INTERACTIVE COMPLAINT COMMUNICATION: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH AGENDA

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that complaints have been consistently defined as communicated expressions of dissatisfaction, little research has explored the communication that actually occurs during complaint interactions. To address this void in the research literature, this paper introduces the concept of Interactive Complaint Communication which focuses on the communication that takes place between complaining consumers and companies' customer service representatives. This focus is especially relevant today as progressive organizations increasingly institute sophisticated communication systems that encourage consumers to voice their complaints directly to customer service representatives. Given the potential importance of Interactive Complaint Communication to both consumer satisfaction and corporate profitability, a theoretical framework is presented for analyzing this specific form of communication. This framework is based on extensive prior research in the communication discipline regarding interpersonal argument, compliance gaining, and account analysis. Relevant research findings from communication studies in these three theoretical areas are reviewed and, finally, an agenda for future Interactive Complaint Communication research is proposed.

INTRODUCTION

The following excerpt from a conversation, which took place recently between a consumer complaining about a utility service problem and one of the utility company's repair service representatives, is typical of the communication interactions that are repeated thousands of times each day in our society:

Customer (C): I thought this was going to be done today.

Representative (R): It will be. Anytime between now and 8:00 this evening.

C: Ma'am, I work. And I understood that my service call would be from 8:00 to noon today.

R: It was canceled. That last clerk canceled it.

C: Why did they cancel it?

R: I am not sure. I guess she has shown that since she was disconnected with you, that she didn't make a full commit.

C: I did make a commit. And the commitment was last week, not this week. I made an appointment, or that is what I thought, last week, last Wednesday.

R: I am not sure of that. I couldn't answer. I don't know. But I can work with you today.

C: This has killed all my day, and it is a little irritating because now we have to start over tomorrow. My biggest problem is, I won't get up until 9:00 to 10:00 tomorrow. If your man comes by at 8:00 and then I go to work, I am confined now to the house until your man comes.

R: We would be glad to work with you, but we do require a four hour appointment. I apologize for what has happened prior to today, but again, my name is Susan. I would be glad to work with you to get your problem solved, but I need a four hour increment between 8:00 in the morning and 8:00 in the evening.

In the past few decades, marketing

practitioners and academic researchers alike have become increasingly aware of the importance of investigating and understanding consumer complaints. Indeed, in the quest to understand more fully consumer complaining behavior, the academic literature has grown sufficiently voluminous to merit publication of several review articles summarizing the conceptual and empirical progress in this area (Andreasen 1988; Robinson 1979; Singh and Howell 1985).

We will demonstrate in this paper that, even though significant advances have been made in our knowledge of consumer complaints, very little attention has been devoted to understanding the role of communication in complaint interactions. As a result, even though communication interactions between complaining consumers and company service representatives are a prominent feature of our economy and culture, we understand little about the structure, dynamics, and strategic elements of this type of communication. This lack of prior research is unfortunate because, as the opening excerpt reveals, communication is the heart of any complaint interaction. When consumers wish to complain to companies, they must communicate their dissatisfaction, feelings and desires to company representatives. Similarly, progressive managers realize that their customer service personnel must listen carefully and respond appropriately to consumers' complaints in order to increase long-term consumer satisfaction and corporate profitability.

OBJECTIVES

Our primary goals are to (a) develop a theoretical framework and (b) suggest a research agenda to stimulate and guide future research regarding the role of communication in complaint interactions. In pursuit of these goals, we will coin a new term, Interactive Complaint Communication (ICC), to describe the interactive communication that occurs between complaining consumers and company customer service representatives. While other important aspects of complaint communication could potentially be addressed (e.g., negative word-of-mouth communication), we believe that the most critical communication issue, in terms of impact on consumer satisfaction and potential corporate

profitability, is the interaction that occurs directly between complaining consumers and company customer service representatives.

Therefore, to introduce the concept of ICC and develop a theoretical framework for future research, in this paper we will:

1. briefly review the existing consumer complaint literature and demonstrate that communication has received scant attention;
2. argue that communication should hold a central conceptual position in the study of complaints;
3. discuss reasons why the study of ICC is becoming increasingly important;
4. present several theoretical perspectives from the discipline of Communication Studies that may provide foundations for future ICC research; and
5. offer an agenda for future ICC research.

CONSUMER COMPLAINT LITERATURE

In our literature review, we will first briefly overview the major research categories in the full domain of consumer complaining research. Next, we will focus more extensively on those research studies that have analyzed, at least to some extent, communication issues related to consumer complaints.

Consumer Complaint Literature: An Overview

Even though the total body of consumer complaining behavior research is quite large and diverse, it can be roughly divided into three areas (antecedent conditions, procedural actions, and outcome conditions) that correspond to the stages in the "life cycle" of a complaint.

Antecedent Conditions. Many researchers have been concerned with understanding the circumstances that may eventually result in consumer complaints. At a descriptive level, some researchers have identified by product classes the types of problems that may cause consumers to complain (e.g., Andreasen and Best 1977; Ash and Quelch 1980; Grainer, McEvoy and King 1979). At a more theoretical level, other researchers have focused on the social, psychological, and economic

factors that may explain why consumers become dissatisfied and choose to complain (e.g., Bearden 1983; Folkes 1984; Richins 1980; Westbrook 1987).

Procedural Actions. Other researchers have been more concerned with the activities involved in the actual complaining process. From the consumer's perspective, many studies have analyzed the variety of actions that complaining consumers can pursue, such as seeking redress from the firm, telling friends, and boycotting the company. (e.g., Andreasen 1985; Bearden and Oliver 1985; Day and Landon 1977; Singh 1988). From an organizational perspective, other researchers have investigated how organizations do or should respond to consumer complaints (e.g., Fornell 1976; Fornell and Westbrook 1984; Gilly and Hansen 1985).

Outcome Conditions. Finally, some researchers have investigated the outcomes, both from the consumer's perspective and the organization's perspective, that the complaint process can create. From the consumer's perspective, a few studies have evaluated how organizations' complaint responses impact consumers' satisfaction levels and future consumption decisions (e.g., Diamond, Ward and Faber 1976; Gilly and Gelb 1982). And, from an organizational perspective, other researchers have suggested that effective complaint management systems can significantly enhance corporate profitability (e.g., Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987, 1988).

In total, this body of research regarding antecedent conditions, procedural actions, and outcome conditions has greatly expanded our knowledge of consumer complaining behavior. However, our concern is that very little research has focused on communication, particularly interactive communication between complaining consumers and company customer service representatives.

Most of the research in the procedural actions area, where the study of ICC should be addressed, does not directly, extensively, and theoretically analyze communication interaction. Instead, most of the procedural actions research, both from the consumer's perspective and the organization's

perspective, has concentrated on a diverse set of behaviors, many of which do not involve communication, that these two parties may engage in during the complaining process. For instance, from the consumer's perspective, Singh (1988) recently concluded after an extensive empirical investigation that consumers have three basic complaint options: voice responses, private responses, and third party responses. In summarizing his findings, Singh (1988, p. 104) stated, "The criterion for classification is based on identifying the object toward which the CCB responses are directed" (emphasis added). Thus, from this perspective, communication (i.e., what is said) is subservient to objects (i.e., to whom it is said), at least when categorizing alternative complaint options. Similarly, from the organizational perspective, the majority of research emphasis in the procedural actions area has been on the processes, only some of which are communication-related, that organizations do and/or should follow to respond better to consumer complaints (e.g., Fornell 1976; Fornell and Westbrook 1984; Gilly and Hansen 1985).

Thus, procedural actions research has basically concentrated on analyzing a rather broad array of behaviors that consumers and company representatives engage in during complaint interactions. As a result, even though communication is sometimes acknowledged to be a critical factor in these episodes (e.g., Andreasen 1985; Fornell 1976), little theoretical or empirical attention has been specifically devoted to a thorough analysis of communication in complaint interactions.

In the next section we will review those relatively few studies that have focused more specifically on understanding the role and function of communication in complaint interactions.

Prior Study of Communication in the Complaint Literature

Our goal was to identify and review those studies that had actually analyzed communication content (i.e., what is said) of complaint interactions between consumers and company customer service representatives. Our search revealed that only a comparatively few articles focused on this type of communication (Boschung

1976; Cobb, Walgren, and Hollowed 1987; Diener 1980; Dwyer and Dornoff 1981; Kendall and Russ 1975; Krapfel 1988; Krentler and Cosenza 1987; Lee 1968; Lewis 1983; Martin and Smart 1988; Pearson 1976; Resnik and Harmon 1983). To help establish a solid foundation for future ICC research, in this section we will discuss the objectives, methodologies, and findings of these studies.

Research Objectives. Regarding research objectives, these studies pursued a variety of research issues:

a) A number of studies sought to identify descriptively the content of complaint response letters, such as expressions of appreciation and compensation offers. (Boschung 1976; Cobb, Walgren, and Hollowed 1987; Kendall and Russ 1975; Lee 1968; Lewis 1983; Martin and Smart 1988; Pearson 1976) and the writing style of these letters (Martin and Smart 1988).

b) Some studies explored possible differences in companies' responses to letters of complaint versus letters of praise (Cobb, Walgren, and Hollowed 1987; Martin and Smart 1988), complaint letters written by children versus letters written by adults (Cobb, Walgren, and Hollowed 1987), nasty versus nice letters of consumer complaint (Dwyer and Dornoff 1981), and varying writing quality levels in complaint letters (Boschung 1976; Pearson 1976).

c) A number of studies sought to determine how "satisfactory" companies' response letters were to consumer complaints, either based on consumers' perceptions (Diener 1980; Krentler and Cosenza 1987; Lewis 1983; Pearson 1976) or the researchers' judgments (Kendall and Russ 1975; Lee 1968). Lewis (1983) expanded this research area further by investigating the effect of response letters on future patronage.

d) Several studies attempted to analyze evaluative aspects of complaint communication. Dwyer and Dornoff (1981) investigated consumers' evaluative perceptions of appropriate redress actions and a manufacturer's actual redress choice. Resnik and Harmon (1983) investigated possible

differences between consumers' and managers' evaluations of the legitimacy of complaint letters. Also, Krapfel (1988) analyzed retail sales employees' evaluations of verbal and nonverbal communication in complaint interactions.

Methodologies. Regarding methodological approaches, we can make the following observations:

a) Almost all studies focus on written complaint communication (i.e., letters) (Boschung 1976; Cobb, Walgren, and Hollowed 1987; Diener 1980; Dwyer and Dornoff 1981; Kendall and Russ 1975; Krentler and Cosenza 1987; Lee 1968; Lewis 1983; Martin and Smart 1988; Pearson 1976; Resnik and Harmon 1983). As an exception, Krapfel (1988) used a videotape of a simulated complaint interaction between a consumer and retail salesperson in an experimental investigation.

b) In most studies the researchers content analyzed, with varying degrees of sophistication, complaint response letters written by companies to consumers (Boschung 1976; Cobb, Walgren, and Hollowed 1987; Kendall and Russ 1975; Lee 1968; Martin and Smart 1988; Pearson 1976). In contrast, the content of consumers' complaint letters was not investigated except for Diener's (1980) inclusion of a few samples of emotional comments made in consumers' complaint letters. Also, Dwyer and Dornoff (1981) and Resnik and Harmon (1983) did use consumers' complaint letters as treatment stimuli in experimental investigations.

Research Findings. Regarding research findings from these studies, we can only draw some very tentative conclusions because of the very limited amount, and sometimes contradictory results, of empirical investigation conducted in this area of complaint communication:

a) Most complaint response letters express appreciation for receiving consumers' complaints and offer some form of compensation (Cobb, Walgren, and Hollowed

1987, Martin and Smart 1988; Pearson 1976).

b) Responses to letters of complaint versus letters of praise do not differ significantly in terms of rate of response or speed of response (Cobb, Walgren, and Hollowed 1987; Martin and Smart 1988). However, rate of response appears to be positively related to the writing quality of the complaint letter (Boschung 1976; Pearson 1976).

c) Most studies, with the exception of Diener (1980), found that the response letters were satisfactory (Kendall and Russ 1975; Lee 1968; Resnik and Harmon 1983) and helpful (Krentler and Cosenza 1987).

d) Consumers are more likely to engage in repeat purchase behavior if they believe the company's response to their complaints is satisfactory (Lewis 1983).

e) Consumers' perceptions of appropriate complaint redress action are often different from manufacturers' actual redress choice (Dwyer and Dornoff 1981).

f) In evaluating the same complaint communication, consumers are more likely than managers to perceive complaints as being legitimate (Resnik and Harmon 1983)

g) A consumer's communication interaction style and appearance can influence store employees' willingness to comply with a complaint request (Krapfel 1988).

Summary. Of the rather large body of consumer complaint research literature, relatively little is devoted to analyzing explicitly the communication aspects of complaints. Of these comparatively few studies that have focused on communication, our review reveals that there has been limited theoretical, methodological, and empirical progress thus far. For instance, few studies have been rigorously theory-driven, most studies focus on communication only by the company and not on interaction between consumers and companies, and most studies analyze letters when interactive verbal communication (i.e., telephone) is becoming increasingly popular for complaint communication.

In the next section we will address the central role we believe that communication should play in the study of complaints.

COMPLAINTS AS COMMUNICATION

Even though communication aspects of complaints have been underdeveloped in the research literature, we believe communication should be a central focus of complaints research. For instance, when researchers have taken the care to define explicitly what constitutes a complaint, the notion of communication holds a focal position. Consider, for example, the following definitions taken from the complaint literature (emphasis added):

For purposes of this analysis, a consumer complaint is defined as an action taken by an individual which involves communicating something negative regarding a product or service to either the firm manufacturing or marketing that product or service, or to some third-party organizational entity (such as the Better Business Bureau or the Federal Trade Commission). (Jacoby and Jaccard 1981, p. 6)

Consumer complaints consist of all oral (telephone and personal visit) and written expressions of dissatisfaction about the purchase of products and services in the marketplace and about government supplied services and benefits. (TARP 1985, p. 1-2)

Postpurchase complaining behavior comprises consumer-initiated communications to marketers, their channel members, or public agencies to obtain remedy or restitution for purchase-- or usage--related problems in particular market transactions. (Westbrook 1987, p. 260)

From these definitions we see that communication is at the heart of complaints. When consumers complain, they are expressing through communication their sense of dissatisfaction with their purchases. While researchers may justifiably be interested in the whole gamut of behaviors in which dissatisfied consumers may engage (e.g., boycotting, filing legal suits), we believe communication, particularly ICC, is a critical complaint behavior that deserves more attention.

In the next section, we briefly explain more fully why we believe more research should be directed toward the analysis and understanding of ICC.

IMPORTANCE OF ICC

We believe there are two major reasons why more attention should be paid to ICC. First, effective consumer complaint management is extremely important for long-term customer loyalty and concomitant corporate profitability (e.g., Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987, 1988; Fornell and Westbrook 1984; Sellers 1988). While numerous factors may affect a corporation's ability to achieve optimal levels of complaint management (e.g., product quality, competitive environment, financial resources), a corporation must communicate effectively in complaint interactions. In particular, several studies have focused specifically on the role of the consumer affairs department in corporations and concluded that the personnel in these positions must be competent communicators who can interact effectively with complaining consumers (Fornell 1976, 1978; Technical Assistance Research Program 1979, 1985, 1986).

Second, the importance of ICC is growing because of technological advances that allow consumers to communicate their complaints more directly and easily to consumer affairs personnel. Specifically, toll-free telephone numbers are being increasingly adopted by companies to allow consumers to communicate complaints more readily (Scaglione 1988; Sellers 1988; Technical Assistance Research Program 1985, 1986). In contrast to other communication modes, such as complaint letters, telephone communication interactions require that consumer affairs personnel be able to process complex information, which is often communicated by angry consumers, and quickly fashion an empathetic and equitable response.

In sum, we believe that the study of ICC is long overdue. Most companies now appreciate the financial importance of effective complaint management, and consumers now have greater direct access to companies to express their complaints. Because of these factors, and the central role that communication plays in these complaint interactions, we believe academic researchers should devote more emphasis to theoretical and empirical analysis of ICC.

However, before empirical analysis of ICC is begun, we believe it is imperative to develop a solid theoretical foundation for guiding ICC research. In the next section we review several theoretical perspectives taken primarily from the discipline of Communication Studies that we believe could form such a foundation.

COMMUNICATION THEORY FRAMEWORK FOR ICC RESEARCH

Three bodies of literature within the domain of Communication Studies seem particularly relevant for future analyses of ICC. These three areas are (a) compliance-gaining message research, (b) account analysis research, and (c) interpersonal argument research. While some aspects of these research areas may have either originated or received substantial research attention from other disciplines (e.g., social psychology, sociology, management), the focus of this review will be upon research findings from these domains that have contributed to knowledge about the practice of communication.

Each of these three areas of research is highlighted next. First, the focus and goals of each research domain are delineated. Second, a brief review of pertinent research findings from each area is offered. Finally, the potential applications of each research area to the study of ICC are explored.

Compliance-Gaining Message Research

Focus and Goals of Research. Compliance-gaining message research focuses on communicative influence, primarily in the interpersonal (dyadic) context. This theoretical perspective involves investigation of the message strategies and tactics that individuals use to win acceptance of, or compliance with, proposals. Its focus has primarily been upon the influencer, rather than the influencee or the interaction between these two individuals. As such, this perspective offers a somewhat limited one-way view of the influence process, yet it is valuable in its own right since it addresses the question of how

one goes about persuading others. We think it may be especially fruitful for the study of the content of complaining consumers' communicative strategies in the ICC context.

Relevant Research Findings. The study of compliance-gaining messages was first introduced to the field of Communication in 1977 by Miller, Boster, Roloff, and Seibold. In this initial study, Miller et al. used a taxonomy of compliance-gaining techniques developed by social psychologists, Marwell and Schmitt (1967), to study both individuals' selection of these techniques and the impact of different situations upon message technique selection. Since this initial investigation, more than 100 articles in the compliance-gaining message research domain have been published (Boster 1990).

To date, much of this research has concentrated on two foci: (a) the effect of individual perceptions of the situation on compliance-gaining message selection (e.g., Miller et al. 1977; Cody and McLaughlin 1980; Cody, Woelfel, and Jordan 1983; Cody, McLaughlin, and Schneider 1981; Roloff and Barnicott 1979), and (b) the relationship between source characteristics and strategy choice (e.g., Roloff and Barnicott 1978; DeTurck and Miller 1982; Bradac, Schneider, Hemphill, and Tardy 1980). In the first set of studies, researchers sought to determine whether differing dimensions of situations, such as levels of intimacy, dominance, or personalness, affected subjects' selection of compliance-gaining message strategies. In the second set of studies, researchers have been concerned with determining how individual difference variables, such as Machiavellianism, dogmatism, or gender, influence subjects' choice of message strategy.

Each of these two bodies of research has produced interesting findings regarding the impact of source and situational factors on individual message choice. More importantly though for the ICC research agenda, each of these sets of studies has either (a) employed a taxonomy of compliance-gaining message strategies or (b) asked subjects to generate such a taxonomy. Because findings from these investigations could potentially provide lists of compliance-gaining message strategies from which to begin investigating ICC, the results of this research are more thoroughly reviewed next.

Many compliance-gaining investigations have employed a taxonomy of strategies from which subjects select those they would be most likely to use. A typical design provides subjects with a compliance-gaining scenario and a list of potential communication messages, and asks participants to indicate how likely it is that they would use each of these messages in that particular situation. One taxonomy that has received much research attention is a list composed by Marwell and Schmitt (1967) (see Table 1). While this list provides a varied set of possible compliance-gaining techniques, it was recently criticized on several grounds (Seibold, Cantrill, and Meyers 1985). Among these criticisms, two are especially relevant here. The first of these criticisms centers

Table 1
Marwell and Schmidt's (1967)
Compliance-Gaining Strategies

1. Promise: If you comply, I will reward you.
2. Threat: If you do not comply, I will punish you.
3. Expertise (positive): If you comply, you will be rewarded because of "the nature of things."
4. Expertise (negative): If you do not comply, you will be punished because of "the nature of things."
5. Liking: Actor is friendly and helpful to get target in "good frame of mind" so that he or she will comply with request.
6. Pre-giving: Actor rewards target before requesting compliance.
7. Aversive stimulation: Actor continuously punishes target making cessation contingent on compliance.
8. Debt: You owe me compliance because of past favors.
9. Moral appeal: You are immoral if you do not comply.
10. Self-feeling (positive): You will feel better about yourself if you comply.
11. Self-feeling (negative): You will feel worse about yourself if you do not comply.
12. Altercasting (positive): A person with "good" qualities would comply.
13. Altercasting (negative): Only a person with "bad" qualities would not comply.
14. Altruism: I need your compliance very badly, so do it for me.
15. Esteem (positive): People you value will think better of you if you comply.
16. Esteem (negative): People you value will think worse of you if you do not comply.

around the fact that many of the techniques contained in the Marwell and Schmitt list are not tied to communicative influence. For example, some techniques on the Marwell and Schmitt list, such as liking, being friendly or helpful, or punishing the target, do not necessarily require communication interaction to be enacted successfully. A second criticism focuses on the idea that the techniques contained in this taxonomy are indifferent to situational differences or role relationships between actors.

In addition to these two primary concerns, researchers have also criticized the checklist method of message investigation on the grounds that (a) a checklist may inadequately represent the full range of strategic choices available to sample subjects, (b) strategies may be included that respondents will not judge as real or viable if they are unfamiliar with them when encountered on the checklist, and (c) differences among strategies preformulated by the researcher may not correspond to subjects' tactical differentiations (Seibold, Cantrill, and Meyers 1985). Finally, recent research suggests the existence of a social-desirability bias among subjects presented with a checklist of strategies, such as the Marwell and Schmidt taxonomy (Burleson, Wilson, Waltman, Goering, Ely, and Whaley 1988). Even though more work needs to be done to prove this hypothesis (Hunter 1988; Seibold 1988), it appears that subjects tend to select socially desirable alternatives from the checklist, ignoring more socially undesirable (but perhaps more realistic) alternatives.

As a means of improving upon the checklist method, other researchers in this domain have asked subjects to generate their own lists of compliance-gaining messages. In using message generation procedures, researchers provide subjects with a compliance-gaining scenario and ask them to report orally or in writing what they would say in this situation (Clark 1979; O'Keefe and Delia 1979). Because the strategies generated in these types of investigations are typically more situation-specific, findings from these studies may offer examples of strategies not contained in the more "general" checklist samples.

Taken together, results from each of these bodies of investigations may provide a point of departure for examination of ICC. Still, the results from most of these studies are based on a research design that only allows one to make inferences about compliance-gaining message behavior. Since most of these investigations employ hypothetical scenarios to generate strategies, rather than examining actual interactions, the ecological validity of these studies is questionable. As Seibold and Thomas (1988, pp. 27-8) argued:

> It would be difficult for any researcher in this area to argue that any method studied in the area is preferable to studying situated, interpersonal communicative influence between two persons. Too, in the absence of research demonstrating the relationship between any of these measures and verbal strategic interaction, it is misleading to consider current research in this area to be studies of strategy "use." Better, we think, that this genre of written or rated-strategy studies be labeled investigations of compliance-gaining strategy "choices."

Application of Research to ICC. Past research on compliance-gaining messages could be important to the study of ICC in at least two respects: (a) providing a basis for conceiving of complaints as influence transactions, and (b) offering a foundation from which message categories for content analysis could be constructed.

Initially, background reading in the compliance-gaining message research literature may help define more clearly whether complaints are (or are not) influence transactions. Dillard (1990), for example, has recently argued that individuals seeking to influence typically have one or more goals, such as gaining assistance, sharing activities, giving advice, or escalating/de-escalating the relationship. Other researchers have focused on compliance-gaining in organizations (Krone and Ludlum 1990; Kipnis, Schmidt, Swaffin-Smith, and Wilkinson 1984). Such background information could provide important differentiating characteristics as we seek to conceptualize and define complaint communication. Perhaps such past investigative efforts can provide some clues as to when an interaction is influence-based and when it is merely information-based.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, research from the compliance-gaining message domain has provided a variety of message strategies for researchers to scrutinize and critique. Perusal of the findings from these investigations could provide important information concerning the construction of coding schemes for detailed examination of ICC content, recognizing of course that it will be necessary to tailor these coding schemes (either deductively or inductively) so they apply to ICC.

Account Analysis Research

Focus and Goals of Research. Account analysis research basically focuses on the communicative strategies used by actors when they have been accused of improper behavior. As defined by Schlenker (1980, p. 136), "accounts are explanations of a predicament-creating event designed to minimize the apparent severity of the predicament." Accused actors are expected to offer accounts whenever they are alleged to have behaved improperly (Scott and Lyman 1968). In selecting an appropriate account, accused actors typically attempt to choose an account that will strategically match the requirements of the alleged offense and serve to "repair" their tarnished image. Therefore, we believe account analysis research may be quite enlightening in studying ICC, particularly as we investigate the types of responses offered by customer service representatives when they are confronted by upset consumers who believe the company has acted improperly.

Relevant Research Findings. Account analysis research has been conducted in several disciplines, including:

-Communication (e.g., Cody and McLaughlin 1985; Cupach and Metts 1986; McLaughlin, Cody, and O'Hair 1983; McLaughlin, Cody, and Rosenstein 1983);
-Sociology (e.g., Goffman 1971; Scott and Lyman 1968; Shields 1979; Sykes and Matza 1957);
-Social Psychology (e.g., Harre 1977; Schlenker 1980; Schonbach 1980);
-Business (e.g., Garrett, Bradford, Meyers,

and Becker 1989; Giacalone and Pollard 1987; Vitell and Grove 1987).

Research in these various disciplines has attempted to either (a) identify the various types of accounts offered by accused actors, or (b) analyze the determinants of the accused actor's choice of accounts. Regarding the first research area, the vast majority of accounts analysis research has attempted to identify descriptively the types of accounts offered by accused actors. Several researchers, including Cody and McLaughlin (1985), Garrett et al. (1989), Schlenker (1980), and Schonbach (1980), have synthesized this typological research and argued that an actor may choose from four basic types of accounts: Denials, Excuses, Justifications, and Concessions. The definitions in Table 2, taken from Garrett et al. (1989, p. 511), represent the latest definitional refinements of these four accounts.

Table 2
Types of Accounts

Denials: Denials are statements that deny the occurrence or existence of the questionable event, or deny that the accused organization is the cause of the event.

Excuses: Excuses are statements that argue that the accused organization should not be held responsible for the occurrence and/or impact of the questionable event because certain factors limited the organization's control over the occurrence and/or impact of this event.

Justifications: Justifications are statements that argue that, even though the accused organization is responsible for the questionable event, the standards being used by the accusers to evaluate the impact of this questionable event are inappropriate.

Concessions: Concessions are statements that agree that the questionable event did occur, that the accused organization caused this event, that the accused organization had control over the occurrence and/or impact of this event, and that the evaluative standards being used by the accusers are appropriate.

(From Garrett et al. 1989, p. 511)

Beyond simply identifying the types of available accounts, researchers have also analyzed account usage by different types of accused actors. The bulk of this research has concentrated on

accounts offered by individuals accused of improper personal behavior, such as lying, cheating, or simply holding certain opinions (e.g., Cupach and Metts 1986; McLaughlin, Cody, and Rosenstein 1983; Scott and Lyman 1968; Shields 1979). More germane to our analysis of ICC, research has begun recently to analyze accounting strategies used by organizational representatives when their organizations have been accused of unethical behavior, such as improper treatment of consumers (Garrett et al. 1989; Vitell and Grove 1987).

In addition, researchers have investigated the relative frequency with which each of the four potential accounts is used in actual communication interaction. Results of these analyses demonstrate that excuses and justifications are popular options in interpersonal contexts (McLaughlin, Cody, and O'Hair 1983; McLaughlin, Cody, and Rosenstein 1983), while justifications are the most often used account in organizational contexts (Garrett et al. 1989).

Regarding the second area of accounts research, a few researchers (McLaughlin, Cody, and O'Hair 1983; McLaughlin, Cody, and Rosenstein 1983) have recently begun to investigate the factors that may determine an accused actor's choice of a specific accounting strategy. As an important advancement over simply focusing on the type of account offered by an accused actor, these researchers have adopted a episodic perspective and argued that accounts are part of a three-stage process. According to McLaughlin, Cody, and Rosenstein (1983, p. 103-4):

> The first move in the sequence, the *reproach*, serves notice that something that the other has said or done is in some fashion wrong, different, unacceptable, foolish, arguable, incomprehensible, and, in general, *not in conformity with the way the reproacher sees things*. The *account*, as a reply to the reproach, serves to confirm, disconfirm, mitigate, mollify, exacerbate, or otherwise deal with the propositional content and/or perlocutionary force of the reproach. The *evaluation*, as a third turn, serves to honor, reject, ignore, or otherwise weigh the adequacy of the offender's account.

Application of Research to ICC. Because a complaint is generally viewed to be an expression of dissatisfaction, we believe it can be interpreted as an accusation that the producer of the questionable product (or other responsible party) has behaved improperly. As such, it is quite likely that customer service representatives, when confronted with consumers' complaints, feel compelled to offer some form of account for their organizations' allegedly improper actions.

As a beginning point in ICC research, the accounts analysis episodic perspective appears to hold considerable promise. In particular, at a descriptive level, communication interactions between complaining consumers and customer service representatives could be content analyzed to develop a typology of not only the types of accounts used by service representatives, but also the types of reproaches and evaluations made by consumers.

Beyond this descriptive typological development, theoretically oriented research in the future could begin to consider the factors that lead to a consumer's choice of a specific type of reproach and a customer service representative's choice of account. In addition, experimental research could also investigate the effect that different types of accounts have on consumers' evaluations of the competency of an organization's complaint management process.

Interpersonal Argument Research

Focus and Goals of Research. The study of interpersonal argument is a relatively recent area of inquiry within the field of Communication Studies. Although the study of argument per se has long been central to research in Communication, in the past it has typically been limited to the study of rhetorical argument or formalized debate. In the past decade however, communication scholars have begun to explore argument in other interactive situations, including small group decision-making, interpersonal (dyadic) encounters, intimate relationships, and organizational discourse, among other arenas (e.g., Jackson and Jacobs 1980, 1981; Meyers 1989a, 1989b; Meyers, Seibold, and Brashers 1991; O'Keefe and Benoit 1982; Trapp 1983).

Interpersonal argument is typically conceived

as reasoned, disagreement-relevant discourse that occurs in the dyadic or small group encounter (Jacobs and Jackson 1981, 1982; Meyers and Seibold 1990; O'Keefe and Benoit 1982; Trapp 1986). The focus and goals of researchers in this area are both theoretical and descriptive. Theory development is progressing on several fronts, including a cognitive theory of interpersonal argument (Hample 1981, 1985), a cognitive-developmental theory (Burleson 1979, 1981), a constructivist/interactionist theory (Willard 1976, 1979), a discourse analytic view (Jacobs and Jackson 1981, 1982; Jackson and Jacobs 1980, 1981), and a structurational perspective (Meyers and Seibold 1990; Seibold and Meyers 1986). In addition, several researchers have begun to develop methods for descriptively analyzing interpersonal argument, including content analysis schemes and discourse analytic procedures (Canary, Brossman, and Seibold 1987; Canary, Ratledge, and Seibold 1982; Meyers et al. 1991; Seibold, Canary, and Ratledge 1983). Although the study of interpersonal argument is still very much in its infancy, we think research conducted to date may provide a strong foundation upon which to fashion future analyses of ICC.

Relevant Research Findings. Two separate investigative foci have emerged in the study of interpersonal argument. The first set of studies is concerned with input factors that affect subsequent argumentative interactions. Especially prominent in this set of investigations is work by Infante and colleagues which examines the trait of argumentativeness and its effect on individuals' propensity to argue (Infante 1981, 1982; Infante and Rancer 1982). A second set of investigations in this same vein has been conducted by Hample and Dallinger (1985, 1987) which examine individuals' cognitive editing practices prior to arguing. These studies suggest that individual characteristics and cognitive processing abilities can have an important impact on (a) whether individuals choose to engage in argument and (b) what strategies they perceive as viable argument tactics.

Perhaps more relevant to the investigation of ICC, however, are studies which have focused on understanding the process of argument as it occurs in actual interaction. One line of research that

seems particularly pertinent is work by Canary and colleagues (Canary 1990; Canary, Brossman, Sillars, and LoVette 1987; Canary and Weger 1989). Over the past decade, they have published a series of investigations that examine argumentative interactions between intimate (dating or married) couples. Their work has focused upon development of a coding scheme, examination of actual interactions utilizing that coding scheme, and analysis of that data via sequential interaction techniques. Results from their research has shown

Table 3
Conversational Argument Coding Scheme

Arguables
1. Assertion: statements of belief or opinion.
2. Proposition: statements that call for discussion or action.
3. Elaboration: statements that support other statements by providing evidence or clarification.
4. Amplification: explicit inferential statements.
5. Justification: statements that offer norms, values, or rules of logic to support the validity of other statements.

Convergence Markers
6. Agreement: statements that indicate agreement.
7. Acknowledgement: messages that indicate recognition and/or understanding of, but not agreement to, another point.

Promptors
8. Objection: statements that deny the truth or accuracy of another statement.
9. Challenge: messages that present a problem, question, or reservation that must be addressed to reach agreement.
10. Response: statements that defend other statements that are met with objection or challenge.

Delimitors
11. Frame: messages that provide a context for and/or qualification of another statement.
12. Forestall/ Secure: statements that attempt to forestall discussion by securing common ground.
13. Forestall/ Remove: statements that attempt to forestall discussion by not allowing something to be discussed.

Non-Arguables
14. Non-argument: statements with no argumentative function.

(From Canary 1990, p. 80)

consistently that differences exist between satisfied and unsatisfied couples' patterns of argument.

The coding scheme they have developed (see Table 3) might provide an important touchstone for future analysis of ICC as argumentative discourse.

Application of Research to ICC. Past research findings and theoretical writings on interpersonal argument could benefit the study of ICC in at least two ways. First, this body of literature would be helpful in distinguishing if complaining interaction is fundamentally argumentative discourse. If conceived as argumentative (which seems, on the surface, to be an intuitively reasonable assessment), then, second, this literature can provide methods and procedures for the study of these interactions on those grounds.

In terms of the first task, much past research has focused on distinguishing argumentative from nonargumentative interaction. Although much work still remains to be done in this area, two characteristics of argumentative discourse that consistently emerge in the literature are: (a) argument is disagreement-based, and (b) argument is reason-governed discourse. Such definitional guideposts may provide important foundational features upon which to fashion a conception of ICC as argument.

In terms of the second task, researchers in the interpersonal argument domain are continuing to develop coding schemes and procedures for analysis of argument practices. The Canary (1990) coding scheme, for example, is based on features of three prominent theoretical perspectives on argument: Toulmin (1958), Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), and Jackson and Jacobs (1980). This coding scheme has been employed in analysis of both interpersonal and small group argument (Canary et al. 1987; Canary, Brossmann, and Seibold 1987; Canary and Weger 1989; Meyers et al. 1991). While critics still question whether the scheme is too complex for coders to perform reliably (Meyers et al. 1991; Ratledge 1986), it provides a thorough, theoretically-grounded analytic scheme from which other more specific and less complex schemes could be constructed.

Summary. While each of these three

theoretical perspectives (compliance-gaining, account analysis, and interpersonal argument) has a unique research focus, we believe that as a total package they may potentially offer a robust theoretical framework upon which future ICC research may be based. Our optimism is founded on several grounds. First, each of these perspectives is primarily concerned with communication (i.e., what is actually said), not just on examining cognitive processes of potential communicators. Second, each perspective has received substantial theoretical and empirical development with comparatively promising results. Finally, the process of customizing each of these perspectives so that they are more directly applicable to the unique characteristics of ICC does not appear, at least on the surface, to be an unreasonable task. Thus, while the investigation of ICC is in its infancy and much theoretical groundwork must still be done, we believe these three perspectives offer a solid theoretical foundation to begin this process.

In the next section we discuss more specifically an ICC research agenda based on these three theoretical perspectives.

ICC RESEARCH AGENDA

As researchers pursue ICC research, we believe five major areas must be considered in this research agenda: (1) Identifying Complaint Communication, (2) Classifying ICC Communication, (3) Heterogeneity of ICC, (4) ICC as an Interactive Process, and (5) Analysis of Verbal ICC Interaction. In this section we will discuss each of these areas.

Identifying Complaint Communication

A fundamental issue that appears to have been largely ignored in previous consumer complaining literature is the identification of the communication characteristics of complaints. Instead of focusing on the existence of a mental state of dissatisfaction as a surrogate or antecedent measure of a complaint, we must define the basic characteristics of a complaint using communication, not psychological, phenomena. If we accept that a complaint is a communicated expression of dissatisfaction, we need to identify more precisely

this form of communication. To suggest the potential complexity in this endeavor, consider the following simple example. If a consumer calls a toll-free consumer affairs number at a company and tells the service representative, "My product that I bought from your company is broken," is this a complaint? Perhaps this statement is indeed a communicated expression of dissatisfaction (i.e., a complaint), but it could also be simply the reporting of a problem that does not necessarily cause any consumer dissatisfaction. If so, how do we distinguish between complaints, reports of problems, and other communication that consumers may engage in with company service representatives, such as requests for product information and suggestions for future product improvements. Therefore, if we desire to focus more extensively on the pivotal role of communication in complaint interactions, we must first identify the specific and various definitional characteristics of a complaint so that we can isolate complaints from other communication phenomena.

Classifying ICC Communication

After we clarify the definitional characteristics of complaints based on communication criteria, we must begin to understand the types of communication contained in ICC. Each of the three perspectives (compliance-gaining, account analysis, and interpersonal argument) in our suggested theoretical framework addresses communication from a somewhat different angle. Therefore, while each of these perspectives suggests promising ways in which ICC may be viewed, we must begin to develop a hybrid conception of the communication actually contained in ICC. We must determine if and to what extent ICC can be viewed as compliance-gaining, account analysis, or interpersonal argument communication. Developing this conception of ICC, perhaps even based on other theoretical perspectives not discussed in this paper, promises to be a significant challenge. To begin this process, we suggest that the category systems from each of these three perspectives (as shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3) could be applied to samples of transcribed complaint interactions between consumers and company service representatives. This content

analysis research could indicate the relative effectiveness of these three theoretical perspectives and their corresponding category systems for analysis of ICC.

Heterogeneity of ICC

Even though the study of ICC is in its infancy, we should recognize that complaint communication is likely to be extremely heterogeneous. For example, the communication contained in ICC will undoubtedly vary based on a multitude of factors such as the magnitude of the consumer's dissatisfaction, the personality of the complaining consumer, the consumer's past experience with complaining in general and with this company in particular, the attitudes of the company's management toward consumer complaints, and the personal skills of the company's service representatives. Thus, our task is exceedingly difficult because, in the face of this complex heterogeneity, we must endeavor to identify the core characteristics of ICC as the foundation for a workable and parsimonious theory of ICC that is both theoretically elegant and practically useful.

ICC As an Interactive Process

As we strive to define the fundamental nature of ICC, an important theoretical issue which must not be ignored is that this communication should be viewed as an interactive process. In other words, ICC probably involves several fairly predictable and discrete stages through which complaining consumers and customer service representatives progress. Just as account analysis researchers have found the three stages of reproach, account, and evaluation, so too are ICC researchers likely to find that ICC involves a fairly distinct process. Of course, beyond identifying a standard process model of ICC, we will eventually also need to understand how this standard model is modified in response to various factors, such as the nature of the complaint and characteristics of the interactants. In addition, ICC should be viewed as interactive communication. Theoretical perspectives that analyze communication myopically from a one-party focus, rather than as interaction between two or more parties, may be only marginally helpful. Instead, as we begin ICC

research, we must concentrate on ICC as an interaction between consumers and customer service representatives in which the communication of each party acts to shape and influence the subsequent communicative responses from the other party.

Analysis of Verbal ICC Interaction

Finally, as we noted earlier, almost all prior complaint communication research has focused on written correspondence by either complaining consumers or company representatives. However, as we also noted earlier, modern technology now increasingly allows consumers to press their complaints verbally through toll-free telephone communication. Therefore, we believe that future research should concentrate more on this latter form of ICC. While we advocate more analysis of verbal ICC, such as telephone or even face-to-face complaints, we recognize the methodological costs involved in this approach. The first major hurdle is the significant cost involved in transcribing audio or video tape recordings of telephone or face-to-face complaint interactions for subsequent analysis. The second "cost" that must be considered is an ethical factor. Specifically, is it ethical and permissible to tape record and analyze complaint interactions without the express consent of the interactants?

Summary

Because ICC research is in its infancy, our research agenda sets relatively broad objectives. As future ICC research is successfully completed, perhaps we can move relatively quickly to develop more detailed research questions, elaborate theoretical frameworks, and specialized methodologies.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we pursued an ambitious goal by, first, asserting that ICC is an important but underdeveloped research concept in the complaining behavior literature, and, second, presenting a theoretical framework and research agenda for filling this vacuum. We do not expect that this paper will set the definitive agenda for all

future ICC research. Rather, our more modest hope is that this paper will perhaps stimulate other complaint behavior researchers to respond to our suggestions and lend their recommendations concerning appropriate theoretical and methodological approaches for analyzing ICC.

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