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SERVICE STATION ATTENDANTS AND THEIR CUSTOMERS:

A STUDY OF FACE TO FACE INTERACTION

By

Walter L. Houdyshell

B.A., Idaho State University, 1963

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

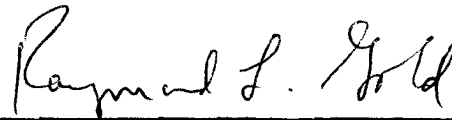
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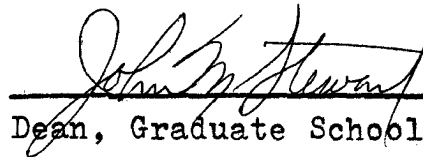
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I am indebted to my wife who, while the research was being conducted and written, patiently made the intra-familial adjustments as painless as possible, and whose perspective helped put the final product into understandable form.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

The research conducted for this thesis consisted of investigation and exploration of the relationship between service station attendants and their customers. The objective of the research was to make a general contribution to the body of sociological knowledge about human behavior in face to face interactions typified by this kind of worker-customer relationship. In this chapter background material will be developed and a foundation laid for the investigation reported upon in this thesis. Included is a discussion of the division of labor in American society, the importance of the study of relationships and interactions within the occupational setting; and general information about the nature of the attendant-customer relationship. The final section of this chapter explains the organization of this thesis.

DIVISION OF LABOR

Nearly all societies exhibit differentiation of the tasks and services to be performed among those who accomplish the work.¹ It is this division of labor which

¹Richard Thurnwald, Economics in Primitive Communities (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), pp. 4-14.

in large measure helps to hold complex societies together. Émile Durkheim recognized that the multiform society is maintained by the exchange and mutual dependence of highly specialized and differentiated groups of social units he called social organs.² The social organ is dependent for life upon other groups, represents only a unit in the division of labor, and will engage in exchange with other groups.³ The occupational group, which serves a distinct and necessary function demanded by a complicated social system, can be considered a social organ which interacts with other social organs. The exchange between these groups requires at least some understanding and communication between them. The division of labor then in part represents exchanges between occupational groups and individuals, which in turn effects such social phenomena as the relationship between clerk and customer. For those participating in the division of labor as members of an occupational group, the job is laid out in some structured and organized system which interacts with other organized systems. An increasing division of labor leads to greater human social differentiation and organizational

²Theodore Caplow, The Sociology of Work (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), p. 4.

³Everett C. Hughes, Men and Their Work (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1958), pp. 25-26.

complexity.

In American society, work organization towers as a separate and specialized system without reference to which a man cannot be understood. A man's work is an excellent clue to the course of his life, and to his social being and identity. His characteristic way of life is reflected in his occupational activities. A man's work is one of the more significant aspects by which he is judged and by which he judges himself and is the productive activity to which most adults give most of their time. The occupation is also the principal activity that influences life style, and which governs the allocation of social rewards, and determines a man's identity in relation to others. In addition, the social positions occupied by men in large part arise from their classification by the work they do. An individual tends to be viewed by others and to view himself in terms of his vocation. Theodore Caplow noted that the identification of a man by occupation has largely replaced such criteria for status fixing as ancestry, religious office, and personal characteristics.⁴

Many workers have direct and frequent involvement with customers or outsiders to their occupational group. In this context all occupations within the division of labor can be placed upon a continuum which signifies the

⁴Caplow, op. cit., p. 30.

amount of interaction occupational members have with outsiders. On one end of the continuum could be placed those jobs with little or no such interaction. Toward the other end would be those occupations with a high level of interaction between workers and customers or clients. Service station attendants would be one example of the latter group, as there is a significant amount of face to face interaction between attendants and the outsiders to the occupation known as customers. The service station depends upon these outsiders for its continued existence as a viable retail enterprise.

SERVICE STATION ATTENDANTS AND THEIR CUSTOMERS

When the service station attendant and his customer meet, each brings into the relationship certain definitions of reality based upon experiences over time, and expectations of what should transpire during interaction. Each participant brings to bear on the other valuations which enables both to make a rough judgment as to how to act toward the other, and how he thinks the other person will act toward him. An attendant is required to cope with many kinds of customers each day. His finesse "on the islands" (concrete area near the gas pumps) in dealing with his clients must be considerable and flexible. This is because of the diverse personalities and expectations encountered in addition to the fact that many sales must be made to customers who, on the islands, are apt to be

skeptical, somewhat elusive, and frequently hesitant about buying. The patron's approach to the vehicle he is driving often is that, as long as the automobile continues to run, gas and oil are all that are needed. Though not entirely typical, an example of the attitude attendants frequently encounter on the islands is exemplified by the following response from a customer respondent just before slamming the door in the interviewer's face:

"I just go up there and buy some gas, and don't fool around with any of their other stuff. As long as it's running its O.K. by me."

The attendant must also be flexible. He must quickly size up each customer and choose the appropriate greeting and social small talk. The attendant must be perceptive of an incorrect approach, redefine the situation and act accordingly. Although important, desire or opportunity to make a sale cannot solely account for all of the observed behavior on the part of the attendants with respect to their customers.

When customers are an active part in the business activity, the organization of work must be adjusted to their behavior. The service station worker engages in a relationship with customers who frequently and inopportunistically interrupt the worker's tasks and who further insist upon directing a major portion of each service station attendant's work. In other words the customer frequently decrees what is wrong with the automobile, what will or will not be

accomplished, and how soon the work will be done. This kind of relationship between workers and customers is a chronic source of tension for service station attendants.

The existence of an occupation whose tasks are organized around outsiders to the occupation presents a form of social life which is characterized by direct face to face relationships. By virtue of the presence of the attendant and his clients interacting in the natural occupational setting, certain behaviors are manifest. Among these are gestures, verbal statements, and facial expressions, which are all continually fed into the relationship. Input of these behaviors may or may not be intended. They represent a framework that ties together the orientation and involvement of each participant with respect to social interaction. The reasons for exploring these small human behaviors rests upon the necessity of describing natural units of interaction and uncovering the prevailing order within these units. From description analysis it is possible to generalize about human behavior in similar interactional settings. Herein lies the importance of this investigation: it offers insight into, and explanation of, the human behavior found in everyday routinized social settings.

SUMMARY

The division of labor acts to hold society together.

The compelling reason for studying work relationships is that no understanding or description of the social world is possible without taking into account what transpires during the major daily activity of most adults. Occupation is not the sole criterion of relative social position. There are other criteria which help locate man in his environment. However, it still remains that occupation is generally the major standard of a man's place in society. A man's career and its necessary interactions are the major focus of his life and thoughts. There is no other activity which provides as much social meaning and continuity to life as does a man's work. Leisure and family have not yet replaced work as the central organizing principle of life in our society. It is a man's place in the division of labor that usually identifies him and gives status to individual and family. The occupational group of service station attendants serves as a starting point for investigation and is one setting of many where similar social phenomena occur.

THESIS ORGANIZATION

The organization of this thesis is as follows: Chapters One through Three provide the fundamental support and background for the presentation and analysis of data included in Chapters Five through Fourteen. Chapter Four deals with methodology and the overall conduct of the investigation. Chapter Fifteen is the final chapter, and

consists primarily of a summary of findings, conclusions with respect to the orientational hypothesis used, and the implications of this research.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The investigation and exploration of the relationship between service station attendants and their customers was assisted and guided by previously reported occupational research and investigation of face to face interaction. In this chapter is a general synopsis of some of this research, and of those concepts which help one to understand and explain the behavior displayed in the interaction between workers and customers. Included is a discussion of license and mandate, norms of address, and definition of the situation. Also considered are the rules and rituals of interaction, collegueship, and the importance of control over the worker-customer relationship by the worker.

NORMS OF ADDRESS DURING INTERACTION

An individual, by virtue of his presence in the division of labor, occupies a status position. In the case of service station attendants the incumbent interacts on a regular basis with customers. Customers also hold status positions in some hierarchical group structure. Face to face relationships which are at least partially based upon status perceptions, are normatively supported and have clearly defined contributions expected

of each participant. There are guides which have developed concerning the conduct of nearly all aspects of human social interaction. One such feature of face to face relationships concerns the rules for the manner in which each participant is addressed during interaction. Observation of the forms of address used by interactants provides the social scientist with some clues as to the rules and rituals of social interaction, and the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the relationship under consideration.

Roger Brown, in his discussion of the forms of address, explains that there are two types of norms which operate to govern forms of address and reveal the dimensions of a relationship. These are called the norms of status and solidarity.¹ Status norms with the forms of address used by interacting participants relate basically to the perceived differences in the social value of and by each participant. Status norms reflect the hierarchical aspects of relationships. The status differences of a superior-inferior relationship are implied by the use of the first name by one participant only when addressing another interactant. Additionally, the use of last name and title indicates differences of status and formal relationships. The norm of solidarity on the other hand, represents the

¹Roger Brown, Social Psychology (New York: The Free Press, 1965), pp. 55-71.

horizontal character of a relationship and is based upon perceived social sameness by interacting participants. The use of first names by participants would be an indication of the presence of a norm of solidarity. With use over time the rules of address which infer the status and solidarity of interactants becomes institutionalized and standardized. However, the decision to address an individual in one way or another is also part of a person's social placement of the other. Social location is based partially upon the standardization of predetermined points of agreement about kinds of interaction, visible status signs displayed by each participant, and upon preconceived notions carried into interaction by each individual. This social placement of each interactant by the other makes up a large part of each person's definition of the situation. An individual's definition is, in actuality, an attempt to define reality and structure the interactional situation being presented. The definition of the situation has very real behavioral consequences for all interactants.

DEFINITION OF THE SITUATION

When an individual enters into the presence of another, each attempts to seek information about the other and use information about the other already possessed. This knowledge helps an individual to structure and define the situation, enabling him to know in advance what to

expect from the other, and how to act during interaction. Orderly social interaction depends upon some advance definition of the situation by all participants. Recognition of the other individual, and defining reality are the first cognitive steps in face to face interactions. When circumstances warrant, the definition can be, and often is changed during the interaction. However, for the most part, unless one's definition of the situation is seriously challenged during interaction an individual continues to operate as if the original definition were true.

Peter McHugh in his consideration of the processes involved in defining the situation, relates that the standards of an individual and his way of making definitions are the basis of action and that these actions are the foundations of social institutions. The definition includes taking the role of the other and in so doing one learns what is expected of himself. From this he begins to construct and to structure his definition of the situation. The rules of society are also included in a member's definition as they help guide behavior. McHugh points out that for a definition of the situation to take place, chronological time and physical space must be converted into social time and space. He then goes on to develop two concepts that are, in his opinion, the basis of a person's definition. The first concept is emergence,

which concerns the temporal aspect of activity wherein past, present, and future events are distinct yet merge together as an influence upon one's definition and resultant behavior. These chronological events have a definite bearing upon the definition, subsequent changes to it, and social interaction. Actors assume before interaction that a pattern of meaning will be discovered in the events they observe. Actors also assume that what has already gone on will in some way inform them about the future. Each of these temporal orientations is reflected in an individual's structuring and description of the present situation.

The second aspect of an individual's definition of the situation is relativity, which is spatial in nature and refers to perceived interactional normality. Relativity facilitates the interchangeability of standpoints, or taking the role of the other. McHugh relates that in its strictest sense, however, relativity does not allow complete perspectives to be taken over by others. Nevertheless, people can and do agree with one another that they are perceiving, believing, and behaving toward the same things; if their positions were reversed they would still be seeing the same things and acting as the other person now sees and behaves.²

²Peter McHugh, Defining the Situation (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1968), pp. 3-43.

These two concepts, emergence (the documentary process) and relativity (perceived normality) are the basic components of the individual's definition of the situation. This defining or structuring of reality is a necessary prerequisite for social interaction. Actors in relationships attempt to know what to expect when entering into social interaction. They must base their actions upon experienced chronological events, and what appear to be the norms for each interaction. In addition, there is a certain amount of standardization and agreement about the rules of most interactional situations.³ Based upon this agreement and the definition of the situation complete strangers can cooperatively enter into the rituals of face to face interaction.

RITUALS OF FACE TO FACE INTERACTION

Erving Goffman provides a framework for the analysis of behavior stemming from the definition of the situation displayed during social interaction.⁴ Goffman notes that a significant number of face to face interactions are ritualized. He uses the term ritual because

³Tamotsu Shibutani, Society and Personality (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1961), p. 50.

⁴Erving Goffman, Interaction Ritual (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1967), pp. 5-94; see also Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959), and Erving Goffman, Encounters (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1961).

the acts that occur during human interaction have a symbolic component wherein each participant demonstrates how he deserves respect and how worthy he feels others are of respect. One of the ritual elements of interaction used by Goffman is line. Line refers to a pattern of both verbal and nonverbal acts wherein an individual declares his view of the particular situation and valuation of the other participants in the interaction. A second ritual component of face to face interaction is face. Face as used by Goffman, refers to the positive social values that a participant in an interaction claims for himself during interaction. The face of an individual is the individual's image of self in terms of positive and approved social attributes. The image may or may not be shared by the other participants in the interaction. An individual is in face, or is maintaining face when his particular line being presented presents a self-image that is consistent internally and supported by the other participants in the relationship or interaction. According to Goffman face has two facets. In individual will attempt to maintain his own face in addition to helping other participants protect and maintain their face during interaction. The reason for this is that all participants during an interaction attempt to get through the interaction with no generally face threatening behavior being displayed. The expressive character of

social interaction revolves around the maintenance of face and helping others to maintain their own face. Much of the activity that takes place during social relationships can be understood as an effort on the part of all participants to see the interaction through without casting themselves or any other participant in an undesirable light. This is accomplished by face-work which is used to help all participants put forth and maintain their own socially positive self-image. Thus face has both a defensive and offensive character.

Goffman, in his consideration of face to face interaction, also deals with the ritual roles of one's self-image. People have an image of themselves which is taken from various events, and from the judgments rendered during continuing interactions. The ritual order of interaction is organized around accommodation to either the situation at hand or to other participants in the relationship. The symbolic acts and rituals of interaction between humans have given rise to rules for the conduct of interaction. These canons provide a conceptual framework for the analysis of human social interactions. Rules of conduct which guide the behavior of participants, consists of both obligations and expectations. Obligations refer to how one is supposed to act, and expectations relate to the manner in which one is expected to act toward others. All participants in an

interaction will be affected by these rules, and have some idea of the obligations and expectations of both themselves and the other participants. The maintenance of the rules of conduct for interaction tends to result in one being committed to a particular self-image. In the case of obligatory rules an individual is to himself the type of person who follows the rules and at the same time the type of person who is naturally expected to follow the rules. In the case of expectations, an individual tends to become dependent upon the supposition that others will properly dispatch their required obligations. In establishing oneself as the type of person who does follow the rules, and who in turn is treated in a certain manner, the individual must make sure that it will be possible for him to act as this type of person. This is important because if a standard of conduct is broken during interaction both participants will have been discredited and their faces threatened. One person's obligation is another's expectation in the maintenance of face. The actions of individuals during social interaction with one another represent symbols in which we confirm our self-image and help others to confirm theirs.

Finally, Goffman notes that the rules of conduct for interaction are generally of two types. Substantive rules are used which control conduct in matters considered important in their own right. Prohibitions against

stealing would be an example of substantive rules. There are also ceremonial rules which guide conduct in areas of secondary significance in and of themselves. Examples of ceremonial rules would be such symbolic actions as greetings and farewells. These two types of rules are institutionalized means of communication wherein an individual expresses his self-image or expresses appreciation to other participants at the beginning or end of interaction. Overall, it is possible to say that rules of conduct govern nearly all human relationships, and that these rules tend to become ritual codes which insure that all participants in human social interactions act in socially approved ways.

OCCUPATION AND PERSONALITY

Interactions frequently take place between individuals who represent different subgroups visible in society. These subgroups will exhibit to a lesser degree the same characteristics that are displayed by the larger society. Some of these groups will be highly organized and some relatively unorganized. Occupational groups in most cases are fairly well organized with recognized positions.⁵ When an individual gains status by virtue of acquiring a place in one of society's subgroups, with varying attitudes and values, he also gains in personality. The personality is

⁵Robert Bierstedt, The Social Order (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963), p. 23.

the subjective aspect of culture, and a man's occupation to the extent that it provides him with a subculture and an identity becomes an element of his personality.⁶ Status assigns individuals to various accepted social categories each having its own rights and duties. Inherent in the occupying of a status position is some idea of these intangibles such as social worth, esteem, honor, social power, deference and rules of address. If the position includes necessary interaction with customers or outsiders to the occupation, the incumbent will probably attempt to make a tentative judgment of each outsider's status. This judgment will be based upon certain preconceived ideas, visible status signs displayed by the outsider, and is used to help guide interactional behavior. As a result of this tentative designation and the incumbent's view of himself and his position, some of his behavior during interaction with an outsider will probably be designed to preserve his self-image, his position, and also his view of his position. In this respect no person really becomes a moral person until he has a sense of his own station and the ways proper to it.⁷ Finally, an occupational status is not peculiar to

⁶Everett C. Hughes, Men and Their Work (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1958), pp. 47-102.

⁷Everett C. Hughes, "Institutional Office and the Person," The American Journal of Sociology, XLII (November, 1937), pp. 404-406.

any one person. It is historic and usually identified with a role and a technique.

OCCUPATIONAL TECHNIQUE AND CULTURE

An occupation, according to Everett C. Hughes, can be represented as both a technique and a culture.⁸ The technique is developed with reference to certain objects or activities carried on by the occupation. The technique of the occupation appears in the individual as personal traits, and will encompass the whole of the occupation group; its relation to outsiders, and how the work is accomplished. The culture, on the other hand, refers to the build-up by the occupational group of a code or a set of collective representations peculiar to the occupation and more or less not understood by outsiders. On the basis of the code and strategy of the group, the collective representations are diffused throughout the group by special language and gestures also not wholly understood by outsiders. The code is an occupation's prescribed activity of individuals toward each other. The strategy represents the occupation's relation to the community of outsiders and includes a rational view of outsiders held by the worker and his colleague group.

⁸Hughes, Men and Their Work, pp. 35-36.

THE COLLEAGUE GROUP

Within each occupation there are the close and equal fellows who make up the colleague group, and to whose opinions one is sensitive. The colleague group of an occupation represents those with whom one can communicate fully and easily, and who take a good deal for granted. The rules of each occupation help define not only outsiders, but also situations on the job. Likewise, the occupational rules help set up criteria for recognizing a true fellow worker or colleague. The colleague group is usually those who have a right to say what a mistake on the job is; for they are the people who consider themselves subject to the same kinds of risks. The colleague group will consider that it alone fully understands the occupation; therefore, it should also determine when a mistake has been made. In some occupations it is assumed those who are in the colleague group will know by subtle gestures when a colleague believes a mistake has been made. Full membership is not attained until all those gestures and their meanings are known.⁹

The colleague group in many cases is also the reference group for members of the occupation. The reference group is generally an identifiable group whose perspective is used by the members as a frame of reference.

⁹Ibid., pp. 90-95.

The consistency with which an occupational member defines a series of relationships with customers or outsiders arises from the fact that one generally uses through time, the same perspective shared with close and equal fellows. This shared perspective of the colleague group becomes the working concepts of the individual¹⁰ in the day to day fulfillment of work obligations to customers.

CONTROL OF RELATIONSHIPS

Occupations which depend upon customers for continuance are also faced with certain tensions created by the work and the necessary interaction between workers and customers. William F. Whyte,¹¹ in his study of waitresses provides some insight into attempts of workers to ease occupational tensions through control of the relationships with customers. The waitress who is successful and bears up under pressure does not simply respond to her customers. She acts with some skill to control their behavior during interaction. She accomplishes this by the things she does, the things she says, the tone and use of her voice, and the expression on her face. However, as Whyte points out, the above generalization needs some qualification. There are

¹⁰Shibutani, Society and Personality, op. cit., pp. 250-258.

¹¹William F. Whyte (ed.), Industry and Society (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1946), pp. 123-147.

really three general types of waitress-customer relationships. In one, the waitress holds the initiative and control from beginning to end. In another, the customer holds the control and initiative from beginning to end. In the third, it is uncertain who is taking the lead and control passes back and forth or remains in dispute. In the first two situations both the waitress and the customer are happy for the situation is well structured and social equilibrium is established. The third situation is the troublesome one; the interaction remains unstructured and both customer and waitress are uneasy in the relationship.

LICENSE AND MANDATE

The relationships between occupational members and clients are in part explained and analyzed by the allied concepts of license and mandate. Understanding the essence of these concepts, their relations to each other and the situations in which they are used is crucial not only to the study of occupational interaction, but also of society. Occupational licenses and mandates reflect the processes wherein various required functions are distributed to society's members.¹²

License

License originally grew out of the medieval guild

¹²Hughes, Men and Their Work, pp. 78-87.

organizations and is formalized in ordinances provided by some political authority. The occupational license partially consists of legal authority to do some kind of work others cannot or will not do. License is part of the technical division of labor and in some form is an attribute of nearly all occupations. Some people are allowed to do things others are not permitted or expected to do. In other words, society gives license or authority to certain people to carry on occupational activities. The license may be very involved as in the case of physicians, or may be nothing more than authority to carry on certain narrow technical activities. License, as an accompaniment of an occupation, includes in many instances the right to deviate in some way from the common modes of behavior. For example, many occupations cannot be carried on without license to know and have certain guilty knowledge. This guilty knowledge may protect the integrity of the occupational member (an example is the lawyer), or it may be the right to look at the work in a different light than that of outsiders to the occupation. In this context each occupational group must look at and classify in some relative way the order of events, objects, and ideas of the occupation. Outsiders to an occupation are often looked at by occupational members as objects. These objects must be viewed comparatively to be effectively classified. The behavior of outsiders must be looked at relatively and, if possible, predicted. Therefore, a

language is developed so that colleagues can talk among themselves about these kinds of things. The language and relative attitude often are developed and adopted toward those outsiders the occupation serves. The license of an occupation to compare, classify, and talk about outsiders is part of the strategy of that occupation with respect to the workers' relationship with their customers. In sum, occupational members cannot accomplish their tasks without license to work and to classify and talk about the clients and their problems.

Affiliated with the license to think about outsiders and customers in a relative sense is the license to do dangerous things. This may refer to actual dangerous work, or to a more subtle and simple form of danger that advice given to a customer or client may be incorrect, or that work done may cause some type of damage or dangerous situation.¹³ Workers with this type of license are frequently considered suspect by clients or customers. Often there is suspicion that the practitioners have in the past exploited the clients in some manner. This suspicion may be manifest in the refusal of customers or clients to allow workers to successfully enforce a mandate to direct their own work-life.

¹³Ibid.

Mandate

Regardless of the form or forms of an occupation's license, members of most occupational groups insist upon a mandate to control the work situation. The mandate of an occupation is part of the moral division of labor, which is the mechanism wherein different moral functions are given to members of society as individuals. The mandate of an occupational group may mean no more than insistence by workers that others move back and give the workers room to do their work. It may, on the other hand, include the claim to determine the conditions of work between the practitioner and outside clients wherein the practitioner may insist upon the mandate to direct what and how, work will be accomplished. Related to the worker's mandate is the worker's self-concept, and his position in relation to his clients or customers. The worker's self-concept will probably include the opinion that he is more knowledgeable and proficient about his work than are his clients. As the expert the worker will insist upon the mandate to direct the work situation. However, often the worker's mandate may be thought by customers and clients to be suspect. The customers may feel they also know something about the work being done, or that because they are paying the bill direction of work is a customer prerogative. It is also possible that the worker's competence is doubted. Therefore, the practitioner must spend considerable time and

effort in enforcing and reinforcing his mandate to the customers. If the worker is successful he then has a good customer to deal with, one who will allow the worker to direct what and when work will be accomplished. In extreme cases, as in the priesthood of strongly Catholic countries, the mandate may even include the right to control the thoughts and beliefs of whole populations with respect to nearly all concerns of life.¹⁴

CLIENT INTERFERENCE

Howard S. Becker in his study of professional dance musicians revealed several interesting phenomena that relate directly to the foregoing discussion of the relationship between workers and customers. The dance musicians, like workers in many retail sales occupations, are subject to interference by clients during the work. The customer to a large extent is able to direct the worker at his tasks and to apply sanctions that range from informal pressure to withdrawal of patronage and conferring it on some other of the many people who perform the same service. The dance musicians feel that the customers should have nothing to say about the kind of music played. Clients do, however, exercise control, but often know nothing about music, except what suits their individual tastes. Consequently, a

¹⁴Ibid.

musician would attempt to control and direct the relationship through various maneuvers carried on during the performance.¹⁵

THE UNIFORM AS A SOCIAL DEVICE

In many service stations the attendants wear some sort of uniform. The uniform usually consists of at least a shirt or coat with the station identification and perhaps the attendant's name. It is possible the uniform will only consist of dirty hands and greasy clothing. Often, however, the uniform worn by attendants will be more complete; made up of an identifying shirt, trousers, coat, and perhaps a cap of some type. Nathan Joseph and Nicholas Alex presented an investigation which dealt with the uniform as a device for resolving certain social dilemmas. The uniform assumes sociological significance in the relationship with customers or clients. Joseph and Alex view the uniform as an artifice to resolve certain quandries of complex relationships. The uniform signifies structure because there exists not only the uniform wearer, but also the supervisor who allows wearing of the uniform, and who oversees conformity to expected rules. Further, the uniform serves the function of controlling social interaction, and is a

¹⁵Howard S. Becker, "The Professional Dance Musician and His Audience," The American Journal of Sociology, LVII (September, 1951), pp. 136-144.

symbolic statement that a wearer will adhere to expected norms and roles.¹⁶

SUMMARY

To summarize and focus the research reviewed in this chapter, the daily interaction of service station attendants with customers is likely to have several visible behavioral consequences for the workers. Rules of address operate during interaction and will, if carefully observed, reveal the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the relationship. Participants in an interaction attempt to structure the interaction through a definition of the situation which is based upon visible status signs, events experienced over time, and perceived normality in the relationship. Additionally, each interactant will attempt to project a self-image in terms of positive social traits through the line taken and the use of face-work. Institutionalized worker-customer relationships are governed by ritual rules which have grown up and direct nearly all areas of social interaction. The rules of interaction are fairly well defined for each participant, and generally are agreed upon in advance.

The filling of an occupational position in the

¹⁶Nathan Joseph and Nicholas Alex, "The Uniform: A Sociological Perspective," The American Journal of Sociology, LXXVII (January, 1972), pp. 719-726.

division of labor provides status for the incumbent and contributes to the nature of his personality. Being a member of an occupational group also provides one with a code and a strategy which is shared by the individual's close and equal fellows. The code is a set of collective representations peculiar to the occupational group, and the strategy represents that group's approach to outsiders. Neither the code nor strategy are wholly understood by outsiders to the occupation. The colleague group was considered as those people whose voices an occupational member listens to rather than someone else's. Members of the colleague group are generally of the opinion they have the right to define mistakes on the job. The rules of an occupation will define not only outsiders, but also who is a colleague.

A study was also discussed which explored the nature of the relationship between waitresses and their customers. The worker sized up the customer, and through words and deeds attempted to control and direct the interaction. If the waitress is successful, she is able to relieve a certain amount of occupational tension created by the daily interaction with customers. License and mandate were reviewed as concepts which help one to analyze and understand the behavior of workers with respect to their customers. License is a multi-faceted concept which refers generally to the occupational members' authority to do certain things others cannot or will not do. The concept of mandate refers

to the insistence of workers to control some aspect of their own work-life. The license and mandate of occupational members may be suspect by customers for a number of real or imagined reasons. Dance musicians and their clients were considered as another type of worker-customer relationship wherein certain behavior results from the contrasting perceptions held by the worker and client. Finally, the uniform was discussed as often consisting of several alternative forms and used as a symbol for identification in resolving dilemmas of social interaction between strangers.

The preceding discussion of research findings emphasized, but was not limited to, occupational investigations. Purposely, the presentation cut across several areas of sociological endeavor in an effort to provide a frame of reference for understanding and explaining some aspects of human behavior in certain natural work settings. In the context of this thesis the behavior referred to is that which is displayed by service station attendants in their daily face to face interaction with customers. As Everett C. Hughes noted, a good rule of thumb to follow is that, if a feature is evident in one occupation, even a minor or odd one, it will likely also be found in others.¹⁷

¹⁷Everett C. Hughes, "The Sociological Study of Work: An Editorial Forward," The American Journal of Sociology, LVII (March, 1952), p. 425.

Chapter III

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROBLEM AND ORIENTATIONAL HYPOTHESIS

Throughout most of each working day service station attendants actively interact in one way or another with customers and potential customers. The reasons people go to service stations are many and diverse; ranging from just neighboring, to using the station as a place to turn a quick dollar by cheating the attendant, or for the purchase of petroleum products and automotive repairs. In this chapter the specific area of investigation is delimited. Presented in addition is the orientational hypothesis which was used to guide and direct the study.

SPECIFIC AREA OF INVESTIGATION

In an occupation whose central feature is the providing of goods and services for outside clients, occupational members will display certain behavior and hold various beliefs with respect to those served. The necessary interaction by attendants with their customers is influenced by the position each is suspected of holding as tentatively judged by the other. These rough opinions become part of the attendants' structuring of reality. These judgments will in large part guide and direct the behavior exhibited during interaction with the customers.

The occupation's work speciality and high rate of

interaction with customers are chronic sources of tension for workers. The service station attendant, to maintain an on-going retail business, must amiably meet and greet all kinds of clients and establish himself as knowledgeable about automotive things while accomplishing routine and sometimes unrewarding tasks or free extra service at the gas pumps. He does this with little or no assurance that the customer will ever return. The attendant must use considerable social skill during interaction with customers. The clients interrupt the attendant's other tasks and may or may not be agreeable and pleasant to wait upon. The customer may be in a hurry and only wish a quick dollar's worth of gas. Just as often the client is not in a hurry and wants the windows washed, the oil checked, plus some friendly conversation. Many customers prefer the attendant to ask to check the oil. Just as many prefer the oil to be checked automatically and become annoyed if the attendant asks first. Still others prefer the attendant not to even think about touching the automobile hood. Furthermore, the customer may mumble his order or he may make his requests of the attendant in a rude manner. The client frequently does not understand the workings of the vehicle he or she is driving, but still insists upon directing what work will be done in the repair of the automobile. Finally, many customers may be very skeptical of the attendants' competence, or perhaps in the attendants' eyes they make unreasonable

demands of him. The service station attendant faced with this work environment, and charged with maintaining a continuing retail enterprise finds it helpful to control the relationship between himself and the customer thereby manipulating some of the client's behavior. If the attendant is successful he can easily interact with the customer, establish himself as well acquainted with automobiles, and insist upon the mandate to direct his own work-life. Success results in the easing of some of the tensions created by the job and its necessary interaction.

The complex of occupational interactional requirements and behavior alluded to above is central to this study. Specifically, the primary area of exploration and investigation was the nature and form of the behavior of service station attendants that results from the interaction with their customers.

ORIENTATIONAL HYPOTHESIS

The license to sell petroleum products and automobile repairs by service station attendants results in a relationship between the worker and the customer in which:

1. Service station attendants attempt to control the relationship between themselves and their customers.
2. Service station attendants insist upon the mandate to direct their work situation.

3. The service station attendants' success in claiming their mandate to direct the work environment is in direct proportion to the effectiveness of their attempts to control and guide the relationship between themselves and the customers.

SUMMARY

The relationship between service station attendants and their customers was chosen for examination because a large number of vocations are involved with interactions similar to the face to face interaction experienced by attendants. In the service station the customer and his automobile are the focal points of each day's labor. The relationship is seen to be especially meaningful when one observes that there is fierce competition between stations for customers and that the automobile is in most cases the second most expensive purchase (after housing) an American may make.

Chapter IV

METHODOLOGY

The method used in this investigation was based upon the principles and perspectives of comparative analysis.¹ Incorporated in this chapter is a discussion of the general and specific methods employed, operational specifications, and an explanation of the delimitation of the population studied. Also included are comments concerning the conduct of the study, some methodological mistakes made and corrective action taken, and the various comparative subgroups (work situations) which emerged during data collection and analysis.

GENERAL METHOD

Comparative analysis is a general method for the systematic conversion of qualitative research data into theory. As a tool and strategy for the conversion of data to theory, comparative analysis can be used for any sized social unit; from units as large as states or nations to units as small as men in work roles. The general method is an approach for the continuous formation, verification, and development of sociological theory based upon evidence

¹Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967), pp. 21-257; see also Norman K. Denzin, The Research Act (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 3-218.

collected from comparable groups and subgroups. Comparison groups are chosen on the basis of their theoretical relevance to the research being conducted. If used correctly they provide the social scientist with vital control over similarities and differences of field data with respect to categories central to the research. The general method also allows for the establishment of the generality of a fact, and can be used to generate both empirical and formal conceptual theories. For both types of theories the essential elements generated by comparative analysis are conceptual categories, properties of categories, and hypotheses. The latter are the generalized relations among the categories and their properties.²

The general method of comparative analysis embraces the ideology that the generation of theory is an on-going process. Sampling, coding, and analysis of data are accomplished simultaneously. Data are gathered through the use of the theoretical sample of multiple comparison groups. The theoretical sample is a process of joint collection, coding, and data analysis. Based upon the emerging categories relevant to the research, and from the analysis of each group, the researcher then decides what data to next

²Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967), pp. 21-43.

collect and where to find it. As noted earlier, groups and subgroups are chosen as the basis of their theoretical relevance for the development of emerging categories important to the research being conducted. Group comparisons are conceptual and made by constantly contrasting and comparing diverse or similar evidence pointing in the direction of the important conceptual categories. Concerning makeup of comparison groups, aggregates or single people can be considered the equivalent of groups or subgroups with respect to the general method of comparative analysis. The comparative approach has four stages of continuous development and analysis: (1) making comparisons of incidents applicable to each relevant category while data are collected, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) limiting the theory that emerges, (4) writing a report about the research findings and theory.³

Finally, because groups are chosen on the basis of the emergence of important data there can be no preplanned definite set of groups which are to be studied and compared. Emerging data dictates the next group or subgroup for sampling. Therefore, theoretical sampling is carried on until no additional new data are being found in any one group. On the basis of data analysis the researcher decides which group to next go to until he has exhausted all the

³Ibid., pp. 45-59.

relevant groups and subgroups.⁴

CHRONOLOGY OF THE INVESTIGATION

The research being reported upon in this thesis spans several years and certain chronological events and includes several mistakes made during data collection. Discussions of these aspects are included in the following presentation of the specific method and conduct of the study.

Late in 1965 a decision was made by the present investigator to study some aspect of occupational behavior. After considerable library research and because of prior work experience as a service station attendant, it was decided the research was to be centered around the relationship and interaction between service station attendants and their customers. Early in 1966, preliminary work was started in the form of five interviews with attendants in the city of Missoula, Montana. The purpose of these interviews was to ascertain categories or incidents important to attendants with respect to their customers and to find out if meaningful data could be obtained from members of the occupation. An equally important benefit of this work was the experience gained in interviewing and coding and analysis of data. The results of these interviews were reported upon in a graduate research paper, and generally revealed gaps in

⁴Ibid., pp. 47-115.

data, investigator inexperience, and certain areas worth pursuing relative to the attendants' interaction with customers.

Specific Methodology

During the summer of 1972, the data base for the report earlier submitted was reviewed and additional library research was conducted in order to bring the investigator up to date in areas pertinent to the bent of the anticipated formal research. As the result an orientational framework and hypothesis was conceptualized and several decisions were made concerning operational specifications and additional field work.

Delimitation of the study. It was decided to delimit the geographical area to be encompassed by the formal study to the city limits of Missoula, Montana. This limitation would make the study manageable. Further, because the study was to be concerned with the worker-customer interaction in one type of retail endeavor, the term service station needed to be defined for this investigation. This term was operationally specified as follows: a small business which is not self-service only and is primarily devoted to selling automotive accessories, repairs, merchandise, and petroleum products to automobile operators. The specification was purposely broad so that the study would be representative of the varied work

situations found in the occupation. Those stations which use gas and oil as drawing cards, but also sell other merchandise, are included. Also included are those stations which are more traditional, that sell gas and oil, and whose major sources of revenue are from the sale of automobile service, supplies, repairs, and equipment. The specification would not include those businesses that do not have an attendant and sell new or used cars or groceries or the like, and whose automotive service and petroleum sales are relatively minor considerations in day-to-day operations. The term service station does not include strictly self-service stations, as those attendants act primarily as money changers. The specification does, however, include gas-and-oil-only operations which use an attendant to pump gas, but would not include any enterprise which does not have an attendant serving customers, or which owes a major part of its existence to nonautomotive or automotive original purchase business. Generally speaking a grocery store with gas pumps or a new car dealer who sells repair service, petroleum products and automobile accessories would not be included in this study. The exception would be if the service station aspect is a separate business area with full-time or part-time employees. The universe of the study therefore consisted of attendants who work at service stations as operationally

specified and within the city limits of Missoula, Montana. The operational specification and universe as stated remained constant for the formal study.

Additional fieldwork. At this point in the conduct of the research a second decision was made to conduct additional interviews to ascertain changes over time and check certain leads uncovered in 1966 with respect to attendants and their customers. A second instrument was prepared, and ten additional interviews were conducted to insure a solid foundation for the formal investigation. The findings of the 1966 project, the additional library research, and interviews accomplished during the summer of 1972 were all analyzed and represented the basis of a thesis proposal submitted in August of 1972.

The thesis proposal contained a quasi-structured fairly extensive instrument which was designed from the two instruments used earlier. During the initial thesis committee meeting, sound reasons were presented for discarding this instrument. These reasons were: first, that there would likely be an overload of unnecessary data due to the rather inclusive nature of the instrument, second, the instrument was not very well suited to research using the general method of comparative analysis and the theoretical sample. Therefore, the instrument was abandoned in favor of a relatively unstructured interview guide which

would allow for more exploitation of the general method, flexibility, and depth of information.

A second recommendation came from a member of the thesis committee and concerned the interviewing of customers as a means to gain more insight into the relationship between attendants and customers. Therefore, several interviews were conducted with people who were customers of service station attendants. From these responses and the earlier responses of attendants, interview topics were selected which appeared important for understanding the interaction between attendants and their customers. These topics, plus others discovered during the formal study, are discussed in detail in the presentation and analysis of data reported upon in Chapters Five through Fourteen of this thesis. In discussions with the thesis committee it was also decided the formal study should have the benefit of information gained from additional interviews with customers. To this end, after each two service station attendant interviews, one customer interview was conducted.

Identification of population. For the formal study service stations meeting the operational specification were identified, located, and listed first by the use of a map showing the city limits, and the current telephone

directory.⁵ Secondly, this list was reconciled with actuality by a visual on-the-spot check of all service stations located within the limits of the city. The reconciled list resulted in a total number of 59 service stations which met the specification. The universe of the study therefore is composed of service station attendants who work at the identified stations, and number approximately 350 people. This figure is an approximation because the number of attendants varies according to the business climate, time of the year, and availability of labor.

Identification of subgroups. As noted earlier, the general methodological approach used in this study includes the theoretical sample wherein data are collected from as many subgroups as is possible. At the same time sampling will cease when theoretical saturation is reached for each subgroup, that is no additional data are being discovered that relate to the area being studied. However, as conceptual or theoretical categories and incidents illustrating concepts emerge the investigator is required to be sensitive to new data and possible new comparison subgroups which arise. This approach yields as many incidents as is possible pertinent to the area of investigation.

With respect to subgroups the population was

⁵Missoula and Western Montana Telephone Directory, (Missoula, Montana, The Mountain States Telephone and Telegraph Company, 1972), pp. 196-198.

initially differentiated into the following subgroups: full-time employees (40 or more hours worked per week), part-time (39 or less hours worked per week), female, and supervisory. In addition, stations were located geographically as follows: residential, downtown business district, and main highways in and out of town. However, as the formal investigation progressed it became clear that even though occupational members consider themselves as part of one of the subgroups noted above, the data being obtained revealed somewhat different relevant subgroup distinctions. These were full-time, part-time, male and female, and type of station. Use of the number of hours worked proved to be an erroneous differentiating criterion as the data were not significantly different based upon hours worked, and there are few attendants who work much less than 40 hours per week. Part-time attendants emerged as those who hold another job or attend school. They are the employees whose life-style does not really depend upon the current job of service station attendant. The category of full-time attendants includes all other attendants not attending school or not otherwise employed. Stations differ primarily according to the absence (cut-rate) or presence (full-service) of facilities for automobile repairs. The former offers petroleum products, perhaps some merchandise, but not automobile repair service. The

latter type of station generally offers petroleum products, merchandise, and automotive repairs. Variations in the data were not significant based upon type of station and geographic location. But, because service stations are of several types, are in all areas of the city, and employ several categories of attendants, respondents were chosen to be representative not only of type of employee and station (cut-rate and full-service) but also of geographical area. For purposes of this study, these various attendant subgroups represented in reality differing work situations present in the occupation.

Interviews. The interviews in the formal phase of the study with both attendants and customers took on the character of informal conversations, with questions being framed around the "ideal types," "logical opposites," and "definitions of the situation." The interviewer attempted to get respondents to talk about their experiences in the attendant-customer relationship. As the situation warranted, the interviewer probed extensively to gain depth of information. There were no outright attendant interview refusals. However, after an interview one station leasee refused permission to interview his employees. There were four customers who refused to be interviewed. Interviews with attendants were conducted at various times throughout the day and night. Respondents for the

customer interviews were selected randomly on the basis of the car in the driveway, area of the city, age, and sex. Respondents were selected with dirty, clean, old, and new cars, and from most residential areas of the city. Interviews with customers were conducted during the day and early evening hours, all at the home of the respondents.

Responses from interviews with both customers and attendants were hand recorded and not limited to the topics or categories initially considered important to the attendant-customer relationship. In addition, interviews were supplemented by insights remaining from previous employment as an attendant, by observations made during interviews, and by playing the role of customer. The previous experience as a service station attendant led, however, to bias. Therefore only insights from this area supported by data were considered valid. All formal interviews with attendants (except one) were conducted at service stations during the attendants' duty hours. Though interviews were frequently interrupted, careful observations by the interviewer often revealed significant information. An example is the difference between stated and actual behavior with respect to certain services offered to customers at the gas pumps. Furthermore, several days or weeks after an interview with an attendant, the investigator would return to the station in various cars to observe the attendant's

behavior. These observations of the occupation in action with respect to customers resulted in important data being obtained not only about that particular attendant but about other attendants also. Information gained through these kinds of observations was recorded for future reference.

Collection, coding and analysis of data. The instrument used for data collection consisted of the following: a top sheet for recording minimal respondent background information (age, sex, number of years as an attendant, customer occupation, and education). The rest of the instrument consisted of blank sheets of paper. At the top of each sheet was listed a category or topic for discussion with the respondent. The background information was considered necessary for two reasons. First, it was desirable to establish the type of respondent being interviewed to insure the correct approach by the interviewer. Second, the background information served to get the interview started through neutral, nonthreatening questions. Concerning the remainder of the instrument there was no definite order in which topics were covered. Subjects were discussed as they arose during conversation. This allowed for flexibility and depth in data gathering, wherein new incidents and categories could be fully explored whenever they came up or returned to as often as was necessary in the eyes of the interviewer or the respondent.

This approach did, however, require careful and laborious organizing, coding and analysis of data, and necessitated the use of special notebooks to categorize responses. Immediately upon completion of each interview the completed instrument was screened by the interviewer. The purpose of this procedure was to add words left out, complete sentences, record observations, and in general make sure each response and the overall interview were meaningful. The general method required the simultaneous collection, coding, and analysis of data. Accordingly, at the end of each day each interview was again screened and incidents important to the research were noted and underlined in brightly colored felt-tip pen. Furthermore, several notebooks were kept. In one notebook all responses were categorized and recorded that related to the various categories or topics important to the interaction between attendants and customers. A separate notebook was kept for customers and attendants. Another notebook was maintained in which were recorded leading ideas for future consideration. In addition, after every seven to ten interviews a summary of impressions and responses by category or topic was prepared to provide a synopsis of what was happening with respect to attendants and their customers. A separate summary sheet was prepared for attendants and customers. These procedures of categorization, analysis and summarization of data allowed for the immediate comparison of emergent data within and between

subgroups. As responses were categorized and analyzed those new and different areas discovered in the responses were placed upon a paper carried upon the interviewer's clipboard. These subjects were then tried out upon subsequent respondents. Valid subjects or topics which yielded pertinent information were kept and discussed with other respondents. Invalid topics were recorded for future reference as possible negative cases. Also, as information was uncovered in the customer or attendant subgroups, it was discussed with members of the opposite subgroups for cross reference and depth. Interviewing for a particular subgroup was terminated when no significantly different data were being obtained relevant to the relationship between attendants and customers.

Methodological Errors

During the period of time when the interviews were being conducted a methodological mistake was made which concerned the failure to make verbatim transcriptions of each interview. Upon discussion of this error with the thesis advisor, it was determined that past interviews should be all transcribed verbatim, and a representative sample of interviews together with a synopsis of findings be provided the thesis advisor. This was accomplished with the following positive results. Overall the thesis was strengthened. The transcription procedure revealed

some aspects of the relationship previously missed. The procedure also disclosed certain gaps in data, some of which occurred because the interviewer had failed to follow up leads during some of the interviews. It was necessary to go back to the respondents to clarify points and obtain more information. The process of transcribing the interviews also exposed certain preliminary and superficial notions about attendant behavior with respect to customers which could not be supported by data. In this respect, initially in the thesis proposal the investigator included the concept of status relationship as the central issue of this investigation. Status, although important and present in the relationship, was found not to be more important than several other aspects of the interaction between service station attendants and their customers. Accordingly in the presentation of data, status is placed in proper perspective.

SUMMARY

By way of summary, there are several reasons for the decision to use the general methodological approach discussed. The investigation was to be qualitative and exploratory research not oriented toward precise inferences regarding number, distribution, or degree of observed phenomena. Rather, the study was oriented toward classifying observed phenomena and explaining what is happening

in the occupation concerning attendant behavior relative to the relationship with customers. Precise measurement was not in keeping with the basic propositions and character of the investigation. The general method provided a perspective toward data; a way systematically to obtain and analyze social data; and to predict and explain behavior, all without losing the flavor of the responses and the natural setting in which the behavior occurred. The theoretical sample represented a flexible and efficient way to gather and analyze data. This is especially true when significant information was already known about the population being studied.

The unstructured interview approach to eliciting information was appropriate because it presented the empirically best and easiest way to get at required data and gain insight into the behavior of service station attendants in the interaction with customers. The type of highly subjective data required was not readily available through any other method and source other than from the mouths of occupational members themselves. Important to this investigation was how occupational members viewed certain aspects of their work. The general method provides for this, and is an overall tactic for handling research data, conceptualization, and for describing and explaining human behavior.

Chapter V

THE NATURE OF THE BUSINESS AND THE OCCUPATION

The relationship of service station attendants with their customers was formally investigated during the latter half of 1972. This chapter contains a general characterization of the service station business and the job of attendant, which sets the scene for behavior described and analyzed throughout the remainder of the thesis. Also, included in this chapter is a discussion and examination of the concepts of occupational license and the dirty work of the job. There are in addition some general comments concerning certain aspects of mobility in the occupation.

GENERAL STATEMENTS ABOUT THE SERVICE STATION BUSINESS

If one has ever heard the statement, "there seems to be a gas station on every corner," all you have to do is observe a city and surrounding areas to see the meaning of that assertion. The allegation is of course a value judgment not entirely factual, but nevertheless in Missoula, Montana, the statement is based upon some truth. The service station business outwardly appears to be thriving, at least numerically speaking. Often stations are built facing each other, or at least very close to one another. This is especially telling when consideration is given to the number of service stations and the size of the city both in area

and population. There are at least 59 service stations which meet the operational specification of this study and which serve a population of approximately 29,497 (1970 figures also list the population for Missoula metropolitan area as 53,364). Actual travel time in the city or surrounding metropolitan area to the station farthest away from the home of a customer probably involves no more than fifteen to twenty minutes. Stereotyped concrete, glass, and steel service stations are found throughout the city and on or very near the main highways in and out of town. Service stations come in all types and combinations, from strictly self-service operations to complete car care centers. The customers of service stations are even more diverse than the number and type of automobiles they drive.

Automobiles are becoming increasingly complex in just the basic mechanisms, plus all the accessories affluent car owners are likely to have which require service or replacement. There is, moreover, the increasing presence of safety and emission devices, and the influx of foreign automobiles which may be outwardly similar to domestic cars, but use different component terminologies, parts and tools. With respect to the current emphasis by some people upon emission and safety requirements; the attendants at full-service stations report this increased awareness about pollution and safety has affected their businesses very little. These attendants relate this while reflecting

upon the fact that a decrease in noxious emissions requires a car to be well tuned at all times. The attendants are aware of customers' safety and emission "needs," but acknowledge these things cost money and the decision to purchase rests with the customer because there is no automobile inspection law in Montana. The following response taken from an attendant at a full-service major brand station makes the point nicely:

"A service station salesman sees the need when you drive in, we show you the need, if you don't buy that's up to you. Safety is my business, but it's hard to sell. I try to point out safety and ecology things, like an air cleaner helps ecology. Ecology costs and we have to all pull our fair share."

Expense and Risk

Service stations are considered by many to be high risk businesses. The national average in leasee turnover at major brand stations is thirty percent or higher.¹ But the failure of one in Missoula, doesn't seem to dampen the spirits of those building another, because stations keep popping up. Service stations are expensive to build and equip. Oil companies consider it costs at least \$150,000.00 to build a regular full-service station (up \$100,000.00 from ten years ago) with large separate building, expensive car repair bays, diagnostic equipment,

¹The Idaho Daily Statesman, April 30, 1972, Sec. E, p. 25, cols., 1-4.

and hydraulic lifts.² This is a fairly large sum of money for investment in a high risk enterprise.

Competition

Competition between stations and companies for the customers' dollar is very keen. Witness the advertising carried on routinely through the use of the mass media and motor sporting events. Competition comes not only from other service stations, but also from various discount stores and self-service operations. Often these kinds of outlets can sell an item for retail at less than the wholesale cost to a service station, or shave several cents off the cost of a gallon of gas to the customer. Some full-service and cut-rate stations have resorted to a split marketing approach, wherein one island (concrete area surrounding gas pumps) is staffed by attendants who fill gas tanks, clean windows, and collect payment in the usual manner. The other island offers self-service only. This marketing practice allows an attendant to spend more time waiting on other customers or in back doing repairs, and therefore probably represents logic in terms of profits. It also represents a curious situation. It is at the gas pumps where there is the most opportunity for customer

²Kyle Given, "International Report," Motor Trend Magazine, August 1972, p. 16.

contact, where the attendant, through various social maneuvers while waiting upon a client, can create many repeat customers, or customers for other areas of the business. The split marketing approach represents an attempt to lure in those customers who would otherwise go to self-service stations. It is interesting to note that when some of the gas pumps at a station are designated as self-service, the specifying sign often does not say self-service only. Experience and observation has shown that sometimes the same service with an attendant is offered at both types of gas pumps at the same station. Some cut-rate and full-service stations solve the problem of tying up a male attendant on the islands who could be working elsewhere by hiring females who do nothing but wait on customers on the islands and help out with odd jobs around the station.

In the context of competition for customers, attendants are nearly unanimous in their realization that credit card buying is a large part of their business. The following composite quote from the responses of two attendants is indicative of attendants' feelings about meeting customers on the islands, gasoline profits, and credit card purchases:

"The worst job is waiting on customers, it's also the most important. The pump man has the least skill, and is the most important because he deals with the public. You must point out the need to a customer for sales, gas is not enough profit. I don't care if I never sell gas, you must push the back room, sell

service and repairs to make a go of it. 75 percent to 80 percent is credit card buying, this keeps me operating."

The following response from a customer in answer to a question about choice of attendants verifies that at least some purchases are based upon the brand of credit card:

"I prefer to go where we have a credit card that's good."

The competition is intense, and frequently staying in business means being aware of customer purchasing habits; the use of such devices as split marketing and promotional items, as well as diversification into quasi-automotive and nonautomotive areas, e.g., snack foods, auto ice chests, extra clean toilets, bicycles, etc. It is doubtful if these marketing approaches used to meet competition are unique to Missoula, Montana.

In Missoula, the totally self-service non major brand-name stations seem to be gaining popularity with customers. Concerning self-service there is, however, a fairly new idea being tried by some major oil companies. That is the major brand self-service station. Though not presently operating in Missoula, this type of station deserves mention because of its acceptance in other areas of the nation. It represents a very probable future form of competition for all stations currently doing business in the city. Some nationally known major brand oil companies are opening major brand self-service locations. These facilities can be constructed for around \$65,000.00. The

oil companies have determined that a customer can pull in, get out of his car, fill the tank, pay, and be gone in about 90 seconds via self-service.³ The customer is not subjected to sales pitches, and gets a major brand-name gas at a savings over attendant operated types of stations. Generally, however, attendants in Missoula do not view self-service as the trend in service stations. The prevailing opinion is that the future of service stations lies in becoming complete car care centers including everything from sanitary trailer toilet disposal areas to exhaustive automotive diagnostic and repair services and automatic car washes. Understandably, attendants at full-service stations view self-service and cut-rate operations with no little apprehension, and sometimes with open contempt, often making deriding remarks about the quality of gas, etc. Some customers also note that the cut-rate and self-service stations sell inferior gas. There are presently two gasoline wholesale (both nationally known major brands) outlets for gas in Missoula. At present all gasoline sold in this area comes from these two distribution points. In the opinion of some attendants this fact also affects the possibility of a "gas war" in Missoula.

Responses from several attendants at both cut-rate and full-service stations indicate a "gas war" is not

³Ibid.

likely to happen soon in Missoula for several reasons. First, there is a nationwide shortage of petroleum. Second, there are only the two distribution points in the city. The advantage gained by the station initially starting the "gas war" would be too short term to be of any real benefit. Other stations in town would quickly drop their gas prices to meet the threat. In the realm of gas retail price control, there is in Missoula a petroleum retailers' association which sometimes attempts to establish gas prices among members' stations. Not all attendants are members of the association. Data are limited on this aspect, but during the investigation the retailers' association emerged as an organization primarily used as a once-a-month opportunity for members (usually leasees, managers and distributors) to have a social evening out and a steak dinner. Further research would perhaps reveal the importance of the association to the service station business in Missoula, Montana.

The Parent Company and the Local Station

The leasees or managers of both full-service and cut-rate stations generally create their own work rules and methods, hiring and firing criteria, and paying the wages they choose. If the station represents a certain brand-name of products the leasee or manager must stock and sell that brand of merchandise. He may also stock and sell competitive products as long as they are not displayed or

advertised. This rule is frequently violated. If the station represents a major oil company the parent company will have a district salesman who makes periodic visits to each one of the company's stations. The salesman comes around to help the leasee, note the general run of business, and inspect. Particular attention is paid to station and restroom cleanliness. There is some feeling of these attendants that the company representative often does not really understand the problems local stations have and what does or does not make a successful station. Leasees note that the primary reasons the salesman is sent around is to sell more company merchandise, conduct unfair inspections, and generally protect the company's best interests rather than help the individual station. Although data concerning the relationship between leasees and managers and the parent companies are very limited; one leasee volunteered what he considered to be the major problems in operating a service station. His complaints revolved around direction of retail sales policies and prices to the station, and differential wholesale parts prices from the parent company. According to this attendant the parent company attempts to coerce the station leasee into compliance with company desires through various means including price controls. In addition, this attendant objected to the requirement that he purchase his replacement parts and

merchandise from the parent company at a higher price than other stations which represent the same company. In his opinion he should pay for his lease, and sell company gas, but in all other areas purchase wherever he sees fit. Conclusions concerning the relationships of attendants to the parent company would have to be based upon further research.

Training courses. Though not in evidence at cut-rate stations in Missoula, there is a trend at full-service stations toward short salesmanship-oriented training courses being offered by major oil companies to their station attendants. In addition, these major companies are sending to their stations more complete information concerning automobile changes, service data, marketing tips, and safety and emission information. The scanty data obtained during the preliminary work for this study revealed that generally only those in supervisory positions take advantage of the training courses.

Ownership of the tools of the trade. With respect to ownership of the tools of the trade, the large fixed equipment (pumps, building, lifts, air compressor, etc.) of full-service stations is usually owned by the distributor or parent company. The leasee furnishes the rest of the smaller tools and stock necessary to conduct the level of business he is interested in. Cut-rate stations are usually

managed with the manager having little or nothing invested in tools, stock, or fixed property. Rental of fixed property of a full-service station is usually taken care of in one or a combination of several ways. One method is an annual or longer lease with rent paid on the basis of the gallons of gasoline sold. There is also straight annual or monthly rent, or no lease agreement and rent paid per month based upon gallons of gasoline marketed. The purchase of necessary city and state business licenses is usually the responsibility of the leasee or manager.

Formal Licenses Required

The formal licensing system imposed upon service stations is simple. If one is to operate a station in Missoula, Montana, he must apply each year to the appropriate city and state authorities. One respondent noted that just as the number of taverns is limited in a given area by law, the number of service stations should also be limited by law. He went on to say, "Every time you turn around there's a new station; the little guy can't exist." The occupational license of service station attendants, however, is not limited to the formal authority to accomplish the work of the occupation.

Informal Forms of License

The service station attendant has two other more subtle forms of license. The first is the license to do

dangerous things,⁴ and the second form is the license to consider the customer and his automobile in a relative sense.⁵ The license of the attendant to do dangerous things is inherent in the type of work done by the attendant and rests upon the distinct possibility that his work may be incorrect. This may possibly result in a dangerous situation for the customer upon whose car the attendant worked. The customers interviewed generally recognize the potentiality of errors by attendants, but also know that it is difficult for most customers to really discern mistakes. Because of this inability to tell about errors, the doubting of the attendants' competence by some customers, or the feeling of other customers that they have in the past been exploited in some manner by an attendant, the license of service station attendants is frequently suspect. Therefore, in the opinion of many customers the alternatives for automotive repairs are limited to three choices: (1) take the car to a regular garage, (2) learn to do the work themselves, or (3) search out an attendant who can be trusted and become a loyal customer. In the latter choice the customer hopes that the relationship with that attendant will develop into a personal and friendly one which

⁴Everett C. Hughes, Men and Their Work (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1958), pp. 78-87.

⁵Ibid.

infers to the customer that the attendant can be depended upon to do correct work, thereby limiting the possibility of errors. The use of the first alternative will probably cost the customer more money because garages generally have a higher labor rate than do service stations. Many customers do not have the time, skill, or inclination necessary to use the second alternative. Use of the third alternative means the customer must make a serious effort to demonstrate loyalty and to develop a special relationship with the selected attendant almost "as if" other customer relationships did not exist.

The license of service station attendants to look at the job and required tasks differently than outsiders, and to consider the customer in a relative sense as an object is demonstrated by the tendency of attendants to talk about, and to size up and categorize their customers. This practice requires the development of special terms and is generally not carried on in the presence of the customer. This reference to the absent⁶ customer by special expressions or phrases (sometimes derogatorily) allows the attendants to talk among themselves about their work and their customers, and to place customers in categories.

⁶Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959), pp. 170-174.

Customers with certain idiosyncrasies are mimicked. Those customers with car problems are compared to those without automobile problems. The reasons people fill their gas tanks are speculated about and contrasted to those who prefer to purchase two dollar's worth of gas each day. The customers are viewed in a relative sense as objects, and almost as if the customer and the automobile are one and the same. The comparison and categorization of customers facilitates prediction of behavior. The special technical language used and understood by the attendants in talking about and considering the clients or the work is visible throughout the occupation, as are the types of situations which give rise to this practice. However, the specific terms used are generally unique to each station. Examples of some of the phrases used are, "old four banger" and "two dollar Annie." The first refers to a customer who drives a car with a four cylindere engine, and was used in a derogatory sense behind the customer's back. For no given reason, automobiles with four cyclinder engines were held in contempt by the workers at the station where this term was heard. The second phrase was used by an attendant of another station more in terms of good-natured understanding of a customer and her peculiar ways (as viewed by the attendant). The use of these kinds of expressions present an imagery all the workers at a station can understand and

share. Much of the expression of this form of the service station attendants' license is not consistent with the treatment of customers to their face, and takes place in back areas of the station not readily visible to the customers, or when they are not present at the station. Nevertheless, the categoric and relative treatment of the job and the customers is important to the attendants. The practice helps provide for the attendants' analysis and prediction of customer behavior which is essential for smooth social interaction with customers. The considerate treatment of the customer in his presence, and hiding of the attendants' real feelings allows for the continuation of interaction in order to get the business done. The practice also serves the purpose of the maintenance of the morale of the workers in an occupation which is often socially difficult. Perhaps one of the best examples in this study of the exercising of the license to view things associated with the work differently from outsiders, categorization of customers, and maintenance of morale, is revealed in the following interchange taken from an interview with a full-time attendant:

"Old ladies are not fun. They can be though, you can pull little tricks on them."

Like what kind of tricks?

"Make funny noises under the hood when you are checking the oil. If there's another guy on the islands too, you can really pull a good one. The other guy acts like there's a funny noise under the hood."

What kind of noises?

"Like chickens. But, usually old ladies want their damn tires checked in fifty below weather."

CHARACTERIZATION OF THE OCCUPATION

The occupation of service station attendant is essentially a younger man's occupation. Hours are often long and pay is relatively low. The attendant spends most of each working day on his feet on either concrete or asphalt. Full-time and supervisory attendants generally work at least 55-65 hours per week, and part-time attendants 35-45 hours per week. Pay for attendants who are not leasees ranges between \$1.75 to \$2.50 per hour, with those employees classified as managers receiving the highest wages. In addition, some stations have some type of program wherein employees can earn extra money through a commission on the labor or parts they sell. Leasees of full-service stations generally pay themselves a salary based upon the station profits. There is no data on the amount. The duties of service station attendants, once learned, are fairly routine and range from information and direction, and housekeeping tasks, to major tune-ups and polite conversation. Nearly every task at a station is oriented toward some actual or potential customer. Data obtained during both the preliminary work for this investigation and the formal study indicates housekeeping tasks, particularly those involved in some way with cleaning up after

customers and changing tires are considered by most attendants as the "dirty work"⁷ of the occupation.

Dirty Work

Cleaning litter off the islands, cleaning toilets, vacuuming out the floors of cars after lubrication, or changing and repairing tires are examples of the jobs which cause status discomfort to attendants. These duties are not only sometimes physically disagreeable, but relate directly to the attendant's relationship with and judgment of his customers. Through the littering habits of the customers the attendant is able to make some judgments about their presumed character. The same is true for many tasks involving tires. Automobile tires are usually dirty, and sometimes difficult to work with. Certain conceptions can be made about a customer who waits until the first snow fall to get the snow tires mounted, and then is in a hurry, or who drives a fairly expensive car and brings in a tire for repair which is nearly bald or a recap. The dirty work of the service station attendants' occupation is often unclean and somewhat physically disgusting. But it involves more than these aspects. This work implicates the customer who hires his dirty work done and who most often interrupts, and infringes upon the attendant. The dirty work tells the

⁷Everett C. Hughes, Men and Their Work (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1958), pp. 50-52.

attendant the little things about his customers that perhaps they admit only to themselves. The makeup of a customer's litter, or the inexpensive grade of tire all reveal to the attendant secret things about the persons who hire him to do their dirty work. It is common at the service station for the dirty work to often be delegated to the part-time or night attendants. This delegation reflects the hierarchy found in a service station, and mobility of the occupation.

Horizontal Mobility

Horizontal mobility is fairly frequent within the occupation. Entry to the occupation of those interviewed tended to be from other lower skilled manual occupations. This is especially true for those attendants who are not leasees, and is typical of the patterns for relatively unskilled manual workers reported upon in other studies. Lipset and Bendix show, that with respect to manual and nonmanual occupations, social mobility largely goes on within these kinds of occupations rather than between them.⁸ In addition, Caplow notes that a common trait of manual semiskilled occupations is frequent and easy movement within the occupation, or from one semiskilled

⁸Seymour M. Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, "Social Mobility and Occupational Career Patterns," The American Journal of Sociology, LVII (March, 1952), pp. 494-504.

occupation to another.⁹ The limited data on mobility uncovered in this investigation indicates that even though leasees tend to be stabilized at one station for longer periods of time than other attendants, they also change jobs fairly frequently. This also falls into line with the ideas of Miller and Form, who note that semiskilled and unskilled workers change jobs during their entire life, and do not have careers in the traditional sense.¹⁰

Vertical Mobility

Upward mobility within the occupation is limited. Regular promotion in the usual sense is confined. What generally constitutes a promotion is an occasional pay raise given to an exceptional employee, or when a part-time employee becomes full-time and receives the appropriate wages. The individual's chances for advancement or continued employment really depend much more upon his personal relationship with the boss than upon work performance. The lack of true opportunity facilitates and even encourages the horizontal mobility discussed earlier. It is very difficult for most attendants to gain a vested interest in

⁹Theodore Caplow, The Sociology of Work (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), pp. 84-85.

¹⁰Delbert C. Miller and William H. Form (eds.), Industrial Sociology (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1964), pp. 541-765.

remaining where they are. Like some other kinds of workers, service station attendants are too easily replaced to be that highly valued.¹¹ It is also possible the routine nature of the occupation encourages horizontal mobility where a change of scenery is a welcome relief. A leasee when asked about trying for the same job again replied, "Yes, if it's a challenge, when it's no longer a challenge I'll look elsewhere." Upward mobility may also be achieved if an attendant becomes a manager or leasee. Lipset and Bendix further point out that a good proportion of small business proprietors come from the ranks of the manual occupations where the alternatives were to engage in more manual labor or to become small businessmen.¹² Conclusions regarding service station attendant mobility must be guarded for the data is inconclusive. However, the information available points in the directions noted, especially when interpreted in light of what is already known about mobility in similar occupational situations.

Promotion and Discharge

Criteria for promotion and discharge are determined largely by the leasee or manager. Although Missoula, Montana, is considered by many to be a "union" town, service

¹¹Caplow, op. cit., p. 86.

¹²Lipset and Bendix, op. cit., p. 499.

station attendants are not unionized. During nearly all interviews there was a good deal of liberty taken by employees with the supervisor of the station. The employees interrupted, ribbed, and called the boss by his first name. It appears that this behavior is a right of employees as granted by the supervisor. This form of give and take is probably used by the employer as a means to keep morale up and hopefully keep employees honest and pleasant with customers. One manager related that because wages are low, the work hard, and regular coffee breaks nonexistent, that he tries to maintain a friendly informal atmosphere to keep employees working and agreeable during the interactions with customers. This is also consistent with Caplow's discussion of the importance of personal relationships in manual semiskilled occupations in the absence of variations in work tasks. Caplow notes that when work is fairly well routinized, personal relationships tend to dominate the work situation and become the positive content of work.¹³ The importance of personal relationships at the service station are further verified by the data on the colleague group presented later in this thesis.

Entrance to the Occupation

There are few formal arrangements governing such

¹³Caplow, op. cit., p. 87.

areas as the learning of occupational techniques and entry into the occupation. A formal test of competence is not an occupational requirement. Techniques of the job are largely learned while working. The attendants feel that on-the-job training is the best way to learn occupational ins and outs. The training courses offered by the major oil companies tend to be oriented toward sales rather than mechanical skills. Entry into the occupation is for the most part a situation of being in the right place at the right time, and having a highly desirable quality referred to as a "good personality." A good personality is being likeable and appearing to have the temperment and appearance to successfully deal with customers. Those interviewed who did the hiring indicated that these qualities and the willingness to work are difficult to find. However, in Missoula, Montana, at the present time there does not seem to be a shortage of people willing to try their hand at the job and its required interaction with customers.

Chapter VI

GOOD AND BAD CUSTOMERS

Workers who hold positions in the division of labor generally have certain concepts of themselves and their work. The workers in those occupations which are on a daily basis highly involved with customers are bound to have some well-developed ideas about their clients. The workers will also often have some opinions about where the preferable customers can be found. In this chapter findings are presented and analyzed which reveal the views of service station attendants about themselves, their relationships with good and bad customers, and the impact of customers upon the attendants' job. The ritual codes that pertain to the conduct of attendant-customer interactions are discussed, as is the manner in which the attendants attempt to initiate the interaction and control the interactional processes. There is in addition, a consideration of the forms of address observed and reportedly used by both participants in the relationship under study. Also examined is the manner in which service station attendants define and structure reality, and endeavor to enforce the mandate to direct their work-life. Finally, the customers' point of view about some of these same aspects are presented to provide more depth for the understanding of the face to

face interaction between service station attendants and their customers.

THE RITUALS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

To appreciate the attendants' opinions of their customers it is important first, to review both the manner in which interactional participants express their views of self and the situation through the rituals of social interaction; and second, to present the impressions attendants generally hold of themselves. According to Irving Goffman, during social interaction each participant will express face through the line others feel he has taken during interaction. The line of an individual is the pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts a person uses to express his view of the situation and through this, his evaluation of himself and the other participants. The face of an individual as discussed by Goffman represents the positive social values an individual claims for himself by the line taken during interaction. The measures used by each interactant to retain consistent face and counteract situations threatening to face are called face-work. During social interaction the face-work of an individual will take on both defensive and protective orientations. The former is designed to protect one's own face while the latter orientation will be toward helping others save their face

during interaction.¹

In nearly all human relationships rules have grown up governing the conduct of interaction. These rules tend to be organized into codes which insure that all participants act correctly and receive their just due as sacred humans. Under the rules, each interactant is morally obligated to recognize the other's social worth, and to allow each person to display his positive and internally satisfying face. The rules infringe upon each interactant in terms of ritual and ceremonial obligations and expectations which generally specify how the interaction will be carried out. The obligations determine how one should morally conduct himself, and expectations confirm the manner in which others are morally required to act in regard to him. An individual who is involved in the maintenance of the rules of interaction is generally committed to his image of self. That is, he is to himself and to others the type of person who follows the rules and expects others to do likewise with respect to him. The actions of an individual during interaction expresses the concepts held of the other participant. These actions also represent communications which reflect confirmation of the self through expectations and the fulfillment of expectations. Any act or communication, which,

¹Erving Goffman, Interaction Ritual (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1967), pp. 5-14.

under the rules does not conform to the obligations and expectations of interactants is not confirming the self and presents an uncomfortable situation for one or the other participant. Face-work is used to counteract these kinds of situations, re-establish ritual equilibrium and to satisfy the ceremonial requirements of obligations and expectations. Face-work can also be used during the ritual of interaction to make positive impressions upon others as well as for correctional purposes. The use of the word ritual is relevant because it represents behavior through which a person symbolically demonstrates how he merits respect or how worthy he feels others are of it. Furthermore, the little ceremonial activities of human social intercourse represent the manner in which a person must guard against and plan for the symbolic implications of his and others' behavior during interaction.² One's face is a social and sacred object, and the behavior required to maintain it is therefore ritualistic.

Each individual who is involved with interpersonal relationships feels he is somewhat sacred and at the same time is granted a certain amount of sacredness by others. This sacredness is exhibited and affirmed by symbolic and ceremonial acts. This ceremonial activity will have, according to Goffman, two major components consisting of

²Ibid., pp. 48-53.

deference and demeanor. Deference refers to the symbolic manner in which appreciation is conveyed to the recipient. Demeanor refers to the behavior, dress, manner of speaking, etc., which expresses to those one is interacting with that he is a socially desirable fellow.³

The rules of conduct for social interaction fasten together the interacting participants and are part of the basic adhesive of society itself. The ceremonial rules are social requirements which can be used and performed in nearly all interactional situations. The acts which are carried out in the presence of others and often considered symbolically void are frequently not that way at all. Nearly all behavior has the potential to hold meaning for the sacred self of someone else. With respect to the self of an individual Goffman relates:

"It is therefore, important to see that the self is in part a ceremonial thing, a sacred object which must be treated with proper ritual care and in turn must be presented in a proper light to others. As a means through which this self is established, the individual acts with proper demeanor while in contact with others and is treated by others with deference. It is just as important to see that if the individual is to play this kind of sacred game, then the field must be suited to it. The environment must ensure that the individual will not pay too high a price for acting with good demeanor and that deference will be accorded him. Deference and demeanor practices must be institutionalized so that the individual will be able to project a visible, sacred self and stay in the game on a proper ritual basis."⁴

³Ibid., pp. 56-78.

⁴Ibid., p. 91.

THE ATTENDANTS' VIEW OF THEMSELVES

In reference to their image of self, the data of this investigation indicates that service station attendants consider themselves in terms of positive social traits. Their self-image or face includes such characteristics as trustworthiness, likeability, reliability, competence, and a sacred human being worthy of respect. The attendant is a competent worker and a solid citizen as seen by himself. The attendant's opinions of himself are closely related to his conceptualization of good and bad customers because it is usually the customers who do, or do not pay attention and adhere to the rules of the sacred game of interaction; thereby allowing the attendant to express his feelings about himself.

THE ATTENDANTS' VIEW OF GOOD AND BAD CUSTOMERS

The service station attendants' notions of good and bad customers involves basically three closely related issues. The first, already alluded to, concerns the proper observance of the ritual codes of interaction. This aspect is crucial, and sets the base for the second issue which revolves around control of the interaction as a necessary prerequisite to the attendants' successful enforcement of their mandate. The third facet of the attendants' characterization of customers relates to the economics of maintaining an ongoing business enterprise, that is repeat

patronization. These three dimensions of the attendants' views of their customers will be discussed in the order listed above.

Interaction Ritual

A significant portion of the job of service station attendant is made up of interactions with customers. Good customers make the relationship, hence the job enjoyable by being friendly, easy to talk to, and appearing appreciative of the attendants' efforts. During interaction an attendant conducts or demeans himself, and expresses his evaluation of himself and the customer initially by being friendly and cheerful. Nearly all attendants interviewed, when discussing their relationships with customers, mention the importance of being pleasant and amiable. This approach to interacting with customers represents part of the attendants' line and face-work generally used to establish themselves in the customers' eyes as the sort of people with whom the customers would want to interact. Throughout interaction the attendant's face-work will take, up to a point, whatever form is necessary in his opinion to insure his line is accepted and supported by his customers. The following response is typical of the attendants' demeanor and line taken during interaction:

"I try to be cheerful as I can with each customer, I hope they respond and bullshit with me. It's a real bad thing when people come in and we are perfect

strangers and they don't respond to cheerfulness. Makes me feel like an ass; like having my personality rejected."

The attendants hope their customers will reciprocate with a certain amount of ritual deference thereby demonstrating acceptance of the attendants' self-image, and view of the situation. A good customer acts in this agreeable manner which infers that he is, on the surface at least, of the same persuasion and not overtly challenging the attendant's view of the situation.

Other acts observed being used by attendants to express their evaluations of themselves and their customers during interaction include certain facial expressions, jokes, use of the customers' names, and neutral comments about the weather. In addition, an attendant may wipe the automobile lights off (which may or may not be dirty), appear to take special care while cleaning the windows, place a rag around the gas pump hose nozzle to prevent spilling, or if the customer is known perhaps be over solicitious about the customer's health or family. Some of these acts are expected by customers and some are not. Nevertheless, the attendant is acting with proper and correct demeanor, and hopes the customer will likewise dispatch his ceremonial obligations to the attendant. These acts are ritual kinds of acts which are calculated to depict the attendant's self-image of competence (albiet indirectly), assist him to symbolically acknowledge the

sacred face of the customer, and fulfill certain expectations of the customer with respect to service station attendants. The attendant is symbolically stating the customer is worthy of respect and a certain amount of deference from the attendant. These activities when coupled with the accomplishment of the other routine tasks required to get the work done, represent how the attendant should conduct himself as expected by the customer.

The customer has a moral obligation to respond in kind. He should return the verbal banter, laugh at the joke, say thank you, or perhaps save the attendant one trip to the islands by going into the station building to sign for credit card purchases. Most of all the customer, especially a good customer, will demonstrate his appreciation and acceptance of the attendant as a competent and socially worthy person. A response from an attendant who worked at a cut-rate station aptly makes this point:

"Customers have an obligation to be nice to you, and appreciate me as a person."

The following composite response describes well those good and bad customers whose behavior makes the job enjoyable, and which reflects their respect for the attendant and the ritual code of interaction:

"A good customer is one who realizes you perform a service for them, that they need you. The good ones are the ones that's really friendly and easy to get along with. Someone who says hi, says please, says thanks, and appreciates it. The good ones are hippies,

they are considerate, never in a hurry and reasonable. A bad customer provides no response to your friendship."

As intimated by the last sentence in the above quote, a customer can choose another approach. He may take the line of being hard-nosed, difficult to talk with and grouchy. The customer may also refuse the joke or to be friendly, and even perhaps refuse to roll down the window thereby making communication most difficult. In the eyes of the attendant these acts are indicative of a bad customer, and present an unsettling situation for the attendant. This is because the customer is inferring he does not grant the attendant his sacred and social worth as a person. As viewed by the attendant, the bad customer does not meet the attendant's expectations nor allow the attendant his just due as a human being.⁵ The interaction becomes somewhat threatening to the attendant who has been denied his right to express his view of the situation and self-image. Because he is not able to present his sacred and viable self; a station attendant faced with an unfriendly customer has no choice left but to restructure the situation for himself, and choose an alternative course of action in the same manner as the waitresses.⁶ The alternative behavior

⁵Ibid., pp. 51-55.

⁶William F. Whyte (ed.), Industry and Society (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1946), pp. 123-147.

chosen would be in keeping with the attendant's restructured view of the situation. As one attendant put it:

"You can tell that you can be as nice as you want, but he doesn't care at all, he wants to own you, and you've got to serve him and take it. He can treat you any way he wants, you got to take it; kiss peoples' ass. Would be a hell of a lot better if people were just nice, just say how good a job you were doing or something."

At the service station, customers who cause this type of uncomfortable relationship to develop may subtly not be encouraged to return to that particular station. In the words of one attendant:

"But, if a customer treats me bad, I'm not as friendly, and I try to not encourage them to come back."

Customers who treat the attendants "bad," have in effect broken a moral rule of conduct for the interaction. Under the rules customers are morally obligated to recognize, at least superficially, the attendants' social worth and area of competence. One rather disgruntled attendant put it like this:

"You walk up there, they order you around, you don't ask to check the oil, you just already know they want it checked. Real dumb asses."

The foregoing consideration of good and bad customers, the things they do or do not do, and the attendants' views of themselves and their customers intimately involves the ritual code which has grown up for this kind of interaction. Both the service station attendant and his customers have certain expectations that the

relationship will be carried out ritually proper according to the rules. What this really means, is that everyone in an interaction expects to get through the encounter and all its unanticipated events without being cast in an undesirable light or suffering loss of face. The attendant has the expectation the customer will treat the attendant with some outward deference which includes acceptance of the attendant's self-image and claim to competence in the repair and maintenance of automobiles. The attendant also has the obligation to help insure during interaction that there are no uncomfortable areas for the customer. The customers have like obligations and expectations with respect to attendants. Good customers follow the interactional rules, bad ones do not, and the rules govern nearly all aspects of the attendant-customer relationship.

It is important to understand the significance to a station attendant that the interaction between himself and his customer proceed according to the ritual code with each taking and giving proper acknowledgement of the other. Providing the attendant is successful in the projection of his positive self or face through the line he has taken, he has not only expressed his evaluation of himself and the customer, but more importantly structured the situation for the customer. This means the customer will hopefully hold an image of the attendant as expert, or at least competent in the diagnosis and repair of automobile malfunctions.

In the attendants' opinion customers demonstrate this by being friendly, easy to talk to, and by allowing the attendant to make unchallenged determinations about the repair of automotive problems. The ritual of face to face interaction is used by an attendant as a means of establishing for his customer a certain definition of reality, and in keeping the definition without significant change over time. This structuring of the situation in terms of the attendant's view of reality (including his self-image) has three immediate benefits: first, a satisfying, nonthreatening, and proper social interaction for both customer and attendant; second, an opportunity to sell more petroleum products, repairs, and merchandise; and thirdly, the attendant gains control of the relationship with the customer. Control of the relationship is crucial because it is an important step to eventual enforcement of the mandate to direct the work environment.

Control of Interaction and Initiation of Action

The second and perhaps most important dimension of the attendants' concept of a good or bad customer involves the attendants' attempts to gain the upper hand in the relationships with their customers. Success here for the attendant is crucial because it leads to successful enforcement of the mandate to direct his work-life.⁷

⁷Everett C. Hughes, Men and Their Work (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1958), pp. 78-87.

For the station attendant, control begins long before the first word is spoken during interaction with a customer. Service station attendants commonly size up and evaluate their customers on the basis of the visible cues displayed or not displayed by customers. When a customer approaches the station or an attendant, it represents basically and initially an unstructured situation. The attendant will size up the customer and attempt to define or structure the situation for himself. Defining the situation enables him to know in advance what to expect from a customer, and how to act toward him. Some of the visible signs that the attendant makes mental note of are the following: the license plate and tires on the customer's car, and the way in which the customer sits in his car. Other cues are: sex, age, the manner in which the customer drives into the station, and where the customer parks in relation to the gas pumps. When asked about the practice of sizing up customers, a fairly typical response of the attendants concerned the feeling that they shouldn't but do:

"Yes, I shouldn't but I do size them up when they drive up on the islands. If they get out of the car they are usually friendly."

Is there anything else you note? "How the car looks, and how they drive up here."

Mentally the attendant will recognize, and socially locate the customer, consider and decide upon the behavior which best suits his structuring of the expected interaction.

The attendant defines the situation for each customer. His definition is based upon the following: (1) external status signs displayed or not displayed by the customer, (2) the attendants' experiences over time, including experiences with this customer and others, (3) what the attendant anticipates to be normality in the impending interaction.⁸ The attendant's definition of the situation is essentially reality-testing and will include some consideration for his self-image. His definition is not fixed and may be changed, or the situation redefined and restructured depending upon what transpires during the course of the interaction. For example, a common situation related by attendants concerned arriving at a customer's car, giving the usual ritually required friendly greeting and receiving little or no response, or an inappropriate (in the attendant's eyes) response from the customer. This kind of situation dictates that new or different behavior is in order. The station attendant faced with an unfriendly customer has no choice left but to restructure or redefine the situation for himself, and in the same manner as the waitresses consider alternative courses of action.⁹ The alternatives

⁸Peter McHugh, Defining the Situation (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1968), pp. 3-43.

⁹Whyte, loc. cit.

are to jockey by words and acts for the social lead; thereby keeping the relationship in limbo and somewhat unsettling for both participants, or to retreat and just be polite, keep quiet, and get along as best as one can. In effect the latter approach allows the customer to control the relationship. However, it is in his best interests for the attendant to control the interaction and the conduct of the customer; especially the customer's treatment of the attendant. The attendant influences the definition of the situation by expressing himself in such a way as to give the customer the desired impression in accord with the attendant's view of the situation. The attendant attempts to establish jurisdiction over matters that are important to him. These areas are probably not quite as important to the customer who will remain fairly uncommitted; thus by silence allowing the attendant's definition to stand. The customer, at least superficially, acts like he accepts the attendant's definitional claims. In this regard most attendants recognize the importance of first impressions in insuring they control interaction, and that their definition remains unchallenged. Later interactional and work adjustments which the attendant may be required to make, hinge upon the ability of the attendant to put over his definition of the situation and to seize and hold the initiative during interaction. In essence through the

things he says and does, especially in the initiation of action the attendant attempts to impose his definition of the situation upon the customer; thereby limiting or guiding the behavior of the customer during interaction.

The successful initiation of action is understood by attendants as the important first step in structuring the interaction for the customer and controlling the relationship, both of which aid the attendant in the enforcement of his mandate. The attendant attempts to set the tone of the ensuing interaction by the first impression imparted in the initiation of action. Exactly like the waitresses there is a clear understanding by attendants of the importance of seizing and holding the initiative in the relationship. This is a capacity that requires subtle aggressiveness on the part of the attendant, especially when his socio-economic status is lower than that of the client. The attendant does not merely wait upon the customer, but responds and acts with some skill. Examples of such acts are the following: smiles, friendly greetings, getting the first word in, use of the name, and turning the pumps to zero during approach to the car. All of these acts are performed to insure the attendant initiates the action and therein has maximum opportunity to create the desired first impression, and hopefully to control the interaction. The following responses make the point well:

Who gets the first word in?

"Me, I come up from the rear and say, hi there!"

How do you go about meeting and greeting the customer?

"Depends upon who the customer is and how well I know him."

What do you say?

"Fill it up sir, with ethyl? If I really know the guy I may say, how's your ass? If it's a lady I play it down the line, you never know how they will take a joke."

Why do you try to get the first word in?

"Works best that way, then they know I mean business."

Another example:

"I try to run out there fast, smile at him through the window; say hi, and beat him, get the first word in."

Finally:

"It's best if I hurry out there and strike up a conversation. Be friendly, say hi, use their name if I know it."

Last or first name?

"Usually last. People like to be called by their names. It's hard to do because customers start talking first with what they want, so I smile a lot. I always repeat the order to be sure I've got it right. It's good to have a rag in your hands, and wipe your hands so they know you are not just fooling around."

The foregoing excerpts from several interviews with both cut-rate and full-service station attendants point out that the attendant has structured the situation, sized up the customer, picked the appropriate behavior, and responded

with a purpose in mind over and above increased sales. These little acts of the attendants are designed to project the attendant's competent and positive self-image, and demonstrate the attendant is in charge and knows what he's doing. If the attendant is successful he has a good start toward control of the relationship, and in having something to say about the work to be accomplished. If the attendant is not successful, and the customer does not allow himself to be manipulated, the interaction will develop in one of two ways: the customer will control the interaction, or control will pass back and forth between the customer and the attendant as each redefines the situation and jockeyes for the interactionally-superior position. Responses taken from customers indicate there is not a great deal of customer awareness about this area. Customers tend to feel they call the shots during the relationship with attendants. It must be remembered that just as attendants attempt to present a positive face and to gain control of the relationship, in all probability the customer for various reasons is trying to do likewise. There is, however, no data in this investigation to support this conjecture except what is already known about human behavior during interaction in other similar circumstances.¹⁰

¹⁰Theodore Caplow, The Sociology of Work (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1954), pp. 25-119.

Enforcement of the mandate is important to the attendant because of his self-image (friendly, competent person) and the nature of his work environment. The attendant considers himself knowledgeable about automobiles. However, customers who may or may not have technical knowledge about cars insist upon designating what work will be done, and often how soon it will be finished. Just as the dance musician is subject to interference of clients during the work, so is the service station attendant. In both instances the client, to a large extent is able to direct the worker at his tasks and to apply sanctions that range from informal pressure to withdrawal of patronage and conferring it to some other of the many people who perform the same service. The dance musicians felt that the customer should have nothing to say about the kind of music played. Their clients do, however, exercise control, but often know nothing about music except what suits their individual tastes. Consequently the musicians would attempt to apply sanctions and control the relationship through various maneuvers during the performance;¹¹ thereby attempting to enforce the mandate to play music of their own choosing. The musicians knew best what should

¹¹Howard S. Becker, "The Professional Dance Musician and His Audience," The American Journal of Sociology, LVII (September, 1952), pp. 136-144.

be played because they were, after all, the professionals hired to do that particular job. This situation is similar to the conditions faced by the service station attendants. The service station attendants' job is characterized by customers who insist upon directing what and when work will be accomplished, frequent inopportune customer interruptions, infrequent vacations, few coffee breaks, and often missed lunch hours. All these factors operate to cause a certain amount of occupational tension. Semiskilled and unskilled manual workers have no reserves upon which to call when there is job tension created by their relationships with the public.¹² In addition, work satisfaction tends to decrease with the level of occupational skill.¹³ The service station attendants' image of self, relationships with customers, and job satisfaction all tend to work to cause occupational tension. Having a voice in the work being done is one of the few ways available to the attendant to relieve some of the tensions created by the job, and achieve some job satisfaction. Enforcement of their mandate is also consistent with their self-image that they are probably more knowledgeable about things automotive than most of their customers. Success in control of the

¹²Sigmund Nosow and William H. Form, Man, Work and Society (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1962), p. 445.

¹³Ibid., p. 11.

relationship and enforcement of his mandate means the attendant not only can relieve a certain amount of occupational tension, but also was successful in projecting his self-image, and imposition of his definition of the situation upon the customer (educating the customer). As one attendant related:

"A good customer is one who will allow you to educate him. I like the man that comes in and says, 'My car needs fixed.' Then I fix it, give him the bill, then show him what I did, then he pays and no problems. I like people that leave the car to us, trust us to fix the car as we see fit to fix it up right; then he pays and no problems. If you are going to make a solid customer you must take time to educate him."

For service station attendants education of the customer refers to defining and structuring the situation for the customer so that the customer voluntarily comes to the same conclusions about the attendant that he holds about himself and his work. These include the competent and worthy worker who should, because of his position and automotive knowledge be allowed to control and direct interaction and to enforce the mandate to direct what and when work will be accomplished; thereby fulfilling his self-image and relieving some of the tension created by the job.

An example of the insistence of the attendant to direct the work is reflected in the use of appointments, and the practice of requiring the automobile be left at the station for service or repairs while the customer

leaves and goes on about his own business. Although data about these areas is limited it seems plausible these procedures relate to the attendants' mandate, and perhaps to the dramatization of the work.¹⁴ There is a certain amount of drama and mystery involved in requiring the car to be left at the station. For in this way the attendant can dramatize the character of his position, and make visible to the customer his skill (although indirectly) which might otherwise be missed. If the car is left at the station the attendant can also do the work when he sees fit, and make his mistakes out from under the watchful eye of the customer. The use of appointments serves the same purpose, but offers an added advantage, that of allowing the attendant to schedule his work in such a manner so that he can accomplish more work (earn more money) than could ordinarily be accomplished on a walk-in basis. In this respect one attendant noted:

"...the way I like it is for them to make an appointment so I can work it in. The appointment deal really works good for me and the customer both. I can do more work for me, and I can work in other jobs around and in between appointments, and do more work."

In the same vein, but also upon limited data, it is possible the concept of "first come, first served" used by some attendants in establishing priorities for the

¹⁴Erving Goffman, Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959), p. 32.

accomplishment of the work is also related to the mandate and can be used to the attendant's advantage. If pressed by a customer about doing some work the attendant can fall back on this as a way of explanation for not having accomplished the work. In many instances it would be difficult for the customer to prove the order in which various jobs arrived at the station. In addition, the customer is likely playing a game without knowing the rules. The customer has no way of knowing what the attendant bases his idea of "first come" upon; actual arrival at the station, a telephone call the day before, or a promise made to a customer at some earlier time, and the attendant is now being called upon to make good. In addition, the "first come, first served" idea could also be used by the attendant as a convenient excuse to cover up for not wanting to do a particular job requested by a customer. The attendant can merely state he has accepted all the work he can accomplish in one day from customers who arrived earlier.

Repeat Patronization

Thus far this discussion of the attendants' view of good and bad customers has revolved around the ritual rules of the interaction and control of the relationship which is prerequisite to enforcement of the attendants' mandate. The third dimension of the attendants' concept of

a good customer involves what is known as a repeat, regular, or steady customer. This aspect of the concept of the good customer reflects to a certain extent the desire of the attendant to conduct a stable business over time. A repeat customer is not only a good customer economically, but he also provides the attendant more opportunity for education about the rules of interaction, and the attendant's image of self. The aspect of the repeating, or steady customer as part of the perception of a good customer is related to the attendants' opinions of where the good customers are likely found.

Data relating to this particular aspect is not as abundant as it could be. However, there is enough evidence to reveal certain patterns. What mainly emerged was that tourists are often a bother, not that desirable, and that good and bad customers are probably found at all stations. One attendant related:

"Tourists are not that good, they pass bad checks and give you bad credit cards."

There is some evidence that the ideas of attendants about tourists reveals the opinion that good steady customers are really found in the residential areas where the relationship may well last over a period of time.

When an attendant enters into an interaction with a customer there is expectation, or perhaps hope that the relationship will extend over time. This is borne out by

the greetings and farewells, observed to be used by attendants and sometimes customers. When the attendant enters into the mediated interaction with his customer, the attendant expects or at least hopes that when the customer leaves, the attendant will remain in a certain relationship to that customer. Greetings provide a way of demonstrating that the relationship is still the same as it was when terminated. At the same time farewells show each interactant that the relationship is likely to remain the same when the participants next meet. The exuberance of greetings and goodbys compensates for the weakening of the relationship by termination and absence. Greetings also help to establish roles that interactants will take during the relationship, and farewells provide an easy non-threatening way to close a relationship.¹⁵ In the case of service station attendants their often enthusiastic greetings and farewells, and emphasis upon being friendly serve these types of purposes. Such observed greetings and goodbys as, "Hi, old buddy, where the hell have you been?" And, "See you shithead," are both indicative of the foregoing. With respect to tourists there is little psychic satisfaction in the relationship and the projection of self to another when it's fairly certain the attendant

¹⁵Erving Goffman, Interaction Ritual (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1967), pp. 41-42.

won't see this customer again. By the same token, there is also little reason for the tourist to meet his interactional obligations to the attendant. Tourists are bothersome customers. Their needs are different than the local customers. Tourists always need to use the toilets, then leave them dirty, and frequently have car problems at odd hours which a service station attendant does not have the ability to repair. This presents a threat to the attendant's self-image. Moreover, tourists also often have very dirty windows. The attitude of attendants about tourists probably also reflects a certain amount of feeling by attendants for violations of the ritual order, wherein the attendant is asked to do more than is really right, e.g. clean an excessively dirty window. An attendant who worked at a cut-rate station put it this way:

"Tourists are sometimes not too good. They know they will never see you again, and always need all kinds of things done, like use the bathrooms, have real dirty windows and tire problems."

The purchase of gas by the investigator using an automobile with out-of-state license plates and a car with Missoula County license plates resulted in some different reactions from the same attendants. However, the difference was primarily of degree. The same interactional expectations and obligations were present for both the tourist and nontourist interactions, but to a lesser extent for the former. The attendants are probably not willing to pay too

high of a ritual price in demeanor to insure that a tourist will treat the attendant with proper deference. It is also possible other factors contributed to the observed differences in behavior. It is equally possible that the difference in license plates contributed to a certain definition of the situation which included the distinction of tourist or local customer.

With respect to good customers a final word is in order relative to the preferred customers of individual attendants. Often attendants specify that the customers they really like to wait upon are those who are friends, or very close to the same age as the attendants. The attendants indicate they are more at ease with their peers.

RECAPITULATION OF THE ATTENDANTS' VIEW OF GOOD AND BAD CUSTOMERS

During the process of interviewing, some observations were made of certain attendant behaviors which are good examples of the ritual order that characterizes the attendant-customer relationship. However, before moving to a discussion of these observations, a brief summary of good and bad customers is in order. Good customers make the job enjoyable. They do this by being ritually proper and following the moral rules of interaction. A good customer is friendly and easy to interact with, not a tourist, and does not require the attendant to reshape his definition of the situation. A good customer is a repeat

or regular customer, and allows the attendant his positive internally satisfying face. The desirable customers confirm the attendant's self-image by allowing the attendants to successfully enforce their mandate to direct what and when work is accomplished. The bad customer fails on all these counts, and is essentially the converse of the attendants' concept of the good customer. The following composite quote is an accurate picture of the attendants' feelings about their customers:

"A real good one is one who, if you say something, he does it, my word goes; one that comes in, orders the work done, then lets you alone to do it as you should. The person should give you some idea, but the job of deciding where to repair should be up to you. A good one is one that will let you take care of the car all the time and leave it up to you to see things are done; a steady customer, and one who is nice to you, and friendly to deal with."

For both cut-rate and full-service stations the concept of the good customer is similar, and differs only in degree. The good customer is one who follows the interactional rules, allows the attendant to claim his mandate and is a repeat (preferably local) customer. The difference in the views of good and bad customers between attendants at the two types of stations centers around the aspect of the relationship emphasized. The cut-rate attendants emphasize the following of, and respect for the ritual order of interaction, and repetition of patronization over the control of the relationship and enforcement of the mandate. The difference is because cut-rate stations offer no repair

services. Therefore, enforcement of the mandate is easier, and not as important to cut-rate attendants as to full-service attendants.

EXAMPLES OF THE RITUAL ORDER BETWEEN ATTENDANTS AND THEIR CUSTOMERS

During the course of the collection of data for this investigation, observation revealed attendants expect and prefer customers to enter the station area in a car, or at least on a motorcycle. The customer is further expected to stop in the vicinity of the islands where the gas pumps are located, preferably next to the pumps. This location is usually in clear view from nearly anywhere within the station building. This allows the attendant opportunity to define and structure the situation and choose appropriate behavior based in part upon certain usual and visible cues displayed or not displayed by the customer. As related earlier, some examples of these status signs are: the appearance and type of car, license plate, the manner in which the customer sits in the automobile, type of tires, and outward appearance of the customer in the car. If, however, the customer approaches the station walking or upon a bicycle he is likely to be slightly ignored by the attendant (noted at both cut-rate and full-service stations). The inattention will not be enough to drive the customer away, but just enough to make it a little difficult to get waited upon. On one occasion a customer had to make a real effort

to chase down the attendant (who was not busy) to inquire about the purchase of an automobile battery. The customer, in entering the station area in this manner had broken a ritual rule, and in the process violated his obligation and the attendant's expectation. The customer has deprived the attendant of many of the cues he uses to size up people, define the situation, and choose behavior. It is possible the customer's approach in this manner represents an unstructured situation the attendant does not know how to handle, and therefore chooses not to see the customer. To a certain degree this may be true, however, on several occasions it was obvious the attendants knew that the customers had chosen their purchases, had them in hand, and the inattention to the customers was still present. It is more likely that the attendants are applying negative sanctions for rule violations. The customer is supposed to drive up on the islands, stop, and provide an attendant with certain status symbols upon which behavior can be based, and an opportunity to perform. That is, to present certain ritualistic and routine behavior during interaction designed to influence the other participant; a part of which regularly functions to define the situation for the other interactant.¹⁶ That's the way it's always been and that's the way it's

¹⁶Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, pp. 17-23.

supposed to be as viewed by the attendants. When entrance to the station does not happen as expected, the attendants' behavioral decision may well include the application of sanctions upon the offending customer.

Forms of Address

Another area of the interaction between attendants and customers observed to be directed by rules were the forms of address used between the two participants. The manner in which customers and attendants address each other is subject to certain guides and can be viewed in terms of the norms of status and solidarity as discussed by Roger Brown. These norms are depicted by the forms of address, and in effect make up some of the ceremonial rules for social interaction and exchange. The status norm reflects social value, is nonreciprocal and helps guide interaction between nonequals.¹⁷ For example, during interaction the use of one way first names always infers status differences or superior-inferior relationships. The use of the last name and title would also indicate existence of status differences. Two-way use of first names infers status equals, or norms of solidarity. Conversations during interactions often oscillate between solidarity and

¹⁷Roger Brown, Social Psychology (New York: The Free Press, 1965), pp. 55-71.

status norms as participants may try to control the interaction or search for points of agreement.

At service stations in Missoula unknown or little known customers are addressed by attendants using title and last name if known, or sir. Well-known customers (except those with titles like doctor), peer customers or younger customers are usually addressed first name or by asking for the order. The following composite interchange is typical of the forms of address used:

"I always use the last unless it's a working man I know pretty good. It usually works best to use the last name, that way it's safe. Young kids like to hear their name, but it's hard to get if they don't have a credit card. If a guy is a doctor, colonel, or sergeant, I use that because they expect it."

Do they use your name?

"Lots call me Bob."

Attendants generally, in fact nearly always, address one another by first names or nicknames. The existence of the norms of address in attendant-customer interactions represent the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the relationships. The norms of address used by interactants also provide for expression of the definition of the situation and perception of the other participant.

An Attendants' Dilemma

The subject of the rituals of interaction and the rules which govern most aspects of the relationship between service station attendants and their customers

have been amply demonstrated and discussed. There is, however, in the technical area of the relationship, one aspect not well grounded in ceremonial rules which presents somewhat of a problem for the attendants. As noted earlier in Chapter Five, the simple act of checking the oil of the automobile often represents a real dilemma for an attendant. There are customers who want the oil checked automatically with a gas fill-up and are offended if the attendant asks first. Some customers prefer to be asked about the oil before the attendant goes to check it. Certain customers take care of their own oil and for various reasons do not want the attendant even close to the hood of the car. In each of the examples related, both the attendant and the customer have expectations and obligations about which the other knows nothing. Even if the customer is known to the attendant the customer has the option of varying his desires from time to time for under-the-hood checking. In short, relative to checking under the hood, irrespective of the attendant's choice of behavior, he stands a very good chance of being incorrect and out of face, or having his face ritually disgraced each time he waits upon a customer. There appears to be no well-defined rules governing this particular area except for the attendant to hope that he has correctly sized up the customer and chosen the right behavior. The attendants report they generally resolve the dilemma by "playing it by ear" as the interaction

unfolds. Just as often, however, the attendants exercise their mandate to direct the work and automatically check the oil.

Social Exchange

The attendants in Missoula, Montana, are convinced that if they can talk to their customers and make the relationship satisfying for both themselves and the customers, the attendants can do a better job, at least in the customers' mind. A better job does not necessarily mean to sell more and do error-free work, but also to feel better emotionally, and have something to say about the work situation. If the attendant is successful in the latter areas he feels increased sales will follow. Data taken from the interviews with customers support this contention. For the most part customers look for a service station which is not only convenient or where their credit card is good, but where during the interaction the customer feels comfortable and good about having gone to that station or attendant. Essentially what appears to be an everyday utilitarian act of purchasing gas or automobile repairs, represents in reality social exchange, wherein during the interaction certain gratifications and symbols of approval and appreciation are provided by each and for each participant.¹⁸

¹⁸George C. Homans, "Social Behavior as Exchange," The American Journal of Sociology, LXIII (May, 1958), pp. 597-606.

THE CUSTOMERS' VIEW OF GOOD AND BAD ATTENDANTS

There is another side to the general area under discussion, and relates to the customers' view of good and bad attendants. The control which the customer exerts or attempts to exert on the attendant is present but informal, and certain rules have developed in this respect. The attendant, as a merchant or an extension of a merchant (in the case of an employee), is expected to minimize his status and exaggerate that of the customer by various forms of demeanor and deference. Examples are yielding in minor arguments, expressing more interest in the customer's personal affairs than the customer is expected to show in the attendant's, and by small personal services (perhaps favors). The attendant is expected to be fairly consistent over time in his approach and routine of work. A good attendant is honest, fast, cheerful, smiling and does not use the hard sell to gain sales. Notably absent from the customers views is mechanical competence. Customers pay lip service to this aspect, but also realize that this area of performance is for most customers difficult, if not impossible, to judge. One customer related, when asked about what determined a good or bad attendant:

"By the way he goes to the car, if he's fast, and acts interested and can talk, chances are he's probably good."

In choosing an attendant to go to, the customer

more often than not looks for a place where his credit card is good, which is convenient, and for those same positive social traits that attendants hold as their self-image and attempt to display during interaction. As one customer stated:

"I prefer where we have a credit card that's good. If there's several, I pick out the station on my way to where I'm going. If he is friendly, and does a good job filling the car he probably does most of his work the same way."

Customers also give consideration to the ability of the attendant to observe the proper ritual for interaction. A very good example of this relates to the attendant's approach and greeting when the customer drives up to the gas pumps. The rules and expectations are that certain behavior will be displayed by the attendant. If expectations are not met, the customer is quick to note it:

"Some just come out and look at you, don't say anything, just stand there with their hands in their pockets."

A good attendant follows the rules, is successful at displaying a positive image of self, and is dependable. Dependable in that the customer's definition of the situation will not be seriously challenged each time he interacts with that attendant. In the words of one customer:

"I want my attendant to be dependable so I know what to expect each time I go there."

The good service station attendant makes the interaction satisfying for the customer. One customer

respondent noted when asked about expectations for service on the islands:

"Don't need the works, if the attendant spent the time telling you about the nice day, would be better off than to vacuum, wash windows and that stuff."

A good attendant also makes the interaction comfortable as well as satisfying for the customer. Customers frequently indicate they appreciate their name being used and like to go where the attendant knows them. At the same time, however, if the customer considers himself a good client, and trades routinely at one station, he is likely to expect more from the attendant:

"I've got a good friendly relationship. If you are a good customer you deserve a little more. But, if you don't know them you've got to beg to get work done."

Another response relates the same feelings:

"If I'm a loyal customer I would feel free to stop in and have the tires checked without the purchase. That's the type of thing I would be embarrassed to do where I'm not known."

Attendants do not ordinarily feel that tire checks are part of the routine of service offered on the islands. The exception is for females, and then they should not in this respect infringe upon the attendant excessively.

Customers who consider themselves loyal and steady customers at one station also like to believe the attendants at that station are not merely average, but the very best. When asked about being dependent upon an attendant

concerning the automobile, one loyal respondent replied:

"Yes, to the extent that my life depends upon the car to perform as it should. If they don't take care of it then I'm in their hands. This is exactly why I go to one station, they take good care of the car and know me well. At our station a mistake would be honest. At a strange station it's probably cheating. I wouldn't put it past them."

Or another similar response:

"The people I do business with wouldn't cheat me and do a really good job, the people there are nice guys."

The bad attendant is slow, careless, sloppy, and acts like perhaps it's a chore to wait on the customer. The bad attendant does not pay his respects to the sacred self of the customer. This is important because the ritual code applies equally to both participants. The bad attendant, as viewed by the customer breaks the rules, does not do a good job, and even perhaps disallows the customer's image of self. As one customer noted, a bad attendant "does not have charisma." What on the surface may appear to be a utilitarian interaction involving the purchase of gas at a service station is much more than that for many customers.

GOOD AND BAD EXPERIENCES OF CUSTOMERS

During the formal phase of the study the investigator questioned customers about their good or bad experiences with service station attendants. The good experiences reported by most customers were generally in relation to

situations wherein the customer received more service or attention than was really expected, or even perhaps warranted under the circumstances. The situation may or may not have been an emergency wherein the customer was vulnerable either personally or monetarily. The attendant did more than was expected or required and also charged what was, in the opinion of the customer, a reasonable fee or no fee at all.

Bad experiences with attendants were reported as those things attendants do, or do not do which are just not "right," wherein the customer felt he was perhaps taken advantage of. Cheating, carelessness, and doing less than could have been done are examples of situations reported by customers as bad experiences with attendants.

CUSTOMERS' USE OF SELF-SERVICE STATIONS

A final note concerning customers. A large proportion of those customers interviewed indicated that they, or their spouses, often use the self-service stations, or did their own automobile repairs. Yet observation of service stations over a period of several months during the formal phase of the study did not reveal any great paucity of customers for the two types of stations considered in this study. In addition, most attendants at some point during the interview related, "Business has been good." Everett C. Hughes noted, the "difference between what

people do about certain matters is often less than the difference in what they reveal to themselves and others."¹⁹

¹⁹Everett C. Hughes, "The Sociological Study of Work: An Editorial Forward," The American Journal of Sociology, LVII (March, 1952), p. 425.

Chapter VII

LOYALTY

In an occupation whose workers are involved in the providing of goods and services in conjunction with frequent face to face interaction with customers there is likely to develop certain views of loyalty held by and about both the providers and the receivers. Contained in this chapter is a discussion of both service station attendants' and their customers' concepts of loyalty, and their opinions of their obligations to each other relative to loyalty. There is also a consideration of the manner in which attendants feel that the loyalty of customers is achieved. Also included are some comments concerning favors and their use as adjuncts of loyalty.

OBLIGATIONS OF LOYALTY AS PERCEIVED BY ATTENDANTS

Loyalty as perceived by service station attendants with respect to the relationship between themselves and their customers involves certain obligations on the part of each interactant. The attendants' conception of customer loyalty involves to a large extent some of the same aspects encompassed by their ideas of good and bad customers. Primarily these are the repetition of customer patronage, and a proper consideration for the ritual codes of interaction. In the words of one attendant:

"I guess the loyal customer is the type who, when he has just checked his oil, doesn't let you waste time doing it."

In this case the loyal customer met the attendant's ritual expectations by not asking him to do something that's a waste of time, and that he shouldn't have to do. Another response from an attendant at a full-service station points out some of the things that contribute to the making of a loyal customer:

"The loyal ones are usually nice ones, and gets all the stuff from you."

USE OF FAVORS

Service station attendants frequently note that loyalty is nice, but there is a good deal of price-shopping on the part of customers. Thus, customer loyalty is elusive. However, in the attendants' opinion customer loyalty is not won through lower prices or favors, but by other things. Examples are fast, efficient, and good service on the islands; friendliness, successful projection of self, and making the relationship comfortable for the customer. Favors accomplished by the attendants are not involved in gaining new loyal customers. Although, occasionally there are favors done for customers who have not yet demonstrated their loyalty. Most customers indicate that favors done by attendants would not cause the customers to seek out one attendant over another with which to do business. Customers

generally expect to pay for what they get, but do, however, appreciate favors, if done. A retired railroad engineer stated:

"I don't expect anything because of loyalty, I owe him my business if he's loyal."

How about favors?

"I appreciate them, my station does a little something for me once in awhile."

Do you ask?

"No and yes. No, not often, and yes, if I think he will do it."

Despite the apparant lack of emphasis upon the use of favors by both attendants and customers, two types of favors were uncovered during this investigation. Both are generally accomplished only for loyal customers. One kind of favor consists of those things done by an attendant for a customer which could legitimately be charged for, but the attendant chooses not to charge. Examples are: adjustment of brakes or headlights, or during an oil change using the customer's own replacement oil with no charge for labor. These types of favors are generally done at the option of the attendant for those already known as good steady customers. One attendant related:

"There is loyalty at this station. Off the record, for a loyal customer I do extra things for him."

Like what?

"Freebies, extra special care of the car, little things I can find."

This last response also alludes to the second kind of favor done for customers. This type of favor revolves around the attendant taking extra special care of a customer's car. That is, the attendant doesn't just fill the gas tank or check the oil, or merely do an average job on service or repairs. The attendant does the customer the favor of doing a really good job, or making a special effort to check the car over for potential problems. Although this type of favor may occur and actually consist of extra care taken to look for and find a problem before it becomes such to the customer (exhaust or radiator leaks for example); most often this kind of favor exists only in the attendant's mind. In this context a full-time attendant stated:

"Like when I do a job and am sure the car runs better, I tell them it's a super job and they will never have another car problem."

With respect to doing a really good job for the customer, there are just two ways of accomplishing most automotive repair or maintenance tasks at a service station: either correctly or incorrectly. After the checking, replacement, or repair of the automobile, no amount of benevolent thought or verbalization will make the new radiator hose last longer or do a better job of carrying coolant. The same is true for most other repairs or services accomplished. For example, with a routine major tune-up the car is either in time or out of time.

It's probably a good bet that many of these kinds of favors are going to cost the customer money. Although not given in the context of a discussion about favors, some responses taken from customers indicate that sometimes, under the guise of favors, attendants have made unjustified repairs, or repairs not specifically authorized by the customer. The cost of these kinds of favors may well be justified if the favor prevented a flat tire from happening in an isolated area. On the other hand many of these kinds of favors are fictions, or represent opportunities to perhaps do a bit more than is really required.

The favor of checking the car to catch potential problems before they develop, may in some instances represent attempts by the attendants to protect their loyal customers from their own ignorance and mistakes.¹ Although in this respect data are limited, it appears that in some cases the attendants have defined their role in such a manner as to include helping protect people from their own automotive blunders. Support for this inference rests primarily upon the acknowledgement by many attendants of their responsibility for a certain amount of their customers' safety. Furthermore, attendants realize a sizeable number of their customers know relatively little

¹Everett C. Hughes, Men and Their Work (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1958), pp. 45-47.

about automobiles and in many instances really do not care about knowing. The automobile could be considered by the attendants as an extension of their loyal customers. Therefore, the favor of carefully looking for and repairing or calling potential problems to the customers' attention, fulfills the role of protecting the customers from their own errors.

The favors done by attendants for their steady and loyal customers cost the attendants very little. Generally the cost is a few minutes time taken in one way or another. The benefits of favors, however, can be significant. The favor, if properly used, can protect an attendant from the certain ideas loyal customer may hold about their attendants. The following response given by an attendant relates the kind of assumptions customers may operate under concerning the man who services or repairs their cars:

"Most customers expect more from the attendant than from a regular garage. We have to charge a lower flat book cost or they gripe, but expect better work from us. Lots of customers think that if a station attendant does it, it shouldn't have to be re-done. They don't expect that with a garage."

By doing or appearing to do a little something extra, the attendant can dissipate much potential customer unrest or displeasure. This response also probably reflects the fact that at a service station the customers frequently deal directly with the individual who will accomplish the work. Whereas at a garage customers most often deal with

the service manager who represents management, and who acts as an intermediary between the automobile mechanic and the customers. Loyal customers tend to feel the attendant they deal with is the best in town. These kinds of feelings are not likely to develop about the garage mechanic because there is not the close and personal face to face interaction between the customers and the person doing the work.

Favors may also be used by attendants to help correctly define the situation for the customers, and to gain the socially-superior position during interaction. Therefore, favors are accomplished mainly for repeat customers, or customers already considered loyal. These kinds of customers are known to the attendant, and there is a good chance the favor will not be wasted or advantage taken of the attendant. Judicious use of the favor will put the loyal customer into social debt to an attendant. The fact that attendants and customers both indicate favors do not play a significant role, or that favors are seldom asked for, indicates the importance of the balance of the ritual order, and that customers perhaps understand at least one possible use of favors by attendants. There is a certain amount of equilibrium necessary in social interaction, and customers do not want to be in too much social debt to an attendant without opportunity to repay the debt.

Outside of continued patronage of an attendant, repayment of social debt is very difficult for most customers. There are very few occasions wherein a customer can repay the attendant for favors rendered. The apparant lack of the importance of favors also indicates that many customers do not trade at one station only, and therefore, perhaps do not know an attendant well enough to be considered loyal and to ask for a favor.

The data of this study concerning favors, indicate that while the aspect of favors is present, it is not as significant to either customers or attendants as perhaps might be expected. In the opinion of attendants, customers do not really have the right to expect favors. Favors are negotiated, and the doing of them is generally at the decision of the attendant, which reflects the attendants' mandate to direct the work. As an attendant noted:

"If asked, I do them as a friend to a loyal customer because I know them. A good customer does not expect, or have the right to expect favors, but we do them when we can."

Favors are not considered important for gaining loyalty in customers, but are generally done for already loyal or steady customers as determined by the attendant. Herein lies the negotiated element of favors. The attendant is in effect saying, "Demonstrate to me that you (the customer) meet my definition of a loyal customer, and I in return may see fit to do a little something extra for you."

A NEGATIVE CASE

Concerning the general opinion of attendants that a loyal customer is expected to make all automotive purchases at one station, an interesting negative case was discovered at a full-service station located near a main highway. The respondent who was also a student, noted that a loyal customer should do all of his automotive business at that station, understand that the attendant's time is worth something, and that the prices at his station were fair.

This attendant then added:

"Maybe he don't need to do all business here, could go to a discount place for oil, be a little economical. He should come here for most stuff, come here first too."

The same attendant added after a moment's reflection:

"Our prices are a little high. I guess because of convenience, small stock, and we are fast."

Being fast and having a small amount of stock are, in this case, justifications for high prices. However, the explanation for this attendant's approval of a loyal customer to "be a little economical" probably lies at least in part, in the fact that this attendant was not the proprietor or leasee who depends upon the profits of the station. Moreover, this part-time attendant was also speaking as a sometime customer, demonstrating an awareness of the vast differences in the prices of certain items between discount outlets and service stations.

RECAPITULATION OF THE ATTENDANTS' VIEW OF LOYALTY

Overall, loyalty involves obligations for both attendants and customers. The attendants view their loyalty obligations in terms of providing a nice, comfortable, non-threatening interaction for the customers. A favor may be thrown in if warranted in the opinion of an attendant. They view customer loyalty in terms of repeat patronage, being ritually easy to interact with and paying the bill. With respect to the views of loyalty expressed by attendants at different types of stations, there was no significant difference between responses.

CUSTOMERS' VIEW OF LOYALTY

Customers tend to consider loyalty in attendants as a good thing, but not often found, and to view their loyalty obligations in terms of repeat patronization and also paying the bill. They view the attendants' loyalty obligations primarily in terms of special care of their cars. Favors though appreciated, do not appear to be of primary importance to most customers. They expect to pay for what they receive, and those customers who are loyal do not want to be in too much social debt to an attendant.

Chapter VIII

MISTAKES AT WORK

The accomplishment of automotive repairs and services for customers is bound to sometimes result in errors on the part of those doing the work. Statistical probability dictates that the more often a man does a given task related to his work, the more chance of a mistake happening. The reasons for mistakes can vary from outright lack of ability and errors in judgment, to ordinary carelessness on the part of the workers. It is important when studying an occupation to find out how the workers take care of their errors. To do this one must look at not only the kinds of mistakes made, but more importantly the social devices used in rectifying mistakes. This chapter includes a consideration of the types of mistakes uncovered during the formal investigation, and the manner in which the attendants prefer to handle their errors. The colleague group is also discussed as it relates to the making of judgments about mistakes. In addition, the customers' view of attendants' mistakes are presented.

DIMENSIONS OF THE MISTAKES MADE AT THE SERVICE STATION

The concept of mistakes can have several dimensions. For service station attendants one aspect has been discussed

in the preceding chapter. This revolved around the speculation that perhaps the attendants have in some instances defined their role in such a manner as to include the protection of loyal customers from their own mistakes of automotive ignorance. The car was considered as possibly an extension of the steady customer, and through the favor of special care of the car the attendant protected the customer from his own mistakes. There are, however, other aspects of the attendants' mistakes at work.

Some of the mistakes made by attendants concern only the internal operation and management of the service station. However, because of the retail nature of the occupation this kind of mistake is in the minority and not of primary interest to this study. A sizeable portion of the errors made at the service station involve customers in some way. Some mistakes made by attendants at both cut-rate and full-service stations are considered by the attendants concerned as less serious. These are in the nature of forgotten gas caps, gas overruns, gas spillage, wrong type of gasoline, incorrect change, etc. Most of these types of mistakes are easily taken care of through negotiation between the attendant and the customer, and are usually resolved before the customer leaves the station. There was an indication by some attendants that for certain small errors (gas overruns, wrong type of gas, etc.) the customer

has a ritual obligation to at least offer to pay the increased cost if any. The attendants interviewed at all types of stations felt that if a mistake leaves the station with the customer, it is highly preferable that the mistake is brought back to the perpetrating attendant and station for adjudication and correction. There are several possible explanations for the insistence by attendants of the desirability of the committing attendant (or at least the same station) having the first opportunity to correct an error. A conceivable reason relates to the traditional idea that if one commits an error he should have first chance to correct it. This explanation, while valid up to a point somewhat begs the more important issues of how mistakes are taken care of, and why attendants insist upon handling errors at the originating station.

COLLEAGUESHIP AND GALLANTRY

In considering the data obtained for this investigation a more likely explanation for the preference toward the return of mistakes rests upon the concepts of colleagueship¹ and gallantry.² The rules that every occupation has

¹Everett C. Hughes, Men and Their Work (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1958), pp. 90-95.

²Erving Goffman, Interaction Ritual (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1967), pp. 220-223.

define not only conditions of work and outsiders, but also the insiders or colleagues of the occupation. The colleague group of an occupation is those to whose opinions the worker is sensitive. These are the true fellow-workers with whom it is safe to discuss station secrets and customers.

Colleagues consider themselves subject to the same work rules and risks, and tend to build up among themselves a collective rationale which is used to share responsibility and keep up morale and courage among themselves. Colleagues come to know each other's problems and points of view.

The colleague is also considered to have the right to say what a mistake is because he is subject to the same contingencies of work risks. The colleague group considers that it alone fully understands the work being done, and therefore should be given the sole right to make judgments about mistakes. This right is carefully guarded in most instances. It is possible, however, that in some occupations the colleague group does not seek and retain this right. The colleagues may not desire to have the full responsibility of adjudication of errors and applying sanctions.

Responses taken during the preliminary work for this study indicate that while there is some colleague-like feeling between attendants who work at different stations, the real insiders or colleagues of the occupation are those who work at the same station. There are several

reasons that account for this. One reason is that the occupation can be entered and left rather easily. Therefore, collective colleague-like feelings are difficult to generate throughout the occupational group. A second reason is (as will be developed later in this thesis) the station attendant fully recognizes that the predominate skill of workers at "other stations" in town is more often than not social rather than mechanical. As one attendant related when talking of attendants' mistakes at other stations "...the attendant does not know and hasn't been taught." Finally, members of the occupation in Missoula do not have a strong formal or informal organization or association of attendants. All of these factors operate to make the attendants' real concern to be with the co-workers at the same station. These people are the close and equal fellows who have the right to know about and determine what a mistake is and when a mistake has been made. This identification with attendants at the same station helps to psychologically spread the risk and guilt of mistakes. Furthermore, occupation-wide clear-cut standards of success and failure are somewhat nebulous and difficult to establish; thus the attendants at each station tend to have developed their own ideas of success, failure and errors. Therefore, it is imperative that the mistakes made by the workers of a given station be judged by standards of those

same workers. The jurisdiction for the realm of mistakes is within each service station.

Mistakes tend to be viewed by service station attendants as those things which sort of just happen or could happen to "any one of us." Examples are, leaving a wrench in the engine compartment, failure to tighten the lug nuts of a replaced wheel, or forgetting to time a car during a routine tune-up. Sometimes the attendant attributes mistakes to being busy, or customer interruptions out on the islands. But, in any event the attendants want their errors returned to them:

"We have made mistakes. ...if a job is incorrect the customer only pays once for it to be done right... It all depends upon what the customer did between here and bringing it back. Every mechanic knows his own work. If it's been tampered with, no deal. If he's right and I decide it's O.K., but there are lots of grey areas... But, I have to look at a mistake to tell about it. Sometimes customers don't understand about us at all."

Another attendant related:

"I want the mistakes back here because if it goes someplace else, some other guy may really goof it up and charge him. If he comes back to us we can't charge him we've got to fix it. That's better than having him go talking about you all over town."

Service station attendants also note that competitors will often do anything to get a customer. Customers are not above using a mistake for their own best advantage. For example, if a customer takes a mistake elsewhere for correction, and then comes to the attendant who allegedly

made the error for reimbursement, that customer often misquotes. The attendant wants his mistakes back because those qualified and who have the right to determine errors are himself and his colleagues at his station. In addition, as the second response above clearly reveals, the attendant is aware of the mechanical skill level generally found at "other stations." A mere unskilled outsider who also happens to be a competitor attendant should not be allowed to look at, and pass judgments about others' mistakes.

With respect to the necessity of continued patronage to insure an ongoing enterprise, the insistence upon the return of a mistake for adjudication and correction presents another possibility for the attendant, that of gallantry. Gallantry is a way of presenting the positive personal trait of integrity. If a mistake is brought back for correction the attendant or his boss can consider it, discuss the mistake and its ramifications with the customer, perhaps even dramatize the work a bit, and then graciously rule in favor of the customer. Through the use of a little face-work the attendant can re-affirm his somewhat fallen image. The following interchange tells the story:

How do you handle mistakes?

"I have them come back so I can explain and make it right. Sometimes you can win a continued customer over a mistake, if you do it right."

How do you do it?

"Repair full, or refund the money, and maybe throw in some little free thing. But, they should bring them back here so I get first crack at them..."

The attendants relate also that they can tell their own work by a special mark, or such things as bending a washer in a certain way. In this manner the attendant knows if he has the right to make judgments or not. In addition, because customers make errors also these "tricks of the trade" help the attendant to know not only his own work, but also if his work has been tampered with by someone else.

The manner in which attendants prefer mistakes to be taken care of is indicative of the importance of the maintenance of ceremonial and ritual order in the interaction with customers, especially regular or loyal customers. There are established rules to be followed in interactional situations involving mistakes. The preference that errors be returned for correction can also be considered closely related to the attendants' mandate. The preferred procedure for dealing with mistakes provides one more area wherein the attendant can exercise some degree of control over what goes on at work. Finally, the attendants tend to view their errors as honest, but are not all that sure about the mistakes of attendants at other stations. As related during one interview:

"Lots of mistakes are a form of cheating, Others do, but we don't; some others lie too."

The following response about the handling of mistakes nicely sums up the attendants' views:

"I want the problem, or the customer to come back here, don't want him to go down the street and bitch about me to someone else. Besides if it's really a bad mistake, like no oil in a car for an oil change, then the insurance would put in a new motor.... If a person makes an error he should have at least one chance to correct it. We have to fix ours, the doctors bury their mistakes."

THE CUSTOMERS' VIEW OF MISTAKES

The subject of service station attendants' mistakes at work can be viewed from another perspective, that of their customers. When the customer contracts with the service station attendant for automotive services or repairs, the customer is actually hiring the attendant to do something the customer can't do, or won't do, and to make the mistakes for him.³ Technically the customer has an aversion to, or can't accomplish his own automobile repair or service work. Psychologically some customers do not wish to run the risk of error. For example, some people (especially women) relate that they do not use self-service stations because they don't know how to and might not do it right anyway. Other customers noted with reference to repair work that they just don't want to fool with it, and besides they would probably do it incorrectly.

³Hughes, op. cit., p. 91.

Many people would rather pay to have service station attendants do the work and run the risks of mistakes. Overall the patterns that emerged during this study concerning the mistakes of attendants, as viewed by their customers, has several facets. In the opinion of many customers, mistakes are often caused by attendants' carelessness. Though customers acknowledge there are probably honest errors, there is a tendency to equate mistakes with some form of dishonesty on the part of the attendants. This is especially true of those customers who routinely purchase at several stations. This suspicion, as reported by customers stems from the following: in most cases, especially on older cars, a customer could probably not tell if a mistake had been made or not. It is equally difficult to readily check much of the work of an attendant. Finally, there may have been in the past some exploitation of the customers by service station attendants. These opinions plus the natural tendency of customers to be a bit skeptical of those hired to do the work and run the risks, all operate to make the attendants' mistakes suspect by their customers. These doubts of customers seriously affect the attendant-customer interactional processes because the attendants' self-image, and definition of the situation are in question. This skepticism of customers also seriously impedes the attendants' successful enforcement of his mandate to direct the

work. Rightly or wrongly under these circumstances customers will insist upon having a voice in the work.

Conversely, loyal customers tend to feel the errors which occur at their regular station are honest, and that mistakes caused by carelessness and dishonesty happen at service stations where one is not known. The attendants who work at the loyal customers' regular stations would not allow these latter kinds of mistakes to happen. The feelings of customers loyal to one station are well put by an attendant who worked at a cut-rate station. He said, "The customer likes to identify with the attendant as his attendant." One rather crusty, loyal customer stated with regard to the attendant mistakes, "It's a mistake for them not to do what I ask them to."

Chapter IX

CHEATING AND WHITE LIES

The title of this chapter is suggestive of rather unsavory practices carried on by service station attendants with respect to their customers. Though perhaps a bit harsh, nevertheless the title is descriptive of certain situations uncovered during this study wherein attendants find it either necessary or convenient to cheat or stretch the truth. This chapter includes a discussion of some representative circumstances leading to dishonesty, and the attendants' views of them. There is also a consideration of the rationalizations used by attendants concerning their dishonest conduct. The views of customers about the lying and cheating of attendants are presented. There are also some comments about the sacred back areas of service stations wherein attendants accomplish some of their secret actions which are inconsistent with their self-image.

CHEATING

Cheating as viewed by a service station attendant happens at other stations in town. The attendant and his colleagues at a particular station do not cheat, but the attendant had heard lots of stories about some attendants around town who do cheat. In fact, some attendants feel that perhaps the mistakes at other stations may well be

cheating. The following response is typical of the service station attendants' feelings about where the cheating in the occupation goes on:

"No, not here ever, in other places here in town, like the _____ station down the road sells empty quarts of oil."

In the attendants' eyes lots of other people cheat including some customers. Examples of the ways that customers cheat include stealing merchandise off the islands or from the station, and attempting to short change the attendant. Another instance is starting the gas sale if the attendant is busy, and then when the attendant is not looking, turning the gas pump meter back to zero's and starting over.

The situations wherein attendants could cheat are numerous. Some examples reported were: short sticking (wiping the oil dip stick clean, then replacing it in such a manner as to show the car is a quart low on oil), cutting fan belts while under the hood, and the practice of replacing more repair parts than is really necessary. The first two instances and similar practices are generally considered by attendants as outright dishonesty. Concerning the last possibility, both attendants and customers commonly note that there is a fair amount of this kind of cheating carried on by attendants. Reasons for this practice are: first, the tendency of service station

attendants doing automotive repairs to replace rather than repair various parts, and, secondly, attendants often operate on the principle of "the process of elimination" in ascertaining or diagnosing the source of an automotive problem.

In the first instance of replacement rather than repair, several practical factors operate to make this practice often used. Many automobile parts are manufactured in such a manner that repair is not possible. In addition, most automotive parts supply houses follow the practice of core exchange. That is, the attendant takes the old part to the parts house and exchanges it, plus a certain amount of money for a new or reconditioned part. The parts house in turn gives the attendant a core credit on the defective part exchanged. In the case of worn brake shoes, for example, the manufacturers supposedly reline and recondition the shoes (core) for later sale. There is also the practice of using complete used component parts obtained from a wrecking yard.

Moreover, there are several different kinds of reasons for the tendency toward replacement as opposed to repairing. These relate to the cost of labor and the psychological effect upon the customer. The term cost of labor as used here relates not to actual salaries paid, but rather to the cost of labor per hour that the station

charges to cover overhead and salaries, etc. This may or may not be determined by the flat rate book. There are situations where the labor charge to repair would be more than the cost for a new part. Thus, replacement of a part is often cheaper for the customer. There are also times when replacement is psychologically better for the customer. For example, presenting the customer with a twenty dollar repair bill which includes two dollars for new repair parts and eighteen dollars for labor to repair, is different than presenting the customer a twenty dollar repair bill which includes fifteen dollars for a new part and five dollars for putting the part on the automobile, even though the total cost of the repair bill may be the same. Replacement requires less time, is often not as expensive, and takes less skill on the part of the attendant.

For service station attendants the lack of mechanical skills and equipment are factors that often result in replacement rather than repair of a part. Skilled mechanics are not the rule at service stations whose employees are often very young, somewhat transient, and where the highest wage paid to an employee is around two dollars per hour. The attendants in Missoula are not union members and there are no standardized occupational entrance skill level requirements, or tests of competence. In addition, the disassembly and repair of an automotive part often requires

extensive diagnostic or testing equipment not available at many service stations. All of the foregoing conditions can, at the service station, operate to make replacement the easiest, least expensive approach for all parties concerned. Moreover, this practice used in conjunction with "the process of elimination" method of automobile problem diagnosis acts to encourage attendants to sometimes replace more parts than is actually necessary.

The use of the process of elimination by service station attendants in the repair of cars relates directly to both the attendants' and the customers' knowledge of automobiles and their abilities to distinguish the source of car problems. With respect to the customers this situation is involved with their being able to order and make requests of the attendants. Often customers know how to ask for what they want, and are able to specify what work need be accomplished on the car. Just as often, however, they do not have this ability:

"A hell of a lot don't know what the hell they want, mostly ladies usually. They say my thingamabob is bad, stuff like that. There are some men too, who have never fooled with cars. When these kinds come in I've got to help them along and explain to them so the next time they will know what to ask for."

These inabilities of customers to correctly order may well cost them more money for their automobile repairs. Service station attendants consistently related this to

be true. When asked about this an attendant stated:

"Sure will, because if you don't know what's wrong lots of times you have to replace parts until you find the problem. But, sometimes this happens because the customer led you astray. I decide what is to be done usually in the end. That is why I'm here."

Another attendant related:

"Yes, like this time a guy brought in a four wheel drive pickup and said the transmission was not working right, slipped out of gear. We went to work on it and finally found out it was the clutch. It cost him \$147.00 instead of about \$50.00 or \$60.00. It's best if they let us use our judgment. We've got the tools and stuff."

And finally:

"Because it takes more time, you have to operate on the process of elimination. Some don't know how to ask for things even oil, especially women. The biggest thing is a customer should find a station they know, get acquainted and stick with that station; find someone you can trust. It's important that you know the attendant well."

Why?

"So you can talk back and forth with each other."

The customer may tell the attendant where he thinks the problem is, or perhaps just informs the attendant that there's a problem that needs fixing in a certain function or component of the car. The diagnosis of the problem by the customer, or the attendant, or both may not be correct. In any event the problem may continue. The attendant will then probably begin the process of replacing or repairing those parts which "could" be the cause until the malfunction ceases. Upon eliminating the problem the attendant

may or may not go back and replace the old parts found not to be connected with the original malfunction.

These kinds of situations give rise to speculation about, and present opportunity for the practice of excessive replacement of parts. Some attendants view this as cheating while others rationalize this may sometimes be necessary to guarantee a job. As noted by a leasee of a full-service station:

"...you got to replace enough to be sure you get the problem and can guarantee it..."

For example, new parts for an automobile tune-up classically consist of new spark plugs, new distributor points, and a new condenser. The points and spark plugs are necessary as they deteriorate with use over the course of ten thousand miles or so. Condensers deteriorate also, but at a slower rate than the spark plugs and points, and therefore do not really require changing as often as the plugs and points (taken from several conversations with mechanics at new car dealership garages). It is true, however, that if the condenser malfunctions that car will not operate, but failure of a condenser is fairly rare. To be really sure, however, the three new sets of parts traditionally called for are routinely replaced with each tune-up. There may be some questions as to whether this example represents occupational socialization or cheating. This point may have merit, but the practice serves well as

an example of similar practices carried on by attendants.

Cheating, to all attendants is inconsistent with their image of self. All agree that such actions as short sticking are outright fraud. Attendants who employ replacement of more parts than is required often rationalize that this is necessary not only to guarantee the work, but also to insure the problem is corrected so that it doesn't come back thereby requiring extensive face-work to counteract the ritual unbalance caused by a mistake.

The social psychological subtleties involved with the rationalizations relative to excessive parts replacement can be explained at least partly in terms of cognitive dissonance theory. An individual's opinions, beliefs, and actions tends to be consistent. When faced with a situation where this consistency is not present, cognitive dissonance or inconsistency results. Inconsistencies tend to be rationalized away if possible. When a dissonant condition exists an individual will do one or more of the following: (1) change one or more of the aspects which are part of the inconsistency, (2) add new thoughts or beliefs (cognitive elements) that are in line with the existing beliefs or opinions, (3) decrease to himself the importance of the inconsistencies.¹ Cheating for most service station

¹Leon Festinger, Current Perspectives in Social Psychology, (eds.), Edwin P. Hollander and Raymond G. Hunt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 347-357.

attendants is internally inconsistent with the beliefs held about themselves. Therefore, they attempt to rationalize the inconsistency away by verbalizing the excessive replacement of parts is necessary for the customer's own good, or to be sure the problem is corrected, and to be able to guarantee the work.

There are at least two other possibilities relevant to cheating by attendants. Since attendants note that cheating goes on not infrequently, it is obvious there may well be some attendants whose cheating is with outright intent to fraud. Data collected from the service station attendants in Missoula only hints at this possibility. There were no actual admitted cases of this nature uncovered. Secondly, cheating could logically be considered as a form of revenge. Although data also do not support this conjecture, it is reasonable to not deny the possibility that cheating does perhaps become revenge for some real or imagined customers' violations of interactional rules or slights to the self of the attendants.

WHITE LIES

White lies and stretching the truth are considered necessary and expedient by service station attendants. White lies fall into two general categories. Those told to get around some untenable situation, and the practice

of telling the customer what an attendant feels a customer may want to hear. The reasons attendants lie could be considered as part of the economic picture of the service station business wherein some lies will save time or turn an extra profit. To some extent this may be true. But, in considering the reported situations in which attendants find it necessary to lie, it is difficult to see the economic or monetary advantage gained by the attendants. For example, one attendant related he lied about checking the air in the tires. He indicated that he merely knelt down and allowed some air to escape from the air hose thereby giving the impression the tires had been checked, and then told the motorist the tires had been checked. In this case little has been gained. The time required for the ruse was very close to the time required to actually do the task correctly. Sometimes this kind of lie is told by an attendant because customers demand it by being overly anxious or concerned about some aspect of their car. So the attendant deludes the customer for "his own good," as one attendant put it. If, as reported by another attendant, he lies about knowing where a fishing spot is, during a conversation with a customer about fishing, little has been gained economically. Especially for an attendant who is paid about two dollars per hour. Supposing, as was also reported, the attendant lies and says that unforeseen

problems came up during the repair of the car; therefore, at the time promised, the car was only half finished. In this case the attendant has lost or gained little, for it's likely what he contracted for with the customer is still his, especially if the car is conveniently not operable. For example, the automobile is on the lift, the oil has been drained, and not yet replaced; therein rendering the car not easily moved.

A more plausible explanation of white lies rests upon an attendant's attempts to maintain his sacred face and the ritual order of the relationship with his customers. In the first instance of checking tire pressures, the situation either warranted a fiction to ease the customer's mind, or violated the attendant's expectations that he will not be imposed upon more than is right (tire checks are not really considered part of the routine service offered on the islands, except for women, and then not to excess or in inclement weather). The customer failed to dispatch his obligation not to cause the attendant to do work he shouldn't have to do. In the lie concerning the fishing hole, the attendant has maintained his stance as a fisherman who knows about the good locations to fish, and fulfilled his obligation to provide good, pleasant, ritually proper conversation to the customer. The lie about unforeseen problems arising during repair of the customer's automobile is a

way of maintaining an internally consistent image of a worthy human who, unless circumstances prevent it, does things on time and as promised or contracted for. This kind of face-work does not allow one's image to depreciate in the eyes of the customer.

The use of white lies to get around a bad situation, or to gratify a customer, involves also a certain amount of rationalization, much of which revolves around the high cost of labor or being busy. The attendant who related he only pretended to check the tire pressures, went on to say that if he's in a hurry (which often means busy), and someone asks about their tire, if it's not flat he tells them "the tire looks good." Another attendant said:

"Yes, like when you are in a hurry and have lots to do, and the customer wants his tank filled right up to the top, that takes too long so I tell him it's full. I don't have time to fool with it."

The concern with being busy is an attempt by the attendants to reduce the internal inconsistency caused by lying. The attendant holds a belief he should not lie, when he does it causes dissonance. The attendant must, therefore, come up with something to relieve the inconsistency. Being busy nicely relieves the dissonant feelings of the attendant. It is difficult to question the motives of a man who is very, very busy and who lies about, in the attendant's view, these kinds of little things.

The lie, like cheating, very possibly may take the

form of revenge for violation of the rules for conduct of the interaction. The lie may also act as a face-saving device. A prime example of this is the attendant who noted that at night, if asked to check the oil of a car and he couldn't see, he would "fake it" under the hood rather than go after a flashlight. For some reason, the attendant perhaps felt that he had under the circumstances been asked by the customer to do more than was reasonable. The attendant also could have used this lie to save face for having forgotten one of his tools of the trade: a flashlight.

Many lies, especially those told in conjunction with the customer's car being left for repairs, and not being finished as promised are directly related to the attendant's mandate to direct the work he will do. If the customer's car is left at the station, and the customer goes on about his business the attendant will have something to say about the work being done. In some cases this may involve no more than successful insistence to do the work out from under the eyes of the customer. It is also true that if the car is left at the station the customer will not know exactly what kind, or the amount of work that went into the job. Nor will he know the amount of time the repairs took, and how many mistakes were made during the repairs. Concerning the desire to accomplish the work not under the watchful eyes of the customer, on several occasions during interviews

customers who were waiting for their cars to be completed, and who wandered back to the repair bays to watch the work, were escorted to the station lobby. They were then offered a chair or coffee especially provided for customers who insist upon the right of waiting and watching.

THE BACK AREAS

The easy access of repair bays, or the back areas of service stations to customer intrusion presents a very real problem to attendants doing the work.² It is here where many of the little secret fictions or shady practices are perpetrated by attendants. The back areas or the repair bays are also generally the only areas in the station where attendants can, in relative safety from outsiders, make errors, trade secrets, talk about customers, or seek advice about the work from one another. It is unsettling to attendants to have this area invaded or violated. As one attendant noted, "It makes me nervous to have customers watch me work." On several occasions the investigator, during an interview, observed the specific instructions of a customer either ignored or changed as the attendant saw fit once the car was placed in the repair bay, and the customer had departed the area. In one typical situation

²Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959), pp. 114-116.

a customer gave the attendant a bottle of window solvent and asked to have some placed in the windshield washer reservoir. The attendant noted (to the interviewer) the weather wasn't freezing yet; then later emptied a small amount of solvent down the floor drain, and placed the bottle of solvent on the front seat of the customer's car. On another occasion the customer had asked for an oil change and specified a certain brand and weight of oil to be used. The attendant used neither the requested weight or brand, relating that the substitution was just as good as that which the customer ordered. The attendant also recounted that a lighter weight of oil was in order because it was going to be cold very soon, and one should use lighter motor oil during cold weather.

Frequently posted in many service stations in a conspicuous place is a humorous sign listing the cost of labor. According to the sign the cost per hour raises in direct proportion to the amount of customer involvement in the work. The highest listed rate per hour is if the customer is in the repair bay closely observing the work. Although the sign is supposedly placed in jest, there is a great deal of truth behind the humor; the attendant prefers to be left alone to do his work.

Cut-rate station attendants do not have as much of a problem in respect to the back areas as do full-service

station attendants. None the less, there are at cut-rate stations sacred areas not to be violated by the customer. One example observed was the area directly behind the cash register, or the counter upon which it sets. When a customer violated this sacred area the attendant on duty became apprehensive, and concocted a reason to move the customer and get behind the cash register himself.

HOMOGENEITY OF ATTENDANTS' RESPONSES RELATIVE TO CHEATING AND WHITE LIES

The responses concerning white lies and cheating taken from the attendants who work at both cut-rate and full-service stations reveal no significant differences between them. Because cut-rate stations generally do no repair or maintenance work, there is perhaps less opportunity for these practices than at full-service stations. Nevertheless, the dishonesties occur at both types of stations. In similarity with other attendants, the attendants employed at cut-rate stations note that they try not to lie, except when necessary in their opinion, and that cheating happens at other stations. At both cut-rate and full-service stations the same kinds of reasons and rationalizations are used by the attendants to account for their little shady practices, and secrets not compatible with their image of self.

THE CUSTOMERS' VIEW OF CHEATING AND WHITE LIES

The responses of customers concerning lies and cheating indicate almost an acceptance, or at least a resignation to these practices happening in dealing with service station attendants. One customer put it this way:

"I figure if I paid a little bit more and got took, I could have gone somewhere else and got took just as bad."

Customers generally agree that cheating and lying do go on, if not to them individually, then to others they have heard stories about. Generally customers relate that there is more tendency of attendants to cheat and lie to women, and young customers than to older men. Most customers note that like mistakes, it's very difficult to tell when you've been lied to or cheated. Some customers relate that they know they have been the victim of some dishonesties, but don't know when. Customers often do not know enough about the automobile and its workings to really tell about the possible cheating of attendants. When asked about this one customer replied:

"I really don't think I would know or could prove it anyway."

Those customers who use several stations tend to feel it costs more for automobile repairs and services if you don't know what to ask for and don't know the attendant fairly well. With respect to those customers who are very

loyal to one station, they feel that it does not cost them more if they do not know how to order automobile repairs or maintenance. These customers note they pay the same as everyone else does:

"I feel it doesn't cost more if you don't know, they charge the same for the same job to all."

These kinds of customers also feel that lying and cheating are done by other attendants at other stations in town. Their own station would not cheat or lie to them. One customer loyal to one station summed it up as follows:

"The attendants I deal with don't cheat, I trust them, they trust me."

Chapter X

BARGAINING

The practitioners of nearly all retail sales and service oriented occupations interact each working day with customers who seek by various means to purchase goods and services at the lowest possible price. Service station attendants are not exceptions to this generalization. The attempts of many customers to strike a bargain with station attendants affects the interaction between the two. The practice of customers of trying to get the best buy takes several forms and sometimes, in the eyes of the attendants, violates the ritual code for the conduct of the attendant-customer interaction. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the attendants' views of customers who try to bargain and the manner in which attendants attempt to restore ritual order in the event a customer fails to properly respect the attendant or his position.

Bargaining is an aspect of the relationship between attendants and customers which is characteristic of the entire interaction and the kinds of behavior subject to the ritual code that guides interaction. These rules affect each participant in several ways. The ritual of face to face interaction requires each participant to appreciate both the other person and his position or point of view.

The rules governing interaction demand each person to have not only self-respect for himself, but to also maintain a standard of consideration for the other. The line taken by each actor during interaction is generally allowed to stand, as is the role one chooses for himself. This apparent acceptance is basic to insure smooth ongoing face to face interaction. But, the acceptance may be based not upon true feeling, rather upon surface feeling only. During interaction this surface agreement about the validity and social worth of a person does not mean there are no differences of opinion. The contrary is often true. However, interaction can continue and even be rewarding providing each participant masks his real feelings and shows respect for the other and his position. This rests upon each disagreeing interactant conveying an evaluation of the other person that the other person would be willing to convey about himself.¹

FORMS OF BARGAINING

The bargaining that was reported by customers took on two forms, overt and covert. Nearly all customers report they use one or both forms in their attempts to get a lower price on some automotive items.

¹Erving Goffman, Interaction Ritual (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1967), pp. 10-12.

Overt Bargaining

The overt form of bargaining emerged as the actual practice of somehow during face to face interaction getting the attendant to lower his stated price. Overt approaches reported and observed ranged from outright asking for a "deal," to noting high prices and hardships, or asking about the attendant's family, etc. Justification by customers for this form of bargaining included the opinions that bargaining is an expected activity, and the prices are probably raised to account for this.

Covert Bargaining

The covert form of attempting to secure a lower price is represented by the common practice of price shopping. Many customers report they price shop even though they do not engage in the overt form of bargaining. A service station attendant related that he no longer runs out too fast on the islands for fear of being hit because of the customers just driving through checking prices. This response was partially in jest, but underscores the point that the attendants are very aware of the substantial price shopping on the part of customers. As part of a continuing and developing pattern revealed by the data obtained for this study, those customers who indicate they are loyal and steady customers at one station also report very little overt bargaining and only some price shopping.

BARGAINING AND THE RITUAL ORDER

Service station attendants consider the covert form of customer bargaining as inevitable. Some attendants also admit that there may be places in Missoula where automobile goods and services can routinely be purchased at a lower price than theirs. They also report, however, that the less expensive gas and merchandise very likely are of inferior quality. Concerning overt bargaining by customers, the attendants are inclined to view this practice of attempting to get the attendants to lower their prices as a natural, almost expected activity. The attendants report that bargaining happens very frequently, and when asked about this on the part of customers a typical answer was:

"Yes, lots, almost everyone does. A bunch of cut-throats out there."

The attendants also indicate that if a customer attempts to bargain for a lower price, they listen and in some instances will either give some form of discount or lower the stated price somewhat. Service station attendants generally do not object to the attempts at bargaining by customers as long as, in the attendants' opinion it's done in the right frame of mind on the part of the customer. During interviews with attendants, when asked their opinion of customers who bargain, most gave responses similar to the following:

"I don't care, as long as they don't get rude, I'll listen to them."

The bargaining should be done in a friendly manner with the customer indicating in the process that he has some appreciation for the attendant and his position. A leasee at a full-service station intimated he really didn't care for some customers who attempt to get a lower price because "...they don't, or won't understand my position...." Other attendants relate that customers generally don't understand the profit margin at a station or how retail service station prices are determined. In the attendant's eyes if the bargaining on the part of the customer becomes too much in earnest, rude, mean, or not in the right frame of mind, this then represents to the attendant a failure on the part of the customer to give the attendant and his position just respect and expected consideration. The customer has the ritual obligation to treat the attendant, at least on the surface as a person of social value, and to at least act like he understands the problems of the service station. The failure of the customer to dispatch his obligations with respect to bargaining will probably result in some attendant behavior to restore ritual order. Behavior observed during this study that was used by attendants to set things straight or sever the relationship took several forms.

Some examples of attendant behavior involved with the restoration of ritual order disrupted by customer failure to fulfill obligations during bargaining centered around the concept of alienation from interaction,² or social control of the conversation. The attendant, partly because of his position as a businessman or as an extension of a businessman up to a point is obligated to the customer to at least pay lip service to the customer's attempts at bargaining. When the customer does not display the right frame of mind, the attendant becomes uneasy and alienated from the uncomfortable encounter with this customer. The attendants would symbolically throw the customer out, or disregard the interaction. The alienation of attendants observed was designed to subtly demonstrate to the customer that he was not properly fulfilling the role of interactant.

Some attendants during the bargaining process choose to remain with their original position and price, and only pretend to be paying attention to the interaction with the customer. On several occasions when a customer was attempting to strike a bargain, the attendants were observed as becoming very busy. They cleaned oil cans, straightened merchandise, or did other busy work. On one occasion the

²Ibid., pp. 113-136.

attendant really pulled himself down under the hood of a car he was working on, thereby making interaction difficult and demonstrating his alienation. The external preoccupation of an attendant who was alienated from the conversation took on two forms as viewed by the investigator or the customer. The form (voluntary or involuntary preoccupation) used depended upon the manner in which the attendant was trying to restore order or sever his obligatory involvement with the customer. The attendants who displayed voluntary preoccupation were in effect telling the offending customer, that they (the attendants) could easily take an interest and follow the conversation, but deliberately chose not to do so. More frequently observed was involuntary preoccupation by the attendants. This generally took the form wherein the attendant was so very busy in vital areas outside the interaction, that he could not possibly pay close attention to the customer and his bargaining.

This behavior was observed not only in relation to customers, but in relation to the interviewer, since the interview is essentially an imposition and a bargaining process for the attendants' time and responses. At the beginning of some interviews some attendants were often very busy and concerned with other events happening throughout the station. They would, for example, go to the door several times to check the islands for customers,

even though the warning bell used for this purpose had not sounded. This preoccupation ceased once a respondent became committed to the interview situation and found it interesting and rewarding to talk about himself. On the other hand if the interview became a little long for one reason or another in terms of time, the attendant would again become very preoccupied. This generally took the form of voluntary preoccupation to inform the interviewer he was not fulfilling his obligation and promise to not impose upon the attendant for a very lengthy period of time. If really pressed, some attendants would finally say something to the effect that, "I hope this is about over because I've got work to do." Having work to do may or may not have been a fact.

A final word is in order concerning the attempts of the attendants to sever or set right a relationship which has deteriorated due to bargaining. Though not observed, several attendants reported that in an extreme case they would threaten or actually throw the offending customer out of the station. These procedures would not only restore some ritual order, but would also demonstrate who controlled the work situation. Of course, the attendants know very well that such behavior seriously limits the possibility of future sales to the ejected customer, and that in a highly competitive retail enterprise this

kind of behavior should be avoided if possible.

SUMMARY

The phenomena of bargaining is a good example of some of the behavior that characterizes the relationship between attendants and their customers. Basically, bargaining by customers represents an unstructured situation for the attendant. He must attempt to define and structure the reality around him and choose what appears to him to be appropriate behavior for this situation. Both the attendant and his customer, for obvious reasons during bargaining, attempt to control and guide the interaction. Success here depends in part upon the imposition of one's definition of the situation upon the other, thereby eliciting certain behavior. In bargaining it is important that the situation be structured and defined so that the desired behavior results. Thus the bargaining process on the customers' part may range from the very subtle over concern about the attendant and his family, to the bolder question about getting a good deal. Capitulation of the customer to buy at the stated price, or of the attendant to sell at a lower than original price represents in part the success of one participant in structuring the interaction and imposing his definition of the situation upon the other who in turn yields his original position.

The process of bargaining also demonstrates that sanctions are used for failure to observe the ritual codes. Violations of the rules may lead to unfavorable behavior or sanctions against the violator. For example, the manager of a cut-rate station related that he did not object to bargaining as long as the customer was "right" with him. When asked what he meant by this he answered, "If they want to bargain they should talk to me before the sale." This attendant was then asked about attempted bargaining after the sale. He stated:

"It's a pressure tactic, don't like it after the fact. They expect a discount, but don't let me in on it. I've got to know about it before."

This respondent noted later that a discount or a decision to give a discount could be made just as well after the sale as before. This attendant was in affect saying that a customer's intentions should be known before the transaction takes place. Bargaining after the sale loads the interaction in favor of the customer. The attendant has given over his social and material valuables first and lost whatever superiority in the interaction he may have had. For this the attendant will sanction the customer by disallowing the discount that could have been given, and require the customer to pay full price.

With respect to the responses taken from various types of attendants concerning bargaining, there was no

significant content differences. The views and behavior related to bargaining with customers were similar across stations and attendants. Cut-rate attendants do not, however, have as many areas for bargaining as do attendants who work at full-service stations. Irrespective of the type of station, the attendant knows that despite whatever front a customer may be maintaining during interaction, there is a very good chance that the customer has bargained elsewhere first.

Chapter XI

SKILLS

Having the job of service station attendant requires certain skills in order to accomplish the work and successfully interact with customers. The data collected for this study indicates that the main skills of station attendants in Missoula, Montana, are social and mechanical. For a number of reasons which will be developed in this chapter, the predominate skill is social rather than mechanical. Also discussed in this chapter is the skill level of most service station attendants and the manner in which they demonstrate competence to their customers. There is in addition, a consideration of those things customers look for in attendants, and the things that attendants look for when placed in the role of customers.

RELATIVE SKILLS OF SERVICE STATION ATTENDANTS

The job of service station attendant in Missoula, is a manual occupation which tends to be, at least at entry, a lower-skilled vocation. In Missoula there are no qualifying devices to determine mechanical skill at entrance, and no tests of skill in automobile repairs used after employment of an individual as an attendant. Moreover, the prior occupations held by the attendants interviewed tended

to be other manual, lower-skilled jobs not ordinarily associated with automobile repairs and interacting with the public. Typical examples are: logger, truck loader, laborer, lumber mill worker, and pole tester for a private electric co-op. One leasee of a full-service station claimed several years experience as a mechanic at a local new car dealership. This respondent's background, however, was an exception. The occupation is one of younger individuals who are fairly transient. The length of time spent in the occupation and the age of attendants interviewed indicated that in consonance with the findings of Miller and Form,¹ viz., that lower-skilled manual workers change jobs fairly often, and if they remain in the lower-skilled occupations do not have careers in the traditional sense. Caplow also notes that the common denominator of lower-skilled occupations is that they cannot be appraised upon skill alone. Their common character is that no lengthy experience is required and occupational movement is frequent and easy.²

More importantly, the data obtained, and observations made which led to the foregoing comments revealed something about the predominate skill of service station

¹Delbert C. Miller and William H. Form (eds.), Industrial Sociology (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1964), pp. 541-765.

²Theodore Caplow, The Sociology of Work (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), pp. 84-85.

attendants. Cut-rate stations which generally offer no repair services do not require a high level of skill related to the diagnosis and repair of automobile malfunctions. This is also true to a lesser degree at full-service stations which offer repairs. In both types of stations the mechanical skill learned on the job is not that considerable. However, the social skills required and learned by attendants at both kinds of stations are significant. One reason for this is because it is an exception to find a station which does major repairs (work requiring engine or drivetrain removal and overhaul) that require a high level of automotive technical information and mechanic skills. The level of work accomplished at most full-service stations can be done at home by the car owner, providing the individual has a basic minimal set of tools and a manual or two. In defense of the service station, there is something to be said for the niceties of hydraulic lifts, and indoor heated work areas. The service station is a convenience for the customer who has neither the time nor inclination for car repairs, or the experience, manual dexterity, and ability to grasp concepts of various automotive components and systems. Nevertheless, with little or no training this investigator has accomplished at home with satisfactory results most of the kinds of work emphasized by the majority of the service stations; e.g., tune-ups, cooling system

repairs, oil changes, lubrication, shock absorber replacement, carburetor overhaul and adjustment, tire repairs, electrical system trouble shooting, and brake relining or adjustment.

The foregoing comments are intended to underscore the point that, for the most part, the major skill of a service station attendant is not mechanical. The important skills required of an attendant are those social skills necessary during frequent interactions with customers. This is also supported by the data gained during the preliminary work which indicated that entry into the occupation of those attendants interviewed was secured primarily by being in the right place at the right time and having what is known as a good personality for working with the public. A recent advertisement taken from the classified section of the local newspaper states rather well those things considered important at entrance to the occupation:

"GAS station attendant with nice personlity and some automotive knowledge helpful;...."³

In addition, the training received by most attendants interviewed consisted of informal, on-the-job training. One attendant at a full-service station related that his training consisted of his being shown the cash register and

³The Sunday Missoulian, February 11, 1973, Classified Sec. 25, Employee Opportunities, p. 41, Col. 6.

the islands, then being told to go to work. Thorstein Veblen pointed out that although little training is required for most lower-skilled manual jobs, a fairly high degree of general education and social adaptability are important.⁴ It is in many manual lower-skilled occupations essential that workers have general intelligence, knowledge of commonplace technology, and social skills ("horse sense" and a good personlity).

Concerning the secondary nature of service station attendants' mechanical skills, a negative case was discovered. A leasee (formally a mechanic at a new car dealership) of a full-service station noted that, in his opinion, the mechanical skills required at a service station were greater than those required at a dealership garage. His reasoning was that service stations must be prepared to take care of all makes of cars, whereas a dealership garage tends to specialize with one brand of automobile. The respondent related, however, that the social skills on the islands are very important also. It should be noted that dealership garage mechanics tend to further specialize (suspension and front ends, carburation, etc.), and rarely deal directly with the customer. The service manager is

⁴Thorstein Veblen, The Instinct of Workmanship (New York: The McMillian Company, 1914), p. 307.

charged with this task. The fact still remains that the theories of automobile carburation, cooling or braking systems, etc., are the same irrespective of where the work is accomplished. The service station will likely see very few customers for these kinds of repair and maintenance jobs if the social skills have not been used to the maximum extent, especially on the islands. It is here that much of the attendant-customer interaction takes place.

A final point about levels of skill in relation to those attendants who are proprietors or leasees. As related earlier, Lipset and Bendix note that a sizeable amount of the self-employed proprietors came from the manual occupations, where alternatives were more manual labor or to become a self-employed businessman.⁵ Self-employment, or becoming a station leasee, is one of the few positions of higher status available to manual workers. The important points to be gained from this entire consideration of skills is that for most attendants, including leasees and managers of all types of stations, there is a good possibility that their real skill is not automotive repair and mechanical skill, but rather the social skills required for satisfactory interaction with all kinds of customers.

⁵Seymour M. Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, "Social Mobility and Occupational Career Patterns," The American Journal of Sociology, LVII (March, 1952), pp. 499-503.

The preceding discussion relative to the skills of service station attendants is very closely related to the manner in which attendants demonstrate their competence and criterion used by both attendants and customers in choosing an attendant to patronize. If the predominate skill of an attendant is social, yet the attendant is hired to accomplish automotive repair tasks, upon what basis is an attendant chosen and how does he demonstrate his mechanical competence to customers?

DEMONSTRATION OF COMPETENCE AND THE RITUAL ORDER

Service station attendants generally feel that their customers are looking for those socially positive attributes which infer worthiness and competence, both of which are part of the attendants' self-image. The attendants attempt, during interaction, to display these traits to their customers. In the attendants' view, customers are looking for an attendant who will make the interaction pleasant and comfortable. Both full-service and cut-rate station workers express these opinions relative to the basis upon which many customers make judgments about attendants. The following composite quote from several attendants is typical of the responses given when they were asked about what customers look for in an attendant:

"The way you treat them, your appearance, your hair, clothes and your attitude. Someone who will wash windows, be cheerful, courteous, and make the stop here

as pleasant as possible. A good friendly, trustful attendant who does things that convince the customer the attendant knows what he is talking about. The attendant must at least seem to know what he is talking about."

Another station attendant related that customers are looking for the following: "For a guy who is nice, friendly, and who does a good job and I want to get to know him. If you know each other you can fluctuate with one another." Reference to the repair and maintenance of automobiles, which is supposedly one of the primary purposes of a service station attendant, is consistently either not mentioned or relegated to secondary importance by attendants. Success socially during interaction with customers is imperative, almost as if mistakes, and other problems connected with automotive repair and maintenance will somehow take care of themselves if social and ritual order prevails.

In the attendants' opinions customers are looking for the right things in choosing an attendant to patronize. The attendants held this belief because these are the things that attendants look for when they are in the role of customers. In this respect, the following is a fairly typical response: "I look for these same things, how he smiles and treats me." As indicated by the foregoing quote and other responses, both customers and attendants, when choosing an attendant to patronize, look first for a psychologically satisfying interaction and secondarily for mechanical

skills.

Service station attendants realize it is difficult for customers to really judge the competence or honesty of an attendant. For most customers it is very hard to pinpoint or prove good work as well as mistakes or cheating. This is especially true for people who drive an older automobile. For example, once a spark plug has been fired several times a competent mechanic would know if it were fairly new or not. However, most customer would have little or no idea about the number of miles on the spark plug.

As one attendant related:

"They can't tell what's going on if they watch you. I don't like them looking over my shoulder when I work, they don't understand anyway."

Because a considerable amount of the contact with customers is on the islands near the gas pumps, much of an attendant's competence can only be demonstrated inferentially. The majority of the work accomplished on the islands is routine and of a nature that the demonstration of mechanical competence is very difficult. A part-time attendant, when asked about the nature of the work on the islands, stated:

"How bad can you screw up a gas fill-up, or an oil check?"

Therefore the attendants set about demonstrating their competence to customers indirectly on the islands through presentation of an internally satisfying self-image

which includes fast, efficient, and friendly service. At full-service stations the extra good service on the islands serves several purposes. Good service provides a justification for prices that are higher than found at some other stations, and fulfills the attendant's self-concept. In addition, service station attendants have an interest in keeping their real skill hidden and emphasizing their secondary skill. These socially-oriented acts on the islands in the presence of customers help the attendants to do this. One attendant noted, "You can work better if you are real friendly with the customers." When asked about the demonstration of skill to customers another attendant related:

"You can't really unless you can talk to them. If they ask a question, you could give a good answer."

Finally, and perhaps a classic interchange concerning the demonstration of skill came from a leasee at a full-service station:

"I can talk about fishing and work into the conversation about repairing his car. I always show the old part to the customers. That really works."

How?

"Let's them know I'm doing a good honest job."

Do they know what they are looking at?

"Sometimes they do."

THE CUSTOMERS' VIEWPOINT

The customers of service station attendants report they look for a friendly, courteous and clean attendant. The customer seeks out essentially an interaction wherein he feels comfortable during the relationship. In the customer's opinion the attendant also has an obligation to show some indication that he appreciates both the customer as a person and his patronage. If a customer finds an attendant who meets these specifications and follows interactional rules, then in the eyes of the customer, that attendant can likely be trusted and depended upon to do a competent job. In response to the question about how could one tell if he (the attendant) were doing a good job, a typical customer's reply was:

"By the way he goes to the car. If he's fast and acts interested and can talk, chances are he's probably good."

Another answer given to the same question:

"If he's friendly and does a good job filling the car he probably does most of his work the same way."

Being comfortable during the interaction and drawing conclusions about competence based upon the social presentations of the attendant are important because most customers report they have little else upon which to judge the work of the attendant. A customer indicated that the only way to really tell about competence, cheating, or

mistakes, would be to disassemble what had been done, and then he might still not know about the quality of the work. The following is a representative response concerning a customer's decision to choose one attendant over another for patronization:

"I look for people who are friendly, and smile when they greet me. People who are not mad at anyone. That will talk.... Biggest thing is, I like to be recognized by the attendant, use my name."

In addition to social gratification there are other things of secondary importance which help a customer decide upon an attendant or station to use. These include brand of credit card, price, and convenience of the station to where the customer happens to be going.

Chapter XII

ORDERING

Many face to face interactions are characterized by one participant asking for and receiving certain items or services from a second participant who represents some retail business enterprise. Important to the interactional processes is the ability, and/or willingness of customers to order and specify their wishes to the workers. To a certain degree some of the smoothness of the attendant-customer interaction and related behavior hinges upon the ordering ability of customers. During this study the process of ordering by customers was found to have an effect upon the relationship between service station attendants and their customers. Attendants categorize customers to some extent upon their ability to make requests of the attendants. The categories basically relate to customers who can't, and those who won't, order correctly. That is, customers who don't know how to order, and customers who mumble or do not order clearly. This chapter includes a discussion of the dimensions of the concept of ordering, and ramifications of customers' ability to order.

The ability of customers to make automotive repair and maintenance requests to service station attendants has four distinct dimensions. The first, as earlier touched

upon in this thesis, concerns the opinion of full-service attendants, that the lack of ordering skill on the part of a customer would likely result in certain attendant behavior, and cost the customer more money for his automobile repairs. The reason for this given by attendants was that when the work to be accomplished is not specified by the customer, diagnosis of a problem requires the use of the process of elimination. This takes time and money. Frequently the customers' level of knowledge about automotive components and functions is such that, if a problem arises, about all a customer can do is give the attendant some idea of the sound of the malfunction. In this respect the following quote is representative:

"They don't know what they are talking about usually, I hold their hand and ask lots of questions. If I know a person better I can do a better job, because he's not afraid to talk to you then."

The second aspect of ordering concerns the failure of a customer to order automotive things that he does not know are needed for his car. In the eyes of many attendants, herein lies an opportunity which requires the pointing out of these needs to the customer. As a leasee put it:

"Lots of people don't know what they want, you must sell them and tell them. When they ask for one job to be done, point out another need. Most can't ask for what they want, you have to hold their hand. They don't care as long as the car goes O.K. A car goes to hell slowly and the driver doesn't care or realize it, but I do as the expert mechanic. So I have to point out and help the customer know what's wrong so I can fix it for him."

The choices of automotive goods and services at cut-rate stations are limited. Gas and oil, and perhaps small items like windshield solution or window wiper replacement blades, are typical automotive items offered by these kinds of stations. Those attendants who work at cut-rate stations, which offer no repair services, generally feel that with the exception of women most of their customers know how to order what they want for their automobiles. The opinions about women represent the third dimension of ordering that emerged from the responses of both groups of attendants interviewed.

Service station attendants generally feel women are usually deficient in knowledge about automobiles, so they cannot be expected to know how or what to order. For this reason, other attendants (than the one talking) often take advantage of women customers. Customers also report there is a tendency of attendants to exploit women customers. The attendants' opinion that women are generally lacking in automotive knowledge is probably part fact and part myth, and was perhaps more true several years ago than today. Womens' alledged ignorance about automobiles, is probably true for some females and based upon the experience of attendants that many women do not know or care to know about the intricacies of the car they are driving. However, the myth seems most evident when consideration is

given to two factors relative to females and automobiles. First, females are working successfully in service stations, albeit usually working on the islands rather than doing repair work. Nevertheless, if a female can learn to be a successful attendant on the islands she could surely learn about automobiles in order to accomplish the level of repair and maintenance emphasized by most service stations. Secondly, the Missoula Technical Center offers an evening class in automobile mechanics for females of all ages; the school reports no shortage of students for these classes. It would appear that at least some Missoula area women are interested in, and attempting to learn about, cars.

The fourth aspect of ordering relates to mumblers. Mumbler, or those people who do not give their order clearly or loudly enough, or require interaction to take place through a closed window are considered a problem irrespective of their age, sex, and reason for mumbling. In the eyes of both cut-rate and full-service attendants, this is an irritant which can be viewed in several ways, all of which relate to the prevailing rituals of interaction between attendants and customers. In the first place, customer mumbling of the order, are viewed by the attendants as a failure on the part of the customers to meet their ritual obligations and expectations of the attendants. This behavior calls into question the

attendant's definition of the situation and places the relationship in limbo. The customer has not only broken interactional rules in placing his order, but has refused to allow the attendant to be privy to the customer's intentions and reasons for being at the station. This causes uneasiness on the part of the attendant. The rules governing interaction require acknowledgement of the order which infers the request is understood. The routine of the work on the islands normally requires the attendant to remove the gas cap and start the gas sale. None of these usual, expected, and comfortable acts can transpire when the attendant is kept ignorant of the customer's intentions. The attendant can also view the mumbling of the customer as preoccupation which, in turn, infers to the attendant that the customer is perhaps alienated from interaction before the interaction even begins. In addition to having an unsettling effect upon the attendant, this kind of customer behavior during interaction often requires considerable face-work by the attendant to counteract the effects of this kind of customer behavior. The attendant may also choose an alternative plan, viz., to retreat, be polite, and try to get along with the customer in the best way possible. In any event, the attendant must redefine the situation and make a decision about future behavior with respect to the customer. The attendant could choose to

apply sanctions upon this customer for rule violations. One type of sanction reported was to subtly not encourage the offending customer to come back again. Other sanctions, both reported and observed, were for the attendant not to do quite as good a job on the windows as he ordinarily does, or scratching the car in the process of inserting and removing the gas pump nozzle. One attendant related that when he encounters a customer who will not roll down the window far enough for conversation, "I stand there and repeat it until I'm sure I've got it right. Sometimes I ask them to roll down the window even if I can hear them." In this case the sanctions are the taking of more time by repeating the order and requiring the recalcitrant customer to roll down the window.

When an attendant encounters a mumblor, he must, when he redefines the situation, consider the alternatives. Was the customer mumbling, or didn't the attendant pay attention or hear well? If the attendant asks for the order to be repeated, he runs the risk of projecting himself in an undesirable light, as a nonattentive or hard-of-hearing attendant. If the attendant pretends he heard the order correctly and does what he considers to be correct, he runs the risk of making a mistake, again placing himself in a bad light. Observations reveal most attendants attempt to resolve the problem of violated expectations during

interaction by repeating the order after the customer, or applying sanctions to insure that this kind of uncomfortable relationship does not occur again.

Chapter XIII

DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT OF CUSTOMERS

Over the course of time service station attendants in their relationships with customers learn to size customers up and to predict their behavior before interaction begins. This practice represents part of the attendants' definition of the situation and is the basis for some of the behavior which occurs during interaction. The attendants' definition is not static, but is changed as various occurrences during interactions appear to warrant different definitions and behavior. The attendants' structuring of the situation with respect to customers leads to differential treatment of customers who appear, in the attendants' opinion, to fall into various categories. This mental classification of customers is based largely upon certain status signs displayed or not displayed by customers, and the size of the customers' purchases. This chapter includes a discussion of the attendants' differential treatment of customers and how the size of purchase affects the attendants' behavior.

BASIS FOR DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT OF CUSTOMERS

It is the general opinion of those customers interviewed that service station attendants differentially

respond in providing service to the various categories of customers who make purchases at service stations. The instances reported by customers cover a wide range of possibilities. By far the most vociferous group of interviewed customers with respect to differential treatment were the younger drivers (ages 20-24) in this study. This group felt that more often than not, because of age, appearance, or type of vehicle driven, attendants do not provide the same service and consideration for them as for older customers. Examples cited concern such things as young customers arriving first at the islands and being waited upon second, dishonesty in repair work, overt indications of the attendants' disapproval of the customer's hair, dress, or car. One young customer related that when he went to his regular station in his parent's car with his parents, there were significant differences in treatment by the attendant of the younger driver and his parents. There is foundation for these allegations of younger drivers. The investigator's observations at service stations generally support the contentions of these customers. Moreover, as has been discussed, attendants do size up customers and in part choose behavior on this basis. Service station attendants' definition and behavior is subject to, and insulated by, the same prejudices, half-truths, and blindnesses as other segments of the population. It is also true that young

customers are not as likely to make many large purchases or gasoline tank fill-ups. The attendants report that often service to customers varies depending upon the size of the sale.

Sizing Up of Customers

Overall the basis for differential treatment by attendants, as perceived by, customers is upon the following broad categories: sex, age, type of car, physical appearance of the customer, and size of the customer's purchase (size of sale). Race is not listed because it was not mentioned by interviewees. But, given the existing knowledge about human behavior when individuals are confronted with people easily identified as belonging to one race or another, it is reasonable to assume that, at least for some attendants, racial membership could also be a basis for differential treatment.

Thus, the two primary factors that contribute to differential treatment by attendants of customers are: first, the sizing up and categorization of customers based upon those broad categories noted above which are part of the visible cues used by the attendants to help define the situation and choose behavior. The sizing up occurs with each customer and takes in to account not only the visible status signs, but also previous experience with either that particular customer or others the attendant has mentally

placed into one or another category. The second contributing factor to differential treatment is the size of the customers' purchases at the gas pumps.

The Size of Purchase

The size of the purchase helps determine the amount and kind of service provided to a customer on the islands. The attendants, however, like to give lip service to the policy of sameness of service for all customers regardless of purchase size. Initially during many interviews, service station attendants often said that each customer gets the same service regardless of sale size. However, observations of occupational members in action, and responses of attendants later in the interviews to probe questions, indicate a scale of service operates with respect to the service provided on the islands (window wash, oil check, tire pressure check, etc.). The scale is not formal and occupation-wide and enforced or publicized by the occupation. Also the scale is generally not a set policy of each station. It is rather, a measure developed and used by each individual attendant. The scale as reported and observed on the islands is generally as follows:

\$1.00 and under gas sale - usually no extra service unless asked by the customer. Sometimes the front window washed.

- \$1.00 - \$2.00 gas sale - front window wash, and perhaps ask about checking under the hood.
- \$3.00 - fill-up of the tank - usually wash all windows, and either ask or automatically check under the hood of the car.

Checking the tire pressure is not considered part of the routine of service offered with gasoline purchases. It is, however, one of the additional services provided with a lubrication job, and may or may not be provided for an oil change.

The same kind of scale operates for certain other work. If the customer orders only an oil change he will probably get in addition only the automobile's front window washed. If, however, the customer also orders a lubrication, or only a lubrication he will likely get the car windows washed, the car vacuumed, and the tires checked. For the lubrication work, most stations use a check list or order form which lists all of these things which should be accomplished during the job. It is interesting to note that with respect to extra routine or nonroutine services provided to customers, nearly all attendants interviewed indicated that at this particular station the attendants did more than any other station in town. Yet the same kinds of services were being claimed as provided by most other stations where interviews were taken. The scale of service and differential treatment of customers was, however,

used by all attendants interviewed and observed. The scale of service with respect to gasoline purchases is practiced by both full-service and cut-rate attendants. Cut-rate attendants do not have the opportunity to apply a scale to other areas involving repairs or maintenance. Cut-rate attendants feel, however, that tire pressure checks are not part of the routine services at the gas pumps. The checking of tire pressures as viewed by nearly all attendants lies in the realm of favors.

RATIONALIZATIONS FOR DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT OF CUSTOMERS

The scale of service and reasons for its use represents a dissonant¹ situation for attendants. The attendants verbalize that each customer deserves and gets the same service on the islands. This is consistent with the positive aspects of the attendants' self-image. In addition, they understand that good service for a small sale may result in a larger sale later on. The attendants, however, subscribe to and use the scale of service. The overall net effect is an inconsistent mental situation for the attendant. Being too busy (not always true), the high cost of labor (for employees approximately two dollars per hour),

¹Leon Festinger, Current Perspectives in Social Psychology, (eds.), Edwin P. Hollander and Raymond G. Hunt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 347-357.

or the customer likely being in a hurry are all rationalizations used for not giving the same service to each customer. These rationalizations serve to relieve the inconsistencies between beliefs, actions, and statements of attendants.

Several final comments about the scale of service and differential treatment are in order. First, it is possible the scale of service or differential treatment may be forms of revenge. However, responses do not support this conjecture. Second, there tends to be something of a myth operating with respect to small purchases. The myth states that those who make these small purchases don't, and likely won't, have any money for larger purchases, and probably won't be back anyway. This myth is sometimes a rationalization for use of the scale of service. The myth with respect to any given customer may or may not be true. Thirdly, as discussed earlier, there is a consensus between customers and attendants that differential treatment exists. Included in this consensus is somewhat of a general opinion that those who really get the differential treatment are attractive young girls.

Chapter XIV

UNIFORMS

Many occupational groups, by design or convention, affect some clothing or other symbols which readily identifies the workers to outsiders and also helps to set interactional limits. The uniform used by occupational members can be any one of several possible alternatives, and is not necessarily limited to clothing. The uniform or identifying symbols used by service station attendants in Missoula, Montana, includes several variations and has some consequences upon interaction with customers. This chapter includes a discussion of the composition of the uniforms worn by attendants, and the social purposes uniforms fulfill for them with respect to their customers. In addition, the significance of the attendants' uniforms in the eyes of customers is also considered. In this chapter, use of the word "uniform" includes clothing plus certain other objects used by attendants for social purposes during interaction. Further, this discussion of uniforms applies to both full-service and cut-rate attendants.

COMPOSITION AND FUNCTION OF THE STATION ATTENDANTS' UNIFORM

For service station attendants the uniform of work

has several variations. It can be a full set of clothing with brand-name identifying accouterments. The uniform can be a shirt only, a coat, cap, or greasy pants. The uniform also can include dirty hands, a tire gauge, or the special laundry service rag tucked half way into the attendants' pocket. Irrespective of the composition of an attendant's uniform, it is a symbol, or symbols, which infer certain social meanings. To understand the importance of the uniform and accessories to service station attendants, the uniform must be considered in light of the parts attendants play during interaction with their customers. The uniform is a symbol toward which people act as if it were something else. Its meaning is whatever the uniform stands for in the minds of customers. The meanings are not absolute, however, and are dependent upon the manner in which reality is structured for the viewer and the context of the situation in which the uniform and accessories are displayed and worn.

Performance

The service station attendant's activities and behavior in the context of the service station when he is in the presence of his customers can be called a performance.¹

¹Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959), p. 22.

The performance is those things the attendant says and does, or infers from expressions and gestures that he hopes will define the situation and influence the customer's behavior. Moreover, for service station attendants in Missoula the performance is calculated to conceal certain secrets of the job. One of the real problems of the performance is to insure that customers do not penetrate the performance and unravel the mystery. The secrets are both important and petty. The important secrets concern the major (social) and minor (mechanical) skills of most attendants. The less important secrets are about such things as some of the routine practices of the job, certain aspects of the work, or other customers.

Front

Those aspects of the attendant's performance used to conceal their secrets and define the situation for the customer can, in turn be called the attendant's front.² To be effective the front of an individual requires two standard parts. One part is the setting³ which is the background items that in effect set the scene for the attendant's performance. These are the props of the performance and for the service station attendant include such things as the gas pumps, oil racks, air hoses, hydraulic

²Ibid.

³Ibid., pp. 22-23.

lift, and window wash equipment. The second part of the front is the "personal front."⁴ This consists of the items of expressive equipment that are closely related to the attendant as performer. Included would be such things as the uniform, tire gauges, patches denoting brand-name, age, speech, jargon, etc. The personal front of an attendant can be further divided into appearance and manner.⁵ Appearance functions to identify the status of the attendant as a performer. For example, at a service station the appearance of the various attendants aids the customer in identifying who he is dealing with, the boss or an employee. The manner on the other hand, identifies for the customer the role the attendant intends to play during interaction. The observed manner of attendants with respect to customers is nearly always one of competent deference to the customer.

Social Use of the Uniform

The service station attendant's front and all of its interrelated parts serves to identify the attendant and to convey during the performance certain general and abstract information. This information relates, in part, to the attendant's self-image. The attendant's routine at the gas pumps, or anywhere else at the station are calculated to claim the abstract elements of his self-image which include

⁴Ibid., p. 24.

⁵Ibid., pp. 25-30.

competence and integrity. The attendant plays his performance in such a manner as to easily fit into the customers' stereotyped generalized thinking of what an honest, competent attendant should do and be. In addition, the attendant's routine in dealing with customers is designed to give the impression that taking care of customers is his only and most important task or routine.

While all of the items observed being used by the attendants during the interactional process with customers may not be part of a uniform in the strictest sense, they are related to and can be considered part of the uniform because of the manner in which they are used. The uniform, accessories, and related props are all part of the attendant's performance directed to influencing the customer's structuring of the situation and resulting behavior. These items help the attendant to define the situation for the customer, convey certain desirable qualities about the attendant, certify legitimacy, and identify the attendant as part of a social structure. At the service station this structure consists of the wearer of the uniform, and the supervisor or superior individual who allows the wearing of the uniform, the use of the props, and insures the individual will conform to expected norms.⁶

⁶Nathan Joseph and Nicholas Alex, "The Uniform: A Sociological Perspective," The American Journal of Sociology, LXXVII (January, 1972), pp. 722-723.

With respect to uniform wearing patterns observed in Missoula, station leasees generally wore a full and complete uniform with patches, etc., denoting brand-name. Leasees generally note the wearing of a uniform acts as a device to allow the customer to identify them, if not for any other reason than to know where to direct complaints. In effect this says the uniform helps to structure interaction and denote the status of boss. Some managers and employees also wore full uniforms. More often, these attendants wore only part of a uniform or mufti. These attendants generally did not feel the uniform was important to them in dealing with customers. They tended to be of the opinion they are readily identified without the full uniform. This may well be so for two reasons. First, the physical arrangement of most stations is such that it is fairly easy to identify the attendant and recognize that the person approaching the car is not an imposter. Secondly, the customers interviewed did not seem to feel the uniform as such was important. However, virtually all attendants used the accessories and props noted above during interaction with the customers. The props used may have included nothing more than having a rag in hand, but none the less were present. The props were available if the ensuing interaction with the customer appeared to warrant use for assertion of self, initiation of action, or control

of the interaction. Some attendants related that a uniform can operate to an attendant's detriment if it's dirty or has been worn several days. In addition, other attendants note uniforms are expensive to purchase. These factors may also help explain the widespread use of accessories or props like rags, tire gauges, or wrenches rather than complete uniforms. For the service station attendant the use of a full and complete uniform of clothing as an institutionalized device for identification, resolving of status questions, and structuring interaction does not seem as significant as perhaps to workers in other occupations. If, however, the uniform and all its variations and accessories, and related props are taken into consideration; then responses and observations reveal the uniform and accouterments are significant for the successful performance and interaction with customers.

THE CUSTOMERS' VIEW OF THE UNIFORMS WORN BY SERVICE STATION ATTENDANTS

Concerning customers, if the uniform and performance fall within certain expected and stereotyped limits then the customers report they are not overly aware or give much conscious thought to what the attendant is wearing or attempting to accomplish during interaction. An example of clothing which falls outside the expected limits is clothing considered to be too dirty. Customers realize that often

the attendant's job is dirty, but report they react negatively to clothing considered excessively dirty. It is possible that very dirty clothing could also be considered a uniform of sorts, and part of the personal front for some attendants. Very dirty clothing perhaps may be part of some attendant's personal front who embrace the often heard, popular saying about the mechanic who doesn't look like much, but really does good work. The data of this study neither supports or denies this assertion. However, for the customer, the attendant's uniform and accessories act to certify the attendant, and aid in identification. After the customer's identification and assessment of the status of the attendant the customer is interacting with, the uniform and props helps to structure and set the boundaries of the ensuing interaction.

Chapter XV

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The primary purpose of the final chapter in this report about the investigation into the relationship between service station attendants and their customers is to bring together the methodology, data and analysis into a summary, and conclusions. In conjunction with this intent the orientational hypothesis listed in Chapter Three is discussed in light of the findings of the study. Certain patterns of service station attendants' behavior that emerged relative to the attendant-customer interactional situation will be reiterated. An alternative explanation for some of the practices observed by the investigator and reported by respondents will also be considered. There is also a discussion of the implications of this study with respect to other areas of society and for further research. In addition, contained within this chapter are comments about the study of occupational interaction within natural settings which relate the contribution of this investigation to the body of sociological knowledge.

SUMMARY

The division of labor is a cause of social differentiation and organization which act to promote social order.

Characteristic of the social order are occupational groups composed of workers who perform the tasks required by a complex society. The workers of many occupational groups are directly and closely involved with outsiders to the group whom the workers serve. This organization of work that is centered around clients or customers is often characterized by direct face to face interaction between those doing the work and those served. Some of the consequences of this necessary or required interaction are that occupational members will display certain behavior and attitudes with respect to their customers. Data for the investigation of this social interaction was obtained by utilizing an interview guide in conjunction with the procedures of comparative analysis and the theoretical sample. The inferences drawn from the theoretical sample data and presented in this thesis represent an attempt to grasp the structure and function of an ongoing social unit: the service station attendant and his customer. With respect to those topics found to be important to the attendant-customer interaction, responses across groups of attendants representing the various locations and types of service stations were found to be markedly similar. The primary differences were of degree. That is, the basic content of responses from the several groups of attendants were basically homogeneous. However, because of variations in work situations (primarily

the accomplishment or not of repairs and maintenance work) the emphasis shifted between topics. The same is true for the customers interviewed, in that the emphasis shifted depending upon the orientation toward service station attendants of the respondent being interviewed.

The service station business is a high risk enterprise characterized by sharp competition for customers. The job of service station attendant usually includes long working hours, generally low salaries, limited opportunities for upward mobility in the occupation, and a good deal of tension for the workers. The customers upon whom the service station attendant depends for continued employment contribute in no small measure to much of the frustration experienced by the attendant at work. It is the customers who interrupt an attendant's work at inopportune times, make demands upon him, and often insist upon having a voice in the day to day work accomplished at the service station. In other words, the customers by their actions and words during interaction with an attendant make the job either enjoyable or miserable. The success of an attendant is practically dependent upon his ability, during interaction with customers, to field all kinds of customer behavior.

In Missoula, Montana, the skills of service station attendants were found to be primarily to two types: mechanical and social, the latter being the more important.

The attendants' automobile repair talents tend to be somewhat limited for several reasons. First, at many service stations automobile repairs or maintenance are not done. Secondly, entry to the occupation is more often a question of being in the right place at the right time and having a good personality, than successful completion of special training or entrance tests of automotive repair ability. Third, occupational members were often found to be young and fairly transient, whose prior experiences tended to not be of the kind which included automobile repairs and maintenance. Fourth, formal training after entrance to the occupation is limited and frequently not taken advantage of if offered. Finally, the level of work accomplished and emphasized by full-service stations which do repairs is not the sort that requires highly skilled automobile mechanics. On the other hand, the social proficiencies required during interaction with customers are considerable. This is especially true on the islands where much of the attendant-customer interaction takes place. The service station attendant is forced to cope with many kinds of people each day. He must have social finesse and flexibility. This is because of the following: diverse personalities are encountered, competence can only be demonstrated indirectly and socially, and many sales must be made to customers who are apt to be somewhat elusive and hesitant about purchasing.

Demonstration of the attendants' social flexibility was revealed in part by their ability to size up customers and choose appropriate greetings and small talk, and by their perceptiveness concerning making appropriate behavioral changes in dealing with a customer.

In Missoula, service station attendants have laid successful claim to the formal license to repair and maintain other peoples' cars in return for money. The formal dimension of the attendants' license represents the technique or activity of the occupation. The attendants not only accomplish work others won't or can't do, but also exercise informal license to do dangerous things and, meanwhile, to size up their customers. The danger of the work involves the possibilities that there may be errors made, or that advice given may be incorrect, thereby perhaps creating a dangerous or costly situation for the customers. The informal license to size up customers represents some of the occupation's strategy concerning outsiders. This generally revolves around the attendants' practice of categorizing and considering their clients in a relative sense as objects, rather than an appraisal on a personal basis. These extrinsic judgments about customers are part of an attendant's definition of the situation, and are based upon the display or lack of display of certain status signs by customers. This is not to say that all attendant-customer interactions

are impersonal. Over time, and through repeated exposure, some relationships with customers may become special as the attendant and customer become known to one another. It still remains, however, that customers are categorized and compared based in part on visible cues. In turn, to no small degree, reality for interaction is structured on this basis. In conjunction with their license to do certain work, and to classify their clients, the attendants in Missoula also insist upon the mandate to direct and control both what work is done and when. Frequently, however, both the license and mandate of station attendants are held suspect by their customers. Customers are often hesitant to grant full license and mandate prerogatives to attendants. This is because customers frequently feel that in the past they have been exploited in some manner by a member of the occupational group, and because those who pay the bills often feel they should have a voice in the work accomplished. Furthermore, some of the customers who view the attendants' license and mandate as suspect have some knowledge and skill relative to the repair or maintenance of automobiles, and therefore also want a voice in the work accomplished. Customers who insist upon being involved with the diagnosis and accomplishment of the work create for the attendants no small amount of consternation and tension. This behavior of customers fails to confirm the attendants'

concept of self and is combatted by the attendants through the use of certain behaviors sanctioned by the ritual code that has grown up and which guides the attendant-customer interaction.

In the face to face interaction, typified by the attendant-customer relationship, the ritual order governing interaction was found to be important to both participants. The ritual order specified how interaction was to be carried out and how the routine business was to be smoothly conducted without serious incident. In fact, it is likely that work could only be accomplished if the rules of interaction were observed. The rules which operate with respect to the interactional processes define not only the manner in which participants should treat one another, but also allow for each interactant to express his views of the situation, himself, and the other person. During interaction attendants and customers attempted to influence each other's behavior in various ways. These words and deeds are in part designed to project a participant's self-image. Service station attendants consider themselves to be friendly, competent, honest, and knowledgeable about automotive matters. They were found to view their customers as generally lacking expertise about cars. Though some customers share the attendants' views, others do not. During interaction with all customers, especially those who fall into the latter

category, it is necessary for the attendants to insure that their definition of the situation and image of self are projected and reinforced in such a manner that customers voluntarily accept and support the attendant's views of the situation and themselves. In short, the customer should conclude that the attendants are to be trusted and considered experts. The attendants attempt to see that this happens by seizing the initiative and initiating interaction, by being friendly, and by engaging in other acts designed to control the course of interaction and influence the customer's definition of the situation and their behavior. First impressions are important, for once a customer's definition and judgment about an attendant have been made, they will remain fairly consistent over time unless very seriously challenged during subsequent interactions. In this event redefinition will likely occur and appropriate behavior will be used. In other words, the attendants always try to initially project their positive and internally satisfying self-image which, in conjunction with certain other acts during interaction, would indirectly infer competence. The ritual order operates to allow for this, and to stabilize the customers' definition of the situation, but not at the expense of ritual balance during interaction. If the attendants are successful in subtly prevailing during interaction, they are well on the way to using their

mandate as automobile repair experts to direct their work. Successful mandate enforcement is one of the few aids available to the service station attendants for relieving some of the tension created by the interaction with customers in the work environment. Social superiority during interaction is imperative for the attendants because they are aware success in directing the work stems from this, and that perhaps their automobile repair prowess is in fact not all that significant in and of itself.

Because of the frequent interaction with customers and the retail nature of the occupation, service station attendants in Missoula have developed some pretty firm ideas about what constitutes good and bad customers. Customers considered desirable were found to be those who respected the attendants and their positions, and who observed the ritual order. Good customers were also those who allowed the attendants to enforce their mandate and fully exercise the prerogatives of their license. In addition to deferring to the attendants on matters important to them, good customers allow the attendants to work unmolested. Finally, a good customer is also a loyal or a repeat customer. In effect customers considered good by attendants, are those who, by their actions, confirm the the attendants' views of reality. Bad customers were found to be essentially the converse of good ones.

Bad customers fail to properly respect the ritual order and sacred self of an attendant, and to dispatch their ceremonial obligations during interaction. Customers, undesirable in the attendants' opinion, are likely to have sanctions applied by the attendants.

At the same time, the customers also expressed certain opinions about what constitutes good and bad attendants and what the customers look for in choosing an attendant to do business with. Good service station attendants are, in the customers' views, those who make interaction comfortable. Good attendants also are friendly and honest. These aspects, plus a station that is conveniently located, or where the credit card is good, are the things which customers reported would cause them to trade with a certain attendant. There were also some customers who consider price important. Bad attendants were found to be those who fail to display appropriate deference to the customers, were not friendly, or were dishonest and careless. Essentially if an attendant can successfully project and have accepted his definition of the situation he will probably be considered a good attendant by his customers. Notably absent from the characterization of attendants by customers was the dimension of competence in automobile repairs. The customers interviewed paid lip service to that aspect in making judgments about service station attendants. However,

most customers also indicated that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to really judge the competence of service station attendants. Moreover, service station attendants understand this limitation of the customer's ability to make evaluations about the technical aspects of the work. The attendants also realize that the demonstration of mechanical competence is equally difficult, and therefore set about it indirectly through social means which hopefully lead customers to draw the right conclusions about the attendants. Overall, in the opinion of attendants, their customers are looking for the correct things when choosing an attendant. This is because these are the same kinds of things the attendants look for when they are in the role of customers.

As in most retail-oriented occupations, service station attendants were found to have some opinions about loyalty. Generally the attendants notion of a loyal customer was one who is easy to interact with, pays his bill, and makes most of his automotive purchases at one station. The attendants' view of their obligation to a loyal customer was simply to take very good care of that customer's car. Customers, on the other hand, considered the attendants' obligations to a loyal customer were to provide honest and good service. Generally all customers related that, in their opinion, it was extremely important to be well known by the attendant who does the automobile repair and

maintenance work. With respect to the gaining of loyalty, the use of lower prices and favors were not found to be considered important by either attendants or customers. Favors emerged as often fictional and infrequently used. Favors were generally done for customers already considered loyal or good customers. The lack of the use of favors can be attributed to several reasons. First, favors could be used by attendants in their attempts to gain social superiority during interaction. A favor done puts the customer into social debt to the attendant. Once a customer is in social debt to an attendant there are few opportunities to repay and balance the ritual order. Second, both customers and attendants voiced the opinion that one must pay for what one gets. Thirdly, many customers go to several stations, and therefore do not know an attendant well enough to ask for or receive favors. From the responses taken from customers one significant pattern emerged. Those customers who consider themselves loyal and traded at only one station in town generally felt that the attendants at their (customers') station were the best in Missoula. These attendants would never cheat or engage in other dishonest practices, and their mistakes were honest.

The service station attendants interviewed readily admitted that mistakes are made. Furthermore, if a mistake is made and leaves the station with the customer, all

attendants much prefer that the error be returned for correction. This insistence upon the desirability of errors being returned for rectification rests upon the attendants' opinion of the colleagues who have the right to make judgments about errors. The colleague group, for a service station attendant, is those attendants who all work at the same station. Therefore, it is important that decisions about mistakes be made by the proper fellow-workers who are all subject to the same risks of work and have the right to verify errors. It is difficult, in many instances, to really tell about mistakes. Thus, if the customer returns an error for correction, the attendant, through the use of face-work, has the opportunity to not only make amends, but also to gain a few interactional points through the use of gallantry. An attendant can thoughtfully and verbally consider all the possible explanations and reasons for the error, then graciously rule in favor of the customer by refunding the money or other conciliatory practices. Service station attendants in Missoula tended to view their own mistakes as honest, but often were not willing to concede the same with respect to the errors made at other stations. The customers of service station attendants tended to equate the errors of attendants with some form of dishonesty. To the loyal customer, mistakes occur at stations where one is not well known. With respect to loyal

customers, there was some evidence uncovered which would indicate that perhaps service station attendants have defined their role in such a way as to include the protecting of their steady customers from their own automotive ignorance and errors.

Service station attendants in this study believe that other attendants in town cheat. However, nearly all attendants interviewed reported that on occasion they stretch the truth a bit. Concerning cheating, several practices were discovered which, depending upon the orientation of the attendant involved, could be considered as opportunities for dishonesties. These practices were the tendency of attendants to diagnose malfunctions by the process of elimination, and to replace rather than repair defective automobile parts. These actions provide opportunities for dishonesties to occur. The white lie, on the other hand, is used by attendants when considered expedient to maintain social equilibrium during interaction, or to get around a potentially unfortunate situation which might jeopardize the attendants' positive face in the eyes of their customers. The cheating and white lies of attendants are supported by rationalizations. These rationalizations are used to relieve the dissonance created by behavior not in consonance with beliefs. These justifications include: telling the customer what, in the attendant's opinion, he wants to hear, the high

cost of labor, being busy, or the act is necessary in order to guarantee the work. Some of these behind the scenes activities are accomplished in the repair bays of the station, which were discovered to be the sacred back areas at full-service stations. The repair bays are the areas where the attendants can make their mistakes, cheat, or confer with one another out from under the watchful eyes of the customers. Cut-rate stations were found also to have sacred areas not to be intruded upon by customers. One such place is the space directly behind the cash register. Some of the shady practices carried on by attendants are, in their opinion, demanded by the interactional situations encountered with customers. These actions also, however, reveal the views that the attendants tend to hold about their customers. Contributing to these views are the attendants' judgments concerning being required to do what is considered dirty work.

The dirty work of the occupation was found to be those tasks involved with cleaning up after customers, or the changing and repairing of their tires. The dirty work is significant, not because it may be physically dirty or disgusting, but rather for the information about the customer yielded to an attendant while doing the dirty work. For it is this information that forms the basis for some of the judgments made about those served by the attendant.

The littering and tire buying habits of the customers reveal to the attendants certain secrets that often the customers admit only to themselves, their closest friends, to God, or perhaps admit to no one. An attendant knows about a customer who puts on airs, yet insists that a nearly worthless tire be repaired, or who leaves certain debris upon the islands or the floor of his car. Being hired, partially at least, to do the dirty work of customer, entrusts the attendant with secrets about his customers that he would rather not have knowledge of, particularly if the customer concerned is considered a good one. This is one of the reasons why the dirty work at the service station is often delegated to the night or part-time employees. The delegation of the dirty work also reveals the status hierarchy at a service station.

Bargaining by customers is part of the daily routine of the attendant-customer interaction, and is fairly widespread in Missoula. In this study the bargaining reported by all groups of respondents took on two forms: overt and covert. The overt form refers to the outright seeking of a lower price by customers during interaction with the attendants. Covert bargaining relates to the common practice of price shopping by customers. To the service station attendants, bargaining was considered almost an expected activity of customers. The process of overt

bargaining does, however, represent for an attendant an unstructured situation which must be structured, and for which behavior must be selected. The attendants interviewed did not seriously object to their customers attempting to strike a bargain so long as the ritual order was maintained, that is, so long as the customer does not become rude or infer that he no longer appreciates the sacred self or position of the attendant. It is important that the customer maintain at least surface acknowledgement and confirmation of the attendant's view of situation and self. If the customer fails to follow the ritual rules during bargaining, the attendant will likely become alienated from interaction and begin to search for ways to either ignore the threat, set the ritual order straight, or sever interaction with the offending customer. One method used by attendants to demonstrate to an errant customer that all is not right was to become preoccupied. By becoming very involved with other things the attendant infers to the customer he has failed to meet his obligations and the attendant's expectations for interaction. The customer has, in effect, during too serious bargaining disgraced his own face and threatened the attendant's face. The ritual rules of interaction require each participant to not only protect his own face, but also help the other to protect his face. Becoming preoccupied serves well the purpose of informing

the customer that things have gotten too far out of hand and order is threatened. Conversely, if the attendant or the customer concedes his position, this represents a case wherein one or the other interactant was successful in imposing his definition of the situation upon the other, thereby affecting the opposite participant's behavior.

During this investigation the ability of customers to correctly order emerged as having both technical and interactional ramifications. Many customers' lack of knowledge about automobiles results in their inability to correctly make requests of the attendants. Women are generally considered by the attendants as deficient in this area and are therefore likely to be taken advantage of by "other" attendants at "other" stations. This opinion was voiced by both attendants and customers. Loyal customers believe their attendants would not take advantage of them. In any event, the inability of some customers to correctly order facilitates two practices which may well end up costing the customers more money than if they specify the work to be accomplished. These practices are: the diagnosis by the process of elimination and excessive replacement of parts. For the attendants in Missoula, however, the inability of some customers to order makes enforcement of the mandate that much easier. Conversely, the unwillingness of other customers to speak their orders clearly presents an

interactional problem for the attendants. Those customers who, for whatever reason, do not speak their order clearly, or talk through a closed car window are labeled mumblers and are considered bad customers. They are bad to the attendants in the sense that these customers make interaction, as preferred by the attendants, very difficult. This kind of situation calls into question the attendant's structuring of the reality and routines of interaction. The mumblers fail to meet their interactional obligation to order clearly, and the attendants' expectations that requests shall be made such that they can understand them. Customers who mumble require an attendant to unnecessarily run the risk of disgracing his face during interaction through the possibility of a mistake being made.

At the service station, customers are sized up and socially located based upon status cues which in turn lead to differential treatment of customers by attendants. The responses taken from customers indicate that they are aware of this practice. The differential treatment of customers is based upon the attendants' definition of the situation. The definition depends largely upon status signs displayed by customers, perceived normality of the ensuing interaction, and the experiences over time of the attendants with various customers. This practice not only aids in the choice of behavior, but used in conjunction

with the size of the customer's purchase it results in a scale of service being used by the attendants which determines the amount of service given to a customer. The lower the size of the purchase, the less service provided. However, sometimes the exception to this practice is the service given the steady customer. As in cheating and the use of white lies, there are certain rationalizations which are used in conjunction with the scale of service. These rationalizations involve high labor costs and being too busy to provide complete service to each and every customer regardless of purchase size.

The relationship between attendants and their customers in Missoula is influenced to a certain extent by the uniform or variations of the uniform worn by attendants. The uniform and accouterments serve as symbols to identify the attendants and structure the interaction for the customers. The uniform was found to be part of the attendants' personal front, which in conjunction with the other props at the service station aid in the performance the attendants put on for customers during interaction. The performance serves to help insure that the customers voluntarily come to the same conclusions about the attendants that they hold about themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

In relation to the orientational hypothesis used to

guide this investigation the following conclusions are drawn from the findings. The formal license of service station attendants to accomplish their work results in a relationship with their customers which is characterized by a ritual code and strategy which guides and directs the conduct of interaction. The attendants respond to the customers with a purpose in mind over and above increased sales. The attendants act with considerable social skill to gain the interactionally superior position, and influence their customers' behavior. Service station attendants in Missoula attempt to gain control of the relationship between themselves and their customers. Success in this endeavor enables the attendants to enforce their mandate to direct the work. In their opinion they are the experts in things automotive; thus they should be allowed to diagnose and repair automobile malfunctions unhampered by their customers. In order to enforce this mandate the attendants must ensure the interaction is ritually proper, and that they are allowed to project themselves so that their views of reality become the customers' definition of the situation.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION

It is possible to argue that data obtained and behavior observed which led to the analysis and conclusions in this thesis are rooted solely in economic motives, rather than explained in light of sociological principles. It is

true that the behavior of service station attendants with respect to customers may be in part based upon the desires to increase sales. But, this is not the overriding reason. If it were, then one would expect different responses between leasees (proprietors) and employees paid by the hour who more often than not gain little directly and immediately from the profits of the station. The data obtained are very similar between types of stations and groups of attendants, and are supported by customer responses. The attendants' responses are also fairly constant over the course of time between the initial interviews of 1966 and the formal study done in 1972.

IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was primarily to explore the relationship between service station attendants and their customers. It attempted an investigation and exploration into the behavior displayed by service station attendants in their interactions with customers. This research was not intended to be an in-depth all encompassing investigation of an occupation, or a comparison between attendants and their customers, although there are some data presented which allow limited comparisons. The focus of this study was upon one very important aspect of an occupation: the attendant-customer face to face interaction. There are, however, certain implications of this investigation for

other areas of society and for further research.

Implications for Other Societal Areas

Some of the findings of this study are context-bound and perhaps are present only because of the nature of the occupation. Nevertheless, many of the social phenomena uncovered during this investigation may well be present in other "taken for granted" areas of social life, areas which on the surface do not appear significant, yet find their importance in the fact that they tend to occupy much of one's time and effort. There are other frequent interactional situations which appear only utilitarian, but in reality probably hold no small amount of social significance for the interactants. For example, the findings of this study relative to ritual and occupational skills may also assume importance for such commonplace interactional situations as the purchase of a hamburger or a beer. The rituals and rules of face to face interaction may be present and important in many other relationships such as those that are found between neighbors in a housing development. There may also be occupations other than service station attendants whose members' skills are not what they appear on the surface. Perhaps this is so even in those occupations whose members do not frequently interact with customers.

Another finding which may apply to other segments of society is the manner in which mistakes and failures are

handled. To be sure it is important to first find out what the mistakes are for any given social unit. But, by looking beyond this to the preferred ways of taking care of errors, one begins to be able to get at and to make statements about more important aspects. These would be the social devices used by humans to maintain ceremonial order once a mistake has been made.

The ability of an individual to correctly state his needs or to order is another aspect which has implications throughout society. It seems that often the greater part of some days is spent in making requests of someone for a needed good or service. In this respect there are bound to be certain ramifications which are the result of the ability of an individual to present himself before and successfully make requests of both private and governmental bureaucracies. It is also possible that many of the misunderstandings that occur between people happen because one interactant did not know how to order or make a request correctly from the other. Perhaps the requesting individual does not know the correct terminology or lacks understanding about the goods or services in question. It is equally possible that in other areas of society the success in the striking of a bargain or in having a favor accomplished, depends in large measure on the ability of one person to correctly make requests of and define the situation for another, thereby affecting

behavior. In any event, the importance of the ability to make requests correctly is not limited to situations in the realm of service station attendants.

Finally, it is likely that the kinds of shady little practices touched upon by this investigation are likely carried on by other people in otherwise legitimate situations. By looking beyond the actual practices to the reasons and rationalizations associated with them, one begins to find out if there are consistencies throughout society concerning the important social devices involved with shady practices.

Overall there is a need to look at the kinds of phenomena uncovered in this investigation in other areas of social life to see if the same things are happening, and why. It is important that sociologists seek to find common themes in the activities of human beings so that generalizations and predictions can be made about human behavior and even society itself.

Implications for Further Research

This study has implications not only for further research with respect to certain issues raised within the investigation, but also in terms of the general method used. The method of comparative analysis and unstructured interview helps one to find out about and to understand the things that are going on between people. An investigator

does not have to guess about what people say and do because he knows these things through the interviewing and the observations of various subgroups that emerged during the research. The method is relevant to the subject matter and purpose of sociological research. The former is social phenomena displayed by people; the purpose of the latter is to make general inferences and theory from specific data. The method and allied procedures allow for the purpose of sociological research to be fulfilled from the subject matter of the discipline.

Concerning the issues raised by this research, there are several which could stand more depth of investigation, perhaps even to the extent of becoming the subject of a separate study. One such area is the degree to which occupational members tend to compartmentalize their lives. Viz., to what extent do the observed behaviors of service station attendants at work carry over into other areas of their lives? In this context a legitimate study could be concerned with the attendants' loyalty to their work role, and the manner in which they have defined their work role.

Another general area which appears to warrant further study concerns the concept of loyalty. For example, one aspect of loyalty is historical. Here the investigator might be interested in how loyal relationships between attendants and customers are arrived at and maintained.

Does the loyal relationship develop over time because of tendencies of attendants to do things for certain customers that are over and above those normally expected from a station attendant? Another question in this context relates to the development of "as if" relationships between attendants and some customers. At what point does an attendant or a customer begin to treat the other "as if" no other customer or attendant existed? More study is also required into the notions of reciprocity of both customers and attendants, and into the emergence and continuance of loyalty. In other words, how does loyalty come about, how is it affirmed and reaffirmed over time, and how and why is a loyal relationship broken off? These are all valid points which need further study, because they are basic not only to the attendant-customer relationships, but also to many other interactional situations.

The present study alluded to another aspect which seems deserving of further study. This concerns the service station as a social institution. The service station may serve as a multifunctional establishment for many people in much the same way as the neighborhood tavern does. In this context it would be informative to look at customers' differing expectations of the service station. Some people who go to service stations prefer limits be placed upon the attendant-customer interaction with little or no social

meaning imparted. Others look for friendship and "as if" relationships at the service station. A valid question could be, to what degree is the service station a place where, among other things, significant social meaning is found? It would also perhaps prove enlightening for an investigator to probe into all the various kinds of relationships that develop between the attendant and his customers.

There are at least two other issues considered by this investigation which would also appear to be fruitful for further study. These relate to the concept of community as it applies to occupational members, and mobility. With respect to the former an investigator could ascertain to what extent service station attendants voluntarily associate with one another in situations other than at work, and to what degree they identify with one another and the occupation at large. A close look at voluntary associations could be a start in a study oriented toward exploring the sense of community the members of an occupation may or may not have. In relation to this, the importance of the local retail dealers association needs further study. For example, a question here could be, under what conditions does this voluntary station attendant association assume economic or social significance for occupational members?

Concerning mobility, this investigation did little

more than scratch the surface. The subject needs to be studied further in terms of both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the mobility of service station attendants. Consideration should be given to probing exactly why and under what conditions mobility takes place within the occupation. Some other mobility factors need also be considered. Some of these would be what occupations act as feeders to the job of station attendant, and what occupations receive members from the ranks of station attendants.

The foregoing suggested areas for further research are those that come readily to mind. The astute reader should not, however, stop at this point. Careful scrutiny of the investigation of the attendant-customer relationship reported upon in this thesis will probably reveal other areas deserving of further study.

CONTRIBUTION

In the larger context the study of occupations is really the study of social organizations, structures, and of the processes of human behavior. In studying work by sociological methods, one can learn of, and make predictions about, group life and process. This type of analysis appears to be one of the most fruitful in understanding the reciprocal interactions of individuals. This research revealed some important social dimensions with respect to face to face interaction represented by the attendant-

customer relationship. The findings reported upon perhaps will point the direction for further research into similar interactional encounters involving rights and obligations rarely discussed by interactants, but to a certain degree negotiated and reciprocally understood. It is important to know the inter-relationships of various occupational behavior systems in terms of the American culture pattern as a totality, so that the social scientists can formulate and predict basic principles of purposive behavior based upon a thorough knowledge of all relationships. On a somewhat lower level, but equally as important, it may well be that the most important contribution of this investigation is to the sociology of the mundane or the "taken for granted." For it is these kinds of things, like one's job and the purchase of gas, which are the everyday routinized social actions that take up the bulk of most every individual's day. These "little" activities of people, that on the surface appear to be relatively unimportant interactions, are really very significant dimensions of society. In summation, a man's work and his daily experiences are such a large and fateful part of his life, that the study of society cannot go far without a thorough description and analysis of them and the natural order of their prevailing interactional units.

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