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40 Years of Service Fairness Research: Literature Review and Meta-Analysis

服务公平理论四十年发展回顾：研究评述与元分析

王 夏／著

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Chapter 1
Service Fairness Research: Literature Review and Prospects

According to Kantian ethics, a fundamental characteristic of a harmonious society is the existence of justice or fairness; for the society to remain harmonious, it is imperative that the majority of the people believes that at least some amount of justice prevails in it (Takala and Uusitalo, 1996). Justice is not only a universally accepted value, but also one whose role in promoting the well-being of individuals and institutions is fundamental. The term justice is used to connote "oughtness" or "righteousness" —an act can be defined through comparison with a prevailing philosophical system (Colquitt et al., 2001), while fairness has been a fundamental base against which people judge the nature of relationships among people and between social institutions and individuals (Clemmer and Schneider, 1996). Even though subtle differences in the concepts of fairness and justice are recognized, in common usage the terms are interchangeable: a fair decision is a just decision (Seiders and Berry, 1998; Sheppard, Lewicki and Minton, 1992).

While the concept of justice may be as old as human civilization itself, it was not until the second half of the 20th century, when social psychological processes were applied to organizational settings, that insights into people's perceptions of fairness in organizations gained widespread attention, giving rise to the concept of organizational justice (for a review, see Colquitt, Greenberg and Zapata-Phelan, 2005). Essentially, organizational justice involves fairness issues in the workplace, particularly as perceived by employees.

Spanning beyond organizational boundaries, marketing researchers began exploring fairness issues in the late 1970s to better understand buyer-seller relationships (e.g., Huppertz, Arenson and Evans, 1978). The notion of fairness is essential for mutually satisfying exchanges, and the customer confidence needed for establishing long-term loyalty can be earned only by firms that have an image of fairness (Seiders and Berry, 1998; Takala and Uusitalo, 1996). Subsequent research expands to examine fairness perceptions in service encounters (e.g., Smith, Bolton and Wagner, 1999; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekaran, 1998). Customers are the disadvantaged group in service encounters, as they have less information about the service provider, the quality of production, and even the market demand and cost structure. Consequently, they are more vulnerable and sensitive to fairness problems in the exchange. In addition, the fundamental characteristics of services, such as being intangible-dominant and inseparable, also exacerbate service fairness problems(Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1985; Clemmer, 1993).

While the literature on service fairness has developed rapidly over the past 40 years, there lacks a cohesive framework to systematically examine its antecedents, the mechanisms by which it is formed, and its consequences. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is two-fold: it aims to provide a comprehensive conceptual framework of service fairness based on the existing theoretical and empirical literature, and to suggest new research directions in the form of testable propositions. Figure 1.1 serves as the organizing framework for this review, delineating the dimensions, antecedents and consequences of service fairness, and the mediator and moderator underlying mechanisms. The author conclude by discussing the managerial implications.

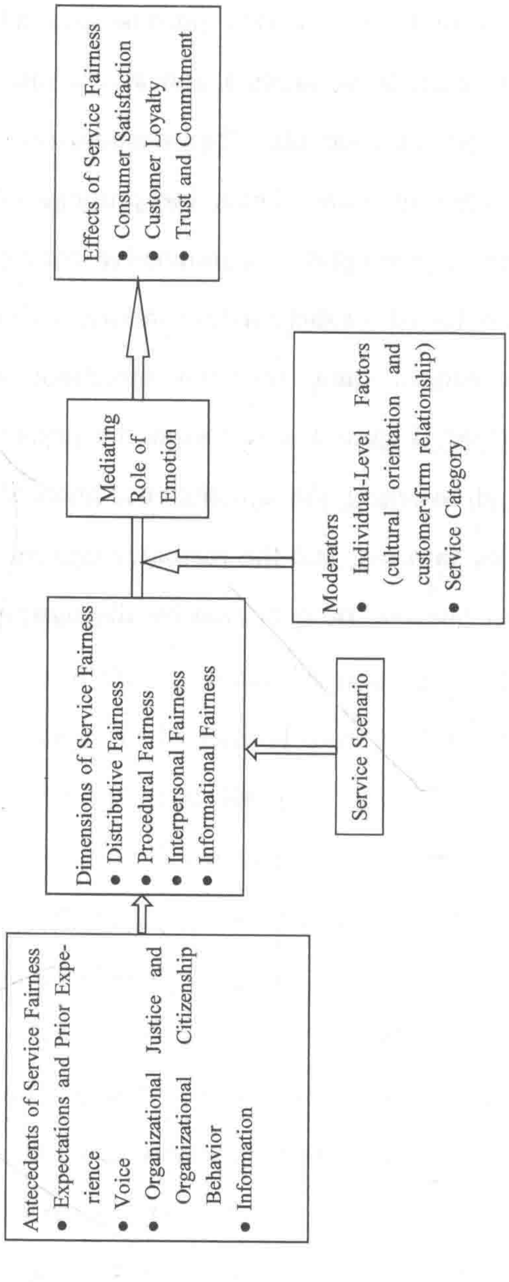

Figure 1.1 A Comprehensive Framework of Service Fairness

1.1 The Service Fairness Framework

1.1.1 The Concept of Service Fairness

Service fairness has been defined as customer's perceptions of justice in a service firm's behavior (Clemmer, 1988, 1993; Seiders and Berry, 1998). While fairness is generally important in marketing exchanges, it is especially significant for service firms, whose product is intangible and difficult to evaluate, forcing consumers to rely on trust (Seiders and Berry, 1998). Another attribute of services is inseparability, or simultaneity in the production and consumption of the service (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1985), which also implies customer participation in the service production process (Clemmer and Schneider, 1996; Keh and Teo, 2001). Such participation and contact with employees can activate interactional fairness (Tax, Brown and Chandrashekaran, 1998). Finally, customers face greater uncertainty and perceived risk for services compared to tangible goods. As such, service customers are vulnerable to exploitation, something which they are aware of (Seiders and Berry, 1998).

Service encounters are exchanges in the sense that both providers and consumers exchange something of value in the process

(Solomon et al. , 1985). Consumers invest resources (i.e., time, ef fort, and money) in obtaining the service, just as the service provider exerts time and effort in performing the service (Carr, 2007). According to equity theory, which emphasizes social compar ison based on the input-output ratio and provides the foundation for research on justice or fairness, when people are involved in any exchange of value, they will evaluate the equity of the exchange (Adams, 1965). This implies that consumers in service encounters will evaluate the equity of the process. Indeed, some researchers contend that fairness principles are instrumental for successful and lasting relationships with customers (Takala and Uusitalo, 1996; Wetsch, 2006).

Just as it is important to define what service fairness stands for, it is equally essential to delineate how it differs from other related constructs. In particular, service fairness is often discussed in tandem with customer satisfaction (Clemmer and Schneider, 1996; McCollough, Berry and Yadav, 2000; Seiders and Berry, 1998). Customer satisfaction is dominated by the disconfirmation paradigm, which holds that satisfaction is related to both the size and direction of disconfirmation of customer expectations (Oliver, 1997; Oliver and Swan, 1989). In contrast, service fairness underscores the psy chological comparison among individuals based on the input-output ratio in an exchange. Service fairness focuses on justice perceptions during the service experience, while customer satisfaction includes much more information about the overall service. In addition, customer satisfaction is more apt to be a post hoc evaluation, while ser vice fairness evaluation takes place as the service unfolds (Olsen and Johnson, 2003). In relating these two constructs, Oliver and Swan (1989) suggest that perceived fairness is an additional factor in explaining consumers' satisfaction that is not captured in the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm.

Another concept closely related to service fairness is service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988). Service quality is the customer's judgment of service excellence across a number of dimensions (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988) and a determinant of customer satisfaction (Oliver, 1997). Compared to service quality, fairness principles offer a distinctive framework for understanding the service consumption process, and fairness episodes can be used as a core component of service evaluation (Carr, 2007). While the original service quality model encompasses substantive attributes of service provision (i.e., tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy), it does not include equity theory as the basis for any of its scales. Yet it is clear from equity theory and introspection that fairness is often evaluated in service encounters (Carr, 2007). Service consumers are concerned with getting what they deserve in relation to other consumers of the service. In other words, consumers do not only evaluate services against some personally constructed expectations of favorableness (i.

e., the five dimensions of service quality), but also through comparisons with multidimensional norms of fairness. These comparisons occur in context and use the consumer's knowledge of how similar others were actually treated by the firm and/or through counterfactual reasoning based upon a mental simulation of how similar others probably would, could, and should be treated by the firm (Carr, 2007). Accordingly, fairness can complement and influence service quality because fairness dimensions—distributive, procedural, and interactional—correspond with factors that determine quality judgments(Brady and Cronin, 2001; Han, Kwortnik and Wang, 2008).

Finally, earlier studies on marketing transactions tend to emphasize perceived fairness based on normative levels of price and service (e.g., Huppertz, Arenson and Evans, 1978). This has led to a stream of research on price fairness (e.g., Bolton, Warlop and Alba, 2003; Xia, Monroe and Cox, 2004). The key difference between these two forms of fairness is that service fairness contains noncomparative inputs and outcomes that go beyond monetary values. For example, while interactional fairness has little to do with price fairness, it makes an indispensable contribution to service fairness. Furthermore, it is arguable if price fairness can be totally subsumed under the distributive dimension of service fairness. Overall, service fairness is more subjective than price fairness and requires more complex and multidimensional information for evaluation.

1.1.2 Dimensions of Service Fairness

Justice theories offers a useful framework for understanding the factors that influence how customers interpret the outcomes, procedures, interpersonal interactions, and information received during a service encounter (for a review of perceived justice, see Colquitt et al., 2001). Clemmer (1988, 1993) indicates that customers' perceptions of service fairness are shaped in three ways: outcome (or distributive) fairness, procedural fairness, and interactional fairness.

Distributive fairness, dealing with the perceived fairness of outcomes, is often deemed the dominant dimension of the fairness construction (Adams, 1965; Homans, 1961). Theories of distributive fairness argue that perceptions of fairness result from customer evaluations of outcome fairness. In purchase transactions, customers invest inputs (e.g., money) and receive outcomes (e.g., service quality). Also, customers compare their own outputs and inputs to the outputs and inputs. Distributive fairness implies that the reward of each person should be proportional to her cost, and the net gain or "profit" should be proportional to her investment in an exchange relation (Homans, 1961). In service encounters, it concerns the quality of the core service itself (Clemmer, 1988, 1993). Three distinct bases are instrumental in forming judgment about distributive fairness: equity, equality and need (Adams, 1965; Deutsch, 1975). Adams' (1965) equity theory is described as a classical social exchange theory, which assumes that humans are motivated instrumentally in their relationships with others (Cropanzano et al., 2001). The equity rule implies that if individuals invest a certain amount of effort, time, or money, a firm should reciprocate proportionately. The equality rule implies that everyone is treated the same way regardless of investment. The needs rule implies that, on the basis of unique, individual requirements, firms may treat people differently (Schneider and Bowen, 1999).

Service consumers are also interested in the procedures used to distribute service resources. They expect the procedures to be unbiased and consistently applied, not unduly favoring any one person or group (Carr, 2007). Thus, ***procedural fairness***, defined as the fairness of the policies and processes contributing to outcomes embodying certain types of normatively acceptable principles (Lind and Tyler, 1988; Thibaut and Walker, 1975), is helpful to capture the fairness perceptions of service delivery (Clemmer, 1988, 1993). While procedural fairness is a complex concept, there are focal issues (e.g., accessibility, speed) that are particularly relevant in service businesses (Blodgett et al., 1997; Tax, Brown & Chandrashekaran, 1998). In service encounters, contact employees should provide products and resolve conflicts in a correct and functional manner.

As service consumers also want to be treated with civility and politeness, ***interactional fairness*** is elaborated to capture the inter