

Emotional Responses to Service Complaint Experiences: The Role of Perceived Justice

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Abstract

There is a growing recognition that perceived justice plays an important role in consumers' evaluations of service complaint experiences. Higher levels of perceived justice have been found to be associated with more positive evaluations in terms of satisfaction, re-patronage and positive word-of-mouth intentions. Emotional responses to complaint experiences have received rather less attention. The current paper seeks to address this gap by considering the role of perceived justice in the elicitation of differential emotions following complaint handling experiences. Service scenario scripts were devised to depict a complaint handling encounter in relation to holiday check-in arrangements. The scripts, which varied in terms of level of (a) interactional justice, (b) procedural justice and (c) distributive justice, were presented to 168 respondents. Respondents were asked to imagine themselves as the person in the scenario and to indicate the extent to which different emotional adjectives described their reaction to the complaint handling encounter. Analyses using t-tests revealed that perceived justice evaluations were predictive of the type of emotion (i.e. positive or negative) elicited.

Keywords: emotions, perceived justice, complaint handling, service failure, service recovery, tourism

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1. Introduction

Although many firms may aspire to offer 'zero defects' service, the possibility of service failures cannot be wholly eliminated simply because of the variety of factors that may impact on the delivery process. Consequently, the manner in which recovery from service failure is managed and consumer responses to the recovery process are increasingly seen as factors that may separate the more successful firms from the others. Indeed some would see service recovery and complaint handling as a critical moment of truth for organisations in their efforts to satisfy and keep customers (e.g., Stauss and Seidel, 1998). There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that good service recovery can have a positive impact on consumer satisfaction evaluations repatronage intentions and the spread of word-of-mouth (e.g., Blodgett et al., 1997; Kelley et al., 1993; Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987). Given the importance of complaint handling encounters, it is not surprising that there has been a growth in the volume of published research in recent years (e.g., Smith and Bolton, 1998, 2002; Smith et al., 1999; Tax et al., 1998; Hoffmann and Kelley, 2000; Sparks and McKoll-Kennedy, 2001).

An increasingly important strand to this research has been concerned with the impact of perceived justice on outcome evaluations such as satisfaction which then has consequences for loyalty, re-patronage and word of mouth. However, there has been little consideration of the more emotional outcomes associated with service recovery. This is perhaps surprising for two reasons. First, there is a growing recognition that one of the key outcomes of service recovery, namely satisfaction will have emotional as well as a cognitive antecedents and second, it has been argued that many customer feel strong emotional reactions in response to service recovery encounters and subsequently decide whether to continue their relationship with the organisation (Smith and Bolton, 2002). In this context, the current paper explores the relationship between the elements of perceived justice during service recovery and the nature of consumers' emotional responses. The study uses a scenario-based approach within a tourism context. The paper begins with an overview of the conceptual framework which underlies the study. A brief description of the methodology follows and the results are

presented and discussed in the third section. The paper concludes with conclusions and managerial implications.

2. Conceptual Framework

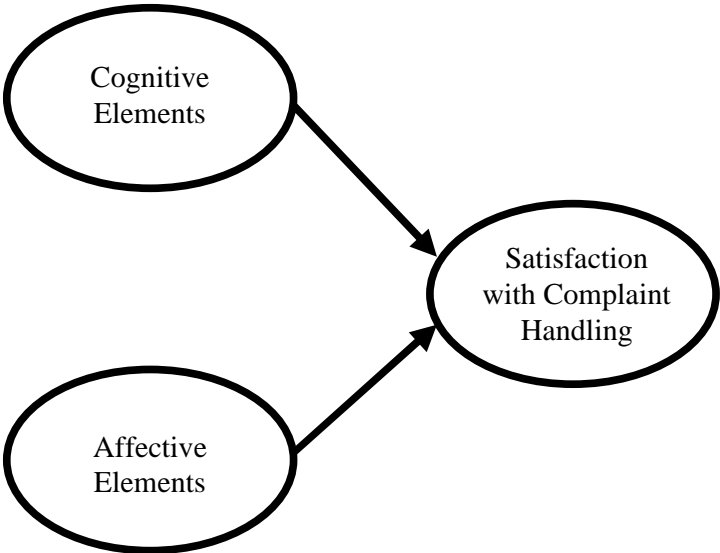
Although there is a substantial literature on customer (dis)satisfaction and consumer complaining behaviour, rather less is known about how customers evaluate a company's response to their complaints. Increasingly, studies that explore consumer responses to complaints have focused on the construct of perceived justice. This theoretical perspective suggests that the fairness of the complaint resolution procedures, the interpersonal communications and behaviours, and the outcome are the principal antecedents of customer evaluations. Collectively, these antecedents are referred to as perceived justice and individually they are described as: procedural justice, interactional justice, and distributive justice. There is a growing volume of empirical evidence to support the proposition that consumers will evaluate satisfaction with complaint handling in terms of perceived justice (Blodgett et al., 1997; Tax et al., 1998; Nel et al., 2000).

Typically, procedural justice is operationalised as the delay in processing the complaint, process control, accessibility, timing/speed, and flexibility to adapt to the customer's recovery needs. Interactional justice refers to the manner in which people are treated during the complaint handling process including elements such as courtesy and politeness exhibited by personnel, empathy, effort observed in resolving the situation, and the firm's willingness to provide an explanation as to why the failure occurred. Distributive justice, the third component, focuses on the perceived fairness of the outcome of the service encounter. In other words, what specifically did the offending firm offer the customer to recover from the service failure (Tax and Brown, 2000; Tax et al., 1998; Blodgett et al., 1997).

This stream of research has been conducted with rather little cross-reference to emotion research. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that emotional reactions associated with the consumption experience are important in the determination of satisfaction (e.g., Matilla and Wirtz, 2000; Jayanti, 1996; Westbrook, 1987; Westbrook and Oliver, 1991; Oliver, 1993; Dubé-Rioux, 1990). Indeed the idea that cognitive and emotional elements may be complementary in determining satisfaction is increasingly widely accepted. (Oliver 1997). Satisfaction with complaint handling can thus be seen as the outcome of the interaction of

both cognitive (judgements, evaluation) and affective elements (feelings, emotions), each of which may exert varying levels of influence at different stages in the complaint handling process. This conceptualisation is visualised in Figure 1:

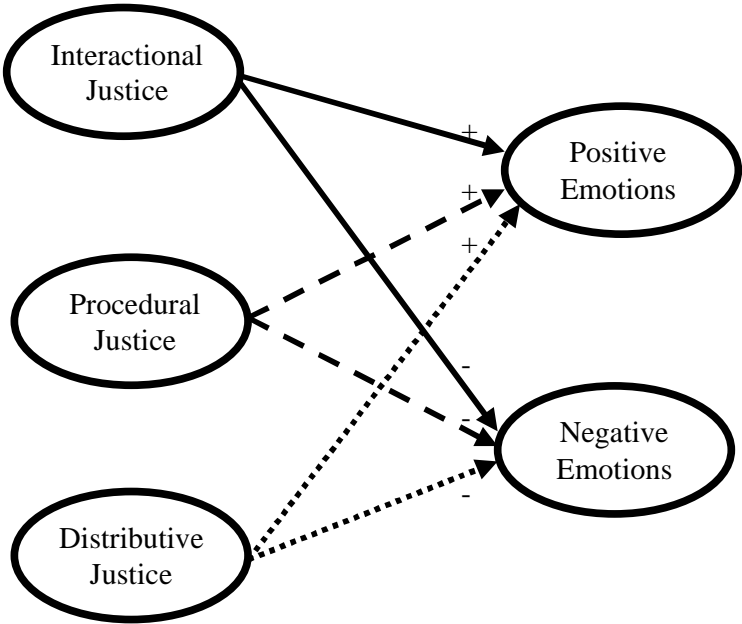
Figure 1: Cognitive-Affective Influences on Satisfaction with Complaint Handling



Emotions are complex and arise from many sources. Oliver (1997) argues that when considering affective responses to consumption experiences, it is sensible to focus on the emotions that arise as a consequence of the specific consumption event. The process of cognitive appraisal may be of particular relevance in this context. This perspective argues that specific emotions and their intensity are tied to an appraisal of the event eliciting the emotional response (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). Although one finds reports of specific emotions such as anger and guilt in response to experiencing injustice from the very beginning of the scientific interest in equity and justice (e.g., Adams, 1965), little systematic research has been devoted so far to the nature of the specific emotional reactions to perceived justice. Some appraisal theorists have mentioned criteria that might imply the perception of perceived justice, such as legitimacy (Roseman, 1984; Smith and Ellsworth, 1985), value relevance (Frijda, 1986), or approval and worthiness (Ortony et al., 1988), but perceived justice itself or fairness are rarely mentioned explicitly by appraisal theorists (for a notable exception see Mikula et al., 1998).

Moreover, most of the rare investigations of emotional reactions to injustice confined themselves to proving the existence of distress. However, experimental studies, which typically use mood adjective check lists as an overall self-report measure of contentment versus distress, generally found that participants were more content (and less distressed) when they were equitably treated than when they were either underbenefited or overbenefited (e.g., Austin and Walster, 1974). Similarly, findings from a study by William (1999) indicate that some emotions, such as anger, do result from perceptions of inequity. Further support for an integration of justice theory with the cognitive appraisal approach to emotions is provided by Weiss et al. (1999). Focusing on the effects of organisational justice conditions on discrete emotions (i.e. happiness, anger, guilt and pride), their findings show that happiness was overwhelmingly a function of outcome (i.e. distributive justice), with procedural fairness (i.e. procedural justice) playing little role. In contrast, anger levels were highest when the outcome was unfavourable and the procedure was biased against the participant. Guilt was the highest when the outcome was favourable and the procedure was biased in favour of the participant. Results regarding the emotion of pride were not entirely as expected. Pride seemed high whenever the outcome was unfavourable. Participants seemed to feel guilty if the process unfairly benefited them, but they were apparently still proud of the result. Based on the discussion above, the following conceptual framework is proposed:

Figure 2: A Conceptual Framework for analysing emotional Reactions following Service Complaint Experiences



Combing justice theory and cognitive appraisal theory, the proposed conceptual framework suggests that perceived justice represents a cognitive appraisal dimension, which helps to explain the elicitation of positive and negative emotions during and/or after complaint handling encounters. For example, rude treatment (i.e. low level of interactional justice) of a customer during a complaint handling encounter is expected to elicit higher levels of negative emotions such as anger or sadness, while polite and courteous treatment (i.e. high level of interactional justice) of the customer, on the other hand, is expected to increase the likelihood of positive emotions such as happiness and joy being elicited. The following section will outline the methodology proposed for exploring the potential existence of these relationships.

3. Research Methods

In order to investigate the relationship between perceived justice and consumption emotions a between subjects, 2x2x2 experimental design was employed, with two levels of distributive justice (low and high), two levels of interactional justice (low and high) and two levels of procedural justice (low and high). The sample consisted of 168 students and members of staff (54% women and 46% men) from two large English universities. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 65 years (mean = 27) and tended to have an university education of some sort (89%). Care was taken to choose a service encounter that would be relevant to such a convenience sample. Specifically, a complaint handling experience at a tour operator's check-in counter in an airport was used for developing the stimuli in this study. In this context, it is important to note that the focus of this study is on stimulus-induced emotion (i.e. emotions that arise from a stimulus, which in this case is a service recovery manipulation) rather than task-induced emotion (i.e. emotions that arise directly from the structure or difficulty of the decision task itself) or ambient emotion (i.e. emotions that arise from background conditions such as fatigue or mood) (Shiv and Fedorikhin; 1999; Isen, 1987; Yates, 1990).

The scenarios described a complaint handling experience at a tour operator's check-in counter in an airport following the cancellation of a flight. In a pre-test, these scenarios were evaluated by customers and fellow academics to check the wording and appropriateness of the scenarios. As a result, minor adaptations were made. Scenarios were manipulated to produce high and low levels of interactional, procedural and distributive justice in the required combinations. These manipulations were achieved by changing the scenario descriptions as follows:

INTERACTIONAL JUSTICE

low : *The ABC Tours employee does not apologise for the cancellation and tells you he is too busy to explain the nature of the problem to every single passenger.*

high: *The ABC Tours employee sincerely apologises for the cancellation and tells you that a temporary breakdown of the local Air Traffic Control System is to blame for the problem.*

PROCEDURAL JUSTICE

low: *After seemingly endless discussions with the headquarter of ABC Tours,...
... (the employee) suggests that you call back later to determine if the problem has been solved and to book a seat on the next available flight.*

high: *... (the employee) suggests putting you on the next available flight in 2 hours.*

DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

low: *The employee advised you and your partner that it is against ABC Tours policy to compensate passengers for cancellations.*

high: *... the employee is authorised to offer you and your partner a £100 cash-back as compensation.*

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of eight experimental conditions. The subjects were asked to read one of the eight versions of a scenario describing the complaint handling experience at a tour operator's check-in counter in an airport. To evaluate the perceived realism of the scenarios, respondents were asked to respond to the item "I believe that such an incident can happen in real life," by using a 9-point scale (1 = "strongly disagree" and 9 = "strongly agree"). A mean score of 7.84 for realism ratings suggests that the respondents perceived the scenarios to be highly realistic.

The dependent variable, consumption emotions following service complaint experiences, was measured using a scale, which was specifically developed for this study. The scale comprised of fourteen positive ("in a good mood", "delighted", "attentive", "alert", "joyful", "active", "pleased", "happy", "excited", "proud", "warm feelings", "enthusiastic", "being valued", "interested"), and sixteen negative ("enraged", "upset", "unhappy", "fearful", "angry", "sad", "distressed", "in a bad mood", "ashamed", "irritated", "annoyed", "unpleased", "indifferent", "afraid", "nervous", "downhearted") emotional items. Subjects were asked how strongly these

feelings described their reaction to the complaint handling encounter described in the scenario. The scale ranged from 1 to 7 points (1 = "not at all", 7 = "extremely"). These items represented an amalgam of the PANAS scale (Watson et al., 1988) and Mano's (1991) Circumplex scale. Additionally, the adjectives were selected from those most frequently mentioned in a pre-test in which comparable subjects were asked to freely elicit how they would describe their own feelings toward a service provider following a service encounter that left them indifferent or with very strong feelings (good or bad).

Table 1: Factor Analysis of Emotional Adjectives

Item (Emotional Adjective)	Factor Loading
<i>Factor 1 – Positive Emotions</i>	
Delighted	0.854
Joyful	0.764
Pleased	0.681
Happy	0.813
Excited	0.743
Proud	0.746
Warm feelings	0.742
Enthusiastic	0.644
Being valued	0.564
Percentage of variances explained	41.1%
Cronbach alpha	0.86
<i>Factor 2 – Negative Emotions</i>	
Downhearted	0.562
Enraged	0.853
Upset	0.769
Unhappy	0.613
Angry	0.812
In a bad mood	0.671
Irritated	0.569
Annoyed	0.714
Unpleased	0.811
Percentage of variances explained	20.4%
Cronbach alpha	0.81

A principal component factor analysis of the 30 items with a varimax rotation resulted in a two-factor solution, accounting for 61.5 % of the variance. KMO (0.854) and Bartlett's test of sphericity (0.000) suggest that factor analysis is adequate for these data. All the items loaded significantly (minimum of 0.45 for sample size of 150-200 according to Hair et al., 1995) on the appropriate factors, except the items "in a good mood", "fearful", "sad", "distressed",

"ashamed", indifferent", "afraid" and "nervous" which were eliminated from further analysis. Furthermore, the items "attentive", "alert", "active" and "interested" were excluded from further analysis as they cross-loaded on both emotion factors instead of loading only on the positive emotions factor. The final factor solution is shown in Table 1. The reliability of these two scales, estimated by using Cronbach's alpha, was 0.86 for positive and 0.81 for negative emotions.

4. Results

4.1 Manipulation Checks

The manipulation of interactional, procedural and the distributive justice was tested using three multiple-item scales which were developed by Blodgett et al.'s (1997). All manipulation check measures used 5-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly agree" [i.e. high justice], 5 = "strongly disagree" [i.e. low justice]). The results showed statistically significant differences (all with $p < 0.05$) in the expected direction between group means on questions about perceptions of interactional justice (low = 3.36, high = 2.70), procedural justice (low = 3.59, high = 3.06), and distributive justice (low = 4.04, high = 2.89).

4.2 Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Two separate 2x2x2 ANOVAs were performed; one for positive emotions and one for negative emotions. The results are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Cell Means

	INTERACTIONAL JUSTICE		PROCEDURAL JUSTICE		DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE	
	LOW	HIGH	LOW	HIGH	LOW	HIGH
Positive Emotions	1.28	2.25	1.12	2.25	1.37	2.19
Negative Emotions	3.50	3.19	3.83	3.08	3.70	3.10

The ANOVA results for positive emotions showed that procedural justice had a significant effect of ($F_{(1,161)} = 6.428, p = 0.022$) as did distributive justice ($F_{(1,161)} = 4.566, p = 0.034$). The low procedural justice group and the low distributive justice groups reported lower levels of positive emotions than did the high procedural and high distributive justice groups. The low interactional justice group also reported lower levels of positive emotions than the high interactional justice group, although this difference was not significant ($F_{(1,161)} = 2.581, p > 0.05$).

For negative emotions, there was a significant effect of procedural ($F_{(1,161)} = 5.680, p = 0.018$), distributive ($F_{(1,161)} = 4.332, p = 0.045$) and interactional justice ($F_{(1,161)} = 5.497, p = 0.024$) and in all cases the low justice groups reported significantly higher levels of negative emotions than did the high justice groups.

5. Discussion

Collectively, the findings present strong evidence in support of the proposed conceptual framework for analysing emotional reactions during and/or after service complaint experiences. In particular, the findings are consistent with Lazarus (1991) who asserts that emotions occur as a result of the cognitive appraisal of the person-environment situation. According to him, cognitive appraisal is both necessary and sufficient for the formation of emotions. The present findings also suggest that such theories are relevant to service complaint experiences and confirm earlier research on the topic by Nyer (1997). In particular, perceived justice appears to represent a cognitive appraisal dimension, which helps to explain the elicitation of positive and negative emotions during and/or after service recovery encounters. More specifically, low levels of perceived justice (i.e. interactional, procedural and distributive) elicit higher levels of negative emotions such as anger or rage. Conversely, high level of perceived justice increase the likelihood of positive emotions such as happiness and joy being elicited. Support for the present findings also comes from recent developments in social psychology, which confirms emotions as one of the central mediators of reactions to perceived justice along with attributions (e.g., Mikula et al., 1998; Cohen, 1982; Sprecher, 1986). Sprecher (1986), for example, conducted a survey with students who were involved in close heterosexual relationships. Participants were asked to assess the inequity of their relationship and indicate the degree to which they experienced each of various positive and negative emotions in their relationship during the previous month. She found perceived

inequity to be significantly related to a variety of positive and negative emotions experienced in the relationship.

Our results have important theoretical implications in relation to customer evaluations of complaint handling. Existing theoretical frameworks focus primarily on cognitive evaluations of perceived justice associated with the complaint handling procedure; the findings of the current study suggest the perceived justice may also elicit an emotional response which in turn is expected to impact on satisfaction with complaint handling.

6. Managerial Implications

Complaint handling encounters represent critical moments of truth for organisations in their efforts to satisfy and keep customers. The current research suggests that these encounters may also be pivotal moments for customers, many of whom experience strong emotional reactions in response to service recovery and subsequently decide whether to continue their relationship with the organisation. This, in turn, has important implications for how organisations should manage their transactions and relationships with customers, especially after a service failure has occurred.

Dubé and Menon (1998), for example, argue that if customers express negative emotions and the service provider identified and responds to them, then the service provider can create higher levels of service encounter satisfaction. Thus, knowledge of emotions experienced by customers during complaint handling encounters can help managers to engineer the service recovery process to maximise satisfaction. According to Smith and Bolton (2002), managers can reengineer the service recovery process in the following ways.

First, service providers must be hired and trained for their ability to decode emotional cues. In other words, they must be able to recognise when customers are angry disappointed, anxious, and so forth. In this context, Dubé and Menon (1998) argue that customers express negative emotions using distinct patterns of facial, postural, vocal and verbal cues corresponding to discrete negative emotions. If such cues are not evident, service providers must encourage customers to verbalise their emotions so they can be recognised. Second, service providers must be trained to offer customised recovery efforts to customers who exhibit negative emotional cues. Since customers who exhibit (negative) emotional responses may pay more

attention to recovery efforts and weigh them more carefully, customised recovery efforts must include a variety of provider responses. Recovery efforts should be especially targeted at improving customers' perceptions of interactional, procedural and distributive justice.

In summary, this study suggests potentially new ways for managers to increase satisfaction by improving their understanding of the complexity of customer emotions and their role in service failure and recovery encounters.

7. Conclusions

This study was concerned to explore the relationship between perceived justice in a complaint handling process and consumers' emotional responses. Cognitive appraisal theory provided the framework with perceived justice as an emotion-antecedent appraisal dimension. The results indicate that such theories are relevant to complaint handling situations. More specifically, the extent of emotional reactions (i.e. positive or negative) varied across different levels of interactional, procedural and distributive justice.

By establishing how (post-)consumption emotions are formed, the current research deepens our understanding of complaint handling encounters and allows us to better incorporate emotions into existing customer (dis)satisfaction models.

However, as an exploratory investigation of emotional responses to perceived (in)justice, results should be interpreted cautiously. The sample comprised students and members of staff of two English universities rather than actual consumers, and a mental simulation of an airline core service failure was utilised to elicit emotional responses to perceived (in)justice. Despite meticulous care in designing and pre-testing the service failure scenario, all of the subtleties of a real-world complaint handling experience may not have been captured by this methodology. Nevertheless, the fact that distinctive emotional experiences were elicited with less vivid stimuli suggests that even clearer patterns are likely to emerge in real-life settings. Future research should therefore attempt to replicate these findings for other services and in field settings.

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