服务接触中的不公平事件：从顾客的角度

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Unfairness in the Service Encounters: the Customer's Viewpoint

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Abstract: This study was designed to answer several key questions regarding the service injustice customers perceived during the service delivery. Using the critical incident technique, the authors collected 195 unfair incidents from a variety of service organizations. The initial sorting of the incidents resulted in four major groups: information asymmetry, unfair procedure, inappropriate attitudes and manners of the service personnel, and unfair outcomes. Within the four major classifications of critical incidents, 13 secondary categories were identified. A further analysis was conducted to discover the underlying reason why customers feel unfair in the service encounters. Finally, some implications for service managers were discussed.

Key words: service encounter; service unfairness; critical incident technique

1　Introduction

Justice or fairness has been of great interest to researchers in organizational behavior[1], and recently received more and more attention in the service management literature. When interacting with service organizations, customers experi- enced many "moments of truth", and may evaluate the service delivery in terms of the justice and the treatment received[2]. According to Seiders and Berry[3], customers' judgments of service fairness surface, when they sense either injustice or uniquely fair behavior. Once they feel unfairly treated, the customers might have a negative impression of the service organization, followed by an intention to switch to another service organization. That is, customer perceived justice has a significant influence on customer satisfaction and customer behavioral intentions[4]. Therefore, it is worthwhile to investigate when and why customers feel unfair in the service settings.

Since 1990s, some researches on service justice have been conducted. Nevertheless, most of these studies aimed to identify the general dimensions of service justice, or to affirm the importance of justice in the context of service failure and service recovery attempts. There are relatively few studies on perceptions of fairness beyond service failures and recovery process[5]. Unlike previous research, this study was conducted to explore the categories and causes of unfairness in the service encounters. The service encounter is a period of time during which a consumer directly interacts with a service[6]. More specifically, our study was designed to

answer several key questions regarding the service injustice customers perceived during the service delivery.

 • What specific events lead to unfairness in the service encounters from the customer's point of view?

 • What are the underlying causes of customers' perceived injustice?

To address these questions, we use critical incident technique (CIT), which has been used extensively in diverse discipline including management, human resources and education. In the service marketing literature, CIT has been employed to investigate customers' responses to services over a variety of applications[7]. Before discussing the method, procedure, and results of the study, we review previous research on service justice.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Relevance of justice to service

It has been argued that justice concerns are pertinent not only to internal aspects of organizational functions, but also can be applied to the service realm[8]. And there are four main arguments supporting the relevance of justice to customers' service reactions[9]. First, service fairness is a desired organizational social identity. Service organizations will endeavor to convey a social image of service fairness[10], as a way of differentiating themselves from rivals, or as a fundamental organizational value. Second, customers participate in the service delivery, which makes justice an appropriate lens for viewing customers' reactions to service experiences[8]. As a given-and-take transaction, the service delivery will be companied by some implicit bargaining, which makes service fairness considerations important. And what's more, customers and service suppliers are bound by social and economic ties. In order to build enduring social connections with customers, the service organiza- tions are likely to care about service fairness.

2.2 Sense of service injustice

The sense of injustice can be characterized as an emotional response to recognizing that one's expecta-tions have not been meet and that misfortune could somehow have been avoided[11]. It means that unfair

service is generally judged as being lower in quality[12]. However, service injustice is not equivalent to poor service quality or dissatisfaction. Compared to service quality, service justice has been broadly defined as a multifaceted construct, consisting of distributive justice, procedural justice and interactional justice[4,9]. Then, how could the customers distinguish a highly fair service encounter from a unfair one? Is there anything guiding their judgment of justice.

To explain the cognitive process of injustice, Zinni[11] proposed a framework that the sense of injustice has three components: distributive situation, beliefs related to the situation, and elements of identity. Based on 16 different versions of a person's going-to-college story, Zinni's study was designed to test how people think about the distribution of goods, specifically, the benefits of some public policies (e.g., scholarship). And the key point of his argument was that the feelings of injustice were related not only to circumstances of the situation and the rules by which people seek to distribute goods, but also the attributions they make and a sense of identity.

Three major principles of distributive justice found in the literature are equity, need, and equality. The equity norm presumes that people judge the distributive outcomes in terms of outcome-to-input ratios. A person feels inequitably treated if her or his ratio of outcomes to inputs is relatively low to his referent's[13]. The "need" rule proposes that the allocation of resources should be based on individual's needs. In addition, the equality principle dictates that regardless of the amount of inputs made in the relationship equal outcomes suffice for the fairness test[14]. As is argued, proper use of these principles is dependent on the distribu-tive situations. Deutsch discussed conditions for each of the three principles. when economic productivity is a primary goal of the cooperative relation, "equity" will be the dominant principle. And "equality" will be dominant when the fostering of maintenance of enjoyable social relations is the common goal. In addition, when personal development and personal welfare is the common goal, "need" will be the dominant principle of distributive justice.

3 Method and Procedure

3.1 Critical Incident Technique

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) has been employed to investigate customers' responses to services over a variety of applications[15-17]. As an exploratory method, CIT also shares the advantages and disadvantages generally attributed to exploratory methods. The primary advantage of CIT is "its capacity to provide accurate and consistent interpretations of people's accounts of events without depriving these accounts of their power or eloquence" [18]. Criticism of CIT typically focused on the reliability and validity issues, which may arise as a result of the ambiguity of word meanings, category labels, and coding rules in a particular study[19]. Nevertheless, when the purpose of the research is to increase knowledge of a phenomenon based on thorough understanding, an approach such as CIT seems particularly well suited to the task[15].

3.2 Date collection

Date collection was done by three trained senior graduated students through an open-ended questionnaire, in which the following 4 questions were asked.

(1) Think of a time when you experienced an unfair service in some service organization.

(2) When did the incident happen? Please describe the whole event in detail, including what the service provider did and said.

(3) For what reason did you feel unfair?

(4) What should the service provider do, as you think?

Similar use of students to collect critical incident data has shown its reliability in previous CIT investigations[7,15,17]. During 6 weeks, a total of 264 questionnaires were collected, 18 of which reported no incidents of service injustice. Following further qualification of the sample, another 76 respondents were eliminated because they had not described the story in detail, or reported the reason why they felt unfair. Finally 170 respondents remained, of which 41.7% were male, about 58.2 were within the range of 18 to 30 years old, and more than 88% were beyond the high school diploma.

3.3 Classification of the incidents

Of the 196 critical incidents identified by the

sample, 31 incidents were reported as the unfairness of service recovery. We eliminate these 31 incidents, for their focus on what kind of recovery is fair to the service failure. Among the remaining 165 incidents, 58 were from restaurants, 33 from travel services, 18 from hotels, 18 from retail services, 11 from transportation services, and 27 incidents from other service organizations, such as hospitals, banks, gas stations, and government offices.

Through a process of repeated, careful readings, two researchers (different from the interviewers) sorted the 165 incidents into groups and categories according to similarities in the reported experiences. Several iterations were necessary to achieve consensus on categories labels and the assignment of incidents. After the classification system emerged, a third researcher who was not involved in the initial sorting effort was asked to apply the classification system across the complete set of incidents[7,15]. The inter-judge agreement produced by the exercise was 87.6% and 81.7% for the primary categories and subcategories respectively.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Incident classification system-primary categories

The initial sorting of the incidents resulted in four major groups of employee behaviors that could account for customer perceived service injustice. Within the 4 major classifications of critical incidents, 13 secondary categories were identified. The labels and proportions of the 4 major groups and 13 secondary categories are shown in Table 1. And the distribution of incidents classified by type of industry is shown in Table 2.

4.1.1 Group 1: information asymmetry

It's not surprising that the information is asymmetric between buyers and sellers, ether in quality or in quantity. Likewise, the service providers actually know more about the services than the customer. Especially, when communicating with the customers, the service provider may hold back some information unconsciously or intentionally. Incidents in this category of responses reflect that not only the quantity but also the quality of service information may affect customers perceived of unfairness. The customer will feel cheated when they find themselves lose the chance of maximizing their outcomes

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or minimizing their costs because of the inadequacy and ambiguity of information. As a customer reported, "the hotel should have reminded its guests that reservations through internet would enjoy a lower price".

Table 1　Major group and subcategories classified by using CIT

Major Group and subcategory	NO..	%
Group 1: Information Asymmetry		
A: Inadequate information	16	9.70
B: Unfaithful information	10	6.06
C: Ambiguous information	2	1.21
Subtotal, group 1	28	16.97
Group 2: unfair procedure		
A: Unfair waiting	41	24.84
B: Lack of control	12	7.27
C: Service policies with bias	2	1.21
Subtotal, group 2	55	33.33
Group 3: inappropriate attitudes and manners of the service personnel		
A: Be treated in a bad manner	21	12.73
B: Be treated inconsistently from one time to another	3	1.82
C: Be treated with personal bias	22	13.33
D: Be Wronged	4	2.42
Subtotal, group 3	50	30.30
Group 4: unfair outcomes		
A: Unworthy service	14	8.48
B: Disconfirmation between service performance and promises	7	4.24
C: Unequal inputs or outcomes across different customers	11	6.67
Subtotal, group 4	32	19.39

Note:n=165

4.1.2 Group 2: unfair procedure

The second group of critical incidents (n=55) emerges from customers' perception of unfair service procedures. Incidents in this category reflect occasions when customers endure a long-time waiting, what's worse, other customers' cutting-in-line was allowed. First come, first served. When the rule is broken for some person who has a special relationship with the service provider, the other customers may feel unfair. On the other hand, some controls of the service procedure are necessary to the customers. The service provider should allow the concerned customers to participate in decision-making. Such important decisions "can not be made without first asking the customers' opinions". In addition, the policies and procedures for dealing with customers should be consistent and unbiased, rather than according to the power of "guanxi".

Table 2　Incident classification by type of industry

Groups / Typy of services	Group1	Group2	Group3	Group4
Restaurants	6	**29**	17	6
Transportation servic	1	3	3	4
hotels	4	3	5	6
Retail services	3	3	**12**	0
Travel services	7	5	7	**14**
other	7	**12**	6	2
Column total	28	55	50	32

Note:n=165

4.1.3 Group 3: inappropriate attitudes and manners of the service personnel

This category includes (n=50) incidents in which the manner of service personnel is viewed rude, impolite, with little care, without courtesy, or even worse, with no respect but a personal bias. As we know, the service encounter is not merely a process of economic transaction, but also a social exchange, into which the customer involved her or his social image. Bad manners and personal bias, let alone an unjust accuse, seriously hurt the customers' self-pride, and broke the norm that "customers are God". Some employees of the service firm do behave in good manners before the customer "pay the bill", whereas show a contrast after the bill.

4.1.4 Group 4: unfair outcomes

Customers will weigh their outcomes to inputs. They may perceive the service delivery an unworthy one, when the outcomes are not proportional to costs, such as "the price is too high, as to a three-star hotel". And they also compared their outcome-to-input ratio with others'. When the unequal outcomes or inputs between customers were identified, the one who had paid more or who had gain less may feel inequality. Additionally, when the

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service company did not serve what they had previously promised, the customer may feel loss of benefits and injustice as a result.

4.2 Insights into research questions

Some conclusions can be drawn about the initial research questions by examining the classification of the incidents and the frequencies and proportions reported in Table 1 and Table 2.

4.2.1 Source of unfairness in service encounters

The four major groups and 13 categories capture the types of events and behaviors that lead to very unfair encounters. It can be noted that group 2 has the highest proportion (33.33%). This percentage suggests that service organizations, especially the restaurants might do well to manage their waiting lines , allow customers to participate in decisions and keep the procedures applied fairly from one customer to another. Another proportion (30.30%) of unfair incidents is classified within Group 3. Incidents in this group relate to the interaction between customers and the service personnel. In retail services, two thirds of the reported unfair incidents were caused by the inappropriate attitudes and manners of the service personnel. Thus, training is extremely necessary in a service company. Observed from Table 1, other unfair encounters may be a result of informational or distributive injustice.

4.2.2 Why the customers feel unfair

As Zinni[11] has argued, the feelings of injustice were related not only to circumstances of the situation, but also the rules by which people seek to distribute goods, and the attributions they make. Likewise, the service delivery can be considered as a process of allocating the service organization's functional and social resources. When judging service fairness, the customer may think about whether the service organizations correctly provide what they promised, whether the service personnel take enough effort, pay enough attention and show a high degree of respect to her/him. That is, the expectations of what should be received are affected by distributive norms. In the service settings, customers and service suppliers are not limited to the economic aspect of their relationship, but also share social ties. So both the equity norm and the equality had been adapted by the customers when judging service justice. That is, the customers will experience a sense of injustice

when the norms they held, are broken, for example, the rule of queuing.

Attributions of causality are also directly related to the fairness perceptions[20], or the sense of injustice[11]. What a person perceives to be the cause of some event can influence the individuals' feelings and evaluations[21]. If the customer attributes some bad outcomes to the service provider, her or his perception of injustice may be strengthened. For example, the customer feels unfair when he attributes the extra cost to the front desk who "should have reminded him reservation through internet enjoyed a lower price in the hotel". It means that customers' judgments of justice are somewhat self-interested.

5　Conclusions

5.1 Managerial implications

To improve customer satisfaction in service encounters, service managers should attach importance to customers' perceived unfairness. Bases on the results of our research, several implications can be drawn.

First, managing the service line is especially significant. We discovered that unfair incidents of queuing in line were quite common. Basically, the service employees should first service those who come first, and play a role of "policeman" to manage the disruptive behaviors of other customers.

Second, training is extremely necessary in a service company. The service employees should be educated to behave in an excellent manner, and treat the customers without personal bias.

Third, service organizations must keep the promise, service exactly what they have promised. Either an explicit promise in the company's advertisement or the physical circumstance as an implicit promise should be entirely performed.

5.2 Limitations

Since all the incidents we collected were from traditional face-to-face service encounters, further researches are needed that collect data from other service settings, for example, e-services, self-services. And some empirical researches are also needed that focus on the antecedents and moderating factors of service justice.

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