



### **Employee/Customer Interactions**

Today's society is based on the existence of a social hierarchy in which different people assume different roles to make sure that the society as a whole is able to function effectively. This difference in social roles is apparent in every interaction between human beings. One particular situation in which there exists a difference in social positioning is in the relationship between employee and customer. For this paper, I chose to observe this relationship, in order to understand more about how the power dynamic between an employee and a customer is carried out. I observed the interactions between the customers at Andronico's grocery store and the cashiers. From my observations, I was able to notice that non-verbal cues communicate the differing levels of social power in the relationship most strongly. It is mainly the use of eye contact, body language and emotional expressions that employees are able to perform their roles as being servants to their customers. These non-verbal cues, along with the setting of the interaction, are what I feel to be the most powerful indicators of different levels of social standing. It is without the use of words that the strongest statements about the differing roles in a relationship are made. In this paper I will show how these non-verbal cues are able to establish a social inequality as well as make it clear for any observer to guess the social roles which are being played out. I will also examine how this relates to Robin Leidner's arguments about the "emotional work" that employees must put in, in order to keep their customer happy. In the interactions which I observed, most of this emotional work is

Excellent  
intro

done non-verbally. With the data which will be presented in this paper, I will show exactly how powerful non-verbal interactions can be.

For the evidence which I collected for this paper, I went to Andronico's on Telegraph Avenue. Andronico's is located about 7 blocks from the UC Berkeley campus and attracts a range of customers, from the residents who live nearby, to the students who live in the same area. Andronico's is a higher-priced grocery store which usually attracts <sup>(well-paying)</sup> college students and more people with families and jobs. The employees at <sup>(racial?)</sup> Andronico's ranged a lot in diversity. On the day which I chose for my observations, there were 2 Asian males, 1 white male, 1 Asian female and 2 African American males working. I focused my observations mainly on the white male who was in charge of one of the cash registers at the front. I went on a Sunday evening, around 7 o'clock. I stayed mainly at the front of the store to observe the interactions between the customer and cashier as they were <sup>checking out?</sup> leaving. I observed several interactions and stayed for about 40 minutes. In this time I saw a number of different customers pass by, although each customer was male and over the age of 30. As I've explained the setting for my observations, I will now outline the data which I discovered.

The first thing which was apparent to me as an observer was the setting for the social interaction. The existence of the checkout stand which the cashier stands behind and the customer passes through as he is being rung up immediately creates a difference in their social roles. It becomes clear that the cashier is completely separate from the customer and vice versa. By having a physical barrier between customer and employee, the setting for the interaction immediately creates a separation which is obvious to any observer. The next key element of the setting which plays an important role in

establishing a difference between the customer and the cashier is the fact that the cashier is wearing an Andronico's uniform. This again immediately establishes a difference between the customer and cashier. Andronico's employees whom I observed did not have a strict uniform, however, they all were required to wear a green apron which said Andronico's on it, as well as a white collared shirt which said Andronicos on it also. Although the employees appeared mostly to be wearing the same thing, each one did come up with small changes to make in order to let their individuality show. For example, the cashier whom I observed was also wearing a pair of gloves with the fingers cut off of them. Another subtle difference which I observed was the bagger was wearing the same uniform, yet he had pierced ears and wore a Livestrong bracelet. While these additions to the uniform are very small and subtle, I found it important to note that the employees did still make some effort to differentiate themselves from one another. A final observation which I made about the setting was the location of the cash registers. The simple fact that the cash registers are located right near the exit plays into the role of customer and employee, because it gives the employee a small bit of power in the relationship. The customer knows that the cashier is the last interaction that he will have before he finishes his shopping and he knows that he cannot leave the store until he finishes his interaction with the cashier. This gives a small amount of power to the cashier because he then is the one with control as to how the interaction will go. He can choose to be speedy and efficient, or slow and lazy, either of which definitely has a direct effect on the customer.

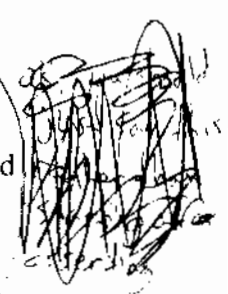
For my next point, I will focus on the different roles which the employee and customer play. From my observations, it was obvious that the customer in the store was

incorporate references to the readings here (about uniforms, for instance)

what good Leader say about this?

good | the one in the power position of the relationship. The employee's purpose was to react to the needs of the customer in a manner that would keep the customer as satisfied as possible. It was interesting to note the subtle interactions which took place between the two to play into these pre-established roles. For example, the use of eye contact was one of the strongest indicators of who in the relationship had the power. If the cashier was talking to the customer and trying to engage him in conversation, it was perfectly acceptable for the customer to occupy himself with other priorities and not make eye contact back. However, if ever the customer was the one who was initiating conversation or talking to the cashier and making eye contact, the cashier always maintained it with him. Eye contact often represents a form of respect for a person. Therefore, it was interesting to note that it was acceptable for the customer to show a complete lack of respect for the cashier, however, never for the cashier to show a lack of respect towards the customer. This shows the existence of a difference in social standing between the customer and cashier.

excellent | I was able to notice this difference in the interaction between a cashier and his boss as well. In this relationship again, the cashier was in a lower social positioning than the boss. I observed as the cashier approached his boss to ask him about a particular problem that he had been having. In the interaction, the cashier was speaking clearly and directly, and maintaining eye contact at all times, yet the boss appeared to be bored and distracted and not paying much attention to the cashier. The cashier was ~~was~~ standing upright, directly facing the boss; whereas the boss was slumped over with his body turned away from the cashier. Everything in the boss's actions and body language indicated a lack of respect for the cashier. This, in turn, is evidence that the boss was in a higher



social position in the relationship. Had the actions been reversed, and the cashier appeared to be bored or disrespectful towards his boss, the interaction would have been viewed as completely unacceptable.

Another example of the power dynamic between customer and cashier was that the customer was largely able to control the nature of the interaction. As I mentioned earlier, the cashier does have some level of power in the relationship because he is essentially the one to determine how quickly to ring the customer up and how pleasant to make the experience overall. However, this power is often taken away from the cashier, not by the customer, but by the company which he works for. Most companies have a strict policy as to how their employees should behave towards their customers. For example, as Robin Leidner argues in her book, Fast Food, Fast Talk - Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life, companies such as McDonalds and Combined Insurance, have a strict routine which they expect all their employees to follow. By routinizing all their employees actions, the companies hope to establish an image of their company that they want people to expect and to be happy with. This same routinization was apparent at Andronico's as well.

In each interaction, it was clear that the employee's role was to try and engage the customer in friendly interaction, while still being efficient in the time it took to ring a customer up. However, the employee's role went beyond simply ringing the customer up and saying hello. It was clear that it was the employee's responsibility to read the personality of the customer as well and to determine how to react to it in order to make the customer as happy as possible. This gives power to the customer because it places a lot of the burden of the interaction on the employee. This work which the employee has

quote?

to do is explained by Leidner in her book as “emotional work”. In her book, Leidner says, “A service interaction must work on two levels: as a work process with a specific goal, and as a human interaction” (Leidner, 1993, 18). With the customer-employee relationship, the employee is responsible both for reaching the specific goal as well as for making a pleasant human interaction.

*Good* | Leidner also explores the requirement of a worker to be friendly. According to Leidner, “In all these kinds of jobs, workers’ looks, attitudes, demeanors, speech, and ways of thinking can be integral to the work process and outcome. The jobs all require... ‘emotion work’, that is, the work of creating a particular emotional state in others” (Leidner, 1993, 26). This argument pertains to the responsibility of the employee to make shopping at Andronico’s a pleasant experience. This requires him to be able to read the non-verbal clues that a customer will give him in order to indicate how the customer wants the interaction to go. This is another example of how the power dynamic between customer and employee works.

In conclusion, I will go back over the main arguments of the paper. The first main argument is that the differing roles in a social relationship are often times communicated most strongly through non-verbal cues. This includes eye contact and body position. The second main point is that other aspects, such as the setting of the interaction, play into these roles as well. Finally, the role of the employee goes beyond simply going through the motions of the job which he has to perform, and includes the labor of reading people’s emotions to determine how to act. These small and subtle interactions between customer and employee represent the different micro interactions that take place in almost every social relationship in society. There is always a level of

imbalance in the relationship, and this can always be observed beyond the things which are being said.

### Works Cited

Leidner, Robin. 1993. *Fast Food, Fast Talk - Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.



**Soc 1 Paper 1**

Name: [REDACTED]

	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Adequate	Inadequate
<b>Problem/Argument (30%):</b> Clarity of problem and logical coherence of argument	X				
<b>Observations(30%):</b> Care and insight in gathering, analyzing, and connecting data to course ideas	X				
<b>Course Materials (30%):</b> Uses of Goffman and/or Leidner critically and creatively	X				
<b>Style (10%):</b> Organization and coherence of writing	X				

**Comments:** [REDACTED], this paper was an absolute pleasure to read. You set out a clear research question, then expertly and insightfully use your observations to answer it. Furthermore, your writing is clear, concise, and methodical (although I would have preferred it if you had separated your paper out under different headings: "Introduction," "Methodology," etc.).

The only reason I didn't give this paper an A+ is that I think you could have done a better job of integrating the readings *throughout* the paper. It's clear from your observations that you had the theories from the readings in mind, but you should have been much more explicit about how you were using them.

But overall, that's a minor point. This is an excellent paper, and I look forward to seeing more of your work in the weeks ahead.

**Grade: A 96/100**