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"In-group love and out-group hate?" A cross cultural study on customers' revenge, avoidance and forgiveness behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Based on Allport (1954) paradigm of "in-group love and out-group hate", this research posits that interpersonal conflicts are more likely to be pursued when allocentric customers are faced with an out-group service employee, leading to a confrontational response such as revenge. However, if the service employee is from the in-group, the allocentrism trait tends to weigh against the pursuit of any conflict and therefore may increase the tendency of forgiveness or at least avoidance. Conversely, idiocentric customers are more likely to engage in confrontational tactics regardless the group affiliation of the service employee, given that idiocentrics make little distinction between in-group and out-group members.

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1. Introduction

Despite the fact that Hispanic-Americans are recognized to be allocentrics who strive to maintain close relationships and avoid interpersonal conflict (Triandis, Lisansky, Marin, & Betancourt, 1984), the 2007 Customer Rage Survey (CRS) reported a striking finding: Hispanic-American customers are three times more likely than Anglo-Americans to seek revenge against salespersons who failed to meet their cultural needs (BusinessWire EON, 2007). This anecdotal evidence suggests that salespersons' group membership, whether they are perceived as in-group or out-group members, plays a key role in understanding how culture impacts customers' responses to service failures (Watkins & Liu, 1996).

In fact, culture is recognized to be target-specific, as a person may behave in individualistic way to certain target persons or situations but in a collectivist way to others (Hui, 1988). Indeed two persons from a common culture, who share the same cultural values such as saving harmonious relationship with the group members, may appraise the same offense differently depending on whether their adversary belongs to their group or not (Struch & Schwartz, 1989). If an individual, is socialized to protect the integrity of the in-group (e.g. allocentric person), a harm inflicted by an out-group member will be more strongly disapproved than if the offense was committed by an in-group member, and accordingly will be demanding of revenge than forgiveness. Therefore greater weight should be attached to whether the source of the hurtful act is an in-group member or an out-group one (Bond, Wan, Leung, & Giacalone, 1985).

This is especially important in the context of global service industry where business-to-customer exchanges occur with employees from diverse ethnic groups. Understanding how angry customers abandon their resentment toward foreign versus local service employees may help marketers to efficiently handle interpersonal conflicts.

The context of this research is service industry, and both culture and group membership are conceptualized at the individual level (respectively, idiocentric vs. allocentric customer and in-group vs. out-group service employee). The paper is organized in the following fashion: first, the effects of customers' cultural values and service employees' group membership on revenge, forgiveness and avoidance copings are introduced. Second, the moderator effects of cultural–situational factors on coping processes are discussed and related hypotheses are derived. Third, 2 empirical studies are presented. Finally, the main theoretical contributions and managerial implications are discussed.

2. Customer revenge, forgiveness and avoidance viewed through the cognitive-emotive coping model

Prior to revenge and avoidance copings (Fig. 1), the betrayed customer assesses the offense severity and the amount of harm inflicted to his well-being and seeks out who is to blame for the wrongdoing. If the service employee is pointed out as the wrongdoer, then the negative

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emotions (e.g. anger) will arise and urge him to either exert revenge or seek avoidance. However, if the wrongdoing is attributed to the customer or if the customer recognizes in part his responsibility for the wrongdoing, he will blame himself and may experience negative emotions (e.g. regret) that leads to avoidance (Zourrig, Chebat, & Toffoli, 2009a). Conversely, if a customer reframes the transgression as a challenge, blames himself, releases negative emotions and makes a juxtaposition of positive emotions (e.g. sympathy) against negative ones, this will result in forgiveness (Zourrig, Chebat, & Toffoli, 2009b).

3. The contingent effects of culture and the service employee's group membership on coping processes

3.1. Cultural factor: idiocentrim/allocentrism values orientation

The idiocentrism–allocentrism conceptualization was recognized to capture the culture-driven psychological patterns of revenge as well as forgiveness and avoidance (cf. Zourrig et al., 2009a,b). In broad terms, allocentrism refers to the person-level of collectivism whereas idiocentrism refers to the person-level of individualism. As idiocentrics cling more to dominating and competition styles than obliging and avoiding styles, they are more likely to adopt confrontational tactics (e.g. revenge) than the accommodating styles of copings (e.g. forgiveness), whereas allocentrics privilege or favor compromising styles of coping over confrontational ones (Triandis, 1983).

3.2. Situational factor: in-group/out-group service employee's group membership

Customers' willingness to take action against a service employee is influenced by nationalistic feelings as well as perceived similarities with the group (Carvalho, 2003). When a customer perceives a service employee as part of the in-group and the customer's extended self, then the relationship between both becomes liable to take on a relatively communal and uncritical nature (Watkins & Liu, 1996). Accordingly, if an interpersonal conflict occurs between the two parts, it is expected that accommodation (i.e. forgiveness) rather than confrontation (i.e. revenge) prevails to resolve the problem and to reinforce the relationship. Hence, one can expect that a prejudice inflicted by in-group members is more tolerable and may foster forgiveness or avoidance; whereas a prejudice inflicted by out-group members is unpardonable and may press for a confrontation (i.e. revenge) (Brewer, 1999). Thus, feelings of identity and close attachment to a service employee (i.e. in-group identification) in contrast with feelings of separateness and opposition toward another (i.e. out-group identification) may reduce customer's willingness to seek revenge with the service employee and promote forgiveness or, at least, lead to avoidance (Lee, Pan, & Tsai, 2012).

3.2.1. The moderator effect of cultural-situational factors on primary appraisals

Research in cultural psychology has recognized that people assess the person–environment relationship according to their cultural values. For instance, allocentrics see their environment as fixed and themselves as changeable whereas idiocentrics see themselves as stable and their environment as changeable (Triandis & Suh, 2002). In claiming so, idiocentrics appraise a stressful situation as more harmful to their well-being and less challenging as they expect change in their environment in such way that the situation will be adapted for their best interest and benefit. Conversely allocentrics appraise a stressful situation as involving more challenge than harm, to master the situation for adaptation purpose.

Furthermore, appraisal of a situation varies also as a function of the extent to which a perceiver shares psychological group membership with the stressor; when the stressor is an in-group member, people were found to report more stress than if the stressor is from an out-group. For instance, following a negative service encounter, consumers were found to report more dissatisfaction in in-group presence condition than in out-group presence suggesting that consumers perceive more stress in in-group situations (He, Chen, & Alden, 2012).

Therefore we hypothesize that:

(a) when faced with a severe incident involving an in-group service employee:

H1a. Allocentric customers will assess the offense as involving more challenge than harm.

H2a. Idiocentric customers will assess the offense as involving more harm than challenge.

(b) when faced with a severe incident involving an out-group service employee:

H1b. Allocentric customers will assess the offense as involving less challenge than harm.

H2b. Idiocentric customers will assess the offense as involving less harm than challenge.

3.2.2. The moderator effect of cultural–situational factors on blaming

Blame ascription depends on one's cultural values. For instance, collectivist customers are more likely to take the blame personally (self-blame) and less likely to blame the service providers (external blame) for service failures. Conversely, when individualists experience those failures they blame more the provider (external blame) than themselves (Watkins & Liu, 1996).

The blame could also be attributed to a specific offender or a group to which an offender belongs (Ruback & Singh, 2007). Blame attribution varies inversely with degree of collectivism and with the perceptions of supplier group membership. For instance, compared to individualists, collectivists were found to be more accepting of personal responsibility for failures, particularly when in-group members are involved. Culturally collectivists have no tendency to defect blame away from themselves as the problems they experience with products are likely to occur in the context of an in-group exchange relationship (Watkins & Liu, 1996). Furthermore, collectivists are more likely to infer the causes of failure related to a foreign product (out-group) to external factors, and make an external blame (Leigh & Choi, 2007). In contrast individualists give credit to their in-group for positive outcomes and blaming the out-group for negative outcomes (Suh & McFarland, 2005).

Therefore we hypothesize that:

(a) when faced with a severe incident involving an in-group service employee:

H3a. Allocentric customers will be more willing to blame themselves and less willing to blame the employee.

H4a. Idiocentric customers will be less willing to blame themselves and more willing to blame the employee.

(b) when faced with a severe incident involving an out-group service employee:

H3b. Allocentric customers will be less willing to blame themselves and more willing to blame the employee.

H4b. Idiocentric customers will be less willing to blame themselves and more willing to blame the employee.

3.2.3. The moderator effect of cultural–situational factors on emotions' elicitation

In the context of interpersonal conflicts, the emotion nature depends on the blame ascription. For example, pointing to a wrongdoer responsibility (external attribution) triggers anger, disgust, or contempt emotions, whereas blaming oneself (self-blame) induces emotions of shame and guilt (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998). Conversely giving-up

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