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An Information Processing Model**

**CEO Publication
G 90-21 (183)**

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ABSTRACT

Service encounters are conceptualized as rites of integration which can establish the appropriate level of psychological involvement between service providers and customers. Psychological involvement facilitates the sharing of information, by customers, necessary for service production and the favorable evaluation, by customers, of the cues they perceive during the service delivery process. The design of alternative rites that result in varying levels of involvement are described, as are the consequences associated with customers having their expectations of involvement confirmed or disconfirmed.

Service organizations must satisfy two fundamental information processing requirements inherent in their encounters with customers. First, from the organization's perspective, a service firm, like all organizations, needs to process information in order to accomplish tasks (Arrow, 1974). This requirement is critical for service organizations because information is the primary raw material of such firms and the way that information is processed will affect productivity (Mills and Turk, 1986). The customer is a principal source of this informational raw material for the organization (Thompson, 1962; Chase, 1978; Mills, 1986). However, at the point of the service encounter, the customer is also a source of input uncertainty for the organization, presenting the firm with incomplete information about what should be processed, how the processing should occur, and toward what desired outcome (Larsson and Bowen, 1989). The service organization is in need of mechanisms by which it can reduce this input uncertainty and acquire the information necessary for effective service production and delivery.

Second, from the customers' perspective, the services which they consume are often characterized by incomplete and ambiguous information, or evidence, which they must use in evaluating the service (Zeithaml, 1981; Bowen and Jones, 1986). This is particularly true for services which, themselves, are highly intangible, such as legal advice and health-care. Customers must rely heavily upon the process of service delivery, in the form of the attitudes and the behaviors of service providers and the surrounding organizational context, for information about the quality of the service that they receive (Shostack, 1977). Service organizations, then, also need mechanisms by which to manage the information processing requirements of customers during the service encounter, in order to positively influence the customer's evaluation of the service.

This paper proposes that service encounters can be conceptualised, and managed, as the repetitive performance of "rites of integration" (Trice and Beyer, 1984 p. 657) which can satisfy these information processing requirements for both the organization and the customer. Service encounters are social interactions in which customers are physically in the presence of service employees. Such encounters are the primary means by which resources are exchanged between the service organization and its environment (Mills, 1986). Rites

have been defined as planned social interactions that consolidate various forms of cultural expressions (language, displayed emotions, gestures, ritualized behavior, symbols, and the physical setting) for the benefit of an audience (Trice and Beyer, 1984). Rites of integration have, as their intended benefit, the achievement of "a temporary sense of closeness" between "potentially divergent subsystems" (Trice and Beyer, 1984). In the present discussion, the focus is on the degree of closeness between employees and their audience, customers, in the service encounter.

The basic thesis of this paper is that organizations can design and enact different forms of rites to produce varying levels of psychological involvement (i.e. a sense of psychological closeness or distance) between the service provider and the customer. In turn, these varying levels of psychological involvement can facilitate customers in sharing the information necessary to reduce input uncertainty for the organization and can facilitate customers in receiving information in the form of service process cues which they can then use to favorably evaluate the service.

An Information Processing Model of the Role of Rites of Integration in the Service Encounter

Figure 1 displays the role played by rites of integration (in the center of the model) in satisfying the information processing requirements of both the organization and customers. By way of overview, the model indicates that: services differ in their information processing requirements, there is a level of psychological involvement that customers expect and should experience in order to facilitate the necessary information flows, organizations can design and enact rites of integration to produce such levels, and if the level of psychological involvement actually experienced by customers confirms their expectations, then a number of favorable consequences will result. The following discussion addresses each component of the model more specifically.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

Input Uncertainty Associated with a Service

At the point of contact in the service encounter, the customer is a source of input uncertainty because the organization has incomplete information about the nature of customer inputs (see Figure 1). These customer inputs can be (a) his specification of desired outcomes; (b) his body, mind, and/or goods to be serviced; and (c) his actions as he participates in the service production (Larsson and Bowen, 1989). Uncertainty, in general terms, has been defined by Galbraith (1973, p. 5) as "the difference between the amount of information required to perform the task and the amount of information already possessed by the organization". In a service context, Larsson and Bowen (1989) offered the following definition: customer - induced input uncertainty is the organization's incomplete information about what, where, when, and how customer input is going to be processed to produce desired outcomes. These authors then presented different types of services arranged along a continuum of low to high levels of input uncertainty. Examples of services with low input uncertainty were fast-food restaurants, movie theatres, and simple retail banking; intermediate examples included car repair and retail stores; high input uncertainty examples included legal advice and medical care.

Information Amount, Equivocality, and the Organization. Two related consequences of higher levels of input uncertainty can be identified (see Figure 1). First, the organization will lack a significant amount of information necessary to perform tasks and there will be substantial equivocality in the information being exchanged between the customer and the organization (e.g. Mills and Turk, 1986). That is, a lawyer is more dependent on a client for task-related information -- and such information is likely to be complex and ambiguous -- than is true of a service encounter between a fast-food clerk and a customer. However, in each case, the organization must acquire and process the requisite information to function effectively.

Performance Ambiguity and the Customer. A second consequence of high input uncertainty is that, given that it tends to be associated with complex services, it is often found in situations where customers have difficulty evaluating the quality of the service that

they have received (see Figure 1). That is, these services are high in performance ambiguity, described as follows:

Performance ambiguity stems from an inability to measure the performance of parties to an exchange, or an inability, even if performance can be measured, to accurately value it (Ouchi, 1980). For example, performance ambiguity arises when the object of exchange is complex, making it difficult to establish the cause-effect relationship that produced the object and making valuation of the object possible only over the long - run (Bowen and Jones, 1986, p. 431).

Intangibility is the primary source of performance ambiguity in service exchanges. The amount of intangibility of a particular type of service will vary with the degree to which the service possesses three sets of properties that customers rely upon for information in evaluating the service: (1) search properties, including attributes of the tangible part of the service such as price and color, (2) experience properties, including attributes of the process such as access to the service provider and the responsiveness of the service provider, and (3) credence properties, including the intangible attributes of the service delivery process, such as the credibility and understanding exhibited by the service provider (Nelson, 1970; Darby and Karni, 1973; Zeithaml, 1981; Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985). Credence properties are especially difficult for customers to explicitly evaluate, even after production and consumption of the service. As examples, evaluations of the quality of fast food and convenience store service encounters tend to be high in search properties; restaurant and banking service encounters tend to be high in experience properties; and legal and medical services tend to be high in credence properties (Zeithaml, 1981).

In evaluating the quality of a service, customers will rely on different cues and processes according to the properties that characterize the service. As services increase in experience and credence properties, the intangible nature of the service will lead to greater performance ambiguity for the customer. As discussed above, performance ambiguity leads to customer difficulty in directly evaluating the service. This forces the customer to rely on

cues obtained during the service delivery process (such as the displayed emotion and specific behaviors of service providers as well as the physical surroundings) in evaluating the service.

The Level of Psychological Involvement in the Service Encounter

Psychological involvement can be defined as the degree of psychological closeness, with the service provider, as experienced by the customer, during the service delivery process. Psychological involvement can range from a customer experiencing the service employee as polite but essentially indifferent toward her as a person (resulting in a low degree of psychological closeness) to medium levels of involvement in which customers experience the service employee as empathetic, to high levels of involvement in which customers experience service employees as concerned, caring and sympathetic toward them. This description resembles the work of Campbell (1978) and Pritchard (1969) who described the "psychological closeness" existing between two individuals as ordered along an impersonal-intimate continuum ranging from "acquaintance" to "friend" to "close friend". Relatedly, the social psychology literature on close relationships offers a definition of closeness as the extent to which people see themselves as belonging with the other (Tesser, 1987).

The experience of high levels of psychological involvement, then, is associated with a customer's belief that the service provider is interested in him, as a person, not just his property, body, or mind in need of being serviced. Certain service encounters, then, have a feeling of a relationship rather than merely a transaction. This situation is well-expressed in Rafaeli and Sutton's (1989) discussion of work by Mars and Nicod (1984) on the nature of exchange between service providers and their customers. Mars and Nicod distinguish between "boundary open" and "boundary closed transactions". They describe boundary open transactions as resembling a meeting between friends, in which the service provider is expected to be actively involved and to share her feelings. In contrast, boundary closed transactions impose tight boundaries around the participants, such that the service provider is expected to be pleasant, but not necessarily friendly. In the present context, high

psychological involvement can be associated with boundary open transactions. Low psychological involvement encounters can be associated with boundary closed transactions.

What Customers Should Experience and What They Expect. We propose that the optimal level of psychological involvement that customers should experience increases as a) the amount and equivocality of information required by the organization for service production and delivery increases, and b) the performance ambiguity of the service, as perceived by the customer, increases (i.e. as the intangibility of the service increases) (see Figure 1). In the first instance, we suggest that for complex services, the experience of involvement is necessary for customers to be both attentive and secure, within the framework of a relationship that they perceive to be close. This will allow the customer to fully and accurately provide the service organization with the information required for service production, as well as to cooperate with the service provider as necessary. The appropriate degree of psychological involvement influences customers to share requisite amounts of task-relevant, comprehensible information, thereby reducing input uncertainty for the organization.

With respect to performance ambiguity, we would propose that the more intangible the service (i.e. the more it is dominated by experience and credence properties), the higher the degree of psychological involvement expected (desired) by customers in the process of service delivery. Expressions of concern and interest by the service provider in the process of service delivery helps to "tangibilize the intangible" (Levitt, 1981) service for the customer, providing customers with cues that help them resolve the evaluation difficulties posed by performance ambiguity. The intangible or process dimensions of service quality (responsiveness, empathy and assurance) identified by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) are directly linked with the establishment of the appropriate degree of psychological involvement between the service provider and the customer. Alternatively, the more tangible the service, the less customers will expect to be psychologically involved in the process of service delivery because the information necessary to evaluate the service is primarily available in the tangible service outcome itself.

Support for these propositions about the role played by psychological involvement is indicated by Czepiel's (1990) work on managing both the economic and social content of exchanges between service organizations and their customers. He states that anthropologists (eg. Marks, 1988) hypothesize that honesty in exchange relationships is inversely related to social distance. Czepiel notes the important role played by trust in the exchange of many complex services, and that maintaining a social relationship, in addition to the professional relationship, is the more natural-feeling approach (although professionalism would require that the service encounter not be compromised by too much intimacy). A relationship approach to exchange, rather than treating it only as a transaction, leads to better communication and collaboration between the parties (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987).

The information processing consequences of involvement are also indicated in the marketing literature on consumer information processing. As reviewed by Celsi and Olson (1988), motivation to process information has been conceptualized by most researchers in terms of the consumer's involvement with the informational stimuli (cf. Mitchell, 1981; Cohen, 1983; Zaichowsky, 1985). Their basic proposition is that the more personal involvement consumers associate with an advertisement or product, for example, the more motivated they are to attend to and comprehend the salient information in that stimulus. In services, we would argue that the more psychological involvement that customers experience in their encounters with service providers, the greater the amount and sophistication of information that they will both intake and output in the service creation process. This is critical in professional services such as medicine, for example, where the accuracy of a doctor's diagnosis can depend upon how completely and accurately the patient responds to the doctor's questions about their symptoms (Eiglier and Lanzard, 1977).

In sum, the level of psychological involvement that customers should experience in the service encounter is positively related to: a) the amount and equivocality of information that the organization needs, and (b) the performance ambiguity facing the customer. The greater the performance ambiguity, the more the customer relies upon the interpersonal process of service delivery to assess the quality of service that they receive. As this occurs, customers' expectations of the desired level of involvement increases. Later in the paper, we

will examine the consequences of customers' experienced levels of psychological involvement confirming, or disconfirming, their expectations (see Figure 1).

Service Encounters as Rites of Integration

We have proposed that service encounters can be conceptualized, and managed, as rites of integration which can satisfy the information processing requirements of both the organization and the customer. Before examining rites of integration per se, it is useful to first explore the general correspondence between the dynamics of the service encounter and the meaning of rites, generally.

Service encounters have been described as being "first and foremost, social encounters" (McCallum and Harrison 1985: p. 35) that begin and end with the customer's entry and exit of the service facility. Obviously, there may be economic exchange as well - (such as money for goods/services), but the rules governing this element of the encounter are often well-understood. Consequently, researchers of the service encounter have argued for the following perspective on the interplay between the social and the economic:

While anthropologists who study exchange do so to see "how social exchange is played out against a background of economic exchange" (Marks, 1988, p. 64), of equal interest here is the reverse - how economic exchange occurs against a background of social exchange (Czepiel, 1990: p. 302).

As possible insight on this social component, Klaus (1985) notes that satisfaction with exchange is a function of the performance of both task-related behaviors and what he terms "ceremonial behaviors" which are those that meet the psychological needs (e.g. trust, liking, commitment) of both partners.

The possibility of treating these service encounters as rites becomes evident when one considers that rites involve: (1) relatively elaborate and planned sets of activities, (2) carried out through social interactions, (3) usually for the benefit of an audience, (4) with multiple social consequences (Trice and Beyer, 1984). Rites and ceremonials are social dramas with well-defined roles for people to perform. Many of them are enacted over and

over, on similar occasions. Such dramatic events require planning. Thus, rites and ceremonials involve deliberately planned, carefully managed, and often rehearsed sets of behaviors.

Additionally, rites have "... well demarcated beginnings and ends" (Trice and Beyer, 1984: p.654). During the performance of a rite, people make use of other cultural forms to enhance the expression of the intended message. The cultural forms, which are a part of the rite, include: language, displayed emotions, gestures, ritualized behavior, symbols, and the physical setting. These various cultural forms are designed to be integrated and mutually reinforcing, with each form sharing in the production of the same set of social consequences for the audience.

Rites, in general, have been shown to aid in achieving consistency and predictability. Research in cultural anthropology has shown that rites can be employed to structure and present particular interpretations of social reality (Moore and Meyerhoff, 1977). They can structure the way people interact and exchange information. Collective ritual has been shown to be an attempt to bring a specific part of social life firmly and definitely into orderly control (Turner, 1969).

Rites can help the "actors" in an organizational setting to learn and enact a relatively standardized set of behaviours, a script. In this way, rites can act as a control mechanism to structure the roles played by participants in the service encounter. The ritualist nature of role behavior makes it possible to achieve predictability and involvement independent from the specific individuals occupying the different roles. The predictable, consistent behavior of service employees contributes to the exchange of reliable information between the organization and customers, across service employees and across time.

Indeed, rites can be used to structure the emotions and feelings that organizational role occupants display to outsiders. Organizations differ in their norms about expressed emotions by their members (Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987) and rites can help to transmit, enact, and reinforce these norms. In this sense, rites establish the "feeling rules" by which organizational members perform "emotional work", such as customer-contact, to

borrow Hochschild's (1979; 1983) language. As Van Maanen and Kunda (1989) summarise these thoughts:

"Labour in the feeling world consists of learning and maintaining the proper affective tone (by proper management, gesture, appearance, words, and deeds). Moods are contextually appropriate matters, and we have the ability to manage them usefully. Consequently, they are, in Hochschild's model, "feeling rules" of the situational sort known to us and available for judging emotional presentations - our own and others (p. 54)."

Van Maaren and Kunda (1989) assert that the more emotional work performed in a role, the more "feeling rules" there are for which role occupants are responsible. They add that cultural components, such as rites, signal how role occupants are expected to feel. They help establish the "corporate display rules" governing emotional expression at work (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1989).

Rites of Integration

Rites of integration are one of six types of rites (e.g. rites of passage, rites of conflict resolution) identified by Trice and Beyer (1984). Rites of integration have, as a social consequence, the encouragement of common feelings that bind organizational members together and commit them to a social system (Trice, 1985). Rites of integration achieve "a temporary sense of closeness" among "potentially divergent subsystems" of an organization (Trice and Beyer, 1984). An example is the annual meeting of stockholders in which different parties are brought together to share in various ritualistic behaviors and a common concern for the organization.

In the service encounter, these potentially divergent subsystems can be conceived of as service employees and their customers. This use of the label of "rites of integration" is usually applied only to different groups who are part of the same organization. Yet, its appropriateness to the service encounter stems from two factors. First, customers, in face-to-face service encounters, are physically present within the organization's boundary. They also are actually performing roles in service production, e.g. describing their symptoms to a

doctor, bussing their trays in a fast-food restaurant. Because of this, these customers have been described as "partial employees" of the service organization (Bowen, 1986; Mills and Morris, 1986). Thus, these rites can be viewed as being enacted between the employees and the "partial employees" of the service organization. Second, the function of rites of integration, producing a temporary sense of closeness between parties, is the objective sought for the service encounter. More exactly, the rites are to be designed and enacted to produce the appropriate perceived degree of closeness between employees and customers.

Rites of integration in service delivery are similar to other secular ceremonies which are invented and produced for persons who have come together for a particular occasion with the participants being from different cultures (Gluckman, 1965). These rites, like other forms of secular ceremony, can be a useful means of conveying a message as if it were unquestionable; thus, they can communicate those very things that are in doubt, such as the elusive nature of service. Rites of integration can be simultaneously a declaration about service and a demonstration of service, thereby portraying something that is intangible in a tangible, visible way. These rites can assert that service, which is culturally-created and a man-made process, is as undoubtable as the physical reality of a product.

The Design of Rites to Produce Alternative Levels of Involvement

Service organizations can design rites of integration to produce the level of psychological involvement customers should experience when interacting with employees (see Figure 1, middle box). The design elements are the various cultural forms which are part of the rite: language, gestures, ritualized behavior, physical setting, symbols, and the displayed emotions of the service provider. The relationship between many of these components and psychological involvement can be derived from the literatures on communication and nonverbal behavior. Previous research in these areas has explored the contribution of an array of verbal and nonverbal behaviors to communication (e.g., Mehrabian, 1969; Mehrabian, 1971; Miller and Berg, 1984; Burgoon, Manusov, Mineo, and Hale, 1985). For example, such behaviors include actions, settings, expressions, postures, and physical distancing (e.g. Hall, 1966; Steele, 1973; Goldman and Fordyce, 1983; Steele,

1986). In addition, the effect of intimacy (especially as reflected through eye contact, touch, vocal expression, and conversational style) has been studied both as intended by the sender and as decoded by the target person (e.g., Anderson and Bauer, 1985). This research on both verbal and nonverbal communication can be used to array examples of each of the elements of rites (as detailed by Trice and Beyer (1984)) on a continuum (low, medium or high) of the psychological involvement customers would tend to experience from the elements (see Table 1, which also provides examples of the types of services for which customers would likely expect low, medium or high levels of psychological involvement).

 Insert Table 1 About Here

Language will vary from the use of the passive for low involvement to the active form for high involvement. "I/we" and more ego-centered vocabulary will be used more frequently for high involvement, while "it/they" will be used for low involvement. High involvement will be characterized by an intimate quality to what is said, medium involvement by a pleasant quality, and low involvement by a neutral quality. Fewer gestures will be used for low involvement than for medium and high involvement. This would include head nods and hand gestures. "Reaching out" gestures will be used frequently for high involvement.

Ritualized behavior in the high involvement situation will include conversation that is directly relevant to the individual customer, intense eye contact, varied facial expressions, full visibility of the service provider to the customer, and other behaviors which bring the customer and the service provider into close physical proximity. The medium involvement situation will include "small talk" or general conversation, eye contact, pleasant facial expressions such as smiling, and other ritualized behavior which involves turning toward the customer. In contrast, the low involvement situation will include little conversation except task related comments, little eye contact or facial expression, blocked visibility of the service provider from the customer, and other behaviours that orient the customer to only one side of the service provider.

The physical setting for low involvement will contain partitioning, large size rooms, a regimented arrangement of furniture, and straight lines of furniture. The physical setting for high involvement will be noticeably different with irregular arrangements of furniture which facilitate common activities for the customer and service provider. In general, fewer and less personal symbols will be appropriate for low involvement with the symbols reinforcing certain aspects of the tangible evidence of the service such as the low price of the goods and the low costs incurred by the customer. In contrast, the high involvement situation will contain many symbols of a personal nature which reinforce the expensive, elite aspects of the service delivery process.

Finally, the work of Hochschild (1983) and de Rivera (1984) can be used to predict the types of displayed emotion appropriate to the differing expectations regarding level of involvement. Service providers in the low involvement situation should display a low level of empathy for the customer, a pleasant outlook and be even-tempered. Empathy has been shown to involve being personal, affectionate, intimate, and warm (Schlinger, 1979; Izard, 1977). Even in the low involvement situation, customers will not expect apathy, boredom, or a total absence of displayed emotion. Nor will they respond positively to hostility, aggression, or a surly attitude. Service providers, in order to develop medium involvement, should exhibit personal caring, empathy, eagerness, and enthusiasm. For high involvement, service providers should display compassion, high levels of empathy, trust, and sympathy.

The design of the elements reading down a column of Table 1 can result in an internally consistent message of psychological involvement being enacted with customers. Examples of three alternative designs follow.

Rites of Integration for Low Psychological Involvement

Services for which customers would expect low involvement are analogous to market transactions where the encounter is principally a price-governed exchange among relatively anonymous sellers and buyers in what has been labelled an "impersonal market" (Bowen and Jones, 1986). For example, based on the logic developed in Figure 1 to this point, one would anticipate customer expectations of low involvement, in general, in fast food restaurants and convenience stores. The amount and equivocality of customer

information required by the organization is relatively low because the input uncertainty associated with such services is low. In addition, performance ambiguity is low because tangibles, such as prepared fast-food, dominate the service package more than the service delivery process. Consequently, customers would expect a low degree of psychological involvement.

The appropriate rites of integration for low involvement would consist of forms of the elements which maintain psychological distance between the service provider and the customer. The focus of these rites would be to establish consistency in the speed and efficiency of the service delivery process while establishing a low level of psychological involvement. The information processing demands that must be satisfied with these rites are minimal.

For example, Sutton and Rafaeli (1988) describe the process of service delivery in a neighbourhood convenience store in a way that can be used here to exemplify the elements of a low-involvement rite. They observed that both service providers and customers tried to move rapidly. There were subtle but potent sanctions for both customers and service providers who moved slowly. The physical setting of the convenience store was designed to process customers quickly. Greetings, smiling, establishing eye contact, and saying "thank you" were rare events. As one service provider described, "I never looked up at customers. I never established eye contact. I never said thank you" (page 21). For this service, customers' expectations regarding their level of involvement were low. The rite of integration matched these expectations. When the preferred level of involvement is low, a rite of integration which treats customers as unique individuals will not be well-received (Soloman and al., 1985), because a match is not being made between the rite and the preferred level of involvement.

Rites of Integration for Medium Psychological Involvement

Services for which customers would expect medium involvement are those in which relational ties supplement price in the governance of the service exchange. The social content of the exchange gains in importance relative to the economic content. For example, one would anticipate customer expectations of medium involvement, in general, in retail store,

restaurant, and banking services. In these services, the ambiguity and equivocality of requisite customer information is typically moderate. Performance ambiguity is also at a medium level because both the process of service delivery and the tangible evidence are important. Neither dominates. Thus, customers will generally expect a medium level of involvement.

The appropriate rites of integration for medium psychological involvement would include forms of the elements which help to reduce psychological distance between the service provider and the customer. Expectations of medium involvement will be met through substantive personalization of the service delivery process. In this situation, the rite should achieve a balance between expedience and personal attention. The rite should avoid having service providers become so robotized in their actions that they greet any customer request with a standardized response (Albrecht and Zemke, 1985). Instead, substantive personalization includes considering the specific needs of the individual customer and increasing the options available to meet those needs (Suprenant and Solomon, 1985). In sum, the rite should be designed to establish a medium level of involvement in order to meet the intermediate information processing requirements of both the organization and the customer.

For example, Russell (1987) describes the rites of integration used at Nordstrom, a department store chain. Service providers, or sales clerks, are encouraged to do almost anything within reason to satisfy customers. Substantive personalization is achieved through gestures, eye contact, friendly language, and ritualized behaviors that seek to understand and meet the needs of customers. In Seattle, as an example, a Nordstrom's sales clerk personally ironed a customer's newly purchased shirt so that it would look fresh for an upcoming meeting. This behavior is one of a repertoire of ritualized behaviors which are focused on eliciting the requisite information, meeting individual customers needs, and reducing performance ambiguity. The rites of integration were matched with customer expectations regarding a medium level of involvement.

Rites of Integration for High Psychological Involvement

Services for which customers would expect high involvement are analogous to a personal relationship in which the relationship, itself, becomes a valued object of exchange. For example, one would anticipate expectations for high involvement with professional services such as architects, lawyers, and at the extreme of the continuum, doctors and therapists. There is a tendency with these services for customers to be unaware or imprecise about both their problems and about how to remedy their problems (Mills, 1986). The amount and equivocality of requisite customer information is high. Performance ambiguity is also high because of the intangible nature of these types of services. The process of service delivery becomes very important to the customer given the relative absence of the exchange of tangibles. Therefore, customers will expect a high level of psychological involvement and the rites of integration will need to establish a close connection between the service provider and the customer.

In these high involvement encounters, customers want to feel that the service provider cares about them as a person and is even sympathetic toward their personal circumstances. These situations represent higher ego involvement with their greater centrality to the self resulting in a preference for intense involvement described elsewhere as engrossment (Goffman, 1961).

For example, rites of integration in the case of an architect should seek to establish a high level of psychological involvement. Villegas (1989), a practising architect, describes her experiences during client consultations. She will often begin a meeting with a client by closely observing the body language, dress, and mannerisms of the customer/client. She prefers positioning herself close to the client in order to maintain intense eye contact and to establish an immediate connection. Her choice of language is vivid, engaging, and she consistently poses open-ended questions that are intended to draw the client into the design process. The goal, as she describes it, is to "actively involve my clients in the mutual creation of a way of living. I believe that we can not succeed without each other. They need to believe this as well. They need to trust me because I can not do my best work without understanding their needs, their fears, their constraints, and their dreams."

Finally, because the level of expected involvement is itself a continuum, one would anticipate predictable variation within each of the low, medium, and high service categories. As an example, expectations of involvement at retail stores (a medium involvement encounter) will range from the low end, such as bargain department stores, to the high end, such as specialty boutiques.

**Customers' Experienced versus Expected Involvement:
Confirmation/Disconfirmation**

Customers will compare the psychological involvement they experience from the rite with their expectations of involvement (see Figure 1). An application of Parasuraman and al's (1988) confirmation/disconfirmation model of service quality in the marketing literature (in which service quality exists when a customer's perceptions of facets of service meet or exceed his expectations), would suggest that an individual's expectations about the level of psychological involvement will be (1) positively confirmed when the level of involvement experienced is equal to, or more than, expected and (2) negatively disconfirmed when the level of involvement experienced is less than expected.

In other words, this is a model of customer satisfaction similar to met or unmet expectation models of job satisfaction (cf. Locke, 1976). In the case of psychological involvement, it seems reasonable to propose three revisions to the met expectations model. First, it is proposed that a "zone of indifference" exists around individual expectations of the level of involvement in the service delivery process. A zone of indifference is some interval around an expectation of involvement in which the amount of involvement experienced during the service delivery process is considered equivalent to the expectation. We suggest that experienced involvement above or below expectation, but within the indifference zone, will lead to confirmation. Disconfirmation will result when experienced involvement is outside the zone and, thus, different enough from the expectation to be noticed as such.

Second, it is proposed that the positioning of the zone of indifference around experienced involvement will vary by the level of expected involvement. If a customer has an expectation of low involvement, he will be more indifferent toward experienced involvement that falls short of expectations than experienced involvement that exceeds

expectations. This will occur because the involving aspects of the process of service delivery are less important to him than obtaining the desired tangible evidence in a timely, efficient manner. If a customer has an expectation of medium involvement, she will be equally indifferent, as reflected in a balanced zone of indifference, for both higher and lower levels of experienced involvement. Finally, if a customer has an expectation of high involvement, he will be less indifferent for lower levels of experienced involvement than he will be for higher levels because the process of service delivery is the critical factor in high involvement encounters.

Third, we propose that positive disconfirmation of expectations of involvement in the service delivery process will lead to dissatisfaction. This means that any level of experienced involvement outside the zone of indifference, either lower or higher, will be viewed negatively by the customer. The negative reaction of the customer to less involvement than expected is consistent with the traditional confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm, but can there be too much involvement? Research on dyadic communication shows that increases in involvement by one individual that are discrepant from another individual's expectations about involvement lead to arousal or cognitive activation (e.g., Berlyne, 1960; Eysenck, 1967; Cappella and Green, 1982). Furthermore, moderate discrepancies produced positive affect and attention but too great a discrepancy became unpleasant and resulted in avoidance or displeasure (Stern, 1977).

We propose that the level of experienced involvement in a situation of positive disconfirmation will be a source of a large increase in arousal and be dissatisfying. For example, in a medium involvement setting such as a restaurant, a waiter who is overly effusive and who is intent on discussing your family history, hobbies, and eating habits is likely to be encouraging an excessive and overly arousing level of involvement for the customer. This suggests that customers can experience "too much of a good thing" and react negatively to positive disconfirmation. This is consistent with cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) which suggests that overfulfillment of expectations will lead to dissatisfaction because individuals prefer to have their expectations confirmed by experience.

Finally, because shared service expectations are relatively predictable and stable, organizations can design rites to meet individual customer expectations during most instances of a particular type of service. An organization can develop, in advance, the means (a rite of integration) of providing the customer with what he expects. The smaller number of customers whose expectations do not match the level of involvement engendered by the rite will experience disconfirmation. This may lead to other types of organizational intervention, such as management attention to certain "exceptional" customers.

Consequences of Rites

It is predicted that for those customers who experience confirmation of their expected level of involvement, a number of process consequences of the rite of integration will ensue; conversely, disconfirmation will be associated with these consequences being present to a lesser extent or absent (see Figure 1). These process consequences aid in satisfying the two information processing issues of information acquisition and the positive evaluation of the service.

Rites have multiple consequences which differ on several dimensions (Trice and Beyer, 1984; Trice, 1985). They can have consequences at the expressive (or "saying") level and at the technical (or "doing") level (Hamilton, 1956; Leach, 1968). In addition, at both these levels, the consequences can be manifest or explicit, as well as latent (or implicit) and not directly expressed (Merton, 1936).

The manifest expressive consequences will include the explicit expression of a feeling of being involved to an appropriate degree, of satisfaction (as described above), and of generally feeling pleased about the service delivery process. The latent, expressive consequences will include the implicit function of the customer making a positive judgment regarding the quality of the service delivery process. This positive evaluation of the process is critical because, due to the intangible nature of many services, quality is not inherent in the service, itself. Due to performance ambiguity, the customer must make implicit judgements when evaluating service quality.

Overall service quality encompasses both the service delivery process (the manner in which the service is performed) and the tangible good (the part of the service that the

customer can possess) (Czepiel, Solomon and Suprenant, 1985). Thus, when the service delivery process results in positive process consequences, and they are supported by high quality tangibles, then overall perceived service quality will be high .

The manifest technical consequences will include the explicit actions of exchanging requisite information and positively evaluating how the roles of the service provider and the customer are structured and enacted to enhance service delivery. The latent, technical consequences will include indirectly expressed actions which reflect attentiveness and, particularly in medium and high involvement encounters, a sense of trust and obligation. This sense of trust is critical in resolving performance ambiguity for the customer because as Schurr and Ozanne (1985) state, trust is "the belief that a party's word or promise is reliable and the party will fulfill his/her obligations in an exchange relationship" (page 940).

The rite of integration and the resulting psychological involvement will indirectly cause the customer to be attentive and to feel obligated to respond to the service provider by being actively engaged in both task and non-task related conversation, maintaining eye contact, and often, prolonging the service encounter. This level of attentiveness will facilitate the delivery of requisite information by the customer because involvement is associated with individuals investing more of their resources in information processing (Celsi and Olson, 1988). Customers must experience the appropriate level of involvement to be effective partial employees in service co-production. The customer must attend to questions from the service provider in order to be able to respond as unambiguously and completely as possible.

Conclusion

This paper has presented how service encounters can be conceptualized, and managed, as rites of integration which aid in resolving the information processing requirements inherent in the service delivery process. Rites of integration can result in customers experiencing an appropriate level of psychological involvement which, in turn, disposes them to share and clarify information necessary for service production and to favorably assess the perceived cues associated with the service delivery process.

This discussion was intended to help model the process of social interaction that occurs between a service provider and a customer during the service encounter. The present model integrates and extends perspectives on the service encounter presented by previous researchers: customer-induced input uncertainty (Bowen and Jones, 1986; Larsson and Bowen, 1989); information processing complexities of the service encounter (Mills and Turk, 1986; Mills, 1986); and the role of emotional displays during the service encounter (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). Extending the concept of rites, and how they can help pattern informational as well as emotional exchanges between parties, follows Trice and Beyer's (1984) recommendation for organizational scientists to take more seriously different types of rites and their implications for organizational behavior.

The present model has certain inevitable limitations in that it does not include all of the contingencies that may affect whether rites of integration should, or could, function as presented. However, the focussed objective of the present effort was to suggest the principal contingencies (input uncertainty and the associated task information deficiencies and performance ambiguity) that should guide the organization's design of rites of integration. It presents input uncertainty as the key contingency around which others can be considered.

Additional potentially relevant contingencies can be categorized as: situational, individual, or strategic. Situational factors are suggested by Sutton and Rafaeli (1988), who found that store pace, i.e. busy or slow, affected whether neutral or positive emotional displays were associated with store sales. Also, feedback from the customer can alter how employees display emotion in the service encounter across a sequence of transactions between sender and receiver (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1989). In addition, some customers may experience the rite differently than what the organization intended, given that customer behavior and perceptions may reflect a host of individual difference variables (Ward, 1973).

These situational factors suggest that the ideal situation would be one in which both employees, and their surrounding setting, were infinitely flexible and inexpensive to change. This alternative is far less feasible than the proposed model. For example, despite measures such as Snyder's (1974) self-monitoring scale, which assesses individuals' sensitivity to

social cues and their ability to adapt to them, there still has been only very limited progress in developing selection technologies for finding such flexible individuals (Bowen, 1986). It is also likely that the increasingly tight labor market for front-line service employees, generally, will not supply a deep pool of such individuals. Furthermore, the physical setting, as a part of the rite and the feeling of involvement it is intended to display, can not be quickly altered. In sum, organizations may do best to design rites around an overall norm for psychological involvement and assume that some degree of employee flexibility and the width of customers' zones of indifference will accommodate variance in situational factors.

Individual factors include employee attributes. For example, female clerks have been found to display positive emotion more frequently than male clerks (Rafaeli, 1989). However, the central unanswered issue concerning employee attributes is whether employees' displayed emotions need to emanate from their true, authentic feelings. On this point, we endorse the thinking of Van Maanen and Kunda (1989) who offered: (1) employees can not easily differentiate what feelings are their own and what feelings go with the job, (2) although emotional displays may be made easier if the emotions displayed are authentic, rather than faked, even the best fakers will at times have difficulty knowing when they are acting, (3) tenure in the organization and reward systems which support certain display rules are likely to lead to employees following and advocating those rules, and (4) rituals can, over time, shape how employees think and feel - even to the point of shaping their self-definition of who they are (e.g. I am someone who enjoys acting in ways that results in the customer feeling close to me). This possibility is underscored by Zajonc, Murphy, and Inglehart's (1989) research that showed that the physical act of smiling could produce a positive emotional state.

Strategic factors center on the organization's choice of its own distinctive competence in service delivery. For example, if retail banks feel they can not rely upon their bank tellers to foster the organizationally-sanctioned level of psychological involvement (i.e. tellers are either too close or too distant), then the service delivery process can be industrialized (Levitt, 1976) through substitution of ATM machines for tellers. (Indeed, when ATMs were first introduced, their users would often report that the ATMs were

friendlier than bank tellers!). Organizations can also use marketing efforts to try to inflate or deflate customer expectations of psychological involvement to better match the involvement presented by its established service delivery process. Finally, service organizations can engage in "niche" market segmentation strategies in which they offer a service with "above or below the norm" psychological involvement to customers whose desires for extremes of psychological involvement leave them dissatisfied with the range of service delivery processes available to them.

In sum, service encounters can be thought of as a "Game Between Persons, borrowing Bell's (1973) metaphor of the nature of work in post-industrial society. This paper has been an attempt to describe how rites of integration can help to frame the rules by which that game is played and, ultimately, the effectiveness of organizations and the satisfaction of customers who are parties to it.

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TABLE 1

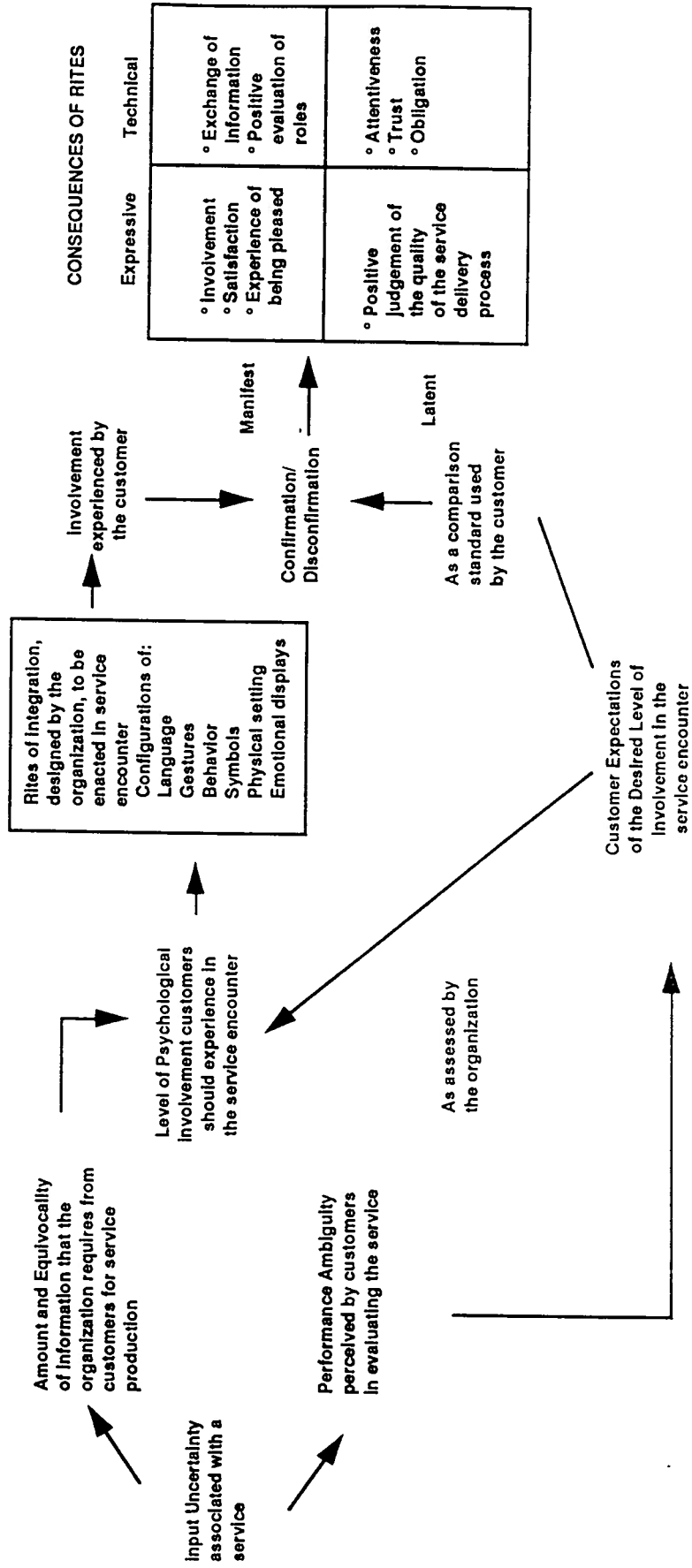
**The Design of Rites of Integration
for Varying Levels of Psychological Involvement**

GENERAL EXPECTATIONS OF THE LEVEL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL INVOLVEMENT

	LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH
ELEMENTS OF THE RITES OF INTEGRATION ↓	Fast food Convenience stores	Retail stores Restaurants Banks	Architects Doctors Lawyers Therapists
Language	Passive Neutral quality	More active Pleasant quality	Most active Declarative statements Intimate quality
Gestures	Few head nods Few hand gestures	Head nods Hand gestures	Many head nods Many hand gestures Reaching out
Ritualized behavior	Little talk Little eye contact Little facial expression	"Small talk" Eye contact Facial expression (smiling) Turning toward	Individual relevant talk Intensive eye contact High facial expression Close positioning
Physical setting	Angled positioning Blocked visibility Partitioning Large space Straight lines	Medium size Less regimented	Full visibility Facilitate common activity Irregular arrangement of furniture Closer, more intimate spacing
Symbols	Impersonal Focus on low cost/ low price Few	Personal Some	Highly personal Focus on high cost of the process Many
Displayed emotion	Low level empathy Pleasant Even-tempered	Personal caring Empathy Eager Enthusiastic	Compassionate Highly empathic Sympathetic

FIGURE 1

**Service Encounters as Rites of Integration:
An Information Processing Model**



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