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# The Role of Relationship Norms in Responses to Service Failures

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A friendly relationship with a service provider can sometimes decrease the negative feelings that consumers experience as the result of a service failure. However, friendship is not always beneficial. When consumers focus their attention on the provider's obligation to respond to their needs, they react more negatively to a service failure when they are friends of the provider than when they have only a business relationship with him or her. When their attention is drawn to their own obligation in the relationship, however, the reverse is true. This difference is confirmed in four experiments in which the perspective from which participants imagined a service failure was activated either by unrelated experiences before being exposed to the failure or by features of the service encounter itself.

Imagine that you are planning to celebrate your birthday at your favorite restaurant. You ask the owner to hold a sea-view table for you, and he indicates that he will try to do so. When you arrive at the restaurant, however, he tells you that all of the sea-view tables have been taken. What would be your reaction?

The answer to this question could depend on whether you and the owner are friends or only business associates. Friends are often tolerant of one another's transgressions and are willing to forgive their occurrence (McCullough et al. 1998). This suggests that consumers will react less negatively to a service provider's failure if their relationship is built on friendship than if it is based on purely business (Goodwin 1996). As our research indicates, however, this is not always true. In fact, friendship with a provider can sometimes mag-

nify the negative reactions that consumers experience when they fail to receive good service. Grégoire and Fisher (2008) recognized this possibility. However, they did not examine when friendship with a provider increases consumers' negative reactions to a service failure and when it decreases them.

Our research provides insights into the conditions in which these different effects occur. We expected that consumers' friendship with a service provider would increase their negative reactions to a service failure when they viewed the situation from the perspective of their own needs and the provider's obligation to satisfy them. However, we expected friendship with a provider to decrease the intensity of these reactions when considering the failure from the provider's perspective. Experiments 1 and 2 confirmed these expectations under conditions in which participants' perspective was unobtrusively primed before they considered the service encounter. Experiments 3 and 4 placed constraints on the conclusions drawn from the first two experiments, showing that the effects of customers' friendship with a provider on their reactions to a service failure depend on both (a) ambiguities surrounding the interpretation of the service failure and the reason for its occurrence and (b) customers' perception of themselves as independent or interdependent.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Our conceptualization is guided by the distinction between exchange relationships and communal relationships made by Clark and Mills (1979, 1993). *Exchange* relationships

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are impersonal. Transactions in these relationships are governed by *quid pro quo*. That is, benefits are given “with the expectation of receiving a comparable benefit in return or as repayment for a benefit received previously” (Clark and Mills 1993, 684). In contrast, *communal* relationships are typically based on friendship. In this case, “the norm . . . is to give benefits in response to needs, or to demonstrate a general concern for the other person. In [these] relationships, the receipt of a benefit does not change the recipient’s obligation to respond to the other’s needs” (684). Although the people involved in a communal relationship often reciprocate the benefits that they receive, their reciprocation is normally motivated by feelings of appreciation, rather than by feelings of obligation (for a discussion of the different effects of these feelings on the exchange of gifts, see Fong [2006] and Watkins et al. [2006]).

Thus, both communal and exchange relationships are characterized by norms that influence individuals’ expectations for one another’s behavior and their reactions to the behavior that actually occurs. These norms can operate in a service encounter (Aggarwal 2004). That is, an exchange relationship between a customer and a provider is governed by a reciprocity norm that is independent of the particular individuals involved in the relationship. Thus, customers expect that a product they buy will be worth the money, and the seller expects them to pay for it promptly and to return it undamaged if they find it unsuitable. Similarly, customers who arrange to eat at a restaurant expect to receive good food and service and are expected to leave a tip in accordance with the quality of the service they receive.

In contrast, the norms that govern communal relationships focus on the unique needs and obligations of the individuals themselves. That is, participants in these relationships are expected to be sensitive to one another’s primary needs and whether they can respond to these needs independently of any benefits that they have received in the past or are likely to receive in the future (Clark et al. 1987). Behavior that violates these norms is viewed as unacceptable and elicits negative reactions (Clark and Waddell 1985).

The norms that govern an exchange relationship are most likely to apply when a customer and service provider are unacquainted. When a customer and service provider are friends, they may have a communal relationship with each other as well as an exchange relationship. In this case, the norms and expectations that govern their reactions to each other’s behavior can depend on which relationship happens to be dominant in the current situation. Thus, it can be influenced by the intensity of the friendship, the situational context in which the individuals interact, and the social roles that they occupy in this situation.

A second difference between exchange and communal relationships is particularly relevant to the conditions we investigated. In an exchange relationship, the goods and services exchanged are objective, and the norms that govern the transaction are normally well established. Thus, in our earlier example, customers who make a reservation to eat at a restaurant expect that a table will be available upon

their arrival and that they will receive good food and service, whereas providers may expect that the customer will show up on time and will leave a tip in accordance with the quality of service they receive. These expectations are held by both parties, and the obligations to fulfill them are clear.

In contrast, the expectations and obligations perceived by parties in a communal relationship can vary, depending on whether the individuals view the relationship from the perspective of their own needs or from the perspective of the other party. On one hand, an individual may expect the other party to understand and be responsive to their needs. On the other hand, they may feel obligated to be sensitive to the other party’s needs and the difficulties they might be having in the situation at hand (Aggarwal and Zhang 2006).

The effects of these perspectives are complicated by the fact that attention to one person’s needs in a friendship relationship simultaneously makes salient the other party’s obligation to satisfy these needs. Suppose customers who consider the provider to be a friend have a special need and the provider fails to respond to it. If the customers consider the situation with reference to themselves and their own needs, they may feel that the provider’s lack of responsiveness constitutes a failure to fulfill his or her obligations in the relationship and might feel betrayed. However, if the customers consider the situation from the provider’s perspective, they may feel obligated to empathize with the situation confronting the other and to tolerate the other’s failure to respond. To this extent, they are likely to be less upset by the failure than they otherwise would.

It is difficult to imagine a situation from two perspectives simultaneously (Hung and Wyer 2009). Consequently, one perspective is likely to dominate the other. This dominance could be determined in part by the magnitude of the consumer’s need and the urgency with which it must be satisfied. However, it could also depend on the ambiguity of the provider’s agreement to satisfy this need and, therefore, the extent to which his failure to do so might be interpreted as due to a misunderstanding. In these circumstances, consumers’ reactions to the failure could depend in part on fortuitous situational factors that influence their perspective at the time the service failure occurs.

The first two studies we conducted investigated this possibility. Participants imagined that they wanted to celebrate a special occasion at their favorite restaurant and had requested a sea-view table from the owner. In some conditions, they imagined having a business relationship with the owner, and in other conditions, they imagined having a friendship relationship with him. The owner’s promise to reserve a table was somewhat equivocal. Participants imagined that upon arriving at the restaurant, they found that the table they had requested was not available.

Experiment 1 evaluated the possibility that when participants imagined being friends of the provider, their reactions to a service failure would depend on the relative attention they gave to their own or the provider’s obligation to the other. This attention was unobtrusively manipulated using priming techniques. That is, participants in an ostensibly

unrelated experiment were asked to list their thoughts about either their own obligations in a social situation or others' obligations in such a situation, thus increasing the accessibility in memory of concepts associated with these different obligations and increasing their likelihood of being applied to the service encounter that the participants considered subsequently. (For evidence that activating concepts in one situation can influence reactions to the information encountered in a later, unrelated situation, see Förster and Liberman [2007], Higgins [1996], and Wyer [2008].) We expected that when participants imagined being in an exchange relationship with the provider, concepts associated with social obligations would have little effect. That is, participants should perceive that the provider has not fulfilled the business contract into which they entered (i.e., to provide a good table in exchange for making a reservation to eat at the restaurant) and should react negatively to it regardless of whether concepts about their own or others' obligations in a social relationship were activated.

In contrast, when participants imagined being friends with the provider, activating concepts associated with their own or others' social obligations should have an effect on their reactions to the failure of the provider to fulfill the business contract. In a communal relationship, customers tend to perceive service failure as a betrayal of the relationship when the failure is viewed from their own perspective or when other-obligations are highlighted. Thus, in situations in which other-obligations are primed, participants should react more negatively to the failure in a communal (vs. exchange) relationship, and their heightened negative reactions should be mediated by participants' sense of betrayal. These negative reactions are decreased, however, when the service failure is viewed from the provider's perspective or when self-obligations are highlighted. In fact, in situations in which self-obligations are primed, participants should react less negatively to the failure in a communal (vs. exchange) relationship as a result of heightened attention to their own obligations to respond to the needs of the service provider.

Experiment 2 more directly investigated the hypothesis that consumers' perceptions of their own or the provider's obligations would be influenced by the perspective from which they imagined the service encounter. To this end, we used priming procedures to stimulate participants to think either about themselves in general or about others in general. We expected that priming of self-referent thoughts would stimulate participants in a communal relationship to focus on their own needs in the service encounter and the provider's obligations to satisfy them, thus increasing their feelings of betrayal and leading them to react more negatively to the provider's failure to fulfill these obligations. In contrast, stimulating other-referent thoughts should lead participants in a communal relationship to take the perspective of the provider and should consequently make salient their obligation to understand, accept, and forgive why the provider might have failed to accommodate them. Therefore, it should lead them to react less negatively to the provider's failure than they otherwise would.

Experiment 3 placed constraints on the conclusions drawn from the first two studies. We noted earlier that participants who have a communal relationship with a provider are more likely to be tolerant of a service failure when the provider's agreement to provide the service is somewhat equivocal and his failure to honor it could be interpreted as due to a misunderstanding. When the provider's promise is explicit and his failure to honor it constitutes a clear violation of his responsibility to be sensitive to the customer's needs, customers may react negatively to it, regardless of other considerations. Experiment 3 confirmed this possibility.

Finally, experiment 4 examined a more general implication of the hypothesis that reactions to a service failure are influenced by the perspective from which the service encounter is viewed. That is, individuals may have a more general disposition to think of themselves either independently or in relation to others (Markus and Kitayama 1991). It seems reasonable to suppose that participants with a disposition to think of themselves in relation to others will be particularly sensitive to violations of the social norms that govern communal relationships and that the effects observed in other experiments will be more pronounced among these participants than among those with independent self-construals. This possibility is discussed in more detail after the results of experiments 1–3 are reported.

## EXPERIMENT 1

### Method

Ninety-six Hong Kong undergraduate students (57% female) were paid HK\$20 (approximately US\$3) to take part in a 20-minute experiment. They were randomly assigned to a cell of a 2 (priming: self-obligation vs. other-obligation)  $\times$  2 (relationship type: communal vs. exchange) between-subjects design.

To manipulate the relative accessibility of self-obligation versus other-obligation thoughts in participants' memory, participants were asked to think about and list their thoughts on social obligations in a university context. In *self-obligation priming* conditions, they were asked to list the social obligations involved in being a university student by completing statements starting with, "As a university student, I should," whereas in *other-obligation priming* conditions, they were asked to think about the social obligations of the university by completing statements starting with, "The University should."

After performing a 5-minute unrelated filler task, participants were asked to imagine a service encounter similar to that employed by Aggarwal (2004). Specifically, they were asked to imagine themselves in a situation in which they had made arrangements to celebrate their birthdays at their favorite restaurant. In the *communal relationship* condition, participants were told to imagine that the owner of the restaurant, Chris, was a good friend; that they visited the restaurant frequently; that Chris had hosted a party for them in the past; and that they had "always associated Chris with positive feelings and . . . have always had a very pleasant

and warm interaction with him.” In the *exchange relationship* condition, participants were told to imagine that they had frequently visited the restaurant over the past 5 years, that they were happy with the restaurant’s quality, that the restaurant had provided excellent service and its prices were among the best in the neighborhood, and that Chris had always fulfilled their requests in the past. No mention, however, was made of Chris as a friend. (Complete versions of the scenarios are given in appendix A.) Pretesting ( $n = 60$ ) indicated that the communal and exchange scenarios elicited similar levels of positive feelings (3.77 vs. 3.87, respectively, on a scale from  $-5$  [very negative] to  $5$  [very positive]), happy feelings (8.19 vs. 8.28, on a scale from  $0$  [not at all] to  $10$  [very happy]), perceptions of service quality (3.52 vs. 3.62, along a scale from  $-5$  [very poor] to  $5$  [very good]), and the importance of celebrating the birthday at the restaurant (7.97 vs. 8.03, along a scale from  $0$  [not at all] to  $10$  [extremely]).

At this point, participants were asked to complete a 10-item measure adopted from Aggarwal (2004) concerning the type of relationship conveyed, with high scores indicating a high level of communality. Both groups of participants then read the second part of the scenario, which indicated that they had made a request to the owner for a sea-view table and that Chris had indicated that he would try to arrange it. Pretesting ( $n = 48$ ) indicated that the communal and exchange scenarios elicited high expectations that Chris would honor the request (5.8 vs. 5.6, respectively, on a 7-point scale). Upon arriving at the restaurant, however, they were told that no sea-view table was available.

After reading the scenario, participants reported their agreement with three items pertaining to reactions to the service failure: “I am dissatisfied with the service,” “I am unhappy with the service,” and “I am not pleased with what Chris has done.” Responses to these items, on a scale from  $1$  (strongly disagree) to  $7$  (strongly agree), were highly correlated ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and were averaged to provide a single index of participants’ negative reactions. To examine the mediating role of betrayal feelings and self-obligation thoughts in the context of the service failure scenarios, participants then completed an index of feelings of betrayal adopted from Grégoire and Fisher (2008), which contained items such as “I feel cheated,” and reported whether they had any self-obligation thoughts (i.e., “I thought of my obligations”) and other-obligation thoughts relating to Chris and the restaurant (i.e., “I thought of Chris’s obligations”) while imagining the service encounter. All of the items were measured on a scale ranging from  $1$  (strongly disagree) to  $7$  (strongly agree). Finally, participants rated the realism of the scenarios, provided demographic information, and commented on the purpose of the experiment. None of the participants guessed the real purpose of the experiment, and the majority found the scenarios to be realistic.

## Results and Discussion

*Manipulation Check.* Two independent coders rated each response generated during the priming task as related to

either the social obligations of a university student (e.g., “As a university student, I should act as an ambassador for the school”) or the social obligations of the university (e.g., “The University should provide a fair assessment system for all students”). Interrater agreement was 89%, and any disagreements were resolved through discussion. As expected, participants in the self-obligation priming condition listed more social obligations of a university student than those in the other-obligation priming condition (2.27 vs. 0.52, respectively;  $F(1, 92) = 90.87, p < .001$ ), and participants in the other-obligation priming condition listed more social obligations of the university than those in the self-obligation priming condition (2.42 vs. 0.88, respectively;  $F(1, 92) = 86.38, p < .001$ ). Participants also perceived the two types of relationship in the manner expected, reporting a higher level of communality after reading the communal scenario than after reading the exchange scenario (5.01 vs. 4.04;  $F(1, 92) = 87.02, p < .001$ ).

*Reactions to the Service Failure.* Participants’ reactions to the service failure are shown in table 1 as a function of priming condition and relationship type. Analyses of these data indicate that participants reacted less negatively when they had been primed to think about self-obligations than when they had been primed to think about other-obligations (3.76 vs. 4.67;  $F(1, 92) = 15.36, p < .001$ ). The interaction of priming and relationship type was significant ( $F(1, 92) = 11.97, p < .001$ ) and consistent with expectations. That is, participants who were primed to consider self-obligations reacted less negatively in the communal relationship condition than in the exchange relationship condition (3.26 vs. 4.25;  $F(1, 92) = 18.85, p < .001$ ). However, participants who were primed to consider other-obligation thoughts reacted more negatively in the communal than in the exchange condition (4.97 vs. 4.35, respectively;  $F(1, 92) = 7.86, p < .01$ ). Put another way, participants who imagined being friends of the provider reacted significantly less negatively to the service failure when self-obligation thoughts were primed than when other-obligation thoughts were primed

TABLE 1

THE IMPACT OF SELF-OBLIGATION VERSUS OTHER-OBLIGATION PRIMING ON REACTIONS TO A SERVICE FAILURE—EXPERIMENT 1

|                                    | Self-obligation prime | Other-obligation prime |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Negative reactions to the failure: |                       |                        |
| Communal relationship              | 3.26                  | 4.97                   |
| Exchange relationship              | 4.25                  | 4.35                   |
| Self-obligation thoughts:          |                       |                        |
| Communal relationship              | 5.83                  | 4.67                   |
| Exchange relationship              | 4.63                  | 4.42                   |
| Other-obligation thoughts:         |                       |                        |
| Communal relationship              | 3.79                  | 5.42                   |
| Exchange relationship              | 5.33                  | 5.67                   |
| Feelings of betrayal:              |                       |                        |
| Communal relationship              | 2.40                  | 3.89                   |
| Exchange relationship              | 2.68                  | 2.61                   |

(3.26 vs. 4.97;  $F(1, 92) = 54.71, p < .001$ ), whereas their reactions when they imagined an exchange relationship did not differ in the two priming conditions (4.25 vs. 4.35;  $F < 1$ ).

*Self-Obligation and Other-Obligation Thoughts.* Participants' reports of their tendency to think about self-obligations and other-obligations while reading the scenario are summarized in table 1. Participants were more likely to report having self-obligation thoughts when these thoughts had been primed than when other-obligation thoughts had been primed (5.23 vs. 4.54;  $F(1, 92) = 12.41, p < .001$ ). However, the interaction of priming and relationship type was significant ( $F(1, 92) = 6.03, p < .01$ ) and indicated that this difference was evident only when participants imagined being in a communal relationship with the provider (5.83 vs. 4.67, respectively;  $F(1, 92) = 36.43, p < .001$ ). It was not apparent when they imagined being in an exchange relationship with him (4.63 vs. 4.42;  $F(1, 92) = 2.25, p > .10$ ).

Participants' other-obligation thoughts were affected in the opposite way. That is, participants reported having more other-obligation thoughts when these thoughts were primed than when self-obligation thoughts were primed (5.54 vs. 4.56;  $F(1, 92) = 16.23, p < .001$ ). However, the interaction of priming and relationship type was significant ( $F(1, 92) = 7.06, p < .01$ ) and indicated that this difference was only evident when participants imagined having a communal relationship with the provider (5.42 vs. 3.79, respectively;  $F(1, 92) = 45.61, p < .001$ ). This difference was not apparent when they imagined being in an exchange relationship (5.67 vs. 5.33, respectively;  $F(1, 92) = 2.66, p > .10$ ).

*Feelings of Betrayal.* Participants' focus on the provider's obligations in a communal relationship was expected to elicit feelings of betrayal as a result of the service failure. The effects of the priming and relationship conditions on these feelings, summarized in table 1, confirm this expectation. Participants felt generally more betrayed in the communal than in the exchange relationship condition (3.15 vs. 2.65;  $F(1, 92) = 5.64, p < .05$ ) and felt more betrayed when other-obligation thoughts were primed than when self-obligation thoughts were primed (3.25 vs. 2.54;  $F(1, 92) = 11.31, p < .01$ ). However, the interaction of priming and relationship type was significant ( $F(1, 92) = 13.64, p < .001$ ) and indicated that the aforementioned effect of priming was evident in communal relationship conditions (3.89 vs. 2.40;  $F(1, 92) = 50.97, p < .001$ ) but not in exchange relationship conditions (2.61 vs. 2.68;  $F(1, 92) = 1.05, p > .10$ ). Furthermore, feelings of betrayal when other-obligations were primed were greater in the communal than in the exchange relationship condition (3.89 vs. 2.61, respectively;  $F(1, 92) = 37.86, p < .001$ ), whereas the corresponding difference in feelings when self-obligations were primed was not significant and in the opposite direction (2.40 vs. 2.68, respectively;  $F(1, 92) = 2.71, p > .10$ ).

*Mediation.* We expected that when self-obligations were primed, the effect of relationship type on reactions to the

service would be mediated by participants' thoughts of their personal obligation to the provider, whereas when other-obligations were primed, its effect would be mediated by feelings of betrayal. Mediation analyses confirmed these assumptions. When self-obligation thoughts were primed, relationship type had a significant effect both on participants' reports of their self-obligation thoughts about the service failure ( $p < .01$ ) and on their reactions to the failure ( $p < .01$ ). When both relationship type and self-obligation thoughts were used to predict these reactions, the effect of self-obligation thoughts remained significant ( $p < .01$ ), but the effect of relationship type did not ( $p > .10$ ; Sobel statistic = 2.42,  $p < .05$ ). In contrast, comparable analyses using feelings of betrayal as a possible mediator showed this variable to have no effect ( $p > .10$ ).

When other-obligation thoughts were primed, relationship type significantly affected both feelings of betrayal ( $p < .001$ ) and reactions to the service failure ( $p < .05$ ). When both relationship type and feelings of betrayal were used to predict reactions to the failure, the feelings of betrayal remained significant ( $p < .001$ ), but the effect of relationship type did not ( $p > .10$ ; Sobel statistic = 2.68,  $p < .01$ ). In contrast, similar analyses using self-obligation thoughts as a mediator showed this variable to have no effect ( $p > .10$ ).

In summary, experiment 1 provides evidence that increasing the accessibility of self-obligation versus other-obligation thoughts resulted in differences in the reactions that participants imagined experiencing in response to a service failure. However, this was only true when the participants imagined being friends with the provider. When participants imagined being in an exchange relationship with the provider, their reactions were only moderately negative and did not depend on the type of obligation thoughts that were primed. When they imagined having a communal relationship with the provider, however, a disposition to generate self-obligation thoughts decreased their negative reactions to the failure, whereas a disposition to generate other-obligation thoughts increased these reactions. Furthermore, the effect of the type of relationship on responses to the service failure when self-obligation thoughts were primed was mediated by participants' reports of their tendency to have these thoughts, whereas its effect when other-obligation thoughts were primed was mediated by feelings of betrayal.

## EXPERIMENT 2

As we have noted, individuals' perceptions of their needs in a communal relationship and their perceptions of others' obligation to respond to them are inextricably linked. Thus, individuals who focus their attention on their own needs should spontaneously activate thoughts about others' responsibility to be sensitive to and to satisfy these needs. Correspondingly, people's consideration of another's needs in a communal relationship should make salient their own responsibility to help the other. Thus, in the conditions of concern in this research, customers who consider a service failure from the perspective of themselves and their personal needs are likely to focus on the provider's failure to fulfill

his or her obligation to satisfy these needs, which should increase their negative reactions to this failure. In contrast, customers who consider the encounter from the provider's perspective may be sensitive to their own obligation to be tolerant of the situation confronting the provider. To this extent, they should imagine reacting less negatively to the failure than they otherwise would. Experiment 2 examined this possibility.

## Method

**Participants and Design.** One hundred Hong Kong undergraduate students (62% female) were paid HK\$20 (approximately US\$3) each to take part in a 20-minute experiment. They were randomly assigned to a cell of a 2 (priming: self-referent vs. other-referent)  $\times$  2 (relationship type: communal vs. exchange) between-subjects design.

**Procedure.** To prime the perspective from which the scenario was likely to be viewed, participants in the *self-referent priming* condition were asked to best describe themselves by completing 20 statements starting with "I am." In the *other-referent priming* condition, they were asked to describe a "typical classmate" by completing 20 statements starting with "He/she is." After the priming manipulation and a 5-minute unrelated filler task, participants were asked to read the restaurant scenario used in experiment 1. After validating the effect of the manipulation with a measure of relationship type, participants completed a questionnaire that measured their reactions to the service failure, their feelings of betrayal, their self-obligation thoughts, and their other-obligation thoughts, using scales identical to those employed in experiment 1.

In addition, participants responded to two items that measured their attribution of responsibility for the service failure to Chris ("I blame Chris for this problem" and "The problem that I encountered was all Chris's fault") and to one item that assessed their attribution of the failure to external factors (i.e., "Chris's failure to get me a table was due to circumstances beyond his control"). Responses to all of the items were reported on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Finally, participants rated the realism of the scenarios, provided demographic information, and commented on the purpose of the experiment. None of the participants guessed the real purpose of the experiment, and the majority found the scenarios to be realistic.

## Results and Discussion

**Manipulation Check.** Two independent coders rated each response generated in the priming task as self-related, other-related, or unrelated. Interrater agreement was 97%, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. Self-related responses typically described personal attributes (e.g., "I am mature"). Other-related responses described the personal attributes of others (e.g., "He is smart"). Unrelated responses had no implications for personal attributes (e.g., "I am doing a survey," "He is playing computer games").

As expected, participants in the self-referent priming condition generated more self-related responses than unrelated ones (16.68 vs. 2.10, respectively;  $t(49) = 18.49, p < .001$ ), and no participant listed any other-related thoughts. Correspondingly, participants in the other-referent priming condition made more other-related responses than unrelated ones (17.12 vs. 1.76, respectively;  $t(49) = 20.79, p < .001$ ), and no participant made any self-related responses. Participants perceived the two types of relationship in the manner expected, reporting a higher level of communality after reading the communal scenario than after reading the exchange scenario (4.83 vs. 4.08;  $F(1, 96) = 43.98, p < .001$ ).

**Reactions to the Service Failure.** Participants' reactions to the service failure are shown in table 2 as a function of priming and relationship type. Participants reacted more negatively to the failure when self-referencing was primed than when other-referencing was primed (4.55 vs. 3.99;  $F(1, 96) = 6.96, p < .05$ ). However, the interaction of priming and relationship type was significant ( $F(1, 96) = 9.90, p < .01$ ). Data relevant to this interaction indicate that participants reacted more negatively in communal than in exchange conditions when self-referencing had been primed (4.85 vs. 4.24;  $F(1, 96) = 9.37, p < .01$ ) but reacted less negatively in communal than in exchange relationship conditions when other-referencing had been primed (3.64 vs. 4.35, respectively;  $F(1, 96) = 12.37, p < .001$ ). Put another way, participants who imagined being in a communal relationship reacted more negatively to the failure when self-referencing was primed than when other-referencing was primed (4.85 vs. 3.64;  $F(1, 96) = 34.18, p < .001$ ), whereas the reactions of participants who imagined being in an exchange relationship were not influenced by priming (4.24 vs. 4.35;  $F(1, 96) = 1.18, p > .10$ ).

**Self-Obligation and Other-Obligation Thoughts.** We assumed that stimulating participants to think about a communal relationship from the perspective of one of the parties

TABLE 2

THE IMPACT OF SELF VERSUS OTHER-REFERENT PRIMING ON REACTIONS TO A SERVICE FAILURE—EXPERIMENT 2

|                                    | Self-referent prime | Other-referent prime |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Negative reactions to the failure: |                     |                      |
| Communal relationship              | 4.85                | 3.64                 |
| Exchange relationship              | 4.24                | 4.35                 |
| Self-obligation thoughts:          |                     |                      |
| Communal relationship              | 4.60                | 5.68                 |
| Exchange relationship              | 4.92                | 4.80                 |
| Other-obligation thoughts:         |                     |                      |
| Communal relationship              | 5.04                | 4.04                 |
| Exchange relationship              | 5.32                | 5.28                 |
| Feelings of betrayal:              |                     |                      |
| Communal relationship              | 3.75                | 2.89                 |
| Exchange relationship              | 2.93                | 3.10                 |
| Attribution of responsibility:     |                     |                      |
| Communal relationship              | 3.56                | 2.77                 |
| Exchange relationship              | 3.04                | 3.12                 |

would spontaneously call their attention to this party's obligation to consider the needs of the other. Participants' reports of having self-obligation and other-obligation thoughts in response to the service failure, summarized in table 2, are consistent with this assumption. Participants were more likely to report having self-obligation thoughts when other-referencing was primed than when self-referencing was primed (5.24 vs. 4.76; respectively;  $F(1, 96) = 4.49, p < .05$ ). However, the interaction of priming and relationship type was significant ( $F(1, 96) = 7.01, p < .01$ ) and indicated that this difference was only evident when participants imagined being a friend of the provider (5.68 vs. 4.60, respectively;  $F(1, 96) = 23.49, p < .001$ ) but not when they imagined being in an exchange relationship with him (4.80 vs. 4.92;  $F < 1$ ).

Participants' reports of having other-obligation thoughts were affected analogously. That is, participants reported having these thoughts to a greater extent when self-referencing was primed than when other-referencing was primed (5.18 vs. 4.66, respectively;  $F(1, 96) = 5.99, p < .05$ ). However, the interaction of priming and relationship type was again significant ( $F(1, 96) = 5.10, p < .05$ ) and indicated that this difference was evident when participants imagined being in a communal relationship with the provider (5.04 vs. 4.04, respectively;  $F(1, 96) = 23.01, p < .001$ ) but not when they imagined being in an exchange relationship (5.32 vs. 5.28, respectively;  $F < 1$ ).

*Feelings of Betrayal.* Participants' feelings of betrayal are summarized in table 2. The interaction of priming and relationship type was significant ( $F(1, 96) = 4.69, p < .05$ ) and indicated that participants who imagined being in a communal relationship reported feeling more betrayed when self-referencing was primed than when other-referencing was primed (3.75 vs. 2.89, respectively;  $F(1, 96) = 13.92, p < .001$ ), whereas participants who imagined being in an exchange relationship did not differ (2.93 vs. 3.10;  $F(1, 96) = 1.23, p > .10$ ).

*Attribution of Responsibility.* Participants' attributions of responsibility for the service failure are summarized in table 2. The interaction of priming and relationship type was marginally significant ( $F(1, 96) = 3.92, p = .05$ ). Participants blamed the provider to a greater extent in the communal than in the exchange condition when self-referencing had been primed (3.56 vs. 3.04, respectively;  $F(1, 96) = 6.48, p < .01$ ) but blamed him less in communal than in exchange conditions when other-referencing had been primed (2.77 vs. 3.12;  $F(1, 96) = 3.29, p = .07$ ).

*Mediation.* Mediation analyses analogous to those conducted in experiment 1 indicated that the effect of relationship type on reactions to the service failure was mediated by different factors. Specifically, the effect of relationship type when self-referencing was primed was mediated by feelings of betrayal (Sobel statistic = 2.17,  $p < .05$ ) but not the likelihood of thinking about self-obligations ( $p > .10$ ). When other-referencing was primed, however, the effect of relationship type on reactions to the failure was mediated

by its effect on participants' tendency to think about their own obligations in the relationship (Sobel statistic = 2.08,  $p < .05$ ) and not by feelings of betrayal ( $p > .10$ ).

We conducted additional analyses to examine the role of attribution of responsibility as a mediator in each priming condition. When both attribution and betrayal were included in the regression model as mediators in self-referent priming conditions, the mediating effect of betrayal was significant (Sobel statistic = 2.03,  $p < .05$ ), but the effect of attribution was not ( $p > .10$ ). When both attribution and self-obligation thoughts were included in the regression model as mediators in other-referent priming conditions, the mediating effect of self-obligation thoughts was significant ( $p < .05$ ; Sobel statistic = 1.82,  $p = .06$ ), but the effect of attribution was not ( $p > .10$ ). In other words, after controlling for the effect of attribution of responsibility, both feelings of betrayal and self-obligation thoughts still significantly mediated the effect of relationship type on reactions to the failure in self-referent and other-referent priming conditions, respectively.

## Discussion

Experiment 2 provides a clear picture of the processes that underlie the responses to a service failure. When participants who imagined being friends with a service provider were disposed to think about themselves, they were particularly sensitive to the provider's obligation to respond to their needs and his failure to do so. Consequently, they felt betrayed and reacted more negatively to the service failure than they would have reacted if they had only had a business relationship with the provider. When they were disposed to take the perspective of the provider into account, however, they were particularly sensitive to their own obligation to empathize with him. As a consequence, they were more tolerant of the failure than they would have been in an exchange relationship.

Although the effect of being friends with the provider on reactions to the service failure depended on whether participants imagined the service encounter from their own perspective or that of the provider, these effects were apparently not mediated by perceptions that the provider was to blame for the failure. This suggests that the greater tolerance of the service failure by participants who imagined the relationship from the other's perspective was a result of their perception that they misconstrued the implications of the provider's implicit agreement to reserve them a table. If this is so, however, making the provider's promise to honor their request more explicit should eliminate any ambiguities associated their interpretation of the provider's agreement and increase their negative reactions to the failure, regardless of whether they consider their own obligations to the provider. The next experiment indicates that this is in fact the case.

## EXPERIMENT 3

In experiments 1 and 2, the provider's indication that he would reserve a table for the customer was somewhat equivocal, and the failure to do so could plausibly be interpreted

as due to a misunderstanding. If the provider's promise to reserve a table is explicit, however, his failure to do so would constitute a clear breach of this promise. In this case, the provider's violation of his obligation to respond to the customer's needs would be particularly salient and difficult to interpret as due to a misunderstanding. We therefore expected that in these circumstances, participants who imagine themselves being friends with the provider would react negatively to this violation, regardless of their perspective.

To examine this possibility, we again asked participants to imagine that they had either a communal or an exchange relationship with the provider. In this case, their disposition to think about the situation from their own or the provider's perspective was not primed. However, we expected that these dispositions would be influenced by the nature of the service failure that occurred. In some conditions, the provider's agreement to reserve a table for the customer was implicit, as in experiments 1 and 2. In other conditions, however, the provider explicitly guaranteed to reserve the table requested. We expected that when the provider's agreement to honor their request was equivocal, participants who imagined having a communal relationship with the provider would interpret his failure to comply with their request as a misunderstanding and would be relatively tolerant of its occurrence. When the provider's promise was explicit and not subject to interpretation, however, we expected that participants who imagined being friends with the provider would interpret his failure to honor their request as a clear lack of concern for their feelings and well-being. Consequently, we expected that participants in these conditions would react more negatively to the service failure than they would if they imagined having an exchange relationship with the provider.

## Method

One hundred and thirty-two Hong Kong undergraduate students (70% female) were paid HK\$20 (approximately US\$3) each to participate in the experiment. They were randomly assigned to one of the six cells of a 2 (relationship type: communal vs. exchange)  $\times$  3 (promise: no promise vs. implicit agreement vs. explicit promise) between-subjects design. We used the same restaurant scenario employed in the previous two experiments to manipulate participants' relationship with the provider. After validating the effect of the manipulation with the measure of relationship type used in the previous experiments, we gave the participants information concerning the provider's response to a request for a sea-view table. In the *no-promise* condition, the scenario indicated: "because it is peak season, he cannot guarantee you that a sea-view table will be available for you next week. Chris said that he will try to arrange a sea-view table for you upon your arrival. You understand that the chance of getting a sea-view table is very low. You agree with his arrangement." In *implicit* agreement conditions, the scenario indicated that Chris would "try his best to arrange the table for you. Based on your past experience with Chris, you think that he will have the table for you next week.

You agree with his arrangement." Finally, in the *explicit promise* conditions, participants were told that "[Chris] guarantees that he will have a sea-view table for you next week. Because of his guarantee, you agree with his arrangement." In all three conditions, the scenario went on to indicate that upon arriving at the restaurant 1 week later, the provider indicated that all of the sea-view tables were taken.

Participants were then asked a series of questions to check the effectiveness of the promise manipulation. They first indicated whether they perceived that there had been a promise to provide a sea-view table and, if not, the likelihood that Chris would provide the table and the extent to which he failed to fulfill the agreement. They then reported their reactions to the service failure, their feelings of betrayal, and their self- and other-obligation thoughts, using scales identical to those employed in experiment 1.

## Results

**Manipulation Check.** Participants reported that the relationship described in the scenario was more communal when they imagined being friends with the provider than when they imagined having only a business relationship with him (4.79 vs. 3.94;  $F(1, 126) = 63.15, p < .001$ ). All of the participants in the explicit promise condition reported that a promise had been made, whereas none of the participants in the other two promise conditions believed this. Nevertheless, participants in the implicit agreement condition reported a greater expectation of getting a sea-view table than did those in the no-promise condition (5.05 vs. 3.53;  $F(1, 84) = 29.31, p < .001$ ). Finally, participants perceived a greater breach of promise in the explicit promise and implicit agreement conditions (5.79 vs. 4.14, respectively) than in the no-promise condition ( $M = 2.53; F(1, 126) = 94.89, p < .001$ ).

**Reactions to the Service Failure.** Participants' reactions to the service failure are shown in table 3 as a function of promise condition and relationship type. Participants reacted more negatively to the failure when an explicit promise had

TABLE 3

THE IMPACT OF RELATIONSHIP TYPE AND PROMISE TYPE ON REACTIONS TO A SERVICE FAILURE—EXPERIMENT 3

|                                    | No promise | Implicit agreement | Explicit promise |
|------------------------------------|------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Negative reactions to the failure: |            |                    |                  |
| Communal relationship              | 2.89       | 3.17               | 5.85             |
| Exchange relationship              | 2.88       | 4.47               | 5.17             |
| Self-obligation thoughts:          |            |                    |                  |
| Communal relationship              | 4.45       | 5.73               | 4.41             |
| Exchange relationship              | 4.68       | 4.77               | 4.55             |
| Other-obligation thoughts:         |            |                    |                  |
| Communal relationship              | 4.50       | 4.31               | 5.32             |
| Exchange relationship              | 4.14       | 5.14               | 5.55             |
| Feelings of betrayal:              |            |                    |                  |
| Communal relationship              | 2.12       | 2.73               | 5.15             |
| Exchange relationship              | 1.90       | 3.06               | 4.21             |

been broken ( $M = 5.51$ ) than when either an implicit agreement had been violated ( $M = 3.82$ ) or no promise had been made ( $M = 2.88$ ;  $F(2, 126) = 92.76, p < .001$ ). However, this difference depended on the type of relationship, as demonstrated by the interaction of relationship type and promise conditions ( $F(2, 126) = 13.40, p < .001$ ). Participants in the implicit agreement condition reacted less negatively when they had a communal relationship with the provider than when they had an exchange relationship with him (3.17 vs. 4.47, respectively;  $F(1, 126) = 45.62, p < .001$ ). When the promise was explicit, however, participants reacted more negatively when they were in a communal relationship than when they were in an exchange relationship (5.85 vs. 5.17, respectively;  $F(1, 126) = 13.35, p < .05$ ).

*Self-Obligation and Other-Obligation Thoughts.* Participants' reports of their tendency to have self-obligation and other-obligation thoughts are shown in table 3. Participants reported a greater tendency to have self-obligation thoughts when an implicit agreement had been violated ( $M = 5.25$ ) than when either an explicit promise had been breached ( $M = 4.48$ ) or no promise had been made ( $M = 4.57$ ;  $F(2, 126) = 4.91, p < .01$ ). The interaction of relationship type and promise type was significant ( $F(2, 126) = 2.98, p < .05$ ). When the provider had made an implicit agreement to reserve a sea-view table, participants were more likely to report having self-obligation thoughts when they had a communal relationship with the provider than when they had an exchange relationship with him (5.73 vs. 4.77, respectively;  $F(1, 126) = 13.32, p < .001$ ). When the provider's promise was explicit, however, this difference was not evident (4.41 vs. 4.55, respectively;  $F < 1$ ).

Correspondingly, participants reported having more other-obligation thoughts when an explicit promise had been made ( $M = 5.43$ ) than when an implicit agreement had been made ( $M = 4.73$ ) or no promise had been made ( $M = 4.32$ ;  $F(2, 126) = 9.08, p < .01$ ). The interaction of relationship type and promise type was marginally significant ( $F(2, 126) = 2.50, p = .08$ ). When the provider's agreement to reserve a table had been implicit, participants were less likely to report other-obligation thoughts when they had a communal relationship with the provider than when they had an exchange relationship with him (4.31 vs. 5.14, respectively;  $F(1, 126) = 10.51, p < .01$ ). When the provider's promise had been explicit, however, this difference was not evident (5.32 vs. 5.55, respectively;  $F(1, 126) = 1.41, p > .20$ ).

*Feelings of Betrayal.* Feelings of betrayal are shown in table 3. Participants reported feeling more betrayed when an explicit promise had been breached ( $M = 4.68$ ) than when either an implicit agreement had been violated ( $M = 2.89$ ) or no promise had been made ( $M = 2.02$ ;  $F(2, 126) = 57.43, p < .001$ ). The interaction of relationship type and promise conditions was again significant ( $F(2, 126) = 3.27, p < .05$ ). When the provider's promise was explicit, participants reported feeling more betrayed when they had a communal relationship with the provider than when they had an exchange relationship with him (5.15 vs. 4.21, respectively;

$F(1, 126) = 14.44, p < .001$ ). However, this difference was not evident when the provider's agreement was implicit (2.73 vs. 3.06, respectively;  $F(1, 126) = 2.40, p > .10$ ).

*Mediation.* We hypothesized that whereas the effect of relationship type on reactions to the service failure when an implicit agreement had been made would be mediated by self-obligation thoughts, its effect on reactions to the breach of an explicit promise would be mediated by feelings of betrayal. Regression analyses analogous to those reported in previous experiments confirmed these expectations. Analyses of the implicit agreement conditions indicated that self-obligation thoughts significantly mediated the effect of relationship type on reactions to the service failure (Sobel statistic = 1.98,  $p < .05$ ), whereas feelings of betrayal did not ( $p > .10$ ). In contrast, regression analyses of the explicit promise conditions indicated that feelings of betrayal mediated the effect of relationship type on reactions to the service failure (Sobel statistic = 2.22,  $p < .05$ ), whereas self-obligation thoughts did not ( $p > .10$ ).

## Discussion

The results of experiment 3 complement those of the first two experiments in showing that customers' reactions to a service failure and the types of thoughts and feelings that mediate these reactions are influenced not only by past experiences that dispose customers to have certain thoughts and feelings about the service encounter but also by the nature of the encounter itself. When the provider's indication that he will provide a service is somewhat ambiguous, consumers who imagine being friends with the provider may interpret the service failure as a miscommunication, leading them to react less negatively to the failure than do individuals who imagine themselves to be in an exchange relationship. When the provider's breach of promise is more blatant, however, individuals who imagine being friends with the provider have more difficulty reconciling the breach and are more inclined to interpret it as a violation of the provider's obligation to be responsive to their needs and well-being. Consequently, they imagine feeling betrayed and react more negatively to the service failure than they would if they had only an exchange relationship with the provider.

Note that participants' reactions to the provider's failure to fulfill an implicit agreement to provide a service were similar to their reactions in the other-referent and self-obligation conditions of the previous experiments. This suggests that the violation of an implicit agreement spontaneously stimulated them to think about the provider's situation and their own responsibility to understand the situation from the provider's point of view. When the failure constituted an explicit breach of promise, however, participants' reactions were similar to those observed in the self-referent and other-obligation priming conditions of the previous studies, suggesting that in this case, participants spontaneously focused on their own needs and the provider's apparently deliberate failure to satisfy them.

## EXPERIMENT 4

Experiment 3 demonstrated that when participants imagine themselves to be friends with a provider, the provider's violation of an implicit agreement increases participants' self-obligation thoughts, whereas the breach of an explicit promise stimulates them to think about the provider's obligations, leading to significantly different levels of reactions to the service failure. Experiment 4 replicated these findings. At the same time, it identified a potentially important contingency in the magnitude of this effect.

Differences exist in the disposition to think of oneself independently or in relation to others. Although these differences can be chronic (Aaker and Williams 1998; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis 1989), they can also be induced experimentally (Agrawal and Maheswaran 2005; Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee 1999). Persons with interdependent self-construals are more likely than those with independent self-construals to think of themselves in relation to others. To this extent, they may be relatively more sensitive to both their own and others' obligations in a social relationship.

An experiment by Gardner et al. (1999) suggests this possibility. Individuals read a story about "Lisa," who refused to help a friend because she was busy reading a book. Participants who had been primed to perceive themselves as interdependent (relative to those who were primed to think of themselves as independent) reported Lisa's actions as more undesirable and were more likely to think that she had an obligation to help. These results suggest that stimulating individuals to think of themselves as interdependent can increase their sensitivity to social obligations and the norms that govern them.

These considerations suggest that the effects observed in experiment 3 are likely to depend on individuals' disposition to think of themselves as interdependent or independent. If individuals with an interdependent self-construal are more sensitive to their relationships with others than are individuals with an independent self-construal, the difference between their reactions to the violation of an implicit agreement and their reactions to an explicit breach of promise should be relatively more pronounced. Experiment 4 confirmed this speculation.

## Method

*Participants and Design.* One hundred and ninety-two Hong Kong undergraduate students (43% male) were paid HK\$50 (approximately US\$8) each to participate in this experiment. They were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions in a 2 (self-construal prime: independent vs. interdependent)  $\times$  2 (relationship type: communal vs. exchange)  $\times$  2 (promise conditions: implicit agreement vs. explicit promise) between-subjects design. The procedure adopted was similar to that used in experiment 3 except that (a) it was administered via computer, (b) a different service context was employed, and (c) participants' self-construal was primed.

*Stimulus Development.* Two online flash advertisements for a fictitious travel agency were created. The general layout of the advertisements was similar in all conditions. In the *independent self-construal* conditions, one picture featured only the natural environment of a beach and the text (adapted from that used by Aaker and Williams [1998] and Ng and Houston [2006]): "Remember the day by yourself at the beach. The warm light of the sun shining down on you. The sound of the waves crashing on the beach. Nothing beats a quiet moment alone by yourself! . . . Enjoy your personalized vacation, perfectly priced for your needs. Leave behind the stresses and strains of everyday life and fill your time with fun and excitement." In the *interdependent self-construal* conditions, however, the picture featured a couple and a small group of swimmers spending time on the beach and the description referred to "your family" rather than "you" (see appendix B for details).

To ensure the effectiveness of the priming manipulation, 35 Hong Kong consumers with travel experience were exposed to the materials and asked to complete a 6-item manipulation check, adapted from Aaker and Lee (2001), containing items referring to independent thoughts (e.g., "you thought just about yourself") and interdependent thoughts (e.g., "you thought about you and your family"). Participants in the independent self-construal condition reported having more independent thoughts than interdependent thoughts (4.96 vs. 3.56;  $t(15) = 2.53, p < .05$ ), whereas those in the interdependent self-construal condition reported having more interdependent thoughts than independent thoughts (4.63 vs. 3.47;  $t(18) = -2.60, p < .01$ ).

*Procedure.* To prime participants' self-construals, they were asked to log on to a Web site to view an online flash advertisement. Then, after completing a manipulation check similar to that employed in the pretest, participants read a travel agency scenario characterized by either a communal or an exchange relationship with the owner. After completing the relationship manipulation as in the previous three experiments, they were then told to imagine that they were in the United States and wished to postpone their return for a week to allow them to travel with friends. In the *implicit agreement* condition, they read: "Chris tells you that it is peak season, but he will try his best to arrange it. Based on your past experience with Chris, you think that he will help you to postpone the day of return by one week." In the *explicit promise* condition, they read: "Chris tells you that it is peak season, but he guarantees that he will postpone the day of return by one week and arrange a ticket for you on the new date of return." In each case, however, participants were told that when they returned to the travel agency a few days later, they found that they could not postpone their return date because the seats were fully booked. Pre-testing indicated that the implicit agreement and explicit promise conditions differed in the level of service that participants expected (5.05 vs. 5.80, respectively;  $p < .001$ ) and their perception that the provider's promise was explicit (3.60 vs. 5.63, respectively;  $p < .001$ ). Participants then completed a check of the breach of promise manipulation

similar to that employed in experiment 3 and reported their reactions to the service failure, feelings of betrayal, and self- and other-obligation thoughts using the same scales employed in the earlier experiments.

## Results and Discussion

**Manipulation Checks.** Analyses of participants' responses to the priming materials confirmed the results of the pretest. Participants in the independent self-construal condition reported more independent thoughts than interdependent thoughts (4.76 vs. 3.18, respectively;  $t(95) = 7.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ), whereas participants in the interdependent self-construal conditions reported more interdependent thoughts than independent thoughts (4.53 vs. 3.75, respectively;  $t(95) = -3.30$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

The manipulation of relationship type was also successful. Participants in the communal relationship condition perceived their relationship with the provider to be more communal than did those in the exchange relationship condition (4.61 vs. 3.65, respectively;  $F(1, 184) = 190.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, 98% of participants in the explicit promise condition reported that a promise had been made, whereas only 2% of participants in the implicit agreement condition did so.

**Reactions to the Service Failure.** Participants' reactions to the service failure are summarized in table 4 as a function of self-construal priming, relationship type, and promise conditions. Participants' reactions were generally more negative when an explicit promise was broken than when an implicit agreement was violated (5.35 vs. 4.05, respectively;  $F(1, 184) = 72.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, this effect was qualified by an interaction of promise condition and relationship type ( $F(1, 184) = 39.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When the provider had made an explicit promise, participants reacted more negatively to the service failure when they imagined having a communal relationship with the provider than when they imagined having an exchange relationship with him (5.84 vs. 4.87, respectively;  $M_{\text{diff}} = 0.97$ ;  $F(1, 184) =$

40.96,  $p < .001$ ). When the provider's agreement to fulfill their request was only implicit, however, participants reacted less negatively when they imagined having a communal relationship with him than when they imagined having an exchange relationship (3.58 vs. 4.52, respectively;  $M_{\text{diff}} = -0.94$ ;  $F(1, 184) = 38.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

However, the three-way interaction involving promise condition, relationship type, and self-construal priming was also significant ( $F(1, 184) = 8.68$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As shown in figure 1, this interaction is attributable to the fact that the effect of relationship type under the two promise conditions was more pronounced when participants' interdependent self-construals had been primed ( $M_{\text{diff}} = 1.41$  vs.  $-1.40$ , respectively;  $F(1, 184) = 42.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than when their independent self-construals had been primed ( $M_{\text{diff}} = 0.53$  vs.  $-0.48$ , respectively;  $F(1, 184) = 5.47$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Further, the interactive effect of the self-construal and promise conditions was restricted to communal relationship conditions ( $F(1, 184) = 11.10$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The corresponding interaction in the exchange relationship conditions was not reliable ( $F < 1$ ).

**Self-Obligation and Other-Obligation Thoughts.** The self-obligation and other-obligation thoughts that participants reported having are shown in table 4. Self-construal priming had no effect on the disposition to have either type of thought ( $p > .10$  in all cases). Participants reported having self-obligation thoughts to a greater extent when an implicit agreement had been violated than when an explicit promise had been broken (5.21 vs. 4.58, respectively;  $F(1, 184) = 11.66$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and to a greater extent when they had a communal relationship with the provider than when they had an exchange relationship with him (5.13 vs. 4.67, respectively;  $F(1, 184) = 6.27$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, these effects were qualified by an interaction of promise conditions and relationship type ( $F(1, 184) = 10.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ). If the provider's agreement to provide the requested service had been implicit, participants reported having self-obligation thoughts to a greater extent when they imagined having a

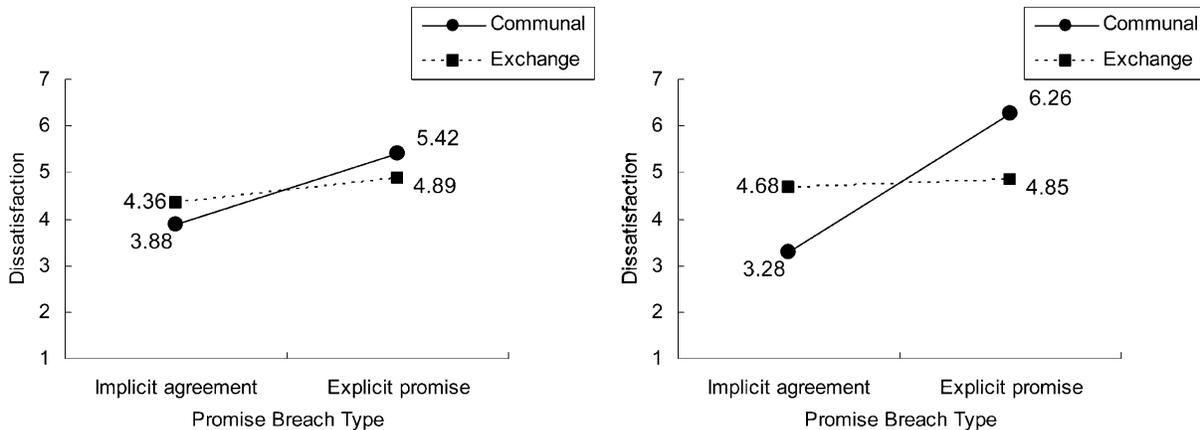
TABLE 4

THE IMPACT OF SELF-CONSTRUAL, RELATIONSHIP TYPE, AND PROMISE TYPE ON REACTIONS TO A SERVICE FAILURE—EXPERIMENT 4

|                                    | Implicit agreement         |                               | Explicit promise           |                               |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
|                                    | Independent self-construal | Interdependent self-construal | Independent self-construal | Interdependent self-construal |
| Negative reactions to the failure: |                            |                               |                            |                               |
| Communal relationship              | 3.88                       | 3.28                          | 5.42                       | 6.26                          |
| Exchange relationship              | 4.36                       | 4.68                          | 4.89                       | 4.85                          |
| Self-obligation thoughts:          |                            |                               |                            |                               |
| Communal relationship              | 5.42                       | 6.04                          | 4.50                       | 4.54                          |
| Exchange relationship              | 4.67                       | 4.71                          | 4.58                       | 4.71                          |
| Other-obligation thoughts:         |                            |                               |                            |                               |
| Communal relationship              | 4.29                       | 3.96                          | 5.21                       | 5.37                          |
| Exchange relationship              | 5.08                       | 5.38                          | 5.13                       | 5.42                          |
| Feelings of betrayal:              |                            |                               |                            |                               |
| Communal relationship              | 2.72                       | 2.56                          | 4.45                       | 5.40                          |
| Exchange relationship              | 2.76                       | 2.67                          | 4.00                       | 4.10                          |

FIGURE 1

THE IMPACT OF SELF-CONSTRUAL, RELATIONSHIP TYPE, AND PROMISE TYPE ON REACTIONS TO A SERVICE FAILURE: EXPERIMENT 4



communal relationship with the provider than when they imagined having an exchange relationship (5.73 vs. 4.69, respectively;  $F(1, 184) = 16.77, p < .001$ ). If the provider had made an explicit promise to provide the service, however, the two relationship conditions did not differ (4.52 vs. 4.65, respectively;  $F < 1$ ).

The experimental variables had the opposite effect on participants' other-obligation thoughts. Participants reported having other-obligation thoughts to a greater extent when an explicit promise was broken than when an implicit expectation was violated (5.28 vs. 4.68, respectively;  $F(1, 184) = 11.71, p < .01$ ). However, the interaction of promise conditions and relationship type was significant ( $F(1, 184) = 10.15, p < .01$ ). Specifically, participants in the communal relationship condition reported having other-obligation thoughts to a lesser extent than participants in an exchange relationship when an implicit agreement had been violated (4.13 vs. 5.23, respectively;  $F(1, 184) = 21.50, p < .001$ ), but no difference was evident when the promise was explicit (5.29 vs. 5.28, respectively;  $F < 1$ ).

**Feelings of Betrayal.** Feelings of betrayal are summarized in table 4. Participants imagined feeling more betrayed when an explicit promise had been broken than when an implicit agreement had been violated (4.49 vs. 2.68, respectively;  $F(1, 184) = 130.69, p < .001$ ) and also more betrayed when they had a communal relationship with the provider than when they had an exchange relationship with him (3.79 vs. 3.38, respectively;  $F(1, 184) = 6.45, p < .05$ ). Again, these effects were qualified by an interaction of promise type and relationship type ( $F(1, 184) = 9.13, p < .01$ ). Participants felt more betrayed in a communal relationship than in an exchange relationship when the provider's promise was explicit (4.93 vs. 4.05, respectively;  $F(1, 184) = 16.23, p < .001$ ) but not when his agreement was implicit (2.64 vs. 2.72, respectively;  $F < 1$ ).

**Mediation.** The interactive effects of relationship type and self-construal on reactions to an implicit agreement violation are presumably mediated by self-obligation thoughts. Mediation analyses confirmed this expectation. That is, the disposition to have self-obligation thoughts significantly mediated the interactive effects of relationship type and self-construal on reactions to the service failure (Sobel statistic = 1.97;  $p < .05$ ), but the mediating influence of feelings of betrayal was not reliable ( $p > .10$ ). In the explicit promise condition, feelings of betrayal significantly mediated the interactive effects of relationship type and self-construal priming on reactions to the service failure (Sobel statistic = 2.03,  $p < .05$ ), but the mediating effect of self-obligation thoughts was negligible ( $p > .10$ ). Thus, the mediating roles of self-obligation thoughts and feelings of betrayal were specific to the type of failure that occurred.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Friendship does not always mitigate negative reactions to a service failure. As our research indicates, customers may react either more or less negatively to a service failure if they have a communal relationship with the provider than they would in an exchange relationship. When the provider's promise is ambiguous and subject to interpretation, customers' reactions to the service failure in communal relationships depend on whether they are disposed to think about their own obligations in the relationship or the obligations of the provider. Experiment 1 showed that participants' thoughts about their own obligations decreased their negative reactions to a greater extent if they imagined being friends with the provider than if they had only a business relationship with him. However, thinking about the provider's obligations had the opposite effect.

Experiment 2 showed that participants' attention to their

own or others' obligations in a service encounter depended on the perspective from which they imagined the situation. Priming participants in the communal relationship conditions to think about the situation with reference to themselves (i.e., the customer) led them to focus on their own needs. In this case, they interpreted the provider's service failure as a violation of the obligation to respond to their needs, which increased the negative reactions that they imagined experiencing as a result of the service failure. When participants were primed to think about others, in contrast, they imagined the service encounter from the perspective of the provider rather than their own perspective. Consequently, they were more inclined to empathize with the provider and imagined they would react less negatively than if they were in an exchange relationship in which concerns for their feelings and well-being were not considered.

These differences are only likely to occur, however, when the provider's agreement to provide a service is somewhat equivocal and failure to do so can be attributed to misunderstanding. Experiment 3 indicated that when the provider explicitly guaranteed to perform the service, participants interpreted his failure to do so as a clear violation of the norm to look out for the interests of others. In this case, they imagined that they would react negatively to the failure, regardless of whether they had a disposition to think about the provider's obligations.

Finally, the different perspectives that individuals take when encountering a service failure may be magnified by differences in their self-construals. Experiment 4 showed that inducing participants to consider themselves as interdependent increased their sensitivity to the norms that govern communal relationships and thus increased the intensity of their reactions to a service failure in which these norms came into play. Although we induced differences in self-construal experimentally, more chronic cultural differences exist in the disposition to think of oneself as either independent or interdependent (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Singelis 1994). Asians, for example, typically have interdependent self-construals that may induce a chronic disposition to activate both self-obligation and other-obligation thoughts in response to service failures. To this extent, our results suggest that Asians may be more tolerant than westerners of service failures that result from the breach of an implicit agreement. However, they may be less tolerant than westerners of the breach of an explicit promise. The implications of these differences for cross-cultural consumer behavior warrant further examination.

## General Implications

Our findings shed new light on the apparently conflicting findings that have pervaded previous research. Some studies have suggested that establishing a communal relationship can mitigate the negative consequences of a service failure and that the greater the strength of the relationship, the stronger the buffering effect (e.g., Goodwin 1996; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar 1998). However, other research has found the reverse pattern (Aaker, Fournier, and

Brasel 2004; Grayson and Ambler 1999; Grégoire and Fisher 2008). It is interesting to speculate that these discrepant findings may have resulted from differences in the extent to which participants were disposed to focus on their own obligations or others' obligations in the conditions that were investigated.

Our findings should be considered in the context of research on consumer satisfaction with services. Ample evidence has shown that effective service recovery can mitigate the negative consequences of service failures (Hart, Heskett, and Sasser 1990) and has identified a number of key antecedents, including attributions (Bitner 1990; Folkes 1988; Hess, Ganesan, and Klein 2003), perceived justice (Tax et al. 1998), and match (vs. mismatch) of consumer resources (Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999), in explaining the effectiveness of a service recovery effort. Establishing service relationships can also mitigate the negative consequences of service failures (Jones, Mothersbaugh, and Beatty 2000). Previous research has tended to focus on examining the effects of the length of a relationship on consumer reactions to a service failure and has identified trust as a key mediator in explaining the mitigating effects of service relationships (e.g., Hui et al. 2004). Our research contributes to the literature by revealing that the mitigating effect is also a function of the type of relationship involved (i.e., exchange relationships vs. communal relationships), and this can be explained by either self-obligation thoughts or feelings of betrayal (i.e., the flip side of trust; see Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009), depending on whether consumers' attention is drawn to their own obligation to respond to the provider's needs or to the provider's obligation to respond to their needs.

The more general implications of our findings are worth mentioning. For example, our research draws attention to an aspect of communal relationships that is often overlooked. Although individuals in communal relationships are typically portrayed as caring and understanding when their partners make mistakes (e.g., Goodwin 1996; McCullough et al. 1998), this observation ignores the fact that individuals in such relationships also expect their partners to be concerned about them. Our examination of the mechanisms that drive both aspects provides the basis for a better understanding of communal relationships.

## Other Considerations

Some caution should, of course, be taken in generalizing our findings and conclusions to actual service encounters outside of the laboratory. There is obviously no guarantee that the way in which participants imagined that they would respond to a service failure reflects the reactions that they would have if they actually encountered it. However, any difference between the imagined and the actual reactions to a situation is more likely to reflect a difference in the interpretation of the situation than a difference in the processes that arise from this interpretation. Thus, although participants' reactions to the specific situations that we constructed might not always be generalizable to situations outside of

the laboratory, the processes that we identified as resulting from a given interpretation of a service failure are likely to occur, regardless of whether the interpretation is of a real or a hypothetical situation.

Several other factors that come into play in actual consumption situations were not considered in our research. Friendship relationships, of course, are inherently subjective. Consequently, complications arise when the type of relationship that the parties perceive to exist is asymmetric. For example, a customer who has had many pleasant social interactions with a provider in the course of doing business with him may consider himself and the provider to be good friends. However, the provider might perceive his interactions with the customer to be simply good business without any personal implications. In such an instance, the customer might be upset when the provider does not cater to his unique needs, although, from the provider's perspective, the failure to do so is understandable and appropriate. Future research directed at this asymmetric relationship would be valuable.

In addition, we focused on only one reaction to a service failure. Other reactions, such as complaining and switching service providers, should also be considered. For example, a breach of an explicit promise could drive consumers in a communal relationship with a service provider either to change to a new provider immediately without complaining or to complain but stay with the existing provider. The role of self-construals in such a situation is worth considering in light of evidence that interdependent individuals are inclined to avoid expressing negative feelings to maintain social harmony (e.g., Markus and Kitayama 1991). Given our finding that consumers in a communal relationship with an interdependent (vs. independent) self-construal experience stronger feelings of betrayal when an explicit promise is breached (experiment 4), it would be interesting to determine whether they would break the social harmony norm and complain to the service provider or simply leave the relationship without publicly expressing their discontent.

## APPENDIX A

### SCENARIOS

TABLE A1  
RELATIONSHIP SCENARIOS

| Experiments 1–3   | Experiment 4   |
|---|--|
| <p>Recently, you are looking for a nice restaurant to celebrate your birthday with your family.</p> <p><i>Communal relationship.</i> You go to your good friend, Chris, who is an owner of Seaside Restaurant. You have been served by Chris for the last five years. You have been to Chris' restaurant quite frequently and have been very happy with the quality. With Chris' help, you have hosted your birthday party in his restaurant in the past. You still remember how thrilled you were when you had your birthday party there. You have always associated Chris with positive feelings since you often visit him whenever you want to have dinner with family and friends. Chris has always treated you well. Over the past five years, whenever you have visited Chris, you have had a very pleasant and warm interaction with him whenever you have visited him. He has often taken the initiative to introduce new menu items to you and he has always fulfilled your requests. Overall, your experience with Chris has been memorable.</p> <p><i>Exchange relationship.</i> You go to Chris, who is an owner of Seaside Restaurant. You have been served by Chris for the last five years. You have been to Chris' restaurant quite frequently and have been very happy with the quality. You have hosted a party in Chris' restaurant in the past and he provided efficient services to you. Seafood prices from Chris are among the best in the neighborhood. Chris also periodically makes some offers to you that appear to be of great value. Over the past five years, whenever you have asked Chris for food delivery services, you have had your food delivered efficiently—Chris respects your time and gets the job done. He has always fulfilled your requests. He seems to be quite well trained and smart. Overall, your experience with Chris has been excellent.</p> | <p>You have booked a roundtrip air ticket between Hong Kong and New York for a one-month summer exchange program. Recently, you want to postpone the day of return by one week because you want to travel around the U.S. with your classmates after the summer exchange program.</p> <p><i>Communal relationship.</i> You go to your good friend, Chris, who is an agent of the Bluesky Travel Agency. You have used Chris' services for the last five years. You have used his services quite frequently and have been very happy with his services. You still remember how thrilled you were when you traveled on the tour package recommended by him. You have always associated Chris with positive feelings since you often visit him whenever you want to buy air tickets or travel packages. Chris has always treated you well. Over the past five years, whenever you have visited Chris, you have had a very pleasant and warm interaction with him. He has often taken the initiative to introduce new travel packages to you and he has always fulfilled your requests. Overall, your experience with Chris has been memorable.</p> <p><i>Exchange relationship.</i> You go to Chris, who is an agent of the Bluesky Travel Agency. You have used Chris' services for the last five years. You have used his services quite frequently and have been very happy with his services. You have bought air tickets and travel packages from him in the past and he provided efficient services to you. Prices of air tickets and travel packages offered by Chris are among the best in the neighborhood. Chris also periodically makes some offers to you that appear to be of great value. Over the past five years, whenever you have booked air tickets through Chris, the job has been done efficiently—Chris respects your time and gets the job done. He has always fulfilled your requests. He seems to be quite well trained and smart. Overall, your experience with Chris has been excellent.</p> |

**TABLE A2**  
FAILURE SCENARIOS

| Experiments 1 and 2   | Experiment 3  | Experiment 4   |
|---|---|--|
| <p>In the restaurant, you ask Chris whether you can reserve a table next week. You request a table with a sea view because you want to celebrate your birthday with your family. Sea-view tables at Chris' restaurant are limited and cannot be reserved.</p> <p>Chris tells you that it is peak season, but he will try his best to arrange the table for you. Based on your past experience with Chris, you think that he will have the table for you next week. You agree with his arrangement.</p> <p>One week later, you go to the restaurant with your family and ask Chris to put you at a sea-view table. However, Chris tells you that all the sea-view tables are already taken. In this case, you cannot enjoy the sea view when having your birthday dinner with your family.</p> | <p>In the restaurant, you ask Chris whether you can reserve a table next week. You request a table with a sea view because you want to celebrate your birthday with your family. Sea-view tables at Chris' restaurant are limited and cannot be reserved.</p> <p><i>No promise breach.</i> Chris tells you that because it is peak season, he cannot guarantee you that a sea-view table will be available for you next week. Chris said that he will try to arrange a sea-view table for you upon your arrival. You understand that the chance of getting a sea-view table is very low. You agree with his arrangement.</p> <p><i>Implicit agreement breach.</i> Chris tells you that it is peak season, but he will try his best to arrange the table for you. Based on your past experience with Chris, you think that he will have the table for you next week. You agree with his arrangement.</p> <p><i>Explicit promise breach.</i> Chris tells you that it is peak season, but he guarantees you that he will have a sea-view table for you next week. Because of his guarantee, you agree with his arrangement.</p> <p>One week later, you go to the restaurant with your family and ask Chris to put you at a sea-view table. However, Chris tells you that all the sea-view tables are already taken. In this case, you cannot enjoy the sea view when having your birthday dinner with your family.</p> | <p>In the travel agency, you ask Chris whether you can postpone the day of return by one week because you want to travel around the U.S. with your classmates after the summer exchange program.</p> <p><i>Implicit agreement breach.</i> Chris tells you that it is peak season, but he will try his best to arrange it. Based on your past experience with Chris, you think that he will help you to postpone the day of return by one week. You agree with his arrangement.</p> <p><i>Explicit promise breach.</i> Chris tells you that it is peak season, but he guarantees you that he will postpone the day of return by one week and arrange a ticket for you on the new date of return. Because of his guarantee, you agree with his arrangement.</p> <p>A few days later, you go to the travel agency and ask Chris for your air ticket. However, Chris tells you that he cannot postpone your return date by one week as seats are fully booked. In this case, you'll miss out on the fun of traveling around the U.S. with your classmates after the summer exchange program.</p> |

**APPENDIX B**  
**FIGURE B1**

EXAMPLE OF STIMULI (EXPERIMENT 4): AN INDEPENDENT SELF PRIME



Remember the day by *yourself* at the beach. The warm light of the sun shining down on *you*. The sound of the waves crashing on the beach. Nothing beats a quiet moment *alone by yourself!*

Enjoy your *personalized* vacation, perfectly priced for *your* needs. Leave behind the stresses and strains of everyday life and fill *your* time with fun and excitement.

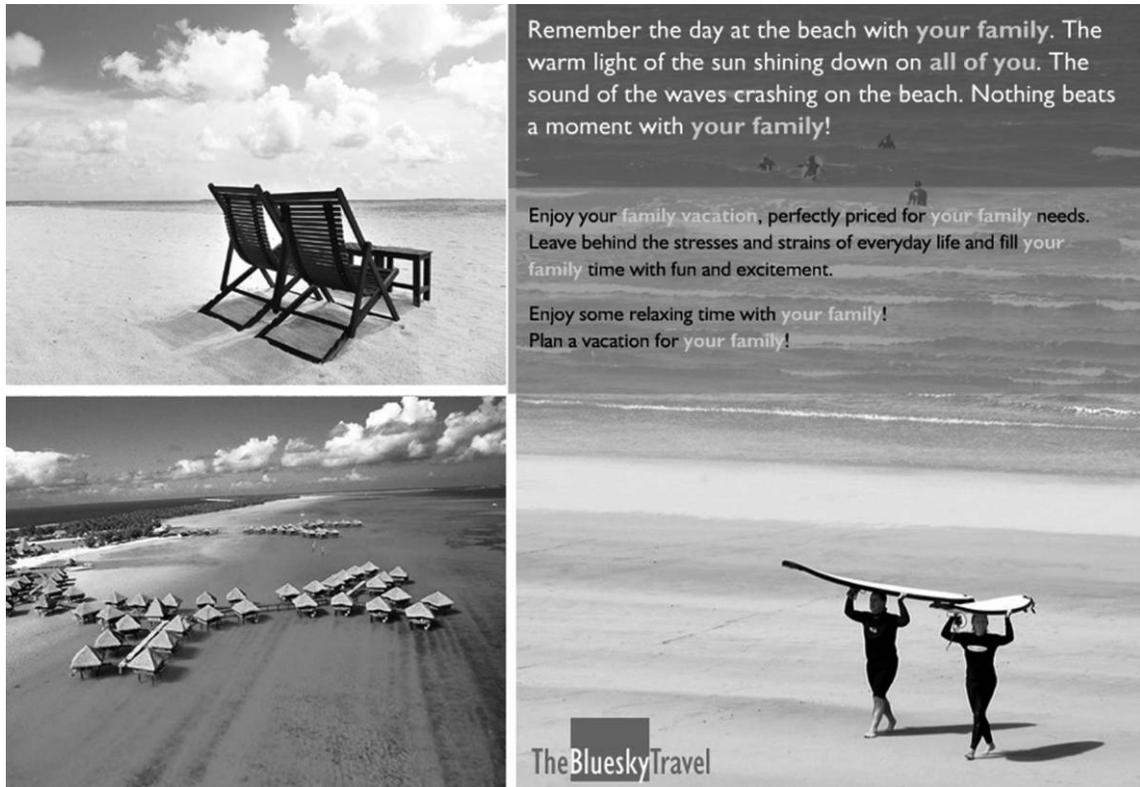
Enjoy some relaxing time for *yourself!*  
Plan a vacation for *yourself!*

The Bluesky Travel

NOTE.—Color version available as an online enhancement.

FIGURE B2

EXAMPLE OF STIMULI (EXPERIMENT 4): AN INTERDEPENDENT SELF PRIME



NOTE.—Color version available as an online enhancement.

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