

CHAPTER 5

Qualitative Study Results

Prior to conducting the main study, an initial qualitative investigation was undertaken. The main aim of this was to gain a better insight of the phenomena of FLEs when dealing with customer aggression. The results permitted a deeper understanding of these incidents. Constructs emerged from this study and some were employed in the conceptual model. The qualitative results are described in this section, including quotations from some of the participants to illustrate key issues and causal inferences. This chapter is arranged by firstly presenting the cognitive appraisal of FLEs when faced with customer aggression. Secondly, the consequences of cognitive appraisal of FLEs are described. Finally, the factors that moderate the link between FLEs cognitive appraisal and psychological well-being are discussed. An overview of the qualitative results is illustrated in Figure 5.1.

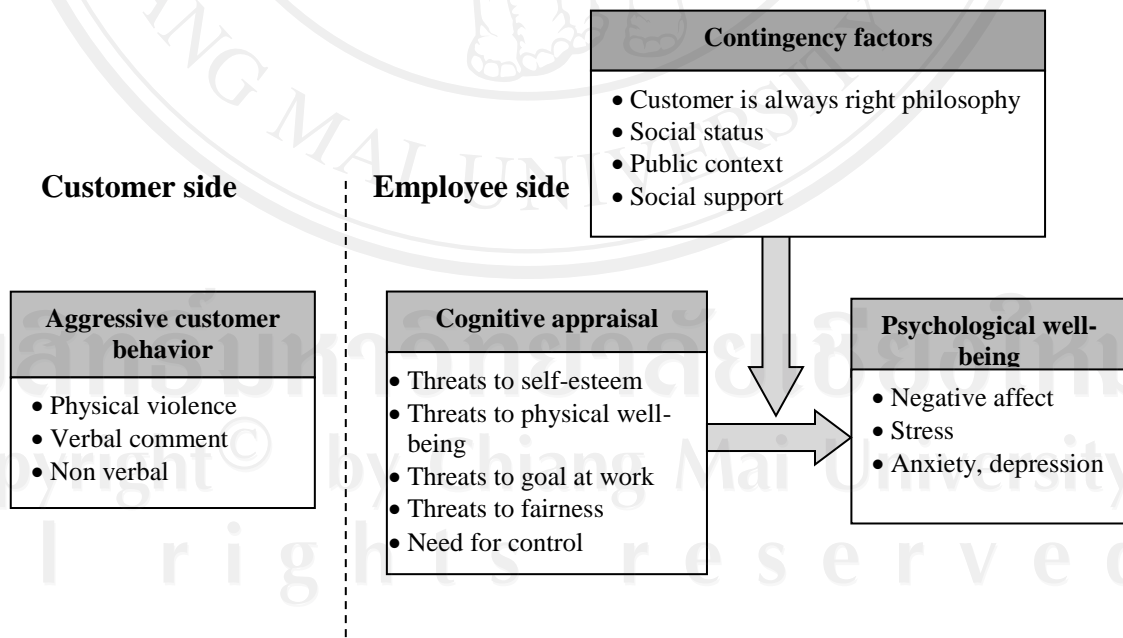


Figure 5.1 Cognitive appraisal of frontline employees

Consistent with literature on stressful life events in general, our data analysis revealed various cognitive appraisals of employees and their consequences for well-being in encounters with aggressive customers. Our analysis also identified several factors that either ameliorated or worsened the impact of cognitive appraisal on the psychological well-being of FLEs. Figure 5.1 contains an overall summary of results.

5.1 Cognitive appraisals by FLEs

Five critical cognitive appraisal dimensions emerged from our interview data: threats to self-esteem, physical well-being, work goals, sense of fairness, and need for control. Each is briefly discussed in turn.

Threats to self-esteem. These threats refer to the person's view of his or her own self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965). In our study, many FLEs claimed that customers were disrespectful to them during the service encounter and that such disrespect induced a sense of dehumanization. Threats to employees' self-esteem were the most frequently mentioned cognitive appraisal. In one example, when a customer dissatisfied by the unmarked price of vegetables threw produce down in front of the employee, the female grocery shop assistant (30 years) stated:

I helped her to check the price of the vegetables three times.... She was upset and threw the parsley down into the tray in front of me.... I thought, I am a human being. I served her very well, why did she have to do this to me?...She didn't respect me as a human. She didn't save my face.

This comment cites the concept of 'face', which is fundamentally important in Eastern cultures and which, though difficult to define, refers generally to a sense of honour or reputation. In Eastern cultures, a loss of face can have disastrous personal consequences and must be avoided at all costs. Tactics for coping with a loss of face and restoring face in turn are central to restoring self-esteem. In many Asian countries, saving face is even a dominant force in shaping effective interpersonal encounters and actions, so the incident with the parsley likely would have devastating effects on an Eastern shop assistant's self-esteem. Similarly, a department store salesperson (female, 27 years), in dealing with a foreign customer, recalled:

He swore at me, saying I was stupid and retarded. It made me feel very bad.... He should talk more politely to me than this. He didn't respect me. I am a human like him. If he was a salesperson and was scolded by customer, how would he feel?

Threats to physical well-being. A threat to physical well-being or loss of a sense of security can be very stressful (Lazarus, 1991). FLEs frequently experienced physical threats from customers (Bishop et al., 2005). These threats to the feelings of security and safety cause stress and precede coping behaviour, as illustrated by a department store public relations employee (female, 26 years) who recounted the following experience:

Two customers (a mom and her daughter) came to the public relations department. The mom asked me to give her money back. She claimed that she had bought sausages 4 days before that were rancid.... I made a call to the fresh food department. The staff member in that department asked me how the sausages were. I said that they were normal and did not smell that bad. The daughter heard what I said and became very angry and shouted. She asked me if I thought they were rancid or not, then she shoved the sausage into my mouth and said to me "eat it." I was frightened and I couldn't control myself. I pushed her hand out of the way and the sausage went flying into her face unexpectedly. This made her get even angrier.

In this instance, the customer's behaviour crossed from verbal expressions of anger to overt aggression and a direct physical threat to the employee. Another FLE, a senior cashier (female, 30 years) in a department store, described:

A customer came to buy shampoo because she saw it in a brochure that stated, buy one get one free. She took two 375ml bottles of shampoo and went to the cashier to pay for them. The receipt showed that she was charged for two bottles. She asked why it was like this. I asked a shop staff to check the price in the relevant department. After a minute he came back and said that the promotional items were actually the smaller bottles of shampoo. The customer got angry and showed the brochure to me and claimed that the volume of shampoo stated on brochure could not be seen clearly. Then, she threw the two

big bottles of shampoo at me. She also spoke very loudly that it was so stupid.

Threats to fairness. A feeling of injustice or of being cheated or treated unfairly may arise because customers seek to take advantage of others, regardless of common decency, reasonableness, or respect for others' rights (Berry and Seiders, 2008). Such customer behaviours are problematic for FLEs, including the employee (female, 30 years) who explained why she felt treated unfairly:

A customer asked me to give him a new mobile phone, claiming that his one was scratched on the screen.... I had already carefully checked the phone when I gave it to the customer.... When I saw the scratches on the screen, I didn't think that it was caused by our department. I wondered if he had done it himself but tried to claim the warranty to get a new one. When I questioned him he got very angry.

Employees also must put more effort into managing their emotions in interpersonal transactions (Rupp et al., 2008), particularly if they confront customers seeking to cheat them or the organisation. One interviewee, a cashier (female, 23 years) in a hotel, stated:

When he pointed at me, I thought why did he have to pick on me? Why did he get angry at me? It was his fault. He didn't make a reservation with me. I was just the one who looked after people checking in.

Threats to work goals. Some employees sense that they will not be able to achieve an important goal in their jobs. During the appraisal process, FLEs consider their personal stake in the event and its threat to their work goals (Bagozzi et al., 1999). If their work goals might be hindered, they likely develop specific emotional reactions to the situation (Stewart, 2005). For example, a pharmacist (female, 31 years) worried that an incident would prevent her from helping other customers:

I was a little bit ashamed and embarrassed. I am the pharmacist in the shop. I didn't know what the other customers in the pharmacy thought about this incident. They might not trust me or the shop. I was worried about my image and what other customers would think of me.

A FLE cashier (female, 35 years) similarly intended to perform well but was impeded by a customer:

I could not work out why this customer didn't understand that I had to follow the rules of service....I was serving her. I was very polite. I never behave badly to customers but why did this customer have to get angry and be impolite to me.

Need for control. Finally, people tend to perform better when they can make decisions freely. Without a sense of control, they experience a sense of helplessness and may engage in maladaptive behaviours (Bowen and Johnston, 1999). When a customer has more power or control relative to the employee, the FLE cannot control the situation. A FLE (female, 28 years) in a telecommunications company noted her experience of helplessness in dealing with a customer:

I thought that I would let him swear at me until he felt satisfied. I didn't react to him. Even if I did reply, I would be wrong as I am the service provider... I thought I won't even ask him. I had to say an apology even though it was not my fault.... I felt powerless.

When faced with an extremely aggressive customer whom they could not control, several respondents believed the best response was to remain passive. As a dental clinic receptionist (female, 23 years) described:

When she scolded me, I was angry. It wasn't my fault. I don't know why she had to be like this. I didn't do anything. I didn't know how to respond to her. I just said to her "yes...yes...yes." I thought that it was useless to explain anything to her.

This analysis of critical incidents thus reveals the cognitive appraisals of FLEs when dealing with aggressive customers, which can be categorised into themes that reflect various types of threats: to self-esteem, to physical well-being, to work goals, to fairness, and to need for control.

5.2 Consequences of cognitive appraisals

Interactions with others (customers and coworkers) at work can have psychological consequences (Sloan, 2012). Lazarus (1993) suggests that psychological distress is a reaction to various kinds of threats, violations of basic psychological needs

and accompanying stress. Some employees can deal well with aggressive customers during particular incidents, but constant encounters with unpleasant events in the workplace can be both fatiguing and distressing. When FLEs experience repeated threats to or violations of their self-esteem, physical well-being, sense of justice and fairness, or work goals, they likely exhibit poor psychological well-being, which may make it more difficult for them to perform their work tasks. Our qualitative findings revealed that the psychological consequences that employees experienced after dealing with aggressive customers included negative feelings, stress, anxiety, and even depression. Each is discussed in turn.

Negative affect

FLEs who had experience aggressive and misbehaving customers frequently are known to have negative emotions (Harris and Daunt, 2013). The interviewees described feelings of anger, fear, embarrassment, and annoyance during and following their encounters with aggressive customers. For example, a salesperson (female, 20 years) in a specialty retail store noted her embarrassment and fear when she was scolded by a foreign customer:

I didn't want the foreigner to yell at me again. It was an incident where I was embarrassed (threat to self-esteem) and scared. Now I don't want to serve foreign customers.

Another case involved FLE (male, 27 years) in an appliance shop. When he dealt with a bullying customer, he got very angry and wanted to attack the customer, explaining.

He would punch me and asked me to go outside the shop to fight (threat to physical well-being).... I was very angry. I wanted to scold him and punch him.

Stress

Customer abusive behaviour is a major source of stress for service workers (Goussinsky, 2011). Stress results from an interaction with an environment that is perceived as too demanding or threatening to their well-being (Yasin and Dzulkifli, 2009). In aggressive encounters, FLEs perceive an imbalance between their capabilities

and the situational demands. If they could not manage to cope, they felt anxious, as recounted by a receptionist at a dental clinic (female, 23 years):

She bawled out in my ear. It seemed I made a severe mistake (threat to self-esteem)....After talking with her, I was very angry. I cried at the counter. I could not do anything.

The intensity of rudeness or aggressiveness of a customer also can induce stress. In turn, this excessive stress reduces performance effectiveness. For example, a hospital receptionist (female, 38 years) described how:

He swore at me with rude words (threat to self-esteem).... I was frightened and panicked. I felt like I had something stuck in my throat....My face was pale and my hands were cold.

Anxiety and depression. Work stress increases anxiety, a psychological disorder that is associated with significant suffering and impairment in functioning (Yasin and Dzulkifli, 2009), and depression, which is an experience of extreme unhappiness or distress (Sarason and Sarason, 2002). After dealing with aggressive customers, FLEs may exhibit feelings of sadness, weakness, disappointment, frustration, despair, helplessness, or hopelessness. The fear of a critical incident reoccurring also emerged from our interviews. A waitress (female, 32 years) in a restaurant thus reported her anxiety:

I was scared. I was afraid that he might attack me (threat to physical well-being)....I was worried. I was afraid that he would come again and would misbehave in the same way to me again. I was anxious. I was unhappy when I worked. I was scared to see this kind of customer again.

Situations appraised as threatening predicted a greater level of depression (Gall and Evans, 2001). Depressed workers generally perform poorly, because they are distracted by the negative incidents and frustrated in their work. As a banker (female, 29 years) reported in response to an angry, high society customer:

It seemed there was a black dot in my heart. I had failed in my work (threat to work goals) when this customer blamed me....On that day, I could not do

anything more. On the next day, it was still on my mind. I saw her face when I ate, even when I slept. As I worked, I thought about this incident. It was like an accumulative tension.... I still remember it until this day.

5.3 Moderators of the link between cognitive appraisal and psychological well-being

During the interview process, it became apparent that certain conditions existed that moderated the cognitive appraisal–psychological well-being connection. Four contingency conditions emerged that indicated threats or violations of needs (i.e., cognitive appraisals) had more or less harmful impacts on employee well-being. Each of these four contingency conditions is now briefly discussed.

The customer is always right philosophy

Many companies, especially in south-east Asia, seek to retain customers by adopting a policy that ‘The customer is always right’. This of course implies in turn that employees must passively accept unreasonable customer demands and even aggression during the service encounter (Bishop et al., 2005; Gettman and Gelfand, 2007). Employees are expected to suppress their true feelings, which leaves them feeling powerless in the face of demands and aggression. This policy approach conveys an unequal power balance between FLEs and the customer (Grandey et al., 2004; Karatepe et al., 2009) and limits FLEs from responding in their preferred ways (Bishop and Hoel, 2008; Hughes and Tadic, 1998). To illustrate, a 30-year-old female supermarket employee believed she had to accept the organisation’s policy and could not express her genuine emotions during a negative incident. This situation depleted her emotional resources and exacerbated her feelings of stress:

I got my training from the company where I am a FLE. I was taught that I have to do anything that makes the customer feel satisfied. During this incident, my face was sullen. Although I was very angry I had to keep it in my mind.... I was under the impression that I should not have any problems with this customer if I followed the company’s policy.... Yes, customer is the king. But my face was feeling hot and it made me unhappy at work for the whole day. I lost my confidence.

In some companies, FLEs are well indoctrinated with this philosophy and so succumb to customer wishes, even while being abused. Following an incident in which a retail employee (female, 26 years) was sworn at and physically intimidated, she stated:

When we have a meeting, my boss always says that the customer is always right. Even when customers respond badly to us, we have to put a smile on our faces. We cannot be moody. If the company knew that we were (unhappy), we would be fired, as it means we don't respect our customers. Customers are the ones who keep us in a job. If we don't please the customers, then they won't come and get service from us.

Social status

Unlike more egalitarian Western countries, most Asian countries are characterised as high power distance societies, such that they accept that power, money, and influence are unevenly distributed. People with high social status are perceived as more worthy and competent, and they possess more social and economic power (Major et al., 2002; Triandis, 1995). They are inclined to see themselves as superior. People without social status instead likely suffer poor self-esteem, report feelings of shame, and behave without resistance in social interactions (Gruenewald et al., 2006). In Thailand, a high power distance culture, people with lower status in society are openly referred to as “lo-so,” whereas high status people are “hi-so”. Our interviews clearly indicated that when an aggressive customer was implicitly categorised as hi-so, the negative impact of the appraisal threat was more harmful to the employee's well-being. To illustrate, a bank teller (female, 29 years) was scolded by hi-so customer due to the service failure:

This customer was of course a hi-so person. I noticed her possessions: a Louis Vuitton bag, diamond ring, branded shoes.... She had more power. I could not avoid her. I was not sure that I could solve this problem.... It seemed like I was her employee. I prepared myself for the fact that if I made a mistake with her, I would be faced with a problem.... I was very angry inside, and I was tense.

This hi-so-lo-so perspective also may dominate customer contact employees' considerations during the service encounter. For example, a salesperson (female, 27 years) in a telecommunication company confirmed this consideration when faced with a simple lo-so customer:

She was simple, not hi-so.... If a hi-so customer was to do this to me, I would be courteous more than this. If hi-so people have problems, they will complain to headquarters. They have power.... If we are faced with complaining hi-so customers, we will get punished seriously by the company.

Public or private context

A characteristic of FLEs' work is that their behaviour (and that of customers) is often in full view of other employees and customers. Thus in some situations, FLEs are threatened or abused by aggressive customers in front of others. The degree of the public exposure can produce varying effects of embarrassment and loss of face for employees, beyond other considerations (Grace, 2007). That is, a public context strengthens the association between the cognitive appraisal and psychological well-being. For incidents that occur in public, the FLEs experienced more embarrassment, which exacerbated the impact of their cognitive appraisal on their well-being, including anxiety, depression, and stress. A receptionist (female, 38 years) in a hospital described how she felt due to mistreatment by a customer in the presence of other customers:

He yelled at me, scolded me with rude words. It was very loud.... I was very embarrassed because everyone around was looking at me. I saw some customers laugh, it seemed like they were watching the circus.

Another FLE (female, 27 years) in a communication company was serving a customer enquiring about an iPad. When the customer suddenly began yelling at her,

I thought she did not respect me. She bellowed at me in spite of her misunderstanding. I did not know why she swore at me like this. Everyone in the shop looked at me. She demonstrated her power....After that I was stressed and I abused her in my mind.

Social support

Social support refers to the consideration, respect, or assistance received from others, which creates a sense of being cared for, respected, valued, and part of the social group (Sarafino, 1997). Social support can be emotional (e.g., sympathy), affirmation (e.g., supportive opinions), or simply advice. Support from coworkers and supervisors likely has the most influence on an employee's well-being (Ng and Sorensen, 2008).

Supportive coworkers not only help employees deal with abusive and aggressive customers (Wu and Hu, 2009) but also should lead to a weaker effect of negative cognitive appraisals on the FLEs' psychological well-being. For example, a pharmacist (female, 31 years) reported that a customer threw aspirin at her and scolded her angrily because the price of the product had increased 3 Thai Baht (10 cents). She was very angry and worried. After the incident, she was able to vent to her feelings by telling the story to her colleagues, after which,

I was less angry and felt less stressed because I told my colleagues about the incident.... I felt better because they were able to sympathise with me and supported me in this incident.

FLEs often need psychological support from various people around them, including managers and colleagues but also members of their family. One FLE reported that she refused to allow a small child to play in a particular play area, because she was concerned about the child's safety. The mother became angry, spoke to her harshly, and then complained in writing. The employee perceived substantial damage to her self-esteem, leaving her emotionally exhausted, worried, and stressed. However, the social support she received from coworkers and family helped minimise the damage to her psychological well-being:

My boss asked what happened, so I told him the whole story. He said I did a good job....I also told to my colleague, she asked me to forget about it and let it be.... When I went back home I told this story to my mom and grandma. I was worried. I asked them whether I was wrong or not. They said that I was not wrong. I did the right thing... all this made me feel a little better.

In summary, our systematic analysis of the interview data demonstrated that the psychological well-being of FLEs can be either aggravated or ameliorated by the presence or absence of social support. Moreover, factors such as a customer is always right policy, social status, and public context can intensify the damage to the FLE's psychological well-being, but social support can diminish the negative impacts, both during and after the interaction with an aggressive customer.