



Complex service recovery processes: how to avoid triple deviation

Complex
service recovery
processes

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Abstract

Purpose – This article seeks to develop a new framework to outline factors that influence the resolution of unfavourable service experiences as a result of double deviation. The focus is on understanding and managing complex service recovery processes.

Design/methodology/approach – An inductive, explorative and narrative approach was selected. Data were collected in the form of narratives from the field through interviews with actors at various levels in organisations as well as with customers in a high-touch service industry. The data form the analysis of double and triple deviation situations and complex service recovery processes.

Findings – The study identifies four factors that influence complex service recovery processes and outcomes in double deviation situations: communication, competence, time, and service system. The resulting theoretical conceptualisation of the recovery process from the customer's perspective emphasises customer perceived control, sense of coherence, and meaning. Together, these factors shape customers' perception of complex service recovery experiences.

Research limitations/implications – The empirical study is limited to the context of restaurant services. However, the findings might generalise analytically to other labour-intensive, high-touch services that rely on face-to-face interactions between customers and the service employees in triple deviation situations.

Practical implications – The different roles in a complex service recovery process must be managed constantly and in light of actors' resource integration in double deviation situations, as part of value co-creation. Service organisations should develop a shared understanding of what factors result in favourable complex service recovery processes, to avoid triple deviations.

Originality/value – The paper offers extended understanding of complex service recovery processes through a new, empirically grounded conceptualisation of double service recovery to avoid a triple deviation.

Keywords Complex service recovery, Double and triple deviation, Multiple actors, Customer experience, Narratives, Customer services quality

Paper type Research paper



1. Introduction

Many customers have had an unfavourable service experience and most often experienced a poor recovery process leading to disaster that worsens the situation even further. That is, the service process has gone wrong a second time. Determining why

and how service companies can avoid unfavourable situations, here labelled double deviation, has been a predominant focus in service research for the past 30 years (see, e.g. Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002a,b; Tax and Brown, 1998; Maxham, 2001; Hess *et al.*, 2003; Smith *et al.*, 1999; Tronvoll, 2007). Despite this wealth of research, though, we know little about the conditions and factors that shape favourable and unfavourable service recovery processes, especially for complex service recoveries.

Service recovery first appeared in service quality literature as a means to describe and understand how service companies could manage customers' complaining behaviour (Grönroos, 2007; Bell and Zemke, 1987), using proactive efforts that would guarantee favourable service experiences (Grönroos, 2007). According to Tax and Brown (2000, p. 272), service recovery is a "process that identifies service failure, effectively resolves customer problems, classifies their root causes and yields data that can be integrated with other measures of performance to assess and improve the service system". Berry and Parasuraman (1991) assert that a service company always has a second chance, even after an initial unfavourable service experience, because recovery activities such as apologies, explanations, substitutions, or compensation can save the relationship and arrest negative word of mouth. More recent descriptions of the service recovery process are more complex. For example, whereas Tax and Brown (2000) focus on customer recovery, Michel and colleagues (2009, p. 267) extend the service recovery notion to "the integrative actions a company takes to re-establish customer satisfaction and loyalty after a service failure (customer recovery), to ensure that failure incidents encourage learning and process improvement (process recovery) and to train and reward employees for this purpose (employee recovery)".

Yet most practical attempts at service recovery reinforce the unfavourable service experience (Hart *et al.*, 1990) and fail. If customers experience an unsuccessful service recovery, they suffer a double deviation (Bitner *et al.*, 1990; Johnston and Fern, 1999; Mattila, 2001). That is, the customer first is disappointed with the process or outcome of a co-created service, and then the same customer becomes distressed by the service company's efforts at service recovery (Tax and Brown, 2000). We use Bitner and colleagues' (1990, p. 80) definition of a double deviation "as a perceived inappropriate and/or inadequate response to a service failure in the service delivery system". However, if the customer can be recovered a second time, after the same unfavourable service experience, it represents a double service recovery, whereas a failure of this outcome or process constitutes a triple deviation. The concepts of double service recovery and triple deviation thus extend the well-known concepts of service recovery and double deviation.

Because customers seldom are pleased with service recoveries (Rust *et al.*, 1992), double deviations are frequent, often caused by the same factors that initiated the first failure. Therefore, it is important to identify and study the root causes of a double deviation; as Casado-Diaz and colleagues (2007) note, service management literature rarely considers the effects of doing things wrong a second time. We address this knowledge gap by investigating responses to a customer's further complaint(s), after a double deviation, as well as how service providers respond to recover the customer using specific resources within a focal service system. Service recovery may involve multiple actors at different management levels; as the number of these service actors increases, the double service recovery process likely creates unique modes. We

therefore compare how different responses relate to successful and unsuccessful (triple deviation) outcomes.

The aim of this paper is to develop a new framework of factors that influence the resolution of unfavourable service experiences during service recovery processes. Accordingly, we provide an extended empirical understanding and theoretical conceptualisation of complex service recovery processes, based on an empirical study of double service recovery and triple deviation. In the next section, we present the theoretical foundation of our study, followed by a discussion of the applied method, empirical material, and interpretations. Finally, we outline our empirical and theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical framing

Feedback from customers provides critical input to companies (Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002a,b; Fornell and Wernefelt, 1987; Tax *et al.*, 1998; Voorhees *et al.*, 2006). Service companies in particular must understand the logic of customer feedback and complaining behaviour, as well as how to facilitate any necessary recovery process. A successful service recovery can significantly enhance the company's financial performance. It also offers an opportunity to educate customers, strengthen loyalty, and evoke positive word of mouth (Shields, 2006; Blodgett and Anderson, 2000; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990).

Successful companies often even encourage their dissatisfied customers to complain (Tax *et al.*, 1998). The more complaints the company receives, the more likely it is to recover those customers. However, recovery demands that the company learn from and not repeat the same mistake. Therefore, customer feedback may prompt redesigns of service systems, including the roles and responsibilities of actors, their routines, and training. If successful, service recovery can generate returns of 30-150 per cent on the investment in the process (Brown, 2000). Because the key objective of a service recovery process is to win back customers who might otherwise take their business elsewhere (Griffin and Lowenstein, 2001), an appropriate service recovery system should solve customers' problems while also ensuring their satisfaction with the recovery process, including complaint processing, response speed, and staff competence (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2007).

All actors in the service recovery process (e.g. service employees, managers, customers) may contribute with their knowledge and skills, as well as time, effort, or other resources, to the value co-creation process. Although customers are not employed by the service company, they should be considered part of the service system – “partial employees” or “part-time employees” (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003; Mills and Morris, 1986). If the service company and the customer thus integrate their resources in the service recovery process (Vargo and Lusch, 2006), then customers represent co-creators of value.

Furthermore, Wirtz and Tomlin (2000) and Tax and Brown (2000) indicate that most customer feedback occurs in face-to-face service encounters, which underscores the importance of front-line employees in service recoveries. However, these employees usually confront strict limitations of what they can do to recover customers; they must follow orders from their superiors and stick to a service blueprint, which gives them little control over the recovery situation. Their efforts at recovery thus rarely please

customers. Moreover, service employees often sit on the bottom rung of the organisational ladder, whereas customers exert great control over the service company, in the sense that they are free to switch to another service company or communicate negative word of mouth (Chung and Schneider, 2002). Especially in a recovery failure, the restricted power of front-line employees highlights the benefits of viewing service recovery as a many-to-many rather than a one-to-one relationship; that is, multiple actors and resources in the service system should be involved in mitigating unfavourable customer service experiences.

Aldrich and Herker (1977) also describe these front-line employees as information processors. Because they function at the customer interface, they are in a position to sense, evaluate, classify, and spread critical information they gain from interacting with customers. Thus service employees can act as gatekeepers who store information they gain, or they might be facilitators who channel the information to the organisation and suggest recovery-based improvements. Plymire (1990) argues that at the individual level, employees tend to personalise negative feedback and regard it as a personal attack, so they prefer to avoid such issues. Negative feedback and complaints seem unpleasant or threatening, because they symbolise customer problems and may induce negative consequences for employees (Homburg and Fürst, 2007). Furthermore, customers may feel justified in taking their complaints to upper hierarchical layers of an organisation, even if the recovery process is already taking place at the front-line interface. Accordingly, customers construct the situation, and the recovery process should be based on their perceptions of control, coherence, and meaning (Antonovsky, 1979), though social structures and the social context also shape the service recovery process (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2011; Giddens, 1984).

In contrast, existing conceptualisations of complex service recovery tend to focus on how companies can recover the customer, sometimes including the necessary actions after an unsuccessful recovery, as we show in Figure 1. To extend our understanding of complex service recovery, we propose the need to investigate the service recovery process after a double deviation, when customers may voice additional complaints and put special pressure on the company, often employees in the front-line. In these cases, not only the front-lines' pre-planned actions are enough but also managerial employees become involved in enabling and resolving additional deviations. If the double service recovery is unsuccessful, it leads to a triple deviation and may be customer switching. The customer in these complex service recovery processes in Figure 1 may exit at any stage; many customers do so at some stage of the recovery process.

To develop a new framework of the factors that influence the resolution of unfavourable service experiences with multiple, complex recovery processes, we undertake an inductive analysis to define empirically anchored service recovery factors. That is, prior service research literature includes factors that result in or explain customer complaints but not recovery processes with favourable or unfavourable outcomes or what prompts them.

3. Research design and methodology

3.1 Background

This research is based on an explorative, inductive multi-case study of double service recovery processes in the restaurant context. Restaurants provide an appropriate context for this empirical study because they provide high-touch, face-to-face service

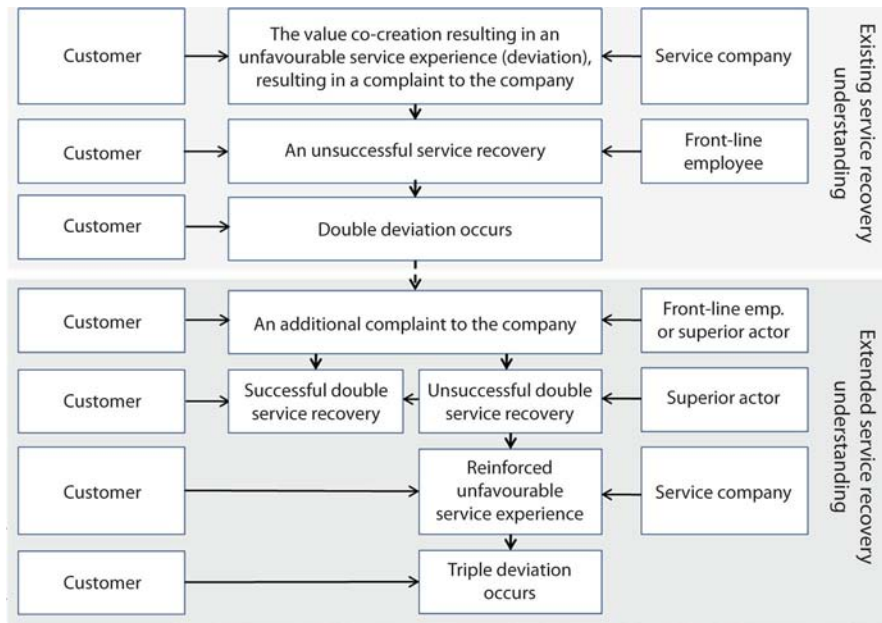


Figure 1.
A complex service recovery process

encounters. The strategic sampling of informants included interviews with customers, employees, and managers. All employee informants had several years' experience working in different restaurants, and the customer informants were frequent diners in restaurants. A total of 32 informants participated in the empirical study and provided qualitative data as narratives about double service recovery processes.

3.2 Data collection

The empirical study was based on conversational interviews with informants (Riessman, 2008), which represent narratives from the field (Czarniawska, 2004). From these interviews, we collected vivid descriptions of service experiences and recoveries. According to Pentland (1999), storytelling is an appropriate method for collecting data about processes that involve corporate actors, because people not only tell stories but also enact them. The empirical study started inductively, and the informants determined the structures for the interviews; the researcher served merely as a facilitator. Interviewees described exactly and vividly:

- what happened;
- what caused the deviation and complaint; and
- the outcomes.

We probed their responses for detailed information that would clarify the situation and unfavourable experience, the complaint, and the recovery process.

Creating narratives requires a focus on gathering as much rich data as possible, which in turn demands a careful selection of informants and a comfortable interaction between the researcher and the informant (Riessman, 2008). The researcher's task

therefore is to elicit stories, co-created with the informants. The traditional subject-interpreting-object split therefore approaches intersubjectivity in narrative conversations. Riessman (2008, p. 24) also defines narrative interviewing as follows:

When a research interview is viewed as a conversation – a discourse between the speakers – a rule of everyday conversation will apply: turn-taking, relevance, and entrance and exit talk (where a speaker transitions into, and returns from the past time story world). Generating narratives requires longer turns at talk than are customary in ordinary conversations, and certainly in research interviews of survey variety.

For our data collection, we employed two phases. The first empirical study was exploratory and provided a tentative understanding of the complexity of double service recoveries. The second phase focused on creating narratives. When the number of narratives fulfilled the criteria established for saturation, we halted the interviews; the interpretation of the narratives was continuous throughout the research process.

All interviews were conducted individually and transcribed from audio recordings. The narratives also were labelled and interpreted with a structural narrative analysis (e.g. Labov, 1972; Gee, 1985). The stories usually followed a basic structure: an orientation, beginning, middle, ending, and conclusions. Therefore, we put the gathered data in the form of a structured story, so we could follow and understand the experience through chronological events and consequences. In this type of analysis, the story itself normally is the object of enquiry (Riessman, 2008), so Dorries and Haller (2001, p. 875) argue that “the researcher seeks to discover how social actors perceive reality and evaluates the respondents’ stories about their reality.” Furthermore, context is an analytical concern – the where (e.g. place) and when (e.g. time) of the story (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004).

Finally, we conducted traditional theme analyses to identify factors in the narratives. To examine the factors that emerged, we used our interpretations of selected narratives that represented a wider group of narratives in the empirical material (Riessman, 2008).

4. Presentation and interpretation of empirical material

The empirical study provided a qualitative database of 75 narratives, 19 of which referred to a double service recovery. We used structural narrative analysis to identify factors that shaped the service recovery processes, according to the narratives from the field. The narratives reflect the interviewees’ perceptions of the recovery processes and revealed four main themes that serve as explanatory factors for the outcomes:

- (1) communication;
- (2) competence;
- (3) time; and
- (4) service system.

To illustrate these factors, we selected four archetypes of double service recovery processes: two successful and two unsuccessful. The four factors behind a double deviation described below, identified in our empirical material structure our discussions of the narrative contents and the dimensions to define meaning, as described by our informants.

4.1 Successful double service recovery processes

4.1.1 Human mistakes. In a restaurant during a busy lunchtime, a waiter switched the orders of two customers. According to a supervisor informant, the waiter recovered the customer in the service encounter:

The customer was told that orders from the two customers had got mixed up and that she would not have to pay for the meal or could have another meal. The customer felt that she had been badly treated and expressed that the waiter did not care and there was no apology. However, she was not charged for the meal and even got a free dessert.

The restaurant thus believed the customer was recovered and pleased with the outcome. In contrast, the customer remained disappointed and expressed an additional complaint:

She contacted the manager directly. Apparently the interaction between the customer and the waiter caused tension. He was young, and he used casual language until he was told to talk to customers discreetly. Apparently the language the waiter used had irritated the customer . . . She wrote the same feedback directly to the restaurant supervisor and then to the owner.

The customer's additional complaint thus led to a double service recovery that proved successful, because it contributed to customer retention:

[The owner] apologised to the customer and sent a voucher . . . Well, we felt then: This cannot be true!? . . . we handled the complaint as well as every other! An apology was made. She received compensation, and has been in the restaurant many times since the incident.

In this story, the front-line supervisor was pleased with the outcome, though she wondered why the customer even made the further complaint. However, she understood that no restaurant could afford to lose a customer who might spread negative word of mouth and create the risk of losing more customers.

In terms of the four factors, the communication between the customer and the waiter suffered because of the bad attitude and language used by the waiter. The restaurant employees also lacked the necessary competence, because they did not know what to do as a team to recover the unhappy customer, nor did they exhibit sufficient empathy to avoid the double service failure after a tangible service recovery. Time also was a problem, because switching the customers' orders required the customer to wait longer for her meal. Customers often experience time constraints in restaurants, especially during lunch hours. Finally, the lack of routines or procedures in the service system for placing orders may have caused the failure, whereas the main driver of the ultimately successful outcome was the owner's willingness to provide compensation in the form of a voucher. The service recovery also encouraged learning and process improvements, in that the manager reminded the waiter not to use casual language with customers.

4.1.2 Payment system. This incident also involved a lunch in a restaurant, located in the building where the customer works. The customer had long been irritated with the payment system and finally was provoked to give feedback about it. Specifically, he did not understand why one of the restaurant service lines would not accept his e-card as payment, whereas the other service line in the same restaurant did. Moreover, the restaurant would not provide customers with cash back when they paid with their bank cards:

I told at cash desk that this system does not work and asked why they were unable to debit my bank card and give me cash . . . She just told me that no way! Nothing else . . . Some upper

hierarchical layer has told her so. This is it! This is what she has to accept and so do I . . . I would have expected that she could have given me some understandable reasons . . . I felt that she is a typical employee working at the cash register who cannot process things like this.

Although the customer did not issue an additional complaint at the time, he later did so when he ran into the supervisor of the restaurant:

The CEO had good explanations for not being able to use that e-card there in another service line. There is no possibility to combine the two different systems.

The customer thus was recovered and customer switching did not occur, because the customer was pleased with the explanation for this relatively less severe unfavourable service experience:

I do not believe that I would go to another restaurant to eat worse and more expensive food just because of the payment system . . . And then, they had a questionnaire there, a formula where you tick the boxes, and tell them all kind of things.

In this narrative, the customer perceived inconvenience, which was not serious. He therefore was willing to listen to an explanation of the restaurant's practices. However, he perceived that the front-line employee was just taking orders from supervisors and passing them on to the customer.

Accordingly, the communication between the customer and front-line employee suffered from the employee's failure to explain why the cards were not accepted. This failure reflects the employee's lack of competence – in terms of knowledge, skill, and attitude – to resolve the problem, such as by learning the reason for the practice and explaining it or taking the initiative to forward the customer's question to the CEO. In contrast, the CEO had the competence to recover the customer by providing a professional and complete explanation. Here again, time seemed to be an important factor, because the customer expected an immediate explanation, which he did not receive. Finally, the service system that did not allow customers to use e-cards everywhere resulted in a disappointed customer. Although the CEO recovered the customer, the system was not changed.

4.2 Unsuccessful double service recovery processes

4.2.1 Dissatisfaction with the core service. A young female customer, who told this story, was dining out one evening with her female friends. They decided to start the evening with a good dinner and thus ordered steaks. The unfavourable experience surrounded the preparation of the steaks; two members of the group perceived that their steaks did not conform to their orders. The customer provided feedback to the nearest waitress:

The waitress first told us that the chef is unable to handle different degrees of "doneness". We told her that the chef usually manages this task quite well. Then, we told her that we cannot eat these steaks and she took them away with a toss of her head. It took some time and meanwhile the others had already finished their meals . . . The same steak was fried a second time and the peppers were burned on its surface . . . Then we started to complain that she [a friend] cannot eat the steak. There was some discussion, and then we asked for her superior. She told us that she was the front stage supervisor that evening. Then, she disappeared and left us there.

The front-line employee's service recovery effort – cooking the steak more – did not please the customer, leading to a double deviation. The customer perceived that this front-line employee should co-operate with the backroom employees and the supervisor:

She would not have needed to offend; we did not complain about her, but about the steaks. She should have thought how she could handle the complaint! Well yes, she could pass it [the complaint] on to the kitchen. She could have handled the complaint ... It was the same waitress who asked us about the doneness. It was strange!!? ... I don't know the relationship between the waitress and the chef. I don't know whether it is her job to tell the management that once again there was a group of customers that did not get the kind of meals they ordered ... Somehow we felt that she was not at all trained for encounters like this: what to do if the customer complains. It's a real simple situation to handle!!

The perceived double deviation led to an additional complaint, aimed at a superior actor. The customer's additional complaint then led to a double service recovery that again failed to please the customer and thus created a triple deviation:

I called the restaurant supervisor the following day ... We discussed [the matter] and he asked me questions, and afterwards it [the discussion] went on smoothly, after all ... I told the supervisor that apparently there have been discussions about us ... Then, I told him the whole story. We, two customers, whose restaurant encounter failed totally, we did not pay anything. He told me that he did understand and there was no need for us to pay. After the incident none of us went back to that restaurant. The reason why none of us ever went back was based on my discussion with the restaurant supervisor. The single incident was handled. But he [the supervisor] did not admit that the incident was due to the way they had acted there. It was as if the incident had just been swept under the carpet. If he had only told me that now there is a need for training on how to handle complaints there. But there was no discussion about that. He did not explain how they would go on after the incident ... If the chef just refries the same steak, there is something wrong with the way they proceed there in the kitchen. Then, the same waitress is probably still working there. This incident was handled ok but then, nothing convinced us that the same incident could not reoccur in the future.

This customer clearly highlighted the meaning of the first service recovery, which left her and her friends angry. That is, the double service recovery failed, and a triple deviation occurred. Moreover, the unfavourable service experience was caused by a series of incidents, and the customer perceived that the restaurant's policies were the ultimate cause of the problem. Because the customer did not believe the effort to respond to the unfavourable service experience would result in learning and process improvement, she found it insufficient (Michel *et al.*, 2009). Wirtz and Mattila (2004) similarly found that offering compensation cannot make up for a poor recovery effort; rather, in the absence of compensation, recovery speed interacts with apology to affect post-recovery satisfaction. Their results indicate that an apology is highly effective when combined with an immediate recovery, whereas a delayed apology, as occurred in this narrative, is less powerful.

The communication throughout this narrative created issues. Discussion of the degree of doneness was unclear, and the waitress exhibited a bad attitude and a lack of social interaction with the customers. The company's internal communication, between the front-line servers and back-stage kitchen, also was neither successful nor customer-centric. Thus, the waitress did not have the competence to recover the

customers, such as by providing a new steak. The subsequent actions of multiple actors also were unprofessional.

This narrative expressed time as a problem explicitly, in that the group of customers expected to be served and finish their meals together. The first service recovery attempt created an awkward situation for the two customers who had to wait because their friends already had finished their meals while they still waited. Furthermore, the informant could not gain access to a supervisor immediately but rather had to wait until the next day to resolve the issue. These gaps suggest that the service system lacked routines for what should be done and how (e.g. the right way to prepare the steaks). The introduction of multiple actors, including a supervisor, did not help to recover the customer, because these different actors and the resources they used were not coordinated in a professional and favourable way.

4.2.2 Unmet customer expectations. On a typical work day, this customer agreed to meet a friend for lunch. They chose a restaurant nearby, but because the informant did not know the menu of the restaurant, she selected a meal she was familiar with: spaghetti Bolognese. However, the dish served did not meet her expectations, so this customer initiated the service recovery and proactively gave the restaurant an opportunity to recover, as well as a means to provide a favourable service experience:

Many times I have been annoyed in restaurants where they come and ask [after the meal has been eaten] my opinion of the meal. It is all right to ask afterwards if I liked it or not. Sometimes I could have told them that there could have been more of this or that [in the meal]. But then, why complain later? So I thought that this time I should express [my dissatisfaction with the meal] before I had eaten it. I told [the waitress]: "This meal is not what I perceive to be Spaghetti Bolognese; I'd like to have a portion of Spaghetti Bolognese with meat in it!" The waitress was friendly and told me that it would be arranged. She took the meal away, and I waited for a new one.

In response to her initial complaint, this customer expected a prompt recovery and a favourable service experience. However, the front-line employee's service recovery effort failed, because there was no co-operation between the front and back lines:

Then she served me the new meal. I looked at it and thought that it was the same meal. I told her that I still do not see any meat in the meal. She told me she did not see any meat in the meal either. Then she started to blame the cook! . . . She explained that she was really sorry but there was nothing else she could do about the matter.

This double deviation triggered an additional complaint:

I wondered whether the owner knew what the cook was doing. I was thinking that I would do the owner a favour if I told him about this experience. He might be interested in knowing what kind of service one perceives in his restaurant. I do not know; perhaps the owner is not even there . . . I thought that I should call him and tell him about [the bad service experience].

However, even after providing this opportunity for a double service recovery, the customer was not pleased:

He [the owner] was a businessman, but he was not different from the cook since he did not concentrate on what went on there [in the restaurant]. He just told that he would talk about it with the cook. He was sorry and he told me: "The next time you come, you tell us who you are and you will get a double portion of Spaghetti Bolognese!" You may guess: Have I gone there? Should I tell them: "I am the one who complained about the Spaghetti Bolognese because it

was so bad. Should I give it a third try?!" That would be humiliating. I would have expected a gift coupon or discount . . . I told him shortly what had happened. I did not chatter about what had gone on. But, he did not ask any questions either . . . perhaps the only question he asked was about what time I was there. But he did not ask for my name and address so that he could send me something. He did not ask if I have been there before . . . He just said: "Oh no! Let's see that you get better food the next time. Thank you for telling me. Bye, bye."

This poor double service recovery process led to a triple deviation and the loss of the customer:

I could go there as well; there is nothing to prevent [it] – if I thought that there would be something to eat there. But I do not think that there will be. There would be, of course, by looking one could find a pizza or something if you eat that stuff. But I know their menu so well that there is nothing that "yes! I would like to eat." I really think that it's useless to go there. You know there are also other restaurants.

The communication and social interaction between the customer and the waiter suffered from a lack of clarity. Moreover, the waiter and the kitchen clearly could not communicate about the customer complaint and its favourable resolution. This unsuccessful internal communication resulted in the blame for the unsuccessful service recovery being placed on another actor. The poor communication by the company spanned all its levels, in that the owner was not proactive and did not ask for contact information that would have enabled him to provide a satisfactory response or solution.

The company actors also appeared to lack competence in the form of knowledge, skill, and service attitudes. They could not provide the expected service in the first place (i.e. meat in Bolognese), nor listen and understand what went wrong. In addition, they did not coordinate activities and interactions across the multiple actors, especially between the front and back stages.

Although no clear timeframe was mentioned for this meal, time still seemed problematic, in that the customer perceived the process as too slow. This narrative lacked any mention of a clear delivery time agreement, but the delivery of the service was clearly too late or not in line with what the customer expected.

Finally, the problem with the core service (a main course with no meat in the dish, twice) and a lack of routines for taking action or coordinating the roles and responsibilities of multiple actors indicate serious issues with the service system. This situation appears driven by lack of empowerment (i.e. the server said there was nothing she could do), with no one clearly in charge. We thus can assume that the service system lacked a checklist, instructions, or routines. The customer took the proactive role, yet still the firm could not recover her, mainly because of the inability of the employees to co-operate and communicate.

4.3 Successful versus unsuccessful double service recovery processes

A comparison of the successful and unsuccessful double service recovery processes identified in our data reveal that similar factors (communication, competence, time, and service system) drive outcomes, which suggests they represent bi-valent factors (Oliver, 1998). The unsuccessful processes resulted in triple deviations that revealed communication problems with both customers and other actors in the service system, as well as time-related issues. A lack of empathy and failure to apologise, listen, or express deeply felt understanding represented common company responses that

resulted in triple deviations. Similarly, defending what happened or blaming someone else failed to satisfy customers.

Time and timing also differentiated success from failure. The front-line employees we interviewed universally asserted that customers should be recovered promptly in service encounters. A service company should aim for prompt and clear service recoveries, because:

Conflicts will emerge. But . . . the only right way is to handle them is ad hoc and not to pass them on any further so that the customer has to give written feedback or call the supervisor and so on. Then, the negative issues are just repeated (server, 30 years' experience).

[. . .] the game is already lost when a customer calls the "boss," I feel. It is difficult to retain the customer at that phase although the customer was recovered somehow. That is how I feel (server, 30 years' experience).

However, a customer's disappointment with the first service recovery and additional complaints are unpredictable. The service recovery may be long and complex, including double service recovery or triple deviation. The employee respondents were well aware of double service recoveries. For example, one server believed she had recovered a customer with an apology and an explanation for the situation, which she perceived as the best possible way to recover that customer. Therefore, she was not pleased with an additional complaint from the customer and the double service recovery process:

[. . .] and they were recovered [by the supervisor a second time]!? I was offended! The customer thought that I was not capable of handling the complaint so of course I was offended. It did not depend on me . . . I could not help it . . . and you know they were recovered [a second time] !!! (server, six years' experience).

What does this comparison of successful and unsuccessful double service recoveries indicate? First, communication with the customer, including listening, showing empathy, and taking prompt action, must take priority. Second, a successful recovery process requires competence and empowerment in the front line and support from actors throughout the service system, as well as access to adequate resources. Third, the recovery should focus on customer recovery, rather than on blaming others or resources in the service system. Fourth, the core service plays an important role but is not sufficient on its own. Fifth, different customers and service recovery processes require different approaches and responses. Sixth, the situation and problem may be more or less intense, which also has an impact on what actions to take in response. Seventh, our data show that the "what" and "how" factors are important, in support of a claim offered by service quality literature many years ago with regard to technical and functional quality (Grönroos, 1984). Sometimes it is more a question of how front-line employees communicate and respond than what is being said and done. Mechanistic actions without empathy can worsen a situation; a genuine apology combined with listening and a solution-oriented response can transform the situation.

The narratives and their interpretations, together with the summary of the reasons for triple deviations, thus provide a basis for an extended empirical understanding of service recovery processes and a new theoretical conceptualisation.

5. Findings and research contributions

Our findings suggest that a complex service recovery is a more demanding issue than previous research indicates. Previous studies and frameworks often assume, implicitly or explicitly, the existence of just two actors in a service recovery process: the customer and the front-line employee. Based on data in this study we extend the understanding of a complex service recovery process by recognising that these processes often persist after the first recovery attempt and may include additional complaints involving employees at higher levels of the company. Complex service recovery performance and role ambiguity in the service system, especially at the customer interface, as well as a lack of communication, competence, or coordination of the actions and resources in the service system thus may result in a double service recovery and perhaps even a triple deviation.

The four factors we identify as influences on the flow of the double complex service recovery process – communication, competence, time, and the service system – emerged from our empirical analysis of 19 narratives describing double service recovery processes. These factors describe not only the process as such but also the outcome of the double service recovery process, as characterised by success (no triple deviation) or failure (triple deviation).

Our analysis and comparison of these factors that shape the double service recovery processes and outcomes also reveal that some factors may be more critical than others, and their criticality varies across customers and recovery contexts (Edvardsson and Strandvik, 2009). We thus can detail multiple dimensions of the four factors.

Communication comprises three dimensions:

- (1) the ability to listen, identify with, and show empathy to understand, interact, and communicate with the customer and thereby understand what to do and what the customer expects;
- (2) the ability to communicate with other actors in the service system; and
- (3) the skill to communicate a solution in advance, such as in the form of an agreement that details the time frames, content, and costs of the solution.

In line with Aldrich and Herker's (1977) description of employees as information processors, we find that front-line service employees in a position to sense, evaluate, classify, and distribute information they gather from customers to facilitate the recovery process. We thus confirm prior theoretical proposals and add that emotional communication, including non-verbal communication, seems even more critical than traditional verbal communications.

Competence has two dimensions:

- (1) the ability to understand the customer's situation, needs, and expectations; and
- (2) the knowledge, skills, and attitude to solve the problem and manage the recovery process.

According to Wirtz and Tomlin (2000) and Tax and Brown (2000), most customer feedback flows in face-to-face service encounters; we add that integrated communications and competences among all actors in a service system are key, because in the service recovery process, all actors contribute their competences (knowledge, skills, time, effort, or other resources). By considering customers and their

competences part of the service system, the company integrates unique resources into the recovery process and thus “forces” customers to participate.

The two time dimensions are:

- (1) the ability to set realistic time frames in line with the customers’ expectations; and
- (2) the delivery of the solution on time and as promised.

Our study reinforces what Wirtz and Tomlin (2000) note: the critical role of time and timing in service recovery processes. Understanding customers’ and other actors’ time expectations, including how to prioritise demands in various situations, tasks, and internal-system-related requirements without promising too much, remains a major challenge (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003). This study both confirms previous knowledge and enhances it by including the need to communicate about the times for promised outcomes.

Edvardsson and Strandvik (2009) also have developed a critical time framework to clarify the dynamics in customer relationships. Critical time starts when the customer or company perceives new challenges or emerging problems in the relationship, and it ends when the issue has been dealt with in a way that achieves a stabilised relationship, whether it has been strengthened, sustained, faded, or dissolved. Critical time contains three elements: an initial state, the flow of critical time, and an outcome state. Edvardsson and Strandvik’s (2009) “three C” model of the flow of critical time thus includes communication, competence, and clock (i.e. time). If we apply the three C model to double service recovery, we recognise that the process is embedded in an initial state, that is, the first service recovery and the customer’s previous experience with the provider. This position affects the flow of the critical time of a double service recovery process. Furthermore, our study reveals that critical time may have different flow modes, and it is hard to anticipate their outcomes. Therefore, service providers must learn what is really critical to the recovery and the reasons for this criticality, from the customer’s perspective, as well as understand the difference between more and less influential factors during critical time.

The service system consists of three dimensions:

- (1) the resources and configuration of these resources;
- (2) the actors and their roles, including empowerment for front-line employees, managers, customers, and other network actors; and
- (3) the processes, checklists, and blueprints that shape and direct the use of resources and the coordination of activities in the co-creation of service.

A successful double service recovery requires the service company and other actors in the service system to meet the customer’s expectations, which means that both the service company and the customer are resource integrators (Vargo and Lusch, 2006). The idea of customers as potential resource integrators has not been analysed empirically or discussed previously in service recovery literature. However, a successful service recovery system should solve customers’ problems while also ensuring their satisfaction with the recovery process, perhaps by using the customers’ own resources (Lovell and Wirtz, 2007).

In Table I, we summarise the four influential factors and the dimensions of each that shape the service recovery process.

These four factors and their dimensions provide a foundation and the prerequisites for the complex service recovery process in Figure 1, which reflects the interplay among the customers and multiple employees during the service recovery process, as well as various outcomes. The service company must involve the customer and mobilise and direct other actors and resources throughout the entire service recovery process. Furthermore, customer-perceived control, sense of coherence, and meaning represent the customer-linked drivers, whereas communication, competence, time, and the service system, together with resources, actors, and the actors' operations of the resources constitute the company-linked drivers.

A triple deviation results when the second, complex service recovery process fails to include communication skills that express empathy, listening, and the co-design of the solution, including the time to deliver the solution. The customer might not understand or accept the recovery process and the solution provided; that is, what is done is important, but how it is done and the social interaction with the customer, including resource integration and flexibility, appear even more important. Customers should feel that they have a say in and co-create the recovery process. The core service and time are critical but cannot enable the firm to avoid a triple deviation on their own. When the service system fails to support the actors effectively, resource integration, internal communication, empowerment, and customer integration are lacking. A double service recovery process that fails might include both successful and unsuccessful activities, but one unsuccessful factor can lead to a triple deviation. Therefore, acting and interacting in a problem-focused, professional, customer-centric way, in concert with all available resources and actors in the service system, including the customer, appears to be a necessity.

Finally, we acknowledge that the complex service recovery process is shaped by social contexts (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2011) and social structures (Giddens, 1984), which

Factor	Dimensions
Communication	(1) Ability to listen to, identify with, show empathy to, and understand the customer during interactions and in communications (2) Ability to communicate with other actors in the service system (3) Skill to communicate the process and solution in advance
Competence	(1) Ability to understand the customer's situation, needs, and expectations (2) Knowledge, skills, and empowerment to solve the problem and manage the recovery process
Time	(1) Ability to set realistic time frames that meet customers' expectations (2) Ability to deliver the solution on time and as promised
Service system	(1) Resources and the configuration of these resources (2) Actors in the service system, including front-line employees, managers, and customers (3) Processes, checklists, and blueprints shaping and directing the actors' use of resources and the coordination of activities in the co-creation of service

Table I.
Competence, communication, time, and service system: four factors that shape service recovery processes and outcome

themselves are linked to signification (meaning), domination (control), and legitimation (moral rules), similar to Antonovsky's (1979) discussion of perceived control, sense of coherence, and meaning. Our empirical narratives reveal that service recovery processes are shaped by customers' perceptions of these elements, which enable them to understand and accept what is going on and why. The value and experiences being co-created must bring the customer back, perhaps through reimbursement or compensation.

The customer is the subject of the recovery, and service is a means to end. Therefore, we argue that customer recovery is a better term than service recovery.

5.1 Managerial implications

The four factors that influence the service recovery process and outcomes also represent managerial guidelines. First, employees must communicate effectively with customers and all other actors. Second, responding to and solving problems promptly is often the only way to recover a customer, because the even right actions, if performed too late, can even worsen the situation. Third, the service system, including actors and resources, should be designed to ensure that sufficient capabilities, empowerment, and support are available when needed. Fourth, our theoretical framework suggests that in managing service recovery processes, the focus should be on customers' perceived control, coherence, and meaning. Together, these factors shape perceptions of double service recovery experiences.

We also conclude that this study suggests different roles in the service recovery process should be managed throughout the process in light of the actors' resource integration into value co-creation.

Moreover, service organisations need to develop shared understanding of what factors result in favourable service recovery processes and avoid triple deviations. In particular, training all employees at all levels to perform real-time actions and clarifying their roles is essential to achieve successful service recoveries.

5.2 Limitations and further research

This empirical study is limited to the context of a high-touch, encounter-based industry (Gutek *et al.*, 2000; Gutek *et al.*, 2002), which holds special interest for service recovery research. It also would be interesting to study unfavourable service experiences and service recoveries in the field in which human interaction plays an important role in service co-creation. Further empirical studies therefore should continue to expand our understanding of service recovery, rather than focus on isolated incidents.

Previous studies include two actors in the service recovery process. We confirm instead that multiple actors influence service recovery; additional research also might consider its different modes, such as clear and brief, employee or customer driven, long and complex, successful or unsuccessful, and constructive or unconstructive.

Although our study extends the concept of service recovery, double service recovery still deserves further consideration. We provide empirical evidence that a triple deviation is possible, even after the service company has had an opportunity to resolve the unfavourable service experience twice. Customers' perceptions of the provider after double service recoveries, as well as employee recovery and role clarity in these scenarios, also demand further research.

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