It is remarkable that, with nearly 50 years of research on the experiences of victims of crime with criminal justice systems across common law countries, including Australia, there is enduring attachment to the use of ‘satisfaction’ as a measure – because the term can hide as much as it reveals. While useful for policy purposes, it tells us little of the detail that persons are being asked to assess, is vague on context, ignores motivations and expectations and fixes identity and place. Moreover, it deftly sidesteps the more fundamental critique that persons, as victims, make of the system – that is, the absence of justice itself. This chapter takes satisfaction seriously and looks to unpack the judgements about justice that lie behind it.

Although satisfaction has been used to quantify assessments of a whole host of environments and interactions from health systems to commercial retail and to democracy itself, there is a paucity of critical analysis on what the term might mean and, consequently, its import. The satisfaction measure is commonly viewed as arising from a deep and wide shift towards marketisation in many areas of public life that took place since the 1980s in liberal democracies around the globe. It is perhaps not unrelated that, over this time, public policy commentators – political and academic – noticed and expressed concern about the disenchantment with and disengagement of citizens from the public sphere (Norris 1999; Pattie et al. 2004). More broadly then, satisfaction joins with related measures such as confidence and support to chart plummeting ratings of many public institutions.

In this chapter, satisfaction is taken as a starting point from which to explore perspectives on justice and to leverage understanding of what might be at stake in victim ratings of the public institutions of justice. It does so through an exploratory study involving a small
group of men and women who were victims of violence. Interviewed three times during the course of their journey through the criminal justice process in a large Australian city, the reflections of these men and women showed context-specific evaluation. They addressed a number of dimensions that they drew upon different conceptions of justice; and also spoke of different recipients to which the good of justice was directed. These comprise value underpinnings to satisfaction. The chapter considers the submerged theoretical and ideological assumptions behind satisfaction as a measure of citizen interactions with and assessments of authority.

Measuring what?

Reviews of the satisfaction measure across different domains have been unanimous in critiquing its conceptual murkiness and imprecision. Significant questions persist about what actually is being measured, the relevance of antecedent factors and expectations, differing emphases on outcome and process and the weighting given to affective and cognitive influences. In the transactional world of consumption, satisfaction has been posed as a response that pertains to a particular focus and at a moment in time (Giese and Cote 2000, p. 4). In service areas such as health, research has attempted to disentangle satisfaction as a quality measure, as something related to effectiveness or to expectation and/or as a relational assessment (Williams et al. 1998). It has been criticised as a ‘seriously flawed’ term (Gill and White 2009, p. 8) and for being ‘under-theorized’ (Aspinal et al. 2003, p. 324). Satisfaction has been linked to developments in thinking of persons as consumers or clients, to a desire for greater participation by service users and as a means of ‘institutional validation’ (Williams et al. 1998, p. 1352). More recently, the perceived value of a service (McDougall and Levesque 2000) and the justice components of satisfaction (Laxminarayan et al. 2013; Martínez-Tur et al. 2006) have been examined.

Whether using public satisfaction with, support for, attitudes about or confidence and trust, criminal justice research has wrestled with similar complexities. These have identified not only contextual differences to assessments (Indermaur and Roberts 2009) but also differences dependent on direct or indirect experience with the entities (Van de Walle 2009), and whether or not the experience being assessed is citizen-initiated (Skogan 2005). Furthermore, how interaction with justice authorities is experienced is recognised as crucial (Bradford et al. 2009; Tyler and Huo 2002). Studies suggest that these assessments are