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A STUDY IN SOCIAL ORGANIZATION:
CHANGE, UNCERTAINTY, AND THE
CULTIVATION OF CUSTOMERS
IN SERVICE STATIONS

A Thesis

Presented to the
Department of Sociology
and the
Faculty of the Graduate College
University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Gilbert W. Gillespie, Jr.

July 1977

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Accepted for the faculty of the Graduate College,
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts, University
of Nebraska at Omaha.

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To My Parents:

G. Wayne and Ruth Gillespie

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Gilbert W. Gillespie, Jr.

PREFACE

A. Importance of the Problem

A large proportion of the people of the United States depend upon the automobile for the greater share of their transportation. Many of their activities are structured so that they must depend upon the flexibility which automobile transportation provides. Commuting five to forty or more miles to work is common. Shopping seems to be done at scattered locations and frequent intervals in urban areas. Over the past half century the automobile has created great changes in dating and courtship patterns. There have developed drive-in theaters, fast-food restaurants, and motels as a consequence of the automobile.

Many of the activities of contemporary Americans are linked to the automobile either directly as with travel or indirectly as with commuting by automobile to work. In this respect, the automobile may be seen as a central symbol in American life similar to the place held by maize in the Mayan villages studied by Redfield (1955: 22-3). Most Americans are unable to conceive of life without automobiles. The functioning of the automobile itself is a mystery, a source of anxiety, and the subject of various rituals for many motorists.

Although, for increasing numbers of motorists, self-service gas stations, automobile dealers' shops, or service

facilities of large chain retail stores are sources for satisfaction of automotive needs, many still obtain gasoline and minor repair and service work at dealer-operated service stations. Not only do motorists spend large amounts of money each year on their automotive needs, they also spend time at service stations obtaining gasoline and meeting appointments to have their automobiles serviced and repaired. Furthermore, many people earn their living either by working in service stations or supplying service stations themselves with goods and services.

Service stations are an important part of modern American culture; they affect the lives of many people. Many of the customers I observed and talked with seemed to have a limited understanding of the service station setting. This was especially true of younger people. One of the practical implications of this study, then, is that it may help automobile drivers and owners to select a service station and deal with the participants of that station in such a way as to better have their motoring needs met.

B. Reasons for Selecting the Problem

There are several reasons why I selected the service station setting for study. The first reason is that such a setting seems to be a neglected area of study. Because of the commonness of service stations and their

variability, they are an obvious and fruitful area in which to develop substantive theory. It may be argued that service stations are mundane and, therefore, of not as much interest as the deviant person or the exotic case. I would argue, however, that the everyday and the commonplace should be of interest to sociologists as these kinds of phenomena, taken together, have a substantial impact on the lives of the people living in a particular culture. Ichheiser (1970:7-11) notes that social scientists often miss significant aspects of their own society because of their commonplace and accepted nature. The result is that social scientific theory suffers.

A second reason for selecting the service station setting for study is that due to sociocultural changes, the dealer-operated station may disappear in a few years. Many retail chain stores are underselling service stations on tires, batteries, accessories, mufflers, service, and minor repairs. Furthermore, there seems to be some movement toward self-service stations which, in many cases, concentrate on the sale of gasoline and do not perform other work or minor repairs. If these trends continue, it is likely that the type of service station that I have studied will cease to exist. This has substantial implications for social change in that the personal relationships which many motorists have with service station personnel will be fragmented into less intimate

relationships with the personnel at various unconnected firms where motorists purchase gasoline, get automobiles serviced, and have minor repair work done. It can be anticipated that this fragmentation will be furthered if motorists, freed from bonds of loyalty, purchase goods and services where prices happen to be lowest at any particular moment.

A third reason for selecting the service station setting for research is a personal one. I feel comfortable in such a setting. I have been fascinated with service stations since my youth when I observed these places as centers of activity in the small towns near my home. Though I have never worked in a garage or service station, through the training and experience I received in the army, I have a certain knowledge of shop management and procedure. This knowledge was useful in helping me to understand what I observed during the field work for this research. It also gave a basis upon which to evaluate explanations given me regarding automobiles and their maintenance. It was apparently an asset in my participant observation "routine" (Goffman, 1959:16) to be classed as an "acceptable incompetent" (Lofland, 1971: 100-101) by possessing basic knowledge taken for granted by the ordinary participants in the setting. Further, this knowledge enabled me to appear to be a quick learner, thus indicating my interest, conserving the patience of

the participants, and developing rapport in the service station setting.

A fourth reason for selecting the service station as a locale for sociological research is that this setting seemed amenable to study by use of qualitative methods. A certain anti-intellectual bias seems to exist in all of the service stations which I have observed. Additionally, there seems to be a degree of sentiment against "paperwork," particularly reports required and requested from but without the assent of the personnel and for which they can see little or no practical value. In my judgement, all of these factors would make it difficult to get responses to questionnaires and difficult for interviewers to gain access to the service station as a research setting. Another consideration is that many participants in the service station setting simply take it for granted and have not consciously considered many of its social features. Until the observer has undergone a degree of socialization into the setting thereby establishing rapport with other participants while maintaining his outside perspective (Bruyn, 1970:306-8), he will not be aware of the perspective of the participants themselves.

Thus, for all of these reasons, the service station combines a significant uninvestigated area of study which matches my personal and methodological interests.

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Chapter I
INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the technique of participant observation which was used in this research and describes the specific settings in which the research was carried out.

A. The Research Technique:
Participant Observation¹

Participant observation is a technique useful in understanding the social organization of a setting. The social organization is the system of positions² and roles which organizes the behavior of the persons who participate in that setting and which results in regular, patterned ways of interacting among the participants (Chinoy, 1968: 68-9).

A researcher, using the technique of participant observation, gains entry into the setting, observes the behavior of the participants, seeks to understand how they view their world and the meanings they give to it, and interacts with the participants as they go about their routine activities.

¹In this section I do not detail or defend the technique of participant observation, but briefly describe it for those unfamiliar with it. I intend also to convey the outlines of the technique as I used it in this research.

²Gross, et al. (1958:48-69), advocate the use of position rather than status because of the connotation of rank associated with the latter.

Gaining entry into an ongoing social setting often poses several problems and ethical dilemmas. First, the participants in the setting may not wish to have an outsider around as he may be seen to expose their shortcomings, tricks, deviant acts, etc. The researcher may also be seen to get in the way, hamper the operations, or otherwise hinder the participants with questions which may be elementary, difficult to answer, or inimical to the definitions of the situation held by the participants themselves. The observer may be regarded with suspicion, or his research may be seen as of no practical value to the participants. He may face the task of convincing one or more reluctant gatekeepers to allow him to study a setting. Once inside, it is possible that he as an outsider may receive only a "guided tour" and may not be given access to certain kinds of information. Still another mode for entering a setting is for the investigator explicitly or implicitly to represent himself as a bona fide participant, rather than as a researcher.

Secondly, the participant observer may face various ethical dilemmas as he attempts to gain entry into a setting, as he interacts with the participants in the setting, and as he writes his report. Among the options facing the researcher as he attempts to gain entrance to a setting are to reveal his purposes, to conceal his purposes and allow those in the setting to define his role, or explicitly

to misrepresent himself and his purposes. Among the dilemmas inherent in this are that, should the participants know the purposes of the research, they may alter their behavior in various ways or may refuse to allow the researcher to observe. On the other hand, to misrepresent oneself, explicitly or implicitly, in order to gain information about others is dishonest, may damage the reputation of the profession, is difficult or impossible to sustain over time, and should the research report be unfavorable to the participants when it is published can cause harm to them (Barnes, 1970:241-9; Erikson, 1970: 252-60).

In carrying out this research, I briefly explained my purposes and asked permission to study the two service stations I observed most intensively. I directly and honestly, but in general terms, tried to answer any questions about the research posed by the participants. In other settings which I observed for brief periods and it seemed unlikely that any research could be traced to particular locations, I observed covertly. This, however, was accomplished within view of and with the knowledge of the participants that I as an unknown outsider was present. Following Shils (cited in Barnes, 1970:248-9) these observations were made in the public sphere and thus were not in violation of the observed's privacy.

Once the participant observer has gained entry by whatever means into the setting, he observes directly what occurs and, in a fashion, becomes socialized into the setting (Bruyn, 1970:307-8; McCall and Simmons, 1969: 4-5). The observer learns the values, norms, and roles of the participants through interacting with them directly, by observing them interact with others, and from informal interviews. As a result of this process, the observer comes to empathize with the participants in the setting (Martindale, 1960:385-8) or, in other words, regarding the participants, he learns to take the various roles of the others (Mead, 1962:253-5).

Depending upon his approach and the characteristics of the particular setting in which he is working, the participant observer may take an active part or he may emphasize observation. In this research, I tended to find my behavior more toward the participant-as-observer end of the continuum (Pearsall, 1970:342-3). That is, I did become involved in the activities of the members of the settings but I was not a quasi-employee. I interacted with the participants as they went about their activities and lent them a hand toward accomplishing their tasks at various times. For example, I sometimes washed windows, fetched wrenches or held parts in place while participants screwed in the bolts.

The participant observer differs from a participant in the setting in that he must maintain his outsider's

perspective (Trice, 1970:81). The outside perspective may be brought to bear at various times, particularly when the observer is away from the setting and consciously attempts to understand what he has seen or experienced in the setting. The outsider's view is also important during times of observation in order to enable the researcher to consciously examine the activity of the setting and probe for data. To whatever degree the field worker is accepted by the participants and interacts with them in the setting, it is important that he never entirely becomes part of the setting, "goes native," or loses his outside perspective on the setting.

The chief advantage of the technique of participant observation is that it allows the detailed observation of the members and their behavior in natural settings. Their activity is occurring in a context which has meaning and purpose for them. Using this technique, it is possible directly to observe the behavior of the participants and what they say is true or should be done. Particularly when the research is carried out over an extended period, the participants' individually and collectively expressed norms can be compared with their actual behavior or verbally expressed norms and values in other situations and at other times. Thus some measure of protection against conscious or unconscious dissembling is gained in the field study.

Participant observation meshes well with other modes of collecting data including the interview and "unobtrusive measures" (Webb, et al., 1966) such as written records. In this research, alternative modes of collecting data (Webb, et al., 1966:65-82, 1-5; Glaser and Strauss, 1967:161-7) were informally interviewing customers in the service stations studied and customers of other stations and researching trade magazines and legal documents. The participants in the settings also served as informants providing data on past and current events that I did not directly observe (McCall and Simmons, 1969:4; Zelditch, 1970:224-5).

Among the variants of participant observation technique is that in which the researcher begins his study of the research setting with an open mind rather than with a previously conceived set of concepts and hypotheses (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:2-6; Becker, 1970:189-90). The researcher is thus able to seek concepts implicitly or explicitly used by the participants or which explain or describe what he has observed. Though such concepts may come from previously existing theory, they possess an added "fit" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:3) or are consistent with and explain what has been observed. This approach and other features of participant observation which I have discussed enabled me to begin my study of service stations and to make sociological sense of and describe what I observed.

B. Generating Substantive Theory from Qualitative Data

Glaser and Strauss (1967:28-31; 1970:289ff) see that one purpose of qualitative sociological research is to produce substantive sociological theory that includes the important features of the social setting. In their view the sociologist should do more than describe one or more groups. Rather, sociologists should seek to develop theories which lead to understanding groups of a particular genre by consciously selecting such groups for study which will help develop the emerging theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:58-60). In other words, rather than seeking a statistically valid sample, the sociologist should focus on groups which will lead to the development--not the verification--of his theory.

The process of developing grounded substantive theory begins with the process of abstracting concepts (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:35-9) from the data--observable behavior or symbols which represent observable, but not observed, objects, abstract concepts, feelings and meanings of the participants (Bruyn, 1970:310-4). Glaser and Strauss (1967:3-6) argue that allowing such concepts to form during observation is superior to attempting to apply to the setting a limited number of concepts from a previously existing formal theory. Such concepts may not be evident

in the setting, they may exist in modified form, or they may not be important even if they are represented in some form.

The second stage in the development of grounded substantive theory is the uncovering of the relationships among concepts, i.e., developing hypotheses (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:39-40). These hypotheses are continuously modified and their range of applicability is systematically ascertained by further research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 55-8). Efforts to verify hypotheses, while important, are secondary to the generation of hypotheses.

The third stage of developing grounded substantive theory is the integration of the related hypotheses into a theoretical system with hypotheses at varying levels of generality (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:40-2). Because such theory is developed from observations of a specific social setting, it ought to "fit" and be useful in understanding the particular substantive area. Concepts and hypotheses from existing formal theory may be used in the construction of grounded theory provided they seem appropriate to the researcher (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:41).

While the grounded theories developed for particular substantive areas are very useful within limited areas, the more complete development of sociological theory requires that similar concepts be identified across diverse substantive settings, e.g., uncertainty in medicine,

service stations, and similar settings. The development of formal theories relating to particular conceptual categories is thus an inductive process beginning with the study of particular categories of social organization (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:49-55).

The present study is an attempt to develop substantive theory in a particular kind of service station--those operated by independent small businessmen who are called dealers. The following section describes the two dealer-operated service stations most intensively studied in this research.

C. The Research

The research was conducted primarily in two small to medium sized dealer-operated service stations.¹ These two stations were in different cities approximately 150 miles apart. One station, Stan's National Oil Station, was chosen because it was convenient to study and it was affected by the gasoline shortage of 1973. The other station, Smitty's Regional Oil Station, was chosen because it differed in several important respects from Stan's, the first-studied station.

Other data came from several visits to another service station, observations of still other service

¹The names of the dealers, the oil companies, and the other participants in the service stations are fictitious.

stations, and random, informal interviews with customers of the intensively-studied service stations, customers of still other service stations and men who had worked in service stations or garages. I also read trade publications, and books containing information about service stations. These sources served both as leads to understanding the station setting and as data to support or modify my developing hypotheses.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will describe the two stations in which the bulk of the observations took place and briefly compare the two research settings.

1. Stan's National Oil Station

a) The Locality

Stan's National Oil Station is located on the fringe of a midwestern metropolitan center. The general area is a rapidly developing one, with new housing being the main thrust. The station is in a small cluster of independently owned small businesses that included a steak house and lounge and another building which was for some time a furniture store and beauty shop. During the later stages of the research both of these buildings became topless go-go bars. A roller rink was also constructed next door to the station during the period of the research.

The paved road on which these businesses front was at one time a heavily traveled highway, but the construction

of a newer and straighter route out of the metropolitan area has left this road to primarily local traffic. Prior to this, Stan's station, with a different owner, was a truck-stop. When the change of highway occurred, the station was closed for several years before Stan bought it and reopened it.

There is considerable new housing in the immediate area of the station. Just over the hill to the south, several hundred acres have been covered with single family dwellings. About 1,500 acres of land lying to the north of the station has been purchased by developers who plan to build single-unit dwellings, apartments, and condominiums. This stretches for about two miles beyond the station, so there is potential for greater traffic on the old highway.

Presently, there still is a mix of agriculture with new houses. Land that has not been developed is still used for farming, but agricultural use seems to be declining rapidly.

Of the other businesses in the immediate area, one had been quite successful. It was a restaurant and bar which has existed ten years or more. Many of the cars parked there had license plates that indicated that patrons came from all over the metropolitan area. Currently both of the topless go-go bars have thriving businesses. Parking lots around them overflow most nights. The crowds

drawn by these other businesses have some influence on Stan's station business. This was particularly noticeable when gasoline was in short supply. Stan then closed for business earlier in the evening in order to avoid the crowds at these places so his supply of fuel would be conserved for his regular customers.

The only service station competition in the immediate area is a small one about half a mile down the road. This station is affiliated with another major oil company and has been operating marginally for a number of years. It has been operated by one man, the owner, who lives with his wife in the back part of the station. This station sells bread, milk, and lawn mowers and handles the metropolitan area evening papers and the major Sunday newspapers in the area, in addition to selling gasoline and doing service work for customers.

b) The Station

Stan's station is constructed of concrete blocks painted white with red trim. It has two parts. The smaller and older section contains the office--Stan refers to it as the sales room--and the restrooms. The larger shop addition was built when Stan reopened the station about six years ago. There are three large plate glass windows in the office which afford an almost complete view of the driveway. In the front of the shop section

there are two large wooden overhead shop doors with windows on one level of the panels.

Near the office is a tall, white wooden fence trimmed in red. This fence surrounds the area directly over the buried gasoline storage tanks. There are three of these tanks, each of which has a capacity of 4,000 gallons. That this station has a third tank which had not been recently used was a definite asset to Stan in the fall of 1974, when he was required to sell non-leaded gasoline for the 1975 model cars with catalytic converters. Stan did not have to install a third tank as was the case at many stations. Nor did he need to drop sales of premium gasoline and lose his customers whose cars required it.

The fuel pumps are directly in front of the office: two pumps on each of two islands. The pumps are of a recent and clean design but are not the latest used by National Oil. The pumps are in the open, i.e., they do not have a canopy over them. This means that during rain storms, the personnel must stand in the rain while cars are being filled with fuel. During the hours of darkness, when the station is open, the area around the pumps is lighted by overhead florescent lights.

The driveway is a large one, constructed of concrete, some of which is starting to crumble. The size and shape of the driveway are likely related to the fact that the

station was once a truck stop and needed room to park trucks and to allow large trucks to get on and off the highway easily.

The interior of Stan's station and some of the furnishings are painted in the standard National Oil interior color. In the office, one can often find Stan sitting in an office chair behind a greenish-gray, metal desk with worn paint. Separating this office from other parts of the station is a painted wooden counter with a lever-operated cash register set into the counter's plastic-laminated top. There are miscellaneous small automotive parts and supplies, grease rags and a steel fishing rod stored in a wooden, glass-fronted display case. Near the front window is an old safe secured by a padlock which is itself well protected from hammer blows by a sturdy steel box welded to the safe door. Around the back side of the office are open shelves storing headlights, filters, and various auto parts and accessories.

Customers may purchase candy bars or soft drinks from vending machines in the office. The soft drink vending machine--called the pop machine--is a fairly recent model advertising one of the major cola brands. Stan owns this machine and keeps it filled. Behind the machine is a stack of cans of unrefrigerated soft drink. The candy bar

vending machine--called the candy machine--is owned and maintained by a small businessman who comes by weekly to service it.

During the early part of the research, there was a cigarette vending machine--called a cigarette machine--which stood between the soft drink machine and the candy machine. This machine was old and beat up. The front cover was "jimmied up", indicating that it had been broken into some time in the past. This machine was owned and serviced by a large vending machine company from the city. Later it was taken out and Stan sold a few of the more popular brands from a drawer in the counter.

Stan makes no profit from the candy machine and the cigarette machines. Stan and his son, Bob, see such vending machines as a necessary customer service, but not profitable even when Stan owns the machines. They see that people expect to be able to buy candy, soft drinks, and cigarettes in the service station.

A coffee pot sits in the corner of the office. Stan and Bob both drink several partly full cups of coffee each day and some customers also help themselves.

Out in the shop there are the common items of equipment found in service stations: a tire changing machine, a sturdy workbench, an air compressor, welders, automotive engine analyzers, lubrication equipment, a hoist, a wheel balancer and many other hand and small power tools. This

equipment is used in the general automotive service and minor repair work carried out in the station.

Often at the station is Stan's older, four-wheel drive pickup which he drives during inclement weather and with which he pushes snow off the driveway in the winter. He also has a ten-year-old pickup which he uses for most service calls and for commuting.

c) The Participants

There are three people who spend considerable time in this setting and who are important figures in it. The central figure is, of course, Stan. He is the owner of the station and he actively runs it. He has operated his own service stations since the completion of a tour of duty with the Air Force during the Second World War. He has operated stations in four other locations. The immediately preceding one was a large station in the downtown area which was leased from National Oil. Stan had five or six employees at this station. It was razed as part of downtown urban renewal.

Stan is about fifty years old. He is a somewhat "salty," but not vulgar character and often is a bit gruff, particularly with strangers, people who think they can get some free advice from him, some salesmen, or when he is very busy. But to his friends, relatives and loyal customers, he displays considerable warmth and good humor. During the course of the research he began to have some

pain in one leg which turned out to be a slipped disk in his back. For a period of about eighteen months he endured severe pain and part of the time was unable to work on the driveway. During this period, Bob, Stan's son, did most of the service work and opened the station in the morning. Stan's retired father began delivering most of the parts and supplies needed by Bob to run the station. Stan lost weight and took on a haggard look during the worst months. He resisted the pressures of some of his friends and relatives to have surgery on his back and eventually his condition improved. However, he still has some pain and must limit his activities.

Stan's son, Bob, is also an important figure in that he spends many hours per week working at the station making it possible to keep it open the twelve-to-fourteen-and-one-half-hour days, six or seven days a week. Bob is friendly, courteous, reliable and trustworthy. In general, he seems to be a definite asset to the business. He has worked in his father's stations most of his working life, except during military duty in Viet Nam. He is in his late twenties, unmarried, and lives with his parents.

Bob attended an automotive trade school in the metropolitan area for a time, but he does not much care for school of any kind. He is, however, not dull, but has done reading on his own on various topics and is well-informed about current events.

A third character of some importance is Stan's retired father. He comes frequently in the mornings and usually brings a bag of doughnuts or bismarcks. Often, he also brings some of the repair parts from the supplier that Stan needs for the day's work. This saves a trip into town and the time it would take for either Stan or Bob to go. He is a widower and seems to have little else to do. He performs similar errands for Stan's brother who also runs a service station.

When I first began the research, Stan made a comment about the service station taking the place of the general store as a gathering place. At least to a limited extent, this appears to be true although Stan's station is probably not as convenient a gathering place as would be a station near the downtown area.

Those who frequent the station for diversion and conversation are a varied lot. Dave Dickerson, an easy going, independent sort of person hung around the station frequently before he moved out of the area. He is a mechanic, a body and fender man, a welder, and a tree cutter among other things. He seldom held any job for very long and made much of his income by cutting trees and other odd jobs, usually automotive related. He did welding and helped Stan and Bob with other jobs around the station as well as providing them with a visitor during slow times.

He owns some junk behind the station that was to be in only temporary storage, but which he never got around to doing anything about.

Others who have spent considerable time around the station include a blue-collar worker at a large military base and an investment broker who was believed to make a good living. Sometimes the businessman who owns and services the candy vending machine spends an hour visiting with Stan and Bob about science fiction or geology.

There are also several relatives of Stan's who come out from the city to get their gas from him. These often stay for half an hour to an hour and have a cup of coffee if the station is not too busy. If they attempt to leave without stopping to visit and have a cup of coffee, Stan issues them a forceful invitation.

A number of customers remain to visit for a while when they stop in. These tend to be older men, many of which have been Stan's customers for years. Most of them seem to be farmers or working class, but there is a government veterinarian and a retired banker as well as a lawyer who sometimes comes in for a short visit. Additionally, there are a number of young boys who ride their bicycles or walk in to get candy bars or soft drinks from the vending machines.

2. Smitty's Regional Oil Station

a) The Locality

Smitty's Regional Oil service station is in University Town, a small city which is important as an education, research and government center. The station is located at a busy intersection where a north-south highway jogs west on the major east-west thoroughfare of the city. The traffic which passes the station primarily consists of intra-city motorists and many commuters who work in a larger city to the south. Most of the long distance traffic is now carried by an interstate highway a few miles to the east.

There are three other stations on the corner with Smitty's. Two are large and modern. To the south on the highway, there are five stations, two of which are cut-rate operations. To the west, there are ten, two of which might also be called cut-rates. On the north, there are two stations on the other side of the business district. On the east, there is one cut-rate station eight blocks away. Competition with other service stations is keen in both gasoline price and service.

b) The Station

Smitty's Regional Oil station is a rectangular, concrete block building containing an office, two service stalls and a wash stall. It is veneered with porcelainized

metal panels on the front and the two ends. This veneer dates back fifteen to twenty years. The shop doors are aluminum and glass and are a few years newer than the veneer. The office area is in the southwest corner of the building and the south and west walls of the office are largely glass.

There are two pump islands: one directly to the south of the office running east and west and one to the west of the office running north and south. Both islands are what seems to the observer to be an unusually long distance from the station building. There almost seems to be enough room for another set of islands between the existing pump islands and the station building itself. Perhaps because the two islands are at right angles to each other, the extra room is needed to avoid traffic congestion. The island to the west had in the past been and in September, 1974, became again a mini-service lane where customers do not get their oil checked or their windows washed. Here the price of the gasoline is two cents cheaper than at the full-service pumps in the island to the south. Both of the islands are illuminated during the evening hours by overhead fluorescent lights.

The station is bounded on three sides by streets--one of them a relatively minor short street that continues as an alley across the street to the south. On the corner stands the station's sign--an internally-lit plastic sign

with "Regional Oil" in its distinctive lettering set out on the face and Regional Oil's logo above the name. The sign stands on a black post and its colors are those of Regional Oil, the same color scheme found throughout the station.

Near the door, inside the office of Smitty's Regional Oil station, there is an old-style safe. The cash register sits on top of the safe. The cash register is electrically operated and prints out a tape showing each transaction, whether it is a sale, a payment or even if the cash drawer has been opened to make change.

Sitting next to the safe and the cash register along the south window is a metal stand with tubular legs which provides counter space for customers to write out checks. On this stand is also the credit card imprinter.

Along the west wall, a yellow metal cabinet on wheels containing windshield wiper blades and associated repair parts rests. Next to the windshield wiper blade sales cabinet stands a recent-model cigarette vending machine with a wood-grained plastic front. Smitty owns the cigarette machine, but does not see it to be profitable; rather it is a convenience for his customers.

Beside the cigarette machine, hanging on the wall, is the public telephone. This is used frequently by strangers in the station, people who come off the street

to make a call and sometimes by occasional customers. Regular customers usually use the station's phone in the back room free.

Along the north wall of the office is a display unit with a storage area at the bottom and a set of shelves on both sides of a perforated hardboard center panel. On the shelves there are various kinds of oil and gasoline additives, waxes, brake fluids, etc., most of which are Wynns brand. On the perforated hardboard panel hang different kinds of work gloves, flashlight batteries, flashlights, and an automotive light bulb display case. In the storage cabinets underneath are stored items such as muffler clamps, radiator caps, and the rainwear worn by the station's employees on rainy days.

On the east wall of the office, next to the shelves, is a window which overlooks the shop. Under the window is a ledge on which is kept the automotive service manuals and the flat-rate manuals. The automotive service manuals were seldom used while I was there although a separate reference book kept in the shop was often used. This reference book contains specifications for tune-ups and lubrication for most cars. The flat-rate manuals were used regularly to price minor repair work. Also on this shelf is a pile of glossy periodicals such as Chilton's Motor Age, Champion's Service Corner, Motorcraft's Shop Tips, Mopar's Spark Lines and Service Station Management.

The pages of these magazines are filled with advertisements for the magazine sponsor's products, articles on tune-ups, and other repair procedures. Articles describe the high profits that can be obtained by vigorous sales efforts centered around the sponsor's products. Such periodicals are sent free of charge to service stations.

Smitty could often be found sitting at his old wooden desk in the middle of the office working on the books, figuring invoices for service and repair work, watching the drive, or talking to a customer. On the desk are an adding machine and a gray metal card file. The card file is used to keep the various account files. The single drawer is about fifteen inches deep and is almost full. This reflects the fact that about fifty percent of Smitty's business is on credit, both commercial and private accounts.

The service shop has two stalls, each with its own overhead aluminum and glass door leading to the drive and its own hoist. In the service stall next to the office, there is a double-beam type hoist which lifts at the axles. This is used primarily for pickup trucks, vans, older cars and also older American Motors cars. In the second stall, there is one of the newer spider type hoists which is used for most automobile service work. Extending beyond the shop is the wash stall which has a floor drain and its own glass and aluminum overhead door opening to

the driveway. It is sometimes used for service work if the other stalls are busy and for small trucks or vans.

Smitty's shop seems to be ordinary for medium-sized stations. Perhaps it is a little better equipped than average and reflects the emphasis Smitty places on service and minor repair work.

Most of the phone calls to the station are taken at the wall phone without a dial which hangs over a slanted-top, wall desk in the shop. Service appointments are recorded on a pad on this desk. Outgoing calls are made from an extension in the storage room, out of sight and unknown to all but some of the regular customers. Others use the pay telephone in the office.

Smitty stocks lines of radiator hoses, fan belts, filters, tires, batteries, spark plugs, ignition parts, and miscellaneous supplies. Most of these are stored in the shop in cabinets, on shelves or hung on the wall. Several salesmen regularly visit the station to check these stocks and order replacements for items that have been used.

c) The Participants

The two most important participants in Smitty's Regional Oil station are Smitty himself and his brother, C. J.. Smitty has operated the station for twenty-eight years. Prior to managing this station, he had a hitch in the military service during the Second World War. In the

service, he attained a supervisory rank. He also worked for a time in grocery stores in a nearby town and in University Town. He originally was from the southern part of the state and moved to the University Town area as a young man.

Smitty likes to have money. He said several times that he made good money in the station for a man with his education, but that he had to work long, hard hours for it. He said he would not have wanted it any other way. He also likes to spend his money although he has a comfortable house paid for and money invested in mutual-fund stocks which, for a time during the research, had dropped to about one-fourth of their highest value. The value of the stocks was considerably below what Smitty had paid for some of them. This, coupled with the actions of Regional Oil Corporation to push Smitty out of the station so that it could install a company-operated station was a constant worry for him during the research.

In early 1974, Regional Oil advised Smitty that his station lease was being cancelled. He opposed the different moves of Regional Oil to evict him by appealing for help from the Federal Energy Administration (FEA) regional office and the state association of service station operators. In late summer, 1975, notice came that he was to be out in early spring, 1976. However, in the meantime

Regional Oil was sold to another oil company and the eviction was delayed until the end of July, 1976.

Smitty seems to enjoy reasonably good health for a man of his age. He has stomach trouble which seemed to get worse as time went along. At times he seemed to be miserable and relatively uncommunicative. The stress and uncertainty about being evicted and his future probably were contributing factors.

Before the station closed, Smitty had opportunities to lease two or three other stations, to manage his current location as a company-operated station, or to become the service manager at a local automobile dealership. Because of the unsettled nature of dealer-operated service stations, he chose the latter.

C. J. Smith, Smitty's older brother, is the only full-time, year-around employee of the station. He farmed in the southern part of the state until about sixteen years ago when Smitty convinced him to come to work with him. The two seem to have a good working relationship. C. J. grumbles and bitches at times, but this seems to be primarily a front as he usually grins from behind it and goes about his work doing a careful job--not the kind of work which would be expected of a disgruntled employee. C. J. gets along very well with most customers. He visits politely with the women customers and often jokes with the men. Besides pumping gasoline and doing mechanical work,

C. J. helps Smitty with various kinds of tasks. He is in charge when Smitty is absent, dealing with salespeople, customers, minor complaints, ordering parts, etc. He has a good understanding of what Smitty would want done in most cases and avoids making decisions in other cases. He helps Smitty with recordkeeping and other special tasks. He will also take on small jobs for the shop even if Smitty is there. Examples of things he promises customers to undertake are service work, tire repair and tune-ups. C. J. does very little vehicle washing and other jobs considered undesirable. These are assigned to those of lower rank even if there is no other work in the shop although C. J. will sometimes help with these if he feels like it.

The other employees of the station during the observation period were part-time men who were either students or employed at the University. Some of the students worked full-time during all or part of the summer, however.

Dick Ford, who worked on the evening shift at the University, was one of the important part-time employees until he went on the day shift. He worked five mornings a week during the period of the most intensive fieldwork. Dick is middle aged and had worked for Smitty full-time in the past. He is an excellent mechanic, but is not punctual in coming to work. This was a bit of an irritation to Smitty, but he tolerated it since Dick is a good

mechanic and Smitty didn't feel that with his short term lease he could hire a good, experienced, full-time mechanic. Dick is a friendly and pleasant man who seems to be well-liked by the other participants and the customers.

Another part-time employee is a student named Larry Olson. Larry was an engineering student who worked for Smitty full-time during the summers and part-time during the rest of the year until he graduated in March, 1975. During the research, although he still did vehicle washing, Larry was progressively given more opportunity for doing the more prestigious jobs such as tune-ups. Part of the rise in prestige can be attributed to the hiring of another student, Tim, who was then at the bottom of the social order. The hiring of Tim was brought about by Dick's being placed on the day shift at his full-time employment for a while; thus, he could no longer work at the station. Larry seemed to be happier and more motivated to work when he rose in the hierarchy although he seemed pleasant and self-motivated before.

Tim Dana, also an engineering student, was at the bottom of the hierarchy the entire time he worked at the station. As the time for the station to close permanently approached, only he and C. J. were left as employees. Also, Smitty began hiring high school and college students on Saturday to wash the utility company vehicles. It was

interesting to watch Tim develop as an employee. Smitty is a good manager and seems to be able to motivate his employees. Tim was primarily the "flunky" while Larry was there. This means that he did the lowest prestige jobs such as vehicle washing although Larry helped with this. All the others in the shop felt free to give him directions. At first, he required considerable supervision in order to produce good results. In one case he washed the car of a customer but did not wash the parts of the wheel covers that were obscured by the fender skirts. When Smitty discovered this, he was infuriated. He wasn't feeling very well that day as he had what he thought was the flu, but he grabbed a bucket of water and finished the job himself since Tim had already gone to class. However, with experience, Tim developed some measure of competence in the kind of automotive work done in the station and became accepted as hard working.

There are a few former employees of the station who still purchase their gasoline at the station. Some do things like pump their own gasoline and they tend to have accounts with Smitty. They tend to stand around and talk a little more than the average customer, but otherwise they seem very little different than other steady customers.

Smitty's Regional Oil station and Stan's National Oil station are similar in several ways, but they also differ in significant ways.

3. A Comparison of the Research Settings

To further describe the research settings, I will briefly compare some of the features of the two stations which are relevant to understanding their social organization. The dimensions to be considered in this section are ownership of the facility, the station location, and views and attitudes of the participants, particularly those of the station operator.

a) Ownership of the Physical Facility

The two major research settings differ on this dimension in that Stan is the owner of his station and Smitty leases his from Regional Oil. This difference in ownership has important implications for the relationship between the station operator and representatives of the oil company with which the station is affiliated. In either case, the operators or dealers are small businessmen who have some protection from many kinds of interference from oil companies by virtue of anti-trust laws (Neale, 1968:190-9). The dealers have some latitude with regard to certain things such as cleanliness of the station and considerable latitude in business practices such as labor charges, credit, kinds of service work rendered and brands of tires, batteries, and accessories sold.

In the case of the leased station, however, the oil company's district representative has a much closer and

more important position in the station. The lease or franchise agreement commonly includes a different method of paying for the gasoline sold for a leased station than for an owned station. The lease also contains other clauses like those which specify the minimum hours of operation. Thus, the district representative has a much more active supervisory role in a leased station.

At a leased station, the fuel in the gasoline storage tanks is usually owned by the oil company and the dealer pays the company at weekly intervals for the amount of gasoline sold. In the case of Smitty and other lessees, the district representative conducts regular audits-- usually monthly--in which the amount of fuel delivered to the station is compared with the amount sold and that which remains in the tanks. The monthly audit insures that the dealer does not get far behind in his payments to the company. This differs from Stan's and other open-account dealers' case in that the fuel is paid for at the time of delivery and the district representative has no concern for accountability.

Another reason for greater participation of the company representative in leased service stations is that the oil company has a greater financial interest in a station which it owns. This is reflected in clauses in the lease such as those relating to minimum hours of operation.

Rent on a leased station is commonly based directly on the number of gallons of gasoline sold. This charge usually is about one-and-one-half to two cents per gallon (Reid, 1975:42-3), though some leases stipulate a minimum monthly rent. The district representative has responsibility to see that the dealer lives up to the terms of the lease. The oil company which owns a station also has an interest in the reputation of a station in that its future profitability may be affected by the actions of the lessee.

In either the leased or the dealer-owned station, the oil company has an interest in the image of its brand name with the motoring public. Thus, cleanliness of the station and the general courtesy of its participants toward customers is of concern to the oil company and this concern is attended to by the district representative.

b) Location of the Station

Both of the stations studied are located either in or very near cities. Stan's station is located in an area of lower population density, has less traffic passing the station, and is a greater distance from the business center of the city than is Smitty's.

Despite the difference in locations, it seems that the regular customers are not greatly different at the two stations. At both stations there seems to be a mix

of working-class people, retired persons, middle-class people and professionals such as doctors and lawyers. Stan seems to have more farmers as customers, but Smitty has a few of these, though it is often difficult to distinguish farmers from other people unless they are seen in their pickups and work clothes.

One of the more significant differences in the customers is that Smitty has a large proportion of his patronage from business firms ranging from a large construction firm and one of the utilities serving the city to small one- and two-man contractor firms and retail businesses. These commercial accounts are about one-half of Smitty's volume. A significant number of people who operate commercial vehicles as well as business owners and managers also do their private trading at Smitty's station.

c) Attitudes of the Participants

The attitudes of the participants in the two station settings are remarkably similar in most respects but differ somewhat in their views of shop work in particular. This difference in the meaning of shop work seems to be primarily one of degree of emphasis and apparently arises out of other differences in the settings. Stan and Bob see most kinds of service work, minor repair and other work as being a service for their customers, particularly their

loyal, regular customers. Service and repair work and especially tire work are not seen to be profitable in themselves, but rather are viewed as part of a business enterprise that includes the sale of gasoline, tune-ups, and other work which is itself profitable. Some activities, such as service work, are not seen to pay their own way even though there is a charge for them and others, such as minor adjustments and very minor repairs, are not charged for at all.

Since certain of these services are rendered for little or no cost to the loyal, regular customers because of the other business they bring to the station, it is felt by the participants that other customers cannot be charged more for the same work. This is because charging more than one price for the same work might lead to a reputation for unfairness among patrons who were not regular customers. In order to skirt this dilemma, Stan avoids doing most kinds of service and repair work for other than his loyal, regular customers. While he will not flatly refuse those who buy some of their gas from him, he is often "too busy" to do the work when the customer wants it done.

Smitty makes the same distinction. Some kinds of tasks such as the servicing of a truck are reserved only for loyal, regular customers. But Smitty, in general, charges all customers for service and repair work. Smitty also advertises with a sign posted on the station

for minor mechanical work. He and one other and usually two other people are at the station during most of the day and Smitty likes to see his employees working because this makes money for him. He is located near auto supply stores and they will deliver parts or filters in a few minutes if they have the items in stock. Thus, Smitty willingly accepts most minor repair jobs and service work. However, very thorough cleanups of the interiors of vehicles and oiling door hinges seem to be reserved for his loyal, regular customers and there is no charge for such service above and beyond the regular fee for the particular work being done at the time. Smitty also tries to avoid doing certain kinds of work for non-customers, e.g., a telephoned-in appointment for the lubrication of a dairy delivery truck was accepted because the participant who answered the telephone mistook the caller for one of the regular customers. The work was accomplished, albeit grudgingly, and there was consensus that in the future such calls would be more carefully screened.

Differences in location, availability of personnel, ready assessibility of repair parts and differences in

emphasis in the meaning of service work may account for part of the differences between the two stations with regard to shopwork.¹

The stations described in this chapter represent two cases of one type of station--the dealer-operated service station. In the next chapter, I will attempt to place the two stations into the larger framework of stations in general and to discuss typical features of dealer-operated service stations.

¹Stan indicated that when he ran the larger downtown station which had several persons on the payroll, he had a view similar to that of Smitty.

Chapter II

THE SERVICE STATION SETTING

Stations differ in many ways. In the first part of this chapter, I will discuss some ways to classify them and in the second section, I will attempt to describe some typical features of dealer-operated stations.

A. Varieties of Stations

Among the ways in which stations may be categorized are according to the relationship between the management and those who actually operate the station, whether or not the station has an oil company brand, the kind of service arrangement, and the size of the station. These categories are not mutually exclusive, nor are they exhaustive. The purpose for examining them is to indicate the range and to place the dealer-operated station in context.

1. Dealer-Operated vs. Salary-Operated Stations

This category generally distinguishes between stations which are operated directly by a proprietor and those which are operated by salaried employees. The former are called dealer-operated stations and the latter salary-operated stations. In most dealer-operated stations, the proprietor or dealer leases the station building from an oil company or a wholesaler and is a relatively independent,

small businessman. Approximately ninety percent of all stations are owned by the fifteen largest oil companies (National Petroleum News, 1975c:11). Thus, most dealers lease their stations from one of the major oil companies. The remainder lease their stations from one of the smaller oil companies, from a jobber or wholesaler, or they may own their station or lease from a source which is separate from the source of their gasoline supply, e.g., a retired dealer or his widow.

In salary-operated stations, the man in charge of the day-to-day operation is a manager who is an employee earning a base salary of eight-or-more-thousand dollars per year. The manager may also receive a commission on gasoline sold and other benefits such as life and medical insurance. Some such managers earn as much as forty-five thousand dollars per year (Reid, 1976a:65). Salary-operated stations are also called salaried stations, company-operated stations or company stations. The latter two terms apply only to stations owned and managed for an oil company.

Dealers affiliated with major oil companies sometimes apply the pejorative term "cut-rate station" or just "cut-rate" to any station which offers little in the way of service but which sells gasoline at a lower price than

full-service, dealer-operated stations.¹ Though most cut-rates are salary-operated, some are dealer operated. Cut-rates are likely to be affiliated with one of the smaller oil companies, but many operate under a private brand name, a secondary brand name, or without brand identification.

In recent years there has been a rapid increase in the number of large, salary-operated stations (National Petroleum News, 1976a:55-6) including those owned and operated by the largest oil companies (Reid, 1976c:60).² Estimates of the total number of stations (Mid-May Fact-book Issue of the National Petroleum News, 1975:94) and the number of dealer-operated stations (Ligon and Pester, 1976:45) indicate that about 35-40 percent of stations are salary-operated.

2. Branded vs. Unbranded Stations

The difference between branded and unbranded stations lies in whether or not the station sells a particular brand of gasoline, usually that of a particular oil company such as Amoco, Texaco, Conoco, as contrasted with no brand

¹Stan distinguishes between service stations and gas stations. The former offer a range of services for customers. The latter are primarily a source of gasoline and are viewed somewhat negatively by Stan.

²Based on a survey by Lundberg Survey, Inc., a "California-based price-reporting and market-evaluation company", carried out during the Spring of 1976.

name, as one might find at "Joe's Quick Stop Service." The primary difference between the branded and unbranded gasolines is that the branded gasoline may contain additives mixed into the gasoline at the supplying terminal, and may also be fresher. Unbranded gasolines are often the excess gasoline bought from a number of suppliers.

Besides the brands of the oil companies with refineries, there are secondary brands such as Skelly Oil's "Surfco" (Reid, 1975:42) which are owned by major oil companies, but not identified with the company. There are also private brands which are sometimes used by large jobbers who may operate a number of salary-operated stations. As a general rule, branded stations associated with major oil companies are likely to be dealer-operated, while those which operate under secondary brands or private brands are likely to be salary-operated, but there are many exceptions. Branded stations may be privately owned, but probably few stations owned by oil companies are unbranded.

Most gasoline is sold through stations with an oil company brand although recently this has been declining and more oil companies are marketing gasoline under secondary and local brands (Greenes, 1976:40). Only about eleven percent of gasoline is sold through "private, unbranded outlets" (National Petroleum News, 1976c:33).

3. Full-Service vs. Self-Service Pump Arrangements

The full-service pump arrangement for stations has been the most common in the past. Under this system, participants of the service station operate the gasoline pumps, clean automobile windows, check crankcase oil levels, and perform other small services for the motorist. In the past few years, laws in many states have been changed so that it has become legal to allow customers to dispense their own gasoline. Thus, in many stations, the participants merely collect money from customers and watch the driveway to discourage customers from driving off without paying. This system is called self-service.

There are two variations of these categories. One is called mini-service. Here the participants dispense the gasoline but do not perform any other service such as cleaning windows. This may appeal to motorists who would like to save money on gasoline but who do not care to operate the pumps themselves.

The other variation is the split-island arrangement where one island or part of an island is self-service or sometimes mini-service and the remainder of the pumps are full-service. Where this is the case, seventy to ninety percent of the gasoline sold by the station is likely to be self-service (National Petroleum News, 1976a:55).

The advantage of self-service arrangements are the lower labor costs that allow a lower, more competitive

price on the gasoline. Self-service stations are often classified as cut-rates because they are frequently very price competitive because of high volume, much lower labor cost, and smaller margin than full-service stations. The number of stations which have self-service gasoline seems to be rapidly increasing.

According to the Mid-May Factbook Issue of the National Petroleum News (1975:94) there were about 196,000 stations in the United States in 1974. In 1975, it was estimated that about 33,600 stations in the United States were self-service in either the split-island arrangement or are totally self-service (National Petroleum News, 1975c:11). This is about seventeen percent of the total. Of the stations owned by the major oil companies, about 27,200 had self-service or split-island arrangements (National Petroleum News, 1975c:11). This is approximately fifteen percent of the total. In April, 1976, a survey by Lundberg Survey, Inc. (reported in Reid, 1976c:60) reported that about thirty percent of the stations in the United States have self-service. This is evidence of the rapid increase between 1974 and 1975 in the number of stations offering self-service gasoline. The Lundberg survey also indicated that there is some regional variation in the percentage of stations with self-service, the highest being in the Rocky Mountains and on the West Coast and the lowest in the Midwest where it is about twenty-five percent of all

stations. In the case of the major oil companies, most of the stations with self-service have the split-island arrangements (Reid, 1976c:60).

In 1975, about twenty-nine percent of all gasoline sold in the United States was sold from stations which had self-service and split-island arrangements. About twenty-three percent of sales by major oil company stations are through stations with self-service pumps and about forty percent of sales by all other stations were through self-service pumps (National Petroleum News, 1975c:11). Based on these figures, one can conclude that stations with self-service tend to sell more gasoline than do full-service stations. This is especially true of stations which are not owned by major oil companies.

4. Size: Large vs. Small

In determining the size of a service station there are three factors to be considered: the volume of gasoline sold, the size of the service and repair business, and the size of any auxiliary business.

a) Volume of Gasoline Sold

Service stations vary greatly in the volume of gasoline they sell. The average of all types of stations has been estimated at between 28,000 gallons per month, based on an EPA survey, (National Petroleum News, 1975c: 13) to 30,000 gallons per month (National Petroleum News,

1975a:52). Averaged into these figures are the giant salary-operated company stations and unbranded, independent stations which sell over one million gallons per year. These latter are called "gas pumpers" in the trade, and more generally, along with smaller such stations, they are cut-rates. The average volume of the type of service station studied in this research is somewhat smaller. The National Petroleum News (1975c:13) reports that the average volume of dealer-operated, leased or lessee stations is about 24,000 gallons per month and of dealer-owned or leased from other than oil companies or open-account stations is about 21,000 gallons per month. This is an estimate based on all stations in the United States. William Zentner¹, estimates that the average volume of dealer-operated stations including both the lessee and open-account stations would be roughly 20,000 gallons per month in Iowa. With the more rural and small-town character of Iowa as compared to the United States population as a whole, the figure seems to be consistent with the other estimates.

On the other hand, the average of 20,000 to 24,000 gallons per month (240,000 to 288,000 gallons per year) may reflect a bias toward a smaller number of high volume

¹Executive Director of the Iowa Gasoline Dealers Association in a telephone interview, January, 1976.

stations. A newspaper report (Des Moines Register, July 1, 1974) indicates that about one-third of the stations in the country have a volume of 200,000 gallons or more per year. This is 16,700 gallons per month. This figure indicates that the median volume of dealer-operated stations, both lessee and open-account, would be below 15,000 gallons per month because the 200,000 gallon per year figure includes the salary-operated company stations, the unbranded independent stations, and stations operated by jobbers. All have significantly higher average volumes than do the dealer-operated stations operating under an oil company brand name (61,000, 55,000, and 32,000 gallons per month respectively compared with the 24,000 gallons per month for the lessee, dealer-operated stations and the 21,000 gallons per month for the dealer-owned stations) (National Petroleum News, 1975c:13).

Volume of gasoline sold is only one aspect of service station size. However, it is the most important for salary-operated stations which sell only gasoline and do not do service work.

b) Size of the Service and Repair Business

For most service stations, the service and repair business is important. In 1975, there were about 190,000 stations of all kinds in the United States, (Mid-May Factbook Issue of the National Petroleum News, 1975:94).

Of these, about sixty to sixty-five percent are dealer operated (based on an estimated number of dealers from Ligon and Pester, 1976:45). Most of these and some of the others do service and minor repair work to an extent. Service business can make a significant contribution to the total income of a station in many cases. The sale of gasoline and the service and repair business are interrelated in that people who buy gasoline at a dealer-operated station also tend to have service work and minor repair work done there. Because dealer-operated service stations usually have higher gasoline prices than cut-rate stations and because both dealers and customers feel that regular customers deserve special attention, it is to be expected that a higher volume of gasoline sales and a higher volume of service and repair work go hand in hand. Some stations such as Smitty's, however, stress service and repair work. Thus, these seem to be a more significant part of the operation than in the case of Stan's station where, except for regular customers, most requests for service and repair work are discouraged.

c) Size of Auxiliary Businesses

Some stations have major sideline or auxiliary businesses. A given station operator may sell lawn mowers, bicycles, groceries, or other things. He may rent moving equipment, do auto body work, run a restaurant

or engage in a variety of other activities on the premises of the station. For some stations, this may be a major part of the business operation while in others it may be insignificant. In dealer-operated stations, auxiliary businesses like lawn mower sales and service are common and fit well with other activities. The operation of a convenience grocery store--"C-store"--is probably more common to a company or salary-operated, self-service station. Other enterprises such as the rental of moving equipment seem to be characteristic of both dealer-operated and salary-operated stations.

The kind of service station focused on in this research is the dealer-operated station which has either a full-service or split-island arrangement. Such stations are likely to be branded, but not necessarily. The size may vary from small to large.

In the next section, I will describe a hypothetical dealer-operated service station in order to show some of the typical features of such stations.

B. Some Typical Characteristics of Dealer-Operated Service Stations

There are great differences among stations. The one thing that all stations have in common is that they all

pump gasoline.¹ Even limiting consideration to dealer-operated stations will do little to narrow the range of characteristics, but will make a discussion of typical features more meaningful because there will be more common ground. Because of the variability of dealer-operated stations, it is important to keep in mind that the purpose of this section is to describe some typical characteristics of dealer-operated stations. I might note the tentative nature of this section in that there seems to be a paucity of statistical data on the kinds of activities of participants in station social and economic organization and on demographic and social variables of the setting. While the present research sheds light on the typical characteristics of service stations, it is not designed to produce a statistical statement.

In this section, I will discuss some general features of dealer-operated service stations, some typical activities of the participants, and some of the important meanings held by participants.

1. Some General Features of Dealer-Operated Service Stations

The dealer-operated service station is likely to be leased from and affiliated with one of the major oil

¹William Zentner, Executive Director of the Iowa Gasoline Dealers Association in a telephone interview, January, 1976.

companies as they own ninety percent of all stations (National Petroleum News, 1975c:11). This is especially true since many smaller oil companies such as Vickers or Hudson and many of the larger jobbers, e.g. Pester, tend to be leaders in the trend toward salary-operated stations with self-service and other cost-cutting measures.

Dealer-operated service stations are likely to sell roughly 15,000 to 25,000 gallons of gasoline per month.¹ Service and repair work are likely to be an important part of the business. A minority of stations are likely to have a major auxiliary business.

Most dealer-operated service stations are only full-service with a growing percentage having the split-island arrangement.² Those which have a split-island arrangement will sell much of their gasoline through the self-service pumps and will have a higher volume than the strictly full-service stations. Many loyal, regular customers will purchase full-service gasoline.

Most dealer-operated stations will have a payroll (Mid-May Factbook Issue of the National Petroleum News, 1975:94) because the nature of the work makes it difficult for one man effectively to operate a service station by himself. The unpredictable nature of the workload and

¹Based on my earlier discussion on pages 44-45.

²Based on my earlier discussion on pages 42-43.

the fact that many jobs require more than one person are two important factors. Further, most service stations are open twelve to fifteen hours a day, six or seven days per week. In order to handle the workload and maintain fifty- to sixty-hour work weeks, most dealers are likely to have between one and five employees with many having more than that. However, an appreciable number of stations are operated solely by a dealer with no additional help. When there are employees there is likely to be considerable employee turnover as the hours are long, the pay usually low, and the work often unpleasant compared to other alternatives in business and industry. The employees may be involved in washing vehicles, working under dirty and dripping cars on the hoist, running in and out in inclement weather to wait on customers on the driveway, and the like. Most employees seem to be younger men. Coordination, supervision, and socialization of employees are likely to be major concerns of the dealer with a payroll.

The typical dealer probably has been in his station for several years. Dealer turnover rate varies with time and location. Estimates of dealer turnover range from fifty percent per year to twelve percent per year. Stan believes the turnover rate for the metropolitan area approaches fifty percent. Binsted (1975:31) estimates the rate at thirty-five percent. The American Petroleum

Institute (1971:303) conducted surveys of member companies on dealer turnover between 1958 and 1969. The annual turnover varied between twenty-eight percent and twenty-one percent for those years. These rates might be higher if smaller, cut-rate stations were included. William Zentner¹, the Executive Director of the Iowa Gasoline Dealers Association, estimated that member dealers have a turnover rate of about twelve percent annually. Members of the Association are more likely to be better established and thus less likely to fail.

In the last few years, there has been a rapid decrease in the total number of stations in the United States. In 1972, the number peaked at about 226,500. There was then a drop of 10,000 in 1973 and another 20,000 in 1974 (Mid-May Factbook Issue of the National Petroleum News, 1975: 94). Since then the decrease has continued, but the rate has slowed (National Petroleum News, 1976f:36-7). This indicates that the rate of dealer-turnover probably has increased in the past few years.

It is likely that much of the dealer turnover involves new dealers who are not successful and those who die or retire. Most dealers are likely to have five or more years tenure in their stations. The tenure of a dealer is important in that it takes time to build up a following

¹Telephone interview, January, 1976.

of loyal customers. While some dealers are able to buy into a business and thus begin with an already established clientele, the loyalty and trust of the customer is likely to be with the former dealer rather than with the station. The new dealer is still faced with the task of establishing the loyalty and trust of the customers. Both Stan and Smitty independently estimated that it would take five or more years of "cultivation" (Bigus, 1972:131-2) to establish a following of customers. Even then, there is turnover as customers move away, die, or become disgruntled. New customers must be cultivated to replace them. This is particularly important for stations which are not on major highways where the transient trade is important.

The relationship between the dealer and his customers develops over time. The dealer is more willing to perform certain kinds of tasks for the long-term, regular customer, such as those which are unprofitable, e.g., temporary exhaust system repairs, dangerous, e.g., tire work on two piece rims, disagreeable, e.g., changing the water pump on certain kinds of cars, or unlikely to be successful, e.g., wiring problems. The dealer may extend credit on a very informal basis, that is, even without a signature.

The long-time customer may bring in his automobile and instruct the dealer to take care of whatever it needs. This is contrasted to bringing in the automobile for

diagnosis, getting an explanation of the needed work, and authorizing only that work. The personnel at the station may not bother to save the replaced parts for the long-time customer's inspection.

By interacting over time, the customer and the dealer come to know and trust each other to some degree through a trial and error process. They also come to recognize certain areas where the other may not be trusted. Smitty noted that the only way one could find out if a customer was a good credit risk was to give him a try. This process is not entirely trial and error, however. Rather it seems to be influenced by the implicit assumptions and values of customers and participants. These are constructed of propositions derived from common stereotypes and some shrewd insights. Bob, in response to probing to uncover how he determined which customers needed to be watched to prevent them from stealing from the station, said, you can always tell because people who are real self-centered are the kind who will steal. They don't consider other people. They are not concerned about what it would do to the other person. They are only concerned about themselves. Relationships between customers and participants become particularistic (Parsons, 1951:62) with each having notions about how far and under what conditions the other may be trusted.

Any given, established station can be expected to have a range of customers from those with which there is a well-developed relationship to those with which interaction is on an impersonal level.

2. Activities of Station Participants

Dealer-operated stations seem to be involved in a wide variety of service and repair activities and auxiliary activities, as such, seem to be of minor importance. Depending upon personal proclivities of the particular dealer and the location and design of the station, a given dealer may specialize in one or two things such as wheel alignment, air conditioning service and repair, or automobile washing. Most stations can be expected to offer general service work, tuneups, minor repair, sale of tires, batteries, and accessories, and, at least for regular customers, road and starting service. Table I is a summary of many of the kinds of activities in which service stations may be involved. This does not exhaust all possibilities, nor can any given service station be expected to engage in all of them.

Estimates on the number of service stations of all kinds involved with service and repair work vary. Mark Emond (1975:75) TBA/Aftermarket Editor for National Petroleum News, estimates that more than 150,000 are "capable of doing service work". William Ramp, Marketing

TABLE I
TABLE OF SERVICE STATION ACTIVITIES^a

-
1. Sale of gasoline, other motor fuels, motor oil, and other lubricants
 2. Service and repair activities on automobiles and trucks
 - a) Service work:
 - oil changes
 - chassis lubrication
 - tire repair
 - wheel balancing
 - filter changes (air, oil, fuel and transmission)
 - driveway service (checking oil levels, coolant levels, belt and hose conditions, tire inflation and condition, washing windows)
 - front end alignment
 - b) Tuneups:
 - spark plug replacement
 - inspection, adjustment and/or replacement of other ignition parts
 - c) Minor repair and replacement of automotive components including:
 - fuel systems (carburetors, fuel pumps)
 - electrical systems (alternators, generators, regulators)
 - exhaust systems (exhaust pipes, mufflers, tail-pipes)
 - suspension systems (ball joints, tie rod ends, shock absorbers)
 - brake systems (brake shoes, wheel cylinders, master cylinders, adjusting mechanisms)
 - cooling system (water pumps, radiator caps, radiator and heater hoses)
 - emission control systems (PCV valves, diaphragms, solenoids, hoses)
 - miscellaneous other components
 - d) Retail sales and installation of tires, batteries and accessories (TBA)
-

^aBased in part on observation and in part on telephone directory advertisements.

TABLE I--Continued

- e) Towing, starting, and road service
 - f) State motor vehicle inspection
 - g) Air conditioning service and minor repair
 - h) Washing and polishing of automobiles
3. Auxiliary activities
- a) Retail sale of cigarettes, soft drinks and candy
 - b) Retail sale of groceries, ice, hardware, dry goods, etc.
 - c) Rental of moving equipment
 - d) Sale and/or repair of lawn mowers, snow blowers and other small engine powered equipment
 - e) Miscellaneous other activities ranging from major engine overhauls, auto body work, undercoating, tank wagon service, snow pushing, parking, restaurants, bicycle sales and repair.
-

Vice President of Applied Power, estimates that about 135,000 stations do service and repair work or sell tires, batteries, and accessories (TBA) (as reported in National Petroleum News, 1976d:96). Based on these estimates, it appears that about three-quarters of all service stations do service and repair work. Ramp estimates that of the 135,000 about "...91% do brake work, 95% do muffler work, and 94% do ignition work". This indicates that if service and repair work is provided at a service station, these kinds are likely to be carried out. Such a station is very likely also to do lubrication and oil changes and related services.

The social implications of the range of services offered by a given station center on the development of the relationship between the station personnel and the customer, particularly the loyal, regular customer. To be sure, not all of a dealer-operated station's customers are of the loyal, regular variety. Some customers will buy only part of their gasoline at a given station, may purchase part of their gasoline there and have part of their service work done there, or in some cases may only bring their car in for service work.

If a dealer offers a wide range of services to his customers and the customers use these services, it should increase the amount of interaction between the dealer and customer. Because of this greater interaction, it can be expected that the relationship will become more personal with each party becoming more aware of the personal characteristics of the other. Both parties will also become more aware of the social norms (Sherif and Sherif, 1956:240) of the other, particularly where the two parties come from different segments of society. Stan routinely test drives the cars of many of his customers because they believe he ought to do it. Specific group norms (Sherif and Sherif, 1956:240) will develop as a result of interaction in the context of a set of conditions such as relative power, prestige, and the value placed by the parties on the continuation of the relationship. Group norms arise

out of vague and general aspects of the relationship (Sherif and Sherif, 1956:266-8). Smitty waxes cars of a few, long-time customers because he feels that they have come to expect that from him. He does not see this as being profitable and thus would prefer not to do it. He indirectly refuses to wax the cars of other customers. As the customer and dealer interact and come to understand one another, they are likely either to come to like each other (Homans, 1950:111-2) or the relationship will cease and the customer will go elsewhere.

The successful dealer¹ must seek to build relationships with his customers unless he can compete with the cut-rates by having low prices himself. The process of building relationships is an active one in which the dealer attempts to attract customers with techniques such as quick and courteous service and extras such as cleaning windows when gasoline is purchased. Once customers have been attracted, the dealer may perform additional services such as cleaning interiors of cars at lubrication time, giving customers automotive-related advice, pick-up and delivery of automobiles at service time, etc. Bigus (1972:131-2) refers to techniques used to build customer loyalty as cultivating techniques.

¹Success being defined here as remaining in business.

Thus, the dealer who offers a wide variety of services to his customers has more opportunity to develop relationships with them and gain their loyalty. The relationship between loyal, regular customers and the station participants is quite likely to be personal though still basically of a secondary nature. This can be contrasted with the less personal quality of interaction in a larger salary-operated station where the customer makes only his gasoline purchases and the rest of his automotive needs are satisfied at other specialized business establishments.

3. Values and Meanings of Participants

The values and meanings held by the participants are important features of the service station setting affecting their behavior and thus relationships between the participants and their customers. I have identified two complexes of related philosophical beliefs, values, and norms. The first centers around the general context of meaning and the second around the social process of appreciation.

Both of these complexes fall under what Lofland (1971:24) calls meanings.

...The level of meanings has otherwise been called "culture," "values," "norms," "understandings," "social reality," "definitions of the situation," "typifications," "ideology," "beliefs," "world view," "perspective," "stereotypes," and the like. Such terms have a common focus on a humanly constructed set of symbolic objects, consciously singled out as important aspects of reality. Meanings tend to be transbehavioral in that

they define, justify, and otherwise refer to behavior and are not simply a description of it. Meanings interpret behavior among participants in a social world (even though they may also describe it).

a) A Complex of Conservative
Economic and Political Meanings

The first complex is a set of conservative political and economic meanings which seem to be shared by many other small businessmen and many of the customers. Included in the complex are meanings relating to the proper role of government, business and profit, technology, and individual effort.

The proper role of government is seen to be to protect property rights and prevent crime. The right to own and use property as one sees fit is an unquestioned assumption. This is related to crime in that much of what is defined as crime involves damage to or appropriation of property. Examples are robbery, vandalism, and writing bad checks. The participants seem to be against legal "technicalities" which allow those accused of crimes to escape prosecution or conviction.

In general, governmental regulation of business activities is decried. State and federal laws and administrative rules of governmental agencies which require modification of existing facilities and practices and which require reports are generally disliked and viewed as unwarranted interferences. The Occupational Safety

and Health Act of 1970 and laws and rules which resulted from it are good examples in that they require a number of changes in the physical facility and equipment of service stations and in practices of participants.

Price controls and other intrusions into the workings of the free market similarly tend to be viewed with distaste.

Another aspect of the role of government relates to taxation which, it is felt, involves the taking of money-- a form of property--from the participants. Taxation is generally disliked, but seems to be accepted to the extent that it is necessary to pay for police and fire protection and national defense. The recent rapid growth of governmental bureaucracies, particularly those involved in regulation of business, protection of consumers, and social programs, e.g. welfare, seems to be anathematized. Closely related to this is the definition of government employees as inefficient, lazy, and overpaid.

At the same time government regulation of business is disliked, there are also some cases where its utility is recognized. State inspection of pump delivery accuracy is seen to be good in preventing the unscrupulous from gouging the public and removing from the dealer the onus of establishing the accuracy of his pumps. Another example is limited support of laws such as dealer-day-in-court laws which give dealers some protection against

arbitrary acts by oil company employees. Under these laws, a dealer can force an oil company to show cause before the company can evict the dealer.

In general, the proper role of government is seen to be to provide a climate favorable to business and profit. The value of economic profit seems to be an important underlying cultural principle (Kluckhohn, 1944:37). Service stations are organized so that they will produce profits for dealers. Most of the activities of dealers seem to be oriented toward profit. Although sometimes, when a dealer's direct cost is small--usually involving only a little labor, dealers will perform favors for customers when there is little chance for a long-term profit. Smitty told of going across the street to start the car of a former customer without charge hoping that he would return as a customer of the station.

Part of the conservative business ideology and profit value is that value of keeping costs down. Station participants repair many pieces of station equipment whether or not they have any knowledge of the particular item. This is one way of cutting costs. This can be contrasted with some industrial plants in which the operators of machines are not supposed even to tighten loose screws. In some cases, minimizing monetary cost seems to take precedence over the time and effort of the participants. Rather than buying a tool which would be

seldom used but would make a particular operation quick and easy, the participants might well spend several hours working on or wrestling with a job.

There exists a great faith in the power of technology to improve life and solve problems. Technology is seen to be good with little or no attention to any of its adverse consequences. There is a belief that technology can clean up the oil refineries to prevent environmental damage and that multi-viscosity oils (e.g. 10W-40) have to be good because the oil companies spent a great deal of money to develop them and would not have put them on the market unless they are good.

There is also a strong belief in individual initiative and effort as a means to improving oneself. Hard work is highly valued by the dealer though, to varying degrees, employees are less likely to hold it in as high regard. This seems to be related to disparagement of government workers and intellectuals who are not seen to work hard nor to do important work.

Implicit in the view of individual effort and initiative is acceptance of the status quo--the way to get ahead is to work within the established economic and political system. This is illustrated by a degree of fatalism about getting automobile designs changed to permit easier servicing and by the attribution of greater

intelligence to those who have been successful within the system. Protestors and radicals are likely to be seen in a negative light.

A certain degree of anti-intellectual bias seems to exist among service station participants. Intellectuals and others who have considerable technical knowledge in a particular field seem to be viewed as being over-specialized. These specialists may be seen as "brilliant in their field, but idiots outside of it." The observable fact that some specialists, particularly intellectuals, are unable to open the hoods of their cars, are oblivious to the need for automobile maintenance or are poor drivers, seems to be sufficient to reinforce any stereotypes about intellectuals. An extreme case is an individual who sometimes drove over the corners of the pump islands in Smitty's station. Furthermore, recommendations of specialists often seem to contradict the social reality as seen by participants, particularly in areas of social reform. This seems to lead to and reinforce the conception that the specialist does not know what is going on in the real world, but lives in his own narrow and obscure world.

In the service station setting, working with one's hands does not seem to be highly valued. Nor does it seem to be the basis for anti-intellectual bias as Miller (1973: 99, 111) found in his study of a race track. Rather, managing is more highly valued and working with one's

hands is somewhat neutral or negatively valued. It seems that the source of anti-intellectual bias in the service station setting rests in specialization and a lack of understanding of the nature of the work of the intellectual. Disagreement with the kinds of sociocultural change seen as the goals of some intellectuals is another factor.

While participants in the service station setting may be biased against work done by others which is outside of their experience, similarly, the work of participants themselves seems to be downgraded by others who do not recognize the skills and efforts necessary for their work.

b) The Social Process of
Appreciation: Service and Workmanship

Activities of participants in the service station setting are performed for all customers or for particular customers at particular times who, to some degree, perceive and recognize the effort and skill behind them. Weinstein and Weinstein (1974:317-9, 347-9) refer to this as the social process of appreciation. They see that human activity has little meaning if there is no real or imagined audience to experience the process and the finished product. In complex, modern societies, specialization has narrowed the range of activities that many people understand and decreased the number of products for which people know about the process of production. The result is that

"...people appreciate only the surfaces of products and services, having little or no understanding of what went into creating them or why they work (when they do)" (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1974:319).

With the increasing complexity of automobiles, participants in service stations conduct their activities for customers who, as appreciators, lack an understanding of how and why their automobile works and a comprehension of the skills and efforts employed in its maintenance and repair. To some extent, participants' responses involve dramatic realization (Goffman, 1959:30-4) or the necessity of making customers aware of what a given job entails. Since customers are not often standing at the fenders of their automobiles where they can observe the actual work, this can be done by giving customers a detailed explanation of the work and any attendant problems when customers return to pay their bills and pick up their vehicles. Such explanation is difficult. Many customers seem to have no experience with automobile work nor an understanding of the work on an abstract level.

In their activities, participants attempt to aim their efforts toward a specific group of appreciators, that is, to their customers and sometimes to other participants. Since most activities of station participants are not understood by customers who experience these things only superficially, the time, effort, and skill

of participants are often missed by the customers. Different standards may be applied to the finished product. A customer may want a smoothly running engine and be dissatisfied while the station participants may have worked very hard, given contemporary anti-pollution devices for example, to make the engine run as smoothly as it does. A repair may have been made, but the customer is dissatisfied because there are greasy fingerprints on the steering wheel and the front of the hood. This does not deny that many customers have legitimate grounds for complaint, but points out that there may be differing definitions of good service and workmanship.

A related feature of the service station as a moral system, but one often not obvious to the customer, is that participants may expect a degree of loyalty and gratitude in return for good service and reasonable prices. Again, participants' definitions may differ from those of customers. In other words, participants feel that the labor charge is not sufficient and expect also loyalty and gratitude. The degree to which this is true varies by the setting and the kind of work done. In Stan's station, with a policy of service work for loyal customers only and a relatively low labor charge, loyalty and gratitude are more strongly expected than at Smitty's where more is charged but less than at automobile dealers' shops. This expectation of Stan is greater when the job is disagreeable or dangerous.

Participants are affronted if customers are not only ungrateful, but complain about the labor charge in such cases. In a third station on a very hot day, the dealer burned his hands in the process of changing a radiator hose. He told me he could have waited until the engine cooled down, but the motorist was in a hurry so he was trying to do the job quickly. He said that the flat-rate labor charge was five dollars, but it was not worth it to him. He told me, somewhat disgustedly, that a lot of motorists would complain about the labor charge, but that he was certain they would not do the work themselves for that much money. He felt his skills and effort were not understood or valued. This same feeling exists toward customers who have histories of trying to get free diagnoses, advice, or work done for which the participants feel they cannot charge.

In this light, loyalty is a two-way proposition. The station personnel provide good service at reasonable prices (by their definition) and expect loyalty and gratitude as well as economic return. The customer wants good service at a reasonable price by his or her definition, but must reciprocate with loyalty and gratitude. If the two definitions do not agree, one or both parties may become dissatisfied with the relationship.

Associated with participants' views on customer loyalty and gratitude is a sense of responsibility for

diagnoses and work performed. When work is done at the stations which I studied, the dealers feel customers are entitled to the solution of their particular problems. If the work does not solve complaints, then the dealers feel that they are obligated to work on a vehicle without further labor charge until it is repaired. They also feel responsible for the parts they sell and on which they make a profit. If such parts fail within a reasonable time, the dealer will do the job again and procure a replacement from the parts distributor at no charge to the customer. The definition of a reasonable amount of time seems to depend upon the dealer and the particular car part or work performed. Stan will back parts and labor in cases such as a water pump for six months to a year. Ninety days may be a more common limit for many kinds of repairs. Other kinds of work may be guaranteed for only a few days unless the station participants determine the problem was their fault. When the fault is not clear, the participants are less likely to feel responsible to correct the problem if the customer is not a regular one or if the customer does not complain.

When repairs are attempted, but outcomes are not thought likely to be successful, participants do not feel they can legitimately charge customers. This kind of work is often avoided unless the customer is a loyal, regular one. Examples of this are some wiring problems,

attempts to repair "non-repairable" components such as light bulb sockets, or repair of tires which have been punctured in places where it is difficult to get a tire patch to hold.

Because of the feeling of responsibility for repair parts and labor, dealers have strong feelings that they should buy repair parts from vendors who will stand by their products as reliable. Oil filters point this out particularly. If an oil filter is defective and ruptures or otherwise fails in use, an engine can be severely damaged. The repair or replacement of such an engine is very expensive and the dealer who had installed the filter would feel responsible. Such dealers feel that the filter manufacturer is expected to cover most of the cost unless the filter was improperly installed. Therefore, dealers feel that they should be careful to use only filters of a company which will back its product. With many other parts, the risk is not great but the customer may be inconvenienced and dissatisfied.

Besides responsibility for repair work and parts, there is also a feeling of responsibility for tires, batteries, and accessories (TBA) that are sold at stations. Smitty, for example, does not charge for a service call to start a customer's car if it has in it a battery he sold. Smitty feels that customers would complain if charged.

There is a strong dislike for mass merchandisers-- large chain retail stores--which sell and install tires, batteries, shock absorbers, etc. While the fact that such places often undersell service stations on comparable merchandise probably does not lead to fondness for them, the root of the dislike seems to lie more in the failure of such places to adhere to certain norms. Personnel of mass merchandisers' shops are seen to be primarily interested in selling the high-profit, rapid-turnover items. In their pursuit of sales, they tend not to diagnose whether an item is needed, but to encourage the customer to buy. Installation of such parts and accessories often shows shoddy work and improper installation. In some cases, battery terminal clamps are not cleaned or exhaust systems are improperly installed so that the former do not connect or the latter fall apart. A third failure of mass merchandisers is that they do not always service what they sell. Mass merchandisers' shops do not make service calls. Stalled motorists call their service stations. Dealers feel obligated to respond when stalled motorists are their customers. They believe customers will be angry if they do not make service calls, but dealers believe that service calls are low-or-negative-profit activity.

Those persons who patronize mass merchandisers and cut-rate stations because of lower prices are

subject to some dislike. Those who compare only price and not service are sometimes referred to as the shopper trade, a mildly disparaging term. There seem to be two reasons for this. One is that such motorists tend to come to service stations only for the low profit work such as small adjustments. If cars were taken to an automobile dealer's shop, there would be a flat-rate charge and perhaps a minimum charge of five to ten dollars. Since dealers do many of these kinds of things for their regular customers free or at little cost to them, dealers feel they cannot charge others more without risking accusations of unfairness. A regular customer may have referred the motorist to the station. It seems also partly a matter of principle--a transient motorist has not earned this kind of special attention.

A second reason stems from these shopper-trade motorists' lack of appreciation for the kind of work station participants do. That is, these motorists have little understanding of the activities and norms of the service station setting, thus they are hardly worth talking to. They are outsiders.

There are many factors beyond the service station setting which influence the activities and structure of the dealer-operated station. In the next chapter, I will discuss how related businesses and government influence the service station setting.

Chapter III
BUSINESS AND GOVERNMENT: SOURCES OF INFLUENCE
AND CHANGE IN THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION
OF THE SERVICE STATION

Service stations do not operate in a vacuum. They are affected by many variables from outside the immediate setting. Two important sources of influence and change in the service station setting are the norms, practices and other features of related businesses and the laws and administrative rules of various levels of government. In this chapter, I will focus on some of the more important of these factors which have and will continue to shape the service station setting.

A. Influence and Change Originating
in the Business Sector

Because the service station is not an independent entity, it can endure as an organization only by depending upon and coordinating with outside organizations. These outside organizations have a considerable impact on the patterns of organization of service stations.

There are several important features of business which have an impact on the way the service station is organized. In this section, I will discuss oil company requirements, the supply system for accessories and replacement parts and the related factor of incessant

change in the automotive field, and flat rates and shop practice. All of these reflect the underlying cultural principle of profit discussed in Chapter II.

1. Oil Companies

In an important respect the service station is dependent upon an oil company or an independent jobber for its supply of petroleum products. Some of the social consequences of this dependency were discussed previously, particularly as they apply to branded stations.

Oil companies attempt to regulate branded service stations. This is perhaps understandable because in years past considerable effort and money have been expended to foster favorable images of particular brands. This process of creating favorable images begins with children (Henry, 1963:72-4).

In order to protect this image, oil companies have rather general requirements for stations. These standards, if not met, can result in the eviction of a lessee or the discontinuance of the brand identification if the physical facilities are owned by the dealer or by third parties.

An important requirement of oil companies, particularly for lessee dealers, is that the personnel be courteous to customers. A customer complaint to the company can bring a visit from officials as occurred a number of years ago when a good but short-tempered employee of Smitty's

flew off the handle at a traveler. Smitty, who was not present at the time, was later surprised when a pair of company officials visited the station. The officials made it clear that they were very displeased. A dealer's lease might be cancelled if there are repeated incidents.

In another situation, Smitty suggested that a man write a letter to the oil company of another station after he complained that the manager of that station refused to sell him gasoline for his lawn mower although he had a proper container. The manager of the station had apparently gotten abusive and disparaged the customer for expecting him to fill the gasoline can. Smitty assured the customer that the oil company would take action on the matter.

Because of the importance placed on courtesy to customers, dealers must pay particular attention to this when training their employees for their organizational roles. In the terms of Schein, (1968:9) employees must learn "pivotal values and norms"--those which are essential to their continued employment. Included in these pivotal values and norms in the service station setting are those relating to customer courtesy, how much to extend, and under what conditions. While organizational socialization in most service stations seems to be an informal process, it nevertheless is important and must be accomplished.

This is part of the social role of the dealer and is, especially with regard to travelers, in part imposed by oil company requirements if it is not voluntarily assumed.

Besides courtesy, there are other requirements. A station must be maintained at an acceptable level of appearance. This means restrooms must be cleaned, floors swept, windows washed, and other housecleaning and grounds-keeping chores done. There are reports to be filed with the company. Lessee dealers are required to maintain certain hours for the convenience of customers. Typically, this might be from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday with shorter hours on Sunday. Thus, in the system of roles of stations there must be provisions for the performance of many tasks. Dealers must organize their staffs so that there will be personnel available to operate their stations during the designated hours and during their absence.

These are some of the ways in which dealer-operated service stations are affected by the oil companies with which they are affiliated. Some other related effects are discussed in Chapter I in the section comparing the research settings in terms of ownership of physical facilities.

2. The Accessories and Replacement Parts Supply System

Dealers are dependent on a number of suppliers for repair parts: filters, antifreeze, motor oil, additives, tires, batteries, accessories, shop supplies, tools and miscellaneous products to be sold or used. Auto supply stores--often called parts houses--are important sources of repair parts, filters and tools used in service and repair work. For many stations the affiliated oil company is an important source for filters, additives, oil and other products. There are also other firms which specialize in supplying particular commodities such as tires, batteries or tools. The parts departments of automobile dealers also serve as sources of repair parts but service stations often look to parts houses first and purchase only such parts as are available exclusively through automobile dealers. This preference for parts houses seems to be related directly to the structure of the system and the importance of financial profit. While the cost to consumers, called the list price, is about equal for a part from an automobile dealer or from a parts house, the net price which service stations pay, is nearly always less if it is purchased from a parts house. Thus, purchasing parts from parts houses afford dealers more profit. Therefore, most of the repair parts business of

service stations is carried out with parts houses. Because of this, participants in service stations are likely to have well-developed relationships with the personnel of parts houses.

Parts house personnel usually deliver parts which are ordered by service station personnel and ordinarily do so in a matter of a few minutes if they have the needed part on hand. Contacts with parts house personnel are not limited, however, to telephone conversations and delivery persons as station personnel frequently go to parts houses when they are in a hurry, when they want to make certain they are getting the correct part, or for other reasons. This, of course, depends on the proximity of a particular parts house to the service station.

Another contact is through salesmen for parts houses who regularly--usually weekly or oftener--stop at a station, visit with the participants, take care of complaints and dissatisfactions not otherwise resolved, and check stocks of various supplies. Service stations commonly carry a selection of spark plugs, ignition points, condensers, distributor caps, ignition wires, fan belts, radiator hoses, heater hoses, air filters, fuel filters, oil filters, positive crankcase ventilation (PCV) valves, radiator caps, thermostats, light bulbs, hose clamps, hardware, and other items. In some cases, one salesman

checks a station's supplies and orders replacements of those which have been used. In other cases, stocked items will be divided among several salesmen, each from a different parts house. In still other instances, no salesmen call and stocks are taken care of by the dealer. Stan, for example, keeps very few parts and supplies on hand and does not have salesmen call regularly. Smitty, on the other hand, has several salesmen among whom he splits his purchases of stocked items. One salesman handles most of the ignition parts, another deals in filters, fan belts and radiator hoses, a third has primarily the nuts, bolts and washers, and windshield wiper blades, and a fourth distributes the light bulbs, muffler clamps, hose clamps, some ignition parts, and various additives. This arrangement of several salesmen calling on a station seems to be typical.

Salesmen seem to serve as intermediaries or go-betweens (Goffman, 1959:149-50) between service station personnel, particularly dealers, and parts houses. In this intermediary role, particular salesmen seem to influence where a given service station does most of its business. If the personnel in a station like a salesman and perceive that he is working for their interests, then that salesman is likely to have a larger proportion of the station's business. If a salesman is disliked or not particularly

liked, or thought to have most of his loyalty to the parts house, he may have only a token business with the station.

Salesmen also keep station personnel informed on changes in products, procedures, and new sales philosophies and strategies. One salesman brought with him a one-page instruction sheet about a simple test to determine whether a switching unit of an electronic ignition system is defective. This was said to work ninety-five percent of the time and replacement of the malfunctioning unit was said to be easy and profitable. In another case, a salesman invited a dealer to a dinner sponsored by the company which sells the line of shock absorber which the parts house had recently began selling. Besides the dinner, there would be a short presentation by a representative of the company on the advantages of his company's product and how to sell it. Parts house personnel sometimes have clinics on particular aspects of automobile repair, such as brake installation, in which they demonstrate to station personnel how to perform the work. The clinics are ostensibly to improve the skills of service station personnel, but the underlying reason for them is to sell supplies and new equipment to station operators. Salesmen are important in contacting station operators and encouraging them to attend clinics. To some extent,

therefore salesmen serve also as informal socializing agents (Cogswell, 1968:429-30) for personnel in service stations.

Another way in which the organization of the service station is influenced by the source of repair parts is through the profit margin allowed dealers by the parts houses. This is done through a mechanism called the list price and serves as an incentive to dealers to aggressively seek repair work to enhance their profits. A dealer buys parts at what is called the net price or dealer price from parts houses and sells the parts to customers at the suggested list price or retail price, provided by the parts house, that appears on the dealer's invoice in the appropriate column. This gives the dealer a moral justification for charging customers the price that he does rather than one based on his wholesale costs. In some cases, the difference between the dealer price and the list price is relatively large, e.g., up to forty percent. Thus this serves as an incentive for dealers to push certain items and is so intended by the company which manufactures or distributes the parts and which sets the suggested prices. The system under which manufacturers establish prices for which goods are to be sold and provide the enforcement is termed retail price maintenance (Yamey, 1968:479).

In some cases, employees of service stations also get commissions on parts that they sell to customers. This serves as an incentive for employees to check customers' cars for worn fan belts, shock absorbers, and hoses, and can lead to potential abuses when the customer is naive about such matters. In extreme cases, it motivates station employees to cut fan belts or hoses or to squirt oil on shock absorbers in order to generate work and sales. In any case, this system puts the interests of the employee and the customer in contradiction to one another.

Annual model changes of automobiles cause problems in the automobile parts supply system. While some changes are cosmetic, there are many minor changes in engine and exhaust system components which reduce interchangeability of parts between model years. Accompanying these changes in recent years has been a proliferation of models of cars-- a fifty percent increase between 1960 and 1970 for United States manufactured cars--and increasing complexity of automobiles due to air conditioners, power accessories, anti-pollution and safety equipment, etc. This has greatly multiplied the number of different parts necessarily carried at one or another level of the distribution system (Randall and Glickman, 1972:7). For example, "...in 1948, only two mufflers and two tailpipes were required for all Ford cars. In 1968, a total of 56 different mufflers and

tailpipes were needed" (Martin Fromm of the Automotive Warehouse Distributors Association cited in Randall and Glickman, 1972:135). According to Robert J. Smith, General Sales Manager of AC-Delco Division of General Motors, this proliferation of parts will continue and many new components of automobiles will be added. This, in turn, will create needs for new, specialized tools and for training of mechanics (National Petroleum News, 1976:97).

Because American consumers want repair parts to be quickly and readily available, an extensive distribution system with three or four levels from the manufacturer to the consumer is required (Randall and Glickman, 1972: 134-5). With each of these levels taking a profit, the suggested list price is much higher than the production cost. In fact, the cost to the automobile owner is likely to be two and one-half to three times the amount for which the manufacturer sells to the first level in the distribution system (Randall and Glickman, 1972: 134-5, 275). In many instances, the retail price or list price is not related to an item's cost of production, but rather to the suggested list price which the automobile manufacturer places on the item as it is sold through automobile dealers. This seems to be especially true of

exhaust parts. One muffler or a tailpipe may have a very different price than a similar muffler or tailpipe for a different automobile model.

The net result of the proliferation of repair parts and the nature of the distribution system is that motorists pay more to have automobiles, which they believe they cannot get along without, repaired quickly. Station personnel will often not commence to do repairs unless they have the required parts in hand because they do not want to keep customers' cars tied up, especially if they are otherwise operational. The price customers pay at service stations for parts influences customer-participant relationships in several ways.

It may cause customers to have car repairs made at one of the mass merchandisers, e.g., Sears, Penny's, Wards, K-Mart, or Firestone. At the mass merchandisers, parts are often sold at lower prices than at service stations. The labor charges, however, are usually the same, being based on the flat rates (Randall and Glickman, 1972:168).

Another effect of the higher prices at stations is that customers service and repair their own automobiles. By purchasing repair parts and supplies from mass merchandisers and directly from auto supply stores (Emond, 1976:80), often at prices similar to what dealers pay, customers can save from twenty-five to sixty percent on oil, filters, tune-up parts, brake parts, etc. For

example, Emond (1976:78) asserts that an "...estimated 40% to 60% of motor oil is sold on a carry out basis through mass channels." He attributes this to the availability of oil at lower prices than at service stations and sees this as an incentive for consumers to change their own oil. Smitty is acutely aware of this and has absorbed in his own margin at least one increase in wholesale price of oil rather than raise the price of his oil and, therefore, to prevent his customers from buying oil and changing it themselves. Ironically, Smitty can buy some brands of oil off the shelf at a local mass merchandiser cheaper than he can buy it from his suppliers; this is also true for some filters.

Filters are another item on which considerable savings can be made if the customer buys from a mass merchandiser and installs them himself. After a customer just bought an air filter with the intention of installing it himself, Smitty remarked that the customer would be "sick" when he finds out that he can buy a comparable filter at a mass merchandiser for one-half to one-third of the price he just paid.

3. Flat Rates and Shop Practice¹

Another feature of automotive related business is the system of pricing labor for repair work, called the flat rate system. Not all service stations use the flat rate method in computing their labor charges. Some calculate the labor charge by the "clock hour" method; customers are charged for the number of hours mechanics actually work on their automobile (Randall and Glickman, 1972:13). Some services such as changing tires are performed for a flat fee. When labor charges are computed according to flat rate manuals, particular repairs on a given model automobile are listed in the manual as taking X number of hours, as set forth in hours and tenths of hours. Labor charges are computed by multiplying flat rate times by the hourly rate of the shop. Also, the manual conveniently has labor charges for particular repairs computed based on a suggested hourly rate. The two most popular flat rate manuals are Motor's Flat Rate and Parts Manual and Motor Age Flat Rate and Parts Manual (Randall and Glickman, 1972:13). These two are the only ones I have observed in service stations.

¹The following discussion of the flat rate system does not address several issues: What is a fair wage for mechanics? What is a fair rate of return on investment for the proprietor of a shop? What is the value to the customer of quick service and nearby facilities? These issues inevitably have effects on the social organization of the service station, but they are beyond the scope of this study.

Randall and Glickman (1972:14-5) argue that flat rate manuals are used as the basis for labor charges in most auto repair shops in terms of both time and hourly rate. They even indicate that a higher suggested rate is a selling point for new editions of manuals. This may result in a tendency toward a standardization of rates based on suggested hourly rates in the manuals rather than cost considerations of individual shops. This, similar to the list price mechanism in repair part pricing, serves as moral justification for service station operators charging the hourly rates they do.

The flat rate system also affects the organization of the participants within the service station setting. A particularly important consideration is whether or not mechanics are paid on commission. Some of the manifest functions (Merton, 1968:73-138 esp. 78, 104-8) of the commission and flat rate system are to get mechanics to work harder and faster and to do better work. Under this system a mechanic's pay is directly related to the number of flat-rate hours he accumulates during the pay period, usually a week. When original work was unsatisfactory, mechanics are supposed to do the remedial work without pay. This supposedly discourages hasty diagnoses and sloppy work. Some of the latent functions (Merton, 1968: 114-36) for the relationship between customers and station personnel will be discussed farther on in this report.

There is some debate about the use of flat rate manuals. On the one hand, proponents argue that customers can be told in advance what the labor costs of a given repair will be. An inefficient mechanic will not make the work cost more. On the other hand, Randall and Glickman (1972:15-21) cite studies showing that most mechanics "beat" the flat rate time in most cases. That is, they are able to perform the repair in less time than is allowed by the flat rate manual. The flat rate system encourages fast but sloppy work because under it most mechanics are paid on commission, usually receiving forty to fifty percent of labor charges. This sort of system encourages cheating on repair bills. That is, mechanics may claim to have made adjustments which they have not made. It provides incentive for replacement rather than repair of components because it usually requires more time to repair a part than to replace it. Installation of new or rebuilt units allows shops and any mechanics on commission to make profits from sales of units whereas if units are repaired, only charges for labor and repair parts are made. Flat rate labor charges also include time allowances for diagnosis of problems. However, labor charges are made only upon repair or replacement of components. Because of this, replacement of parts without proper diagnosis by unskilled mechanics known in the trade as "parts hangers" or "parts changers" is encouraged.

The system invites mechanics to do unneeded repairs while a car is in the shop, especially where included operations are involved. Because flat rate time includes getting out tools and equipment, making the diagnosis and the disassembly, repair, adjustment, and reassembly of a single component by itself, it follows that there are certain efficiencies which occur if two or more repairs of related items are performed at the same time. The flat rate manual does not make allowances for this. Thus it is often more profitable for the mechanic to perform several repairs at one time. A good example of this, related to the kind of work done in many dealer-operated service stations, is exhaust system replacement. In a hypothetical case, the flat rate manual might allow three-tenths hour to replace the tailpipe, five-tenths hour to replace the muffler, and four-tenths hour to replace the exhaust pipe if each is done separately. This totals one-and-two-tenths hours. If all three are replaced at the same time, the entire job might take only twenty minutes or about three-tenths hour. In this case, under the flat rate system, customers would be charged for one-and-two-tenths hours labor at the current shop rate. Thus included operations along with the profit in the repair parts themselves serve as a powerful incentive for mechanics or service station operators to replace parts needlessly. While many station operators and

mechanics are honest and do not exploit this to a great degree, this aspect of the system, coupled with the profit motive, is a source of motivation for those who are less honest. The flat rate system, in effect, puts customers and mechanics or service station operators in an adversative situation.

Customers usually pay for unnecessary work without question as they generally lack the expertise to evaluate the need for the work. In most cases, it is difficult to establish whether or not repairs were needed after they are already accomplished. In most states, neither mechanics nor shops need be concerned about collecting for work completed. Considerable protection is ordinarily provided through mechanic's lien laws which allow a businessman to take possession of a vehicle and after a statutory waiting period, sell it to satisfy the bill plus whatever other costs he has incurred (Elkins¹, cited in Randall and Glickman, 1972:126-7).²

¹Herschel T. Elkins was Deputy Attorney General of California. His remarks are from hearings of the Subcommittee on Anti-trust and Monopoly of the Committee of the Judiciary, United States Senate, ninety-first Congress.

²In Iowa, this provision is called the 'Artisan's Lien' (Code of Iowa 1975, Chapter 577) and the sale of an automobile may be accomplished after the owner is notified of the amount due, the kind of sale, and if a public sale, when and where it will take place (Code of Iowa 1975, Chapter 554, sec. 7308).

As previously mentioned, not all service stations, automobile dealers, or repair shops use the flat rate system. Stan does not use flat rate manuals extensively. He bases his labor charges more on time actually devoted to jobs perhaps using his flat rate manual as a guide. He also charges a lower, per-hour rate than is currently suggested by the flat rate manuals. He sees, however, when discussing future expansion plans, that in order to get a good mechanic he will need to go the flat rate and commission system.

Smitty uses flat rate manuals as guides for most of his charges for minor repairs. If the flat rate charge seems excessive for the work done, he charges less. Smitty does not pay his mechanics on commission. They are paid hourly or weekly rates depending on the circumstances of their employment. He sees this as beneficial to his customers as it does not encourage unnecessary work. He then pays a bonus at the end of the year. The size of the bonus depends on the profitability of the shop during the year. This provides incentive for his mechanics to do overall good work.

There are many variations in the method by which automotive repair labor charges are computed. Thus, it is difficult to set forth all the implications of the method

for the social organization of service stations. In general, the flat rate system is of great influence in determining labor charges.

Some of the effects of the flat rate system are to motivate customers to perform their own repair work because of perceived high labor costs in repairs. This thus cuts down on the amount of interaction between station personnel and customers because customers do not rely as much as they otherwise would on service stations for car care. Surveys by the Automotive Parts and Accessories Association indicate that about sixty-to-sixty-five percent of automobile owners perform some maintenance and service work themselves (Emond, 1976: 79-80). While one of the reasons for this is to save money, in some cases it is because auto owners do not trust anyone else to do the work properly, (Emond, 1976: 79). Customers are often surprised by the size of their repair bills, of which, of course, the flat rate labor charge is only one component. When a customer perceives his prospective repair bills to be very high, he is more likely to do service and repair work himself if he can.

If customers decide to do some of their service and repair work themselves, this can have further effects in service stations. Participants feel, to some extent, that customers, in order to get first-class treatment, should bring their cars to the station for all automotive

needs. Thus, this condition may result in a reduction of the mutual loyalty between participants and their customers. Reduced loyalty may mean that customers may take their cars elsewhere for service and repair work and this may accelerate the trend toward self-service stations which compete primarily on the basis of the price of gasoline and not service and repair work.

It also implies a different definition by customers of service stations as places to buy gasoline and where automotive service and minor repairs can be obtained on an impersonal basis. To be sure, this definition is not new; it only seems to be becoming more widespread.

Another implication is that the automobile owner takes a more active role with regard to the care and maintenance of his automobile. In the case of long established, loyal, regular customers, service station personnel may regularly check oil change intervals, tune-up intervals, tire condition, etc., and advise such motorists when service and repair work is needed. In the more fragmented social condition when motorists buy self-service gasoline and have service and repair work done at still other places, motorists themselves must determine when their automobiles need repair and service work. This may have positive or negative consequences in that if a motorist can competently evaluate the condition of his automobile (which most motorists seemingly cannot do),

he can save money. On the other hand, motorists may also be sold unnecessary or shoddy service and repairs, which can also occur at regular service stations, or they may fail to have needed service and repair work done only to end with unsafe or unreliable vehicles or face even more costly repairs. Such generalizations, however, are of limited predictive value due to the large number of factors and the wide variation in service and repair practices.

B. Influence and Change Originating in the Government Sector

Through laws, modern American federal, state and local governments have had various impacts on all individuals and organizations. The service station setting is no exception. Service station operators, and perhaps many small businessmen, do not always appreciate governmental regulation of or interference in their affairs. Governmental regulation of business activities runs counter to free enterprise ideology widely accepted among more conservative segments of the population. In spite of this, government has been increasingly involved in the affairs of small businessmen over the past years. Witness, for example, such things as zoning ordinances, sales taxes, unemployment insurance, programs to alleviate race and sex discrimination, Social Security, the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, consumer protection

laws, the Emergency Petroleum Allocation Act of 1973, income tax laws, antitrust laws, and a host of others.

In this section, I intend to examine the impacts on the social organization of service stations which stems from some of these governmental inroads into the realm of private business.¹ I will look at Federal legislation--

¹The legal research behind this section is not intended to be authoritative as I am not trained in law. I have examined relevant laws to find material which seems to have effects on the social organization of service stations. My work here is intended to be suggestive and is not exhaustive.

Statutory laws are only one part of the effects of legislation. There are four other factors which are important. The first is the body of case law which develops out of interpretations of laws by the courts. This serves to clarify the extent of applicability of a law; there may be many refinements of laws through this process. Since this is an ongoing process, laws, particularly controversial ones, are constantly in a state of change.

A second important impact of laws results from administrative law promulgated by governmental agencies. A provision of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 directed the Secretary of Labor to set specific occupational safety and health standards with which those subject to the law are required to comply. The Labor Department could not construct the standards without making a series of decisions about the kinds of specific things that were intended to be covered by the law. Although the burden of knowing the requirements of a law is on those who are subject to it, often administering agencies attempt to inform those persons affected by laws of the consequences for them. In the instance of the Occupational Safety and Health Act this was done, in part, through a series of booklets designed specifically for particular settings such as service stations, bakeries, grocery stores, etc. The introduction to the booklet, "Health and Safety Guide for Service Stations" (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 1975:1) differentiates the words "must," "required," and "necessary" from the words "should" and "ought" as they are

anti-trust laws, the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, environmental protection laws, the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966, and the Emergency Petroleum Allocation Act of 1973.

found in the text. The former indicate that the employer is legally bound to do what is discussed and the latter indicate "good practices" to which the employer is not legally bound. There may thus be effects beyond the scope of the law if the employer does not note these subtle distinctions.

Third, the impact of laws is affected by the functionaries who enforce them. I am indebted to William E. Harris for this idea. Such functionaries have to make interpretations in order to enforce laws. The six and one-half pages of fine print describing standards which portable wood ladders must meet in order to comply with the Occupational Safety and Health Standards, states, among other matters, that wood ladders must be "...sound and free by accepted visual inspection from shake, wane, compression failures, decay or other irregularities..." (Federal Register, sec. 1910.25(b)). Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) inspectors cannot avoid making interpretations in the enforcement of such standards. The interpretations made by such functionaries will influence the interpretations of employers in that employers must conform to laws as they are interpreted by those who enforce them or challenge the interpretations in the courts.

Fourth, the ultimate impact of laws is determined by the interpretation of the laws by those who are subject to them. I am indebted to Philip E. Harris for this insight. In modern society, this is often mediated by trade associations and the staffs of trade publications. Much information about the perceived impact of legislative bills and enacted laws appears in newsletters and trade magazines. In this way, speculation becomes reality for the participants of a setting (Thomas, 1971:276-7). A relevant example are the signs I have observed in a number of service shops informing customers that the Occupational Safety and Health Act prohibits them from being in the shop. I have not been able to find any basis in the law for this assertion.

1. Antitrust Laws¹

Antitrust laws, e.g., the Clayton Act and the Sherman Act and case law developing from them, shape the social organization of service stations in that they forbid oil companies from entering into exclusive contracts with their dealers that restrict them to the sale of only one company's products (gasoline excepted) (Neale, 1968: 190-9). This affects branded outlets and includes most dealer-operated service stations.

The result of these antitrust laws is that the service station operator has, or at least may have, relationships with suppliers other than the oil company. This is especially true for the kinds of products such as tires, batteries, additives, filters, light bulbs, etc, in which the larger oil companies deal. Thus Smitty has different suppliers for tires, batteries, accessories, additives, oil and grease, filters, light bulbs and other needs. He markets only gasoline and oil under the Regional Oil brand name. Stan buys a greater proportion of his needs through the National Oil salesman. He however, does not, except for oil and gasoline, sell their products exclusively. Stan is very aware of his options to buy from sources other than National Oil channels. He told of a National

¹I am grateful to William E. Harris for helpful assistance in locating reference materials for this section.

Oil salesman who unsuccessfully tried to bluff him into selling only National Oil brands of tires and other products when he previously operated a leased station.

Also directly affected is the relationship between the branded dealer and the oil company with which he is affiliated. This results from the cases of Standard Oil Company of California and Standard Stations v. United States and United States v. Richfield Oil Corporation¹ (Neale, 1968:190-9). The net impact of decisions in these cases is to reduce the power that the oil companies can exert over their branded dealers. It means that retail petroleum dealers are independent businessmen and not part of the oil company's business (Neale, 1968:194). While an oil company can refuse to renew the lease of a lessee dealer, it or its representatives cannot be too restrictive during the term of a lease.

2. The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970

The Occupational Safety and Health Act passed by Congress in 1970 has had a significant impact on the internal social organization of service stations. The act requires employers to provide places of work which

¹The legal citations for these cases are Standard Oil Company and Standard Stations v. United States, 337 U.S. 293, 69 S. Ct. 1051, 93 L. Ed. 1371 (1949) and United States v. Richfield Oil Corporation, 99 F. Supp. 280 (1951).

are free from known hazards to the lives and health of employees and, as well, must ensure that employees follow prescribed procedures (Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, 29 U.S.C. sec. 654). The act gave the Secretary of Labor the authority to develop a set of occupational safety and health standards which are binding on businesses engaged in interstate commerce. These standards, as developed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), were published in the Federal Register (1974). The act also provides for the federal government to pay up to fifty percent of the cost of approved state programs and ninety percent for specific kinds of state programs (Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, 29 U.S.C. sec. 672(f), (g)).

The state in which this research was carried out enacted an occupational safety and health statute closely modeled after that of the federal law (Code of Iowa 1975, Chapter 88). This law gives the state Labor Commissioner the authority to promulgate a set of rules and standards for occupational safety and health. The state law extends coverage to all private employers within the state and also to the state government and any of its departments, agencies, and political subdivisions. The state Labor Commissioner adopted, in their entirety, the Occupational Safety and Health Standards of the United States Department of Labor as the standards which apply within the state.

Thus, the requirements of the National Occupational Safety and Health Act were brought to apply directly to service stations.

The social impacts of the OSHA requirements are several. First, the employer is responsible to train and supervise his employees and to otherwise ensure that they know and meet the applicable standards. The standards prohibit certain customary behaviors such as the use of compressed air to blow dust off clothing or the use of bare hands to clean parts in solvent (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 1975:33, 52). When the OSHA standards contradict long-established practices in which employees have for years engaged without apparent ill effects, employers may have some difficulty gaining the compliance of employees.

It seems to me that OSHA and related legislation has shifted a greater part of the burden for the health and safety of employees onto the employer than formerly. This may be a necessary outgrowth of greater complexity and specialization and the fact that employees cannot be expected to realize ill effects of the materials and procedures involved in their work. An example of this difficulty is the case of the small plant which manufactured the insecticide, Kepone, at Hopewell, Virginia. Kepone is a substance highly toxic to humans. Apparently the officials of the small company which had contracted

with a large chemical corporation to produce Kepone were either not aware of, or did not inform the workers of, the dangers from working around the substance. As a result a number of the workers are permanently disabled with high concentrations of Kepone in their bodies. Also the city's sewage system was damaged by the chemical and the James River was polluted. The governor of Virginia banned fishing in the river for a time (Offenburger, 1976:1).

Employers are now held legally responsible not only for the training of their employees, but for the failure of employees to adhere to required procedures. Employers with eleven or more employees--this excludes most service stations--must keep records of many kinds of work related accidents. OSHA requires employers to provide a workplace which is free of recognized hazards. This seems to be one step farther than the workman's compensation laws in shifting more of the risk of work-related accidents from the employees to employers. OSHA requires employers to provide safe working places, to provide safety-related training and to supervise workers to ensure that they follow safety rules. Sanctions for violations include fines and, in extreme cases, prison sentences.

OSHA, however, does not carry the bulk of the burden of injured or killed workers from the worker and his family to the employer. This is dealt with by workman's

compensation laws although they frequently provide only inadequate compensation, especially because they involve fixed amounts which have been undermined by inflation.

Nor does OSHA deal with currently unrecognized hazards which in the future may result in cancer or other illnesses. One such problem, related to carcinogens in the work environment, is that symptoms may not develop for twenty or more years after exposure to the carcinogen. Also, it is often difficult to establish when and where the individual has been exposed. One such compound is asbestos. Asbestos is used in automobile brake shoes (Newsweek, 1976:67). Many employees of service stations are involved in brake work and, therefore, are exposed to asbestos fibers. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (1975:21) recommends, but does not require, that personnel wear dust masks and that dust inside the brake drums be vacuumed rather than blown off with compressed air as has been the established custom. This should reduce but not eliminate the risk. In cases in which an employee contracts lung cancer resulting from exposure to asbestos fibers, most of the costs are borne by the employee and his family either directly or indirectly through health insurance.

The Occupational Safety and Health Act, relatively new, is still being implemented. Most training and inspection efforts of the State Labor Bureau have been

concerned with larger businesses. Inspectors and enforcement have not yet concentrated on service stations. Many station operators seem to have made an effort to comply with the law, but informal observation of a number of stations indicates that most are probably not yet in full compliance. Further effects of these laws on the social organization of stations will undoubtedly appear in the future as stations comply with them.

Relationships between service station operators and their employees have been altered to the extent that the operators, as employers, have greater responsibility for, and must supervise more closely, the work practices of employees. This has potential for enlarged cooperation between employer and employee when both recognize that employee safety is a common goal. At the same time, it has potential for greater conflict and dissatisfaction which results from closer supervision of employees (Parker, 1971:44-5). Greater conflict and employee dissatisfaction can result from employer interference with time-honored work practices such as that of cleaning automobile parts with bare hands in solvent. Rubber gloves are required by OSHA (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 1975:52). The reasons for such changes may not be fully understood by employees. The changes are mandated by an outside source and the participants are likely to resist them (Spicer, 1952:18).

The operators of service stations are also required to develop a new role vis-a-vis Occupational Safety and Health inspectors from the State Bureau of Labor. This perhaps will bear a certain similarity to the relationship between military supervisors and their inspectors. Successful supervisors are likely to exhibit a "manner" (Goffman, 1959:22-30) which is polite, attentive, ostensibly open, respectful and eager to correct any deficiencies found while, simultaneously, attempting covertly to cover up known deficiencies.

3. Environmental Protection Laws

Environmental protection laws, such as the Motor Vehicle Air Pollution Control Act (1965) which limit automobile emissions, have had certain consequences for the service station. The ways that relationships between participants in the stations and their customers have been affected are at least two. A first effect is in the amount of control customers can have over the action of participants in what they do to the automobile and a second centers on the potential satisfaction of customers with their automobiles and participants' role in maintaining them.

First, it is illegal for service station mechanics to remove emissions control devices or to render them inoperable (Motor Vehicle Pollution Control Act, 42 U.S.C.

sec. 1857f-2). This means that even if a customer tells station personnel that he wants a particular device such as the limiter cap on the idle adjustment screw of the carburetor or the catalytic converter in the exhaust system removed, the personnel cannot legally do it.

Nor can personnel disconnect hoses or take other action which will prevent such a device from working. Thus, some of the control customers formerly had over the services they wanted at stations has been limited. Mechanics are put in a position of having to refuse to do such work or face a fine of up to \$10,000 (Motor Vehicle Pollution Control Act, 42 U.S.C. sec. 1857f-4). It may be a particularly difficult decision to face when a regular customer is insistent.

Second, participant-customer relationships can be affected by emissions control laws in that emissions control devices of automobiles are harder to keep properly adjusted making the automobiles tend to start hard, idle roughly, and stall. While most customers are aware of these effects of emissions controls, they may still be dissatisfied with a tune-up job on their automobiles. Service station participants try to educate customers about this with explanations of the negative effects of the emissions control devices on automobile performance. But these effects may lead to customer dissatisfaction

and can cause severance of relationships when customers' expectations for a smoothly idling engine cannot be changed.

Emissions control laws also have internal effects on the service station. One of these was suggested by Stan who sees that there is a decline in pride of workmanship traditionally associated with automobile tune-ups. In the past, a mechanic could directly experience that an automobile was tuned-up properly in that the engine ran very smoothly. As a result of technological and legal changes, if the engine runs smoothly, it is improperly adjusted. Thus, mechanics may find it more difficult to derive satisfaction from tune-up jobs which result in engines that apparently do not run very well. This may be exacerbated when customers are not pleased. The mechanic, therefore, defines his work as less useful than formerly, or that good work is not important and will not be noticed. It can otherwise lead the mechanic to be unhappy and unsatisfied with his work and lessen its meaning in his life.

Emissions control systems are rather complex and problems with them may be difficult to diagnose. This, to some extent, has resulted in increasing specialization within service stations. It requires more training and skill than formerly to work with emissions control systems. A likely consequence is a more complex division of labor with one or more employees specializing in this kind of

work in a given station. This process of differentiation produces problems in coordination (Parsons, 1966:22-3) and accentuates status differences within stations. It is likely to make supervision more difficult because operators may not have the technical competence to evaluate the work of specialists (Blau and Meyer, 1971:142-3).

Because of the increasing need for specialized knowledge and expensive equipment to work on automobiles, certain kinds of work are less likely to be done in service stations especially the smaller ones as they cannot afford the equipment or the highly trained mechanics for their low business volume. Stan has flatly stated that he will not attempt to correct emissions control system problems on 1975 or later model cars because of their complexity. Smitty has spoken of a piece of test equipment that costs six hundred dollars which he would need in order to analyze problems in modern electronic ignition systems. To the extent that service stations refuse to or are unable to handle maintenance or repair work on automobiles due to emissions control laws, customers will be obliged to take work elsewhere, e.g., to automobile dealer's shops, to specialty shops, to larger, better-equipped service stations. This can be seen to accelerate the basis for fragmentation of social relationships internal and external to the station.

Other aspects of environmental protection laws deal with hydrocarbon vapors which escape from service stations during the filling of storage tanks and the dispensing of fuel into the tanks of motor vehicles. This loss has been estimated to be three-and-six-tenths tons per year at a station which has a monthly volume of thirty thousand gallons (National Petroleum News, 1975a:52).¹ Some local areas, particularly in California, already are requiring devices to cut down on this type of pollution.

The means to curb hydrocarbon pollution but not necessarily to reduce the loss of fuel are also being developed. These new systems will certainly open up new relationships between operators of service stations and those who sell and maintain them and with inspectors from governmental agencies whose responsibility is to ensure that the systems work properly.

4. The National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966

The National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 and its amendments have had some of the same effects

¹At a density of 41 to 43 pounds per cubic foot for liquid gasoline, I calculate this to be roughly 1250 to 1300 gallons per year. Not all hydrocarbons in gasoline are equally volatile, however. Temperature is important in the amount of vapor losses as evaporation rate is directly related to temperature. Thus, there would be regional variations in the vapor losses. This estimated vapor loss represents about 0.36 percent of the total gasoline handled by this hypothetical station.

as the pollution control laws. First, the federal government has taken some of the control from the customer over what the mechanic can do to an automobile. Second, it has led to greater technical complexity in automobiles. Third, it has generated more reports which must be completed by service station personnel.

First, the law provides that vehicle repairmen cannot render inoperative any safety device which is required by the law (National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966, 15 U.S.C. sec. 1397(a)(F)(2)(A)), except devices which are intended to warn the driver that seat belts are not fastened or which prevent the starting of the engine unless seat belts are fastened (National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966, 15 U.S.C. sec. 1397(a)(F)(2)(C)). Violators of this provision face fines up to one thousand dollars for each violation (National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966, 15 U.S.C. sec. 1398(a)). While the customer himself can disconnect safety devices required by the law, he cannot have the personnel at a service station or other vehicle repair facility do so. To some extent, particularly before it became legal to disconnect seat belt warning devices, the law was circumvented by station personnel explaining to the customer how to disconnect the device himself. Thus, a significant number of the devices were probably disconnected by owners who did not have the faintest understanding of how

the system worked or what its components were. This constitutes a form of collusion between customer and station personnel which resulted in the circumvention of a law that had little public support.

Second, safety devices required by the law increase complexity of automobiles by adding new components. In models built during the years that seat belts had to be fastened for the vehicle to start, failures in the system sometimes prevented starting of engines and other problems. This increasing complexity may, as in the instance of equipment required by environmental protection laws, lead to greater specialization and greater fragmentation of the relationships associated with automobile ownership.

Another effect on the social organization of service stations is a result of an amendment to the law, the Motor Vehicle and Schoolbus Safety Amendment of 1974 which requires the manufacturers of tires to keep records of the names and addresses of all persons who purchased new tires (Motor Vehicle and Schoolbus Safety Amendment of 1974, 15 U.S.C. sec. 1418(b)). This requirement enables manufacturers to notify owners if there are defects in the product which mandate its recall. As a result of this requirement, service station operators must report names and addresses of new tire purchasers and the size, model, and lot number to the tire company. While the report to the tire company is brief and does

not appear too difficult to fill out, in Smitty's station it is seen as a symbol of governmental interference which causes work for which there is no compensation.

4. The Emergency Petroleum Allocation Act of 1973¹

Another feature of government which has effected the social organization of service stations is the Emergency Petroleum Act of 1973. Among its provisions are requirements that, when motor fuels are in short supply, the available supply is to be distributed to service stations of various categories according to past distribution patterns. It also provides that the price of gasoline can be regulated with price increases allowed only for certain increased costs.

Particularly during periods of short fuel supply there have been several effects on the service station. These are primarily regarding participant-customer relationships. In the first part of 1974, service stations were allocated approximately seventy-five to eighty-five percent of the gallons of fuel sold during a base period. The exact allocation depended upon the region of the country and the supplying oil company. The base period for a given month is that particular month in the year

¹I am grateful to William E. Harris for helpful assistance in locating reference material for this section.

1972 (Federal Energy Administration, 1974:sec. 211.102 and 211.103). Because station operators had less fuel to sell, and were concerned about making their allocations last through the month, many stations, as did Stan, cut their hours of operation. Sometimes leases were rewritten. Smitty was allowed to close at six o'clock in the afternoon and remain closed all day Sunday. This meant shorter hours of operation, fewer employees, and fewer hours of work. It also meant some changes in the established behavior patterns of customers. Customers had to plan ahead if they intended to take a drive on Sunday. The situation also brought out the loyalty of dealers toward their regular customers. Dealers tried various techniques of conserving fuel for their regular customers including the legally questionable tactic of flatly refusing to sell gasoline to others.

Other effects were that many dealers restricted customers' purchases of gasoline. Stan limited purchases to three dollars' worth at any one time. This had an impact on participant-customer relationships in that formerly customers could buy as much gasoline as they could afford. To the extent that regular customers perceived that dealers were attempting to conserve gasoline for their use, it may have increased loyalty. To the extent that customers perceived no "real" fuel shortage, but that oil companies and dealers were trying

to raise gasoline prices--seemingly not an uncommon perception--customers may have become less loyal and even hostile. The gasoline shortage may also have moved dealers out of the category of the routine and everyday into new importance, at least temporarily.

There was also an effect on the price of gasoline. The law probably held down prices because dealers were not able to increase their margins in order to make more profit from a commodity in short supply. This perhaps served to decrease hostility toward station participants because most customers seemed to be aware that prices of gasoline were controlled; dealers themselves were not responsible for most of the price increase. Since customers were faced with rising gasoline prices, it is surprising that there was not more hostility directed toward service station personnel than there actually was. The law may have created overall better relationships between dealers and their public.

The Emergency Petroleum Allocation Act also required station operators to compute the proper selling price for their gasoline based upon the cost of the gasoline to them and their authorized margin. Some operators were found selling gasoline for more than allowed by the law and were forced to refund overcharges, usually by selling a specified number of gallons at a lower price. Whether the errors were honest mistakes or were intentional was

difficult to determine, but they were often published in newspapers and created some unfavorable publicity for the trade. Stan, in particular, articulated the belief that the published accounts of price violations would lead the public to conclude that all service station operators are "crooked."

While the allocation and price regulation provisions of the act were to have expired at the end of February, 1975 (Emergency Petroleum Act of 1973, 15 U.S.C. sec. 753 (g) (1)), these provisions were extended several times by Congress and have continued into 1976. The law has had less impact since the fuel crisis has seemed to have temporarily abated. Its primary effects have been to force oil companies to supply independent stations with gasoline if they had done so in 1972 and to force computation of the allowable gasoline price according to a formula specified by the law.

In these and many other ways, government at various levels has had a significant impact on the social organization of the service station. Laws have been responsible for the creation and modification of social roles within the service station organization as well as in relationships between customers and participants. A particular law, of course, does not have the same effects on all service stations because there are many differences in size and type of station, activities of the personnel, number of

participants, and other characteristics. Many of these effects can only be classified as latent (Merton, 1968: 114-36), that is, unintended and often unrecognized consequences of legislation intended to accomplish some other goal. They serve to underline the complexity and interrelatedness of the social structure of the service station and its milieu.

Change in the service station setting is a source of uncertainty for the participants. When uncertainty develops, participants develop ways of dealing with it. In the next chapter, I will discuss the concept of uncertainty and some of its consequences in the service station setting.

Chapter IV
UNCERTAINTIES: VARIETIES AND
COPING STRATEGIES

One pervasive underlying theme which I found in service stations was the theme of uncertainty. Stan put it this way: "Oh, Gil, I tell you in this business, it's either feast or it's famine. There may be no cars in the station for hours and then there will be a line at each pump." This is only one variant of the uncertainty found in the service station.

A. The Concept of Uncertainty

Uncertainty is the condition in which an individual is faced with a situation about which there is incomplete knowledge or information. While persons are always faced with incomplete knowledge at many times, the relative lack of information about outcome varies from one situation to another. That is, in focused gatherings or encounters (Goffman, 1961:7-14) when two or more persons interact, for a time focusing on the same topic such as a sales transaction, participants in that interaction vary in their knowledge about proclivities and preferences of others. Thus, when more is known about others, participants are better able to predict the outcome of any given course of action. When a service station operator and a long-term customer interact, each knows reasonably well what

the other expects and how the other might react to a particular course of action. On the other hand, neither a service station operator nor a transient customer know what to expect from each other except in the most general terms.

Similarly, when the independent actions of others may affect a person and they are not known by the person, it may be difficult for him to predict the outcome of the action of which he is the object. This occurs when a bureaucrat in government or business makes policy decisions which affect participants in the service station setting.

The lack of information about a situation or its outcome is necessary but not sufficient for an individual to experience uncertainty. The other two necessary conditions are the person's perception of the lack of information and the degree of perceived salience of the outcome to him.

In order for lack of knowledge to lead to a state of uncertainty, the person must perceive that there is incomplete information and, because of this, the outcome of particular action by himself or others cannot be accurately predicted. That is, an individual must realize that he or she cannot predict the consequences of his or her actions or else that the actions of others cannot be predicted. This refers to the person's perception of the

unpredictability of the potential outcome, and not the degree of unpredictability agreed upon by others or the inter-subjective or public judgements (Friedrichs, 1970: 206-12) of other observers.¹ Uncertainty probably develops primarily out of situations where an individual perceives that, from his perspective, negative consequences could occur, though there is no reason why uncertainty might not develop even when only positive consequences are perceived as possible results of a given situation.

The amount of uncertainty experienced by the participants in a situation should be directly related to the perceived salience of the outcome to the individual. In other words, the outcome of a situation must be believed to have an important impact on the individual if he is to experience uncertainty. If possible outcomes are seen to be of little or no importance to the individual, then little or no uncertainty will be experienced. For example, a clean-cut, young man walking toward a station may be seen to want cigarettes, make a phone call, purchase a gallon of gasoline, or use the restroom. The participants in the service station organization may not be able to predict this, but none of these possible perceived outcomes greatly affects them. Therefore, little uncertainty

¹This relates to Fox's (1957:207-8) observation that medical students differ in their perceptions of uncertainty in the practice of medicine.

results. If possible outcomes are seen to be important to the participants, then greater uncertainty will be experienced. For example, a complaint by a long-time, valued customer about shoddy service may invoke considerable uncertainty in that the customer, as one alternative, could terminate his business relationship and cause reduced income and damage to the station's reputation.

A shortage of fuel, as in the fuel crisis of 1973, may lead the operator of a small service station to believe that the oil company may channel its available fuel to its larger, company-owned stations where the available fuel will bring the company greater profit. This would be very salient to the service station operator because its consequences are that he could be put out of business. Also important in degree of uncertainty is an individual's assessment of the probability of various possible outcomes occurring. Especially in the case of a possible negative outcome, the greater the probability of its occurring, the greater the degree of uncertainty. This state would hold until the probability of the event occurring neared unity, in which case the person might not be pleased, but there would no longer be uncertainty. However, as long as there is some chance that the event will not occur there is some uncertainty.

Thus, there are three conditions necessary for the person to experience uncertainty. First, there must be

a situation for which the individual lacks complete information upon which to act or upon which others are acting. Second, the person must be aware that there is incomplete information and thus cannot predict outcomes of his or other people's actions. This is based on the person's own perception, not necessarily what others agree upon. Third, the outcomes themselves must be perceived to be salient to the person. The amount of uncertainty experienced is to some extent a factor of the person's assessment of the likelihood of various possible outcomes occurring.

Uncertainty cannot be escaped, but some positions in social organization require occupants to deal with greater uncertainty than do others. Within the service station setting, there are differences depending upon position in the amount of uncertainty which must be tolerated. This has its analogue in the medical profession in which psychiatrists and general practitioners are faced with greater uncertainty than are gynecologists (Knight, 1973: 97-9). In the service station, the dealer or manager probably faces the greatest amount of uncertainty and the greatest variation in kinds of uncertainties. A participant who works as a mechanic experiences more uncertainty relating to technical matters such as diagnoses and repair problems. An unskilled general mechanic involved in

lubrication, changing tires, replacing shock absorbers, and washing vehicles is likely to experience relatively little uncertainty.

Different people seem to differ in their ability to cope with uncertainty (Knight, 1973:95). To the extent that this is true, personnel may gravitate to positions which demand different degrees of ability to cope with uncertainty. A person who has difficulty coping with uncertainty may be less likely to become a dealer or a manager of a station because he is not comfortable with the degree of uncertainty the position requires him to tolerate¹.

Uncertainties found in the service station are similar in many respects to the kinds faced by those in the practice of medicine (Fox, 1957; Mumford, 1970:158-63). In medicine, most practitioners such as physicians differ from most scientists whose pursuit is knowledge (Knight, 1973:8). While the formal training of physicians sometimes gives explicit attention to learning how to handle uncertainty (Fox, 1958:227), this is primarily an informal socialization process (Mumford, 1970:158-63; Fox, 1957). In the service station setting, socialization is informal although it may be dealt with at meetings and clinics. In the cited research considerable attention has been

¹The current study however is not designed to test this interesting hypothesis.

given to the process of socializing medical students for dealing with uncertainty. In the service station, socialization for coping with uncertainty is a diffuse and drawn out process since the kind of work done by the initiate and his training tend to be for preparation for dependent positions and consequences of error are not great in many cases. In the stations studied, there was little opportunity to observe the process of socialization for uncertainty.

Participants in the service station setting must act in spite of uncertainty or nothing will be accomplished. However, they seem to dislike uncertainty and strive to reduce it through various means which are called coping strategies. Coping strategies are the ways in which participants in a social setting act in order either to prevent situations in which they experience uncertainty, or, if this is not possible or practicable, to reduce the amount of uncertainty.

Coping strategies involve two levels, the overt action and the covert thought process. The former refers to overt action designed to prevent a situation or reduce its uncertainty-producing potential. In the service station, refusing to accept a vehicle for repair late in the day is an example of an overt action designed to prevent the uncertainty of finishing the job before the end of the working day.

A coping strategy on the mental level is one which involves a redefinition of the situation so that it no longer has the potential for creating a condition of uncertainty or, at least, of reducing the severity of the uncertainty. An example of this strategy, related to the foregoing example is to adopt the view that if a customer brings in his vehicle late in the day and wants work done on it, he implicitly accepts the risk that it might not be finished by quitting time and should not expect the participants to finish the job until the next day. A related example is the decision to have customers who are late for appointments with their automobiles wait their turn for the desired work and for participants not to feel obligated to work harder or faster because work has piled up as a result of customer tardiness.

There are many sources of uncertainty in the service station setting. In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss some of these that are important in the day-to-day operation of service stations and some of the strategies of coping with them. This analysis is particularly applicable to dealers, but many aspects are applicable to their employees, also. Two major types of uncertainty will be discussed, those stemming from business and those stemming from robbery and theft.

B. Uncertainty and Coping Strategies in Service Stations

1. Business-Related Uncertainty

In service stations, there are many unknowns which lead to uncertainty in the participants. Some of the important areas in which there are unknowns and outcomes difficult to predict are diagnoses of automobile problems, obtaining repair parts, accomplishing repair and service work, and the patronage patterns of customers.

a) Correct Diagnoses

One activity of service stations which is an important source of uncertainty is the diagnoses of problems in automobiles. This problem has been increasing in importance as the complexity of automobiles has increased.¹

The diagnoses of automobile problems is similar to physicians' diagnoses of human ailments in that such diagnoses are usually based on incomplete information. In automobiles, as in humans, a great deal of equipment has been developed to help pinpoint problems. The equipment is, however, expensive and needs skilled operators. In service stations, there is not likely to be found the highly specialized and expensive diagnostic equipment which exists because most station operations

¹The increasing complexity of automobiles is discussed in Chapter III in sections on environmental protection laws and the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966.

cannot make owning such equipment profitable. Service stations also tend to deal with a wider variety of makes of car than automobile dealers' shops. Furthermore, on the whole, service stations probably have less highly skilled mechanics. Service station people, especially employees, are not prone to reading about diagnostic and service procedures in manuals or magazines. Thus, even though much information is provided in trade magazines, these magazines may not be read. Most persons who work in service stations lack the background in physics which would help them understand systems such as those of emissions control. Parts houses have occasional clinics on various automobile systems, but these will not fully train mechanics. Although service station operators usually limit the kinds of work in their shops, diagnoses are made by less skilled personnel than at automobile dealers' shops. Service station mechanics tend to make diagnoses based on less information because stations have few items of sophisticated test equipment. Thus uncertainty exists in diagnoses of automobile problems. While uncertainty cannot be eliminated from any diagnosis, it is probably higher in general service stations than in highly specialized repair shops.

Uncertainty can be reduced by several means. The kinds of work carried out on automobiles can be restricted to those areas in which the station has the necessary

equipment and the personnel have competence or, at least, familiarity. Both Stan and Smitty avoid jobs for which they lack either equipment or trained personnel. Uncertainty can be reduced by having the best-trained personnel make the diagnosis. It can be reduced by installing new parts in an attempt to eliminate even remotely possible causes of the problem. While I did not personally observe this sort of practice in the research settings I observed-- an occasional fuel filter is the possible exception--it has been reported by automobile clubs and television stations that have sent automobiles with known defects to service stations and repair shops. In some cases, it is not possible to distinguish between faulty diagnoses and outright gouging of the vehicle owner.

There is a sound basis for some of the uncertainty of diagnoses. In some cases, two or more marginally functioning parts may be the cause of the problem. In other cases, the malfunction occurs only sporadically. In cases when the mechanic is uncertain of his diagnosis, he, like the physician, must hide this fact from the customer in order to give the customer confidence in the diagnosis and repair of his automobile. That is, personnel must present a confident, personal front (Goffman, 1959: 22-30) which fosters the belief that an individual or the other personnel in the shop can or have effectively diagnosed and corrected the problem. As physicians allay

the anxiety of patients with their confident manner (Goffman, 1959:24-5) when they deal with patients (Knight, 1973:103; Mumford, 1970:163; Fox, 1957:227-9), so do station personnel perform a similar function for automobile owners.

This definition of certainty can be carried too far, however, and may, if incorrect, destroy customers' and perhaps patients' confidence. In the case of physicians, Knight (1973:101) discusses advice given him by an experienced physician when Knight was a young doctor. The experienced physician counselled him always to indicate to the patient the possibility of a changed diagnosis if the prescribed treatment were not successful. In service stations, where participants are not quite certain of having corrected problems, the general form of the hedge seems to be, "we checked the [specific offending] system and found the [name of a specific part] to be [weak, worn, or out of adjustment] and we [replaced or adjusted] it and that seems to have cured the problem. A [the specific fault] doesn't usually cause [the customer's specific problem] though, so try it, and if you still have problems bring it back. In that case we may have to [replace or adjust] the [name of the specific part, often

expensive] which is usually the cause of problems like yours."¹ This kind of hedge indicates to customers that their problem may not have been corrected and that station participants have other potential solutions to it. It also indicates that they are concerned for the customer and do not run up his bill by replacing parts which potentially could cause the problem, but which are not determined to be defective.

Once the diagnosis has been made, in the majority of cases, the participants must locate the necessary parts.

b) Repair Parts and Supplies

Probably the most often experienced uncertainty is that resulting from procuring repair parts and supplies for automobile service and repair work. This is related to the great diversity in automobile components discussed in Chapter III and to the expectation of American motorists that there should be no waiting for repair parts. The problem is two-fold, first there is the problem of locating the part, and secondly, there is the problem of obtaining incorrect or defective parts.

¹Of course, in some shops the part indicated by the problem would be adjusted or replaced even though it passed the testing procedures in order to prevent "come-backs", vehicles brought back because the problem was not corrected.

Whenever an automobile comes in for service or repair, participants in the station must acquire the parts and supplies necessary to complete the job. Because of the diversity of automobile parts, a station has neither room for nor could afford the overhead of even a moderate stock of repair parts. Ordinarily, only the more common filters, fan belts, radiator hoses, ignition parts, and lubricants are stocked.¹ Even parts supply houses do not stock seldom used items. Thus, participants usually call or visit one or more parts houses to locate needed items for the average service or repair job. In most cases, the first parts house contacted will have the needed items and the participants can proceed. In other cases, the second or third supplier will have it and, not infrequently, automobile dealers' parts departments will be called and will have the part on hand. Sometimes, a given part can be located only at a salvage yard.² This has implications for lower profit and less reliability. In other instances, a part cannot be located and must be ordered and can be expected to arrive in a day or two. Occasionally, such orders may take a week or more to arrive.

¹In this, the automotive industry differs from the watch industry (Strodbeck and Sussman, 1968:305-6) and bicycle industry where there is considerable standardization of components. Thus, watch repair shops and bicycle repair shops commonly stock most of the repair parts they might need.

²Rear axles, brake drums and certain other parts are routinely obtained from salvage yards.

A significant portion of station participants' time, particularly dealers', may be spent telephoning to locate parts, going to pick them up, and checking on ordered parts. When a repair or service job comes in, unless it is a service job or a tune-up on a common model automobile for which participants are certain to have necessary parts and supplies on hand, it is impossible to know how long it will take to procure the needed items. The likelihood of difficulty and heightened uncertainty is greater for less common models and foreign cars or for highly specialized parts unique to a given model, but even common parts for Fords and Chevrolets are sometimes difficult to obtain. Where customers' automobiles are disabled, there is added pressure on the participants in the station setting.

At Stan's station, a greater portion of the participants' time is spent seeking repair parts. Usually Bob is sent to one of the larger parts houses in the city. If that parts house does not have what is needed, then the personnel of the parts house will call elsewhere to try to locate the required parts. Because Stan stocks few parts, except for oil filters, participants in his station are often faced with this uncertainty.

Even after a needed repair part has been located, it sometimes turns out that it is incorrect due to errors committed by service station or parts house personnel.

The components tend to vary according to model year, model, engine size and options on the vehicle. Errors sometimes also appear in parts catalogs. Furthermore, vehicles have sometimes been modified in various ways making the listed part inapplicable. Often these kinds of mistakes are discovered and can be corrected before work begins. In other cases the component must be disassembled before the error can be determined. The problem is often compounded by the fact that components manufactured by different suppliers may vary slightly in outward appearance, but are functionally equivalent. In some cases, improved or less expensive designs have replaced the original ones.

Another source of uncertainty is defective parts. These can look and fit properly, but do not function. Or, they can carry the correct designating number, but are incorrect in some way or other. The former situation sometimes leads to questions about diagnosis of the problem and correct installation, but defects are so common as to lead the participants also to question the part. Parts houses usually accept returned parts claimed to be defective without quibbling, but costly work time has been lost. The latter situation often leads to considerable frustration if the part is to be fitted in a place which is difficult to see or reach. An example of such a part was a replacement exhaust pipe, correct with the correct part number, for a V-8 engine but which

had incorrect flanges crimped on it. The flanges were both of the approximate proper size and shape, but the span between the bolt holes was too narrow. Because there was a gap of about an inch between the flange and the exhaust manifold and it was hard to see and reach, it was difficult to determine why the bolts would not screw into the manifold. The participant worked for about half an hour before the pipe was compared to the original. A cursory visual inspection showed that the old and the new were different and what the problem was. A new pipe was obtained and was bolted on in less than five minutes.

Simple generalizations about incorrect and defective repair parts are difficult to make because automobile repair parts range from simple metal castings to complex electronic units. Sometimes the same basic unit is used on different model vehicles, but it may be assembled differently. A fuel pump can be assembled so that the outlet will be in several different positions or the mounting brackets on an alternator are positioned differently. Because the disassembly and reassembly of the unit involves risk of damage to it or may invalidate the warranty, personnel usually attempt to get a unit which is assembled in the proper format for the vehicle being repaired.

Faced with many uncertainties relating to repair parts, station participants develop certain strategies for reducing or coping with the uncertainty.

One of these strategies is not to begin work on a repair job before the needed parts are in hand or, at a minimum, located. Stan, in particular, is very careful in this way. He loathes to keep a customer's automobile overnight. Smitty is not likely to begin a job until one of the parts houses or another source has claimed to have the parts he expects will be needed. This prevents needless disassembly and reassembly which require work time and may disable the vehicle in the station. There are also certain risks of damage to components in the assembly and disassembly processes.

Another strategy is to turn down jobs such as those on foreign cars which might involve parts which are hard to find. This seems to be harder to do when the motorist is a regular customer, but the lack of metric tools and expertise on a particular model car also can be offered as reasons. Sometimes personnel will do some work such as filter changes on this sort of automobile if the customer is insistent and will provide the filter.

Another strategy is to make a detailed comparison of the new or rebuilt unit with the old as soon as the new one is delivered. Even though participants may not be ready to reassemble the vehicle, by making an early,

detailed comparison they are able to gain time by allowing the parts search to continue while they do other things if the part turns out to be an incorrect one. Detailed checks are also likely to be made when participants perceive that there is a possibility of destroying or damaging the part already on the vehicle in the process of removing it.

Another tactic is to refuse to begin jobs late in the working day so that the risk of having to search for a part after ordinary business hours is reduced.

Additionally, station participants sometimes turn to informal sources for parts and supplies otherwise hard to obtain--a phenomenon akin to the military supply aberration known as "scrounging". When antifreeze was in short supply in 1974, Smitty called one or two people he knew in other automotive shops to see if they had a little antifreeze they could spare.

Stan said that all dealers have a junk drawer where they put many little hardware items in order to have a source of parts which may be hard to find. Smitty also had such a drawer as well as a supply of old carburetors and other units in his back room. A visiting dealer, upon observing Smitty's junk drawer, talked about a successful search in the drawer for a small item he could not find anywhere else.

Related to uncertainties about repair parts and supplies are others stemming from problems which crop up during repair work.

c) Repair Problems

When a repair job is undertaken in a service station or other repair shop, it is not possible to determine how long the job will take. Several kinds of problems can complicate the work. Sometimes bolts twist off. Other parts may be damaged during disassembly or reassembly or additional problems may be discovered during the course of the work. Such problems may produce little delay, with participants having only to acquire a replacement part, or they may cause considerable delay and extra work. The latter is exemplified by a twisted-off bolt in an engine block. Such a bolt must be drilled out and removed, a time consuming process with a high probability of failure.

Participants are quite aware of this kind of uncertainty. They seek to reduce its impact by being reluctant to begin repairs late in the day. Thus, if such problems do occur they do not feel obligated to stay late to finish the work. The same holds true if they find it is difficult to get a part because the parts houses are closed. They might have to keep the automobile overnight. Additionally, participants may attempt to avoid repairs which have a high probability of such problems, especially

work of other than regular customers. Stan, with his lesser interest in repair work, is less likely to accept risky jobs than Smitty except when the motorist is a regular customer.

Risky jobs include attempts to repair an assembly which is ordinarily non-repairable or to correct a problem which is especially difficult. The former occurred when Stan tried to fix a console light fixture on which the lens had broken. An example of the latter is an intermittent short-circuit in the lighting system of a van that Smitty worked on. Depending on the problem and the expertise of personnel in a particular station, such repairs vary in their likelihood of success. In the stations studied, if the operator doubted that the repair had been successfully made, he seemed likely not to charge for the labor involved. This can be seen as a strategy for avoiding further responsibility because the acceptance of a payment for work done seems to imply that the problem has been corrected. If payment has been accepted, but a problem persists, it is expected that there will be no additional charge for labor even if participants must spend several additional hours to correct it. Particularly when something is perceived to be non-repairable, participants do not want to be obligated to continue to work on it.

However, the extent to which this is true in all service stations and repair shops is uncertain. Examples

of unsatisfactory work being done and charged for came up in conversations with customers. Smitty and Stan also cited several instances of this. In one case, an older widow described to Smitty how an automobile dealer's shop had worked on the climate control unit of her luxury car and did not repair it, but charged her twenty-five dollars. In another case, Smitty described how the manager of a repair shop had charged one of Smitty's customers several times to replace a leaking gasket on an engine which the repair shop itself had overhauled. Smitty related, somewhat disgustedly, that the manager of that shop "used to run a clean shop."

Another major source of uncertainty in repair activity comes from participant errors and accidents during the repair process. While working on an automobile or raising it on a hoist, participants may damage a component or an accessory. At Smitty's station, once the participants raised a pickup on the hoist and jammed a citizen's band radio antenna against the ceiling, breaking the antenna. In this case, Smitty paid the owner for the cost of the replacement, even before trying to collect insurance.

Other kinds of damage may result from work done in a shop, but not until after a vehicle has left. Wheel lug nuts can work loose and ruin a rim, or an oil filter gasket, not properly seated, can allow the crankcase oil to escape and result in engine damage.

Insurance is an important way of coping with these risks when insurance is applicable. Another strategy of coping is to use only well-known brands of filters and repair parts whenever possible. It is expected that the company which makes an item, or which distributes it, stands behind its product and pays for any damage caused by its failure. Stan states emphatically that he uses only oil filters from "good" companies so that he has someone to back him should an oil filter fail. Another strategy is to willingly reimburse customers for any damage which might be caused by participants, their work, or products sold by the station. When loyal, regular customers are involved, this can involve a short-term economic loss. It may however be profitable in the long run by aiding in retaining the customer and maintaining the dealer's reputation among other customers.

d) Customer Patronage Patterns

In a service station, several related uncertainties grow out of customer patronage patterns. It is a convenience to motorists to be able to stop at a station during the day or evening hours, get waited on, have their vehicle's fuel supply replenished, and its windows cleaned in a matter of a few minutes. Motorists can ordinarily expect a very short waiting time before a station attendant is out to serve them.

For participants in the station setting, this freedom of customers translates into several kinds of uncertainty. Due to frequent interruptions and the fact that much of their work is brought in by the customers on short notice, participants have difficulty planning their work in advance.

Participants in service stations can expect many interruptions of their shop or office work unless there are several employees. This is related to the norm of quick service for gasoline customers. Interruptions seem to be of greater significance when there are only one or two persons at a station. At Smitty's station, this occurs in the early morning and at lunch time. It also occurs when the part-time help is not present or when Smitty is gone on an errand. At Stan's station, interruptions are particularly important because Bob and Stan are ordinarily there together from 8:00 to 11:15 a.m. Other times whenever a customer arrives, the attendant must interrupt whatever he is doing and wait on the customer.

Participants cope with these frequent interruptions in several ways. One way is that if a participant is at a station alone, he avoids working on jobs which prevent him from quickly going out to the drive. This eliminates work which results in dirty or greasy hands. Another way of coping with interruptions is to avoid doing any kind of work which requires sustained concentration or otherwise cannot easily be left at any time. Thus Smitty does some

of his bookkeeping at home and the rest at times when there are several employees in the station. Stan and Bob avoid service work in the afternoon and evening. Insulation of the ceiling of their shop, work not easily dropped on short notice, remains unfinished after five years.

There is an implicit system of priorities in the service stations which were studied. The highest priority is to give prompt service to customers on the driveway. A second priority is given to service and repair work, and a third priority includes other activities around the station. This system of priorities is flexible and is altered according to the exigencies of the particular situation. It provides, however, the participants with a ready-made guide for determining which activities to perform first and thus serves to reduce uncertainty in the face of conflicting demands.

Another source of uncertainty, related to customer patronage patterns, is the customer's adherence to appointments for service or repair work. Many customers who tell the personnel they will bring their vehicles at a certain time do not or do so at a later time. Sometimes this is not a serious problem as other customers may come in without appointments or others may come early. In these cases, participants have work to do and the schedule is simply rearranged. At other times, however, the work accumulates, several customers coming in at the same time

after participants have been idle. This puts added pressures on the participants to get the work done because customers are waiting or in the case of Stan's station, the major work time in the morning when both Stan and Bob are present may be about over. Also, there may not be enough time to be confident that a job can be done on a particular day, given the possibility of problems in obtaining repair parts or in accomplishing the work. In one instance, a woman with a malfunctioning windshield wiper motor on her car pulled into Stan's station at 11:00 a.m. after he had told her to come early. Since it was the kind of task that might produce problems, Stan would not begin the work that day.

One way of coping with the uncertainty relating to customers and their appointments is to schedule very loosely and take the customers as they come in--"first come, first served." Stan follows this approach. To a great extent, Smitty does too but he gives priority in some cases to customers with appointments. Scheduling customers through appointments can save time for them and make the work of station personnel more efficient.

There may be reciprocal effects between the actual reasons for indefinite scheduling and indefinite scheduling itself. Possible problems in getting parts or in repairs, as well as late customers, are among the reasons for indefinite scheduling of customers for service and repair

work. At the same time, customers are probably aware of indefinite schedules and may feel that it is not important to bring their vehicles on time because participants attend the automobiles roughly in the order in which they arrive. Thus, the function of indefinite scheduling may be to increase the problem of customers' not keeping their appointments.

Another source of uncertainty for a station operator lies in minor services he performs for his regular customers and their contrary tendency to go to mass merchandisers for tires, batteries, shock absorbers, and exhaust system repairs. In both stations studied, the personnel watch the automobiles of regular customers for things such as a new tailpipe or new shock absorbers their automobiles may or will be needing. They have an idea of when the item will need replacing and check it when the car is in for servicing. Sometimes they warn the owner by telling him that a particular item will be "going bad" in the near future and then inform him when it needs to be replaced. Smitty will sometimes cut a piece off a discarded tailpipe to make an extension to replace a rusted off end of one on a car. Replacing the tailpipe completely may result in damage to a muffler which has rusted thin but would otherwise give service for another few thousand miles. This kind of work is done at no charge to the customer as it is not requested by him.

For other such kinds of work, small charges may be made but it is not very profitable, in itself, for the dealer. When no work is done, but customers are informed about the condition of their automobiles, station personnel are using their expertise and time for customers' benefit. Motivation for this is the participants' hope that customers will have the work done in their shop, providing income from labor and profit from parts. Participants also desire that customers will remain loyal to their firm in gasoline purchasing and service work.

A major source of uncertainty for dealers is that customers may buy the needed parts and service elsewhere. Mass merchandisers usually sell tires, batteries, shock absorbers, and exhaust system components for lower prices than do service stations. Some customers might take their vehicles to a mass merchandiser to have repairs or replacements made. Other customers, once the problem has been diagnosed, purchase the parts and install them themselves.

Thus, dealers are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, they and their employees have a measure of expertise in the automotive field and through this expertise they make their living. To some extent service station operators seem similar to doctors, lawyers, and other specialists who have acquired a body of knowledge and who sell that knowledge. They are reluctant to give out free advice

to outsiders. When a station operator gives an automobile owner an assessment of the condition of his automobile, he is essentially giving free advice about the automobile while the owner has little commitment to have the station make repairs unless he specifically has requested the inspection. Even then there seems to be a custom of not charging for such inspections. On the other hand, part of the service that a dealer gives to a good customer is to check his automobile to keep it safe and reliable.

Thus, a station operator experiences uncertainty when he informs the automobile owner about the condition of his automobile or when he makes minor, temporary repairs at no charge. This uncertainty is reduced somewhat by carefully selecting only automobiles of customers who through past experience are known to have brought their repair work to the station. Further, customers who are warned of upcoming repair work might also be those who can reasonably be expected to bring the work to the shop. Others might not be told until the vehicle is in the shop and the work needs to be done. It does not seem likely, given the orientations of participants in stations studied, that information about defects which relate to safety would be withheld from any customers.

In the service station setting, uncertainty stems from several aspects of doing business. Uncertainty arises in the processes of diagnosing problems, obtaining

repair parts, and doing repair work. Other important sources of uncertainty are patterns of behavior of customers in purchasing fuel and bringing their vehicles for service and repair. Another major source of uncertainty in stations comes from the risk of theft and robbery.

2. The Uncertainty of Robbery and Theft

Two important unpredictable features of the service station setting are robbery and theft. Robbery is salient because participants face personal risk of being injured or killed. Thefts are important because of constant risk and difficulty in providing close surveillance while participants must attend to other necessary activities.

a) Robbery

Service stations are targets for robberies. Partly, this may be due to the hours, usually including evening hours, of operation. The general layout of stations makes them easily accessible on foot or by motor vehicle. Often, an attendant will be alone without co-workers or customers who might resist, call the police, or help identify the robber. Also, stations sometimes have on hand several hundred dollars in cash.

The subject of robbery is not a common topic of discussion in service stations, however. Any such conversation is sparked by instances of robberies elsewhere.

or by discussions of crime in general. When I first began my research in Stan's station, the persistent concern about crime in general puzzled me. One day, I was talking to Bob and the subject came up and focused on service station robberies and their high likelihood of occurrence. It was in this discussion that I became aware of how Stan and Bob cope with the uncertainty of being robbed. Bob said that he and Stan had spent a lot of time talking about what they would do in the event of a robbery. He said he would just hand over the money, even if there were a thousand dollars in the safe. It was just money and it beat getting killed. He went on to tell of a case in the downtown metropolitan area where the operator told the robber, "you're going to have to kill me in order to get the money" whereupon the robber promptly shot and killed him and made off with the money.

Another case Bob cited, was that of a man in a nearby small town, who told the hold-up men that he was getting their descriptions and would call the sheriff as soon as they left. The operator was abducted and found dead on the highway a few miles away. By thoroughly discussing what to do in the event of a hold-up, Stan seems to have eased the fear of it for Bob. The position Stan has taken can be seen to reaffirm the importance of Bob's life over money. It would seem that this tends to make Stan feel

more confident that his son will not act precipitately in a hold-up.

On the other hand, beside the cash register, in a recessed area of the top of the counter, is an eighteen inch long hickory hammer handle ready for use if an opportunity presents itself in a robbery or if there is a disturbance of some other kind.

Adopting a strong, law-and-order stance may be another response to the uncertainty of robbery. This probably derives most directly from the conservative, business-oriented ideologies of participants, but the possibility of being a robbery victim certainly adds salience to the law and order position. However, whether the law and order stance develops out of the perception of a high likelihood of robbery or whether the stance focuses participants' attention on robberies is difficult to determine. Likely there is a mutually influencing relationship. To the extent that the law and order orientation focuses attention of participants on strategies and courses of action to be taken in the event of a robbery and on preventive measures, it may be considered a useful coping strategy. There is, however, danger that such an orientation leads participants to overemphasize risk and creates unnecessary anxiety.

b) "Tapping the Till" and
Other Varieties of Theft

Another uncertainty faced by participants in station settings stems from the various tactics by which persons attempt to steal money or goods from stations or short change personnel in monetary transactions.

(1) "Tapping the Till"

"Tapping the till" or "getting into the till" is a technique in which a thief opens the cash register and takes out a few large bills while station personnel are on the drive or otherwise out of view. Not so much money is taken that an attendant will notice its loss immediately when he opens the register. A thief might take one or several bills each from the stacks of five-, ten-, and twenty-dollar denominations, the number taken from any one stack depending upon the size of that stack. A till tapper might take up to one hundred dollars if the register drawer has a substantial amount of money in it. If there are only one or two bills of any kind, they might not be touched as their loss would be likely to be noticed immediately. The actual theft is accomplished very quickly, once it is planned. A trucker might pull up to the gasoline pumps so that his truck blocks the view of the station's office while the attendant fills the truck's tanks. During winter, frosty station windows might provide concealment for such an act. A thief might

work alone or have an accomplice to distract the attendant. Tapping the till is more likely to occur at times when there is only one participant at the station.

Tapping the till can easily be prevented because most cash registers must have a key inserted in a lock before they will operate. However, the process of inserting a key and turning it is somewhat bothersome and in many stations the key is left in the machine with the lock turned to the operating position. In cases in which an attendant is at a station alone and he is suspicious of an unfamiliar customer, or the view of the cash register is blocked from the drive, he may carry the key in his pocket. However, situations may develop when the attendant does not have a convenient opportunity to remove and pocket the key ahead of time. Further, participants may be in the shop working at an especially noisy job, and not see anyone enter the office. At Smitty's station the cash register is placed near the front door of the office where it is conveniently observable from the drive and from many parts of the shop. At Stan's station, however, it is not possible to see the cash register from most of the shop. Thus, participants attempt when necessary, to use other techniques to reduce uncertainty. They may sensitize themselves to the noise the cash register drawer makes when it opens. Smitty notes that when he is the least bit suspicious he takes note of the last figure

rung up on the cash register tape. If anyone opens the drawer while he is out on the drive, there will be an additional entry or a pair of zeros printed on the tape.

(2) Stealing Small Items

The theft of small items from the office of a service station is another potential source of uncertainty. Much of the merchandise in the office of a service station is difficult to conceal or store away easily and individual items tend to be of low value. Nonetheless, there is the possibility that some things will be stolen. Often customers and others stand around the office while waiting for their automobiles to be serviced, repaired, or fueled. Other persons may wait for someone to pick them up because stations usually have pay telephones and are warm places to wait during cold weather. During this time, participants must wait on customers on the drive and continue to work in the shop if their work is to be done.

Personnel try to reduce this uncertainty. Similar to the problem of keeping others out of the cash register, participants are attuned to various kinds of noises from the office. Bob relates a situation when he was out in the shop working and heard a soft drink bottle being opened. It occurred to him that he had not heard the vending machine operate. He came out to the office and found an adolescent with an open soft drink bottle in

hand. Bob inquired whether he had purchased it and the young man assured him he had. Bob said he told the "kid" that he was "going to reach up and grab the bottle. If it's warm, you're gonna pay me fifteen cents and if it's cold, I'll pay you fifteen cents." The youth then admitted that he had taken the bottle from the cases of warm soft drinks stored near the vending machine and paid Bob the fifteen cents.

Some regular customers as well as strangers are believed to require careful watching if they are in the office alone. Participants may have work they need to do in the shop or they may need to go out of the building to wait on a customer. Thus, they must face the uncertainty that the person in the office may steal something. One strategy for dealing with this uncertainty is to make an assessment of the trustworthiness of the person. Henslin (1968; 1972) has dealt with the problem of assessing the trustworthiness of cab passengers based on their appearance, actions, and destinations. Service station personnel seem to make similar judgements, but this is not as salient for the participants in the service stations which were studied as it seems to be for cab drivers and service station participants in higher risk robbery areas. A factor which is important in the assessment of trust in the service station is appearance. Well-dressed individuals and older blue collar workers seem to be

accorded more trust. That is, they are watched less carefully than are younger, lower-class males. Another factor pointed out by Bob is that people who were self-centered and not considerate of others are less likely to be trustworthy.

Service stations differ from taxi cabs in that it is more difficult for station participants to avoid having unwanted people on the premises and they are more likely to have repeated contact with whom they deal and thus get to know them better.

The assessment of trustworthiness of customers is important for participants in a station setting because, due to other duties, they cannot constantly observe persons in the station. If a person is known to be untrustworthy, the priorities of participants will be reordered to allow the person to be watched.

A dealer-operated service station needs customers if it is to do a large enough volume of business to make sufficient profit to pay expenses and make a living for the proprietor. Because customers are free to do business where they please, the service station operator must attract customers to his station. One of the common ways of doing this and, at the same time, reducing uncertainty associated with staying in business is to build a clientele of loyal customers who regularly trade at the station.

Chapter V

STEADY CUSTOMERS AND THEIR CULTIVATION

The cultivation of a body of loyal and regular customers is an important strategy for reducing business-related uncertainties in dealer-operated service stations. In this chapter, I will first suggest a typology of customers from the perspective of participants in service stations, and, second, discuss the cultivation of customers in order to induce and maintain their loyalty.

A. A Typology of Service Station Customers

From the perspective of participants in service stations, a motorist who pulls onto the driveway is not merely a customer, but rather is a particular type of customer. The categorization of particular motorists implies differing definitions which result in participants according particular kinds of treatment to different customers. In this section I will briefly discuss four

identifiable types of customer.¹ The four types of customer are: 1) the steady or loyal regular one, 2) the good or regular customer, 3) the occasional customer and 4) the transient customer. There are two identifiable variants of the occasional customer: the shopper and the parasite. Customers who stop at particular stations seem likely to represent a wide range of variation among these types. The steady customer is the most highly desired type. However, all except the shopper and the parasite are welcomed in dealer-operated service stations.

¹These types of customer are not always labeled as such by participants, but they are implied. The terms vary somewhat by station, but the conceptual categories exist in the stations which were studied. The terms used in the respective stations have meaning to dealers and others familiar with the business. To some extent, these categories as described here, are arbitrary in that in the reality of the settings there seems to be considerable overlap in the categories. Also, there are implied variations in the differences among customers as viewed by participants. Dealers make sharper distinctions, perhaps due to their more direct interest, and show greater stress on them than do employees. Among the part-time employees at Smitty's station, there is an awareness of categories of customers. Customers and their vehicles are treated differently according to these categories. However, categories do not seem to be personally salient to part-time employees.

1. The Steady Customer¹

The steady customer or the loyal, regular customer is very important for many dealer-operated service stations. These customers are primarily interested in good service and are willing to pay extra for gasoline, repair parts, and tires, batteries and accessories in order to get that service. This is important because dealer-operated stations often have higher prices than cut-rates for gasoline and for tires, batteries and accessories than do mass merchandisers. The steady customer provides a dealer with stability in his business because he can depend on these customers to come to his station even when his prices are higher than those of his competition.

The steady customer views the service station where he trades as the exclusive source of gasoline, service, minor repair work, tires, batteries, and accessories unless he is on a trip. He purchases full-service gasoline. Price is of secondary importance in purchase decisions--service is the most important consideration. A steady customer feels a great deal of loyalty toward his dealer and his station and may endure considerable

¹"Steady Customer" is Smitty's term. Stan uses the term "regular customer," which seems to be applied to a somewhat broader range. Both use the term "customer" without adjective. This term has at least two meanings--the "steady customer" and someone who purchases anything, especially gasoline. Heretofore, I have used the term "loyal, regular customer" for the category because of its descriptive value.

inconvenience to do business there. Although the ideal steady customer does not exist, Stan spoke of customers who twenty years ago approximated the type. At that time, Stan would occasionally close an hour early on Sunday night. These customers would come in Monday morning and apologize for having had to buy fifty-cents worth of gasoline from a competitor in order to get home on Sunday night. Some of Stan's and Smitty's steady customers drive up to five miles out of their way to buy gasoline from their respective stations.

The steady customer becomes dependent upon his particular station to take care of his vehicles. The station is a proven source of automobile care and the customer has abdicated much of the responsibility for the care of his vehicle to station personnel. Because of this, the steady customer may know little about the care and servicing of his vehicle and is accustomed to the personal service of a particular station. Other stations or shops are not trusted and seem cold and impersonal because the customer does not find the kind of service to which he or she has become accustomed. This serves to isolate the steady customer from other service stations and shops except for the kinds of thing not provided by his service station. Even then, the gasoline dealer may recommend where to take the automobile, make appointments, and check on the work after it has been completed.

A steady customer has done business at a station for several years and all participants know what he likes and does not like regarding filling and servicing his automobile. Some of Stan's and Smitty's steady customers have been with them for over twenty years--some of Smitty's since his first week in the station. Smitty calls them "my old, steady customers".

Steady customers trust participants in their station to watch for things their automobiles need. Participants are trusted completely in repair of the vehicle. Steady customers tell their dealer to do whatever the car needs when they bring it in. They are not interested in explanations of what was done to the vehicle nor in examination of old parts.

Relationships of steady customers with participants of their service stations are characterized by a high degree of social cohesiveness. As such, these relationships provide considerable satisfaction to such customers through the participant-conveyed definition that they are valued and important people. Compared with alternatives, steady customers are much less likely to experience uncertainty in that there is considerable agreement about norms governing the relationship and they are able to predict behavior of participants.

If relationships between steady customers and service station participants are terminated involuntarily, these

customers may face a period of mild disorientation and sense of loss. Based on his study of Italian ethnics who were forced by urban renewal to move from a deteriorating area in the West End of Boston, Fried (1973: 69-70, 74-5) calls this "grief." While, for motorists, the service station is a much less significant part of their lives than the West End was to its residents, grief can result, though in milder form.

In the final business months of Smitty's station, many of his steady customers seemed to be at a loss as to what to do when the station closed. In conversation with me and the participants, many expressed anger toward Regional Oil. Some wrote angry letters to the editor of University Town's newspaper. Many asked Smitty where they should take their business when the station closed.

In actuality, customers who are called steady customers vary in their degree of loyalty and the degree to which the station is the exclusive source of their automobile needs.

2. The Good Customer¹

The good customer is a regular customer who is less loyal to a service station than is the steady customer. The good customer balances price and service to determine

¹The term "good customer" is Stan's, but is not often used. In Smitty's station the category seems to be implicit.

whether or not he will buy gasoline, service work, or tires from a particular station. The good customer purchases much of his gasoline needs at a particular station, but is not given to personal sacrifices in order to do business at that particular station. He also tends to choose mini-service or self-service gasoline if either is available. The good customer buys gasoline at regular intervals and is recognized by the participants as a customer of the station, but they may not know the person's name if he pays cash. A station may get part of good customers' service and repair business, but some of this business is also taken to mass merchandisers or automobile dealers, or they may do it themselves. A good customer may purchase tires, batteries, and accessories at a service station if the station carries what he wants. However, good customers will pay only a small premium over the price of a comparable product at other sources such as mass merchandisers.

3. The Occasional Customer

The occasional customer is one who purchases only a small part of his gasoline and other motoring needs at a particular dealer-operated station. Price is an important consideration for the occasional customer but he may also be aware of expectations of dealers with regard to the purchase of fuel as a criterion for deserving service

work. Thus, the occasional customer is likely to purchase some of his gasoline needs at the station and may bring all or part of his service work. The shopper is a major variant of the occasional customer.

The shopper¹ is a customer for whom price is the primary consideration. While the shopper may consider quality in price consideration when he can ascertain quality differences, he is not willing to pay a premium for service. Because price is the primary feature, the shopper patronizes a station for gasoline only when its price is lower than those of other stations. When self-service gasoline is available, the shopper purchases it. Because mass merchandisers ordinarily have tires, batteries, and accessories available at lower prices, the shopper is not likely to purchase any of these at a service station. The shopper is likely to change his own oil. If or when the shopper does not care to do this, he may bring his vehicle to a service station to have it done. Ironically, because station personnel may not perceive this to be profitable work in itself, shoppers may find it hard to get it done in a service station. The shopper approaches the ideal conception of economic man, or "homo-economicus"

¹"Shopper" is Smitty's term. It has a pejorative connotation. The "shopper trade" is briefly discussed in Chapter II, pages 72-3. In Stan's station this category exists, but is more implicit.

(Sorokin, 1947:8), who makes decisions based on rational, economic considerations.¹

An extreme form of the shopper is the parasite². Because dealer-operated stations usually have higher gasoline prices than do cut-rate stations, parasites seldom if ever buy gasoline from dealer-operated stations. However, in many service stations charges for service and certain kinds of repairs are lower than at automobile dealers' or mass merchandisers' shops. Sometimes, automobile dealers have minimum charges of five or more dollars or will refuse to work on certain small problems because there is little profit in them. Similarly, mass merchandisers' shops are oriented toward installing parts and accessories they sell themselves and will do little in the way of adjustments and other kinds of minor repairs except for high-profit work such as wheel

¹While in the narrow sense the decision may be rational, it may be based upon too few factors affecting the overall costs and benefits. Stan notes that if motorists do not check their tire pressures regularly, the tires will become underinflated and wear out more quickly. Premature tire replacement can cost motorists more than is saved by buying self-service gasoline. Stan used to check the tire pressures of all automobiles having the local county license plates whenever their tanks were filled with gasoline.

²"Parasite" is my term because there seems to be no label applied to the category though it exists in the minds of participants, especially the dealer's.

alignment. Thus, parasites seek out service stations to have low-profit repairs performed because they perceive that such repairs can be accomplished less expensively there or that no one else will do the work.

From the perspective of participants in service stations, most service and repair work requested by parasites is the kind which is not seen to be profitable in itself. It is the kind done for steady customers who, by loyal patronage, repay the difference between what participants believe the service is worth and what they charge for it. Therefore, participants tend to see that parasites are attempting to get the work done for only a fraction of what it is worth and there is a tendency not to want to give away to parasites that which other customers are perceived to have earned. Participant-parasite relationships are asymmetrical. The parasite wants work done, but participants, especially the dealer, do not value the parasite's business because it is ordinarily low- or no-profit work.

Thus, participants may prefer to terminate such a relationship and, therefore, may employ "decultivating techniques" (Bigus, 1972:156-9), acts designed to end a relationship. As with the milkmen described by Bigus, participants in service stations avoid telling customers that their business is not wanted or terminating relationships by being rude or abusive. This could be a basis for

complaint to the oil company and might be harmful to a station's reputation. Participants, thus, may resort to several different, primarily delaying, tactics. Customers may be told that the station is too busy this week. If they persist, they may be told to talk to the dealer the next week. If the dealer is away at the moment, employees are likely to tell parasites that they will have to talk to the dealer about whether or not they can do the work. After the work has been put off, it is hoped that parasites will either have given up or gone elsewhere.

4. The Transient Customer

The transient customer is a category of customer who does not live in the area but only passes through it. In most such cases, there is not a great probability of repeat business although salesmen and others who regularly travel a route may return to the same station each time they pass. Transient customers run a gamut from those who are steady customers at a station near their place of residence to shoppers. Thus, the orientation of particular transient customers is difficult to predict. Prediction is complicated by the possibility that the orientation of a customer toward a particular station near his home may not continue while he is traveling. A steady customer who ordinarily buys full-service gasoline may prefer cut-rate stations with the least expensive gasoline if he perceives

there is little benefit to be derived by paying extra for services where no long-term relationship exists.

Transient customers may purchase service work, minor repairs, tires, or batteries if these are necessary to continue a journey and a station is convenient. Station personnel are likely to accord transient customers much of the courtesy accorded steady customers and make special efforts when transient customers need service or repair work before they can continue their trip. If work is within the capability of station personnel but is seen to be unprofitable, participants may refer transient customers to other shops during normal business hours. The motivation for participants to help transient customers comes in part from satisfaction derived from the gratitude of such customers and in part from oil companies' expectations.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss the concept of cultivating customers and the techniques through which this is attempted.

B. The Cultivation of Customers

1. Cultivation and Its Part in Reducing Uncertainty

In order to develop a following of steady customers, participants in service stations engage in strategies designed to induce loyalty in customers and to maintain existing loyalties. In order to do this, steady customers

and those who appear to have potential to become steady customers are "cultivated." According to Bigus (1972: 131-2) cultivating

...refers to the courting and wooing activities engaged in by servicers in relations with those whom they service. Cultivating techniques are employed with the intent of either directly or indirectly gaining a reward (usually monetary). "Cultivated relationships" are relationships which are carried out with the primary intent of gaining such a reward. They include, but are not limited to service relationships. They are usually asymmetrical, with the less powerful party utilizing the cultivating tactics to bring the relationship closer to a state of symmetry.

The relationship between a dealer and his steady customer is a service relationship and is intensively cultivated. Cultivating techniques include services such as oiling door hinges, pick-up and delivery of vehicles, cashing checks, and credit. The social power feature of the relationship is asymmetrical in that customers are free to go to whichever station they choose and otherwise control the direction and nature of relationships (Bigus, 1972:132, 160). Relationships between dealers and their steady customers seem to approach power symmetry when the latter come to feel that they cannot get the same courtesy and good service elsewhere. Therefore, steady customers are less likely to terminate the relationships. However, dealer-customer relationships seem to remain asymmetrical because customers maintain considerable control over them. Customers can terminate them easily.

Customers determine whether relationships are narrow, e.g., involving only the purchase of fuel, or broad, e.g., involving all their service and minor repair work. This control over the relationship is expressed in Stan's station by the statement that "the customer is the boss."¹

The need to cultivate customers seems to stem from the social conditions under which service stations exist. Recently, there has been considerable competition among stations for customers and a relative plenitude of gasoline. With a wide variety of stations in all but the smallest towns, motorists could pick and choose their service stations using whatever criteria they desired. Only for a while, in 1973 and 1974, did customers experience restrictions on this freedom. During that period, the asymmetry of control in the relationship came nearly to be reversed and customers were grateful for any gasoline they were permitted to buy. This condition and subsequent stress on energy conservation conceivably has given greater control to dealers and their parent oil companies. This

¹The service station situation is similar to that of milkmen if consideration is limited to the sale of gasoline. However, in service stations there is service and repair activity over which participants have considerable control. When an automobile is brought in for repair of a specific problem, participants may do what they think is necessary to solve the problem and the customer is obligated to pay for parts and labor. Thus, once vehicles have been committed for service or repair, dealers have substantial power with their claims backed by the state through the mechanic's lien laws.

view is supported by Stan's observation that the service station business has deteriorated because the customer is "no longer the boss." With what now appears to be ample supplies of gasoline, customers may have regained some degree of the control they formerly had.

Steady customers are important to the stability of service station businesses in that they can be counted on to bring their business to a particular station. If all customers made purely rational, economic decisions about where to purchase gasoline, they would all patronize stations with lowest prices in an area. The service station business would be highly unpredictable and the competition stiff if this were the case. Cultivating customers is a strategy for reducing uncertainties that would thus exist and allows for a more orderly system of distribution.¹ To the extent that price of gasoline is the determining factor in a motorist's choice of gasoline source, he fits the shopper or the parasite categories.

Higher gasoline prices typically found at dealer-operated service stations and the belief that charges for many kinds of service and repair work are not adequate to

¹It also implies that a free-market, in its pure sense, does not exist in the service station setting, at least with respect to gasoline. If, however, one considers both service and gasoline as a unit, a stronger case for a free-market distribution system could be made because gasoline profits seem to subsidize the service aspect of stations. This permits participants to get an indirect return on the kind of work which brings little profit.

pay for the total value of the work, might well have been results of uncertainty. By charging higher prices for gasoline, dealers could have been able indirectly to make profits which cover work difficult to demonstrate to customers, such as minor adjustments and lubrication of door hinges. Gasoline, similar to the casket of Habenstein's funeral director (Goffman, 1959:32), is a highly visible product and thus a higher charge for it compensates for other, less visible services¹.

The higher price for gasoline at full-service, dealer-operated stations makes it necessary for dealers to cultivate customers in order to get them to pay greater prices in return for other services rendered for less than participants perceive them to be worth. Thus, the sale of gasoline and automotive service and repair work have become linked in such a way that a non-regular customer may have great difficulty getting work which is not seen to be profitable. Some jobs, seen to be profitable in themselves, are tune-ups, brake work, and front-end alignment and repair.

¹Currently, with success of jobbers and small oil companies in marketing self-service gasoline at a price as low as four- to six-cents per gallon over the terminal price (Reid, 1976b:38-41), this arrangement seems to be threatened. Dealers may be forced to charge more for service and repair work.

Not all service station operators seem to use this technique. They charge whatever they believe a job is worth or what the market will bear.

Bigus discusses two important facets of the cultivation process. First is reciprocity based on Gouldner's concept of the norm of reciprocity and second is developing and maintaining the trust of the customer (Bigus, 1972: 159-60). The importance of the norm of reciprocity to the cultivation process is that it is the basis for many of the strategies for gaining customer loyalty and continued patronage. The norm of reciprocity refers to the socially shared expectation that people will reciprocate in approximately equal measure both beneficial and negative acts (Gouldner, 1960:171-2). Cultivation techniques involve giving favors, courtesy, friendship, and special deals with expectations that customers will reciprocate with loyalty, increased business and other benefits to the servicer (Bigus, 1972:160). In a relationship such as a service relationship, the exchange is not like-for-like. Rather, each party expects to receive from the other something that the other can offer. A dealer, for example, can give extra attention to cleaning the inside of a customer's automobile if, in the past, the customer has acquired all or most of his automotive needs at that station.

A number of other factors effect reciprocity in participant-customer relationships. The social class of customers influences differing interpretations of the norm of reciprocity (Muir and Weinstein, 1968). A

customer's perceptions of the magnitude of participants' sacrifices may be of greater importance than the participants' actual sacrifices of time or expense when the customer assesses his obligation to reciprocate. This is indicated by the results of a laboratory study (Pruitt, 1968). An implication is that there can be social class differences in the perception of sacrifice by a dealer in a particular action which benefits a customer.

Extending credit to a working-class person may be perceived as a big favor by the recipient and thus an obligation for more loyal patronage than would be perceived by a middle-class person who has been extended credit. A visiting dealer remarked that "the poor always pay" in a conversation about Smitty's working-class customers who have charge accounts. Smitty had been telling about the number of his working-class customers and how faithful they as customers are even though they do not always pay their bills on time.

Another factor potentially affecting reciprocity is indicated by Goranson and Berkowitz's (1966) research. In that study, it was found that an individual may not feel as great an obligation to reciprocate when the actions of another person are seen to be involuntary. In dealer-operated stations, dealers have considerable operating latitude and thus are in a position to make many "voluntary" actions for the benefit of customers.

Stan's backing of parts and labor for longer than the usual ninety days may be effective in making customers feel obligated to reciprocate with more business.

A second facet discussed by Bigus (1972:160) is that of trust. Trust is seen to be important in most service relationships because customers lack the expertise to be able to evaluate the work of the servicer. Customers

...have no way of ascertaining whether a repairman did the services he claimed to have done, whether he did them properly, and so forth. Customers are generally aware of this. This puts the expert in the position of having to display trustworthiness in the course of carrying out his services (Bigus, 1972:160).

Thus, many of the strategies used in cultivating customers seem intended to show customers what was done and why it needed to be done. "Trust-inducing tactics" (Bigus, 1972:148) are intended to demonstrate that the servicer did not take advantage of the customer's ignorance in the servicer's field of expertise. This also implies that if the servicer does not take advantage of the customer in one situation, he will not do so in others.

Trust is not an independent dimension but rather only one aspect of reciprocity. That is, when the servicer has acted in what he believes to be the best interest of a customer and conveys trustworthiness, the customer is expected to reciprocate by trusting the servicer and returning with his future business. Thus, in a service station, the dealer may tell the customer that he had

the customer's automobile radiator flushed, but since that did not cure the problem, he will not charge the customer for it.¹

In both reciprocity and trust, the perceived relative contributions or sacrifices of the parties, seem to be important. Adams (1970:367-8), in the context of workers' assessments of the equity of their pay, suggests that perceptions of value of contributions and returns affect whether or not that person feels he is being treated fairly. In the cultivation of customers, servicers can influence customers' definitions of the work done, the trustworthiness of the servicer, and the worth of favors received. In the last section of this chapter, some of the cultivating techniques used to guide the customer's perceptions will be discussed.

2. Cultivating Techniques

In this section I will describe some cultivating techniques used in the service station setting. These strategies are implicitly or explicitly intended to induce and maintain loyalty of customers--to develop customers into steady customers and to maintain the loyalty in those who are already steady customers. The discussion

¹Parts installed in a customer's vehicle are often charged whether they are needed or not although sometimes such a part is removed and the old one reinstalled at no charge.

will be limited to cultivating techniques which fall into three categories of action intended to a) inspire trust in customers, b) cause customers to feel an obligation to participants and their stations, and c) develop personal aspects of relationships between participants and customers.

a) Cultivating Techniques
Intended to Inspire Trust

Customers tend to distrust participants for several reasons. Most customers recognize they are not capable of making technical judgements about diagnoses or work of participants in a service station. Second, they recognize that there are pecuniary incentives for participants to do unneeded work and install unnecessary parts. Third, they have heard horror stories from friends, neighbors, and relatives who have been taken advantage of by unscrupulous or incompetent repairmen. Regardless of whether these stories are true or not, their importance lies in their impact on customers' views of service stations. Customers thus tend to be alert for cues which indicate whether or not station personnel are honest or dishonest, competent or incompetent. Since customers usually do not see work being done nor can they evaluate it, the actual honesty and competence of participants are of secondary importance. Instead, customers look for cues which have meaning and upon which they can make judgements. As with milkmen's customers (Bigus,

1972:147), service station customers do not always display mistrust outwardly. If there is mistrust, a customer simply may not return. If participants in a station desire to develop and maintain a body of customers, they must present a set of meaningful symbols which will lead customers to believe that participants are both honest and competent. Participants implicitly or explicitly, but actively, influence judgements of customers through the use of cultivating techniques. In Goffman's (1959: 15-6ff) terms, cultivating techniques are part of the performance and are supplemented by the setting and personal fronts of the participants¹.

Bigus (1972:148-51) refers to this category of cultivating techniques as "trust-inducing tactics" and presents four such tactics: the sincerity act,² contrived disclosure, situational mitigation and accentuated honesty. All of these techniques seem to be used in service stations. I have also identified other techniques used in the service station setting including programmatic education and fulfilling role obligations.

¹Setting and personal front will be discussed only indirectly.

²This seems to be part of front, therefore will not be discussed here. A related tactic might be called the confidence act. The nature of the confidence act is indicated in Chapter IV, pages 127-128.

(1) Programmatic Disclosure¹

Programmatic disclosure involves "...disclosing, at opportune times, what was implied to be 'insider' information" (Bigus, 1972:149). While the information disclosed is not well known, neither is it in the category of trade secrets for which a discloser would suffer a penalty if it were known to his colleagues that he had given such information to an outsider. The object of programmatic disclosure is to induce customers to infer that participants are loyal to them, at least loyal enough to pass privileged information.

Smitty occasionally engaged in programmatic disclosure when he told prospective customers that the brand of tires he sold were manufactured by another better known company. Stan, during the fuel crisis, sometimes volunteered information about his station's current allocation.

¹Bigus (1972:149) uses the term "contrived disclosure," but I have chosen not to use the adjective "contrived" because of its connotations of artificiality and unnaturalness and implication of being forced. I prefer the adjective "programmatic" because it indicates a background of planning and policies without the implication of unnaturalness from the perspective of participants or that of others. This does not mean that participants do not feel their act is unnatural or forced in some situations nor that such actions may have felt unnatural in the past. The use of "programmatic" seems better to describe the possible range of perception by participants as they express themselves in interaction with others. The presentation of expressions, while they may be misleading, can vary from being consciously calculated to produce certain desired impressions to being relatively non-conscious (Goffman, 1959:4-6). When the giving off of expressions is a non-conscious process, it seems likely the participant does not experience a feeling of unnaturalness.

(2) Situational Mitigation

Situational mitigation is used when customers indicate mistrust of participants. Participants act directly to undermine customers' beliefs that they have or will inadvertently or intentionally take advantage of or cheat them (Bigus, 1972:150). The action is intended to show customers that their beliefs are in error, or, if participants are at fault, that it is a mistake rather than intentional. When customers' beliefs can be shown to be mistaken, participants do not respond with a self-righteous, "I told you so". Rather, they stress that they are not perfect, that such errors occasionally occur, and that they appreciate customers' bringing mistakes to their attention so they can correct them. Participants attempt to convey the impression that they are pleased to be able to check on things about which a customer is concerned.¹

When it is apparent that participants are in error, they apologize and express appreciation that the customer informed them so they can correct the matter. In less clear-cut cases, as when a repair job does not successfully solve a problem, participants indicate that repair work

¹This has a very practical aspect in that participants believe that dissatisfied customers may be lost as future customers.

is not always successful the first time, but that they are happy to keep working on the problem until the customer is satisfied.¹

In a service station, many occasions for expression of signs of mistrust by customers or dissatisfaction (implying mistrust) center around service and repair activity and invoices or "tickets" for service and repairs. Such expressions usually elicit explanations of work and its necessity or, if mistrust is about invoices or amounts of charges, these will be reviewed and total charges checked. If the participant who did the actual work is present, he may be called over to explain directly to the customer, taking some of the burden from the dealer.

Another area of possible mistrust by customers is in the accuracy of gasoline pumps on the driveway. Customers are aware of a potential for gouging by adjustment of delivery by the pump. A joking remark about the number of gallons delivered to my almost empty gas tank, prompted Stan to explain carefully about the accuracy of pumps and how inspection procedures of the Weights and Measures Division of the State Department of Agriculture made selling the customer short very risky. Thus, these practices have been practically eliminated.

¹Usually it is implied that there will be no extra labor charge, but this does not hold at all stations.

Situational mitigation activities have definite limits beyond which participants, usually dealers, will not budge. The limit in a given case varies according to the value placed on a customer by a dealer. A dealer is more likely to compromise more for a steady customer. However, a steady customer is also probably less likely to mistrust participants. Usually after an explanation of work accomplished and computation of a bill, a dealer will conclude that charges are reasonable and fair and that customers should also be satisfied. Perhaps, further negotiation would imply to customers that they can haggle over their bills. Dealers are faced with the problem of satisfying customers in order to minimize the risk of losing them while also avoiding haggling over the size of bills.

Sometimes, regarding even minor disputes, a dealer may stand fast. A motorist related to me how he had recently ended a relationship with a dealer. The man, as he described his patronage patterns, was a good customer. He claimed to have requested regular gasoline but the attendant claimed he had asked for premium which had been dispensed. The customer refused to pay thirty-six cents, the difference in cost between premium and regular gasoline for the amount he purchased. The dealer was not at the station at the time, but when the motorist next went in, the dealer insisted that he pay the difference and disparaged

him for taking advantage of his employees. The man said he explained his position but this did not satisfy the dealer.¹

(3) Accentuated Honesty

In the accentuated honesty technique, a participant voluntarily shows honesty when exposure for failing to do so would be unlikely. That is, the customer would not have been likely to notice a situation if the participant had not made an admission (Bigus, 1972:150-151). One motive for this is a desire to have the customer infer that if participants are honest about things that the customer could not have caught, then they are generally trustworthy.²

An excellent example of accentuated honesty occurred after participants in Smitty's station had worked on an

¹The customer indicated that the dealer had seemed less than friendly from a prior time, so this incident may have only been a final one. This dealer's treatment of his customers was the subject of a conversation among service station business "insiders" at another station in the same town. It lends credibility to the motorists' version of the story summarized here. Situational mitigation might be very limited when the dealer is attempting to "get rid of" a customer for one reason or another. In this light, such action may be what Bigus (1972:158-9) calls "terminating tactics."

²Because most human behavior is complexly motivated, it would be an oversimplification to assume that this is the sole reason for accentuated honesty. Whatever the original motivations for such action, the consequences are the same and it seems to me that participants are aware of them.

overheating problem in a car and had tried a number of things, including flushing the radiator, without success, before the problem was finally solved. When Smitty explained to the customer what had been done as he was going over the bill, he crossed off the labor charge for flushing the radiator and subtracted it from the final total. As he did this, he explained to the customer that it had not helped the problem, so he would not charge for it. The customer protested, saying that he should pay the eight-dollar charge because the work was done as part of the process of solving the problem and that the radiator probably needed flushing anyway. Smitty refused to let the customer pay for it, explaining that he had no "out of pocket costs" for that part of the job.

The conditions under which accentuated honesty seems likely to be practiced include situations when there are no "out of pocket costs" for parts or subcontracted labor but only labor of participants is involved. This includes not charging for repairs which are thought not likely to be successful.

In another example of accentuated honesty, one of Stan's customers had recently purchased a car with radial-ply tires. One of these tires was ruined by an object on the road. The customer brought in the wheel and told Stan he wanted another, less expensive tire for a spare. The former spare was of the same size and brand as the

other tires on the car, but had never been used. The customer had mounted the spare wheel in place of the wheel with the ruined tire and planned to continue to use it on the car. Stan told the customer that he could get him a spare tire and would be glad to do so, but that the damaged tire would be guaranteed against road hazards by the manufacturer. Stan told the customer the name of the local retailer of the brand, what kind of adjustment he could expect, and that the customer would be better off with another new tire of the same brand because it would match the almost new tire now on the car.

By sending a customer elsewhere, a dealer shows that he can be trusted to act in the customer's interest rather than in his own. Such a dealer has foregone the opportunity to make a sale and a profit and has used his knowledge and expertise to suggest a better alternative than that which the customer has requested.

Accentuated honesty might be practiced when minor, but observable damage, e.g., scratched paint, occurs to a vehicle while it is in the care of participants¹. Once customers have left a station, it is difficult to establish that the damage was done by participants at the station.

¹This differs from more serious and noticeable damage such as a dented or crumpled fender. In the instance of a scratch, considerable variation in stations or other repair businesses can be expected as to whether or not the accentuated honesty technique is employed.

(4) Programmatic Education

Programmatic education is a technique of preventing mistrust and misunderstandings with customers, especially steady customers. This involves teaching customers what kinds of service they can expect from participants of a station and what kinds of reward are given for loyal patronage. Many motorists are not aware of benefits of being steady customers at a service station. A dealer must often approach this matter carefully and indirectly because of risk of having customers against suggestions. Customers might perceive this as a sales pitch with undertones threatening difficulty in getting service if they do not become steady customers. Customers who perceive that prices charged at a service station are payment in full for service are likely to react negatively to such a discussion. Because of asymmetry of power in the relationship, a dealer ordinarily must be cautious in his attempts to educate his customers. As specific subjects arise, benefits relating to them might be explained. For example, a dealer can explain to a customer who has inquired that if a battery purchased by him from the dealer fails to start the car, a service call will be made for no charge.

Part of programmatic education is to inform customers of what work has been done and reasons for it. A customer is told that door hinges on his car were oiled while the vehicle was in for service and that this is something

dealers do for their good customers. Requests for difficult repairs may be met with a remark like, "I don't ordinarily do that kind of work, but since you're a good customer, I'll see what I can do." Small jobs may not be billed because the person is a good customer.

Over time, a dealer may be able to teach a customer the benefits of becoming a steady customer and norms held by participants for such a customer's behavior. This reduces potential for mistrust because the customer becomes aware of benefits he gains from continued patronage of the station and the potential reciprocal gains of the dealer. As customers are socialized to accept norms for their behavior in the station setting, they are able better to predict and understand actions of participants and therefore have less basis for mistrust. In certain cases, however, customers come to be able to predict when mistrust is warranted.

Another aspect of programmatic education which relates indirectly to trust is that of teaching customers how to operate and maintain their automobiles. A customer might learn, for example, that leaving the ignition switch at the "on" position when the engine is not running can cause breaker points to burn and that this, in turn, is the cause of a hard starting problem instead of a faulty tune-up job. Customers can also be prepared for future service and repair needs, e.g., they are told that they

will need new brake pads in 5,000 miles. When the time for the work arrives, the customer expects it and does not feel that it is something participants "spring on" him while his vehicle is in the station.¹ Correct operating procedures and better maintenance results in fewer problems with the vehicle, problems which could be attributed to station participants. This, along with fewer unexpected repairs, leads to an image of participants as trustworthy in their work.

(5) Fulfilling Role Obligations

The roles of dealer and participant in the service station setting include expectations or social norms which call for certain kinds of behavior vis-a-vis customers. These expectations can be called obligations which participants owe to customers (Gross, et al., 1958:62-3). In a full-service station participants' role obligations include filling customers' gas tanks, making change, thanking customers, servicing automobiles, etc. The role sector of the dealer and the role sectors of other participants with respect to customers (Gross, et al., 1958:62) are very similar except that dealers are expected to handle

¹This tactic may be decreasing with the growing popularity of mass merchandisers. This is discussed in Chapter III, pages 143-145.

complaints, make decisions about credit and negotiate prices of purchases such as tires.

Not all obligations of participants are desirable, enjoyable, or have apparent utility in their view. Being on the driveway to fill a customer's tank on a cold day or during a rainstorm is not likely to be intrinsically pleasing to them. Cleaning windshields when there is slush on the street may seem, in itself, to be an exercise in futility. This sort of thing is done because customers expect to have their automobiles filled promptly and windows cleaned except in severe weather. Meeting customers' expectations seems to be one way in which participants cultivate trust from their customers. When participants behave according to expectations, it contributes to customers' feelings that a participant really does hold the particular position or status which he appears to hold (Goffman, 1959:75-6). When a participant fulfills the role, customers feel more confident that he will fulfill other expectations and thus is trustworthy.

Stan routinely test-drives automobiles of certain customers because they expect him to tell them that their vehicles are in good running order based on his direct observation. To Stan, this often does not seem necessary but these customers feel it is part of the role of dealer. One of the reasons these customers trust Stan is because he fulfills this obligation.

When participants do not fulfill what in a customer's perspective is their obligations, the customer can mistrust them or their competence. A young woman brought a van to Smitty's station to have its ignition system and carburetor checked. The participants in the station found nothing wrong with the van so no adjustments were made nor was other work done. The woman was charged a three-dollar hoist charge for the work. A male companion of the woman seemed hostile that nothing was discovered to be wrong with the van but Smitty assured him that the van had been checked and it needed nothing. The couple went to the van, opened the engine compartment and talked for ten or fifteen minutes before leaving. It seems as though they expected something should have been done to the vehicle and they did not trust the participants because nothing was done. This may have involved the technique of accentuated honesty, but apparently the fulfillment of obligations of the role of dealer was more important to the customers.

Besides being important in cultivation of trust, the technique of fulfilling role obligations is also important in effecting obligation, to be discussed next. In many cases, a particular action may have multiple consequences. As indicated previously, trust seems to be indirectly related to reciprocity.

b) Cultivating Techniques Intended
to Effect Obligation

Effecting obligation is a general category of techniques which are intended "...to somehow instill in customers a sense of obligation or indebtedness. It was ...assumed that customers would reciprocate through increased sales and prompt bill payments," (Bigus 1972: 154).¹ The techniques in the category of effecting obligation are most directly based on the norm of reciprocity. Participants do something for the customer and expect that the customer will reciprocate by becoming or continuing to be a more loyal and regular customer. As Bigus notes, prompt payment of bills is another effect of customers' feeling of obligation. One of the characteristics of steady customers is a strong loyalty to a particular station and a willingness to endure inconvenience

¹Bigus (1972:154) refers to effecting obligation as the technique which is "...accomplished...in two different ways--through offering 'specials' and through performing 'favors.'" Elsewhere he uses technique in a more narrow sense as referring to specialized procedures or categories of action, rather than the more general sense of a body of specialized procedures (Bigus, 1972:142-6). This is a minor inconsistency, but for conceptual clarity I am using the term technique in the more narrow sense of specialized procedures or categories of action. The difference is in the relative level of abstraction. Bigus seems to use techniques to refer to categories at two levels of abstraction, while I am attempting to restrict the use of the term to the lower of the two levels.

in order to patronize it. It is primarily through the techniques of effecting obligation that these characteristics are developed.

There seem to be at least two important techniques used by participants in service stations to effect obligation. First is the technique of fulfilling role obligations and second is the technique of doing favors. Fulfilling role obligations as a technique for effecting obligation is another aspect of developing trust in the customer. The importance here is the perceived sacrifice of participants in carrying out expectations of customers. Fulfilling role obligations differs from performing favors in that the former is seen to be in the line of duty whereas the latter is above and beyond the call of duty.

(1) Fulfilling Role Obligations

Because fulfilling role obligations has been defined in the previous section, I will only deal with its implications for effecting obligation. When participants fulfill their obligations, customers may experience strain to fulfill the perceived obligations of their role. This is especially true when participants undergo discomfort or other sacrifices in order to perform their role. Participants will go out in a downpour to wait on a customer rather than hesitating five minutes for the rain to let up. Participants sometimes work through their lunch hour in

order to get a job finished at the time it has been promised. Participants can work for an hour or more on a bitterly cold morning trying to get a customer's car started. A customer may observe these sacrifices or may be informed through programmatic education. As previously discussed, a customer's perception of the size of the sacrifice may relate directly to the extent of the customer's felt obligation to reciprocate.

This is related to Stan's observation that customers are not as loyal as they were twenty years ago. While many factors are related to this, especially the rise of mass merchandisers, participants in stations do not now have to endure as many sacrifices for their customers as they once did. Stan and Smitty talk about how, in the past, they serviced customers' automobiles outdoors in cold weather because they did not have service shops. On days of snowstorms, participants laid in the snow to put on tire chains for customers. In doing this they got wet, dirty, and cold. Changing tires with the hand tools of a previous era was hard physical labor, and there was more such work because punctures were more frequent. Thus, price may not be the only factor in the success of mass merchandisers. New technological developments and other changes have reduced sacrifices of participants as perceived by customers.

Another aspect of fulfilling role obligations occurs when participants warrant their work. Many customers do not seem to be aware of this aspect of the role of service station dealer or else are not certain how to apply the necessary social control. Not all dealers or others with repair shops warrant their work. This particular norm can be roughly stated as "repairmen who accept and claim to have accomplished repair work by accepting payment or the promise of payment, should perform additional work or correct problems caused by the work without a labor charge." The application of this norm is limited in that the customer must express dissatisfaction with the work, the problems must occur within a reasonable time (usually ninety days), and the problems must be related to the original work. Conforming to this norm carries with it the cultivation of customers in that one of the primary reasons for it is to make customers feel an obligation to return with their business.

(2) Performing Favors

In the service station setting, the most important cultivating technique for effecting obligation is performing favors for customers. The category of favors includes both services performed for and material items given to customers. It also includes services which are not ordinarily performed at a particular service station, but

which a valued customer has requested. E.g., Stan repaired the charging system of a farm tractor for a customer. Ordinarily there is no charge for favors, though in cases such as the latter there may be one. When there is a charge it can be only a token one or for materials only.

There are many kinds of favor which are performed. All are intended to make the customer feel obligated and express gratitude by increasing purchases. Bigus' (1972: 154-6) discussion of effecting obligation includes the technique of doing favors for the customer and another technique called specials which are reduced prices on certain items, usually in large quantities. On higher volume customers, some milkmen make the specials permanent in order to increase sales and the obligation of these customers. In the service station a similar technique is used to entice operators of commercial vehicles and large-account business firms. The particular methods vary somewhat, but discounts are given on gasoline purchases, repair parts, labor or some combination of these. At some stations operators of commercial vehicles who have latitude to take these vehicles to any service station get discounts on purchases for their personal vehicles if they also bring the commercial business which they control. Even though he has many commercial vehicles, Smitty does not often give discounts. An exception is that the utility company and its employees sometimes get special prices on

such items as batteries, but this is not extensive. Smitty prefers to rely on good and prompt service to induce customer loyalty.

Particular favors include gifts of pens, ice scrapers, and coffee. Lending station equipment such as the hoist, the station pickup for moving, and perhaps tools are other favors. Participants are reluctant to lend equipment which allows a borrower to perform the kind of work done in the station lest the station become a tool crib for the neighborhood. They depend upon doing automotive work for their livelihoods and because lending tools produces little or no income, this tends to be quite restricted.

Customers are given free advice on the condition of their vehicles, on where they should take their vehicles for specialized repairs, and on how to deal with other repairmen and prices to expect. In some cases the advice may take the form of collusion with customers on how to disconnect safety or pollution control equipment which participants are forbidden by law to disconnect. Services for customers which are favors include pickup and delivery of cars, cashing personal checks, and charging oil changes under the heading of tire repair in order to circumvent the no-maintenance policies of some fleet operators.

Sometimes free work is done as when Bob helped a young man install a new windshield washer tank on his Volkswagen.

In order for a customer to feel that he is obligated to reciprocate in some manner, that is, for the technique to be successful, the customer must realize that the service or gift is a favor, that something of value has been done for or given to him. Because customers often do not appreciate the work of participants in service stations, they may not realize that they have received a favor.¹ Participants will try to communicate this to customers if they do not display gratitude. Many women customers are not expected to be able to appreciate favors rendered.

Favors are voluntary on the part of dealers, but to effect obligation they need to be seen as voluntary and unexpected by customers. The appearance of voluntary choice by the performer of a favor is important in the amount of obligation to reciprocate (Goranson and Berkowitz, 1966). It seems that when participants are perceived to be required by custom to provide certain services, the amount of obligation incurred by customers decreases.

¹The social process of appreciation is discussed in Chapter II, pages 66-73. Actions of participants intended to make customers aware of the nature of participants' work are discussed in the context of service station work in general. Favors are merely one category of work in stations.

When dealers perform particular favors regularly, customers come to see such acts as part of dealers' role obligations even though dealers may still see them as favors. Thus particular favors can lose their effectiveness in producing customer obligation if they are performed frequently. In his new job, Smitty has complained about customers' expecting to be given rides to work when their cars are left for service and to be picked up when the work is finished. It seems no longer to be a favor, but part of an implicit bargain between participants and customers. In this way, action that begins as a favor comes to be expected by customers if it is made routine. On the other hand, it may be difficult for dealers to avoid regularizing favors in the process of cultivating customers, because after a favor has been performed several times, customers feel something is wrong if it is discontinued.

c) Cultivating Techniques Intended
to Nurture Situational Friendship

Bigus (1972:153) refers to the nurturing of situational friendships as nurturing pseudo friendship. This seems to imply that the servicer is insincere in behavior which expresses liking for a customer. While this may be true, in many instances in service stations participants have genuine feelings of liking and friendship for customers. The fact that there is pecuniary interest on the part

of dealers and interest in receiving respect and good service on the part of customers does not mean that the appearance of mutual liking is phoney. I prefer the term situational friendship because it allows for differences in the strength of any friendship which exists and further connotes an important property of such friendships. This property is that such friendships tend to be restricted primarily to a limited number of situations, i.e., the place of business and other places where business-related interaction occurs such as on a service call. In other words, it expresses what both persons in such a relationship generally understand--that the relationship is a segmented one and in general kept within the boundaries of business dealings unless there are other ties such as lodge, church, or neighborhood.

In the service station setting, there is little need to cultivate friendship unless there is a mutual desire for that friendship. A technique which might be called accentuated courtesy may serve as an alternative to friendship. This technique involves politeness, promptness of service, and the expression of respect which may or may not be sincere, without connotations of like or dislike. Through the use of this technique, participants in stations can maintain considerable distance without giving customers justifiable basis for offense.

Techniques of nurturing situational friendship involve acts intended to encourage customers to like participants in order to cause them to want to do business at a station. This differs from techniques of effecting obligation which are intended to result in customers' feeling that they should take their business to the station. While persuading customers to like the participants is the primary goal of nurturing situational friendship, mutual liking may develop between customers and participants (Bigus, 1972:153-4).

At least three techniques are important in nurturing situational friendship. These are: 1) showing liking and similarity to customers, 2) showing concern for customers and their problems, and 3) jesting. All three involve participants taking time to interact with customers.

(1) Showing Liking for and
Similarity to Customers

In this technique, participants display liking for customers by engaging in friendly conversations. While such conversations may initially center on the weather, customers are likely to reveal other interests upon which conversations can be based. Such conversations tend to avoid topics on which participant and customer disagree. This means that participants must probe with care to avoid taking stands on issues until they can ascertain a customer's position. If a customer voices a position

counter to that of a participant, the participant probably will be noncommittal and let the subject drop. Politics is a subject which is avoided except when customer and participant are known to have similar views. One of Smitty's customers is a liberal Democrat who often brings up political issues. She often takes strong stands which Smitty himself opposes. Because the woman is a long-time steady customer, Smitty sometimes indicates disagreement, but avoids taking firm stands and arguing. There is a strong norm against overt political involvement by small businessmen. When the service station across the street from Smitty posted a message in support of Richard Nixon before his resignation, participants in Smitty's station expressed disbelief and surprise that the dealer would not know better. It was predicted that he would lose customers because of the sign.

An important aspect of like of and similarity for customers is the reluctance of participants to criticize or show disagreement with them about their maintenance practices. When maintenance has been neglected, participants tend not to criticize or even to agree with self-criticism of motorists or criticisms of their spouses. An extreme example of this was a van which was driven into Smitty's station with the engine bearings clattering for lack of oil. The dipstick was rusted in the tube and was difficult to remove. The driver, a young man, thought it was strange

that the engine was out of oil because he thought he had checked it three or four months ago which was doubtful because of the condition of the dipstick. He did not think the engine used oil. While there was limited sympathy and no overt criticism to the driver's face, there were a number of comments after he had left the scene. It was referred to as C.J.'s "first oil change without a drain." The driver was not a regular customer and was not likely to return. If there ever is criticism in Smitty's station, it is likely to be in cases such as this.

Another area in which display of liking and similarity is used is in complementing customers' new or recently purchased automobiles. Many customers bring such vehicles to their stations apparently looking for validation of their tastes and recognition of their shrewdness in bargaining. Such customers often reveal prices and other information, then wait for or directly ask for response from participants who frequently, depending upon their genuine opinions, have been shifting from one foot to the other or displaying other signs of nervousness. Norms about honesty sometimes interfere with fulfillment of role obligation of participants. Some such evaluations by participants to customers are hedged with remarks concerning the participant's lack of knowledge about the current market or the condition of the vehicle. In these

cases, the participant is ambivalent because the customer seems to expect positive comments and continued patronage of the station potentially hinges upon such reinforcement. Yet overt lies may lead to loss of participant credibility if a customer later discovers from other sources that he paid too much or if the vehicle turns out to be defective.

In general, agreement is voiced and disagreement is minimized. In this way, the technique of showing liking and similarity is much the same phenomenon as that found in ordinary conversations of middle-class persons. However, because of unequal social power in the relationship, participants must be more concerned about concealing differences than customers. This technique is used in other relationships characterized by an asymmetry of power, e.g., an upwardly mobile junior executive or military officer cultivates a relationship between himself and his superiors. Liking and similarities are perceived as leading to further business.

(2) Showing Concern for Customers and Their Problems

The technique of showing concern for customers and their problems is similar to that of showing like for and similarity to customers. It implies liking a customer, but is shown through concern for the customer personally or indirectly through care of his vehicle. Sentiments expressed by participants are likely to be sincere, but

they may be based on information gathered, and noted, for purposes of cultivating the social relationship. Remarks and questions about family members, health, hobbies, and other matters of concern and interest to the customer are frequent. A customer who has had a heart attack may be asked how he is progressing and respond with an updated report on his treatment, condition, prognosis, and hopes for the future.

Participants in service stations seem to serve a function similar to that attributed to bartenders. They may inquire about a customer's problems at work or others judged not too personal. Reciprocally, a customer may talk about work or family problems if a participant seems sympathetic.

Another way in which concern for customers is shown is by inquiring about automotive problems and volunteering advice. Small favors are performed for the customer. This is related to performing favors in order to effect obligation. The two forms of reciprocity are closely related in that performing favors implies to the customer that the participant is concerned about him/her. What is important here is not the value of the favor or the perceived sacrifice of participants, but that a participant voluntarily does something to solve a problem or make a customer feel better about something. Whether the concern is sincere or motivated by pecuniary interest is

of secondary importance. Frequently, in the two stations studied, such concern seems to be sincere in that customers may never know about what has been done for them. Probably, the most clear-cut example is related to Smitty's special care of the van operated by a woman employee of the utility company. This young woman was one of the first to enter a previously male-dominated occupation. Not only was she subjected to considerable jesting and ridicule, but she was assigned a van that had had a history of frequent breakdowns. When the vehicle broke down or failed to start, the woman was teased about its being her fault as she was a woman driver. Participants at the station inspected the vehicle closely in order to anticipate and prevent problems with it for the young woman.

(3) Jestings

Another technique of nurturing situational friendship is to participate in good-natured jesting with customers. This jesting centers around work competence, character, sex, money, and drinking. Jestings routines most often used consist of good-natured ridicule and gross overstatement. The latter especially are associated with drinking and sex. Personal characteristics of participants in any particular station seem strongly to influence the amount and nature of jesting. In Stan's station there is only a moderate amount of jesting, with little about

sex and drinking. In Smitty's station and in another which I observed for a while, there was considerable jesting, much of it concerning work competence, sex and drinking.

Jesting also varies with the customer. With a particular customer, the focus is on drinking, with another on work competence, etc. Jestings varies with the sex of customers there being considerably less with women customers. When it does occur with women customers it tends to focus on money or perhaps the character of husbands, e.g., how is that no-good husband of yours? Jestings is more prevalent with young people and with blue-collar workers. The young and the blue-collar customers' situations and lesser statuses are similar to those of participants in service stations and thus all have more shared meanings and positions upon which to base jesting without its becoming threatening.

In the light-hearted manner which characterizes most jesting between participants and customers, it implies equality, acceptance, and liking. Jestings between customers and participants does not seem to be entirely devoid of the social control and testing functions that Haas (1974) has found among ironworkers in that many topics deal with concerns of both customers and participants. However, even with a light-hearted tone, jests serve to remind participants that customers are aware of the

possibility that participants may not do a good job on their vehicles. Jestling also occurs among the participants, but there seem to be stronger implications of testing and social control than with customers. Among insiders to the setting, binging, the process of testing the trustworthiness and self-control of the other through verbal sparring and sometimes physical gestures (Haas, 1972) is much more pronounced.

In this and the previous three chapters I have discussed the features and change in the service station setting, the development of uncertainty, coping with uncertainty, and cultivation of customers. In the next chapter I will relate these themes in a developing substantive theory of change, uncertainty and cultivation of customers in dealer-operated service stations.

Chapter VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS: TOWARD A SUBSTANTIVE
THEORY OF CHANGE, UNCERTAINTY, AND THE
CULTIVATION OF CUSTOMERS IN THE
SERVICE STATION AS A SOCIAL
ORGANIZATION

In the first chapter of this work, I stated my intention to develop a grounded substantive theory of dealer-operated service stations as social and social psychological organizations. Such a theory is developed from concepts which are abstracted from data gathered in a setting. The researcher uncovers relationships among data, conceptualizes them, states them as propositions, and organizes them into theory. Because concepts and propositions are grounded in empirical observation, they allow prediction and will explain particular aspects of the setting (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:42). In this chapter, I intend to develop a grounded substantive theory relating important features of and changes in the service station setting to the feature of uncertainty as these have been set forth in detail in the preceding pages.

The milieu of the service station and changes in it foster uncertainty in participants in that milieu. Participants strive to prevent or reduce this uncertainty through a variety of strategies. These strategies have

reciprocal effects on the milieu, tending to make it more or less conducive of uncertainty for participants. The theory set forth here focuses on the relationships among station participants and their customers. Because the dealer is the central figure in the dealer-operated service station, the theory relates most directly to the relationship between dealers and customers. This relationship, in its many variations, is the service station's primary reason for existence.

In the first section of this chapter, I describe features of the station milieu, how it has been changing, and some effects of these changes on participant-customer relationships. Second, I will discuss how influences of these features and changes lead to uncertainty in the dealer. Third, I will relate uncertainty and responses to it to changes in relationships between customers and participants of service stations. The reader might find it helpful to refer to the figures in Appendix A, pages 254-8.

A. Characteristics of and Change in the Service Station Milieu

There are many features in the milieu of service stations¹ which cause the dealer to experience uncertainty. The following are some of these features: 1) Most of the products and services provided by service stations are not highly differentiated in the minds of customers. 2) There have been significant changes in marketing practices over the past twenty years. 3) Most customers are unable to appreciate the process or the results of repair work. 4) Customers have considerable control in the relationship with participants except during the actual repair process. 5) There has been a general trend toward greater complexity of automobiles and frequent changes in components and models.

1. Effects of Non-differentiated Products and Services

Gasoline, a central product of service stations, seems to be relatively undifferentiated in the minds of customers. Most customers do not see great differences between different brands of the same grade of gasoline-- a gallon of regular gas is a gallon of regular gas, no matter where it is purchased. Oil companies have made

¹The characteristics of the service station milieu discussed here are social because they are a result of business policies, laws, social norms and the division of labor in society. These develop and are maintained through the social activity of people.

considerable effort to differentiate their products from those of other oil companies by advertising that their gasolines contain additives with distinctive names which keep carburetors clean or prevent winter carburetor icing. The effects of these additives are not readily ascertainable by the customer, so their usefulness in convincing customers that particular brands are superior is questionable.

Service, except for driveway service, seems to be relatively non-differentiated in the minds of most motorists. Most motorists do not seem to understand and appreciate differences in service and repair work done by participants at different stations. The primary exception to this is in the steady customer who prefers the personal service provided at his service station. This service differs from that which is less personal at other stations.

In general, different service stations offer products and services which are not sharply differentiated in the minds of motorists. Most localities offer a choice of stations which motorists believe to be very similar. Choices between such stations are based on minor personal preferences. There are two consequences of this situation leading to uncertainty in the dealer. First, it results in asymmetry of power in the relationship between customers

and dealers because customers feel they are free to take their business elsewhere without significant loss of quality of service or at personal sacrifice.

Second, the condition of non-differentiated products and services provides a context in which other stations, especially salary-operated stations, can attract customers with lower prices than dealer-operated stations. If motorists feel that gasoline from branded service stations is the same as that from cut-rate stations--except that it costs more--they would be inclined to purchase from cut-rate stations. The lower prices of cut-rate, salary-operated stations reflect some of the changes in marketing practices over the past few years.

2. Effects of Changes in Marketing

There have been several significant changes in marketing practices in the petroleum and automobile supply fields. The most general and sweeping changes have been the rise of mass merchandisers and self-service, salary-operated gas stations. Mass merchandisers have flourished because they sell commonly used items such as tires and batteries at lower prices than service stations. Among the reasons for lower prices are that there are fewer middlemen in the supply system, large-volume purchases, perhaps lesser-skilled mechanics, and fewer proffered services. That mass merchandisers' service shops do not offer road

service exemplifies the latter. If a battery from a mass merchandiser fails, it will be replaced by the seller but the customer must first get the vehicle to one of the shops of the mass merchandiser. Participants of most service stations will make service calls if batteries sold by the station fail.

Mass merchandisers rely heavily on advertising and reduced prices to attract customers. Newspapers frequently contain advertisements or flyers advertising special prices on shock absorbers, tires, or batteries. One of the largest mass merchandisers has run a massive campaign to stigmatize two-year-old batteries. Radio and television audiences were bombarded with the sounds of grinding starter motors turning engines over too slowly to start. This was accompanied by the moans of an actor expressing powerlessness, futility, and the prospect of missing his daughter's wedding or another important event because of a weak battery. The message of the series of advertisements was clear--such problems can be prevented by a visit to the mass merchandiser's stores for a new battery. Through such advertising, the idea that mass merchandisers are sources of batteries as well as tires, shock absorbers, and other high volume items has been instilled

in the consciousness of many people. About three times as many batteries and shock absorbers are now sold by mass merchandisers as by service stations.¹

Another form of mass merchandising is the self-service, salary-operated gas station. These stations sell large quantities of gasoline at fiercely competitive prices and low overhead that results from simple facilities and a minimum number of employees who are usually paid a minimum possible wage. Since these stations are operated directly by oil companies or jobbers, one or two middlemen and their profits are eliminated.

These changes seem to have resulted in a trend toward more impersonal and temporary relationships between those who sell and those who buy automotive products. These relationships seem to be characterized by a present-time orientation. Sellers desire to make a sale (and hence a profit) whether or not such a sale is economical or necessary for the customer. Customers are viewed as people who must be sold something before they escape.² On the other hand,

¹This is an estimate based upon sources (National Petroleum News, 1975b:86; Emond, 1976:80) which used classifications of marketers different from those used here. The service station's share of the battery and shock absorber market is not large (fifteen percent or less).

²These orientations have been typical of many merchants for a long time. However, they seem to be increasingly held in the automotive field which, as the designation "service station" implies, has had a stronger service orientation.

customers who are not competent to evaluate the quality of products can be cynical about service. They also face other immediate demands for their money and therefore are apt to prefer items of lower price.

In service stations, especially those catering to steady customers, the relationship between customer and participants is more personal and is viewed from a longer-term perspective. Thus, participants are not as concerned with making an immediate sale if the interests of the customer are better served by another course of action. The goal is the long-term satisfaction of the customer which satisfaction is perceived to lead to continued patronage. However, mass marketing at lower prices tends to attract customers to mass merchandisers for items in which the latter deal. The effect is that customers are attracted away from dealer operated service stations.

3. Effects of the Lack of Customer Appreciation of the Processes and Results of Repair and Service Work

An important part of the milieu of service stations is customers' level of appreciation (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1974:317-9) of the processes or the results of automobile service and repair.¹ Most customers do not understand the operation of various components of

¹The process of appreciation is discussed fully in Chapter II, pages 66-73.

automobiles nor the skills, techniques, and problems involved in servicing and repairing them. If repair work solves an apparent problem and is not perceived to be too expensive, a customer will probably be satisfied.

Customers generally cannot understand the work of service station participants, but can only judge whether or not repairs or service have been successfully performed in the short run. They cannot determine whether workmanship is of high quality. For example, in an overhaul of a drive shaft universal joint, if mechanics are careless allowing grit to get into the new bearings, there may be premature failure of the joint. Customers have no way of knowing if grit has been introduced. They only perceive that the problem has been corrected. In service and repair work there are many possibilities for carelessness and damage to components which can lead to early breakdowns. Because customers lack ability to evaluate the quality of repair work, they may feel that the work of one mechanic is as good as that of another. This is likely to reduce loyalty to any particular source of service and repair. When there is little loyalty to a particular station, customers will tend to take their business where prices are lower. The lack of customers' ability to evaluate the quality of service and repair work also heightens mistrust of participants because customers recognize that they can be taken advantage of.

4. Effects of the Lack of Customer Control Over Repair Work

While customers have control in selecting where they want service and repair work performed, their control over the actual process diminishes considerably.¹ Participants, especially the dealer, once the automobile has been delivered to them, assume control of the service and repair process within general limits set by the customer. Customers may limit the work to the correction of a specific problem, although for steady customers the limits may be more implicit than explicit.

Participants do what they believe necessary to correct problems about which a customer complained. Prices for repair parts are established by suppliers and labor prices are determined or guided by flat-rate manuals. In service and repair work, dealer-customer relationships can be viewed as adversative with the interests of dealers and customers opposed. Dealers make their profits through the sale of parts and labor--the more parts and labor sold the more profit. Since profit is an important cultural

¹A customer can, however, diagnose the condition of his vehicle and specify what is to be replaced or repaired and thus retain a semblance of control. For most customers such a course is risky because of their unsophisticated level of expertise. It also absolves participants from certain responsibilities should a problem remain uncorrected. Repairmen sometimes refuse carry out work if they feel a customer is too restrictive, that the resulting repair would not be satisfactory, or that the job will produce too little profit.

value and goal, it can be expected that a dealer will seek profit when it is perceived as attainable providing other values are not violated. On the other hand, customers are aware of the profit implications of repair work and the potential for being taken advantage of because of their relative lack of expertise. Customers also recognize the lack of control they have over repair processes.

Furthermore, laws further restrict the control customers have over repair processes. Participants in stations cannot legally disconnect safety and pollution control equipment even if a customer requests it.¹

A major consequence of the lack of customer control over repairs is that customers have cause to mistrust participants. Once work is done, customers usually cannot evaluate it. They are constrained to pay at rates determined by others--persons in the parts distribution system and dealers.

5. Effects of Increasingly Complex Automobiles

Over the years, automobiles have grown increasingly complex. Automobile manufacturers have provided more and more options such as air conditioners, automatic transmissions, speed control devices, multiple-speed windshield wipers, disappearing headlights, and the like. While some

¹This reduction in customers' control is discussed in Chapter III, pages 105-6 and 109-11.

devices such as power seats and power windows are found only on the more expensive models, many others such as electronic ignition systems are common. Some of these devices are quite sophisticated, using space-age electronic circuitry.

Another source of increasing complexity has been the federal government's environmental protection laws and National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966.¹ For example, the environmental protection laws have required the addition of a variety of devices including positive crankcase ventilation (PCV) valves, exhaust gas recirculation (EGR) valves, and catalytic converters and modifications of previously used components such as carburetors.

More complex automobiles require more highly skilled mechanics and specialized test equipment. Some of the automobile components are sensitive and are easily damaged by inept testing. Such complexity has several consequences in service station settings. First, it contributes to customers' inability to appreciate the work of station participants because such work is further removed from the ordinary experiences of customers than was true when autos were simpler.

¹These laws and their effects are discussed in detail in Chapter III, pages 105-12.

Second, increasing complexity further reduces the control customers have over repair processes because they must rely heavily on the expertise of participants in determining what needs to be done to an automobile and the fair cost of such work.

Third, greater complexity lessens the attraction of customers to many service stations because their generalized shops can handle relatively fewer of the kinds of malfunctions which occur. Repair and service work thus tends to go to automobile dealers' shops or specialized repair shops where complicated equipment and expertise are more likely to be present. Customers will be inclined not take their cars to their regular stations initially if they feel that they ultimately will have to go elsewhere for the repair work.

Finally, greater automobile complexity leads to more problems in diagnoses, acquiring needed parts, and accomplishing the actual repair work. More complex systems mean that more components must be considered in diagnoses and the interactive influences of marginal components create increasingly complex problems. Because more parts must be carried in the distribution system, obtaining any particular part is more problematic. Parts houses have limited storage capacities and thus may be less likely to carry particular parts in stock. In accomplishing the actual repair, greater complexity often means that greater

and more varied skills are needed to make repairs than formerly. There is a greater chance of damaging the system if mistakes are made. The larger number of problems in the repair process tends to make customers less satisfied with the work done.

6. Effects of Constant Change

Closely related to increasing complexity in automobiles is the constant and unremitting change in components and styles and the growing numbers of models.¹ These frequent changes and the increasing numbers of models mean that more parts must be carried in the parts distribution system (Randell and Glickman, 1972:135). Since many of these parts are needed infrequently there are high storage costs for specialized inventories. These parts represent invested money which cannot earn interest or produce profits. Waste is often a factor in that parts can become obsolete and have to be discarded. High prices on parts reflect these costs and influences participant-customer relationships.

High prices on parts seem to cause customers to cease to rely on service stations. Parts which are in high demand can often be purchased at lower prices from mass merchandisers or those auto supply stores offering

¹The problem of constant change is described in detail in Chapter III, pages 83-85.

discounts. Filters, shock absorbers, batteries, spark plugs are only a few of these high-volume items. Customers can install many of these items themselves at considerable savings or have them installed at mass merchandisers' shops at about the same labor cost as at service stations.

A second effect of incessant change in the automotive field is that it creates disruption and uncertainty in repair work. Diagnoses are difficult because variations in any one component may require different test procedures and have different tolerances. Particular parts can be hard to obtain if they are not widely used. Variant and special procedures are often required for assembly and disassembly. Difficulties in repair activities are likely to lead to decreased customer satisfaction.

In this section I have discussed how certain characteristics of the milieu of service stations influence relationships among participants and customers. The important propositions in this section are listed in Appendix B, beginning on page 259. In the next section, I will show how the four principal effects of the milieu--asymmetry of power in relationships among customers and participants, inconstancy of customers in their patronage of a particular station, mistrust, and difficulties in the repair process--lead to uncertainty for dealers.

B. Some Conditions in the Milieu Leading to Uncertainty

Certain features of the milieu of service stations lead to a set of conditions which, through intermediate steps, produce uncertainty in dealers. In the first part of this section, I will trace some of these through an intermediate step--problematic customer patronage patterns.

1. Problematic Customer Patronage Patterns

Four salient characteristics of the milieu are suggested in the preceding section. These are power asymmetry in participant-customer relationships, attraction of customers away from service stations, customer mistrust, and problems arising in diagnosis and repair. These can lead to decreased customer loyalty and less steady patronage: problematic customer-patronage patterns. In this section, I will describe how these salient features lead to problematic customer patronage patterns.

a) How Asymmetry of Power in Participant-Customer Relation- ships Leads to Problematic Customer Patronage Patterns

An important consequence of the condition of non-differentiated products and services of service stations is inequality of power in relationships between participants and customers. Customers have considerable power in such relationships because they determine whether or

not particular relationships are to continue or to be dissolved. They decide how much business to take to a particular station. The greater the degree to which customers perceive that the products and services in stations are similar, the greater is customers' relative power in such relationships. This power advantage and the availability of many other sources of automotive needs, gives customers few tangible reasons to patronize any particular station. There are, however, intangible reasons such as personal service. For dealer-operated stations, higher prices for gasoline serve to further decrease the incentives customers have to begin and maintain relationships. The greater the incentive for customers to sustain relationships with particular dealers, the less will be the difference in power in these relationships.

The power differential may be lessened in small towns with only one, two, or a few stations. Under such conditions customers might have to drive several miles and endure inconvenience if they are not satisfied with local service stations. In addition, a fuel shortage such as that which occurred in 1973 and 1974 can reduce the relative power advantage of the customer. During the shortage, customers were willing to wait in line and pay higher prices and nevertheless be grateful to be able to buy fuel.

The major consequence of asymmetry of power in participant-customer relationships is that customer patronage becomes problematic. Customers are free to take their business where they please, so that a given dealer cannot count on faithful patronage from most of his customers.

b) How Attraction of Customers
Away From Particular Stations
Leads to Problematic Customer
Patronage Patterns

There are several features of the general milieu of service stations which can lure customers away from particular service stations. These are non-differentiated products and services and changes in marketing practices to include use of mass advertising, elimination of middlemen, and reduction of customer services. These factors create a situation in which prices are very important for attracting customers. Mass merchandisers have lower prices on the kinds of work they perform and thus have increasingly attracted motorists away from service stations. In the summer of 1974, Smitty installed a set of four shock absorbers on a car and charged about sixty-two dollars for the materials and the labor. About that same time, there was a sale on shock absorbers at the local outlet of a large mass merchandiser. During the sale, the mass merchandiser's middle-line shock absorbers sold for five dollars and fifty cents each and installation was two

dollars and fifty cents each. Thus a set of these would cost about thirty-three dollars including sales tax or about half the cost of those sold and installed by Smitty. The brand Smitty sold was a better quality and guaranteed not to leak, but the mass merchandiser's were warranted to last as long as the original purchaser owned the auto. The mass merchandiser thus replaces worn out or defective shock absorbers free of charge. Albeit the installation would have been better performed at Smitty's station, the price differential can serve as a strong incentive for motorists to take their shock absorber business to mass merchandisers.

The inability of most customers to appreciate the process and results of repair and service work is an important factor contributing to the attraction of customers away from service stations. Customers do not understand the work of the participants, therefore they are not able to recognize good workmanship and quality. This has two effects. First, motorists are not able to distinguish between the effectiveness of the work of different mechanics or in different shops in any systematic way because they lack expertise and there are few recurring problems which are amenable to systematic observation. Second, customers seldom reward mechanics for competence and good or careful workmanship so these are not fostered.

These conditions favor the attraction of customers away from service stations for repairs and services which can be obtained more cheaply elsewhere when quality is not considered. As a result, the patronage of customers becomes problematic for the dealer.

c) How Decreases in Customer
Satisfaction Lead to Problematic
Customer Patronage Patterns

When customers mistrust participants of service stations and when participants cannot readily repair their automobiles, the satisfaction customers gain from particular service stations will decrease.

(1) Mistrust and Decreases
in Customer Satisfaction

Mistrust results from customers' inability to appreciate the process or results of repair and service work. Customers recognize their lack of automotive expertise. They also recognize that there are monetary incentives for the participants to take advantage of them. Because of this customers do not wholly trust participants to act for their (customers') benefit. This mistrust is exacerbated by the limited control that customers have over actual repair work and over obligations they incur during the work.

The greater the customer's perceived lack of self-expertise and the greater the perceived lack of control

over the repair process, the greater will be the mistrust engendered in the customer. To the extent that customers do not trust participants in particular service stations, they are likely to be dissatisfied with the outcome of their relationships with participants. Dissatisfaction with the results of participant-customer relationships will lead to decreased loyalty from motorists and a greater probability that they will take their automotive work elsewhere.

(2) Problems in Repair and
Decreases in Customer Satisfaction

Problems of automotive diagnoses, in acquisition of repair parts, and in actual repair work are directly related to automobile complexity, the rapidity of change in components and procedures, and the total number of parts in the supply system. Great complexity and rapid change increase the problematic character of diagnoses and repair work. The growing number of parts is related to the increasing probability that given parts will not be readily obtainable. This is largely a result of limited application of and demand for particular items which makes stocking such parts unprofitable at lower levels in the supply system. Thus, motorists are less likely to be able to obtain prompt and effective service

and repair work at service stations. Delays will lower customer satisfaction and lead to decreased loyalty to particular stations.

(3) The Relationship Between Customer Satisfaction and Patronage Patterns

Customers become dissatisfied with relationships with participants because of mistrust or because participants seemingly cannot correct malfunctions in customers' vehicles. When this occurs, customers feel less loyal to particular stations and tend to take their business to other service stations, automobile dealers' shops, and mass merchandisers' stores. They may also do more of their own repair and service work. This means that customers who are dissatisfied are less likely to patronize a particular station steadily.

2. The Relationship Between Customer Patronage Patterns and Uncertainty Experienced by Dealers

In order for dealers to remain in business they must maintain a satisfactory volume of sales. They must sell enough gasoline, service and repair work, tires, batteries, and the like to pay their expenses and to derive a profit on which to live. This volume can be

provided by a large number of customers who stop at a particular station occasionally or a smaller number of customers who patronize it regularly.

In the current milieu in which service stations exist, mass merchandising techniques have made many needs of motorists available at lower prices than at stations. In strictly economic terms, stations cannot compete on high volume items such as gasoline, batteries, tires, shock absorbers, and tune-up parts. Non-regular customers are not likely to see any benefit in paying higher prices at service stations. Therefore, dealers are not likely to be successful if they have to rely on occasional customers. The sporadic patronage patterns of occasional customers cause dealers to experience uncertainty about remaining in business. Steady customers, on the other hand, can be counted on to patronize a station in spite of price differentials. Assuming a reasonably competent dealer, if a station has a sufficient number of steady customers, it is unlikely to fail as a business. Thus, the more faithful the patronage of customers, the lower the uncertainty of dealers.

The important propositions deriving from this section of this work are listed in Appendix C, beginning on page 262. In the next section, I will discuss some of the responses

of dealers to the uncertainty they experience resulting from features in the milieu of service stations.

C. Responses to Uncertainty

Dealers do not passively accept uncertainty. Rather, they act to reduce it. Coping strategies are actions taken in response to uncertainty generated by conditions present in the service station organization. An important variety of coping strategy is the cultivating technique. Cultivating techniques directly involve participant-customer relationships. I will first discuss some coping strategies which are used to manage uncertainty-producing situations in the service station milieu. Then I will discuss cultivating techniques. As I discuss coping strategies and cultivating techniques, I will suggest some of their consequences for the milieu or its characteristics.

1. Responses to Uncertainty: Coping Strategies

Certain characteristics in the milieu of service stations lead to uncertainty for participants. They respond to this uncertainty with coping strategies, actions implicitly or explicitly intended to control the consequences of their operating in the milieu in order

to prevent or manage conditions which cause uncertainty.¹ The four major uncertainty generating conditions which bear on participant-customer relationships are problems in correctly diagnosing automobile malfunctions, obtaining repair parts and supplies, accomplishing repair work, and adjusting to sporadic patronage patterns of customers.

a) Coping Strategies Intended to Reduce Uncertainty in the Diagnosis of Automobile Malfunctions

There are unknown factors in most diagnoses of automobile malfunctions. The number of these unknowns has been increasing with the increasing complexity of automobiles. Greater complexity is caused by laws mandating safety and pollution control and by optional equipment, such as air conditioning, offered by automobile manufacturers. The increase in unknowns is accompanied by an increase in uncertainty in that station participants perceive that unknowns hold the key to successful diagnoses. Sophisticated test equipment aid in diagnoses, but such equipment may not be profitable at service stations because of low use. Test equipment also requires personnel trained to use it and interpret the results. Many dealers have businesses which are too small to enable them to afford to hire trained personnel. Hiring competent

¹These strategies, and the conditions of the service station setting which give rise to them, are discussed in detail in Chapter IV.

personnel and acquiring sophisticated test equipment is one strategy open to large service stations, but it is not economically feasible for the average station.

A common strategy which dealers use to manage uncertainty is to limit the kinds of repair jobs they accept. The limits vary according to the equipment in the station and expertise of participants. Preferences of the dealer are important in establishing boundaries even if participants are capable of other kinds of work.

Limiting the scope of repair operations results in fewer problems in repair because participants do only the kinds of work in which they feel competent or comfortable. This sort of policy can be expected to result in greater customer satisfaction if any work performed is done well. However, when the scope of work done is narrow, it fragments relationships related to automobile maintenance and repair and causes customers to be attracted away from particular stations. If a given service station performs only tune-ups and service work, then customers will have to take their vehicles elsewhere for brake and exhaust system work, and other repairs.

Another strategy for reducing uncertainty in diagnoses is to hedge diagnoses both before and after the repair work is done. This indicates to customers that there is uncertainty in diagnoses, but that participants are in control of the situation. Hedging can be expected

to allay mistrust or increase it due to the ambiguity introduced into the situation. Hedging sets up a situation in which the customer is prepared for the possibility of the repair work being unsuccessful. Customers are perhaps less likely to believe that a mechanic is incompetent when repairs are unsuccessful if indications of other possible causes have been given. But customers are more likely to be satisfied if they feel that they can trust the participants.

b) Coping Strategies Intended to Reduce Uncertainty in the Process of Obtaining Repair Parts and Supplies

Because of increasing complexity, continuous change, and lack of standardization in automobile components it is often difficult to obtain repair parts. Ordinarily parts are available, but frequently they must be ordered from a regional warehouse. Ordered parts can take several days to arrive. Because American motorists are highly dependent on their autos for transportation, they want to have them repaired promptly and may be dissatisfied if this is not accomplished.

In order to avoid being unable to repair customers' automobiles on the same working day as they are brought in for repair, participants in service stations seek to reduce the associated uncertainty through several strategies. Ordinarily, they will not begin jobs until

the parts they expect to need are on hand. This is especially true when the malfunction does not disable the automobile. They carefully check the replacement parts, thus avoiding disassembly of vehicles only to find that they have incorrect parts.

Most dealers maintain junk "drawers" and informal ties with other stations as sources of small parts, especially items of specialty hardware. Often, non-standard items are hard to find at parts houses or auto dealers. Participants then turn to salvage yards and junk drawers. Because of lack of organization in junk drawers, they are used only as the last resort unless participants remember seeing a needed part in these.

These strategies can, besides reducing uncertainty for the dealer, cause customers to develop greater trust in the dealer. Customers are seldom left without transportation when their vehicles are still operable otherwise. Dealers are more likely to be seen as concerned about the customer's convenience.

Another strategy of coping with uncertainty stemming from repair parts problems is to refuse to accept jobs which might involve hard-to-obtain parts. Foreign cars and older model American cars fall into this category. This strategy tends to force customers to take their

repair work elsewhere. Greater fragmentation of relationships in automotive maintenance results thus lessening the possibility of developing steady customers.

c) Coping Strategies to Reduce
Uncertainty Resulting From
Problems in Repair Work

The increasing complexity of automobiles, the unremitting change in components, and lack of standardization of parts and procedures give auto repair work a strong problematic quality. Mechanics are more likely to disassemble, reassemble and adjust components incorrectly. Errors can result in failure to remedy the original complaint or the creation of new problems by damaging other components. All of these make repair work a source of uncertainty.

Participants use several strategies to reduce this uncertainty. They may refuse to begin work on a job if they perceive that there is a good chance it cannot be completed by that day's quitting time. They may refuse to attempt kinds of work which are prone to producing problems. If such jobs are accepted, they may invest much time and effort for little return or the customer may be dissatisfied with the results. Participants may claim not to have the skills or equipment to do a job properly.

Repair work which is perceived as likely to be unsuccessful is not billed in order to avoid an obligation

of having to attempt the work again. To invest further effort entails additional uncertainty and is not financially profitable. Sometimes, however, participants tell a customer that they do not believe that an item can be repaired but, in spite of this, they will attempt it as a favor to the customer.

These strategies not only reduce uncertainty for the participants, but they also have certain effects on participant-customer relationships. The greater extent to which participants are able to meet expectations of customers in whatever repair work is accepted, the greater will be customers' satisfaction. On the other hand, refusing to accept problem-prone work means that customers have to take it elsewhere or do it themselves. This leads to greater fragmentation in automotive care. It also leads to lessened customer loyalty if customers perceive participants as unwilling to make sacrifices for them. This would be true primarily in the realm of work ordinarily carried out in service stations. For example, refusing to perform a major engine overhaul is not likely to reduce customer loyalty because service stations are not expected to perform this kind of work.

d) Coping Strategies to Reduce Uncertainty Resulting from Patronage Patterns

Patronage patterns are problematic because non-differentiated products and services coupled with many

sources of supply have produced a condition of power imbalance in which customers hold most of the control over participant-customer relationships. Customers can take their business anywhere they wish. Because this condition is partly the result of mass marketing practices which permit reduced prices, customers are attracted away from service stations. This contributes to power-asymmetry of participant-customer relationships because, on the surface at least, customers have little incentive to continue such relationships.

Another factor affecting customer patronage patterns is that most customers are unable to appreciate efforts and skills of station participants. This contributes to an inability of customers to differentiate between services and products. Also, it does not permit customers to anticipate problems faced by participants nor the time required for particular tasks.

Thus, participants in the service station milieu are faced with actions of customers who conceptualize service and repair work differently than they, themselves, do. As a result, participants experience uncertainty and attempt to reduce it through various actions.

One such strategy is to avoid jobs which require sustained concentration or considerable clean-up time unless several participants are present. Because customers expect prompt attention whenever they drive in for fuel,

at least one participant must be ready to wait on them. Closely related to this is the strategy of developing a set of priorities which spares participants some uncertainty by establishing what is to be done first. Priorities are important because participants' roles are frequently "overdemanding" (Goode, 1960:485). Ordinarily, the highest priority is to wait on customers on the driveway and the second is service and repair work. Third priorities include visiting with customers, and clean-up and other station maintenance chores. These strategies contribute to customer satisfaction and reduce uncertainty if participants' priorities coincide with those of customers. If participants interrupt a service job on a customer's auto to wait on a gasoline customer and the first customer sees nothing wrong with this, then his priority system parallels that of participants.

Another strategy for reducing uncertainty is flexibility in scheduling vehicles for service and repair. This results from both the undependability of customers in bringing their vehicles, and from the complex of factors causing uncertainty in diagnoses, repair part acquisition, and the repair process. Among the latent consequences of indefinite scheduling is the customer belief that it is not important to keep appointments on time because participants do not maintain their schedules anyway. If dealers seem irritated when customers have not been on

time for an appointment, increased mistrust and decreased customer satisfaction may result. Because customers are unable to appreciate the work process, they cannot understand such responses from dealers. Their inability successfully to anticipate responses of dealers causes customers to become uncertain and to mistrust dealers and other participants.

Another major source of uncertainty arising in patronage patterns is that customers sometimes use the favors of participants to the benefit themselves and mass merchandisers and other repair sources. Participants cope with this uncertainty by carefully selecting those customers for whom they perform favors. This is especially true regarding favors which require significant effort, sacrifice, or expertise. However, by restricting such favors, participants miss opportunities to make customers feel obligated to them. Customers who feel obligated to participants of a station will feel constrained to patronize that station. Making customers feel obligated also reduces the asymmetry of power in participant-customer relationships. On the other hand, some customers lack appreciation for the cultivation process and efforts on their behalf are to no avail.

2. Responses to Uncertainty: Cultivating Techniques

Cultivating techniques are an important category of service station participants' responses to uncertainty generated in the milieu.¹ Cultivating techniques differ from the coping strategies discussed in the previous section in that they are acts directed at customers in order to alter their behavior instead of an adjustment to or manipulation of other features in the milieu. The concept of cultivating customers is an analytically distinct variant of coping strategies, but, in practice, coping strategies also often latently alter customers' behavior. As discussed in the preceding section, participants, through coping strategies, can either encourage customers to patronize them steadily or drive them away entirely. Cultivating techniques are intended by the participants to build customer loyalty and steady patronage.

a) Cultivation Techniques Intended to Inspire Trust

Most customers understand neither the process nor desired outcome of repair and service work. Furthermore, they lack control over the actual repair process. This, coupled with the perception that service station participants have economic incentives to take advantage of them,

¹Cultivating techniques are discussed in detail in Chapter V.

causes customers to mistrust participants. The economic incentive for participants to use customers' lack of expertise for their own advantage is considerable.

There are profits to be made from the sale of parts and from participants' labor. Customers, however, are free to take their business elsewhere if they do not trust participants. It is in this context that service station participants use techniques intended to create trust by customers for them. The most important of these techniques are: 1) programmatic disclosure, 2) situational mitigation, 3) accentuated honesty, 4) programmatic education, and 5) fulfilling role obligations.

(1) Programmatic Disclosure

Programmatic disclosure is the technique by which participants convey supposed inside information to customers. This information seldom involves trade secrets, but is not common knowledge. It is not usually secret enough to bring negative sanctions should other insiders learn that it has been disclosed to outsiders. The programmatic disclosure strategy will cause customers to infer that the participant is loyal to them because he is, by implication, treating them as "insiders." When customers believe that participants are loyal to them, they will develop greater trust in those participants. Greater trust will result in greater customer satisfaction.

Greater customer satisfaction will result in steadier patronage and lowered uncertainty for dealers.

(2) Situational Mitigation

When participants of service stations attempt to resolve errors or misunderstandings, they are engaging in situational mitigation. If participants believe that their own action is the cause of a problem, they apologize and thank the customer for calling the error to their attention. If a problem involves work done by the participants, they will attempt to correct the condition. If the source of the problem seems to be in the beliefs of customers, participants attempt to explain and convince such customers of their errors, but are careful not to cause offense. The goal of situational mitigation is to reach agreement with customers while avoiding haggling over prices of goods and services. Participants, whether by taking corrective action or by demonstrating that charges or acts are justified, attempt to convince customers that they have not been trying to cheat them. If customers are so convinced it will lend credibility to the participants' claims to trustworthiness. Greater trust results in lowered uncertainty for dealers through increased customer satisfaction and steadier patronage.

(3) Accentuated Honesty

Accentuated honesty involves admission of and adjusting for errors or damages which customers are unlikely to notice themselves. These errors or damages are apt to be billing errors or slight damage to vehicles. Accentuated honesty also involves advising customers to purchase elsewhere to better meet their needs. The accentuated honesty technique is a device used to induce trust because it implies that participants would not intentionally exploit the customer even when it would likely go undetected. When customers have more trust in the participants of a particular station they are more likely to be satisfied and will patronize that station regularly.

(4) Programmatic Education

When dealers attempt to educate customers to be good customers and about their automobiles, they are engaging in programmatic education. Because asymmetry of power in the relationship, dealers must approach this circumspectly and in suitable contexts such as in response to customers' questions or in discussions initiated by customers. Programmatic education may involve generalized sales efforts which, from the point of view of participants, customers ideally do not recognize as such. Because of economic implications of this form of

programmatic education, customers will discount these messages if they are perceived to be efforts to make sales. The degree to which programmatic education will be discounted is directly related to how strongly the messages are perceived to be sales pitches and inversely related to the degree to which the person differentiates the stations' products or services from those of others.

If customers perceive programmatic education to be genuine advice, it will be discounted much less than if it is seen to be attempts to induce them to buy a station's products. Convincing customers that a station's brand of gasoline is superior to competing brands will result in considerable discounting if the customer cannot distinguish differences in performance or gas mileage between competitive fuels. If there is an observed basis for claims that station participants give better service than competitors, then customers can be won over. More prompt service and greater courtesy are observable and can support or refute participants' assertions; thus, discounting may not occur.

The importance of programmatic education in inducing trust is that, as customers become socialized to accept the norms which participants hold for them, they experience fewer conflicts with participants and greater satisfaction from the relationships. The behavior of participants also

becomes better understood and thus more predictable. This results in customers coming to define participants as being more trustworthy.

Programmatic education can also lead to better driving techniques and more attention to the service needs of customers' vehicles. Customers are instructed in such things as the proper techniques for starting their engines and what to avoid in order to make a front-end alignment last longer. If customers have fewer problems with their cars, they may infer that this is the result of the trustworthiness and helpfulness of station participants.

Programmatic education reduces mistrust and increases customers' satisfaction with the participant-customer relationship. This leads to steady patronage and reduces economic uncertainty for dealers.

(5) Fulfilling Role Obligations

When participants in service stations act to fulfill expectations of customers or to do what they themselves believe they owe customers, they are engaged in fulfilling role obligations. By meeting these expectations, participants can convince customers that they really do hold their positions (Goffman, 1959:75-6). From this, customers will infer that participants can be trusted to fulfill other obligations too. Role fulfillment increases customer

trust and contributes to customer satisfaction which, in turn, leads to steadier patronage. Steadier patterns of patronage lead to reduction in economic uncertainty for dealers.

b) The Relationship Between Inspiring Trust and Reduction of Uncertainty

If they are successful, all of the techniques used by participants in service stations to inspire trust in their customers reduce, as discussed, uncertainty. As noted, most dealer-operated service stations have higher prices than their competitors who rely heavily on mass marketing techniques. Customers have to be attracted to and retained by such stations with factors other than price.

One means for attracting customers is to persuade them that participants in a particular station can be trusted to act in the customer's interests. This approach convinces customers that participants are sincerely interested in satisfying them. This can be demonstrated by taking good care of customers' vehicles and by not exploiting their ignorance of automobiles. When customers perceive they get good service and are not exploited, they will be likely to patronize a particular station even though they recognize that gasoline and repair parts are more expensive there than at other

places. The more faithfully customers patronize a station, the less uncertainty the dealer experiences because profits of his station will be larger and steadier.

c) Cultivation Techniques Intended
to Effect Obligation

The techniques of effecting obligation are directly based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner 1960:171-2). Participants do things for customers with the expectation that customers will repay them with faithful and regular patronage. By creating a feeling of obligation, participants can develop a following of customers who will make sacrifices and endure inconvenience in order to patronize a particular station. Steady customers will pay the higher prices found in dealer-operated stations and will drive out of their way in order to support them. Two major techniques for effecting obligation are fulfilling role obligations and performing favors.

(1) Fulfilling Role Obligations

When participants in a service station carry out their roles, they are engaged in the cultivating technique of fulfilling role obligations. Usually, the specific actions are taken by participants at their own initiatives, based on their acceptance of the station's norms. In a sense, although called for by participants' roles, these actions are partly voluntary because they are not coerced by laws

or oil company policies. If fulfilling role obligations is to be effective as a cultivating technique, customers must not need to prompt participants to fulfill these obligations as, for example, in the case of having to ask to have oil checked. Many customers either do not know norms of the roles of participants or else are not confident enough of their own knowledge to exert social control.

By participants' fulfillment of their role obligations, especially to the degree that customers perceive that these entail personal discomfort or hardship, customers will feel obligated to reciprocate by faithful patronage and loyalty.

(2) Performing Favors

Performing favors for customers in order to induce feelings of obligation is the most important cultivating technique used in service stations. This technique consists of rendering special services, lending expertise or equipment, and giving small gifts to customers. Special services usually involve free labor. Sometimes, however, participants may do kinds of work which are not ordinarily done in their particular station because a customer has requested it. While there may be a charge, it is usually less than at other sources for these services or else it is done at the convenience of the customer as,

for example, when a customer planning a trip finds that his car needs last minute repairs. If the motorist is a good or steady customer of a station, participants might attempt the repairs if such work is reasonably within their capabilities. By undertaking the work, the participants can prevent disruption of the customer's plans and cause the customer to feel obligated to the station.

To be effective, that is, to cause customers to feel obligated to reciprocate with steadier patronage, favors must be perceived by customers to be voluntary acts not required by rules or custom. As a result of having received favors, customers feel that they should return the favors by being steady in their patronage.

d) The Relationship Between Techniques
of Effecting Obligation and Reduction
of Uncertainty

Participants practice techniques of effecting obligation with the goal of reducing their personal uncertainties resulting from conditions in the social organization of service stations. The products of service stations tend to be non-differentiated with a variety of alternative sources available to customers. As has been explained, many alternate sources of supply use mass marketing techniques that allow for lower prices on high volume items. Mass merchandisers advertise heavily, especially sale items, creating greater awareness of

their products. These factors produce conditions in which customers have considerable control over the nature and extent of their business relationships with particular service stations. Thus, customers are attracted away from service stations by awareness and prices of mass merchandisers. Through techniques of effecting obligation, participants can reduce the power differential in relationships with customers by developing in them feelings of obligation to do business at their particular stations. These feelings of obligation also counteract other forces attracting customers away.

e) Cultivating Techniques Intended
to Nurture Situational Friendships

Nurturing situational friendship is a category of cultivating technique intended to cause customers to "like" the participants of a particular service station. Situational friendships tend to be limited to the station context and participant-customer relationships. Customers who like particular participants will want to do business at their station. The three major techniques of nurturing situational friendship are: 1) showing liking and similarity, 2) showing concern, and 3) jesting.

(1) Showing Liking and Similarity

Service station participants often chat and talk with customers. These friendly conversations are often

motivated by more than mere mutual attraction between participants and customers, although participants often do "like" their customers and enjoy talking with them. In such conversations, personal liking is conveyed to customers through warmth and friendliness. It is also displayed by accentuating similarity. This involves: 1) showing agreement with customers, 2) avoiding disagreements, 3) avoiding criticism of customers or their maintenance programs and 4) complementing customers' vehicle purchases. These actions convey to customers that participants think like, and agree with, them.

When customers believe they have views similar to those of participants, they will tend to be attracted to them. When this occurs, customers will increase and maintain their business with a particular station.

(2) Showing Concern

Another technique by which situational friendship is nurtured is through showing concern for customers. This concern can be expressed by inquiring about customers and their health and family or by sympathetic listening to personal problems and concerns. Showing concern for customers indicates an interest in the customer and implies liking. Showing concern accomplishes essentially the same things as the technique of showing liking and

similarity. That is, when customers like participants of a particular station they will increase their business there.

(3) Jestng

Good-natured jestng with customers is another way in which situational friendship is cultivated in service stations. Jestng in service stations occurs on the topics of work competence, character, sex, money, and drinking. The content of such bantering varies according to the interests of particular participants and customers. The amount of jestng also varies with the sex and social status of customers. Male customers are more frequently jested with than female customers. Younger and working-class persons are more frequently joked with than persons of higher prestige.

To jest in a friendly way with another implies that one likes and accepts the other, communicating some degree of friendship. When customers accept this friendship, they will respond by more faithfully patronizing a station.

f) The Relationship Between Techniques of Nurturing Situational Friendship and Reduction of Uncertainty

Showing liking and similarity, showing concern, and jestng are all techniques used to nurture situational friendship. That is, conveying like, concern and personal regard for customers carries hope that they will

reciprocate and therefore want to do business at a station. Situational friendship between participants and customers is important in reducing uncertainty for service station operators. Situational friendship works to reduce asymmetry of power in participant-customer relationships in that friendship implies a degree of equality and mutual concern.

Situational friendship counteracts some of results of mass marketing techniques. It helps create a feeling of loyalty to station participants and causes customers to be more willing to pay higher prices for goods and services. It results in an increased awareness of the service station as a source of automotive needs and to some degree counters mass advertising. Situational friendship results in customers' deriving personal satisfaction from their relationships with participants and thus increases the attraction of particular service stations for them. Because friendship implies a degree of mutual trust, situational friendship also serves to reduce any mistrust that customers have toward participants.

Situational friendship, then, reduces uncertainty in dealers by producing steadier customer patronage. This is a result of reducing the degree of power asymmetry in participant-customer relationships, counteracting factors

which attract customers away from service stations, and increasing the degree to which customers trust participants.

In this section, I have discussed the responses of service station participants to uncertainty. The two major types of response to uncertainty are the general category of coping strategies and its variant, techniques of cultivating customers. Under the heading of coping strategies I have discussed how these strategies are used to manage uncertainty-producing situations in service stations and some of the impacts of these strategies on participant-customer relationships. Techniques of cultivating customers are used to reduce uncertainty in participant-customer relationships. Some of the effects of such strategies on relationships in service stations have been delineated. Some of the important propositions developed in this section are listed in Appendix D, pages 264-269.

In this chapter, I have attempted to relate the effects arising in the milieu of service stations and its changes to uncertainty experienced by station participants, especially the central figure: the dealer. I have also related the responses to this uncertainty to general participant-customer relationships.

Uncertainty is a salient feature of service stations, but it would be misleading to leave the reader with the

impression that participants in the service station milieu direct most of their energies toward reducing it. The station setting also has many characteristics which provide satisfactions for its participants. In most stations there is ample time for participants to talk and joke with their fellows and with customers. Participants often work together, deriving satisfaction from the joint activity. They seldom are closely supervised and therefore have considerable control over their work. The work done in service stations is varied and often filled with challenges. Since most service stations are small, the positions within the organization are not rigidly delineated. This means that participants, particularly those at the lower end of the hierarchy, have opportunities to learn more advanced skills. Participants also derive considerable satisfaction from customers, many of whom are grateful to them for the services they render. Thus uncertainty is only one facet, albeit an important one, in the service station setting, but these other features of the service station as a social organization must be reported elsewhere.

APPENDIX A

FIGURES

Figure 1: Characteristics and Change in the Service Station Milieu and Resulting Conditions

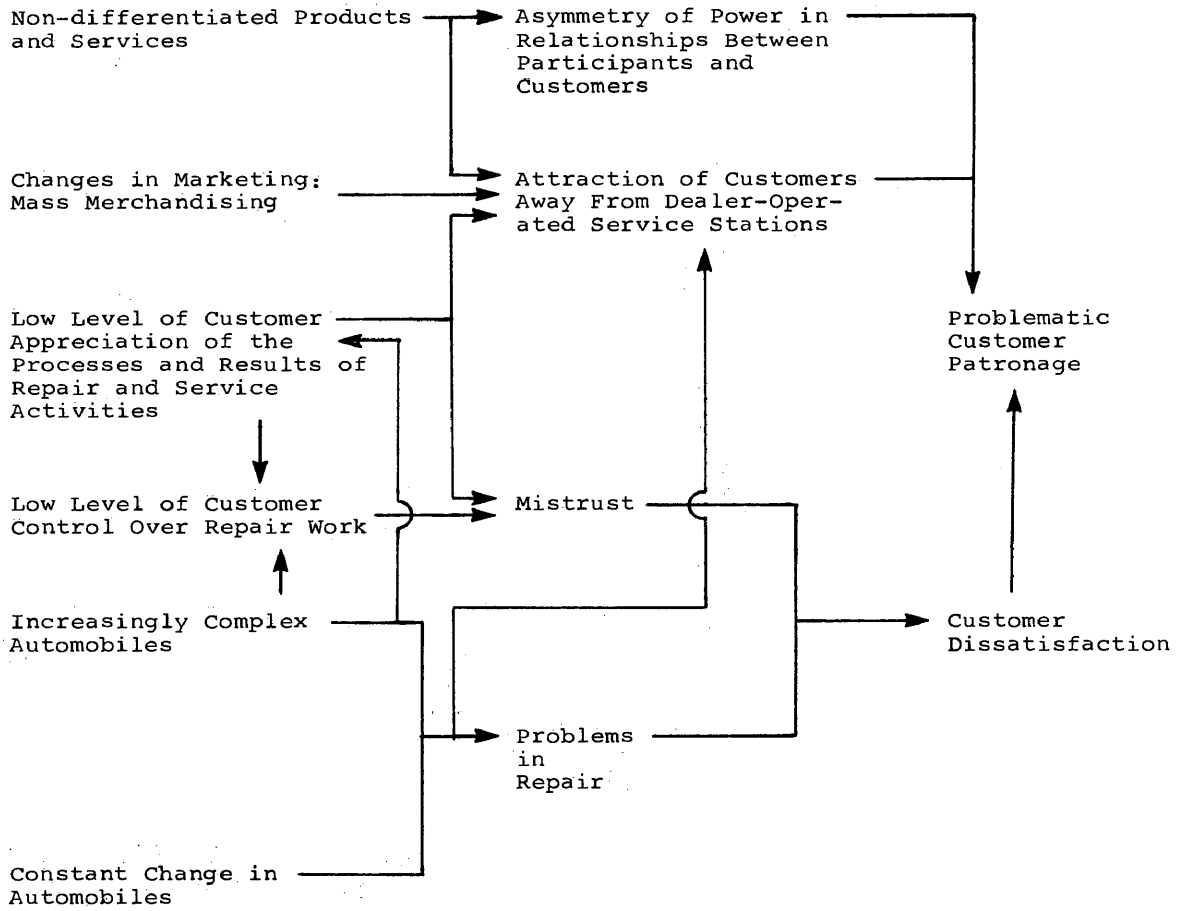


Figure 2: Conditions of the Milieu Which Lead to Uncertainty

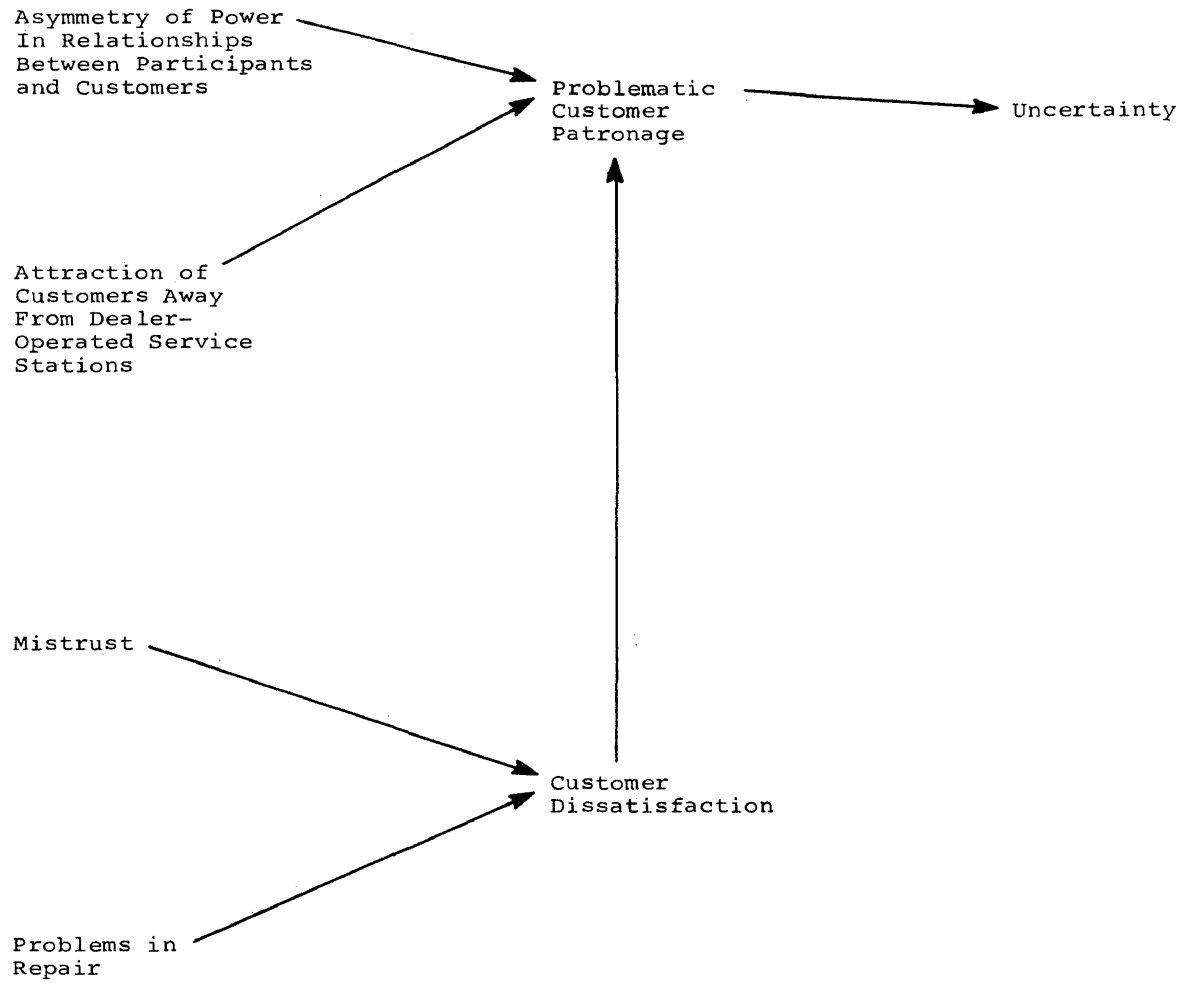


Figure 3: Responses to Uncertainty: Coping Strategies

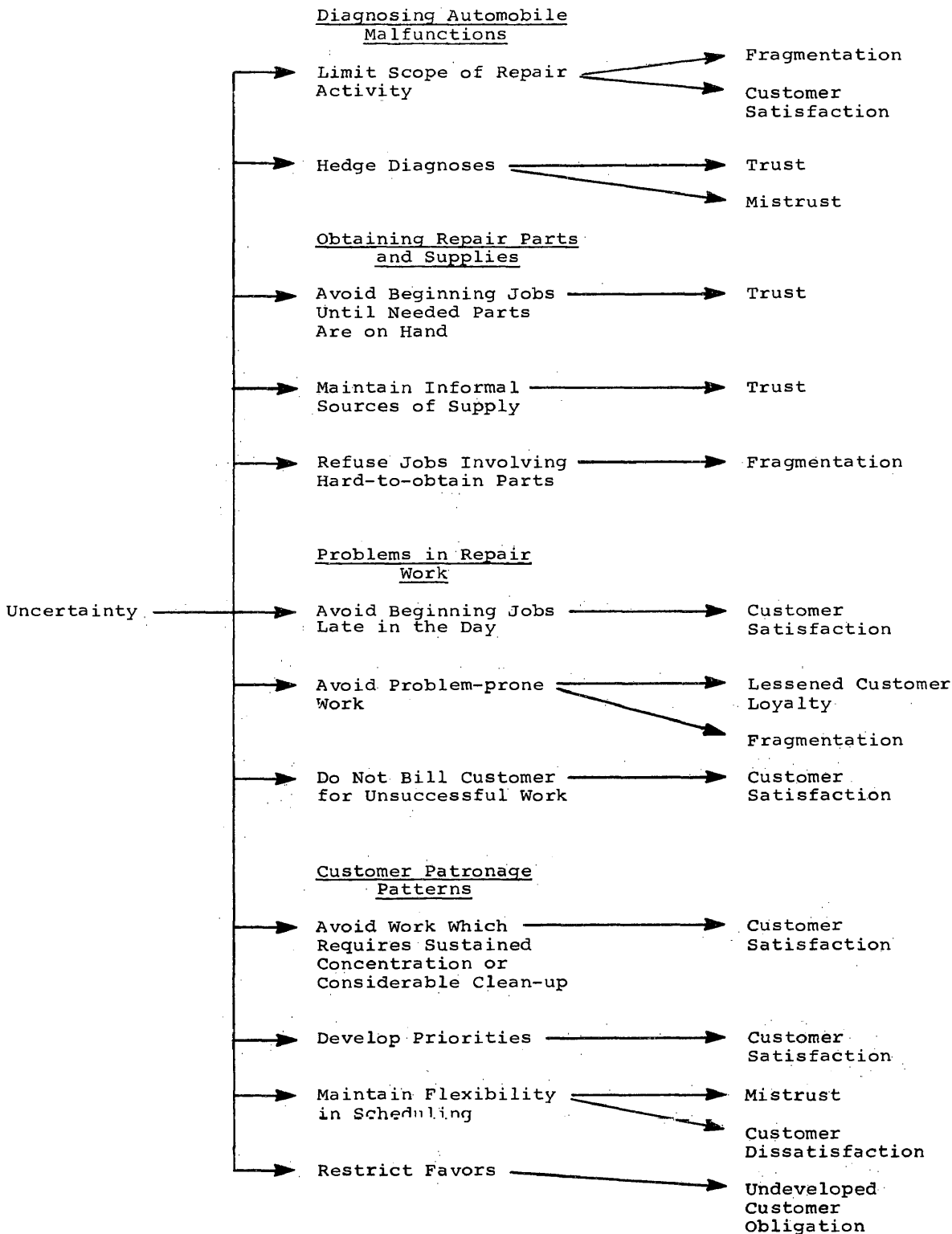


Figure 4: Responses to Uncertainty: Cultivation of Customers

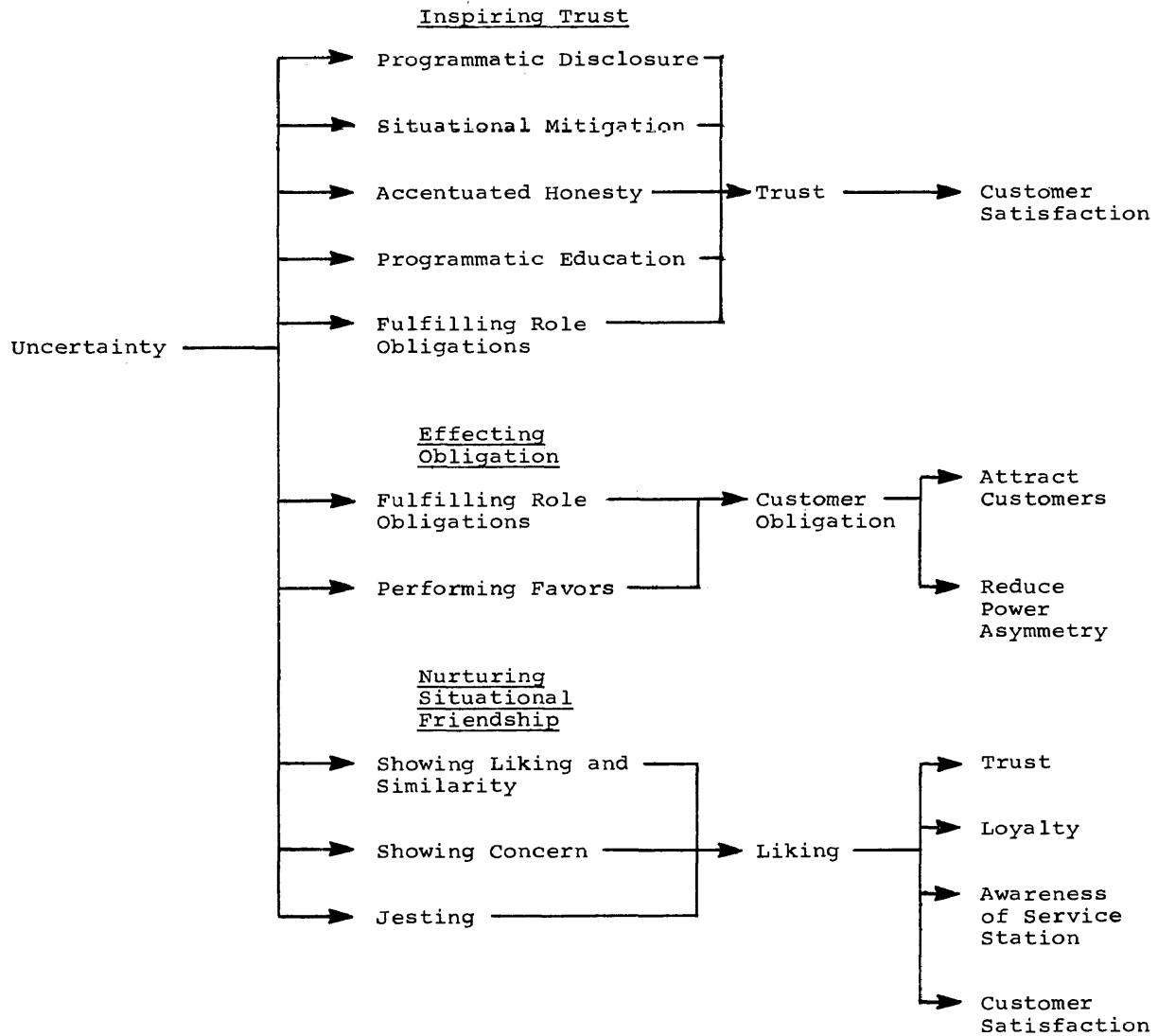
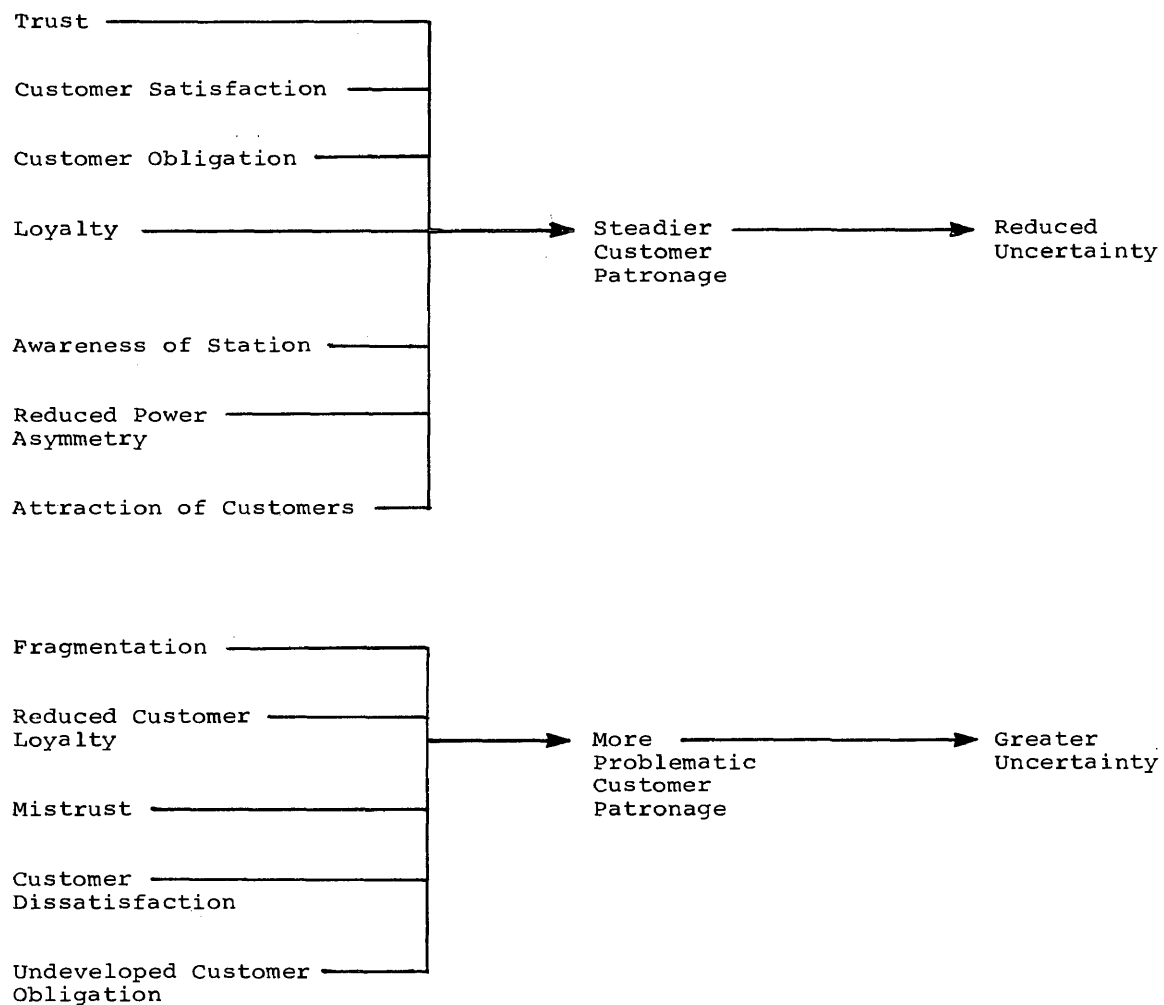


Figure 5: Effects of Responses to Uncertainty



APPENDIX B
PROPOSITIONS RELATING TO CHARACTERISTICS AND
CHANGE IN THE SERVICE STATION MILIEU

1. In the service station setting, the less the differentiation of products and services and the greater the availability of such products and services, the greater will be the relative power of customers in dealer-customer relationships.

2. The less the differentiation of products and services and the greater the availability of them at different prices from different sources, the greater will be the fragmentation in automotive-related relationships.

3. Changes in marketing practices in the automotive field result in changes in the degree to which customers are attracted to particular service stations.

a) Advertising by mass merchandisers attracts customers away from dealer-operated service stations by making customers think of mass merchandisers first when they need replacement items.

b) Changes from a customer-satisfaction orientation to an immediate-sale orientation of salesmen attract customers away from service stations because less effort is devoted to assessing customer automotive needs and more effort is devoted to convincing customers to buy.

c) Mass merchandising practices result in lower prices which attract customers away from dealer-operated stations.

4. The less the ability of customers to appreciate the processes or results of repair work, the greater will be the degree to which customers make distinctions based on superficial features such as short-run success and price rather than on workmanship.

5. The lesser the ability of customers to appreciate the processes or results of repair and service work, the greater will be their mistrust of the participants.

6. The less control customers perceive they have over the repair process, the greater will be the degree to which they mistrust the participants.

7. The greater the complexity of automobiles, the less will be the ability of ordinary customers to appreciate the processes and results of service and repair work.

8. The greater the complexity of automobiles, the less control ordinary customers will have over repair work.

9. The greater the complexity of automobiles, the greater will be the degree of fragmentation in the automotive-related relationships of motorists.

10. The greater the complexity of automobiles, the more frequent will be problems in repair work and thus the less customers will be satisfied with such work.

11. The greater the number of variations in automobile parts, the higher will be the relative prices of parts and thus the greater will be the attraction of customers away from service stations when alternative sources of repairs with lower prices exist.

12. The greater the rate of change in automobiles, the more frequent will be problems in repair work and thus the less customers will be satisfied with such work.

APPENDIX C

PROPOSITIONS RELATING TO CONDITIONS IN THE
SERVICE STATION MILIEU AND UNCERTAINTY

1. The greater the relative power of customers, the less incentive customers will have for beginning and maintaining exclusive relationships with participants in particular service stations for their automotive needs.

a) The less the incentive for customers to maintain relationships with participants, the more problematic customer patronage patterns will be.

2. The greater the degree to which automotive products and services are non-differentiated and the lower the relative prices at which mass merchandisers sell such products, the greater will be the attraction of customers to non-service station sources and thus the less predictable will be the patronage of customers.

3. The degree to which customers are satisfied with relationships with participants in particular stations is directly related to the loyalty of customers to those participants and thus to customers' predictability in patronizing these stations.

a) The less customers trust the participants of particular service stations, the less satisfied they will be with these relationships.

b) The more frequently problems arise in repair work, the less satisfied customers will be with their relationships with participants in service stations.

4. The less steadily given customers patronize particular stations, the greater the likelihood that such stations will go out of business and thus the greater the uncertainty that such dealers will experience.

APPENDIX D
PROPOSITIONS RELATING TO RESPONSES
TO UNCERTAINTY

1. The degree to which service station participants experience uncertainty is directly related to their devising ways of preventing, reducing, or eliminating uncertainty by use of coping strategies.

2. The greater the uncertainty stemming from diagnoses, acquisition of repair parts, and perceived repair problems, the more limited will be the kinds of repair jobs accepted by service stations.

a) The more limited the scope of repair work done in a station, the greater will be the customer satisfaction with the work that is done, but the greater will be the fragmentation in customers' automotive-related relationships.

b) The greater the uncertainty in diagnoses, the more likely participants will hedge their diagnoses.

(1) Within limits, hedging diagnoses reduces customer mistrust of participants.

3. The greater the uncertainty stemming from obtaining repair parts, the more likely it will be reduced by not beginning work until the correct repair parts are on hand.

4. The greater the uncertainty stemming from obtaining repair parts, the more likely will dealers maintain informal sources of supply.

5. The more effectively a dealer avoids problems in obtaining repair parts, the less likely his customers will be inconvenienced and thus the greater trust they will have in service station participants.

6. The greater the perceived likelihood that repairs will be unsuccessful, the lower the probability that customers will be billed for the labor.

7. The more participants are able to meet the expectations of customers in repair work, the greater will be customers' satisfaction with such relationships.

8. When participants face situations in which they have many things to do to meet customer expectations, they will develop systems of priorities.

9. When participants experience uncertainty in their relationships with customers, they will act to reduce that uncertainty by using cultivating techniques to alter customers' behavior.

10. The degree to which customers trust the participants is directly related to the degree to which customers are satisfied with customer-participant relationships.

11. The degree to which customers are satisfied with participant-customer relationships relates directly to the degree of loyalty and predictability in their patronage

patterns and thus relates inversely to the degree of uncertainty experienced by service station operators.

12. The stronger customers believe that participants in particular service stations are loyal to them, the more customers will trust these participants.

a) When customers perceive that participants have revealed confidential information they will perceive that these participants are loyal to them.

13. The degree to which participants can promptly resolve errors, problems, or misunderstanding relates directly to the degree to which they are perceived as trustworthy by customers.

14. The degree to which participants convey the impression of honesty to customers relates directly to the degree to which customers trust them.

15. In programmatic education, the degree to which the message is perceived to be a sales effort relates directly to the degree to which the message will be discounted by customers.

16. The more customers have been socialized to accept participant expectations for their behavior, the more harmonious will be participant-customer relationships and thus the greater the trust will customers have for participants.

17. The degree to which customers trust participants is directly related to the degree to which

participants fulfill role obligations in participant-customer relationships.

18. The more customers trust participants in a service station, the more loyal will be the customers' patronage and thus the less uncertainty the dealer will experience.

19. The greater the obligation that customers feel toward the participants of particular service stations, the greater sacrifices they will make in order to do business at such stations and thus the more predictable will be their patronage.

20. The effectiveness of the technique of fulfilling role obligations in developing customer feelings of obligation is directly related to the degree to which customers perceive that performance of role obligations by participants is voluntary.

21. The effectiveness of the technique of fulfilling role obligations in creating customer obligation to a service station is directly related to the degree to which participants are perceived to have experienced personal sacrifices in fulfilling their role obligations.

22. The effectiveness of the technique of performing favors in producing feelings of obligation in customers is directly related to the degree to which customers perceive such favors are voluntary acts for the benefit of the customers.

23. The degree to which customers feel obligated to participants of particular service stations is inversely related to the degree of power imbalance in the relationship.

24. The more customers like participants in a particular service station and perceive them as friends, the greater will be the customers' desire to patronize such stations.

25. The degree to which participants are friendly to and accentuate similarity with customers is directly related to the degree to which customers will like the participants.

26. The degree to which participants in service stations show concern for customers relates directly to the degree to which customers will like participants unless that concern exceeds what customers perceive to be the bounds of propriety.

27. The degree to which participants engage in good-natured jesting appropriate to the sex and social status of particular customers relates directly to the degree to which customers will consider the participants to be friends.

28. The greater are customers' perceptions of friendship with the participants of particular stations, the greater will be those customers' loyalties, attraction to that station, and trust in participants.

29. The greater are customers' loyalties, attraction to a station and trust in station participants, the steadier will be the patronage patterns of that station and thus the less uncertainty the dealer will experience.

APPENDIX E

STUDYING SERVICE STATIONS: SOME METHODOLOGICAL
NOTES ON SELECTING STATIONS AND GAINING
ENTRANCE TO THE RESEARCH SETTING¹

A student of any setting faces problems of gaining entrance. An important problem is that of gaining enough understanding of the setting to make intelligent efforts to enter. At the onset of the research reported here, I knew very little about the social aspects of service stations. My contact with stations had been superficial, being limited primarily to the purchase of gasoline. I did, however, have some grounding in the technical aspects of automotive work. I had done most of my own service and repair work. As a young man on a farm, I had learned basic skills necessary to service and repair automobiles. When necessary, I sought out written sources such as automotive manuals to learn about techniques and specifications. I also had training and experience in maintenance shop operations during military service.

¹My remarks in this appendix have the unavoidable character of a testimonial. I only describe the method that "worked" for me. I cannot attest that what I did was the most efficacious, nor that it was either necessary or even beneficial. I was never refused entrance to a station nor ejected from one, so I cannot report major pitfalls to be avoided. I would anticipate the problems of a field worker in gaining entrance for study of any small businesses would be similar.

Entry into Stan's station turned out to be relatively easy. I asked the proprietor of the station where I had been buying gasoline, if he knew any independent service station operators who were experiencing difficulty obtaining gasoline.¹ This was during the fuel shortage of 1973 when many of the major oil companies were cutting back supplies to independent stations. Stan said that he did not know any independent dealers very well, but I was welcome to hang around his station. It turned out to be fortunate for me because Stan had many years of experience as a dealer at several locations. I decided that, at the very least, Stan's station would be a good start and I would gain much useful information about service station subculture.

When I moved to University Town and was looking for another station to study I wanted to examine different stations. I was looking for a leased, dealer-operated station that would provide a good contrast to Stan's station. A station with a balance of steady customers

¹This indicated my general ignorance of the service station business in that I expected that most service station operators in the city would know each other. Based on a remark made by a participant in another service station a year or so before, I had the notion that there was a strong service station organization. That remark was made about a price change during one of the frequent gasoline price wars of the time. The participant had commented that they had gotten a call that prices would change at four o'clock. He indicated that this would occur at other stations also.

and transient customers was preferred. I also wished to avoid stations with major auxiliary businesses because it seemed this would be an unnecessary complication and would be atypical of service stations in general.

By use of a telephone directory, I eliminated many stations which had major auxiliary businesses or were salary-operated. I then drove around and looked at most of the remainder. Several others were eliminated because they were in out-of-the way locations, were too small or too large. This left about a dozen possibilities.

My next problem was to sort the remaining stations on my list in order to eliminate those which were not suitable in one way or another. I wanted to observe these stations for a while in order to make preliminary judgements about amenability to study and typicality. In order to make these preliminary judgements, I felt I needed to spend some time in stations where I could observe firsthand the arrangement of the station building, how many people worked there, and who was in charge.

In my early research in Stan's station, it became apparent that those who drove automobiles into the station were categorized according to the kind of customer they were. I came to sense that a stranger who drove in and parked his car on the driveway without purchasing gasoline would be viewed negatively. I did not, however, drive my automobile enough to be able to buy gasoline at all the

stations which I wanted to visit nor would gasoline purchases alone give the time I wanted to assess particular stations.

While I was pondering the problem of an acceptable reason for my being in service stations to observe, it occurred to me that since it was late spring, I could ride my bicycle around to the various stations. The weather was hot and I reasoned that station participants would conclude that bicycling makes one thirsty. By stopping and buying a can of soft drink, I would have a plausible reason for being in a station. Bicycling might also lead a station's participants to believe I was tired and needed to rest. By riding into stations on my bicycle I would avoid being categorized as a non-customer who blocked the driveway. If I rode rather than walked, I anticipated that it would be apparent to the participants how I got to the station.

The tactic worked well. I usually made a loop in front of the station when I rode in so that participants could see me. Because of this, most of the time I did not need to explain my presence and when I did, it seemed readily accepted. A soft drink gave me a reason for being on the scene for between fifteen and thirty minutes.

In all stations, I was careful to keep myself where one or more of the participants could easily observe me in order to remove any suspicion that I might steal

something. Surprisingly, I was left alone in the office many times and had to walk to the doorway between the shop and the office or walk outside and look into the shop to be observed. Since I did not feel I had an apparent reason to go into the shop areas, I stayed out except once or twice. If the participants were busy in the shop when I got ready to leave, I made a loop in front of the open shop doors as I rode out of the station. I wanted them to see that I had not stolen anything. I did not want to arouse their suspicion in case I decided to return to that station again.

On the basis of a single, first visit I was able to eliminate several stations for possible study. In some, the arrangement of the station made it difficult to observe both the office and the shop at the same time. In another, the office was small and cluttered and I judged this to be a major handicap in trying to observe unobtrusively.

I visited other stations two or more times before I narrowed the possibilities to two. The decision between these two was made when one of the stations turned on the air conditioner in the office and closed the door between the shop and office creating a barrier to observation.

The technique of using my bicycle to make preliminary observations had several advantages: 1) I knew who the dealers were and when I chose a station for intensive study I was able to select a time to ask permission to

carry out my research when the dealer was not feeling pressured by work. 2) I had been there several times and participants recognized me so I was not a total stranger. 3) In my conversation in which I asked permission to study the station I was able to comment that I had chosen the station because I had observed that its participants gave good service. While I recognized the possibility of introducing bias in this way, I decided this would be less harmful than possible assumptions participants might otherwise make that I was out to do an exposé of service stations. 4) I did not perceive any of the negative responses sometimes given to non-customers. 5) I was able better to assess the typicality of the station which I selected and gain some feeling for the range of characteristics of service stations in University Town.

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