

## EMOTIONS AND COMPLAINING BEHAVIOR FOLLOWING SERVICE FAILURE

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### Abstract

One feature of a democratic society is voice, especially the freedom to dissent. One form of dissent of relevance to organizational scholars is complaining, whether it be complaints from employee stakeholder groups or customer stakeholder groups. Despite the increased ability that the knowledge economy provides for people of all walks of life and nationalities to voice complaint, little is known about the antecedents and consequences of complaining. This paper addresses this issue with respect to customers' response to service failures. Specifically, this paper develops a conceptual model for service settings building upon a model of emotional and cognitive response formation to an affective event (Härtel, McColl-Kennedy & Bennett, 2002), and its source theory, Weiss and Cropanzano's (1995) Affective Events Theory (AET). We argue that when a service failure occurs, a number of cognitive and affective responses take place in consumers. The proposed model aims to operationalize affective responses to service failures in the marketplace. 'Affective response' refers to cognitive, emotional, behavioral and neuropsychological responses to emotional events. As such, the model makes explicit the relationships between and factors within each of these domains of affect expression.

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite the increased ability that the knowledge economy provides for people of all walks of life and nationalities to voice complaint, little is known about the antecedents and consequences of complaining (Kowalski, 1996). This paper addresses this issue with respect to customers' response to service failures (a breakdown in the delivery of a service). Specifically, this paper develops a conceptual model for service settings building upon a model of emotional and cognitive response formation to an affective event (Härtel, McColl-Kennedy & Bennett, 2002), and its source theory, Weiss and Cropanzano's (1995) Affective Events Theory (AET).

We argue that when a service failure occurs, the following cognitive and affective responses take place in consumers. First, there is an immediate affective reaction (involving physiological responses, psychological responses, cued recall and peripheral processing). Second, the customer undertakes primary appraisal which could be first emotional then cognitive or vice versa. Third, the customer engages in secondary appraisal resulting in attitude formation in terms of the service failure itself and the service provider, and fourth, the customer engages in behavioral responses that are either (1) primarily cognition-driven behaviors or (2) primarily emotion-driven behaviors.

## SERVICE FAILURE AND COMPLAINT BEHAVIOR

Despite all the best intentions, sometimes things go wrong when employees are attempting to deliver services to customers. Service failure - a breakdown in the delivery of a service - can result from a wide range of sources such as the service itself, from service providers, from elements outside the employee's control and even from the customer (Bitner, Booms & Tetreault 1990; McColl-Kennedy & Sparks 2003). Service failures may result in organizations losing customers and, potentially, this may mean millions of dollars in lost revenue (Sparks & McColl-Kennedy 2001). Increasingly, managers are becoming interested in knowing more about how service failures occur, how customers respond to these failures and what can be done to recover customers who have become very dissatisfied with the organization as a direct result of service failures.

It is widely accepted that customers frequently experience emotions such as anger, frustration, and even rage during service failure (McColl-Kennedy & Sparks 2003). When customers become frustrated, annoyed and angry with an organization, it influences how they evaluate the service (Dube & Maute, 1996). Thus, negative emotions triggered by a service failure negatively influence customer satisfaction (Andreassen, 1999).

During service failure and recovery attempts, customers engage in cognitive appraisals. McColl-Kennedy and Sparks (2003) argue that, when a service failure event takes place, a customer engages in an assessment of what took place, evaluating whether it was essentially negative, standard as expected or essentially positive. If a customer appraises the event as something a service employee could have done more about then the customer will feel angry, resulting in low satisfaction (McColl-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003). On the other hand, if the customer appraises the failure as something the service employee could have done less about, then the customer is likely to experience positive emotions, which in turn, should result in high levels of satisfaction.

While it is acknowledged that emotions are triggered during service failure and that customers engage in cognitive appraisal during service failure and recovery attempts (c.f. McColl-Kennedy & Sparks 2003), relatively little is known about the interplay between customer emotions and customer cognition for service failure. Focus to date has been on service recovery rather than service failure events. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to fill this gap by developing an AET based conceptual model of service failure that focuses attention on the interplay between customer emotion and cognition and the individual customer

characteristics that moderate these respective responses. A central premise of this research is that complaining behavior is a method of coping.

## **PROPOSED MODEL OF SERVICE FAILURE**

The model that we present (See Figure 1) is an extension of Weiss and Cropanzano's (1996) model of Affective Events Theory (AET). The proposed model represents the first attempt to operationalize affective responses to service failures in the marketplace. According to Weiss and Cropanzano (1996), 'Affective response' comprises the cognitive, emotional, behavioral and neuropsychological responses to emotional events. Thus, the proposed model makes explicit the relationships between and factors within each of these domains of affective expression.

A service failure is depicted in the model as the precipitating (negative) affective event. It should be noted, however, that a service failure is only an affective event in so far as it elicits an affective response. Thus, for some individuals or groups, perhaps those for whom the event is of no consequence, a service failure will not elicit an emotional reaction, and hence, will not be an affective event.

In the event that the service failure is an affective event, the model shows the sequence that is initiated. First, comes the immediate affective reaction. Thus, the model proposes:

*Proposition 1: A service failure will trigger an immediate affective reaction.*

Ashkanasy, Härtel and Zerbe (2000) define affect in terms of internal and external manifestations of emotion. The internal manifestations of affect include the subjective feelings experienced by the individual subject to the emotion-eliciting stimulus, which the subject cognitively interprets. The external manifestations of emotion include respiration rate, facial expression and posture. These external manifestations of emotions, like the internal manifestations, are both voluntary and involuntary. Behavioral expressions of emotion such as perspiration and increased heart rate are autonomic, and result from primary or secondary internal emotions. Posture, facial expression and motor activity, however, is, at least to some extent, controllable both cognitively and physically. Thus, the immediate affective reaction involves autonomic emotional appraisals and is operationalized by psychophysiological manifestations and behavioral expressions.

Following the immediate affective reaction, primary appraisal occurs, which includes both cognitive and emotional responses. We propose that cognitive or emotional responses can occur simultaneously, at which time, one dominates over the other. This primary appraisal is followed by a secondary appraisal, which involves the formation or consolidation of an attitude. It is this attitude that then determines the behavioral response, in this instance, complaining behavior to the affective event. These aspects of the model are represented by the following propositions:

*Proposition 2: An immediate affective reaction will trigger primary appraisal*

*Proposition 3: The extent to which the primary appraisal (emotional and cognitive response) is positive or negative will determine whether secondary appraisal (attitude formation) will be impacted negatively or positively.*

*Proposition 4: Secondary appraisal (attitude formation) will be positively related to behavioral outcomes (complaining behavior).*

The primary appraisal domain represents the expression (internal or external) of primary emotions as described by Damasio (1994). As such, the primary appraisal domain is operationalized by the internal or external expression of basic emotions that have not yet been cognitively interpreted. The secondary appraisal domain represents secondary emotional responses, which are characterised by the cognitive appraisal of one's basic emotional state, and the evaluation of its appropriateness. The secondary appraisal is operationalized by those social values that are utilised in order to control or modify the (subordinate)

behavioral expression of emotions. Social values, beliefs or attitudes constitute subordinate emotions (Fischer et al. 1990).

Congruent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of appraisal and coping, the primary appraisal evaluates whether there is anything at stake in this encounter. It is a process through which the person evaluates whether the affective event is relevant to his or her well-being, and if so, in what way (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, what is the potential for harm or benefit with respect to commitments, values or personal goals? What are the risks? Does the affective event pose a psychological challenge? (to self-restraint, self-control or other self-regulatory capacities). Features of one's social ties can also influence individual's appraisals and coping choices (Pirola-Merlo, Härtel, Mann & Hirst, 2002), especially if an individual's normal coping response to conflict or confrontation is avoidance.

Primary appraisals may be emotion-focused, problem-focused or directed toward both (Vitaliano, Russo, Carr & Becker, 1985). If a primary appraisal is emotionally charged, the evaluation will focus on harm to the psychological self (damage to ego, self-esteem, embarrassment, humiliation) (Oakland & Ostell, 1996). If a primary appraisal is problem-focused, it will evaluate short-term and long-term consequences, the extent of damage versus potential damage, and evaluate the causal process in order to initiate a strategy of coping (Oakland & Ostell, 1996). Cognitive responses can be expressed as biases, needs, stereotype, desires, schemas, expectations and heuristics (Härtel & Härtel, 1997; Simon, 1976.)

Attitude formation occurs during what Folkman et al. (1986) refer to as secondary appraisal. The model proposes that attitudes are formed as a consequence of secondary appraisal, which may also be emotion-focused or problem-focused (Folkman et al., 1986). Thus, in the domain of attitude formation, the person evaluates, in response to the primary appraisal, an appropriate coping strategy (what, if anything, can be done to overcome or prevent harm, or to improve the prospects for benefit). Various coping options are evaluated.

Secondary appraisal evaluates the cognitive and emotional response to the affective event and assesses the benefits and costs associated with maintaining or manifesting these thoughts and feelings (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, upon secondary appraisal, one may decide that their goals are best achieved by negotiating a resolution to the problem (problem-focused coping strategy) rather than avoiding or directly confronting the problem to diminish the negative emotions associated with the affective event (emotion-focused coping).

Thus, according to the present model, primary and secondary appraisals converge in attitude formation or consolidation (if congruent with a previously determined response strategy) to determine a behavioral response (coping strategy) to the affective event. Primary appraisal occurs in the form of a cognitive response and an emotional response. This model proposes that these responses can occur simultaneously where one of these responses dominates. Nonetheless, the overall response is primarily cognitive or primarily emotional.

The model proposes that behavioral responses are cognition-driven and/or emotion-driven. That is, the goal of coping is predominantly problem-focused or emotion-focused. The objective in this aspect of the model, therefore, is to identify coping responses that are problem-focused and differentiate them from behavioral responses that are emotion-focused. It is proposed that a single behavioral response may be arrived at via many different patterns of problem and emotion-focused primary and secondary appraisals.

Cognition-driven behavior generally refers to behavior that is the result of judgment-making processes. Choices regarding how to behave are based on how one frames a situation (Latack, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The resultant behavioral outcomes can have positive or negative consequences for the individual and the organization. To illustrate, if a customer has experienced a service failure and has given it a negative assessment, this is likely to lead to cognition-driven behaviors such as boycotting the store, product, service or organization. Other cognition-driven behaviors could include writing letters of complaint to the Office of Fair Trading or Office of Consumer Affairs, writing letters of complaint to websites and letters to the editor.

Emotion-driven behavior, on the other hand, refers to behavior that is the result of processes aimed at reducing the emotional discomfort rather than dealing directly with the situation or problem at hand. In research on complaints relating to everyday social interactions conducted by Alicke, Braun, Glor, Klotz, Magee, Sederhom and Siegal (1992), over 75% of complaints were non-instrumental in that they were not aimed at changing the existing state of affairs, but rather, were expressed to vent frustration or solicit sympathy.

The final proposition depicted in the model (proposition 5) shows individual characteristics as also influencing the behavioral outcome to a service failure. For example, neuroticism is related to emotion-focused problem solving (Mayes, Johnson & Sadri, 2000). Emotional intelligence, on the other hand, impacts on cognitive responses such as perspective taking and behaviors such as problem-solving responses (Compeau, Grewal & Monroe, 1998; Kibby & Härtel, 2002; Schutte et al., 2001).

Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) suggest that affective dispositions moderate the relationship between work events and directly influence affective reactions. These dispositions determine the intensity and valence of the affective reaction, thus for instance, the predisposition of an individual to react in a particular manner when exposed to a negative or positive affective event. The proposed model in this paper extends these predispositions to include other individual characteristics, including personality traits such as neuroticism/extroversion, stress, risk propensity, and demographics. These characteristics are proposed to influence all reactions to the service failure (negative affective event).

Personality has an impact on primary appraisal aspects of emotional responses. For example, extroversion predicts positive consumption-based emotions and neuroticism was directly related to negative consumption-based emotions (Mooradian and Oliver 1997). Additionally, a significant interaction between private self-consciousness disposition and proximity of the event has been observed in studies of perception of service quality (Marquis & Filiatrault, 2002). In particular, when compared to low public consciousness subjects, for scenarios involving situations occurring immediately in front of the subject, high public subjects had a significantly more negative perception of service quality (Marquis & Filiatrault, 2002).

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper addresses the antecedents and consequences of complaining with respect to customers' response to service failures. Specifically, a conceptual model for service settings was developed, showing that, when a service failure occurs, a number of cognitive and affective responses take place in consumers. Affective responses include cognitive, emotional, behavioral and neuropsychological responses to emotional events. The proposed model makes explicit the relationships between and factors within each of these domains of affect expression and indicates that individual difference characteristics can impact at any of the points.

The model proposes that primary and secondary appraisals converge in attitude formation or consolidation (if congruent with a previously determined response strategy) to determine a behavioral response (coping strategy) to the affective event. One of the contributions of the model is that it shows that cognitive and emotional responses can occur simultaneously, with one dominating over the other.

A significant contribution of the model is that it enables testing the applicability of Weiss and Cropanzano's (1995) Affective Events Theory to the marketplace. Service encounters and the service economy are important to most organizations and economies the world over. Indeed, it has been said that "services companies win or lose during the moments of contact ('moment of truth')" (Schuler, 1996:17). While it is thought that both service provider and customer know what to expect from one another (Bitner, Booms & Mohr, 1994), these expectations may not be met in the 'moment of truth' due to a variety of reasons, which we attempt to capture by combining cognitive and emotional responses within a single model.

Service encounters can be an affective event for customers and one of the tasks of service employees is to ensure these events conclude with the customer feeling satisfied. Often times, the service employee must achieve this with a customer they have never met before (Martin & Adams, 1999) and therefore do not have knowledge of their personal characteristics, skills, understanding or goals. Nonetheless, a significant amount

of personal information is communicated in service encounters both by employees and customers through both conscious and unconscious processes (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). An implication of this is that service employees must be able to monitor their own emotions and thoughts as well as the customers' and use this information to direct their actions in the service encounter. Thus, employees require training to develop emotional competencies and decision-making skills. In line with this, Härtel, Barker & Baker (1999) argued that emotionally competent service providers are able to influence the customer's cognitive and affective appraisal of the service encounter, and Härtel and Härtel (1997) showed that decision-making training can minimize negative emotional responses on judgment tasks.

In summary, we developed a conceptual model for service settings that shows that, when a service failure occurs, a number of cognitive and affective responses take place in consumers. We have argued that affective reactions to events can be decomposed into three specific domains: superordinate, basic and subordinate emotional expressions. We also demonstrated that a single behavioral response may be arrived at via many different patterns of problem and emotion-focused primary and secondary appraisals. Finally, we demonstrate that the role of emotions during and after service failure is an important area of concern for both researchers and practitioners.

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**Figure 1: Propose Model of Emotional and Cognitive Response Formation to an Affective Event**  
 Adapted from Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1995)

