

A MODEL OF CROSS-CULTURAL ATTRIBUTION PROCESSES ON SERVICE QUALITY, SRILANKA

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Abstract:

When a service failure occurs, employees will either make internal or external attributions for the service failure. A model is developed that suggests that the training needs of employees who make internal attributions of service failures will be very different from those of employees who make external attributions. Evidently, the specific training program will be localized to the country and employees. Hence, the value of the model stems from its ability to highlight the need for attribution style training in order to ensure service quality. With the increase in services export, understanding the employee's perspective of service quality will result in better provision of services to the end customer.

Keywords: Cross-cultural, Service Quality

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INTRODUCTION:

The current global economic crisis has highlighted the need for nations' to reevaluate their economic policies. In some countries the over reliance on certain industries has made it difficult for countries to recover as the global economic crisis has endured. Sri Lanka has historically earned foreign exchange from exporting tea, coffee and other agricultural produce. As a primary producer, the country is subject to global market prices and events. These types of fluctuations highlight the need for developing countries to diversify their economies beyond agricultural produce.

Many Asian countries have entered the services industry by developing their tourism industry. In some countries such as Sri Lanka, tourism has continued to account for a significant portion of the country's foreign exchange earnings. Indeed, while tourism continues to be an important foreign exchange earner for Sri Lanka, it has become increasingly evident that the Sri Lanka government must diversify its exports in order to earn needed foreign exchange. The tourism industry is subject to fluctuations in visitor arrivals which ultimately affects earnings. This was due to the post election crisis which resulted in many travel bans from the tourist originating locations. The recent volcanic ash eruption in Iceland also caused some further losses to the tourism industry.

Clearly, the over reliance on the tourism industry is detrimental to the economic viability of the country. As such, countries such as Sri Lanka must diversify beyond the tourism industry. Nations must continue to invest in other services that are exportable. Examples of these services include among many others, education, health and information technology. Services exportation invariably results in service employees of one cultural background interacting with customers who will undoubtedly be from a different cultural background. In order for services to be exportable, companies must offer quality services. One of the challenges of exporting services is the inherent notion that service quality is defined differently in different cultural settings and differences in service expectation can affect service delivery and customer satisfaction. In addition, if and when there is a service failure, the attribution styles of the service employee and the customer may affect perceptions of service quality. A recent study by Iglesias (2009) found that attribution of failure to the service firm causes systematic reduction of quality perception in all service aspects even those not connected to the failure. Therefore, it is evident that

understanding attribution processes is very important since these attributions have an impact on overall quality perception.

Attribution will be influenced by the employee's cultural background. Many researchers have already advanced the notion that attributional styles are subject to cultural variation (Hine and Montiel 1999). Thus, the purpose of this manuscript is twofold. First, the argument is advanced that employees from different cultural backgrounds will evaluate service success or failure using their own cultural attribution processes. Second, a model is developed to highlight the managerial implications of these differential attribution processes. Specifically, managerial implications for service employee training across different cultures are presented. The paper is organized as follows: First, a review of service quality, service encounter and customer satisfaction literature is presented, followed by a review of attribution theory. Second, differences in attribution across cultures are reviewed and the impact of attributions on employee's job satisfaction is presented. In addition we highlight the link between employee's job satisfaction and future service encounter interaction and interpretation. Finally, conclusions and suggestions for future research are presented.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:

Service Quality

Service quality has been compared to the "zero defects" concept in manufacturing. (Heskett, Sasser and Hart 1990) have suggested that service managers should pursue the goal of 100% defect-free service. Berry and Parasuraman (1991, p. 15) state that the "proof of service quality is in its flawless performance." According to Bitner (1994) one of the central goals in the pursuit of zero defects in services is to work toward 100% flawless performance in service encounters. Service quality affects service satisfaction at the encounter-specific level (Rust and Oliver 1994). Consequently, consumers' perceptions of service quality are often based on the manner in which the service was delivered as well as on the outcome of the service provision (Mangold and Babakus 1991). Researchers have proposed that the best definition of service quality is the customer's definition and the best evaluation of service quality is the customer's definition (Berry et al. 1988).

Service quality has been operationalized most often by assessing service expectations and performance on twenty two items believed to represent five key dimensions of service quality (Babakus and Boller 1992; Cronin and Taylor 1992; Parasuraman et al. 1988, 1991). Although there is disagreement about the expectations and performance measures and the dimensionality of the SERVQUA

L, there is a general agreement that the twenty two items are good predictors of overall service quality. Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) define service quality as "the overall evaluation of a specific service firm that results from comparing that firm's performance with the customer's general expectations of how firms in that industry should perform.

The presence of a close psychological relationship between employee and customer perceptions of service quality has long been established (cf. Bell 1973; Bowen 1986). For example, (Schneider 1980; Schneider and Bowen 1985) demonstrated strong correlations between the views of the customers and those of employees. In addition, the role of the service employee in determining customer satisfaction with a specific service encounter is well documented in the literature (Crosby and Stephens 1987; Henning-Thurau et al. 2006). Clearly empirical research in both service quality and service satisfaction affirms the importance of the quality of customer/employee interactions in the assessment of overall quality and or satisfaction with services (Bitner 1990). As such, gaining a better understanding of employee as well as customer perceptions of service quality is a logical first step towards proactive influence of the service exchange process (Barnes and Glynn 1994). Since the service encounter involves at least two people, it is important for researchers to understand the encounter from both the employee's and the customer's perspective. This manuscript primarily focuses on the employee's perspective. According to Kumaradeepan V (2010) having relationship in Marketing in service organization is importance than in manufacturing firm.

Service Encounter

Shostack (1985) defined the service encounter as that "period of time during which the consumer and service firm interact in person, over the telephone, or through other media". Therefore, the service encounter is a discrete event occurring over a definable period of time (Bitner 1990). For the customer, the determination of service quality occurs during the service encounter or the "moment of truth", Carlzon (1987). During the "moments of truth" (Carlzon 1987), service

quality is evident to the end consumer. Certainly, at the heart of the delivery of service quality and customer satisfaction is the importance of managing the service encounter. Indeed service quality and customer satisfaction logically draw attention to the management of individual service encounters between the ultimate customer and representatives of the firm. It is evident that due to the intangibility of services that the customer evaluates service quality by evaluating the moment of interaction with the firm i.e. the moment of truth (Carlzon 1987). It is at this point that the company has an opportunity to either meet or exceed customer expectations Rust and Oliver 1994). Other researchers have compared the service encounter to a dramatic event (Grove and Fisk 1983).

Suprenant and Solomon (1987) define the service encounter as "the dyadic interaction between a customer and service provider." Therefore, it is important to understand both the customer's perceptions of service quality as well as the employee's perceptions of service quality. Bitner et al. (1990) and Bitner et al. (1994) systematically examined the employee's perception and the customer's perceptions of service quality. In the 1990 study, using the critical incident technique, Bitner et al. attempted to identify the particular events and related behaviors of contact employees that cause customers to distinguish between very satisfactory services from very unsatisfactory services. Bitner et al. (1994) examined the contact employee's perspective of critical service encounters and the kinds of events and behaviors that employees believe underlie customer satisfaction.

Meuter et al. (2000) examined service quality and satisfaction in self service technologies. Hennig-Turan et al. (2006) examined how emotional contagion and emotional labor affect the service relationships and they found that the authenticity of employees labor display directly affects the customers' states. Reimer and Folkes (2009) evaluated how evaluation of service quality of one service provider such as the (hotel front desk) influences evaluations of other service providers such as (hotel tour services) or the (hotel restaurants). Reimer and Folkes (2009) found that consumer beliefs about managerial control of these services results in generalizations of service quality and that the spatial proximity of service providers was also important. While there are many studies on service encounters there is sparse research on cross-cultural service encounters and in particular studies done in an African context. Therefore, we offer this research as a beginning point of recognizing this important area and context. According

to Kumaradeepan V (2010) significance relationship between relationships marketing and customer satisfaction in an service industry mainly.

Service Quality and Service Satisfaction

Crosby and Stephens (1987) found that the client's satisfaction with their contact person or agent was a significant predictor of overall satisfaction with the service. Additionally, Day and Bodur (1978) and Brown and Swartz (1989) found that the human interaction component was important in the evaluation of professional services. The services literature recognizes the importance of personal interaction in creating satisfied customers (Crosby and Stephens 1987; Parasuraman et al. 1985; Solomon et al. 1985). The lack of concreteness of many services increases the value of the persons responsible for delivering them. Bitner and Hubbert (1994) have argued that service encounter satisfaction, overall service satisfaction and service quality are three distinct concepts. They offered the following definitions. The overall service satisfaction has been defined as “the consumer's overall dis/satisfaction with the organization based on all encounters and experiences with that particular organization.” while the service encounter satisfaction has been defined as “the consumer's dis/satisfaction with a discrete service encounter (e.g. a haircut or an interaction with a dentist etc.) Finally, Bitner and Hubbert (1994) have defined service quality as “the consumer’s overall impression of the relative inferiority or superiority of the organization and its services.

Parasuraman et al. (1985) identified different areas that can result in service dis/satisfaction and they developed the GAP model. The Gap model identifies differences in a firm’s current level of service delivery and the gap that exists when there is a difference in the expected level of service and the actual service. These gaps have been found to ultimately affect service dis/satisfaction. When dissatisfaction occurs, it is important to identify the root causes of the service failure. In indentifying the causes of the failure, then attribution theory becomes important and relevant. For example, Bitner et al. (1994) used attribution theory to examine the causal explanations for service success and service failure by employees. When there is a service failure, dissimilarities in viewpoint may arise when service encounter partners have conflicting views of the underlying causes behind the events, that is, when their attributions differ (Bitner et al. 1994). The attribution theory used in the Bitner et al. (1994) study focused on western style attribution processes. According to Kumaradeepan.V (2010) there is positive

relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in telecommunication industry and it determine the degree of tendency.

Attribution Theory

Attribution and its dimensions affect satisfaction and quality evaluation in different ways. Attribution research is concerned with all aspects of causal inferences: how people arrive at causal inferences, what sort of inferences they make, and the consequences of these inferences (Folkes 1988). According to Heider (1958), performance can be attributed to the person or to the situation. From the stability point of view, ability and task are considered stable, whereas effort and luck are viewed as more variable. Ability and effort are viewed as internal whereas task difficulty and luck are conceptualized as external. Effort is perceived as a controllable cause, whereas ability, task and luck are uncontrollable (Heider 1958).

Research shows that there are many biases in the attribution process (Fiske and Taylor 1984). Snyder et al. (1976) and Wolosin (1973) all indicated that people tend to take credit for success and deny responsibility for failure. This tendency is known as self-serving bias or ego-defensive and has been explained as preserving and enhancing self-esteem by giving internal attributions for successes, (a self-enhancing bias) and denying responsibility for failure (i.e. blame failure on external causes, a self-protecting bias). More specifically, it has been suggested that people attempt to enhance or protect their self-esteem by taking credit for success and denying responsibility for failure. Bitner et al. (1994) suggest that the self-serving bias is very relevant to the service provider, customer interaction since given these biases we would expect employees to blame the system or the customer for service failures, whereas the customer would be more likely to blame the system or the employees. The result would be different views from employees and customers of the cause of service dissatisfaction. These different views would affect the service recovery process and could potentially have implications for future service delivery. For example, an employee who consistently blames the system or the customer may be slow to recognize “areas” where they could potentially modify their own behavior in order to minimize future service delivery failures. By the same token, customers who blame the system

or the employees for service failures may fail to identify their own potential role in the service failure.

Bitner et al (1994) demonstrated that the self-serving bias is relevant to the employee customer interaction. However, it is important to note that the self-serving bias evident in the service provider, customer interaction in Bitner et al's (1994) study, is best understood within the context of western interactors. In a comprehensive review of attribution, Zuckerman (1980) concluded that self-serving effects for both success and failure among westerners are well documented. People from non-western cultures do not always make ego-defensive attributions for their performance. Subjects have been reported to make self-effacing attributions by attributing success to good luck, and failure to lack of ability (Bradley 1978; Miller and Ross 1975). An examination of attribution across different cultures shows that causal attributions depend not only on the situation at the moment but more importantly on ethnic and cultural variables (Friend and Neale 1972).

Causal Attribution across Different Cultures

Most of the research in social psychology has been done with Caucasian Anglo-Saxon groups. Stipek et al. (1989) suggested that the conceptual foundation that has emerged from attribution theory, is based primarily on investigations using American subjects, hence the validity of the principles derived from the theory and these investigations may rest, to some extent on beliefs that are culturally bound. Fletcher and Ward (1988) suggested that the relations between attributions and emotions that have been derived from research in achievement related contexts in the United States, do not generalize beyond belief systems rooted in western thought. Similarly, in a study of South Africans, Louw and Louw-Potgieter (1986) noted that attribution theories reflect a North American bias of individualistically based explanations. In their research Louw and Louw-Potgieter (1986) found that research done in the South African context did not support Weiner (1979)'s categorization of attributions in terms of stability and locus of control.

Several researchers (Streufert and Streufert 1969, Weiner and Kukla 1970) demonstrated that individuals in the White-Anglo-Saxon culture assume more responsibility for their success than their failures. Also, there is evidence to suggest (Miller 1976) that Anglo-Saxons attribute their success to internal factors such as ability, effort and achievement and attribute their failure to

such external factors as luck, chance, task difficulty etc. Americans tend to make self-enhancing attributions for their own performance (Weiner 1986).

In their review of attribution for success, Fry and Ghosh (1980) found that Asian Indian subjects indicated that they were "lucky" thereby implying that their success was less associated with ability, effort expended or difficulty level of the task. These tendencies were attributed to cultural and personality characteristics of Asian Indians in general. The Asian Indian culture dictates that individuals are responsible for all of their deeds and must accept all outcomes, whether negative or positive (Murphy and Murphy 1968). In a recent study of Indian nascent entrepreneurs Chattopadhyay (2007) found that there are differences in attributional entrepreneurial style. In this study Chattopadhyay (2007) found that rather than a self-serving bias as found by Gartner and Shaver (2002) in similar studies of US Panel of Entrepreneurial Dynamics, that highly successful Indian nascent entrepreneurs were found to have an internal locus of causality whether the situations were positive or negative. However, low successful Indian nascent entrepreneurs were found to have an external locus of control thereby attributing failures to external causes. Thus at best, it is clear that the "self serving bias among entrepreneurs is not a generalized concept.

Chinese subjects were found to attribute success to external factors and failure to internal factors Bond et al. (1982). This finding is consistent with the collectivist orientation (Hofstede 1980) of the Chinese who strive to maintain harmony in their social relations. In Chinese culture, in order for group harmony to be maintained and enhanced, the humility of individual members occupies a central and noticeable position in human interactions. Humility determines how people explain their performance. In general successful and humble people attribute success to factors that are external to them i.e. luck, others' help etc. whereas an unhumble person dedicates success to factors that are internal to him/her i.e. competence, dedication etc. When failure occurs, a humble person would tend to self-deprecate and attribute failure to internal factors such as incompetence whereas the unhumble person would generally tend to be defensive and to attribute failure to external factors such as chance, and others mistakes (Bond et al. 1982). In a study of five different cultures, Chandler et al. (1981) found that the Japanese were the most internal in causal ascriptions for failures and the least internal for successes. They attributed achievement failures more to lack of effort than their success to their own efforts in contrast to

all other countries. Most Japanese express less overtly their own pride for successful performance to other persons while they express their own responsibility for their poor performance.

In a comprehensive review of causal attribution across cultures Choi et al (1999) have shown that cultural differences in causal attribution have important implications for social psychological phenomena. Specifically they illustrate these impacts in areas such as: “accuracy of attribution, situation influences particularly those involved in producing cognitive dissonance and intercultural contact (Choi et al. 1999: p 58). Of course the intercultural contact is central to the service encounter whether contact happens face to face or via some technological medium such as phone, email, chats or the internet.

Research of African attribution processes is scant. Early work by Munro (1979) examined African supernatural beliefs in Zambia and Zimbabwe and the impact of these beliefs on attributions about reasons for events. Munro (1979) found limited or ambiguous support for the greater importance of supernatural attribution by blacks in the sample. The study of African attribution styles presents some interesting challenges such as those identified by Boski (1983) who studied attribution styles among three different ethnic groups in Nigeria. Boski (1983) noted that the three ethnic groups studied, Ibo, Hausa and Yoruba can be regarded as potentially national in terms of population, cultural heritage and social structure but they also have considerable psychological differences. These challenges would be found in most African countries where individuals of one tribe/ethnic group are similar yet different from other ethnic groups in important ways. Nonetheless, when Boski (1983) examined attribution among the Hausa, Ibo and the Yoruba in Nigeria he found that the Hausa subjects attributed their success less to internal value enhancing causes than did the Ibos and the Yorubas who made internal attributions.

As noted earlier, it has clearly been demonstrated that attitude based processes as well as attribute-based processes are affected by attribution (cf. Iglesias 2009). Hence, given the above discussion, it is obvious that as the services industry grows, African service managers will need to take into account cross-cultural differences in attribution processes across cultures and how these differences will impact service quality. Evidently, these attribution processes will impact

employees' and customers' perceptions of service quality. Employee training will be very important if African companies are to develop exportable services.

The Model:

Once a service failure occurs, employees will seek causal explanations for why the service failure occurred. The employees will either make external or internal attributions to the service failure. As shown in the above discussion, employees from a western culture will generally attribute service failure to external factors such as task difficulty, or luck while employees from some other cultures may make internal attributions such as lack of effort. The model proposes that employees who make internal attributions to service failure will be dissatisfied with their individual job performances while employees who make external attributions will be dissatisfied with factors external to themselves. Research has shown that performance affects job satisfaction and we would expect that dissatisfaction with outcomes of service encounters will in the long run impact job satisfaction.

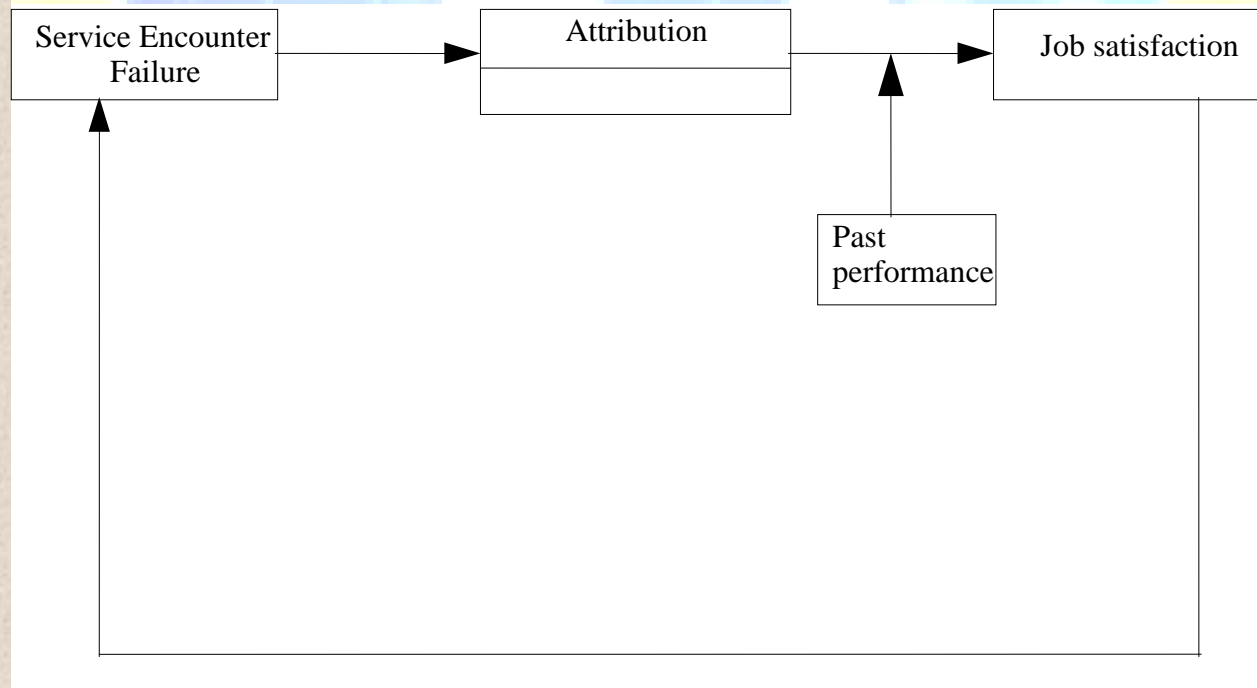
The employee's level of contentment and turnover is related to the level of customer satisfaction, maintaining that the happy employee makes a happy customer (Beatty and Gup 1989, Bowen 1990). This link between job satisfaction and customer orientation is well documented in the literature (Hoffman and Ingram 1991). Motowidlo (1984) reports, "feelings of job satisfaction are associated with patterns of behavior at work that reflect interpersonal sensitivity and kindness behaviors such as listening to others, showing awareness and concern for the needs and feelings of others, tact emotional control and acceptance of criticism. Jones and Nesbitt (1972) and Kelley (1973) argue that attributions for success or failure of past performance, influences subsequent behavior and expectancy for future success or failure. We therefore expect that past attributions of success or failure will impact the employee's interaction with the customer, and that the evaluation of this interaction will be impacted by past attributions of success or failure.

Bitner et al. (1994) suggest that effective management of the service encounter involves understanding the often complex behaviors of employees that can distinguish a highly satisfactory service encounter from a dissatisfactory one, and then training, motivating, and rewarding employees to exhibit those behaviors. The model developed in suggests that the

training needs of employees who make internal attributions for service failure will be different from those of employees who make external attributions. More specifically, employees who make internal attributions will have to be trained to objectively evaluate the reasons for the service failure so that they may refrain from unnecessarily making internal attributions for the failure. On the other hand, employees who make external attributions will require training that enables them to refrain from placing the blame on the customer or the organization for service failure. This training will be crucial because employees who make external attributions may blame the organization in front of the customer thereby engaging in negative word of mouth communication to the customer.

FIGURE 1

MODEL OF DIFFERENCES IN ATTRIBUTION PROCESS AND IMPACT ON SERVICE ENCOUNTER



MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS:

As more and more service companies export services, the challenges of managing the employee customer interaction will be increased. International service companies that assume that their

employees will attribute success and failure in the same way as their customers in other regions of the world will not be successful. These companies may find themselves with highly dissatisfied employees. Needless to say, dissatisfied employees will lead to poor service delivery and ultimately service dissatisfaction from the customer.

It is clear that many developing countries particularly those in Africa can leverage their services by adequately managing the service encounter. The managing of the service encounter is important regardless of whether the service delivery occurs face to face, on the phone, e-mail, internet, web conference or even in chat rooms. The mastery of the service encounter will ensure service quality and service satisfaction. With increased levels of service satisfaction, then countries such as Sri Lanka will begin to eliminate their over reliance on one industry.

CONCLUSION:

The aim of this paper was clear that as services are developed and exported service firms need to be aware of the challenges of managing quality perceptions based on attribution processes. Author has suggested some potential opportunities for firms to develop relevant training materials in order to make their employees aware of these attributional processes. We have also demonstrated that these attribution processes have an impact on job satisfaction which ultimately affects future service delivery and could potentially increase the incidence of service failures.

Future research should develop these concepts further and data collection with firms that implement different training materials would be in order. A limitation of this manuscript is that only a subset of cultures is evaluated. In addition, the model assumes that employees from one culture will all have similar attribution processes, while there may be some exceptions. An interesting area of future research would examine whether there are differences in the perceptions of service quality of customers in cultures that do not give ego-defension attributions to success or failure.

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