

# TOWARD AN INTEGRATED CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF CONSUMER COMPLAINING BEHAVIOR

Jeffrey G. Blodgett, The University of Mississippi  
Donald H. Granbois, Indiana University

## ABSTRACT

The authors develop a conceptual model of consumer complaining behavior, in a retail environment, by integrating the confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm, A.O. Hirschman's theory of exit, voice, and loyalty, and Folkes' attributional approach with the work of Day, Richins, Bearden and Mason, and Singh. The model advances current work by treating complaining behavior as a *dynamic* process (as recommended by Robinson). That is, this model explicitly recognizes that some complaining behaviors (i.e. negative word-of-mouth, exit, and third party complaints) are largely dependent upon the outcome of the redress seeking episode (herein referred to as *perceived justice*).

## INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a conceptual model of the consumer complaining behavior process, following dissatisfaction in a retail environment. This model makes two contributions. First, it integrates several streams of CS/D&CB research. Specifically, it merges the confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm, A.O. Hirschman's (1970) theory of exit, voice, and loyalty, and Folkes' (1984a) attributional approach with the work of Day (1984), Richins (1983a, 1985, 1987), Bearden and Mason (1984), and Singh (1990). These various streams of research actually complement each other very well, and, when combined, provide a strong theoretical framework to guide future research. To date, however, no one has fully integrated these streams of research into a nomological net, showing how the various constructs used to explain and predict satisfaction/dissatisfaction and complaining behavior fit together.

The second contribution of the proposed framework is that it treats complaining behavior as a *dynamic* process (as recommended by Robinson

1979), by recognizing that certain complaining behaviors (i.e. negative word-of-mouth, exit, and third party complaints) are largely dependent upon the outcome of the redress seeking episode. A major limitation of previous models (e.g. Richins 1983a, 1987; Singh 1990) is that they treat consumer complaining behavior as a *static* phenomenon. These models do not explicitly recognize that complaining behavior is actually a *process* and that many consumers will first seek redress before engaging in negative word-of-mouth, choosing to exit, and before lodging a third party complaint. The proposed model, however, recognizes that these latter behaviors are oftentimes dependent upon the manner in which the retailer responds to the complaint. It is somewhat surprising that previous models have omitted this interaction between the consumer and the retailer considering that Gilly and Gelb (1982) and a TARP (1981) study have demonstrated that consumers who are dissatisfied with the manner in which the retailer responds to their complaint are much more likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior and are less likely to repatronize the offending retailer. With these findings in mind, these authors argue that when investigating the determinants of negative word-of-mouth behavior, exit, and third party complaints, it is imperative that we treat complaining behavior as a process and take into consideration the complainant's level of *satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the manner in which the retailer responded to the complaint* (herein referred to as *perceived justice*). By including this "intervening" variable, and thus treating complaining behavior as a dynamic process, we gain much greater insight into why consumers engage in the various types of complaining behaviors.

Briefly, the confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm will be shown to provide the conceptual foundation upon which the study of consumer complaining behavior is built. Negative disconfirmation leads to dissatisfaction, which is a

necessary, but not sufficient, condition for complaining behavior (ignoring illegitimate complaints, Day 1984). If the disconfirmation paradigm provides the conceptual foundation, then A. O. Hirschman's (1970) theory of exit, voice, and loyalty provides the framework; i.e. the conditions that lead to complaining behavior. Hirschman's theory is actually manifested in the work of Day (1984), Bearden and Mason (1984), Richins (1983a, 1985), and Singh (1990). This paper also integrates Folkes' (1984a) attributional approach into the conceptual framework, thus increasing the explanatory power of the model. Finally, the proposed model views complaining behavior as a dynamic process, in which some complaining behaviors are dependent upon the outcome of the redress seeking episode (i.e. perceived justice), thus taking into account the work of Homans (1961), Adams (1965), Deutsch (1975), Greenberg and Folger (1983), and others in social psychology and organizational behavior.

## CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION AND FRAMEWORK

### Confirmation/Disconfirmation Paradigm

The disconfirmation paradigm provides the conceptual foundation for the study of consumer complaining behavior (see Oliver 1980; Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins 1983). In general, confirmation/disconfirmation is an evaluative process whereby a consumer compares a product's performance to his/her prior expectations of the product. Confirmation occurs when a product performs as expected. Positive disconfirmation occurs when a product performs better than the consumer expected, while negative disconfirmation occurs when the product does not perform up to the customer's expectations. Negative disconfirmation, in turn, leads to dissatisfaction, which is generally defined as a negative feeling, or emotion, in response to, or following, a specific consumption experience (Woodruff et al. 1983; Day 1984). The distinction between negative disconfirmation and dissatisfaction, then, is that negative disconfirmation is a cognition, while dissatisfaction is an affective response; i.e. an emotion. This feeling of dissatisfaction is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for

complaining behavior (Day 1984; Day, Grabick, Schaezle, and Staubach 1981).

A number of studies have supported the confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm (e.g. Oliver 1980; Oliver and Linda 1981; Churchill and Surprenant 1982; LaBarbera and Mazursky 1983). Bearden and Teel (1983), in particular, applied this paradigm in the context of customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction and its effect on complaining behavior. Their findings support the expectations ---> disconfirmation ---> dissatisfaction ---> complaining behavior relationship.

(Please note that, in addition to disconfirmation, Westbrook [1987] has found *negative affect* also to be an important determinant of dissatisfaction and complaining behavior. While our model explicitly recognizes the effect of negative affect on dissatisfaction, we have chosen not to deal with the issue of emotions more fully in this article. It is not yet clear to us how these emotions fit into our model, especially when dissatisfaction itself is defined as an affective response (see Day 1984). As future research better explains the relationship between these two concepts, we fully expect that the concept of emotion will become a major element of our model.)

Although Bearden and Teel's (1983) study supported the dissatisfaction ---> complaining behavior relationship, dissatisfaction has actually been found to explain only a small percentage of complaining behavior. For example, Day and Landon (1976) asked respondents what action(s) they took in response to their *most* dissatisfying consumer experience, and found that only 20% - 35% of these people complained to the seller. In Bearden and Teel's (1983) study dissatisfaction explained only 15% of the variance in complaining behavior (their Guttman scale included complaints to the retailer, to one's friends, and to third parties).

Day (1984) provides one of the most logical explanations of the effects of dissatisfaction, thus explaining these seemingly contrary findings. He states that dissatisfaction is motivational in nature and that high levels of dissatisfaction cause people to consider complaining, but in and of itself, do not cause complaining behavior. Rather, given dissatisfaction, the decision to complain is

contingent upon situational and personal factors. In short, dissatisfaction is best thought of as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of complaining behavior. Day et al. (1981) sum up the effects of dissatisfaction best.

(It may be helpful conceptually to think of strong feelings of dissatisfaction as an emotional or attitudinal state which can provide motivation for possible action, but ... if one wishes to focus on complaining and noncomplaining actions (behaviors) ... it would seem appropriate to [also] ... look at other factors (p. 93).

#### A.O. Hirschman's (1970) Theory of Exit, Voice, and Loyalty

Hirschman's (1970) theory of exit, voice, and loyalty actually supplies the situational and personal factors mentioned by Day (1984) and Day et al. (1981) that moderate the dissatisfaction --- > complaining behavior relationship. More importantly, these factors provide insight into the *types* of responses consumers take once dissatisfaction occurs.

Hirschman's framework is actually very broad, and can be applied to "any economic, social, or political system, individuals, business firms, and organizations in general [which] are subject to lapses from efficient, rational ... or otherwise functional behavior" (p. 1). For example, Hirschman also uses this framework to explain why some dissatisfied employees leave an organization (i.e. exit) while others stay, even in the presence of better job opportunities (these latter employees are loyal). In the consumer complaining behavior context, Hirschman uses this same framework to explain why some dissatisfied consumers complain to the seller (i.e. voice) while others just silently vow never to shop there again and hence take their business elsewhere (i.e. exit). Hirschman astutely points out that exit is particularly detrimental because the firm never finds out what it is doing wrong. Companies, therefore, should encourage dissatisfied customers to complain.

**Conditions for Exit and/or Voice.**  
Hirschman posits that voice (i.e. redress seeking)

depends on the value of voicing the complaint times the probability that the complaint will be successful. Voice also depends on one's willingness to complain and "on the *invention* of such ... mechanisms as can communicate complaints cheaply and effectively" (p. 42). Exit, in contrast, is negatively related to the ability and willingness of consumers to take up the voice option, and is often a last resort after voice has failed.

Recent CCB research is actually quite consistent with Hirschman's framework. The "value of voicing the complaint" factor is manifested in the *product importance* construct (see Richins 1985) and in Singh's (1990) *worthwhileness of the complaint* construct, while the "probability that voice will be successful" factor is analogous to the *likelihood of success* construct (see Day and Landon 1976; Granbois, Summers, and Frazier 1977; Day 1984; Richins 1983a, 1985, 1987; Singh 1990). Furthermore, the "invention of mechanisms to communicate complaints" (i.e. customer service counters, 1-800 numbers, etc.) serves to increase consumers' perceptions as to the likelihood that their complaint will be successful. The "ability and willingness to take up the voice option" factor is manifested in the *attitude toward complaining* construct (see Richins 1980, 1982; Bearden and Mason 1984).

Hirschman states that the cost of voice, in terms of time and money, must also be considered, and points out that voice tends to be costly in comparison to exit. Considering that the vast number of products we buy are not very "important," the cost of voicing a complaint (i.e. seeking redress) is usually greater than the benefit of the remedy desired. Given this cost vs. benefit tradeoff, consumers will be more likely to voice their complaints when dissatisfied with an expensive durable good, as compared to an inexpensive, nondurable good. When dissatisfied with the latter type of good the consumer will be more likely to merely switch to a different brand (which is not the same as exit, unless the retailer carries only one brand). Although some authors have explicitly included a *cost of complaining construct* (see Day 1984; Richins 1983a, 1985, 1987) in their models, these authors point out that this construct appears to be inversely related to the product importance construct, and that these two

constructs may be confounded.

**Loyalty.** Although Hirschman applies the loyalty construct in the context of organizational behavior, it too has implications for consumer complaining behavior. In his example, he argues that it is the loyal employee who speaks up and complains about deteriorating work conditions, ill-conceived strategies, declining firm performance, etc., while those employees who are not loyal are more apt to just quietly leave the firm for another organization when dissatisfied with current conditions. In other words, the loyal employee often chooses to stay and complain in the hopes of turning that organization around. In addition, it is the loyal employee who is more likely to threaten to exit, in the hope that this threat will cause the firm to finally recognize and address the problem. The nonloyal employee, however, will just quietly leave the organization without any warning, in which case the firm is not explicitly made aware that a problem exists.

The straightforward analogy to the complaining behavior literature is that it is a store's loyal customers who are more likely to complain when dissatisfied with a product. These loyal customers, by definition, feel a certain attachment to the store and thus have an interest in seeing that store continue as an ongoing concern. These loyal consumers should therefore have an incentive to correct any deterioration in performance of that store. At the same time, loyal customers -- as compared to nonloyal customers -- should be less likely to exit when dissatisfied with a product. In other words, because of their psychological attachment to that store, loyal customers should be more likely to give the seller a "second chance." For the same reason, loyal customers should be less apt to hurt the seller by engaging in negative word-of-mouth behavior.

#### **Attribution Theory as it Relates to Complaining Behavior: Stability, Controllability, and Attribution of Blame**

Several authors have suggested an attributional approach to complaining behavior, most notably Folkes (1984a, 1984b), who stated that "the perceived reason for a product's failure influences how a consumer responds" (1984a, p. 398).

Basing her work on Weiner (1980), she says that consumers attribute causes for product failure -- or more generally, for dissatisfying purchase episodes -- based on *locus of control*, *stability*, and *controllability*.

Locus of control refers to whether the product failure is due to the seller (an external attribution) or to the consumer (an internal attribution). As such, this variable should actually be referred to as *attribution of blame*, and should not be confused with Rotter's (1966) internal/external causal inference theory, which refers to stable differences between individuals in the way they view their world. Folkes found that consumers who make external attributions of blame are more likely to ask for a refund, an exchange, and/or an apology, while consumers who make internal attributions -- that is, they accept all or part of the blame for the dissatisfaction -- are less likely to seek redress.

Stability refers to whether the underlying cause of the dissatisfaction is perceived as being temporary or permanent. Upon experiencing dissatisfaction with a product, a consumer then makes a judgement as to whether a similar type of problem will occur when patronizing that retailer in the future. Folkes found that consumers who viewed the cause as being stable preferred a refund rather than an exchange.

Controllability refers to whether the consumer perceives that the retailer could have prevented the problem, or whether it was accidental. Folkes found that consumers who perceive that the seller could have prevented the problem, but did not take the necessary precautions, are more likely to be angry and hence tend to want to hurt the offending company. Although Folkes does not mention how such a consumer could hurt the company's business, several ways are through negative word-of-mouth, exit, and third party complaints.

Figure 1 summarizes Folkes' findings.

**Attribution of Blame in Relation to the Proposed Model.** Rather than modeling attribution of blame as a direct determinant of complaining behavior, we feel that this variable is more appropriately conceptualized as a determinant of dissatisfaction. That is, we posit that attribution of blame affects complaining behavior only through its effect on dissatisfaction. The reasoning for this conceptualization is as follows. Upon

experiencing negative disconfirmation the consumer will try to determine whether this discrepancy is due to the product and/or the retailer, or if he/she is to blame for the problem. Consumers who perceive the product and/or the retailer to be at fault will be dissatisfied and will be justified in seeking redress. However, when internal attributions are made the consumer is admitting that the product and/or the retailer is not at fault. In this situation, the consumer will not be dissatisfied with the product and/or the retailer per se, and hence should have little, if any, motivation to seek redress. It should be noted that there is also empirical support for treating attribution of blame as a determinant of dissatisfaction. In two studies, Richins (1985, 1987) actually found attribution of blame to be a significant predictor of dissatisfaction, rather than of complaining behavior.

have been prevented and whether the same type of problem is likely to occur in the future. Consumers who perceive that the retailer could have prevented the problem (controllability) will be angry and hence should be more likely to exit, to engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior, and to file third party complaints. Likewise, consumers who perceive the underlying cause of the problem to be stable probably will vow to never again patronize that retailer, and might even warn their friends about the retailer so that they do not experience the same type of problem. However, when the cause is perceived as neither stable nor controllable the consumer is less likely to exit or complain to friends. In this situation the consumer should be willing to give the retailer another chance.

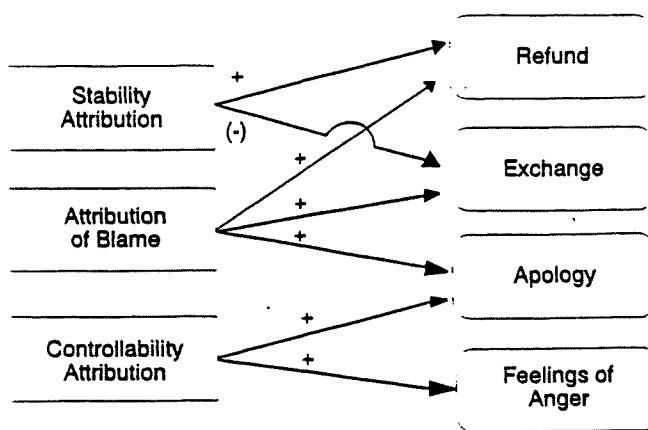
**RECENT CCB RESEARCH**

**The Dependent Variable: Consumer Complaining Behavior**

Consumer complaining behavior actually manifests itself in several different types of behaviors/responses (for an excellent discussion, see Singh 1988). In order to determine the causes of these various behaviors it is imperative that the different complaining behaviors be operationalized as separate, distinct, dependent variables. By doing so, we can better determine which variables lead to which complaining behaviors, and the relative magnitude and direction of these effects. In order to better understand these effects, we classify consumer complaining behavior into the following four dependent variables:

1. **Redress seeking (or voice)** - complaints directed toward the retailer; asking for a refund, an exchange, for the product to be repaired, or for an apology.
2. **Negative word-of-mouth** - generally defined as telling others about one's dissatisfaction; i.e. complaints about the retailer and/or the product to friends and/or relatives (who are not living in the consumer's household).
3. **Exit (or repatronage intentions)** - a vow, or intention, to never again patronize the offending retailer. (It should be noted that this

**Figure 1**  
**Summary of Folkes' (1984a) Findings**



Note: In Folkes restaurant example, asking for a refund implies exit.

**Stability and Controllability Attributions in Relation to the Model.** In the proposed framework stability and controllability attributions are posited to be direct determinants of complaining behavior. Given dissatisfaction, consumers will ask whether the problem could

variable does not include brand switching per se -- i.e. a vow to never again buy a certain brand. The reason for making this distinction is that since most retailers carry several different brands, switching brands does not necessarily imply switching retailers. Brand switching, then, is not necessarily detrimental to the retailer.)

4. **Third party complaints** - includes complaining to public/private third parties, such as the Better Business Bureau, the Chamber of Commerce, letters to a newspaper, etc., and legal action (or the threat thereof).

### Relationships Among the Dependent Variables

It should be pointed out that consumers are not restricted to one type of complaining behavior. Rather, some consumers might seek redress *and* complain to friends, or seek redress *and* vow never to shop there again, etc. In more extreme instances, consumers might engage in all of these complaining behaviors. A model of complaining behavior should therefore allow for multiple behaviors. It should also be noted that some complaining behaviors are dependent upon the outcome of others. For example, the Better Business Bureau (a third party) does not accept consumers' complaints unless they have first tried to resolve the problem with the retailer. Research has shown that negative word-of-mouth and exit are also largely dependent upon the outcome of the redress seeking episode (TARP 1981; Gilly and Gelb 1982). By modeling consumer complaining behavior as consisting of four, distinct, dependent variables we are able to capture the dynamic nature of this phenomenon.

### Independent Variables: Situational and Interpersonal Factors

Over the years, researchers have found that socio-demographic variables and underlying personality traits provide very little explanatory power in explaining differences in consumer complaining behavior (see Robinson 1979 for a review of the early studies; see also Kraft 1977; and Granbois et al. 1977). Therefore, more recent CCB research has focused on situational and

interpersonal variables. Two situational variables that have been found to be important determinants of complaining behavior are the perceived likelihood of success (see Day and Landon 1976; Granbois et al. 1977; Richins 1983a, 1985, 1987; Singh 1990), and product importance (Richins 1985; Singh 1990). One interpersonal variable that also has been found to be a significant predictor of complaining behavior is attitude toward complaining (Richins 1980, 1982; Bearden and Mason 1984). Not only do these variables explain a significant portion of the variance of complaining behavior, they are also consistent with Hirschman's (1970) theory of exit, voice and loyalty. Moreover, these variables help explain which *types* of complaining behavior are undertaken by various consumers. Because one of the main objectives of CCB research is to determine which type of complaining behavior(s) will be undertaken, and why, these three variables will each be discussed in detail.

**Product Importance.** Hirschman (1970) first posited that consumers would be more likely to voice their complaints (i.e. complain to the seller) when dissatisfied with an "important" product. Indeed, the empirical evidence amassed thus far certainly indicates that product importance is a significant determinant of complaining behavior (see Day and Bodur 1977; Day and Ash 1979; Kraft 1977; Granbois et al. 1977; Richins 1985; Singh 1990).

Moreover, the concept of product importance helps to explain why dissatisfaction has historically been found to explain only a small percentage of the variance of complaining behavior (again, Bearden and Teel [1983] found dissatisfaction to explain only 15% of the variance of complaining behavior). That is, given dissatisfaction, the decision to seek redress is dependent upon whether the product is "important" enough to warrant the time and emotional energy that it takes to complain to the retailer. In other words, product importance interacts with dissatisfaction in providing the *motivation* to complain. A consumer who is dissatisfied with a relatively unimportant product will be less motivated to ask for a refund or an exchange, while a consumer who is dissatisfied with a more important product will be highly motivated to complain. Although the relative level

of dissatisfaction could be the same in both situations, it is more likely that the latter consumer would complain to the retailer. Based on this line of reasoning, product importance is conceptualized as a moderator of dissatisfaction. These two factors together thus provide the motivation to complain. (Please note that this conceptualization differs from previous studies which model product importance as a direct determinant of complaining behavior [e.g. Richins 1985; Singh 1990]).

**Likelihood of Success.** The likelihood of success construct refers to the perceived probability that the retailer will remedy the problem without protest. Some retailers have a reputation for remedying any and all customer complaints, while other retailers are perceived as being less willing to provide redress. Hirschman (1970) first posited that voice (redress seeking) is dependent upon the perceived probability that the complaint will be successful. Since then several authors have found the likelihood of success construct to be one of the more important determinants of complaining behavior. For example, in the Granbois et al. (1977) study, 77% of those people who felt that the retailer was willing to remedy the problem complained to the retailer, compared to only 25% of those people who felt that the retailer would not remedy the problem. In her studies, Richins (1983a, 1985, 1987) has consistently found the likelihood of success construct to have a significant effect on redress seeking behavior. More importantly, the likelihood of success construct helps explain why some consumers seek redress while other silently exit and/or engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior. For example, Singh (1990) found that those people who perceived the probability of success to be high were more likely to voice their complaints, while people who perceived the probability of success to be low were more likely to exit and/or to engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior.

In the proposed framework, we posit that dissatisfied consumers who perceive that the retailer will refuse to remedy the problem, and hence *do not* seek redress, will be more likely to exit and/or to engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior. Consumers who perceive that the retailer *will* remedy the problem, and hence *do*

seek redress, will be less likely to exit and/or engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior at this time. For these consumers, exit and negative word-of-mouth behavior are dependent upon the outcome of the redress seeking episode.

**Attitude Toward Complaining.** Attitude toward complaining refers to an individual's predisposition toward seeking redress. Some people are very assertive and will seek redress whenever they are dissatisfied with a product while others are reluctant to seek redress no matter how dissatisfied they are. Conceptual support for the attitude toward complaining construct is provided by Hirschman (1970), who posited that voice is partly dependent on the ability and willingness of the consumer to complain. Empirical support for this interpersonal variable comes from Richins (1980, 1982), who found a significant relationship between attitude toward complaining and intention to complain. However, as in attitude research in general, the relationship between attitude toward complaining and actual complaining behavior was weak. Bearden and Mason (1984) did find, though, that those consumers who sought redress had more favorable attitudes toward complaining. In addition, Richins (1983b, 1987) found a similar variable -- consumer assertiveness -- to be a significant, positive correlate of redress seeking behavior.

Like the likelihood of success construct, attitude toward complaining is valuable in explaining which type of complaining behavior will be undertaken by different individuals. The empirical evidence just discussed indicates that consumers who have a favorable attitude toward complaining will be more likely to seek redress from the retailer. In addition, we posit that consumers who are averse to seeking redress will instead just silently exit and/or engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior.

#### **INTERVENING VARIABLE: PERCEIVED JUSTICE**

Although it is intuitively obvious that the manner in which the retailer responds to the complaint will largely determine whether that consumer subsequently engages in negative word-of-mouth behavior, exits, and/or files a third party

complaint, recent models of complaining behavior (e.g. Richins 1983a, 1987; Singh 1990) fail to take into account this interaction between the retailer and the consumer. It is important to focus on the interaction between the retailer and the consumer because many dissatisfied consumers -- i.e. those who have a favorable attitude toward complaining and who feel that the retailer will remedy the problem -- will first take their complaints to the retailer. At this point these consumers are unlikely to engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior and/or to exit. For these consumers, negative word-of-mouth, exit, and third party complaints are dependent upon their level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the outcome of the redress seeking episode. If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome he/she will *then* be more likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior, to exit, and/or to file a third party complaint. This hypothesis is supported by a TARP (1981) report which showed that consumers who are dissatisfied with the retailer's response engage in twice as much negative word-of-mouth as do consumers who are satisfied with the retailer's response, and by Gilly and Gelb (1982), who found that consumers' level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the retailer's response greatly affected their repatronage intentions.

We agree with Robinson (1979), who stated that complaining behavior should be viewed as a process. As just pointed out, the process of complaining behavior varies across different individuals. There are those individuals who do not seek redress but instead just silently exit and/or engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior, and there is another group of individuals who do not exit and/or engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior unless they are dissatisfied with the retailer's response to their complaint. Without this "intervening" satisfaction/dissatisfaction variable (i.e. perceived justice) we cannot distinguish between these two groups of consumers. By including the perceived justice variable, however, we gain greater insight into *why*, and *when*, consumers undertake the various types of complaining behaviors. And, by understanding more about the causes of the different types of complaining behaviors, retailers will be better able to develop specific marketing programs and/or complaint handling procedures to better serve the

needs of their customers.

### Distributive and Procedural Justice

Building upon the foundations of equity theory (Adams 1965), the literature in social psychology and organizational behavior suggests that individuals perceive the fairness of a situation, or decision, based on two criteria: *distributive justice* (Homans 1961), and *procedural justice* (Thibaut and Walker 1975; Lind and Tyler 1988). Briefly, distributive justice refers to the perceived fairness of the actual outcome, or consequence, of a decision. For example, does the concerned party feel that a fair settlement, reward, or wage increase was received? Procedural justice refers to whether the procedures, or criteria, used in making the decision are perceived as being fair. That is, were the criteria used unbiased? Did the decision maker consider both sides of the issue? Was the concerned party given any input into the decision (Greenberg and Folger 1983)? These two forms of justice have been studied in the context of wage disputes, hiring and promotion decisions, and other labor relations disputes (for a review, see Greenberg 1982), and in various legal settings (see Thibaut and Walker 1975). Basically, this research has shown that even if concerned parties do not receive the outcome desired, they may still be satisfied if they perceive that the procedures used in arriving at that outcome were fair. For example, if concerned parties are given the opportunity to provide input into the decision there is a greater chance that they will be satisfied, regardless of the actual outcome. As Deutsch (1975, p. 139) states that "there is much psychological research which would suggest that ... people are more apt to accept decisions and their consequences if they have participated in making them," even when the decision is not entirely favorable to them (LaTour 1978). (For a more detailed discussion of the distinction between these two types of justice, see Walker, Lind, and Thibaut 1979.)

The concepts of distributive and procedural justice appear to be equally applicable in the context of consumer complaining behavior. In this situation, distributive justice refers to the perceived fairness of the redress offered by the retailer (i.e. the amount of the refund, or exchange offered),



while procedural justice refers to the manner in which the retailer responded to the complaint (i.e. how quickly the retailer responded, whether it responded in a courteous and respectful manner, whether the consumer was given a chance to tell his/her side of the story, etc.) While it is intuitively obvious that most consumers will focus more heavily on the distributive justice element, the notion of procedural justice is intriguing. Again, the organization behavior and social psychology literature suggests that consumers may still be satisfied with the retailer's response to their complaints, even if they do not receive the remedy they requested, *if* they perceive that the retailer was fair and impartial in arriving at this decision, *if* the consumer was able to provide input into the decision, and/or *if* the retailer responded in a timely and respectful manner. Indeed, Goodwin and Ross (1990, p. 59) provide evidence that there is an interaction effect between the distributive and procedural justice components: "When the outcome of a complaint was favorable, consumers were more satisfied if they had the opportunity to express feelings and opinions." Consumers were also willing to return to the store when only a token remedy was received, *if* the procedure was perceived as being fair.

While the underlying notion of perceived justice is not new, the explicit recognition that it consists of two dimensions -- distributive and procedural -- could prove to be quite interesting and important to the CS/D&CB field. Future research might focus on the interaction between the procedural and distributive justice dimensions, thus providing further insight into the conditions under which the complainant will be willing to repatronize the retailer, and into those conditions in which the complainant will most likely engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior and/or lodge a third party complaint. Although we do not suggest that the procedural dimension will ever outweigh the distributive dimension, previous literature would suggest that the procedural justice component can mitigate the effects of the distributive component. For example, complainants who receive the remedy desired may still exit and engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior *if* they are dissatisfied with the procedures they encountered, while complainants who do not receive the remedy desired might still

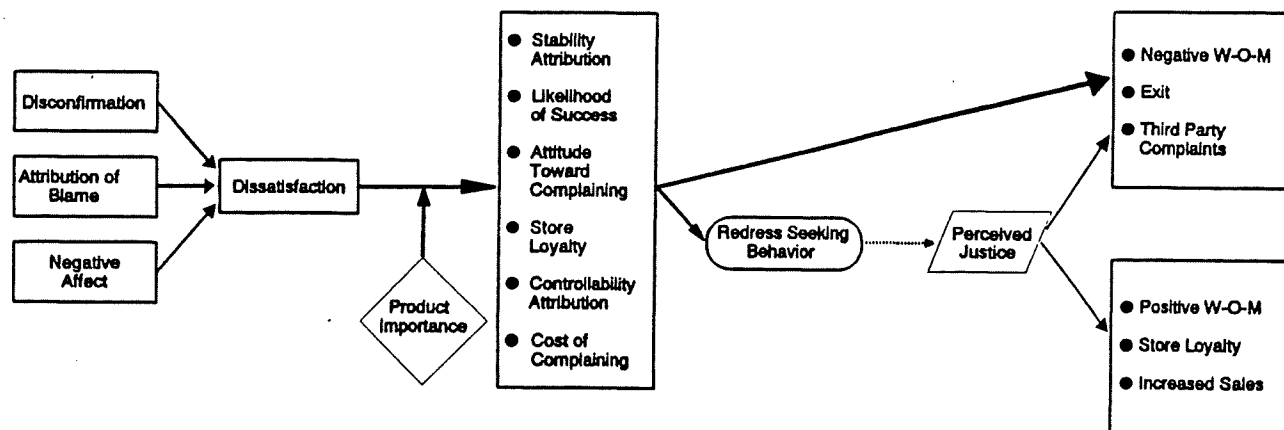
patronize the retailer *if* they are satisfied with the manner in which the retailer responded to their complaint. The distributive and procedural justice concept is quite intriguing, and can add to our knowledge of consumer complaining behavior.

#### SUMMARY: THE MODEL

Based on the work of Hirschman (1970), Bearden and Teel (1983), Day (1984), Bearden and Mason (1984), Richins (1983a, 1985, 1987) and Singh (1990), the model posits that disconfirmation, negative affect, and attribution of blame lead to dissatisfaction, which together with product importance provides the motivation to complain. Given dissatisfaction with an important product, the specific type of complaining behavior undertaken is largely dependent on the likelihood of success, one's attitude toward complaining, and one's level of store loyalty. Consumers who are averse to seeking redress, who perceive the likelihood of success to be low, and/or who are not store loyal, are more likely to exit and to engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior, while consumers who have a favorable attitude toward complaining, who perceive the likelihood of success to be high, and/or who are store loyal are more likely to seek redress. Based on Folkes' (1984a, 1984b) work, stability and controllability attributions also determine which type of complaining behavior will be undertaken. Consumers who perceive the cause to be stable and/or controllable will be more likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior and to exit. Finally, the model is based on the premise that consumers who seek redress *will not* exit and/or engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior *unless* they are dissatisfied with the retailer's response to their complaint. For these consumers negative word-of-mouth behavior, exit, and third party complaints are dependent upon their level of perceived justice. See Figure 2 for the conceptual model.

By merging these different approaches to the study of consumer complaining behavior, and by modeling complaining behavior as a complex, dynamic process, this model develops a strong theoretical framework which has been lacking in

Figure 2  
Blodgett and Granbois Conceptual Model of Consumer Complaining Behavior



previous research. The model should thus allow more precise insight into the conditions that lead to the different complaining behaviors/responses, which in turn should help retailers develop marketing programs and complaint handling procedures to better satisfy their customers.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, J. S. (1965), "Inequity in social exchange," in L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, (Vol. 2), New York: Academic Press.
- Bearden, W. O. and J. B. Mason (1984), "An Investigation of Influences on Consumer Complaint Reports," *Advances in Consumer Research*, 11, T. C. Kinnear (Ed.), Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 490-495.
- Bearden, W. O. and J. E. Teel (1983), "Selected Determinants of Consumer Satisfaction and Complaint Reports," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 20, (February), 21-28.
- Churchill, G. A. Jr., and S. Surprenant (1983), "An Investigation Into the Determinants of Customer Satisfaction," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 19, (November), 491-504.
- Day, R. L. (1984), "Modeling Choices Among Alternative Responses to Dissatisfaction," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, 11, T. C. Kinnear (Ed.), Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Consumer Research, 496-499.
- Day, R. L. and S. B. Ash (1979), "Consumer Response to Dissatisfaction with Durable Products," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, 6, W. L. Wilkie (Ed.), Miami, FL: Association for Consumer Research, 438-444.
- Day, R. L. and M. Bodur (1977), "Consumer Response to Dissatisfaction with Services and Intangibles," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, 5, H. K. Hunt (Ed.), Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Consumer Research, 263-272.
- Day, R. L., K. Grabick, T. Schaeztle, and F. Staubach (1981), "The Hidden Agenda of Consumer Complaining," *Journal of Retailing*, 57, (Fall), 86-106.
- Day, R. L. and E. L. Landon (1976), "Collecting Comprehensive Complaint Data by Survey Research," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, 3, B. B. Anderson (Ed.), Atlanta: Association for Consumer Research, 263-268.
- Deutsch, M. (1975), "Equity, Equality, and Need: What Determines Which Value Will be Used as the Basis of Distributive Justice?" *Journal of Social Issues*, 31, 137-150.
- Folkes, V. S. (1984a), "Consumer Reactions to Product Failure: An Attributional Approach," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 10, 398-409.
- Folkes, V. S. (1984b), "An Attributional Approach to Postpurchase Conflict Between Buyers and Sellers," *Advances in Consumer Research*, 11, T. C. Kinnear (Ed.), Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 500-503.
- Gilly, M. C. and B. D. Gelb (1982), "Post-Purchase Consumer Processes and the Complaining Consumer," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9, 323-328
- Goodwin, C. and I. Ross (1990), "Consumer Evaluations of Responses to Complaints: What's Fair and Why," *The Journal of Services Marketing*, 4, (Summer), 53-61.
- Granbois, D., J. O. Summers, and G. L. Frazier (1977), "Correlates of Consumer Expectation and Complaining Behavior," in *Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, R. L. Day (Ed.), Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 18-25.

- Greenberg, J. (1982), "Approaching Equity and Avoiding Inequity in Groups and Organizations," in J. Greenberg and R. L. Cohen (Eds.), *Equity and Justice in Social Behavior*, (pp. 389-435), New York: Academic Press.
- Greenberg, J. and R. Folger (1983), "Procedural Justice, Participation and the Fair Process Effect in Groups and Organizations," in P. B. Paulus (Ed.), *Basic Group Processes*, (pp. 235-256), New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Hirschman, A. O. (1970), *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty. Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States*, Harvard University Press; Cambridge: MA.
- Homans, G. C. (1961), *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World.
- Kraft, F. B. (1977), "Characteristics of Consumer Complainers and Complaint and Repatronage Behavior," in *Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, R. L. Day (Ed.), Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 79-84.
- LaBarbera, P. A. and D. Mazursky (1983), "A Longitudinal Assessment of Consumer Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction: The Dynamic Aspect of the Cognitive Process," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 20, (November), 393-404.
- LaTour, S. (1978), "Determinants of Participant and Observer Satisfaction with Adversary and Inquisitorial Modes of Adjudication," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36, 1531-1545.
- Lind, E. A. and T. R. Tyler (1988), *The Social Psychology of Procedural Justice*, New York: Plenum Press.
- Oliver, M. L. (1980), "A Cognitive Model of the Antecedents and Consequences of Satisfaction Decisions," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 17, (November), 460-469.
- Oliver, M. L. and G. Linda (1981), "Effect of Satisfaction and its Antecedents on Consumer Preference and Intention," in K. Monroe (Ed.), *Advances in Consumer Research*, 8, Association for Consumer Research, 88-93.
- Richins, M. L. (1980), "Consumer Perceptions of Costs and Benefits Associated with Complaining," in *Refining Concepts and Measures of Consumer Satisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, H. K. Hunt and R. L. Day (Eds.), Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 50-53.
- Richins, M. L. (1982), "An Investigation of Consumers' Attitudes Toward Complaining," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, 9, A. Mitchell (Ed.), St. Louis, MO: Association for Consumer Research, 502-506.
- Richins, M. L. (1983a), "Negative Word-of-Mouth by Dissatisfied Consumers: A Pilot Study," *Journal of Marketing*, 47, (Winter), 68-78.
- Richins, M. L. (1983b), "An Analysis of Consumer Interaction Styles in the Marketplace," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 10, (June), 73-82.
- Richins, M. L. (1985), "The Role of Product Importance in Complaint Initiation," in *Proceedings of the Conference on Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, R. L. Day and H. K. Hunt (Eds.), Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 50-53.
- Richins, M. L. (1987), "A Multivariate Analysis of Responses to Dissatisfaction," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 15, (Fall), 24-31.
- Robinson, L. M. (1979), "Consumer Complaint Behavior: A Review with Implications for Further Research," in *New Dimensions of Consumer Satisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, R. L. Day and H. K. Hunt (Eds.), Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 41-50.
- Rotter, J. B. (1966), "Generalized Expectancies for Internal versus External Control of Reinforcement," *Psychological Monographs*, 80, (1, Whole No. 609).
- Singh, J. (1988), "Consumer Complaint Intentions and Behavior: Definitional and Taxonomical Issues," *Journal of Marketing*, 52, (January), 93-107.
- Singh, J. (1990), "Voice, Exit, and Negative Word-of-Mouth Behaviors: An Investigation Across Three Service Categories," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 18, (Winter), 1-15.
- Technical Assistance Research Programs (1981), *Measuring the Grapevine—Consumer Response and Word-of-Mouth*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Consume Affairs.
- Thibaut, J. and L. Walker (1975), *Procedural Justice: A Psychological Analysis*, N. J. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Walker, L., E. A. Lind, and J. Thibaut (1979), "The Relation Between Procedural Justice and Distributive Justice," *Virginia Law Review*, 65, 1401-1420.
- Weiner, B. (1980), *Human Motivation*, New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Westbrook, R. A. (1987), "Product/Consumption-Based Affective Responses and Postpurchase Processes," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 24, (August), 258-270.
- Woodruff, R. B., E. R. Cadotte, and R. L. Jenkins (1983), "Modeling Consumer Satisfaction Processes Using Experience-Based Norms," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 20, (August), 296-304.

Send correspondence regarding this article to:

Jeff Blodgett  
 Department of Management and Marketing  
 School of Business  
 University of Mississippi  
 University, MS 38677