

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF COLLINEARITY EFFECTS BETWEEN ANTECEDENTS OF POST-COMPLAINT SATISFACTION

ABSTRACT

The issue of the conceptual independence of attributes of perceived justice has received scant direct empirical attention in the complaint-handling literature. The present study aimed to investigate the strength of associations between attributes of perceived justice and, in doing so, contribute to the literature on conceptualisations of apology, politeness, and empathy. A naturally occurring dataset of 524 responses to customers' complaints posted on France's largest public forum (www.lesarnaques.com) between September 2003 and September 2013 were analysed. Cramer's V coefficients demonstrated strong collinearity effects in relation to some of the associations tested and, as such, suggest that existing problems in implementing effective complaint-handling strategies might be due to a lack of clarity concerning how apology, politeness, and empathy should best be defined. Recommendations are provided as to what should be measured, and how, in further research; implications for industry practitioners are also discussed.

KEYWORDS

Complaint handling, justice theory, politeness, empathy, apology

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INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Findings from twenty-five years of academic research in the field of complaint management (see Gelbrich&Roschk 2010 and Orsingher et al. 2010 for reviews) should have provided firms with considerable knowledge concerning best practices for handling customer complaints; yet, approximately one half to two thirds of firms fail to deal with customer complaints effectively (Davidow 2012; Estelami 2000; Grainer, Broetmann, & Cormier 2003). Although a variety of explanations likely exist as to why managers are not implementing the research (*cf.* Davidow, 2003, 2012; Homburg, Furst&Koschate 2010), the present study was stimulated by the question of whether current conceptualisations of perceived justice attributes might lack the validity and clarity required for successful application to practice (Davidow, 2012).

RESEARCH QUESTION

Using a dataset of naturally occurring exchanges between complainants and firms, the present study aimed to investigate the collinearity effects between attributes of perceived justice and, in doing so, contribute to the literature on conceptualisations of apology, politeness, and empathy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer complaint-handling has been the topic of passionate research for over 25 years (Davidow 2012). Hundreds of researchers have studied how consumers perceive recovery attempts and how these recovery attempts influence customer loyalty and word-of-mouth. The most widely adopted theoretical framework in this area is the perceived justice framework, the key tenet of which is that post-complaint satisfaction and other customer responses to complaint-handling are proximally influenced by the customer's perceptions concerning the fairness of service recovery efforts. However, this theoretical framework has been applied largely in contexts that attempt to understand the customer's experience of recovery efforts; much less research attention has been given to its utility for enhancing our understanding of best organisational practices for complaint-handling (Davidow 2003, 2012; Homburg et al. 2010).

Aside from the problem of the dearth of research on the justice framework within the organisational context, questions have also been raised concerning its utility for informing best practice. For example, Davidow (2003) questioned the utility of the original justice dimensions for shaping organisations' practices, arguing that there are six justice dimensions that affect post-complaint satisfaction: timeliness, facilitation, redress, apology, credibility, attentiveness (Davidow 2000, 2003). In this model, however, the perceived justice framework is used to evaluate consumers' perceptions of organisational practices but cannot serve as a tool to teach companies what they should do. In addition, there is widely varying opinion as to how the different attributes of perceived justice should be conceptualised: Davidow (2003) asserts that "[W]e are witnessing a proliferation of different scales all purporting to be measuring the same construct. If procedural justice is measured in one study as 'voice' (Goodwin & Ross 1992) and in another study as 'timeliness' (Smith, Bolton & Wagner 1999), how can we expect to achieve the same results, or if we achieve the same results, how can we expect them to mean the same thing when we have essentially measured two completely

different concepts, even though they are called the same name?” In light of these conceptual issues, it is unsurprising that findings relating to the importance of the three key dimensions of perceived justice—interactional, procedural, and distributive—are inconsistent (Gelbrich&Roschk 2010; Orsingher et al. 2010) and that research results are rarely implemented (Davidow 2012).

Inconsistencies between studies concerning the importance of different dimensions of perceived justice might be explained by the fact that researchers often experience labelling problems when categorising best practices for complaint-handling. It is not uncommon in these studies to observe statements such as, “we were forced to consolidate and subsume similar organisational responses (empathy and respect) under the same category (favourable employee behavior). For example, in their meta-analysis of satisfaction with complaint-handling, Orsingher et al. (2010) categorised concepts sharing the same meaning into one single construct in order to obtain a ‘satisfactory (average) inter-rater reliability’. Similarly, Smith et al.’s. (1999) definition of apology subsumes aspects of interactional justice—politeness; courtesy; concern; effort and empathy—that other authors treat as independent attributes.

In yet another meta-analysis Gelbrisch and Roschk (2010) followed a similar path and grouped together dimensions of the justice framework that other authors classified differently. These authors defined compensation as “Monetary (e.g., 50% discount), cash equivalent (e.g., product replacement), or psychological (e.g., apology) benefit or response outcome a customer receives from the company”. It is however questionable whether “apology” can be embedded in the “compensation” construct. In the marketing literature apology is usually categorized as a separate antecedent belonging to distributive justice (e.g. Tax et al. 1998) or to interactional justice (Smith and Bolton 2002; Smith et al. 1999; McCollough et al. 2000). Recent work by Schwab et al. (2015) provides support for including “apology” in the interactional justice category. The contradiction pertaining to the categorization of justice components can be seen already in the paper by Gelbrisch and Roschk (2010) itself. Although the authors base their study on the seminal papers by Davidow (2003) and Estelami (2000), they purposely extend the definition of compensation proposed by those authors to consider apology as a form of compensation: “In a broader sense, however, compensation also comprises intangible response outcomes that can be considered to be psychological compensation. This is because a service failure often entails social loss (e.g., loss of face and threat of self-esteem). Social loss can be compensated by an apology (e.g., displaying regret for a failure), which is an intangible response outcome that helps restore social equity and redistribute esteem (Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar 1998). Hence, in line with others (e.g., Hess, Ganesan, and Klein 2003; Mattila and Patterson 2004), we consider apology as a form of compensation” (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2010, p.26). The inclusion of apology within distributive justice contradicts previous studies beyond those by Estelami (2000) and Davidow (2003). In fact an analysis of the most cited papers included in the meta-analyses by Orsingher et al. (2010) and Gelbrich and Roschk (2010) shows the lack of alignment of researchers when categorizing antecedents of post-complaint satisfaction and points already towards conceptual overlapping impeding results (see table 4). Smith et al. (1999) for instance considered the “politeness” and “empathy” dimensions as embedded within the apology construct: “An apology from the service provider communicates politeness, courtesy, concern, effort, and empathy to customers who have experienced a service failure and enhances their evaluations of the encounter” (p.359). Other authors however see those dimensions as separate constructs (Tax et al. 1998; McCollough et al. 2000) and show even misalignment as far as categorization of variables is concerned (e.g. “apology” categorized under distributive or interactional justice).

The aim of the present research was to step away from the inconsistencies in categorization and to focus on individual antecedents of post-complaint satisfaction. By investigating the strength of the associations between some of the key attributes of perceived justice, the goal of the research was to disentangle conceptual problems and propose a first step for more conclusiveness on how to handle complaints. A comprehensive exploration of definitions given to all perceived justice variables during the last 25 years of service recovery research is beyond the scope of the present paper; thus, Davidow's (2003) seminal paper was used as a starting point. Examination of Davidow's paper led to the identification of three constructs with unclear definitions: apology, empathy, and politeness.

Apology and Empathy

Although apology has been variously defined, several researchers share the view that simple formulaic expressions of apology such as "We are very sorry" or "Please accept our apologies" are, by definition, empathetic responses (Barlow, 1996; Davidow, 2003; Hoffman & Chung, 1999). According to Davidow (2003), apology shows an understanding of the dissatisfaction felt by the customer; for Barlow (1996), an apology says that a company is sorry for a service failure and expresses concern, and according to Hoffman and Cheung (1999), apology is an empathetic response in which the organisation acknowledges the customer's complaint. So far as the author is aware, however, no previous research has examined the degree of association between formulaic expressions of apology and empathy.

There is an important distinction in the theoretical literature between cognitive empathy and affective empathy: Whereas the former pertains to the emotional reaction to other people's experiences, the latter is a cognitive understanding of other people's experiences (Preston & de Waal 2002). In the context of customer complaints, affective empathy is displayed when the firm's representative acknowledges the customer's status as a victim and tries to put her- or himself "in the shoes" of the customer; cognitive empathy is displayed when the firm's representative exerts effort in attempting to solve the complainant's problem. With regard to affective empathy, theoretical evidence suggests that apologies function, in part, to convey remorse and alleviate upset feelings in the victim (Smith, Chen & Harris, 2010); thus, this perspective suggests that apology is, by its very definition, an *affectively* empathic response. However, based upon the assumption that apology represents a form of psychological compensation—that is, an intangible response outcome that helps restore social equity and redistribute esteem—apology has traditionally been regarded as an aspect of distributive justice ('redress') (Tax, et al. 1998; Webster & Sundaram, 1998) which suggests that apology should be strongly associated with cognitive empathy. Thus, on the basis of the above evidence, the following hypotheses shall be tested:

H1: Apology is strongly associated with affective empathy;

H2: Apology is strongly associated with cognitive empathy.

Apology and Taking Responsibility

Current conceptualisations of apology in the complaint-handling literature posit that saying sorry for a service failure does not, in and of itself, convey an admission of guilt or responsibility; rather, an apology is an acknowledgement that the customer has been inconvenienced (Zemke 1994) and that the company takes the customer's problem seriously and will give it attention (Goodman, Malech & Boyd, 1987). Conversely, Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1979) holds that apologies "presuppose the truth of the proposition"—that is, the act

of apologising can only take place if the apologiser believes that some act has resulted in an infraction which has affected another person who at the same time deserves an apology; similarly, for Fraser (1990), apology is an act of acknowledged transgression or blameworthiness. In light of this theoretical evidence, the following hypotheses shall be tested:

H3 : apology is strongly associated with taking responsibility

Apology and Politeness

A number of theorists converge on the view that politeness involves ‘face-work’ (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1955). Specifically, politeness is message behavior that addresses another person’s autonomy needs—that is, the desire not to be imposed upon—and the desire to be liked, admired, ratified and related to positively. According to this face-work perspective of politeness, being polite means that the company or the company’s employee 1) avoids threats to the customer’s positive face (for example, criticisms, ironies, and reproaches); 2) avoids threats to the customer’s negative face (for example, a request for evidence or a ban on the customer to do something); 3) accepts threats to one’s (or one’s organisation’s) *positive* face, and 4) accepts threats to one’s (or one’s organisation’s) *negative* face. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), saying ‘Sorry’ or expressing regret for a wrongdoing is a negative politeness strategy that is designed to show respect for the addressee’s face. More recent evidence also suggests that apologising is a positive politeness strategy in that it conveys—whether implicitly or explicitly—an acknowledgement that the apologiser has offended the addressee (Holmes, 1990). In light of this theoretical evidence, it is perhaps unsurprising that previous research has either failed to reveal a clear distinction between apology and politeness (for example, Smith et al. 1999), or has obtained findings to suggest that apology and politeness are two dimensions of a single higher-order factor (for example, ‘favourable employee behaviour’: Gelbrich&Roschk, 2011; ‘atonement’: Boshoff, 1999). Thus, the present study shall test the following hypothesis:

H4: Apology is strongly associated with politeness.

Excuses

A number of theorists converge on the view that apologies are only one of a number of ways in which unanticipated or untoward behaviour can be explained (see, for example, Meier, 1998). An additional explanation-based construct that has been widely researched in the context of complaint-handling is ‘excuse-making’. This construct is typically operationalised within the context of attribution theory which posits that excuses are self-serving strategies that are designed to shift blame for a failure away from the excuse-giver (Shaw, Wild & Colquitt, 2003) and, in doing so, preserve the excuse-maker’s self-image and sense of control (Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Snyder, Higgins &Stucky, 1983). According to Scott and Lyman (1968), excuses can take four forms: “appeal to accidents” when reference is made to the infrequent occurrence of the problem; “appeal to defeasibility” when a denial of intent is expressed; “appeal to biological drives” when fatalistic forces are invoked to explain the failure; and, finally, “scapegoating” with which someone explains his/her own behaviour as a consequence of someone else’s behaviour. Thus, according to this perspective, excuses involve a denial of responsibility through the citation of an external cause or mitigating circumstance (Shaw et al. 2003) and, as such, directly contrast with formulaic expressions of apology. In light of this evidence, the following hypotheses shall be tested:

H5: excuse-making is strongly associated with a rejection of responsibility

H6 : excuse-making is strongly associated with a lack of politeness

Cognitive Empathy, Politeness and Flexibility

The final two hypotheses to be tested in the present study relate to the conceptualisation of the cognitive empathy construct. As previously discussed, cognitive empathy is typically operationalised in the complaint-handling literature as the willingness of the company or the company's representative to solve the customer's problem (Sparks & McColl-Kennedy, 1998). In the context of the face-work perspective (Brown & Levinson, 1987), such operationalisation equates to politeness, since expending effort to find a solution to the complainant's problem (for example, in the form of compensation, a promise, or an offer) represents a face-threatening act for the negative face of the company or the company's representative (Enache & Popa, 2008). Moreover, to the extent that cognitive empathy is characterised by a strong motivation and willingness to help, it is likely to be strongly associated with flexibility—that is, the willingness to adapt procedures to reflect individual circumstances. On the basis of this evidence, the following hypotheses were generated:

H7 : cognitive empathy is strongly associated with politeness;

H8 : cognitive empathy is strongly associated with flexibility.

METHOD

Data Collection

The data selected for analysis in the present study were 524 responses to customers' complaints that had been posted by firms on France's largest public forum (www.lesarnaques.com). These responses had been posted between Sept 6th 2003 and Sept 9th 2013 and pertained to the activity of 179 firms mainly active in online retail. Online forums have long been considered a reliable source of data for academic research (Harrison-Walker 2001; Hogreve, Eller & Firmhofer 2013).

Coding

After an extensive review of the literature on the different dimensions that needed to be coded, a coding guide was developed and tested.

Politeness was defined in terms of both politeness markers (*cf.* Dickinger & Bauernfeind 2009; Mattsson, Lemmink & McColl 2004) and Face-Threatening-Acts (FTAs) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). With regard to the latter, recent findings suggest that acceptance of FTAs by the company or the company's representative is positively associated with customers' perceptions of politeness, whereas FTAs made by the company or the company's representative to the customer's face is negatively associated with customers' perceptions of politeness (Schwab & Rosier, 2013).

Apology was coded along three dimensions: formulaic expressions of apology and excuses (*cf.* Meier, 1998).

Empathy was split into two distinct dimensions (Tettegah & Anderson, 2007): Affective empathy was detected through concerns expressed for the complainant; cognitive

empathy was coded when the firm showed initiatives and efforts to solve the problem and/or propose a series of alternatives to the complainant to give him/her satisfaction.

With regard to ‘responsibility’, firms’ responses were distinguished in terms of acknowledgements (RESP+) versus denial (RESP-). Both attributes were coded as present (‘yes’) only when the firm’s response explicitly acknowledged (RESP+) or denied (RESP-) responsibility. Thus, cases in which the admission of guilt was not explicitly mentioned were coded as “no”.

Flexibility was coded in terms of whether the firm’s representative “bent the rules” (FLEX+) versus whether the response indicated a lack of flexibility (FLEX-).

Double-blind binary (yes/no) coding was conducted on the sample of firms’ responses; the initial intercoder reliability coefficient was 0.8960. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Measure of Association

The strength of the relationship between a pair of categorical variables is typically measured using Cramer’s V (Mention, 2011). The Cramer’s V test produces a coefficient that ranges from 0 (no association) to 1 (complete association). A Cramer’s V of < 0.10 indicates a weak relationship whereas a coefficient > 0.30 indicates that the two variables are strongly associated yet conceptually distinct. A Cramer’s V of > 0.50 is indicative of conceptual redundancy (that is, the two variables measure the same construct).

Data were analysed using SAS 9.3.

FINDINGS

Table 1 presents the Cramer’s V coefficients for all possible pairings of the study variables. The values in bold directly relate to the hypotheses tested.

Apology

The results support our hypothesis that apology is strongly associated with affective empathy (H1): The Cramer’s V (0.71792, $p < .001$) indicates that the two attributes tap the same overarching construct. A weak, albeit statistically significant, association obtained between apology and cognitive empathy (0.1371, $p < .001$); thus, the author’s hypothesis that apology is strongly associated with cognitive empathy (H2) is not supported.

Results pertaining to the relationship between apology and taking responsibility supported the author’s hypothesis that apology is strongly associated with taking responsibility (H3): Cramer’s V = 0.30945, $p < .001$.

The author’s hypothesis that apology would be strongly associated with politeness was not supported in relation to politeness markers: Associations between politeness markers and apology were non-significant for HELLO, NAME, THANK, NAME_COMP, and significant but weak for BYE (0.10805) and NAME_EMPLOY (0.16232). The author’s hypothesis that apology would be strongly associated with politeness was also not supported in relation to FTAs to the negative face of the company or the company’s representative (FACE(-)_COMP = 0.09064, $p < .001$; FACE(-)_REP = 0.1371, $p < 0.001$) but was supported for FTAs to the

positive face of the company and the company's representative (FACE(+)_COMP = 0.34297, $p < 0.001$; FACE(+)_REP : 0.64423, $p < 0.001$).

Excuses

On the basis of evidence to suggest that excuses involve a denial of responsibility and, as such, directly contrast with formulaic expressions of apology, it was hypothesised that excuses would be strongly associated with both a rejection of responsibility (H5) and a lack of politeness (impoliteness) (H6). Results fully supported H5 (Cramer's $V = 0.44438$, $p < 0.001$). With regard to impoliteness, H6 was supported for the association between excuses and FTAs made to the positive face of the customer (0.34086, $p < 0.001$) but was not supported for the association between excuses and FTAs to the negative face of the customer (0.12622, $p < 0.001$); these latter results provide partial support for H6.

Cognitive Empathy

With regard to relationships with cognitive empathy, the author predicted that there would be a strong relationship between cognitive empathy on the one hand and politeness and flexibility on the other (H7 and H8, respectively).

With regard to politeness markers, the Cramer's V coefficients indicated either weak (from 0.07439 at $p < 0.001$ for NAME to 0.15523 at $p < 0.001$ for NAME_EMPLOY) or non-significant relationships (in the case of HELLO and NAME_COMP). Hypothesis H7 was also not supported for FTA's made to the faces of the company: the Cramer's V coefficients were not significant. A weak relationship was obtained between cognitive empathy and politeness in the form of FTAs to the positive face of the employee (0.12822, $p < 0.001$), and a strong relationship was obtained between cognitive empathy and politeness in the form of FTAs to the negative face of the employee (0.38336, $p < 0.001$). These findings lend partial support to the author's prediction that cognitive empathy would be strongly associated with politeness.

Finally, despite the significance of the Cramer's V coefficient between flexibility and cognitive empathy, its value was too low (0.10078, $p < 0.001$) to validate the association; thus, the author's hypothesis that cognitive empathy is strongly associated with flexibility is not supported.

DISCUSSION

Motivated by the observation that the conceptual independence of attributes of perceived justice has received scant direct empirical attention in the literature on complaint-handling, the present study aimed to examine the strength of the associations between attributes of perceived justice. The first set of hypotheses (H1 through H4) pertained to the apology construct, the second set (H5 and H6) to excuses, and the third set (H7 and H8) to concept of empathy.

Apology

Apology is the second most frequently examined antecedent to post-complaint satisfaction (Orsinger, *et al.* 2010); and yet, some authors either fail to define what "apology" means (for example, McCollough, Berry & Yadav 2000), or define it in very general terms (for example, Davidow 2003). Other authors try to better define the concept but then use some fuzzy terms. In the present study, apology was so strongly associated with affective empathy

and politeness in the form of FTAs to both the positive face of the company and the company's representative as to suggest conceptual redundancy; however, apology was only weakly associated with cognitive empathy and, whilst strongly associated with taking responsibility, this latter relationship did not reach a level indicative of collinearity. The especially strong relationships obtained here between apology on the one hand and affective empathy and FTAs to the positive face of the company's representative on the other suggest that apology might best be conceptualised as an aspect of 'social sensitivity'—a dimension of interactional justice characterized by concern and respect for the complainant (*cf.* Colquitt, 2001). The author's findings provide little support for the notion that apology represents a form of psychological compensation (redress) (Tax et al. 1998; Webster & Sundaram, 1998): Apology was only weakly associated with cognitive empathy (the effort exerted in attempting to solve the complainant's problem) and was not associated with taking responsibility. More generally, these findings suggest that failures to find a significant effect of interactional justice in previous research (see, for example, Gelbrich & Roschk, 2010) may have been due to the possibility that inclusion of apology under the 'distributive' dimension of perceived justice may have deprived interactional justice of one of its key attributes.

Politeness

Several authors regard apology and politeness as independent constructs (see, for example, McCollough et al. 2000; Tax et al. 1998) and the present findings largely support this contention: With the exception of conceptual redundancy between formulaic expressions of apology and FTAs to the positive face of the company representative—a finding discussed above—the Cramer's Vs for the associations between apology and all other components of politeness indeed suggest that apology is distinct from both politeness markers (for example, 'Hello', 'Thank You') and face-threatening acts other than FTAs to the positive face of the company's representative. Additionally, none of the Cramer's Vs between all possible pairings of the politeness components and the remaining study variables indicated conceptual redundancy. Considered collectively, these findings suggest that 'politeness' involves the company's (or company representative's) acceptance of acts that threaten their own negative face (for example, making an offer or promise to the customer) and the avoidance of acts that threaten the positive and negative faces of the customer (for example, mockery and reproaches; requests for evidence or banning certain activity). FTAs are significantly associated with customers' perceptions of politeness (Schwab & Rosier, 2013), and these perceptions have a positive impact upon customer loyalty.

Excuses

Excuse-making is an antecedent to post-complaint satisfaction that has rarely been considered in quantitative research: Of the 50 studies included in Orsingher et al's (2010) meta-analysis, only one (Conlon & Murray, 1996) took the effect of excuses into account. The present results demonstrated that excuses are correlated with two dimensions that are much more often included in studies on the antecedents of post-complaint satisfaction: impoliteness (for example, Collie, Sparks & Bradley 2000; Kau & Loh 2006; Liao 2007), and the rejection of responsibility (for example, McKoll-Kennedy & Sparks 2003; Tax et al. 1998). However, although the coefficients pertaining to these relationships were strong, they did not reach a level indicative of collinearity (Cramers Vs: excuses-FTA(+) Customer = 0.34; excuses-rejection of responsibility = 0.44, respectively); excuses are conceptually distinct from the rejection of responsibility and impoliteness in the form of threats to the positive face of the customer.

These relationships can be explained by using an example from the data. A customer complained that he lost his internet domain because his registrar had not handled his extension request quickly enough. The company's response was that the time between the receipt of the customer's request and the expiration date of the internet domain was very short and wrote: "This type of urgent request requires, by common sense, that you call us". In this example, the company's excuse implicitly attributes blame to the customer and, at the same time, threatens the customer's positive face. As in many other cases, the excuse here triggered a chain of other arguments, all of which partially involved reproaches about the customer's behavior.

Cognitive Empathy

The final two hypotheses tested in the present study pertained to the cognitive empathy construct. Firstly, a strong association between cognitive empathy and politeness was hypothesised, the latter being divided into markers of politeness, FTAs to the positive face of the company or the company's representative, and FTAs to the negative face of the company or the company's representative. Since expending effort to find a solution to the complainant's problem (for example, in the form of compensation, a promise, or an offer) represents a FTA for the negative face of the service provider (Enache & Popa, 2008), the author's finding of a strong relationship between cognitive empathy and politeness in the form of FTAs to the negative face of the company's representative (Cramer's $V > 0.3$, $p < .001$) supports theorising that cognitive empathy involves problem-solving with the victim—that is, the complainant—(Tettegah & Anderson, 2007). A likely explanation for the author's finding of only a weak relationship between cognitive empathy and FTAs to the negative face of the company (0.1288) is that, in the vast majority of the exchanges analysed, expressions of willingness to solve the customer's problem came from the company's representative, rather than the company: By taking the initiative to manage the situation and solve the customer's problem, the company representative accepted a threat to his or her own negative face.

The author's final hypothesis was that cognitive empathy would be strongly associated with flexibility; however, no significant relationship obtained between these two variables. Expressing the willingness to 'go the extra mile' to solve the problem and looking for alternatives were the most prevalent cognitive empathy-related strategies used by employees; in their search for a solution, employees rarely proposed bending the rules. These latter findings may explain why no strong association was found between cognitive empathy and flexibility.

Implications for Researchers

Findings from the present study suggest that there is conceptual redundancy between some attributes of perceived justice that have, until now, been handled as unique and independent constructs. This has important consequences for scholars who research the effects of such antecedents on post-complaint satisfaction, such as when the combined effects of politeness, apology and empathy are analysed (e.g. Liao 2007) or included in meta-analyses (e.g. Orsingher et al. 2010). The Cramers V coefficients pertaining to four relationships (see Table 3) suggest that researchers measuring the effects of (affective) empathy, apology and FTAs to the positive face of the company or the company's representative should be especially aware of collinearity issues that may impede the validity of their findings.

Formulaic expressions of apology (APO) were found to be conceptually redundant with affective empathy (EMPAFF); moreover, the latter was found to be associated with

FTA's to the positive face of the firm's representative (FACE(+)_REP). This suggests that the concepts covered by APO and EMPAFF are covered by FACE(+)_REP and that apology might best be defined as an aspect of 'social sensitivity'— a dimension of interactional justice characterised by concern and respect for the complainant (*cf.* Colquitt, 2001). Since a strong association also obtained between taking responsibility (RESP+) and FTA's to the positive face of the company, future research should focus on FTAs. A focus upon the different aspects of FTAs and cognitive empathy should negate the need for inclusion of affective empathy and formulaic expressions of apology in complaint-handling research. Since markers of politeness were not associated with the other study constructs, and since politeness markers play a minor, if any, role in the perception of politeness in the online context (Schwab & Rosier, 2013), complaint-handling researchers are advised to exclude markers of politeness from their research.

CONCLUSION

Over the last twenty-five years, considerable research attention has been devoted to the factors that influence customers' perceptions of fairness (Davidow 2003, 2012; Homburg et al. 2010); and yet, many firms still fail to respond effectively to customer complaints. Understandably, therefore, doubts have been expressed concerning what has been measured and why implementation has failed (Davidow 2012).

On the question of what has been measured, findings from the present research suggest that the doubts of Davidow (2012) may be justified: strong collinearity effects between oft-cited variables were found; this may have indeed impeded the reliability and validity of some results in the past. Whereas some constructs are clearly defined (compensation for instance relates to some "tangible" marks that can be easily detected and operationalised), others— especially politeness, apology and empathy—are far complex and subjective. Indeed, some authors advocate that research should remain on the level of subjectivity (Andreassen 2000). The findings obtained here relating to the strength of the associations between three key attributes of perceived justice not only suggest how these attributes might best be defined, but also highlight what should be measured and how, and what recommendations such as 'be more polite' or 'more empathetic' actually mean in practice.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

In their work on apology, Roschk and Kaiser (2013) showed that a dichotomic view of the components of justice theory is perhaps too straightforward. Indeed, intensity, empathy and timing all contribute to a unique perception of an apology. In the present study, therefore, the binary coding may have been too simplistic. Further research is required to account for the intensity of the different variables that were considered here.

The author also acknowledges that his dataset was obtained from a public forum where online retailers were overrepresented. Although naturally occurring data enhance the validity of research findings, attempts should be made to replicate the present study in the context of other industry types. Similarly, further research is required to ensure that the present findings generalise beyond the public character of the forum and are validated in research involving private exchanges between complainants and firms.

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		politeness												apology		responsibility		process		empathy	
	CODE	HELLO	NAME	BYE	THANK	NAME_EMPLOY	NAME_COMP	FACE(+)_CUST	FACE(-)_CUST	FACE(+)_COMP	FACE(-)_COMP	FACE(+)_REP	FACE(-)_REP	APO	EXCUS	RESP+	RESP-	FLEX-	FLEX+	EMPAFF	EMPCOG
politeness	HELLO	1,00																			
	NAME	0,03	1,00																		
	BYE	0,07	-0.08*	1,00																	
	THANK	0.40***	0.26***	-0.03	1,00																
	NAME_EMPLOY	0,05	-0.18***	0.21***	-0.06	1,00															
	NAME_COMP	-0.04	0.16***	-0.01	0.19***	0.02	1,00														
	FACE(+)_CUST	0.07	-0.05	-0.01	-0.14***	0.00	0.04	1,00													
	FACE(-)_CUST	0.13***	-0.05	0.03	-0.13***	0.05	-0.02	0.30***	1,00												
	FACE(+)_COMP	0.01	-0.03	-0.04	0.00	0.07	0.04	-0.15***	-0.12***	1,00											
	FACE(-)_COMP	0.07	-0.12***	0.11**	0.04	-0.07	-0.07*	-0.13***	-0.04	0.23***	1,00										
	FACE(+)_REP	0.11**	0.02	0.10**	0.03	0.22***	0.00	-0.06	-0.10**	-0.04	-0.06	1,00									
	FACE(-)_REP	-0.03	0.12***	0.05	0.03	0.24***	0.04	-0.12***	-0.15***	-0.07	-0.32***	0.25***	1,00								
apology	APO	-0.03	-0.04	0.11**	0.00	0.16***	0.02	-0.18***	-0.16***	0.34***	0.09**	0.64***	0.13***	1,00							
	EXCUS	-0.10**	-0.06	-0.01	-0.1**	-0.02	-0.05	0.34***	0.13***	0.00	0.02	-0.02	-0.11***	-0.01	1,00						
responsibility	RESP+	0.03	-0.05	0.04	-0.04	0.14***	0.04	-0.14***	-0.07	0.50***	0.16***	0.14***	0.05	0.31***	-0.11**	1,00					
	RESP-	0.01	-0.03	-0.03	-0.09**	0.01	0.06	0.47***	0.19***	-0.09**	-0.06	0.01	-0.13***	-0.07	0.44***	-0.19***	1,00				
process	FLEX-	0.15***	0.04	-0.06	-0.08*	0.00	0.04	0.26***	0.17***	-0.13***	-0.11**	0.00	-0.05	0.00	0.15***	-0.07	0.36***	1,00			
	FLEX+	0.08*	-0.01	0.00	-0.01	-0.03	0.01	0.10**	0.02	0.01	0.10**	-0.01	0.00	0.00	0.07*	0.00	0.10**	-0.03	1,00		
empathy	EMPAFF	-0.03	0.08*	0.06	0.01	0.16***	0.05	-0.16***	-0.10**	0.22***	0.03	0.53***	0.18***	0.72***	-0.01	0.22***	-0.07	-0.05	0.06	1,00	
	EMPCOG	0.03	0.07*	0.08*	0.10**	0.16***	0.06	-0.05	-0.13***	0.06	-0.04	0.13***	0.39***	0.14***	-0.08*	0.03	-0.06	-0.05	0.10**	0.19***	1,00

Table 1. Cramer's V (*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, *p<0.1)

Variable 1		Variable 2		Hypotheses	Hypothesis validated (if Cramer's V>0.3)
Apology	Formulaic expressions of apology	Empathy	Affective empathy	H1	Yes
			Cognitive empathy	H2	No
		responsibility	Taking responsibility	H3	Yes
		Politeness	Markers of politeness	H4	No
			FTA to the positive face	H4	Yes
			FTA to the negative face	H4	No
	Excuses	responsibility	Rejecting responsibility	H5	Yes
		Politeness	Lack of politeness : FTA to the positive face of the customer	H6	Yes
			Lack of politeness : FTA to the negative face of the customer	H6	No
empathy	Cognitive empathy	Politeness	Markers of politeness	H7	No
			FTA to the positive face	H7	No
			FTA to the negative face	H7	Yes for firm's representative
		flexibility	Flexibility	H8	No

Table 2. Overview of associations tested

Variable 1	Variable 2	Cramer's V (p<0.001)
APO	EMPAFF	0.71792
FACE(+)_REP	EMPAFF	0.52624
FACE(+)_REP	APO	0.64423
FACE(+)_COMP	RESP+	0.50456

Table 3. Overview of associations indicating possible redundancy between variables (Cramer's V > 0.5)

Authors	Dimensions tested	Categorization of justice components included in this study			
		Excuses	Politeness	Apology	Empathy
Smith and Bolton (2002)	Compensation (distributive justice), apology (interactional justice), response speed (procedural justice), recovery initiation (interactional justice)	Not measured	Not considered as a separate antecedent: included in “apology” per Smith et al. (1999)	Interactional justice (see Smith et al. 1999)	Not considered as a separate antecedent: included in “apology” per Smith et al. (1999)
Smith et al. (1999)	Compensation (distributive justice), apology (interactional justice), response speed (procedural justice), recovery initiation (interactional justice)	Not measured	Not considered as a separate antecedent	Interactional justice	Not considered as a separate antecedent
Tax et al. (1998)	16 dimensions covering distributive, procedural and interactional justice.	Interactional justice	Interactional justice	Distributive justice	Interactional justice
McCollough et al. (2000)	Distributive and interactional justice. Interactional justice is seen by the authors as a “subelement of the more global justice construct of procedural justice”	Not measured	Interactional justice	Interactional justice	Interactional justice
Maxham III (2001)	Different components (compensation, empathy, ...) included but no analysis of individual effects	No categorization			
Blodgett et al. (1993)	Perceived justice measured as a whole.	No categorization.			

Table 4. Discrepancies in categorization of justice components among top cited papers used in meta-analysis