Customer Rage:
TRIGGERS, TIPPING POINTS, AND TAKE-OUTS

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Road rage, school rage, and customer rage are becoming almost everyday occurrences. Customer rage is an intense anger coupled with expressions of physical, verbal, or other potentially harmful behaviors in response to a dissatisfying service experience and can potentially result in severe negative consequences for firms, employees, and even other valued customers. *Fortune 500* firms are so concerned that some are installing new software in their call centers to detect rising levels of anger in customers' voices so that management may intervene to prevent an incident escalating to rage.[1] Furthermore, *Entrepreneur* magazine noted that Americans are getting angrier every year and reported a 24% increase in complaints filed with the Better Business Bureau.[2]

Apart from the direct financial impact of customer anger on a firm's business, another major concern is that employees are increasingly the victims of customer rage. A study of American workers shows that almost 25% were victims of psychological and/or physical aggression from customers.[3] Indeed, over the past two years, ComPsych Corporation, which provides employee assistance programs, has seen a 78% increase in the number of stress counseling sessions it has provided to retail employees who have experienced customer abuse.[4] Some examples of violence against service employees during customer rage incidents include:

> After arguing with an employee, a 43-year-old man, who had felt that the wheels of his car had not been scrubbed properly, grabbed the car wash supervisor by the throat and choked him until he passed out. (*The Chicago Sun-Times,* November 2, 2006)

> A 20-year-old night manager at a Wendy's fast food restaurant was shot in the upper arm by a drive through customer who was disgruntled about the number

of packets of hot sauce he thought he should have received with his meal. (*The Miami Herald, May 30, 2007*)

Less-violent incidents include ATM users pounding the machine when their cards is swallowed and incensed restaurant patrons throwing food on the floor when offended by a waiter.[5] When anger reaches a boiling point, neither people nor property are safe.

Our research involves a large-scale, two-year study across four countries (USA, Australia, China, and Thailand) and a diverse range of customer rage incidents. Whereas previous research has investigated rage incidents as a snapshot in time, we take a longitudinal perspective to see how rage incidents unfold over time. Furthermore, most studies that have analyzed failed service encounters have focused on justice theory,[6] unmet service quality expectations,[7] or attributions of blame.[8] Our research examines the underlying psychological processes of stress and coping that propel some consumers to experience extreme negative emotions, including rage and, finally, resentment.[9] Hence, the aim of our program of research was to:

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- determine the triggers (antecedent conditions) that give rise to rage behaviors;
- identify and understand the tipping points for extreme anger and rage incidents;
- determine the extent to which these circumstances and coping behaviors can be generalized across situations in Eastern and Western cultures; and
- recommend a course of action for practicing managers for the prevention or, at least, the management of customer rage incidents.

Customers Psychological Processes

When individuals experience anger they tend to want to attack the target.[10] This can result in non-confrontational behaviors, such as leaving a service encounter, engaging in negative word of mouth, and making complaints to third parties. However, it also may lead to direct verbal intimidation, damage to the organization's property, and even violence directed at front-line employees and other customers. Sometimes it results in acts of deliberate sabotage. Yet, while anger is one of the most commonly experienced negative emotions in service experiences, it is surprising that this emotion, along with the accompanying destructive expressions and behaviors, has received so little attention.[11]

In examining customer rage incidents arising from failed service encounters, we employ the theory of stress and coping.[12] This theory is consistent with a "Think-Feel-Do" framework[13] and helps us to understand the underlying psychological processes that trigger rage incidents. This theory identifies two key psychological processes, *cognitive appraisal* and *coping*, to help explain how customers react to stressful encounters. The theory has been employed extensively across cultures in analyzing individual behavioral responses and outcomes of stressful life events. At the *appraisal* stage, a person evaluates whether a particular (stressful) encounter with the environment (e.g., service encounter) is relevant to their well-being and, if so, is it likely to be harmful or beneficial to them. Is there possible harm or threat to one's values (e.g., sense of fairness), commitments, or goals? Is the health or security of self or a loved one at risk? Is there a potential threat to one's self-esteem? Cognitive appraisal is the process of "categorizing an encounter, with respect to its significance to well-being."[14] This appraisal process goes a long way to explain why customers sometimes have severe negative reactions to, for instance, an impolite employee or when a customer is made to wait in line for 15 minutes or more before receiving attention. It is the cognitive appraisal of a stressful incident that triggers negative emotions (frustration, annoyance, anger) and, sometimes, rage behaviors. *Coping* refers to the constantly changing efforts, both behavioral and cognitive, that people employ to master, tolerate, or minimize a stressful situation. Coping has two widely recognized functions: managing stressful emotions and their consequences (emotion-focused coping); and altering the troubled person-environment relationship that is the perceived cause of the distress (problem-focused coping). Coping focuses on what the person actually thinks and does in a specific stressful encounter and how this changes as the encounter unfolds. Typical coping behaviors include confrontation (complaining, exhibiting rage), escape-avoidance (leaving the incident quickly), distancing (pretending it did not happen), and even exercising self-restraint.

Next, taking a lead from earlier conceptual work of Ben Schneider and David Bowen,[15] we contend that organizations cannot truly understand emotionally charged customer reactions such as rage incidents unless they consider their customers as people first, and as consumers second. A person's psychological needs and expectations shape their pre- and post-consumption behavior. It is at the cognitive appraisal stage of the theory of stress and coping that consumers appraise what psychological needs are "at stake" or are being threatened. These needs are deeply rooted in one's psyche and are met when individuals get what they seek from life as a person. In fact, *psychological needs* (such as self-esteem, sense of belonging, need for control, fairness, and security) are so central to a person's core well-being that failure to gratify them can result in extreme negative emotions and subsequent vengeful behaviors.[16] For example, self-esteem is an individual's sense of his or her value or worth as a person. Feeling good about oneself and having high self-esteem is important to one's psychological equilibrium.[17] However, the management of customers' self-esteem needs varies between products and services. Esteem needs for products are managed via advertising that appeals to the self-concept as being smart, sophisticated, and

competent (e.g., attractive, popular people wear a particular brand of jeans). With services, however, interpersonal interaction provides firms with an opportunity to not only maintain a customer's esteem, but to enhance it. Employee actions, such as remembering a customer's name or genuinely greeting or thanking a customer, are actions that can enhance esteem. On the other hand, circumstances perceived as threatening to one's self-esteem (being treated with disrespect, an excessive wait in line for basic service) are seen as a direct cause of anger and aggressive behavior.[18]

Fairness is also a value that strongly resonates with most people. Schneider and Bowen propose that individuals have a justice motive that derives from an implicit psychological contract with others to be treated fairly.[19] As Berry noted "The service promise . . . includes the implicit promise of fair play. Customers expect to be treated fairly; they become angry and mistrustful when they perceive otherwise."[20] Marketers acknowledge the investment an organization makes in delivering a service, but all too often neglect to consider the customer's investment including time, inconvenience, and forsaking the opportunity to sample a competitor's offering and price.

Viewing customers as *consumers* focuses a firm on meeting its performance targets such as making a sale or answering an inquiry within a specified time period. However, viewing consumption experiences with a different lens by thinking of customers as *people*, first and foremost, shifts the thinking. This way, the focus is on satisfying both the functional expectations *and* the basic psychological needs of the person. Violate these basic human needs and the outcome is likely to result in rage; gratify these needs and your customers will love you.[21]

Study Method

Details of the in-depth interviews and diary completions of customers in the USA, Australia, China, and Thailand are provided in the Appendix.

Findings

Our findings reveal the psychological processes that propel some consumers to go into rage. Five key findings emerged:

- Rather than being an immediate reaction, rage evolved over time as complaints were poorly handled. Rage behaviors typically emerged after the customer gave the firm multiple opportunities to recover, with emotions escalating at each unsuccessful recovery effort.
- Customers' appraisals of threats to their basic human needs (e.g., self-esteem, fairness) were identified as the triggers that escalated emotions.
- There are two distinct tipping points at which service recovery becomes almost impossible.
- There are subtle differences in the expression of negative emotions across Eastern and Western cultures.

FIGURE 1a. Insurance Company
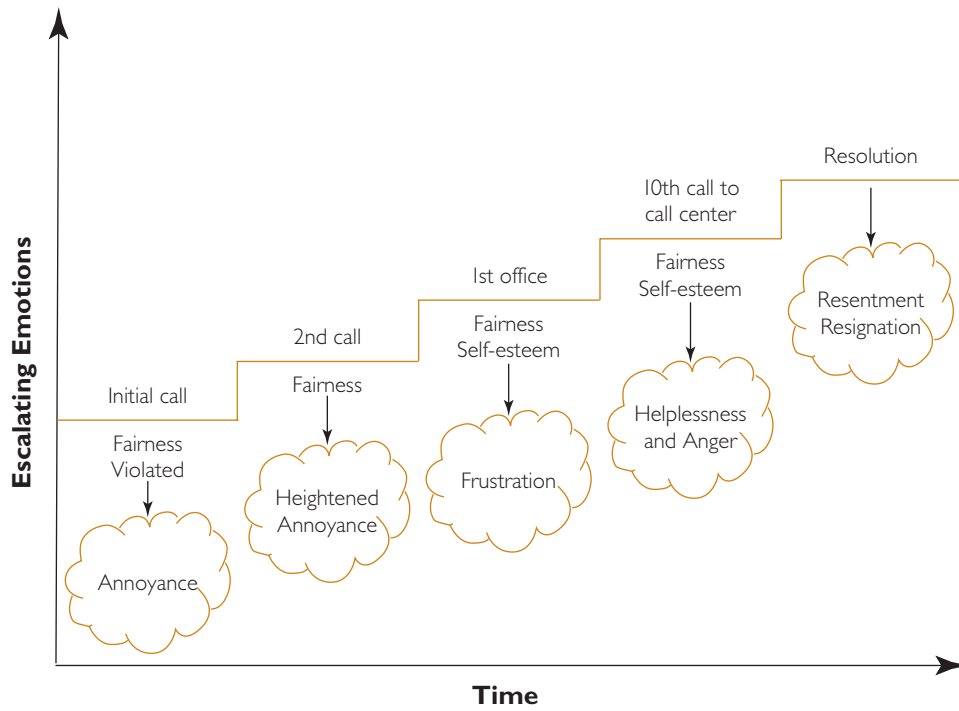
- There is a variety of rage behaviors.

Temporal Dimension

There is a critical temporal dimension that resulted in two distinct tipping points. In every case studied, a series of dissatisfactory service encounters (related to the same incident) occurred over a period of time ranging from 5 minutes to several weeks. These were the result of an initial service failure followed by multiple, ineffectual, or non-existent recovery efforts by the firm. On average, there were 5 separate failed recovery episodes following the initial incident that triggered the customer complaint. In most cases, there were multiple service personnel involved. Customer negative emotions escalated with each ineffectual or non-existent recovery attempt.

Importantly, expressions of anger and, later, the accompanying rage behaviors only surfaced after several failed pleas by the *customer* to have the issue resolved. Rage did not manifest immediately, rather it unfolded over time. Initially, interviewees reported expressing mild negative emotions such as frustration, irritation, or annoyance, but when the issue continued to be unresolved or was exacerbated by uncaring, incompetent, or resentful employees, only then did it escalate to anger and ultimately rage. To illustrate, in Figure 1a, a 37-year-old female customer of an Australian insurance company made eleven calls to a

FIGURE 1b. Starbucks
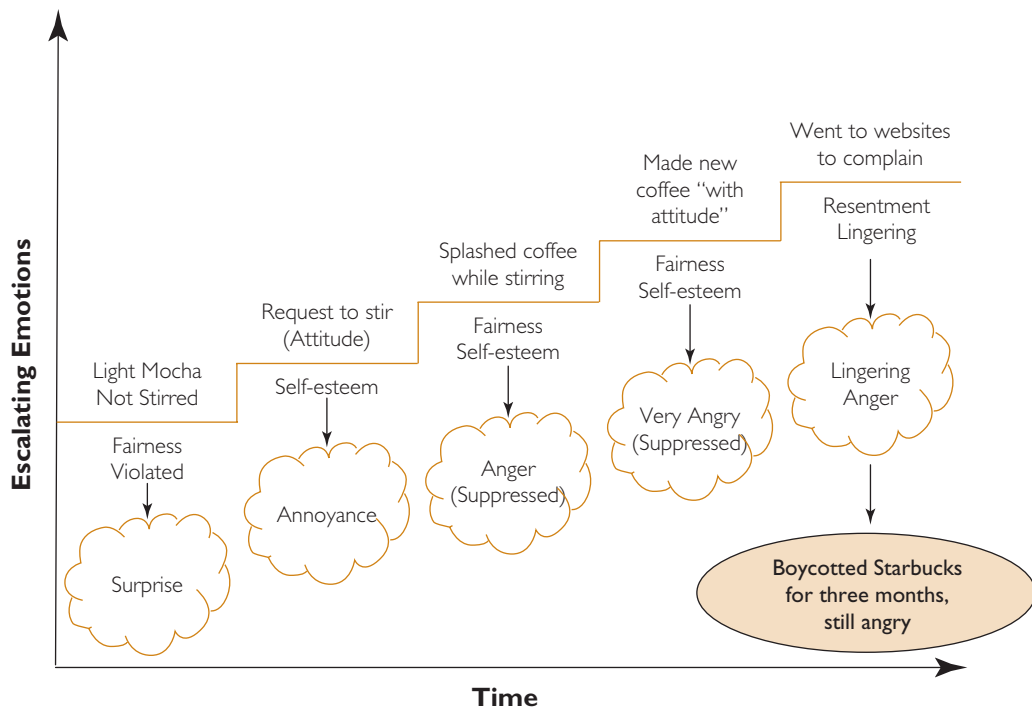
call center and two in-store visits over a five-week period in an effort to obtain a legitimate refund of $500. At each encounter the interviewee reported that employees seemed "not to care" or assist, and they displayed a lack of empathy and willingness to solve the problem. In this particular case, employees repeatedly displayed ignorance of the individual's situation due to an unwillingness to read previous computer log files that would have apprised them of the situation, enabling them to resolve the problem. The interviewee stated that after the 5th encounter she felt, *"A sense of helplessness, desperation, no one would listen to me. . . . I felt I had no control any longer over what was happening."* Following each encounter, emotions escalated from initial surprise to concern, then annoyance to frustration, and finally extreme anger, accompanied by expressions of rage such as yelling, swearing, slamming down of the telephone, and finally resentment. Figures 1a-1c depict the patterns of escalation of negative emotions that were typical of most interviewees.

Take the case of a loyal Starbucks customer of four years who purchased a chocolate mocha at her regular store (see Figure 1b). Unfortunately, a new employee did not mix the drink properly and the customer politely asked for it to be mixed. Upon this request:

FIGURE 1c. China Aircon Installation
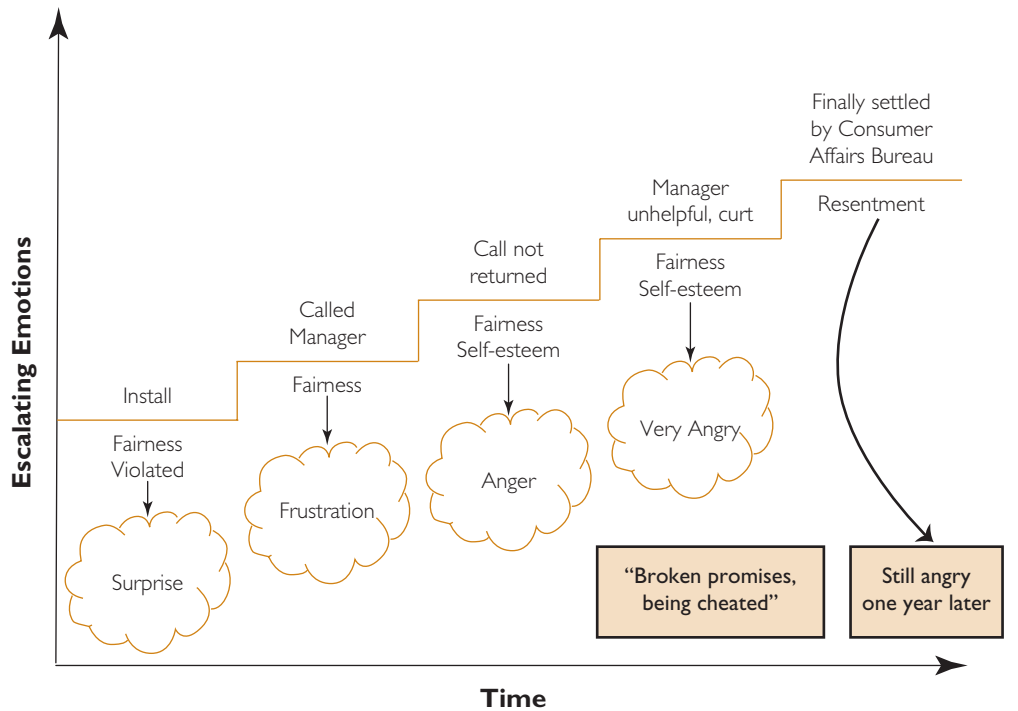
"The employee gave me this attitude . . . and said you can mix it with a spoon . . . After again asking for it to be mixed, she [Starbucks employee] took the coffee and mixed it, but when returning it, slammed it down on the counter and spilled it. She then went away and made me another one and then gave me a filthy look . . . I felt belittled [i.e., loss of self-esteem]. I was slightly annoyed initially, but later I got quite angry with her." (Female, 28 years old, Starbucks, USA)

To further illustrate, a Chinese middle-aged female customer arranged the purchase and installation of an air-conditioning unit in her apartment from a department store in Shanghai, China. Within 24 hours of installation, the unit began leaking water inside her apartment. Repeated attempts by phone to store personnel and a personal visit to the store manager failed to get the seller to acknowledge responsibility for the problem. It was not until two weeks later, following representations to the consumer affairs bureau, that the problem was acknowledged and action taken by the seller. Again at each episode, the interviewee's reported emotion progressed from an initial annoyance to frustration to extreme anger, as a sense of being cheated and then of desperation surfaced (Figure 1c). This interviewee felt so strongly about the incident that she became extremely emotional during the interview, even though the incident had occurred 6 months previously. The interviewee reported:

"I felt cheated . . . Why are they treating me like this? . . . Because no one would listen to me I went to the Consumer Tribunal in Shanghai. Only then did the department store contact me and replace the air conditioner." (Female, 42, Shanghai department store, China)

Threats to Basic Human Needs

In our research, interviewees were asked to describe what happened, what they were thinking, how they felt, and how they reacted *at each stage* in the process of trying to get a satisfactory resolution from the firm. What emerged from their stories were clear descriptions of threats or violations of their psychological needs or core well-being. The three rage incidents illustrated in Figure 1 are consistent with the core concept of stress-appraisal-coping theory, whereby a person first interprets and appraises a stressful event in terms of how it enhances or threatens their well being (or that of a loved one).[22] These appraisals in turn affect how a customer reacts emotionally and behaviorally.[23] Different individuals may evaluate a situation differently. In other words, emotions are produced by an individual's appraisal process in conjunction with a specific service encounter. Past studies have shown that situations appraised as threatening, violating one's self-esteem,[24] creating feelings of being cornered, creating feelings of helplessness or having no control over a stressful situation,[25] lacking in fairness or justice,[26] or threatening to loved ones are all situations that threaten one's core human needs. Such situations represent the appraisal stage of stress-coping theory and provide fertile ground for extreme negative emotions. Following are the findings concerning each appraisal dimension.

Threats to Fairness Needs

Feelings of a sense of injustice,[27] of being cheated or treated unfairly, were described by 68% of the interviewees (see Figure 3) as a belief that preceded their negative emotions and subsequent rage behavior. To illustrate:

"I was being cheated." (referring to how he was being treated by a taxi driver shortly before the rage incident, Male, 55, Australia)

"I felt cheated because they [airline] had taken my money and now they wanted me to pay again." (Female, 30, USA)

It is evident from the examples illustrated in Figures 1a-1c that, even though appraisals of being treated unfairly were made, the initial customer reaction was typically a feeling of irritation or mild annoyance. It was only after repeated appeals by the customer for resolution, and repeated failure by the organization to resolve the problem, that negative emotions escalated. Importantly, the sense of being unfairly treated did not dissipate over time but rather remained throughout the escalation of negative emotions.

Threats to Self-Esteem

In many instances, the apathy, disinterest, and lack of apology from service personnel in responding to a customer request for service recovery were threatening to customers' self-esteem. Violations of self-esteem were

FIGURE 2. Cognitive Appraisal
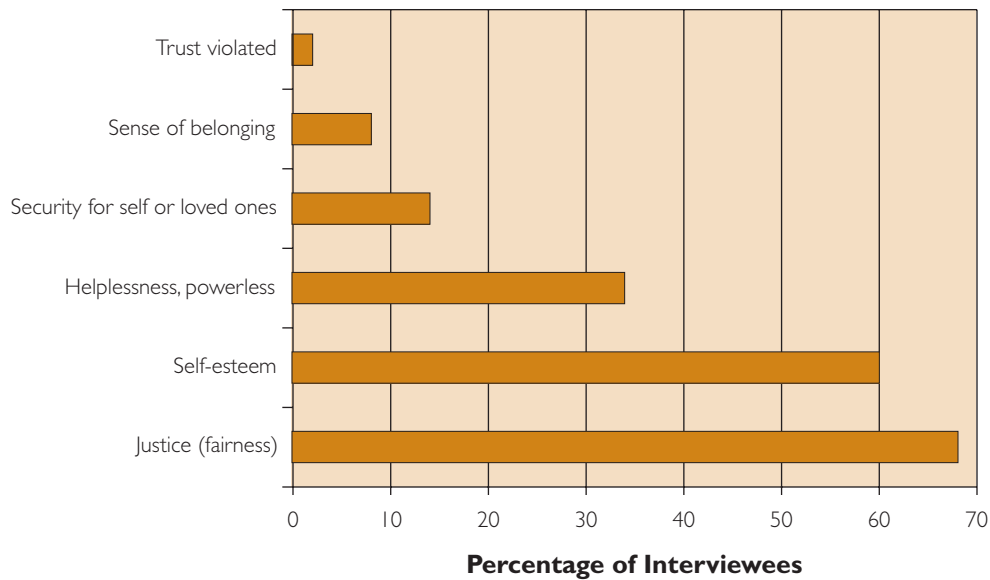
the second most reported appraisal (see Figure 2) behind justice, with 60% of the interviewees reporting that it preceded their escalating negative emotions and subsequent rage behavior. Interestingly, in over 90% of cases, the interviewee reported that they never, at any stage, received an apology—an action that has the effect of restoring a customer's sense of self-worth. The following quotes illustrate:

> [A Thai male who had taken his young daughter to a public hospital reports what he was thinking before he became very angry.] "I was thinking I was being looked down upon and repressed. I was treated like I wasn't important and was in a low class [socio-economic class]. . . . If the nurse were a man, I would punch him in the face." (Male, 24, Thailand)

> [A Home Depot customer who received poor in-store treatment.] "You've got to imagine a whole store treating people like garbage. I hate Home Depot." (Male, 45, USA)

> [A Chinese customer of a retail dress shop who reported her thoughts.] "I was treated like I wasn't important, like I didn't have enough money to buy their expensive clothes. . . . I became very angry but didn't show it." (Female, 39, China)

Threats to Self or Loved Ones and the Need for Control

The security of self or loved ones is acknowledged in social psychology as an important appraisal issue that causes stress and precedes coping behavior. Although, this did not emerge as a prominent trigger of extreme negative

emotions, being reported by only 14% of interviewees (Figure 2), one third of interviewees reported a sense of helplessness, desperation, or having no control over the events they experienced. Work in social psychology has linked these concerns to anger and rage. Thoughts of helplessness and lack of control led to negative emotions.[28] A customer who had made eleven calls to an insurance company for a refund that was owed to her said she experienced "*a feeling of helplessness, no one would listen to me . . . I felt I had no control any longer over what was happening*" (Female, 40, Australia).

### Two Tipping Points

1st Tipping Point, from Anger to Rage

We found two distinct *tipping points*, which has been described by Gladwell as the level at which the momentum for change becomes unstoppable.[29] They are either a threshold or a boiling point. Gladwell explains how infectious diseases, social trends, commercial successes, and even word-of mouth take off once they reach a tipping point. The tipping points typically happened after the interviewee had given the offending firm several opportunities to put things right. The initial failure was compounded by a firm's unresponsiveness or non-existent recovery effort. Mild negative emotions (annoyance, irritation, and frustration) gradually reach a boiling point, and then more extreme emotions such as anger and rage behaviors emerge. It is at this tipping point that life becomes extremely difficult for all parties. When employees do not have the experience or maturity or training, to deal with highly emotional customers, those customers begin to exhibit potentially damaging behaviors towards employees, property, and the brand.

2nd Tipping Point, Resentment and Even Vengeance

Our analysis showed that many incidents ended with the customer having a strong sense of *resentment* and sometimes even *vengeance* towards the firm. In fact, many interviewees were still simmering with resentment days, weeks, and sometimes months after a rage incident, as they relived the encounter. They made statements such as "*I still hate _____, and every time I think of it, I hate them a little more*." As another interviewee put it, "*You've got to imagine the whole store treating people like garbage. I hate _____.*" It is at this point that service recovery is not possible and the relationship is beyond being salvaged. At this point, interviewees began spreading negative word-of-mouth and even in some cases talked about sabotaging the organization.

Emotions and Coping Behavior

Anger is the most frequently reported emotion following a service failure and so it is perhaps not surprising that anger was mentioned by all interviewees (see Figure 3). Interviewees stated their anger grew after repeated failures to get a satisfactory organizational response. The other most frequently cited emotions were frustration and annoyance (cited by 42% and 24% of interviewees, respectively).

FIGURE 3. Expressed Emotions

Percentage of Interviewees
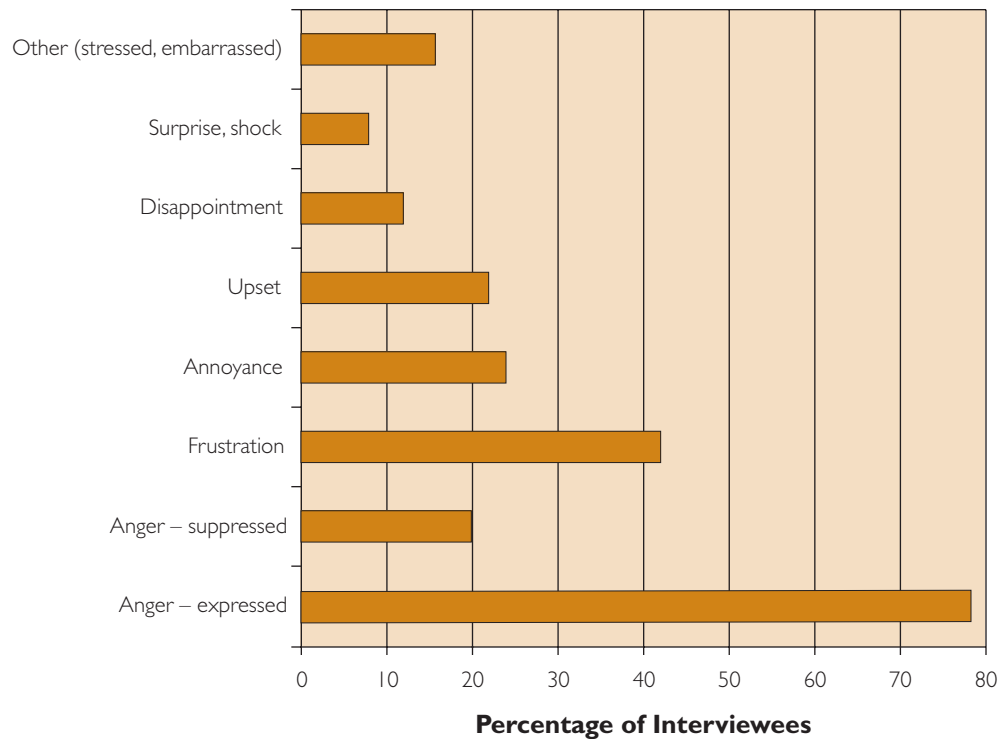
Asians (Thais and Chinese) often felt anger (and indeed used the word anger in the interview) but deliberately suppressed their feelings.

> "I felt very angry inside and wanted to shout at him [doctor] but he would lose face if I did." (Male, 34, Thailand)

> "I was very angry inside, but determined not to show it." (Female, 31, China)

In some Eastern cultures it is considered a sign of weakness to publicly display extreme emotions (either positive or negative). Importantly, however, the feeling of anger remained, and still resulted in various forms of revenge or retaliatory behavior (such as spreading negative word-of-mouth, or boycotting the supplier), the same as for U.S. and Australian interviewees.

Rage Behaviors

A wide variety of aggressive behaviors consistent with research on road rage was reported, including:[30]

- *Verbal*: shouting, screaming, swearing, speaking rudely, speaking with sarcasm, speaking with a strong voice, and arguing forcefully;
- *Physical*: shoving of personnel, slamming fist on counter, and slamming phone down; and

- *Non-verbal*: angry facial expressions and other body language, abruptly hanging up (phone), and staring at personnel.

These rage behaviors expressed by consumers can be stressful for service providers as well, and they can make it difficult to effect a satisfactory service recovery. What is interesting is the contrast between interviewees from Western and Eastern cultures in expressing these rage behaviors. Those from an Eastern culture were twice as likely as those from a Western culture (80% vs. 44%) to exhibit mild forms of behaviors (such as raised voices or sarcasm), while customers from a Western background were almost twice as likely as their Eastern counterparts (60% v 36%) to engage in more violent behaviors (e.g., slamming down fist, screaming, making threats, and intimidation). Importantly, however, interviewees from both cultures were equally as likely to engage in potentially damaging retaliatory behaviors including boycotting the brand, spreading negative word-of-mouth, and vengeful behavior. What this means for management is that customers of a Eastern background may not openly exhibit rage expressions, yet their appraisals appear to be the same as their Western counterparts, and they are just as likely to engage in retaliatory behaviors. In an increasingly global environment where services cross national borders, front-line service employees need to take considerable care when dealing with dissatisfied customers from an Eastern culture as their rage expressions still exist, but are deliberately masked.[31] Clearly, the potential remains for subsequent damaging behavior to be directed towards the firm if a satisfactory recovery is not effected. Furthermore, customers from relationship-rich Eastern cultures, where in-groups (close friends, family) are extremely cohesive and supportive,[32] were more likely than their Western counterparts to spread negative word-of-mouth about the unsatisfactory service incident.

Discussion and Implications

The theory of stress and coping proved useful in gaining insights into the circumstances and triggers for negative emotions and subsequent rage behaviors. The cognitive appraisals that followed the service failure (and subsequent lack of effort to resolve the issue at each stage) clearly support the view that threats to a person's self-esteem, sense of fairness, and a sense of having no control over a stressful situation are the tipping points to the more extreme negative emotions and, ultimately, rage behaviors. This emphasizes the importance of recognizing that customers are people first, and consumers second. Furthermore, people strive to satisfy core needs in life at a level more fundamental and compelling than simply meeting expectations in their role as a consumer. Conceiving of customers as consumers propels service firms to focus on service attributes (such as product features, speed of service, product knowledge of personnel, in-store ambience, and time waiting in queues) and how to meet, if not exceed, consumer expectations. However, viewing customers foremost as people shifts the emphasis to satisfying basic human needs as the first priority.

In the incidents reported in the interviews, this guiding principle was blatantly disregarded. Indeed, in many of the reported incidents, an individual's self-esteem was violated not only once, but several times following a service failure, by a firm's reluctance to firstly acknowledge the feelings of the person and, secondly, by not effectively resolving the service failure at the first opportunity. The quotes in Table 1 are testimony to this. When negative emotions escalated at each subsequent episode, it was *the manner in which the customer was treated* by service personnel that was the issue.

TABLE 1. Interviewee Illustrative Quotes *(continued on next two pages)*

Quote	Context	Country	Sex, Age (in years)
Appraisal Dimension: Threat to Fairness (Justice)			
That's not fair [doctor being 45 minutes late for an 8 a.m. appointment] and it sucks, but there is not a lot I can do …	Medical	U.S.	M, 35
It was a new car and it shouldn't have broken down.	New Auto Dealership	U.S.	M, 40
I felt cheated because they [airline] had taken my money and now they wanted me to pay again.	Airline	U.S.	F, 30
So where is the right and fairness to the people. . . . I felt I was being cheated.	Government Department	Thailand	M, 31
I felt cheated and the airline staff were responsible …	Airline	Thailand	M, 28
He [taxi driver] was simply trying to cheat me … I knew exactly how much it should cost to the airport. After asking him for the third time to put his meter on, I got very angry and slammed my fist on the dashboard.	Taxi	Thailand	M, 55
I was bamboozled into taking out a contract with them. . . . That's when I started to get a bit steamed up and the reason for getting steamed up was I felt that I was manipulated into going with another plan.	Telecom	Australia	M, 37
If you pay $50,000 for a motor vehicle, I was expecting … and when they sold me the vehicle they told me because the vehicle that I had selected, it came with additional things from the dealer because it was the top of the range model, and they said "we treat you differently, we will look after you better" etc. It was like a VIP type membership. . . . I took the car back a couple of times and they thought that I was a fool. They thought that I was an idiot. I attempted to explain. . . . So after taking it back a couple of times, they said "ok we have fixed the problem" and then after driving away and then driving around the corner, the problem came back and the car broke down again and I became all emotional.	New Auto Dealership	Australia	F, 54
I felt so cheated. I felt I was the prey of the hospital [after waiting two hours, and then being given medication that was ineffective].	Hospital	China	F, 27

TABLE 1. Interviewee Illustrative Quotes *(continued)*

Quote	Context	Country	Sex, Age (in years)
The store cheated us. I thought I was defeated and angry.	Department Store	China	F, 38
Appraisal Dimension: Threat to Self-Esteem			
You've got to imagine a whole store treating people like garbage. I hate Home Depot.	Hardware Store	U.S.	M, 45
It was a new car and you should get some respect when it breaks down.	Auto Service	U.S.	M, 40
The customer service rep didn't care, they weren't helpful, they just followed the script.	Telco	U.S.	F, 29
Hutch employees did not treat me as a customer, they treated me like a debtor.	Telco	Thailand	F, 27
She looked at me, "Why do I have to give you a discount?" She just expressed her dislike through her eyes.	Department Store	Thailand	M, 35
She looked down on me making me feel like I didn't know anything. I think the bank staff looks down on local people [from non-urban areas] because local people have lower education. I wanted to say I am not a beggar, but I did not say that . . . They think they are superior because they have higher social positions than local people.	Bank	Thailand	F, 42
And the way she looked was like she [nurse] was looking down on me. . . . I think she divided people in classes [i.e., social hierarchy]. When she did it the second time, my emotions peaked.	Hospital (Public)	Thailand	M, 24
She looked down on me, especially the expression in her eyes. After I tried several coats, she went away to take care of another customer and did pay any more attention to me. The good mood I was in that day was destroyed . . . [Response to question about what made interviewee so angry].	Department Store	China	F, 33
He was too careless . . . and nothing could be done to retrieve it [a bad haircut]. I was angry because my appearance was important to me.	Hairdresser	China	M, 25
Yes I thought it was rude at the beginning when she [waitress] was chewing on something, eating something when she came to serve me and talk to me while she had her mouth full and I couldn't understand what she was saying . . . I thought it was an arrogant approach that she started with.	Restaurant	Australia	F, 50
Appraisal Dimension: Sense of Helplessness, Desperation			
I felt trapped. . . . I had no control over the situation.	Retail	U.S.	M, 35
I felt helpless because you try multiple times to get through the bureaucracy and you run up against a brick wall	Public Sector	U.S.	M, 43

TABLE 1. Interviewee Illustrative Quotes *(continued)*

Quote	Context	Country	Sex, Age (in years)
I did everything in my power to arrange the [telephone] connection . . . but I was powerless in this situation. They are a monopoly so I had no choice and the feeling of helplessness made me angry.	Internet	U.S.	F, 29
I had to take a leave day from my office to do this transaction. After waiting two hours, the staff answered that it takes two weeks to get the ATM card.	Bank	Thailand	F, 42
I asked her to please help me . . . can you please look at my file [in the database]. I have called nine times and no one else will help me. . . . A sense of helplessness, no one would listen to me . . . I felt I had no control any longer over what was happening.	Insurance	Australia	F, 40
Because for such a long time I could do nothing, I felt helpless. I didn't have any control over what happened to me.	Hospital (Public)	China	F, 27
Appraisal Dimension: Threat to Security of Self or Loved Ones			
My daughter was sick. I took her to the hospital. The nurse spoke rudely to my daughter "Where is Ms. XXX? Are you here? Why did it take you so long?" This is not the way Thai nurses should speak. . . . I went back to the hospital to return the medicine telling them the medicine didn't work.	Hospital (Public)	Thailand	M, 24

The emergence of a critical temporal dimension and distinct tipping points, and the accompanying rapid escalation of negative emotions, were other key findings. As reported, almost every rage incident involved a series of failed recovery attempts related to the same incident, occurring over a period of time ranging from 5 minutes to several weeks. On average, there were five discrete recovery opportunities afforded to the organization (but not taken) that preceded the final expressions of rage and resentment for a given incident. Negative emotions escalated only after each ineffectual recovery effort. In other words, anger and accompanying rage expressions only surfaced after multiple (failed) attempts *by the customer* (not the organization) to have the issue resolved.

Lessons for Management

Because services are typically delivered and consumed in "real time" with little or no opportunity to inspect quality before consumption, service failures will inevitably occur, even in the most quality-conscious organizations. Therefore, an integral part of any service quality program is having a systematic and effective service recovery program, thus limiting the damage to the company's reputation and bottom line. As noted earlier, rage incidents can damage two key assets of any firm: customer relationships and employees.

TABLE 2. Lessons for Management: A Summary

	Before Rage Incident	**During Rage Incident**	**After Rage Incident**
Strategy	• Take pre-emptive action to anticipate rage incidents	• Develop a culture that "decriminalizes" complaints • Minimize damage to customer relationship and protect employees	• Attempt to salvage customer relationship and limit psychological damage to employees
Tactics	• Use voice recognition technology to detect rising customer anger (call centers) • Prevent customers from failing • Recruit only "service minded" people; hire for attitude and train for skill • Train staff in techniques to cope with angry customers (e.g., "pacing," "partnering")	• Empower front-line employees to make discretionary decisions • Restore customers' sense of self-esteem, sense of fairness, and give control • Be sensitive to cultural nuances	• Conduct root cause analysis • Involve senior management if high-net worth customer

Step 1: Anticipate Rage Incidents

There are four strategies that should be adopted in anticipation that rage incidents can occasionally arise (see Table 2).

Take pre-emptive action. This may involve implementing early warning systems that signal the onset of customer rage. BBN Technologies, a 60-year-old company in Massachusetts, has developed caller-experience analytic software that detects rising tones of anger on interactive-voice-response (IVR) systems in industries such as airlines, utilities, and railways.[33] IVRs are the speaking tubes that connect corporate America. Companies use BBN's software to determine when their callers are getting angry so they can intervene to defuse the incident before it explodes. The cities of Rotterdam and Amsterdam in the Netherlands have installed an aggression-detection system in the rail network to detect imminent trouble. Based on the tone of speech, the software detects overstressing of the vocal chords, which only occurs in real aggression, and allows pre-emptive action to be taken.

Prevent customers from failing. Recent research by Tax et al. showed that in many instances an organization's processes actually set up customers for "failure" and subsequent complaints.[34] For example, customers at a supermarket using a new self-service check-out technology are almost setting customers for failure if they do not provide patient, well-trained employees to show first time customers how to use the technology. A large hotel chain found that many customers were demanding a refund for in-room telephone charges that they considered unjust. Management was confused because the charges were outlined in a book in a drawer beside the bed. However customers were simply unaware of this, so both parties were unhappy leading to some heated exchanges. When the

hotel realized the problem they placed a laminated card with the charges next to the telephone that could not be missed by customers.

- *Recruit the right people for the front-line.* Successful recovery depends largely on the attitude and behavior of front-line employees who first receive the complaint. While in most cases the initial failure was an organizational process failure (e.g., product not working properly, inaccurate quote for repairs, unexpected delays, and overcharging), the situation and customer emotions only escalated after unresponsive and unprofessional treatment by front-line employees—i.e., when the customer had given the organization an *opportunity* to recover. In interviews with the general manager at the Cape House, a large serviced apartment in Bangkok (Thailand), he explained that he went to great lengths to only hire people with a natural "service mind." Other major organizations do likewise (for instance, St. George Bank in Sydney, FedEx, and Wells Fargo). These organizations *hire for attitude and then train for skill*.

Train customer-facing employees to anticipate and cope with not just a dissatisfied, but an angry customer. For face-to-face service encounters, employees should be trained to understand that people express anger in two different ways. There is "cold" anger, in which words tend to be over articulated but spoken softly, and "hot" anger, where voices are much louder with a typically high pitch. Employees should be trained to understand that cold anger often precedes hot anger, and immediate corrective action needs to be taken to defuse a potential rage incident.[35] Customer-facing staff are often young and at the beginning of their careers, and they have limited experience to call on. Experienced staff should be on stand-by as part of the firm's service recovery procedures. Even experienced employees need to be trained to use language and timing that neurolinguistic psychology has shown to be effective in defusing anger states. For example, "pacing"—getting in step with someone—can be achieved by mirroring a person's behavior, so the person sees him or herself. We pace another's smile when we give one ourselves. Pacing might be as simple as saying, "Miss X, you look very upset. How can I help you?' Such words pace the emotional state. Recent work by medical sociologists at the Harvard Medical School has shown the impact of social and emotional contagion, for example, how people unconsciously mimic the facial expressions, manner of speech, body language, and other behaviors of people around them and especially those with which they interact.[36] For instance, emotional displays by bank workers have been shown to affect the moods of customers. Such techniques have been used successfully to defuse angry customers. "Partnering" might also be used to pacify angry or irritated customers. For example, "I can see you are upset, and I am very happy to work with you to solve this problem."[37] These and other techniques are specific to handling angry, not just unhappy, customers and should be incorporated into any training program.

Step 2: Take Action during Early Stages of a Rage Incident

- *Develop a culture that "decriminalizes" complaints.* St. George Bank in Sydney, a customer service icon, has long preached to employees that complaints are not right or wrong, good or bad, but rather an opportunity to salvage a relationship. This culture has meant that staff don't feel threatened by complaints, don't take them personally, and are uninhibited in reporting or dealing with them in a rational rather than emotive manner.

Customer-facing employees must be empowered to solve a problem quickly rather than delaying recovery by referring the incident to a supervisor. Marriott, for example, specifies the situations that dictate empowered action based on the nature of the incident and the status of the customer.[38] At a more general level, many scholarly and managerial works have specified a series of standard responses such as Starbucks's LATTE principle, which their employees are trained to practice world-wide (*L*isten, *A*cknowledge the customer's problem and feelings, *T*hank the customer for taking the time to complain, *T*ake action to reduce anger and rectify the problem, and practice *E*mpathy).[39] Interestingly, both acknowledging a customer's feelings and practicing empathy are really adhering to the philosophy of "I'm a person first and a customer second." At the first opportunity, front-line employees must "put themselves in the customer's shoes," listen and acknowledge the issue from the *customer's* point of view. Acknowledge the customer's feelings as a person (for instance, "I can understand you are annoyed"). The aim at this point is to prevent emotions from escalating beyond surprise, annoyance, and frustration and reaching the first tipping point—i.e., escalation of emotions to extreme anger. These actions, and a sincere apology, help rebuild rapport, which is the first step in stabilizing the situation and restoring any damage to a person's self-esteem.[40] Further, the situation is also then less stressful for employees and may prevent employee burnout.

- *Letting the issue go unchecked spells disaster.* The key lesson here is that someone must take ownership of the problem and promptly inform the customer of the steps to be taken and the timeframe to resolve it. If this is done, milder negative emotions such as annoyance or irritation would be the felt emotions, and further damage to the firm's reputation, repeat patronage, and loyalty could be minimized. Although the complaining behavior and service recovery literature is a relatively mature area of research, the findings of this study suggest that even some of the largest organizations (insurance companies, home improvement stores, airlines, banks, hospitals, and government departments) still do not appreciate the criticality of fixing the problem at the first opportunity.

- *Restore a sense of fairness and enhance complainants' self-esteem.* Another key finding was that interviewees frequently (68%) felt a sense of being treated unfairly or cheated, especially at the initial service failure. A key goal of any recovery strategy then must be to restore a sense of fairness (justice) to prevent the incident from escalating. This can best be achieved by offering a sincere apology, rectifying the problem as soon as possible, and offering (in select cases) some form of compensation. The next, most

frequently threatened need, was one's self-esteem. Service is often an issue of interpersonal interaction and it is during this interaction that speedy, respectful, professional, and courteous treatment of customers actually boosts self-esteem. Starbucks trains staff to make eye contact and warmly greet customers within five seconds of their entering the café. For regular customers, full-time employees are expected to remember the names of up to one hundred customers and to greet them by name. Greeting a customer by name as they enter the café makes them feel important and enhances their self-esteem.

In today's global economy, services cross national boundaries with relative ease and service firms invariably serve a mix of customers from a variety of cultural backgrounds, including the major Asian economies—China, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand. However, customers with Asian backgrounds possess some fundamentally different cultural norms and values to people of western origin. One such value is a reluctance to openly display emotion, especially negative emotion. When a customer with an Eastern cultural background complains, it would be a big mistake to assume that, because they do not complain vociferously that they are accepting of the situation. Our research indicates that these customers often will not openly display negative emotions the way westerners do, and perhaps may nod as though in agreement and even smile, but internally they may be fuming. While not an easy task, Western employees who frequently interact with customers of an Asian background need to be trained to detect the subtle nuances and body language that signal unhappiness.[41] Firms in the hospitality, airline, tourism, and even tertiary education industries are especially likely to have a large Asian client base (at least in the U.S. and Australia), and employees need to be trained to understand these issues and sensitivities.

Step 3: Post-Rage Actions

- *A systematic analysis of the causes of complaints and incidents that have escalated into rage should be undertaken periodically to ensure systems, processes, recruitment, and training agendas address the underlying causes.*

- *Involve senior management depending on the severity of the rage incident and the status of the customer.* At St. George Bank in Sydney, senior managers have even flown to other cities to try to salvage a (high net worth) customer relationship with the bank following a rage incident.

Organizations increasingly demand emotional labor from their employees. So when they have to face an angry customer, they must keep their emotions in check and display empathy and controlled emotions. It is now well documented that this creates significant stress and other potential health problems among front-line workers.[42] Employees need to have a suitable environment that enables them to have time away from one-on-one interactions with customers. Some organizations (such as Western Water in Melbourne) limit direct interaction with customers to four hours or less each day so as to avoid burnout.

Conclusion

While complaint handling and service recovery undoubtedly form part of the strategic plans of most major firms in today's global marketplace, there remain serious implementation issues at the customer-employee interface. In our study, customer anger, subsequent rage behaviors, and lingering resentment only manifested themselves after the organization had been given multiple opportunities *by the customer* to set things right. In the vast majority of cases, the response—and especially the non-response—by employees only added fuel to the initial small flames, resulting in a much larger blaze (i.e., extreme anger and rage behaviors). It is well known that effective service recovery is closely linked to customer loyalty and the lifetime value of a customer. So that while it is widely acknowledged that service failure is inevitable, steps need to be taken to avoid allowing the initial failure to escalate to a rage incident. This can be accomplished if the right employees are put on the front-line and are appropriately trained to prevent escalation of the issue. Acknowledging that customers are people first and foremost, and consumers second, reinforces the need to meet basic human needs for fairness, self-esteem, safety of self or loved ones, being in control, sense of belonging, and security. Engaging in perspective taking, that is, empathizing and putting themselves in the shoes of the customer, should help facilitate this. Indeed, "recovery" employees must continually ask themselves, "Am I doing/saying anything that will be perceived by the consumer as violating their human needs" and "Would I like an employee to do that if I were that customer?"

APPENDIX
Details of the Study Method

Using the critical incident technique (CIT),[43] we initially conducted 50 in-depth interviews and then a further 950 critical incident diary completions across four countries (USA, Australia, Thailand, and China). This article is based on the initial in-depth interviews. However, the subsequent diary completions confirmed all the patterns of consumer behaviors gleaned from the first phase. CIT is particularly well suited to this study as it allowed us to explore the dynamics of the cognitive appraisal and coping processes that surround the service encounter and customer rage incidents. A convenience sample covering a broad demographic spectrum of urban consumers was interviewed in each country. Only interviewees who could recall a rage incident over the past twelve months were included. To ensure meaning equivalence, a critical consideration in any cross-cultural study, a forward-translation[44] was made of the English version questionnaire by bilinguals whose mother language was Chinese and Thai respectively, and then a back-translation into English was undertaken by separate bilingual researchers.[45] In China and Thailand, interviewees were recruited and interviewed by a marketing research agency.

In both research phases, interviewees were asked to give a detailed general description of the rage incident. After several pilot interviews, it became

apparent that there was an important temporal and multi-stage element and that anger did not usually manifest immediately upon the first failed recovery attempt. Hence for the in-depth interviews, the final interview protocol asked interviewees to first describe what happened and what emotions they felt at each stage. At a later point in the interview, they were asked what they were thinking (appraisal stage) before they became angry. In the final stage, respondents were asked to describe how they expressed their emotions. Limited prompting and probing were involved.[46] Other information was captured using 5-point itemized rating scales (e.g., strength of relationship with the organization before the incident; likelihood of incident occurring due to uncaring staff, systems failures, or external causes; and personal importance of the purchase occasion). All interviews were audio taped and transcribed for later analysis. Each interview was approximately 1.0 to 1.5 hours in duration. The incidents involved a wide variety of service settings including medical services, airline, insurance, retailer, telecom, retail bank, and automobile service.

Each encounter was analyzed as set out by Strauss and Corbin.[47] Through this process, the situations that gave rise to the need for coping were identified and coded. The respondents' options for coping and how they appraised these along with the resultant coping strategies and/or behavior were also interpreted. The coding of the interviews was undertaken by the principle researcher and an associate, with an inter-coder reliability ranging from 92-95 percent depending on the construct being interpreted (e.g., coping behaviors or cognitive appraisal).

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