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What is This?

How Lines Organize Compulsory Interaction, Emotion Management, and “Emotional Taxes”: The Implications of Passenger Emotion and Expression in Airport Security Lines

Shawna Malvini Redden¹

Abstract

Everyday nearly two million people use commercial air transportation in the United States. To fly, each passenger must perform a unique type of emotion management that may impact their entire travel experience. Using ethnographic observation and interviews, this project explores how airport structures—security queues in particular—serve to cue emotional responses for passengers and shape interactions with others. Specifically highlighted are the reflexive nature of emotions, how emotions “travel” among people and through contexts to influence communication, and the consequences of emotion management for individuals and organizations. In examining compulsory interactions between passengers and employees, the study forwards a new emotion management construct specific to customers—“emotional taxes” or the emotional performances customers must “pay” to negotiate a compulsory interaction.

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I am careful not to make any jokes or commentary that could be misconstrued as threatening . . . They not only are observing my belongings but my behavior, as well. A smile or a thank you response makes me feel comfortable and secure.

Evan C., MRI Technologist, describing airport security line interactions

I usually regard them with respect . . . I try to remember to thank them and be pleasant, as I'm sure they don't often get that kind of response . . . It helps to keep me in a better mood about the trip as well. If I'm in a good mood and trying to be pleasant to them, I'm typically more upbeat when I get to the gate.

Tex, software developer, discussing airport security employees

Airports are emotion-laden environments. Before even reaching a plane, passengers may experience a gamut of feelings: anxiety, fear, excitement, joy. Although emotions fluctuate with reasons for travel, commercial flying is a stressful affair, rated among events like divorce or buying a home (Bor & Hubbard, 2006). As such, travel within airports may necessitate the management of emotion, a process that can directly impact travel experiences, potentially improving interaction or provoking conflict (Boyd, 2002). Less clear are what emotions are present, what structures and processes provoke emotion, and what consequences arise from emotional expression and management. Understanding emotional experience in the airport context is important as it can not only influence interaction within the airport, but also on board aircraft where emotional outbursts may result in serious repercussions.

Everyday nearly two million people use commercial air transportation in the United States (Transportation Security Administration [TSA], 2010). Travelers interact with hundreds of people including passengers and employees. They also stand in multiple lines. A ubiquitous part of life, lines organize the delivery of goods and services (Schwartz, 1975). In this study, I explore how lines also cue and organize emotions for individuals, potentially prompting emotion-laden interactions. Given the heightened levels of security since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and TSA behavioral

analysis initiatives (Smith, 2011), line interactions are overtly scrutinized and regulated. As such, I argue that it is imperative to investigate emotion management in the airport security context, the outcomes of which may result in emotional and material penalties for individuals, and serious organizational consequences as well.

Although emotion-in-organizations research has proliferated in recent years, much study emphasizes the emotional experience of organizational members. For instance, in a groundbreaking study of flight attendants, Hochschild (1983) examined a specific type of emotion management called *emotional labor*, the process of displaying inauthentic emotions at work as mandated by organizational training. Following this germinal work, scholars have examined the implications of emotion management with municipal court judges (Scarduzio, 2011), firefighters (Scott & Myers, 2005), cruise ship employees (Tracy, 2000), and convenience store clerks (Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988). While a rich understanding of *employee* emotional experience is known, the role of customers is often left implicit. This study provides a more fully developed picture of emotion in organizations by examining the implications of customer emotional experience during air travel and addressing the following research questions: What is the character of customer emotion and expression in airports? How do security lines, as fundamental airport structures, organize passenger emotional experience?

To explore these questions, I spent 6 months conducting ethnographic research at several U.S. airports. Using the results of participant observation and interviews, I map the emotional experience of travel, pointing out critical sites of interaction. Specifically, I examine how queue structures prompt emotional reactions for passengers, shaping encounters with others. Finally, I theorize the character and consequences of customer emotion management. To begin, I review relevant research to frame the study. Then I discuss methods and procedures before offering theoretical and practical implications, and conclusions.

Laying the Foundation to Understand Emotional Experience in Airports

Often without realizing, passengers bring emotional baggage to the airport along with their carry-on luggage. Reasons for travel—vacation, a funeral, business—set the tone for a trip, and stressors such as running late, bad weather, or fear of flying may intensify or complicate these feelings. At the airport, emotions may be exacerbated or transformed by any number of stimuli—fellow passengers, employees, lines. How emotions are expressed

in this context is potentially significant. Unlike at retail stores, interactions in airports are overtly and thoroughly surveilled. Atypical behavior or emotional displays are *immediately* marked and subject to material consequences such as scrutiny, detention, or in the extreme, fines or arrest (Smith, 2011). Complicating the scenario, air travel is not a frequent activity for most people and is fraught with uncertainty. With a foundation of emotion theory, this literature review focuses on sites and instigators of passenger emotional displays, including aspects of emotion management, the impacts of service encounters, and the airport itself.

Emotional Expression

Emotion is a multifaceted psychological construct (Scherer, 2005). Emotions may be generated almost automatically—such as instant joy at finding lost money—or they may grow gradually after appraising an interaction, like feeling shameful when recalling a public mistake. Either way, “emotions call forth a coordinated set of behavioral, experiential, and physiological response tendencies that together influence how we respond to perceived challenges and opportunities” (Gross, 2002, p. 281). Response tendencies include the physiological, like increased heart rate during anger, and behavioral tendencies, such as “fight or flight” responses to fear stimuli (Kemeny & Shestyuk, 2008). Emotions may also influence how others respond when particular feelings are displayed.

Displays of emotion can be considered strategic or goal directed as they generate behavioral and attributional responses from others (Metts & Planalp, 2003). For instance, expressing sorrow at a recent loss is likely to engender support from friends, and sharing joy may increase attachment with intimate others. A key factor in meeting goals is *appropriate* emotional expression. If expressed sorrow becomes chronic, as in depression, for example, important others may react with avoidance or lack of support (Barney, Griffiths, Christensen, & Jorm, 2009). Understanding appropriate expression is largely context-specific and culturally based.

Effective displays of emotion are highly contextual and ruled by social norms (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). Particular “display rules” regulate which emotional presentations are appropriate for what contexts (Kramer & Hess, 2002) or cultures (Ekman, 1993). For instance, it is appropriate to cry and not laugh at funerals, to make direct eye contact in America, but not, perhaps in China. Performing emotion appropriately is often a matter of emotion management.

Emotion Management and Emotion Regulation

People in the airport may use different strategies to manage their felt and expressed emotions. Ekman and Friesen (1975) suggest five distinct emotion management techniques: (a) simulation or displaying emotions that are not felt; (b) inhibition, or suppression, which involves showing no emotion even though emotion may be felt; (c) intensification, or exaggerating felt emotion; (d) deintensification, or minimizing the display of felt emotions; and (e) masking, or showing one emotion while feeling another. The utilization of a particular approach may be engrained by long-term exposure to the social norms of a specific context or strategically implemented based on interaction goals (Domagalski & Steelman, 2007). Tests of this display rule typology show that simulated emotions are most likely to be positive while hidden emotions are considerably more likely to be negative, indicating a cultural preference for socially cohesive displays (Hayes & Metts, 2008).

While display rules focus explicitly on social and cultural applications of emotion, a particular type of emotion management—emotion regulation—describes more internal processes. Emotion regulation refers to “the process by which we influence which emotions we have, when we have them, and how we experience and express them” (Gross, 2002, p. 282). Two regulation strategies notably impact individuals and how they experience emotion: *antecedent*-focused cognitive reappraisal and *response*-focused expressive suppression (Gross, 2008).

Cognitive reappraisal involves reframing a potentially emotional situation in a manner that changes its impact and emotional trajectory, possibly lessening the impact of negative emotion. For instance, one might conceptualize an annual performance review constructively as a strategy for career planning versus as a stressful, intimidating practice, thus lowering anxiety. Expressive suppression, on the other hand, involves inhibiting emotional expression as emotion responses are already in progress, such as when one remains neutral after receiving an unexpected layoff notice. When regulating negative emotion, suppression may result in increased experience of negative feelings and decreased experience of subsequent positive emotion (Gross, 2002). Due to the considerable effort of maintaining inauthentic emotions, suppression uses up cognitive resources and may impair social performance. The effects of emotion management are especially critical in organizations where service relies on social interaction.

Emotion in Organizational and Customer Service Contexts

A plethora of research indicates the value of healthy emotional expression at work (Fineman, 2008). Examples include studies that highlight resulting organizational citizenship behaviors (Carmeli & Josman, 2006), improved decision making, and increased creativity among organizational members (Brief & Weiss, 2002). Scholars also describe, however, the disruptive influence of negative emotions at work. With increased stress for employees, decreased job satisfaction, and potential burnout (Tracy, 2000; Vecchio, 2005), negative emotion has a deleterious impact on customer satisfaction which may reduce organizational performance (Burns & Neisner, 2006). Emotion is particularly influential in customer service encounters.

With slogans like “the customer is always right,” the American conception of customer service is wrought with entitlements and high expectations. Customer service literature feeds these ideas by portraying service work in primarily rational, transaction-based ways: the customer as king, service workers as docile servants, and profit as primary concern (du Gay & Salaman, 1992). However, some authors call for a more relational representation of customer service (Bolton & Houlahan, 2005). Significant work highlights customer aggression, demonstrating the potentially dangerous consequences of escalated emotion (Bishop & Hoel, 2008). Boyd (2002) specifically calls for a more thorough examination of emotion management within transportation industries as a result of increased violence against workers. This research focuses on employee–customer relationships, but highlights the repercussions of emotion, not the causes. Further research using a communicative lens would help demonstrate how emotion develops and functions during interaction.

Emotional Cueing of Queues

A critical element of customer service is the physical environment, which influences how individuals make sense of organizations. Environmental psychologists describe meanings that individuals ascribe to surroundings, including coherence, friendliness, and safety, among others (Farshchi & Fisher, 1997). Queue structure is of significant interest. Highly emotion-laden, queues have been examined by business scholars to understand how line-standing influences customers’ perceptions of service and intent to repeat business (Avi-Itzhak, Levy, & Raz, 2008). Queues are depicted as a microcosm of social systems, which may induce anxiety, agitation, and feelings of inequity if not done well.

Although research indicates the affective influences of line-standing, a communicative perspective is missing. For instance, Rafaeli, Barron, and Haber (2002) note negative effects of queue structure on customer attitudes, pointing to the need for organizations to understand the structure of lines and service. To extend current theorizing, this study focuses on how customers display emotion in lines, how lines structure communication, and what impacts lines have on later interactions. Examining line interaction is critical to understanding emotion within airports since 600 million annual domestic fliers navigate at least two lines for each trip (Research and Innovative Technology Administration [R.I.T.A.], 2010).

Airport settings

How emotions influence interaction at airports is important given the current climate of air travel within the United States. With passengers' emotional displays inadvertently causing security breaches (Associated Press, 2010) and flight attendants wildly reacting to the effects of burnout (Newman & Rivera, 2010), the emotions of passengers and employees can influence how organizations function, security policies are enacted, and people relate in public. Although researchers have investigated crisis communication among aircrews (Haruta & Hallahan, 2003), airline pilot identity (Ashcraft, 2005), and how airports are rhetorically constructed (Wood, 2003), little research specifically examines the communication of emotion during air travel.

An investigation of airport governmentalities provides a useful exemplar to understand the complicated web of emotions present in airports. Salter (2007) examined the complexities of power within airports: "For the citizen, the immigrant, the refugee . . . airports are places of extreme interrogation of one's identity and home—and one airport may represent oppression and another potential freedom" (p. 52). Emphasizing elements that provoke emotion, Salter highlighted differing passenger and employee roles, perspectives, and attitudes. These differences may also influence how emotions are cued and displayed in the airport and the potential consequences.

Method and Procedures

To understand the implications of emotional experience in the airport, I spent six months collecting data using an iterative inductive approach. I took 36 one-way flights and conducted ethnographic observations and interviews. I acted as a full participant (Spradley, 1980), taking an empathetic *verstehen* approach (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) by which I explored passenger

viewpoints. Recognizing the danger of being blind to important aspects of a familiar scene, I maintained a self-reflexive stance and contemplated my roles as participant, traveler, and human research instrument (Gonzalez, 2000).

Sites of Study and Participants

Research took place primarily in two airports—Sky Harbor in Phoenix, Arizona, and Sacramento International in Sacramento, California. Sky Harbor is one of the 10 busiest airports in the world, operating 1,200 flights daily for approximately 100,000 passengers. My observations took place within the largest of four terminals, which had many shops and security areas. Sacramento International, at 360 flights per day, offered contrast as a smaller site with two main terminals, and single security areas in each. Research took place in the newest, busiest terminal at the time. I also observed in Denver, Honolulu, La Guardia, Los Angeles, Midway, Oklahoma City, and Seattle—Tacoma international airports.

Research participants included airport passengers and employees. My sampling strategy was purposive in that I sought specific types of people based on their roles and abilities to illuminate research goals (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I focused respondent interviews on passengers with varying degrees of flying experience. I also spoke with aircrew, security agents, and police officers informally.

Data Gathering

As airports are public spaces, I did not seek organizational permission but rather made observations and contacts in nonobtrusive ways, researching only in public spaces after receiving Institutional Review Board approval.

Interviews. I completed 19 formal interviews with ten female and nine male passengers, ages 25 to 60. All formal interviewees read an information letter and chose pseudonyms. An interview guide based on observations and extant literature directed our conversations, including questions such as “What types of emotions do you experience at the airport?” “Can you please describe a memorable air travel experience?” “How do you interact with other passengers in security?” “What does going through security feel like?” I also invited participants to direct the conversation and add detail. Thirteen interviews were digitally recorded, ranging between 30 and 65 min, averaging 45 min. Six interviews took place via email due to participant preference.

Transcription resulted in 183 single-spaced typed pages. Analysis focused on content rather than interaction details, for example, pauses and verbal fillers (Tracy & Baratz, 1993).

I also conducted approximately 45 ethnographic interviews—short, informal conversations about events and observations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Informal interviews took place along a “natural” travel path that someone might take from arrival to security, and boarding. It was useful for analysis to compare respondent and informal interviews with observations as a variety of data types provided a multitedited understanding of the scene.

Observations. I spent more than 75 hours in the field, writing thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) and detailing interactions, sights, smells, and sounds to create vivid pictures of the sites (Spradley, 1980). I made a point to interrogate underlying assumptions, what Tracy (in press) describes as tacit knowledge or “cultural knowledge that is never explicitly articulated, but is revealed through subtleties of shared cultural meaning such as eye rolls, smirks and stolen glances.” During highly interactive experiences like security screenings, I made “head notes” which are “focused memories of specific events, as well as impressions and evaluations of the unfolding project” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 159). I translated head notes into written form immediately after interactions and then into formal field notes as soon as possible, resulting in 178 single-spaced typed pages.

Data Analysis

For analysis, I used a multistep coding process featuring the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), including open, focused, and theoretical coding. I coded data looking for themes that organized around emotional experience and interaction. I then reread the transcripts to identify relationships within themes to generate theoretical implications.

To accomplish open coding, I read a subset of data twice without writing notes. Then I uploaded data into NVivo qualitative data analysis software, and noted emergent themes. From this subset of coded data, I developed a codebook of the most significant themes to use in completing focused coding of remaining data. As the process evolved, I organized codes into groups or axial codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This integration “changes the nature of categories from mere collections of incidents into theoretical constructs” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 222) while still grounding categories in the data.

Finally, during theoretical coding, I collapsed and integrated categories into main themes so that I could “formulate the theory with a smaller set of

higher level concepts" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 110). The procedure of interpreting and refining coding schemes ceased with theoretical saturation or when new incidents added little fresh insight (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Understanding Emotion and Emotion Management in the Airport

By understanding customer emotion and how feelings influence interaction, a richer picture of the emotion-in-organizations landscape emerges. Using the airport milieu, I first describe categories of emotional experience including *felt* emotions described by participants and *observed* emotional displays and interactions. After describing the emotional context, I explore fundamental structures that prompt emotion management, namely security lines. Although not a one-to-one comparison of reported emotion and observed expression, the varied data provide context to theorize emotion management.

Emotional Landscape: Air Travel as an Emotional Weather System

Just as weather systems cycle amongst cool breezes, torrid temperatures, and horrifying hurricanes, so too does the emotional energy of the airport. One moment the space may be temperate, the emotional climate mild. With an influx of passengers, the atmosphere transforms—a cacophony of voices, kids crying, bags rolling—frenetic energy filling the terminal. As with weather, the system builds and recedes with each wave of passengers. Only the residue of feelings lingers as people catch planes, emotion imprinted on body and mind, ready to influence future interaction. This context boasts three currents of emotional experience—positive, negative, and neutral, presented in interpersonal interactions versus group-level moods.

Updrafts: Positive Emotional Currents. Although relatively infrequent, positive emotions experienced and expressed in the airport most often included happiness, joy, excitement, and anticipation. Collette, a sales manager and highly frequent flier, related feeling "happy, relaxed, stress free" when traveling to Kauai. Similarly, Andrea, a college instructor, said flying to new destinations is "exciting." Contact with employees stood out positively for both women as with Tex who described his favorite flying experience taking young relatives on their first flight. Tex said the aircrew "went out of their way to make the experience special." Likewise, Patrice, a very infrequent flier, discussed her young son's excitement when first flying. A nervous flier,

the constructive emotions helped Patrice remember the trip fondly despite her perpetual fear that airplanes will “fall from the sky.”

Upbeat emotions surfaced in interactions between individuals through conversation, questions, compliments, and humor. My fieldnotes show how a Southwest Airlines pilot demonstrated most of these elements:

Coffee in hand, our pilot stands in the jetway glad-handing. To passengers, he offers a smile and a comment like “That’s a pretty smile!” or “Everyone looks so nice in the morning!” Nearby, a demure pilot from another airline loiters. As passengers settle, our pilot says, “Tim, the visiting Skywest captain is aboard . . . If you have small children, Tim is a great babysitter . . . If you have questions about flying or aviation or engineering, just ask . . .” A flight attendant pipes up, “When the competition flies, they choose Southwest.” Passengers giggle.

With friendliness and humor, the flight crew established community with passengers, however briefly. The atmosphere of the entire flight felt lighter, more fun, more inviting. What took very little time or energy by staff may have also generated longer lasting rewards as positive emotions not only “broaden and build” possibilities for physical and social health, but can also “undo” the adverse effects of negative emotion (Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, & Conway, 2009; Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2009).

Downdrafts: Negative Emotional Currents. Humor and happiness contrasted with negative emotions like anger, fear, and confusion. Participants most frequently described feeling anxiety, frustration, stress, and annoyance. Isaac, an Internet marketer, explained how his feelings are more negative in the airport, “Definitely more stress than normal. Either I’m herding my kids . . . or I’m thinking about the business I have to do on the trip, or I’m in line for security.” Negative emotions clearly emerged in complaining, yelling, and sarcasm, and more subtly, via nonverbals including crossed arms, absence of eye contact, scowling, eye-rolling, and huffing.

This field note excerpt shows a rich interaction with TSA:

The agent waving people through the metal detector yells through tight lips, brows furrowed. “YOU CAN’T PUT THAT THERE!” he shouts with startling abrasiveness at someone incorrectly packing grey bins. I notice the same woman receiving a pat-down later. A female agent runs her hands all over the woman’s legs, practically molesting her although

she did *not* set off the metal detector. Bright red, the traveler looks utterly mortified. Later I overhear her talking to a friend. “That guy was an IDIOT,” she said of the angry agent. “Then I asked her [the screener] ‘Why did you pick me?’ She said, ‘Because you were wearing a long flowy skirt.’” The woman rolled her eyes in mocking, “She gave me a fullll body pat down . . . she touched EVERY part of me. I liked it. Just kidding!” Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

In this vignette, negativity ripples out to influence more than the individuals initially experiencing it. The metal detector agent’s anger and aggression incited anxiety and irritation for the traveler, which combined with flimsy explanations by the screener (not to mention the invasive bodily search), resulted in frustration and mortification. Notably, the impact of expressed and shared emotions did not stay in security. The traveler encountered the negative affect of others, experienced negative feelings, and then shared them with her friend, extending the impact. As the story is repeated, its meaning may further perpetuate the influence of negative emotion. This “sharing” of emotional experience resonates with the concept of “emotion cycles” and social processes of sharing or being influenced by emotional displays of others (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). Crucially, it demonstrates how emotional expression may quickly, directly, and sometimes inadvertently impact communication.

Calm Winds: Neutral Emotional Currents. The vast majority of interactions and expressions I observed played out neutrally. Employees exemplified neutrality through impassive expressions or acts of boredom like sighing, yawning, or staring blankly. Elle, an insurance consultant, described security employees as mostly “nonengaging professionals.” Employee neutrality was evident in more than 80% of my observations, and likely stemmed from energy conservation due to encountering masses of people daily.

Passengers often displayed neutrality but for different reasons. For passengers, neutrality sometimes indicates boredom or concentration, according to Collette. Pivotal, it may also mask feelings like uncertainty, confusion, or ambivalence, especially in security. LeRoy discussed actively trying to look “normal” to avoid arousing suspicion. Jaycee, a 30-year-old regular flier, described air travel as having “a nonemotion. I try to not be so emotional because so many people around you are emotional . . . When you’re calm, people don’t give you grief.” As a strategic emotion management choice, this masking or inhibition (Hayes & Metts, 2008) provides insight into the customer emotional experience. Just as employees use display rules for

expressing emotion with customers and coworkers (Kramer & Hess, 2002), customers use “rules” when interacting with employees. More interesting may be how rules are developed and what consequences they generate.

I found the proliferation of negative and neutral emotional expression startling. One of the most apparent features of the emotional landscape was how *unhappy* people looked and how *little* meaningful contact took place. I noticed just one in 50 individuals smiled. Little conversation took place outside of groups already traveling together. I watched thousands of people stand mere inches from each other and avoid eye contact, pleasantries, or common courtesy. Isaac concurred, “You can only watch other people yell at their kids, treat their fellow travelers poorly and generally misbehave for so long before you get sick of it.”

As I analyzed my data, I realized that most communication and emotional expression took place in situations where individuals were *forced* to interact: lines. As noted earlier, fliers must successfully navigate at least two lines per travel experience. These lines foreground mandatory passenger–employee interaction in security and passenger–passenger interaction during boarding that would not, according to observations, take place unless required. By understanding the general emotional landscape of air travel, it becomes easier to see why the airport is a unique emotional context: As I describe below, the emotional context stems from the required interaction that instigates, especially during security, particular emotional performances and emotional management, which may generate subsequent consequences. Building on this foundation of passenger emotional experience, I now turn to security lines and their role in organizing emotional expression and interaction.

Organizing Emotional Experience: Airport Lines as a Race

Ubiquitous and familiar, people seem to hate lines universally (Rafaeli et al., 2002), as one passenger indicated while winding through an especially slow security lane. He muttered, “I try to think Disney Land . . . but it’s more like the post office.” Another passenger offered, “No, the DMV,” and everyone laughed. In the airport, however, lines do not just mean a wait. They mean stress from detailed security screenings, fear of invasive pat-downs, anxiety about getting through fast enough. Lines cue intense emotions for passengers that exacerbate existing feelings and may also manifest as emotional interactions with others. While the emotional experience of airports is easily compared to a weather system, travel itself could be likened to a race, with lines as the ultimate hurdle. In describing lines, participants overwhelmingly talked of time, pressure to move quickly, and the overall process of travel. Security

lines provide the most vivid example of how lines provoke, structure, and constrain emotions and communication in the airport. To understand the function of security lines in this organizing process, I present three important themes: line structure as cue for emotion, the emphasis of uncertainty, and the impact of interfacing with security personnel.

Line structure as a cue for emotion. As outlined by customer service research, the physical structure of lines may prompt emotional responses for customers including anxiety about length and concerns for equity (Rafaeli et al., 2002). Universally, participants depicted long security lines as stressful and anxiety-producing. Constance, a nurse and seasoned traveler, described always arriving at the airport early “in case something happens or there are long lines in security. It’s better to be safe than sorry.” Interestingly, even the *thought* of long security lines cued negative emotional responses like irritation and uncertainty, which echoed throughout other participants’ speech.

Typically, security lanes are broken up by priority with casual travelers, the vast majority of fliers, in the longest lines and priority passengers, like those in frequent flier programs, in the shortest lanes. Reflecting queue theory, passengers indicated that long lines trigger negative emotions and concerns about fairness. These emotions, when communicated and not controlled effectively, could instigate negative reactions toward those in shorter lines. Carrie, a weekly commuter, expressed irritation at routinely receiving dirty looks from waiting passengers as she traversed the priority lane. I also observed similar behaviors where passengers in general boarding lines demonstrated negative emotions toward priority passengers via nonverbal behaviors, such as eye-rolling, scowling, and huffing, and snarky comments. These negative expressions emphasize lines as a competition, which may adversely affect communication.

Structure is emphasized with verbal and nonverbal cues that may also influence customer emotion management. For instance, at airports in Sacramento, Los Angeles, and New York, an agent often stands at the security entrance, ostensibly to greet passengers and offer directions. At Sky Harbor, the officer stands at the front of the line as passengers approach the ID checker, in a surveillance role. As I observed, “A female agent stalks the check-in area. Arms crossed, she struts, hawking the crowd, grimacing, presumably looking for signs of mischief.” The woman alternated between shooing away bystanders and staring malevolently at the line. I felt uncomfortable with the agent’s gaze, wondering what she was looking for, and why she paced so fervently. Her behavior contrasted sharply with placards indicating that my safety is TSA priority. Instead, I felt suspect and pressured to move quickly.

Emotion-provoking pressure also comes from other passengers, at least *perceived* pressure to move rapidly. Daphne spoke of taking longer than others would like: "People want to get through security quickly. Or at least that's always been my impression . . . Nobody's ever said anything . . ." Jaycee confirmed the sentiment by stating she prefers to move hastily. Laughing, she said, "I don't like people who are slow . . . Take off your shoes, take off your overcoat, put your bag in the bin and let's go." Elle also noted there is "always" someone slow in line. In my observations, people sighed, rolled their eyes, and gave dirty looks when preceding passengers did not move fast enough. While no one in line actually *said* they hate slow people, the resulting pressure to move forward, felt even by seasoned travelers, speaks of an orientation toward travel in terms of time and efficiency. This perspective prompts feelings of anxiety or irritation and also emphasizes uncertainty about protocol.

Underlying uncertainty. As the physical structure of lines provokes emotion, it also highlights the uncertainty many passengers experience while traveling. Especially for new or infrequent travelers, uncertainty produces stress, anxiety, and confusion. One contributing factor is lack of organizational communication. Missing is signage that explains step-by-step the process of security. Infrequent travelers are left to improvise as official documents do not readily demonstrate which line to choose, how many plastic bins to pick, or how to pack items. During several trips, I noted that passengers would try to economize on bins by stacking belongings. The response from Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) included yelling, frustration, and condescension as densely packed bins apparently require rescanning. Similarly, while signs about prohibited items dot security areas, passengers may not be exposed to the messages until already in line, thus not giving them time to adjust. In some security areas, TSOs will shout directives to passengers. In my observations, yelling did little to improve passenger relations but instead increased feelings of anxiety about travel and animosity toward TSA.

Portlander, a sales rep who averages 120 one-way flights annually, described other travelers as "genuinely stressed out" and said he tries to help by showing people the ropes. "Unless I'm feeling a real rush, I don't exude impatience. It just scares people and makes them move slower," he stated, laughing. A "helpful" encounter occurred when I met a woman who had not flown since 1997. She seemed flustered as she approached security. When I showed her how to put her belongings in bins, she thanked me profusely, saying, "The last time I flew, we didn't do all this," gesturing to security. When asked if she was nervous, she remarked, "Only because I wasn't sure how it worked." Later, as we retied our shoes, she said she came to the airport two

hours early for her 50-min flight. She sighed deeply, commenting, “That wasn’t so bad!” as if she expected a lot more drama from security. The woman’s apprehension demonstrated fear about the security process and uncertainty about expectations.

A considerable factor underlying uncertainty includes lack of traveler readiness. From Evan C’s perspective, travel would be easier if people were prepared: “Preparation for travel, knowing what to expect and to allow for delays [are] most important aspects of travel . . . [If you] can anticipate problems, they aren’t so difficult to deal with if and when they do occur.” Portlander also emphasized the need for passenger responsibility: “If you’re late, don’t have your ID, have some complicated clothes on, that’s your fault . . . recognize what issues you may have caused and just get through line.” Structure and uncertainty about lines cue emotional responses and may trigger emotion management for passengers when interacting with security personnel.

Impactful interaction with employees. When participants described their most memorable airport experiences, the majority recalled security line incidents. The manner in which interaction with security personnel provokes and constrains emotional expression and communication is remarkable. While positive experiences surfaced in a few interviews, negative examples stood out most prominently.

Observations and interviews revealed several ways that TSA interaction negatively affects passengers in line, including general rudeness, extra “random” security checks, confiscation of “contraband,” and invasive screening procedures. These elements provoke considerable passenger emotion and, at times, lead to substantial emotional displays. Daphne recalled being chosen for a pat-down as “icing on the cake” of a very traumatic day. Already upset as she left her family to study abroad, she described the experience theatrically, “It wasn’t one of those gropey ones you hear about now, but . . . I’m mortified like ‘WHY IS THIS HAPPENING TO MEEEE? MY LIFE IS PAIIIIIN.’” While she contextualized the interaction with a somewhat gruff agent in relation to her highly emotional travel plans, she recounted the story with tears in her eyes, repeatedly stopping to gain composure. Six years later, the memory of interacting with a specific agent roused considerable emotion and continues to color how she approaches travel to this day.

During communication in security lines, passengers enter into awkward positions related to emotion management. Whereas TSOs may display negative emotions, most often without repercussions,¹ passengers feel they must contain, inhibit, or mask their feelings to avoid censure, additional scrutiny, or punishment. Patrice described feeling uncomfortable and angry at being singled out for the then-new backscatter scanner. Despite her negative

emotions, she proceeded through the advanced imaging screening quietly. However, afterwards, she said, “I walked off, and I called them perverts, and everyone around me could tell I was pissed. I was really loud... just livid! I’m surprised they didn’t pull me off and try to fine me.” While Patrice described herself as friendly and cited previous positive interactions with TSOs, she felt inhibited by the immediate security environment in demonstrating the full extent of her feelings. She recognized potential penalty and instead of *directly* engaging agents with anger, used passive aggressive strategies—complaining *after* the scan—to express emotion strategically. Although avoiding conflict and immediate consequences, Patrice stifled her anger, potentially intensifying the adverse psychological and physiological effects of negative emotion (Gross, 2002). It is telling that feelings produced in security lines are relived and, in effect, last for years. Because strongly valenced emotions are remembered most clearly (Kensinger, 2007), it is not hard to imagine how intense feelings, replayed in other areas of the airport, might have distinct relational consequences.

Theorizing Passenger Emotional Management in Airports

Adding a communicative lens to existing queue theory, this study demonstrates how emotion is experienced and expressed in airports, and how lines organize emotional management. The findings suggest emotions surface throughout the process of travel including in response to line structure and via interaction. Complementing past organizational research on employees, this study examines customer experience and illuminates several important theoretical and practical implications about how emotional experience influences individuals and organizations.

Theoretical Implications

This ethnographic exploration suggests that emotions escalate throughout the course of travel, which is especially significant for closed environments like airports. As passengers arrive and negotiate structures such as security lines, their emotions evolve and may escalate with each interaction. The data not only show that emotions “travel” through the airport but also that repercussions of emotion management reverberate throughout the entire travel process. If the impact of emotion ripples throughout airport interactions, imagining negative emotions spiraling to violence by the time passengers get through multiple mandatory interactions is not difficult and may

help explain the process of consumer violence during travel (e.g., Boyd, 2002). Furthermore, these findings support the need to understand better the entire emotional experience of travel to find points of intervention in negative emotional cycles. Intervention may potentially prevent conflict and perhaps alleviate demanding emotion management requirements for front-line employees.

This study also shows that emotional expression may affect organizational settings by impacting relations between customers and employees (see Table 1). Interactions with employees provoke considerable emotion, and employees' emotional displays may dramatically influence passengers' felt and expressed emotion, which corroborates theoretical work on the social influence of emotion in organizations (Harel & Rafaeli, 2008). In security lines, authority and power emerge as substantial constraints on emotional expression. TSOs, with control over travel, have license to express negative emotions largely without consequence, while passengers feel they must maintain composure to avoid delay, harassment, or fines. This finding resonates with research associating acceptable negative emotional expression with positions of dominance and authority (Hess, Blairy, & Kleck, 2000). However, passenger composure does not negate *felt* feelings, and negative interactions may cause customers to perform emotional management akin to emotional labor e.g. demonstrating unfelt emotions in response to organizational pressure (Hochschild, 1983).

The idea of passengers performing organizationally preferred emotional management challenges traditional conceptions of customer service. For instance, if a mall employee yells at a customer, that customer may be seen as justified to respond negatively—the exchange is voluntary, and expressing negative emotion may not generate major repercussions. In security lines, interactions are *compulsory* and passengers move from positions of authority and dominance—“customer is king”—to ones of low status—“customer as suspect.” Passengers are captive once they enter the system, since TSA regulations state that once people enter security lines, they *must* proceed through screenings or face an US\$11,000 fine (Kim, 2010). This arrangement changes typical power dynamics for individuals, which alone may spark uncomfortable feelings.

This compulsory system becomes even more problematic when considering the purposes and roles of TSA. On one hand, TSA is fundamentally in place to ensure safety and provide service. On the other hand, agents are expected to search for wrongdoing and view passengers with suspicion. Accomplishing this second set of expectations is materially evident only when finding “contraband” or correcting aberrant passenger behavior.

Table 1. Observed Security Area Emotional Expressions and Theorized Outcomes

Mutually positive displays	Mutually neutral displays	Mutually negative displays
<p>Examples: Joking, laughter, smiling, conversation, kindness</p> <p>Individual outcomes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Positive emotional contagion/transfer 2. Positive future interactions 3. Employee emotional labor <p>Organizational outcomes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Positive word of mouth 2. Lower productivity 3. Less efficiency/slower lines 4. Increased customer satisfaction 5. Increased morale/satisfaction 	<p>Examples: No conversation, minimal pleasantries, no smiles, no connection</p> <p>Individual outcomes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Employees insulated from emotional labor consequences 2. Mutual emotion management 3. Passenger emotion regulation <p>Organizational outcomes</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. High productivity 2. Faster lines 3. No impact to customer satisfaction 4. Potential for employee burnout 	<p>Examples: Verbal hostility, glaring, sarcasm, closed body language, scowling, eye-rolling</p> <p>Individual outcomes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Negative emotional contagion/transfer 2. Passengers face material consequences 3. Increased stress/burnout <p>Organizational outcomes</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Managing outbursts 2. Decreased productivity 3. Decreased morale/satisfaction 4. Decreased customer satisfaction 5. Negative word of mouth
Positive passenger/negative employee	Positive passenger/neutral employee	Neutral passenger/positive employee
<p>Individual outcomes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emotional contagion/transfer 2. Negativity influences passenger's future interactions 3. Employee negativity cues passenger emotion management <p>Organizational outcomes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. High productivity 2. Negative emotion "transfers" to future interactions 3. Negative word of mouth 	<p>Individual outcomes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emotional contagion/transfer 2. Positivity influences employee's future interactions 3. Passenger positivity is neutralized <p>Organizational outcomes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Positive emotion transfer/contagion 2. Neutral influence on satisfaction 3. Positive influence for customer and employee satisfaction 	<p>Individual outcomes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Positive emotional contagion/transfer 2. Customer attitude improvement 3. Emotional management <p>Organizational outcomes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Less efficiency/productivity 2. Higher customer satisfaction 3. Higher employee satisfaction 4. Positive feedback/word of mouth

(continued)

Mutually positive displays	Mutually neutral displays	Mutually negative displays
Neutral passenger/negative employee Individual outcomes: 1. Negative emotion transfers 2. Passenger future interactions are less positive 3. Perspective of travel is negatively influenced 4. Potential conflict Organizational outcomes: 1. Increased efficiency 2. Decreased customer satisfaction 3. Customer complaints 4. Other customers see “example” 5. Negative word of mouth	Negative passenger/positive employee Individual outcomes: 1. Emotional contagion/transfer 2. Less positive future interactions for employee 3. Neutralized passenger anger 4. Potential conflict 5. Passenger emotion management	Negative passenger/neutral employee Individual outcomes: 1. Emotional contagion/transfer 2. Less positive future interactions for employee 3. Employee emotion management 4. Potential conflict Organizational outcomes: 1. Decreased efficiency 2. Neutral impact to efficiency 3. Increased employee stress 4. Decreased satisfaction 5. Negative word of mouth

However, the activities required to correct wrongdoing (searching, reprimanding, etc.) make it difficult for passengers to feel safe and well served. This set of multiple expectations, similar to the contradictory roles of correctional officers, indicates a paradox of success (Tracy, 2004). Agents must provide service but also stay on guard. Maintaining these complex goals is likely not only difficult for agents, but also taxes passengers as they must manage interactions with agents. While some passengers view other travelers as “race” competitors, agents may see passengers in an even more adversarial fashion, thus heightening the potential for negative interaction.

Some passengers seem keenly aware of these intricate power dynamics. LeRoy depicted security lines as “the privilege of being treated like a pain in the ass and a potential criminal. And I’m a white guy. I can’t imagine how it feels to be someone the TSA drones assume is a threat.” Like other passengers, LeRoy described purposefully acting friendly to avoid trouble, even while harboring disdain for TSA “drones.” This arrangement suggests considerable effort for travelers as they try to “act right” in line. More interesting may be how passengers decide what “acting right” means, or in theoretical terms, how they enact appropriate emotional display rules for the organizational context.

Signs in the airport suggest that passengers should report “suspicious activity” and should avoid “assaulting” TSA officers, but no documents indicate what behaviors or emotional expressions are permissible or preferred. As uncertainty was an overwhelming theme, it seems that passengers—particularly new or infrequent fliers—perform improvisationally when interacting in security, behaving based on messages in popular press, stories from others, or observations in line, and not actual organizational rules or norms. Remarkably, passengers may have much more latitude for emotional expression in security than they realize, which may lead to *unnecessary* emotional management.

The complexity of emotional experience in the airport suggests that passengers may be performing emotional work not captured by existing theoretical constructs such as “emotional labor.” By interpreting airport security lines as settings requiring particular emotional performances—albeit with rules that must be intuited on the fly—passengers demonstrate a somewhat unique type of emotion management. Like emotional labor, they offer emotional performances in line with perceived organizational norms to achieve their goals. Although motivated by material outcomes—saving time, avoiding fines, and so forth—the arrangement is not explicit or contract based as with employees who perform emotion to accomplish work. In settings like security lines, customers are really paying what I call an “emotional tax,” a necessary but not necessarily pleasant emotional performance that must be “paid” to negotiate a compulsory interaction successfully. This newly developed construct lends itself to explaining different types or degrees of customer emotion management when compared with existing financial taxes.

For most air passengers, the emotional tax is likely small, similar to a mandatory bridge toll. Individuals who traverse the bridge frequently can use tools that automate the payment process to speed up interaction (priority passenger lines), while the majority must expend time and energy waiting in lines to pay the toll. Although the fee is small, every single person must pay and those who try to evade payment face more serious penalties. For others though, emotional taxes may be more significant, like bribes extracted to cross third-world borders—unexpected and variable fees that depend on contextual factors like identity, location, and travel intent, which may vary wildly in terms of cost. The concept of emotional taxes is helpful to extend existing emotional management typologies and show how customers navigating compulsory service interactions perform unique types of emotional work.

Interestingly, passengers must pay several “emotional taxes” throughout a single security experience as they interact with different TSOs at the ID checkpoint and metal detector or advanced imaging technology screenings. Adding another layer of uncertainty, any one of the TSOs may be a “Behavior

Detection Officer" (BDO) or security officer specially trained to "identify potentially high-risk passengers" and screen individuals for reactions that indicate "a fear of being discovered" (TSA, 2011). Although the TSA asserts that the BDO program's "element of unpredictability" is "easy for passengers to navigate but difficult for terrorists to manipulate," my data suggest that passenger emotional management may be at odds with that assumption. Passengers might be able to navigate easily BDOs if they are acting normally. However, if they are busy negotiating strategic emotional performances and "paying" emotional taxes in the form of masking true feelings or inhibiting negative emotions, they may inadvertently arouse suspicion for TSOs and experience the consequences they were trying so hard to avoid in the first place. Further, if passengers expend their "emotional capital" early in their journey, they may have little left to pay emotional taxes at other points of travel including during compulsory interaction with other passengers during boarding lines.

How passengers manage emotions may have social *and* physical consequences. If passengers choose—as the data suggest—to suppress emotions and mask their internal feelings, a number of costs may result. In addition to stress-causing dissonance between actual and expressed emotions, individuals who engage in suppression of negative feelings may experience *increased* negative emotion and less positive emotion than nonsuppressors (Gross & John, 2003). The cognitive costs of suppression may also trigger social consequences if suppressors fail to respond appropriately to others during interaction. This finding is especially noteworthy in the airport security context where failing to properly adhere to social norms and directives may result in penalties. The intensification of negative emotion in the body can also trigger a rise in stress hormones and adverse cardiovascular reactivity, which can contribute to decreased immune function over time (Kemeny & Shestyuk, 2008).

Emotion management in the airport seems to be predicated on familiarity and perspective. Frequent travelers describe feeling comfortable in the airport—some, like Portlander, use the metaphor of "home." From this vantage, the airport is a place of community and sustenance, with familiar patterns and processes. Bud, a government contractor, recognizes that certain travel aspects are outside his control, such as weather or slow security lines, and purposefully tries to relax and "go with the flow." Although nonroutine events occur, they are contextualized within a recognizable framework such that they are less emotionally taxing. Almost in opposition, casual or infrequent travelers spoke of stress and uncertainty, conceptualizing the airport in "racing" language, highlighting time, frustration, and competition.

These perspectives influence how individuals frame the entire experience of travel and how they manage emotion in the airport. In approaching airport travel as a race, participants unconsciously mark their co-traveler as competitors, the TSA agents as referees, and line structures as “hurdles” or “hoops” to “get through” before reaching a final destination. With this in mind, my observation that little spontaneous interaction takes place is not surprising. If travelers view fellow passengers as competitors, they may be more likely to avoid interaction. The disparate perspectives of frequent and infrequent travelers also demonstrate differences between antecedent-focused and response-focused emotion regulation strategies.

Whereas new or infrequent passengers might *respond* to unfamiliar or stressful stimuli and thus must manage and/or suppress feelings, frequent travelers likely enter into the scene with emotional stressors in context. This contextualization suggests that cognitive reappraisal or reframing can serve to reduce the impact of potentially emotional situations. Those using reappraisal “are more likely to cope by looking for something good during stressful events” (Gross & John, 2003, p. 354), which helps to lessen the impacts of negativity. By engaging in reappraisal, passengers are freed from focusing cognitive resources on suppressing emotions—paying “emotional taxes”—and potentially missing important social cues. Instead, they can reap the benefits including being able to share their emotions more effectively, experience more positive emotions, and enjoy greater interpersonal function (Gross & John, 2003).

Practical Applications

In addition to theoretical implications, this study also suggests practical organizational applications. In broad brushstrokes, the findings indicate that emotional experience may impact organizational performance, and lack of clear communication may exacerbate negative emotional experience and outcomes.

As Table 1 indicates, specific organizational outcomes may result from emotional displays between passengers and employees, whether mutually positive, negative, neutral, or in combination. From a performance perspective, emotional interaction can speed up or slow down lines, improve or damage customer and employee satisfaction, and contribute to mutual emotion management. Although TSA has rules for behavior, the inconsistency of employees’ emotional displays affects not only performance, but also adds to customer uncertainty.

Passengers were particularly uncertain about the structure and protocol of security lines. Leaving the burden of understanding travel process to passengers is problematic. Although flying information is available on travel websites, it seems that most uncertain passengers instead rely on following the actions of others or the experience as portrayed by media. The need for better communication highlights a fundamental conflict between airports, airlines, and security. While it is in the best interest of *airport* and *airline* operations to have well-communicated policies and practices throughout the entire course of travel, stated national security objectives impose significant limitations. John Pistole, head of the TSA, indicated security tactics are purposefully obfuscated to protect national security and keep an element of uncertainty (Hosford, 2010). Ostensibly, it is to keep *terrorists* surprised, but the result is frustration for those the TSA is trying to protect.

Directions for Future Research

This study focused on implications of passenger emotional management in airports. An important next step would be to examine the experience of organizational members to understand the *relationships* between passenger and employee emotion management. Researchers interested in understanding more explicitly individual differences in emotion management may also find value in testing claims made in this piece utilizing other methods. Survey measures taken at key points of travel would provide valuable information measuring emotion as it happens. Observational analysis or shadowing of individual passengers to trace the actual progression of emotional expressions would also be insightful.

Airport security is a particularly rich site for emotional experience and interaction. Future research would benefit from using discourse tracing (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009) to unpack the relationships between encounters at micro levels, practices at meso organization levels, and larger macro discourses that may influence organizational policies and practices with individual perspectives of travel. This enquiry may help illuminate how passengers develop display rules for an infrequently tread and uncertain environment. Given the role of media in influencing perceptions, understanding how larger discourses frame, impact, and constrain airport interactions would be compelling.

My data suggest that lines organize emotional experience and that emotions “travel” through the airport to other sites of interaction. Future research could corroborate these claims by investigating interaction “downstream” from security such as boarding lines and flights. This study also suggested

that lingering deleterious effects of negative emotion may be carried off the plane and into other important relationships. Interesting next steps would include interrogating that assumption, especially as it relates to frontline employees who bear the brunt of emotional management everyday. Furthermore, it may be useful to attend to positive social processes to see how positive emotions function in organizations and may “interrupt” or de-escalate negative emotion cycles.

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Note

1. Although TSOs are constrained by strict protocol, observation suggests a fair degree of latitude for emotional expression. For instance, the angry agent described previously was allowed to yell and intimidate passengers without censure. Likewise, agents were allowed to joke and make fun of protocol as one did when my hand sanitizer “contraband” required several extra screenings.

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Bio

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