by providing a mandate and guidelines within which FLEs can autonomously act to deliver on the service promise. However, FLEs can both hinder this enablement and step up to deliver on the service promise even if management has not formally enabled them to do so. Finally, management and FLEs can be so closely aligned that they restrict themselves from taking any initiative, although this lack of action is damaging for the service delivery experienced by the customer. In combination, the model explains the relational nature of FLE autonomy and how it can take different forms depending on the circumstances of the service episode within which it unfolds.

4. Discussion

The goal of this study was to address the need for a relational conceptualization of FLE autonomy. To do so, I reviewed the relevant literature on FLE autonomy, developed a typology for distinguishing among different kinds of autonomy, and conceptualized a relational model of FLE autonomy that takes different kinds of autonomy into account. The proposed conceptualization suggests that management, FLEs, and customers should be viewed in combination, as described in the services triangle (Bitner, 1995). From this perspective, FLE autonomy may happen in the interaction between FLEs and customers, but it is enabled or hindered by management and judged by the customers, who rate the service delivery in relation to the expectations formed by management prior to the service interaction (Bitner, 1995). Hence, a triadic relationship forms, which helps explain why FLE autonomy might conform with or deviate from managerial directives, and how the customers will react.

The proposed model is based on a review of the literature on FLE autonomy in a service context, but it also draws on important insights on conformity and deviance found in the fields of sociology and social psychology. This is important, as these fields provide an overlooked theoretical basis for FLE autonomy—individuals can act autonomously within a predefined managerial mandate (conform) or break with the predefined managerial mandate (deviant). Moreover, conformity and deviance play even more pronounced roles in a relational model, as autonomous behavior must then be seen in relation to other actors and their expectations.

The limitations of this study predominantly relate to the conceptual nature of the work. The plausibility of the conceptualizations should be empirically tested in different contextual settings in order to assess their relevance. Moreover, additional conceptual work is needed to further refine our understanding of the relational nature of FLE autonomy in a service context.

The model suggests that FLE autonomy is a relational, multidimensional, and heterogeneous construct, and that it is crucial to understand the actors, their roles, and their mutual interactions. In this regard, the paper calls for finer-grained and more stringent use of the construct in future work.

5. Implications

5.1. Theoretical implications

The proposed model makes an important contribution to business and service research, as it provides a relational conceptualization of FLE autonomy. The word 'relational' has a dual meaning in my conceptualization. It is relational, as it argues that FLE autonomy, despite being concerned with individual FLE decision making, is actually a multi-actor relational phenomenon. Such a (re)conceptualization is arguably substantial, as it transforms the construct from being perceived as individual decision making to being about collective decision making. Yet, the conceptualization is also relational, as it draws upon MacInnis (2011) *relational reasoning*, i.e. it engages with both *differentiation* (seeing what is different in a seemingly similar phenomenon) and *integration* (finding similarity in these differences and reconciling).

In terms of differentiation, the paper provides a novel perspective for understanding and explaining different forms of FLE autonomy. While autonomy may be related to self-determination and making choices by oneself – the context within which this takes place, and the triadic relationships that influence it, will result in very different materializations of autonomy. Hence, this study mirrors De Spiegelaere et al. (2016) focus on different forms of autonomy, but does so from a behavioral perspective. In this regard, the study partly supports the move towards viewing FLE autonomy as a multi-faceted phenomenon. In terms of integration, many of the definitions of autonomy already include aspects of relational elements, making autonomy inherently relational, although such a perspective has not been explicitly emphasized in the related literature. As such, a relational perspective may therefore reconcile the existing, and otherwise fragmented, autonomy literature. By so doing, the literature on autonomy in general, and FLE autonomy in particular, could obtain a key commonality in the relational elements, while the literature could concurrently advance its work on theorizing on the multidimensionality of FLE autonomy, by not only studying the different dimensions of the construct, but similarly the relations between them.

Perhaps the most important theoretical implication that can be derived from the above is that FLE autonomy is, above all, *contextual* and *dynamic*. It is contextual, as it should be seen through a larger relationship perspective and these relationships ultimately determine the way in which autonomous behavior materializes. Moreover, it is dynamic, as these relationships form and evolve on an ongoing basis, which suggests that studies in FLE autonomy should engage in longitudinal process research and conceptualizations. Such a relational anchor could be the commonality needed to tie together past, present and future work (MacInnis, 2011), and it could help explain why FLE autonomy (i) materializes into so many different forms, and (ii) is so difficult to implement in a service context. These points are not only of interest to researchers, they are similarly important for practitioners.

5.2. Managerial implications

The aspects presented above are also important from a managerial point of view—a relational approach to FLE autonomy emphasizes that autonomy is created by the ongoing interactions and exchanges among management, FLEs, and customers, and that the triadic relationships are built upon promises and trust. Hence, managers will likely need to take a very different approach to their day-to-day management tasks.

Moreover, managers need to pay attention to and sufficiently manage the different forms of FLE autonomy, as the various scenarios need to be managed in different ways. Hence, the present study mirrors the call for critically re-examining managerial assumptions that seek to understand autonomy as a simple concept (e.g., Pedersen, 2019a).

Finally, the relational understanding of FLE autonomy accentuates that managers need to enable FLE autonomy. That is, managers must recruit, train for, and support FLE autonomy in order for it to materialize. Specifically, managers must recruit individuals with the

motivation and ability to be self-driven in their line of work, as these individuals comprise the key input for autonomous behavior; managers must train these autonomy skills of FLEs on an ongoing basis, such as assessing and discussing critical incidents in service delivery where autonomous efforts either succeeded or failed – and they must support FLE autonomy, by allowing for the required trust, teams, time and tools to be present in order to enable it (Pedersen, 2019b). As such, managers often play a substantial and pronounced role behind the scenes of FLE autonomy.

6. Towards a research agenda and concluding remarks

FLE autonomy remains an essential construct for effective service organizations, as it relates to employee engagement, firm agility, and innovation. This study provides a conceptual model for advancing our understanding of the relational nature of FLE autonomy. More specifically, the study shows how management, FLEs, and customers interact in a dynamic interplay, which may result in different forms of FLE autonomy depending on the actions of the actors that make up the service triad. This study proposes that FLE autonomy should be viewed through a relational lens, which points to many exciting avenues for research focused on improving our understanding of FLE autonomy as a relational, multi-actor phenomenon. For instance, FLE autonomy can be studied from the perspective of FLEs, management, customers, their dyadic relationships or the entire triad as a whole. Put differently, there are (at least) seven different perspectives which can be utilized to study FLE autonomy, based upon the suggested relational framework.

While the present study suggests one way of conceptualizing FLE autonomy, additional studies are needed. As a first step, the plausibility of the conceptualized model needs to be examined in empirical settings. Such research could include both qualitative, in-depth case studies and quantitative surveys of the parties involved. However, future research should also go beyond validating the model.

For instance, we know surprisingly little about how to effectively manage FLE autonomy. While the management of autonomy may seem like an oxymoron at the outset, the relational understanding of FLE autonomy suggested here emphasizes that to the extent that FLE autonomy is desired, FLE autonomy should be enabled and supported by management. Managers can enable autonomy through trust, teams, time and tools (Pedersen, 2019b), but other managerial options may be available. Moreover, the effectiveness of such measures need to be assessed under different contingencies. Consequently, there is ample room for additional research in this important domain.

Moreover, we need scales and measures that can enable us to better quantify FLE autonomy from a relational perspective. While a variety of scales exist, few explicitly focus on FLE autonomy, and even fewer explicitly consider a relational conceptualization or the duality of giving and taking autonomy in their operationalizations. As FLEs and the service context introduce a variety of idiosyncrasies, we need better modes of measurement to capture these unique features as well as better measurements in terms of the duality of autonomy (Pedersen, 2019a). Moreover, we should not only develop items and scales in a survey format but also operationalize the constructs using behavioral data.

Along similar lines, we would benefit from multi-level analyses of FLE autonomy. Work is still needed to establish a multi-level, relational view of FLE autonomy, and refined modelling approaches must be incorporated into these efforts in order to fully realize the potential of this agenda in empirical work. As the utilization of multiple levels can result in complex modelling, rigorous conceptual studies must accompany the empirical work on multi-level issues associated with FLE autonomy.

Moreover, researchers should undertake process studies of FLE autonomy. As FLE autonomy often emerges and evolves due to episodic developments over time, we need both qualitative and quantitative studies that follow these emergence patterns. Such studies of FLE autonomy can specify *how* FLE autonomy emerges, evolves, and ends over time. A view of FLE autonomy as a phenomenon in a constant state of motion is not only in line with the presumptions of the service-marketing triangle, but also necessitates longitudinal research designs. Moreover, process studies can also explicate the underlying causal mechanisms for why FLE autonomy may develop the way it does, i.e. why the different autonomy types materialize.

While the present study has expressed a greater conceptual goal of *relating*, other studies should engage with conceptual goals of *envisioning* (identifying vs. revising), *explicating* (delineating vs. summarizing) and *debating* (advocating vs. refuting) (MacInnis, 2011). Such variety of studies with clear conceptual objectives would substantially improve future theorizing on FLE autonomy.

These research avenues can be further specified in a variety of distinct research questions. While these questions may remain unanswered for several years, it is important to initiate research focused on addressing them. Such research would ideally take the form of joint industry-academia collaborations aimed at stimulating engaged scholarship (action) research, as this is a topic of both academic and practical value.

Autonomy is too important to be misunderstood and mismanaged (Pedersen, 2019a). Therefore, we must disentangle the various layers of this complex phenomenon in order to further improve practice and academic theorizing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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