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The interactional work of suppressing complaints in customer service encounters

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Abstract

The analysis in this paper draws from customer service calls to an electronic repair facility and systematically examines the interactional dynamics between customers and service representatives as they each manage to keep service complaints from becoming overt. This paper considers how the recognizability of a complainable matter can be used as leverage for achieving other types of interactional projects, such as gaining additional assistance or, for representatives, working to quickly close down the call before the customer has a chance to complain. By building upon Schegloff's (2005) observations regarding suppressing complaints in ordinary encounters, the analysis in this paper contributes to our understanding of the function of complaints within institutional encounters, with implications for understanding complaint management in service encounters.

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1. Introduction

Service encounters are interactions between a service seeker and service provider, which typically involve the exchange, or provision of some type of commodity or service (Félix-Brasdefer, 2017). These encounters are characterized by their fleeting, rather than lengthy duration (Gutek, 1995, p. 8), which tend to be more impersonal as customers place more emphasis on obtaining a service rather than establishing trust as one would with, for example, a doctor (Gutek et al., 1999).

Whether the service encounter is purely transactional or requires a longer exchange, there is an interpersonal orientation between members that engenders opportunities for establishing rapport and forging a personal connection. As noted by Marquez-Reiter and Bou-Franch (2017), “telephone agents have become mediators or gatekeepers of a kind whose job is to ensure and guarantee access to the service requested by the consumers in an expediently personalize manner” (p. 663). This statement suggests the importance organizations place on service providers to work toward meeting customers’ varying expectations, and leaves open a question of what happens when these expectations are not met. Since service representatives are a type of front line employee, they are responsible for tasks involving general information seeking questions about products and services, and to trouble shoot customers’ service problems. Part of the trouble-shooting may involve managing customers’ complaints about the service in a way that keeps the customer happy without impacting their overall satisfaction with the organization’s service.

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The analysis in this paper uses conversation analysis (Drew and Heritage, 1992) to examine how service agents and customers manage service problems in a way that keeps service complaints from escalating. The analysis in this article draws from Schegloff's (2005) work on suppressing complaints in ordinary interaction, contributes to our understanding of how complaints are managed in one type of service encounter context: calls to a customer service line in an electronic repair facility. Data are drawn from telephone calls where customers phone to find out the repair status of equipment previously sent in for service.

2. Review of literature

The last several decades have seen an increase in service-based organizations, specifically organizations that provide “intangible products that are produced, presented, and consumed in a single episode” (Suskind, 2016, p. 328). Such organizations have a business-related focus wherein the provision of goods is managed through communication and interaction between the service provider and client (e.g. airlines, cable and telecommunication services, repair organizations, medical, etc.). These service encounters are an essential component of any service industry, and good customer service is critical for an organization's success.

The hallmark of the service encounter, which differentiates this interaction from the service experience, “is the discrete interaction between the customer and service provider relevant to a core service offering, including the interaction involving provision of the core service offering itself” (Voorhees et al., 2017, p. 270). While the service encounter is a component of the overall service experience, the distinction between the two lies in the encounter being the moment when a core service provision is offered. Since evidence suggests that customer satisfaction is influenced by what happens when customers interact with service representatives (Bitner et al., 1994), researchers have taken an interest in examining in situ practices that might shape customers' opinions about their encounter. For example, Chevalier (2011) considered how French tourist officers manage to remain impartial when clients solicit recommendations about various tourist providers, and found that by avoiding type-conforming responses to client questions they are able to maintain a good relationship with the client without explicitly violating any institutional constraints. In another study, Stokoe et al. (2017) demonstrate why it is important for sales personal to be mindful of how they elicit a client's name. Their findings show how different methods for soliciting a person's name can expose various categorical presuppositions about the client. Such presuppositions are consequential for the ensuing interaction as trouble may arise early in the encounter, thereby leaving the relationship between the two strained. While not a core feature of the aforementioned studies, a common theme that emerges involves how various interactional moments provide opportunities for relationship maintenance with clients. This current study considers how service representatives work to manage situations where clients voice a possible complaint about a service problem that requires some form of remedy.

Complaints (or complaining about others) are characterized as an expression of dissatisfaction where one speaker points out a transgression or misconduct about another (Drew, 1998; Drew and Walker, 2009; Edwards, 2005; Monzoni, 2009; Schegloff, 2005). Complaints can be indirect where speakers complain about an absent third party (Drew, 1998; Jefferson, 1984; Monzoni, 2009; among others), or direct where the co-participant is both the recipient *and* the one held accountable for the transgression (Emerson and Messinger, 1977; Monzoni, 2009; Pomerantz, 1978; Schegloff, 2007). A customer service context poses an interesting site of investigation for complaining behavior because on one hand customers' could make an indirect complaint about an absent third party (the third party being the organization), or they can make a direct complaint if they hold the service representative accountable for their service problem.

When one person initiates a complaint they create an opportunity for others to affiliate with their stance by joining in on the complaint about an outside party (Curl and Drew, 2008; Mandelbaum, 1991/1992). Heinemann (2009) demonstrated how one party's complaint about a co-present third party works to invite another to join in (and affiliate with) the complaint, while excluding the co-present third party from the interaction. By joining in on the complaint, the two parties ratify their relationship by building a coalition that excludes the co-present other. When there is a lack of alignment between participants, however, speakers can manage the interactional difficulty by formulating their complaint as an idiomatic expression, thereby closing down the complaint sequence (Drew and Holt, 1988). Thus prior work points to the importance of tracking how speakers use complaints in specific interactional contexts to manage emergent interpersonal challenges.

The activity of complaining has a number of pragmatic functions in institutional interactions. In their work on complaints in two different health care environments, Ruusuvaori and Lindfors (2009) demonstrated how direct complaints about previous medical treatment serve different functions depending on the healthcare setting (e.g. traditional medical or homeopathic). For example, in traditional medical settings patients' complaints about previous medical care are treated as accounts for their current visit, while in homeopathic settings complaints are “used as means to build up trust in homeopathy as a form of treatment. . .and rapport between the professional and patient” (p. 2433). Ruusuvaori and Lindfors (2009) noted patients' complaints are fitted to the type of institutional task they are designed to achieve.

Complaints about service trouble can also trigger negative effects with regard to identity alignment and achieving institutional goals (Drew and Heritage, 1992). For example, when service providers attempt to humanize their talk and

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