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SERVICE ENCOUNTERS AS RITES OF INTEGRATION: AN INFORMATION PROCESSING MODEL*

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We propose that service encounters (the interaction between customers and employees) can be conceptualized, and managed, as rites of integration. Rites of integration are defined as planned social interactions that have the objective of achieving "a temporary sense of closeness" between customers and service providers. We argue that such rites help to establish the appropriate level of psychological involvement or the appropriate degree of psychological closeness between the service provider and the customer. Psychological involvement facilitates (a) the sharing of information by customers and employees that is necessary for service production and (b) the favorable evaluation, by customers, of the service delivery process. We describe (and give examples of) different types of rites that result in varying levels of involvement. We conclude by offering propositions for the consequences associated with customers having their expectations of involvement confirmed or disconfirmed. These consequences include the importance of a "zone of indifference" around individual expectations of levels of involvement and the negative effects of too much closeness between the employee and customer.
(CULTURE; SERVICE; INFORMATION PROCESSING, TECHNOLOGY)

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

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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 conceptualized, 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 of integration have been defined as planned social interactions that consolidate various forms of cultural artifacts (language, displayed emotions, gestures, ritualized behavior, symbols, and the physical setting) with the objective of achieving "a temporary sense of closeness" between "potentially divergent subsystems" such as managers and employees (Trice and Beyer 1984) or, as we will argue, customers and service providers.

In the present discussion, we model how organizations design and enact different forms of rites of integration to produce varying degrees of closeness, or psychological involvement, between the service provider and the customer. In turn, these varying levels of psychological involvement facilitate customers sharing the information necessary to reduce input uncertainty for the organization *and* facilitate customers receiving information in the form of service process cues which they then use to evaluate the service. To guide research on this model, we present a number of propositions for subsequent testing. These propositions are presented throughout the paper to help clarify or summarize the discussion, as it develops.

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

Figure 1 models the information processing role of rites of integration in the service encounter. By way of overview, the model depicts that different types of services are associated with different levels of input uncertainty which in turn create differing information processing requirements for both the organization and the customer. Furthermore, there is a level of psychological involvement that customers expect based on the degree of performance ambiguity that they perceive. As depicted in the center of the model, organizations design and enact rites of integration to produce alternative levels of psychological involvement. If customers' experiences of psychological involvement confirm their expectations, then a number of favorable information processing consequences will result. The following discussion addresses each component of the model more specifically.

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. 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), extending earlier

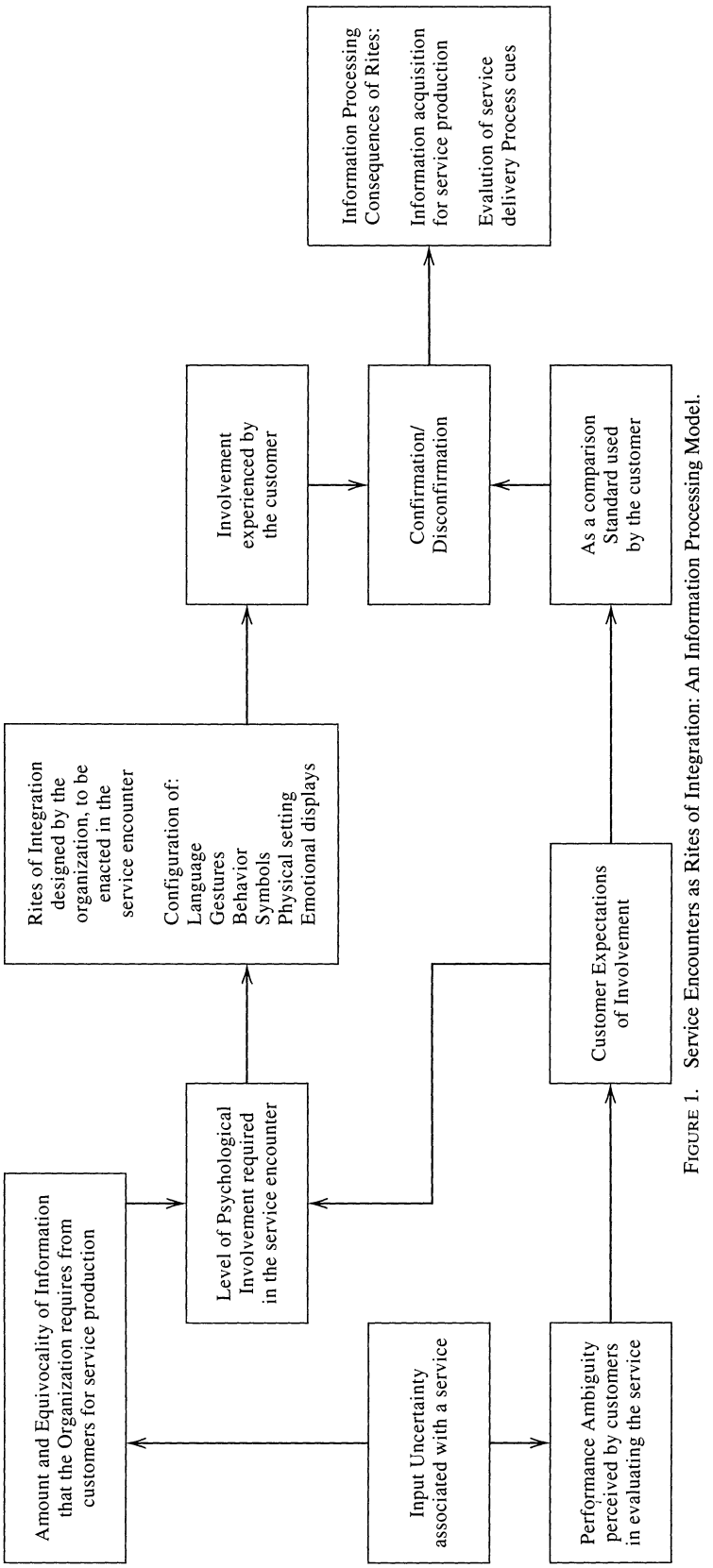

FIGURE 1. Service Encounters as Rites of Integration: An Information Processing Model.

work on the uncertainty construct (Slocum and Sims 1980; Argote 1982; Brass 1985), 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. This focus on customer inputs as sources of uncertainty does not deny that there are, of course, internal sources of uncertainty (e.g., incomplete employee knowledge of how to perform a specific task, given high task difficulty). However, as Thompson (1962) observed, organizations can be expected to have more complete knowledge (with supposed expertise) about the tasks it offers than knowledge about what customer input it will face because, in the latter case, it has far less authority.

The level of input uncertainty that customers pose for service operations can be expected to vary with two variables: the diversity of customer demand and the tendency of customers to participate in the production of the service (Larsson and Bowen 1989). Different types of services can be associated with different levels of input uncertainty. Examples of services with low input uncertainty (low demand diversity; low production participation) are fast food operations, movie theaters, and simple retail banking; intermediate examples include car repair and retail stores; high input uncertainty (high demand diversity; high production participation) examples include education, estate planning, and health care. The starting point of the model, then, is the level of input uncertainty associated with a service.

Information Amount, Equivocality, and the Organization. Two related consequences of higher levels of input uncertainty can be identified (see Figure 1). First, service organizations often lack a significant amount of information necessary to perform tasks. 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. 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 customers have difficulty evaluating the quality of the service received (see Figure 1). 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).

A customer will utilize different evaluation processes in assessing the quality of an organization's services, depending upon their degree of performance ambiguity. Performance ambiguity is a function of the intangibility of services. As intangibility increases, performance ambiguity increases because the customer has far less "hard" information to use in assessing the service. Retail stores and fast food operations exemplify services characterized by low intangibility. The merchandise or meals that accompany these services provide the customer with tangible attributes for evaluating the service. Services that are moderately intangible include restaurants and banking. Attributes of the service delivery process, such as access to the service provider and the responsiveness of the service provider, are components of the information upon which customers rely. Legal and medical services are examples of highly intangible services that are especially difficult for customers to evaluate even after production and consumption of the service. Attributes of the delivery process such as the

credibility and understanding exhibited by the service provider are among the information that customers use in assessing the service.

We develop the thesis that organizations design and enact rites of integration that influence how customers interpret the different forms of information available in the service encounter. We suggest that an appropriate level of psychological involvement is the mediating variable between these various forms of information and the favorable consequences of information processing.

The Meaning 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 others (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 them *as a person*, not just their property, body, or mind in need of being serviced. Thus, certain service encounters 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 service providers are expected to be actively involved and to share their 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.

Level of Psychological Involvement Experienced in Service Encounters

The flow of information between parties in an exchange appears to be facilitated by the "closeness" of the relationship. Support for this can be found in Czepiel's (1990) work on managing both the economic and social content of exchanges between service organizations and their customers. He states that anthropologists 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 "friendly" relationship, in addition to the professional relationship, is the 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. Their basic proposition is that the more personal involvement consumers associate with an advertisement or product, 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 Langeard 1977).

In sum, we propose:

PROPOSITION 1. *As the amount and equivocality of information that the organization requires from the customer increases, the amount of psychological involvement required increases.*

For complex services, the experience of involvement is necessary for customers to be both attentive and secure. 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.

Relative to customers' information processing requirements, expressions of concern and interest by the service provider help to "tangibilize the intangible" (Levitt 1981) service for the customer with cues that help them resolve the evaluation difficulties posed by performance ambiguity. The *process* dimensions of service quality (e.g., a doctor displaying 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 (e.g., fast food), 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, e.g., the quality of the hamburger, its costs, and speed of delivery. Thus, we propose:

PROPOSITION 2. *The more intangible the service, the higher the degree of psychological involvement expected by customers in the process of service delivery.*

Finally, a comment on the distinction between service process and outcomes is a necessary context for this proposition. For intangible services, process dimensions become increasingly important influences on how customers evaluate the service provided. Obviously, customers' evaluations are not determined entirely by process dimensions alone. The service outcomes, e.g., was the patient healed, is also clearly important (although that outcome may not be known for a long time; in the case of estate planning, the customer may never really know the outcome). The proposition is that process dimensions explain increasing amounts of variance in customers' ratings of quality as intangibility increases and that psychological involvement influences customers' perceptions of these process dimensions—at a minimum. There is a fine line between customer perceptions of process and outcome; for example, research reveals significant positive correlations between customer ratings of service-provider courtesy and customer ratings of service-provider competency (Schneider and Bowen 1985; Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry 1990).

Service Encounters as Rites of Integration

We have proposed that service encounters can be conceptualized and managed as rites of integration that 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.

Service encounters have been described as being "first and foremost, social encounters" (McCallum and Harrison 1985, p. 35). They 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 1991). Rites 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 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 artifacts to enhance the expression of the intended message. The cultural artifacts that are a part of the rite include: language, displayed emotions, gestures, ritualized behavior, symbols, and the physical setting. These various cultural artifacts are designed to be integrated and mutually reinforcing with each artifact sharing in the production of the same set of social consequences for the audience (Trice and Beyer 1991).

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 learn and enact a relatively standardized set of behaviors. 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) summarize these thoughts:

> Labor 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 Maanen 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 artifacts, 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. 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, the potentially divergent subsystems of interest are service employees and their customers. This use of the label of "rites of integration" is typically 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). Rites of integration can be viewed as being enacted between employees and the "partial employees" of the service organization. Second, the function of rites of integration is to produce a temporary sense of closeness between parties, the objective sought for the service encounter. More specifically, the rites are designed and enacted to produce the appropriate perceived degree of closeness between employees and customers.

PROPOSITION 3. *Service organizations design rites of integration to produce the necessary level of psychological involvement customers experience when interacting with employees.*

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. This can help to satisfy the two information processing requirements inherent in service delivery: information acquisition and the evaluation of the service delivery process.

The Design of Rites to Produce Alternative Levels of Involvement

Rites of integration consist of elements or various cultural artifacts such as: 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, 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, 1986; Goldman and Fordyce 1983; Ornstein 1989). 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). The research on both verbal and nonverbal communication can be used to array examples of each of the elements of rites on a continuum from low, medium or high, depending on the psychological involvement customers would tend to experience from the elements. Table 1 also provides examples of the types of services for which customers would likely expect low, medium or high levels of psychological involvement.

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 more 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 behaviors 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

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	Examples: Fast food Convenience stores	Examples: Retail Stores Restaurants Banks	Examples: 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 Some facial expression (smiling) Turning toward	Customer relevant talk Intensive eye contact Great facial expressiveness 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

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 often 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 typically 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 expect low involvement are analogous to market transactions where the encounter is principally a price-governed exchange among relatively anonymous sellers and buyers. This has been labelled an "impersonal market" (Bowen and Jones 1986). For example, building upon Propositions 1 and 2, low involvement would seem to be appropriate for fast food operations and convenience stores. The amount and equivocality of customer information required by such organizations 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.

PROPOSITION 4a. *Rites of integration that consist of the configuration of elements in the left column of Table* 1 *will be associated with customers experiencing low levels of psychological involvement.*

PROPOSITION 4b. *Relative to information processing, these rites will be positively associated with customer evaluations of the service delivery process and with service providers' reports of having acquired information from the customer necessary for service production (when enacted for services characterized by low input uncertainty).*

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 neighborhood 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, effusive smiling, establishing lengthy eye contact, and saying "thank you" were rare events. As the service providers described, "Our customers just want to get in and out quickly" (p. 474). The researchers report that there was tacit agreement that norms of low emotional expression should guide the behavior of both customers and service providers. For this service, customers' expectations regarding their level of involvement were low. The rite of integration matched these expectations. In these encounters, rites of integration which treat customers as unique individuals will not be well received (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel and Gutman 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 many retail stores, restaurants, 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 typically dominates. Thus, customers will generally expect a medium level of involvement.

PROPOSITION 5a. *Rites of integration that consist of the configuration of elements in the middle column of Table* 1 *will be associated with customers experiencing intermediate levels of psychological involvement.*

PROPOSITION 5b. *These rites will be positively associated with evaluations of the service delivery process and with service providers' reports of having acquired information from the customer necessary for service production* (*when enacted for services characterized by medium input uncertainty*).

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 experience 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 (Surprenant 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.

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. At Nordstrom, it is standard practice, for example, for sales clerks to extend the length of service delivery contact by accompanying their customers throughout the store in order to offer assistance in coordinating accessories or choosing additional, related merchandise. This behavior is one of a repertoire of ritualized behaviors which are focused on eliciting the requisite information, meeting individual customer's 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. 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.

PROPOSITION 6a. *Rites of integration that consist of the configuration of elements in the right column of Table* 1 *will be associated with customers experiencing high levels of psychological involvement.*

PROPOSITION 6b. *These rites will be positively associated with evaluations of the service delivery process and with service providers' reports of having acquired information from the customer necessary for service production (when enacted for services characterized by high input uncertainty).*

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 practicing 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 cannot succeed without each other. They need to believe this as well. They need to trust me because I cannot do my work without understanding their needs, their fears, their constraints, and their dreams."

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). Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry's (1990) confirmation/disconfirmation model of service quality in the marketing literature 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 (e.g., Kanfer, 1990). In the case of psychological involvement, it seems reasonable to propose three revisions to the met expectations model.

PROPOSITION 7. *A "zone of indifference" exists around individual expectations of the level of involvement in the service delivery process.*

A zone of indifference[1] 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 propose 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.

PROPOSITION 8. *The positioning of the zone of indifference around expected involvement will vary by the level of expected involvement.*

[1]Our use of the term "zone of indifference" is derived from the work of Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins (1983) and Woodruff and Jenkins (1987). They argue that, in the case of products, there is a zone of indifference between satisfaction and dissatisfaction levels, with any given product experience needing to be outside an acceptable range of performance before it is viewed as unsatisfactory. This acceptable range of performance is the customer's zone of indifference.

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 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.

PROPOSITION 9. *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? If so, can a rite of integration be too successful, creating a degree of closeness that customers perceive as too high, and, thus, dissatisfying?

The answer appears to be "yes" based on research on dyadic communication. This research 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 Greene 1982). Furthermore, moderate discrepancies produced positive affect and attention but *too great* a discrepancy became unpleasant and resulted in avoidance or displeasure (Stern 1977).

Proposition 9 assumes that the level of experienced involvement in a situation of positive disconfirmation will be a source of a large increase in arousal and, thus, 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.

The negative effects of "too much of a good thing" can also be explained in information processing terms. The diner becomes dissatisfied because the waiter is requiring more information processing than is required by the simple task of ordering dinner in this type of restaurant. The organization is not acquiring information efficiently, and the customer reacts negatively to overly personal cues provided by the waiter during service delivery. If it was an expensive, gourmet restaurant, however, a more complex service with higher associated input uncertainty, then both the organization and the customer could benefit from higher psychological involvement. A waiter in such a restaurant, displaying high empathy rather than cool civility, would enhance the likelihood that the restaurant would fully intake customers' meal preferences and that customers would favorably evaluate the process of service delivery, using cues partly shaped by the waiter's display of empathy.

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 customers with what they expect. The small 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.

The Information Processing Consequences of Rites

As presented in the preceding discussion and propositions, the model predicts that when customers experience confirmation of their expected level of involvement, this satisfies the two information processing requirements of information acquisition and the positive evaluation of the service delivery process. Customers must experience the appropriate level of involvement to be effective as partial employees in the co-production of service. The rite of integration and the resulting psychological involvement will establish the appropriate degree of customer attentiveness and of feeling obligated to respond to the service provider by being actively engaged in both task and nontask related conversation, maintaining eye contact, and, often, prolonging the service encounter. As input uncertainty increases, 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). The customer must attend to questions from the service provider in order to be able to respond as unambiguously and completely as possible.

The feeling of appropriate involvement by customers will be associated with their perceiving service delivery process cues as positive information about 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 Surprenant 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.

Conclusion

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.

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). 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.

Such 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 (in terms of overall cost, training, and assessment) 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 develop, cannot 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 moderate variance in situational factors.

Turning to the individual factors that could be relevant contingencies in the model, employee attributes would be key variables. 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' display of organizationally sanctioned emotions need to emanate from their authentic feelings. For example, recent research on the relationship between top management mandated corporate culture and emergent subcultures suggests that there is a need for consistency between individual values/beliefs and organizationally reinforced values if positive results are to be obtained (Jermier, Slocum, Fry, and Gaines 1991). Overall, we endorse the thinking of Van Maanen and Kunda (1989) who offered: (1) employees cannot 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, "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) rites 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 result 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 include viewing the alternative rites of integration as important means by which a service firm implements its chosen strategy. For example, firms attempting to implement a low cost, high-volume business strategy would effectively utilize rites of integration associated with low levels of psychological involvement. Minimal resources are required to select and train employees to enact low involvement rites, relative to rites associated with higher levels of involvement. In contrast, firms attempting to implement more of a differentiation strategy (e.g., Porter 1980) might design and enact rites of higher involvement. This would be particularly true if the service firm was seeking to differentiate itself based on the service delivery *process*, even more than the service outcome, per se. Of course, the move toward differentiation is a move away from a low cost position, since there will be higher selection and training costs associated with rites of higher involvement.

A related strategic issue is whether a low involvement service provider might be able to gain competitive advantage via, for example, an increase in the warmth of emotion displayed by service personnel. Two factors would make this difficult (but not necessarily impossible). First, altering only one or two elements (e.g, displayed emotion) of an otherwise low involvement rite could compromise the mutually-reinforcing, internally consistent nature of the rite that is essential to its effectiveness. It would be analogous to a firm being "stuck in the middle" between low cost and differentiation business strategies, the negative consequences of which have been documented (Dess and Davis 1984). Alternatively, the firm could alter all elements of the rite. This would result in an overall shift from a low to a medium involvement market, the success of which would depend upon the strength of competitors in the firm's new market versus those in the old.

In sum, 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 service delivery process cues they rely upon for information about the quality of the service.

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 presented by previous researchers: customer-induced input uncertainty; information processing complexities of the service encounter; and the role of emotional displays during the service encounter. Finally, 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.

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