Norm Formation and Non-Interaction in Grocery Stores

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The argument is made that behavior is defined and judged based upon meaning created through interaction. This meaning stems from background expectations of the situation that include the norms of appropriate behavior and anticipated actions from others. Deviance is the breaching of these norms as defined through interaction. Within grocery stores, minor deviance is engaging in behaviors that disrupt the main norm of non-interaction. Supporting this norm and as existing as norms themselves are avoidance of eye contact, maintaining personal space and territories, non-verbal reactions, and mutual avoidance. Appropriate behavior consists of maintaining these behaviors which support the meaning of grocery shopping: an errand to be accomplished as quickly as possible.

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Norm Formation and Non-Interaction in Grocery Stores

Every situation has a set of norms that defines the behavior expected within a given context. Norms allow for smooth interaction in that people know what is appropriate behavior for the role they are playing and what actions will likely come from others. Within a grocery store, the expectation is that people are there for the purchase of groceries; not doing so constitutes an act of major deviance. However, within a situation are interconnected norms that govern how people engage in a certain behavior. Breaching these norms can be defined as minor deviance because the actions do not go against the primary behavior of the activity but do violate the norms within. Thus, the focus of this project is an exploration of these norms and breaches because through minor deviance, what is considered appropriate behavior comes sharply into focus. More importantly, minor deviance most clearly demonstrates how deviance comes to be: through interaction and the subsequent labeling of others due to a given behavior.

Deviance as behavior that is so labeled is important for understanding human behavior and interactions. It is the realization no behavior can be inherently defined; it all depends upon the people within a situation and the expectations of behavior by those people within that context. As such, minor deviance is ideal for examining how all of these factors converge into the judgment of other’s actions because it marks the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. In order to examine how behavior is defined through interaction, I decided to focus upon the everyday errand of grocery-store shopping, a

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complex pattern of interaction and non-interaction where previous experience forges the background expectations essential to the definition of deviance. After all, how can one be deviant if there is no standard of behavior, a formulated set of norms, to compare to? Through research, interviews with both employees and patrons, unobtrusive observation, and participant observation, I have discovered a series of norms that guide our everyday behavior in grocery store and can be applied to other contexts where strangers interact.

Symbolic Interaction

Sociologists are people-watchers. Through observation, interviews, and studying relevant research, they discover how societies, groups, and individuals relate and interact with each other. One of the most effective tools for subjectively learning about human behavior is the symbolic interactionist perspective. This theory operates on the basis that human behavior forms through interactions with others, and that previous interactions dictate what is “proper” behavior in a given situation. In a given instance, people interact and behave according to how those interactions progress. Many circumstances require individuals to assume roles, which they successfully do because of previous experience and cues from others. They know what kind of interaction that situation requires, and adjust themselves. For example, students arrive at class with a pen and paper, ready to take notes upon a lecture. They do this because they have been students before, and know that this is how they are supposed to act in this situation. However, situations arise where people are

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2 Howard S. Becker, “Outsiders,” Deviance: The Interactionist Perspective. p. 11. Previous interactions are essential to “appropriate behavior” because they form the background expectations which carry into future interactions. It is my thesis that background expectations of an individual in a given situation define what is deviant behavior in others.

unfamiliar as to how they should act, be they in an unfamiliar role or circumstance. In these cases, interactional cues are essential to guide the uninitiated. Cues can come in the form of body language or verbal hints. Through the observation of such interaction, the sociologist can gain insight into role assumption, role creation, and how human behavior is created and maintained through dealings with others.⁴

The importance of the symbolic interactionist perspective cannot be ignored. One of sociology's tendencies is to generalize and make broad sweeping statements about human behavior. This perspective recognizes the importance of the individual and his/her interactions with others and constantly updates human behavior based upon new interactions. An example of this type of behavior modification occurs in clubs. One enters a club with a certain idea of appropriate behavior. Depending on the theme of the club, the people present, and the music, the individual adjusts his/her behavior. Such behavior modifications are based upon awareness, often including subtle shifts that the person does not even realize are being made.⁵ Additionally, symbolic interaction operates within a context, realizing that any conclusions drawn from interactions are statements that can only be made about that society, and not society in general. It makes the distinction between

⁴ Aaron V. Cicourel. "Basic and Normative Rules in the Negotiation of Status and Role," Studies in Social Interaction. pp. 244-245. Role assumption is the roles that people take on in a given situation depending upon the interactants involved. For example, the oldest person in the group may assume a position of authority, which other people in the setting can choose to accept or reject. The key to role assumption is that the person has been in a similar situation before, and knows what roles are to be played. By contrast, role creation is behavior that is formulated in an unfamiliar situation. An example of this often occurs in a crisis. If a man had a heart attack, someone might run to call an ambulance. By this action, this person has defined him/er sex as a helper, involved in the situation. The difference between role assumption and role creation all depends upon a person's familiarity with a situation, which can change at any time.

⁵ Blumer, Herbert. Symbolic Interaction: Perspective and Method. pp. 70-71. Blumer's term for such behavior modification is called joint action, "the fitting together of the lines of behavior of the separate participants." This is not to say that everyone acts alike, because different people serve separate purposes within the context of a setting. Instead, they first identify the social act and then interpret and define others’ behavior (while being interpreted and defined at the same time) in the formation of the situation.
groups and subgroups, and that interactions can be different and interpreted differently based upon the group. This leads into the important notion that nothing is inherent in human behavior, a critical tenet of symbolic interaction.

The Positivist v. The Symbolic Interactionist

In order to understand the symbolic interactionist perspective, there must be a basis of comparison. By providing an alternative microscope for studying human behavior, a better case can be made for why symbolic interaction has been used. The contrast to this viewpoint is the positivist perspective. It assumes a given behavior to be good or bad, and then looks at the people who commit that behavior to see what similar characteristics they possess. The shortcomings in this is that by judging a behavior as good or bad, the committer of the behavior is automatically stigmatized as well as being written off. By calling someone a shoplifter, they have been labeled and assumed to possess certain qualities of a shoplifter, whatever those may be. Additionally, the tendency to try to categorize the person increases, thus increasing the generalization that occurs. By labeling someone first, the person is being studied after the fact, and the potential for false attribution of causes increases. In studying a “shoplifter,” one already has in mind what kind of person s/he is and what led him/her to it.

Another aspect of the positivist perspective is that the label does not transcend human inaccuracy and bias. Not everyone who shoplifts becomes known as a shoplifter; it is only

6 John I. Kitsuse. “Societal Reactions to Deviant Behavior,” Deviance: The Interactionist Perspective, p. 19. Kitsuse goes on to say that “forms of behavior per se do not differentiate deviants from non-deviants; it is the responses of the conventional and conforming members of the society who identify and interpret behavior as deviant which sociologically transforms persons into deviants.”

those who are caught that are labeled so⁸. Conversely, people may be labeled falsely. They may not actually be engaging in deviant behavior, but are labeled due to others’ biases. False labeling is especially prevalent in regards to race. A group of white adolescents may not get a second look whereas a similar black group might get questioned by social control agents. While no actual deviant behavior has been exhibited, the black adolescents have nonetheless been labeled as troublemakers, and thus are subject to scrutiny and narrower definitions of acceptability⁹. Thus, the positivist perspective is weakened by its own lack of application of deviant labels to all who commit deviant behavior. Thus, deviants as defined by positivism are only those deviants who have been caught or witnessed as deviant. It does not include the many who engage in the same behavior that are not found out.

However, the most damaging aspect of the positivist perspective is that it assumes that certain behaviors are inherently good or inherently bad, thus prejudging the individual and allowing him/her to be defined by a single behavior¹⁰. To observe the positivist perspective, one only needs to look at crime. From this viewpoint, breaking laws makes someone deviant. Therefore, a prostitute is deviant, and should be compared with other prostitutes to discover what common factors they share in order to gain a typology of who a prostitute is. S/he is viewed as a collection of characteristics that make up a label. Most importantly,

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these attributes are ascertained after the label has been applied. In this process, the human being behind the label is lost.

From the symbolic interactionist perspective, no behavior is inherently good or bad. Rather, this judgment comes from other people within an interaction\textsuperscript{11}. This aspect of symbolic interactionism becomes paramount when studying deviance. Deviance and deviant behavior are defined by the players in interaction. Whether or not the players catch the deviance or even consider an act to be deviant will define an act as deviant or normal. In many cases, some acts are considered deviant in some circumstances, and normal in others. For example, wearing a bikini at the beach is normal, and interactions with others will confirm the bikini as normal attire upon the beach. However, the same bikini in an office building would be considered deviant; the bikini is not defined as appropriate attire for an office building. How people treat and react to deviants and deviant acts depends upon the deviant, the deviant act, the reactor (the person reacting to the deviant), and the context of the act\textsuperscript{12}.

Criminal behavior is viewed as more serious deviance and will more likely generate a stronger response than the bikini-clad woman. The woman might cause looks, whispers, and a call from her supervisor, but chances are the criminal will be reported or avoided.

What is important is that every situation is based upon the actors within and the interactions

\textsuperscript{11} Kai T. Erikson. “On the Sociology of Deviance,” \textit{The Collective Definition of Deviance}. p.17. Related to the judgment of behavior as deviant or not is the notion of boundaries. These boundaries establish where the norms end and deviance begins, and they are always shifting due to new interactions. Erikson states that “single encounters between the deviant and his community are only fragments of an ongoing social process... Boundaries remain a meaningful point of reference only so long as they are repeatedly tested by person on the fringes of the group and repeatedly defended by persons chosen to represent the group’s inner morality.”

\textsuperscript{12} John I. Kitsuse. “Societal Reactions to Deviant Behavior,” \textit{Deviance: The Interactionist Perspective}. p. 14
that occur between them. By looking at deviance as it is defined through symbolic interaction, the sociologist can observe the behavior for what it is: the breaching, testing, bending, or breaking of the norms and limits of society. To be deviant is to act outside of the expected norms in a given situation. From this, the sociologist can learn what is normal by looking at the line where deviance is labeled and how people react and interact with the so-called “deviant.”

Background Expectations and Defining Deviance

With an understanding of how deviance is defined, the attention must turn to the final ingredient of interaction, the reactor in a given situation. How an act is interpreted depends upon the interpreter(s), those who witness or take part in the interaction. The judgment made is based upon the reactor’s previous experiences in this situation or similar instances that can be deemed as relevant. These past interactions culminate into a mental folder, the background expectations of a situation and the behavior that is expected of others in it. The expectations are subconsciously applied, guiding reactions and judgment in the present situation. Background expectations are significant because they form the norms of behavior that guide actions. They come from personal and others’ experiences and values as well as how people see others reacting in a given situation. For example, patrons at an amusement park learn through these various sources that they must wait in line after people who have arrived before them in order to ride the attraction. Those who disobey this norm, which has been established as a rule of the park as well as a social rule of appropriate behavior, will receive the negative sanctions of agents of control as well as other patrons.


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Background expectations also arise from positions of power where guidelines are set to dictate appropriate behavior. The amusement park sets the norm of waiting in line and not cutting in front of others. Speed limits are set to create a standard speed on a given roadway, creating a norm where sanctions in the forms of tickets will be issued to those who violate. Additionally, other drivers will also judge those not following the norm through various demonstrations of their agitation.

Wherever their origin, background expectations dictate appropriate behavior in a given situation. They allow people to expect a certain type of interaction through the establishment of norms. Deviance is the violation of those norms, the actions or words that go against what is expected. It is the disruption of unwritten and/or written laws that creates ripples in the smooth pond of interaction. Let it not be forgotten that while norms are standardized by society, they are also modified and adapted to the individual. Because deviance relies upon interaction, the same behavior will be defined differently depending upon the reactor. Theft is an example of a behavior that generates many responses. According to the law, stealing is illegal and wrong. However, others may accept or reject the behavior due to situational factors, demonstrating that there is no inherent right or wrong action; the interpretation of it places that judgment14.

A final aspect is the incorporation of new experiences which are inconsistent with currently-held beliefs. Background expectations determine anticipated behavior in a given situation, and when a discrepancy exists, two choices exist:

1. The reactor will modify his/her background expectations to include the new interaction.

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2. The reactor will maintain his/her background expectations and judge the inconsistent interaction to be an exception to the rule.

To clarify, the inconsistent experience is deviant to the reactor in that it violates the reactor’s behavioral norm. The other will be labeled as “deviant” because of this violation, but how the reactor chooses to follow up this transgression varies. An example of the entire cycle can be witnessed in interactions between a non-smoker and a smoker. Background expectations are formed by the non-smoker based upon past unpleasant interactions with smokers that have been rude, defensive of their right to smoke, and insensitive to who may be affected by the smoke. From these encounters, society’s negative judgment of smoking, and the non-smoker’s own beliefs about the habit, the individual formulates a norm of expected behavior that will guide the interaction with a smoker. However, any new interaction with a smoker which does not fit this mold of how smokers “should” act will cause a disruption in the background expectations of the nonsmoker. A polite smoker, aware of how the cigarette is affecting the nonsmoker, might offer to put his/her cigarette out, thus completely going against the expected norm of behavior in smokers. At this point, the non-smoker may choose to re-evaluate the variety of opinions about smokers or simply declare that experience an exception to maintain the norm already in place. Whatever the situation, one’s background expectations guides the interpretation of all aspects of behavior.

Application of Theory

15 It should also be noted that the positive or negative feelings of the reactor towards that norm will determine how the “other” is viewed as well as how the inconsistent experience is reconciled.
Understanding how background expectations underlie and guide our everyday behavior and judgments provides the link between symbolic interaction and how deviance occurs. How members of society define deviance, based upon experientially-documented norms, reveals the boundary between the acceptable and the unacceptable. More importantly, deviance is about how that boundary changes in any given situation, depending upon who the interactants are and their background expectations. My interest in deviance lies in how people relate to each other, which includes maintaining norms and defining each other as well as the situation. As an avid people-watcher, I have discovered that everyday behavior is just as critical and telling as actions in extraordinary events, perhaps even more so because of the intricacies of behavior that occur without a second thought. We engage in the mundane the majority of the time; most of our interaction occurs within this context. Firmly entrenched in the symbolic interactionist perspective, I researched the everyday errand of grocery-store shopping, an ordinary task where a multitude of norms exist and are continuously breached. By learning how behavior is defined in this setting, it can be applied to similar situations as well. Another aspect is the realization of norms, ways of doing things in a given context so deeply embedded that one hardly notices. I now find myself constantly aware of the normative behavior present and how others are subscribing or deviating, and the interactions that follow. This project is about what every one does every day in every situation: attempt to make sense out of others and their behavior.

Within the context of grocery shopping, the background expectations, interactions, and deviance as defined by others all have specific forms. They shape the errand into how we know it to be. Background expectations include the experience of an errand and what it entails, specific expectations regarding the errand of grocery-shopping, and anticipated
behavior of the participants in that arena. Interaction occurs between customers and with employees, with standards of appropriate behavior determined on all sides. Deviance violates the smoothness of the errand norms and disrupts interaction, creating a new set of behaviors for everyone. Like many situations involving stranger-to-stranger interactions, a variety of factors come into play that manifest themselves differently depending upon the interaction and the interactants. Grocery shopping is an ongoing behavior, thus providing many opportunities to form and reinforce background expectations. Additionally, the sheer amount of time one spends shopping as well as the multitude of norms and the different aspects of behaviors as people move from selecting items to checking out provides many opportunities for interaction of all sorts. However, the most important reason is that many subtle breaches of background expectations and appropriate behavior occur within the grocery shopping experience. How people react to the testing of limits and pushing at the boundaries of acceptable behavior sheds light upon what is expected behavior in a given situation. By observing minor deviance, I have found a line of tolerance, the line between acceptable pushing of boundaries and the crossover into being labeled as deviant by reactors.

Research Methods: Interviews

Researching this topic, and the subsequent subtopics that developed, required ascertaining exactly what I was attempting to study. At the beginning of my research, I had only a vague notion of what I was looking for. Thus, I began through interviewing people
that know best what goes on in grocery stores: the employees. I selected two stores that are part of major chains to get separate input upon behavior in grocery stores\textsuperscript{16}. The employees include checkout clerks, a produce clerk, courtesy clerks, store managers, and a lobby supervisor. Almost all of them have been in the grocery business for a significant amount of time. The range was from several months to twenty years with the average being two to five years\textsuperscript{17}. Additionally, nearly all of the employees had worked at other grocery stores.

As a precursor to all the interviews, I stated that I was researching deviance and people’s reactions to deviants and deviant behavior. I guessed where deviance might be defined, and asked the employees for verification, opinions, and examples, citing shoplifting, writing checks in the express lane, and public displays of affection that might lead them to recall experiences. When being told of experiences, I would ask them to elaborate or describe a reaction in more concrete terms (e.g. attitude, “this look”). After the interview had progressed, I would finally ask about background expectation of customers in a grocery store and the clerks’ expectations of customers. Because they spent more time in the store than I ever could, I decided that it would be best to draw upon employee experiences and accounts as the first component of my field research. From these interviews, I discovered areas of information crucial to my research, and was thus able to expand and focus my data. Additionally, I was better equipped to conduct interviews with customers and do my

\textsuperscript{16} Due to company policy, I found that most of my research ended up in Store A, finding supporting data in Store B.

\textsuperscript{17} An interesting side note, unbeknownst to the average customer, is that the employees belong to a union, with a pay scale and benefits including medical and dental care coverage. Because of the union, everyone works their way up the same route. Not only are their jobs protected by the union, the box person (the entry position) starts work making $13 per hour. Despite the fact that “half the time, [they] make more than the customers, [they] are still treated like dirt, like [they’re] low class,” according to Brian, manager at Store A. This obviously affects interaction because the customers are unaware of the advantages of grocery store employment, which is assumed to be menial.
own observations as a shopper in the store because the employee accounts provided a basis of comparison and clues of what to look for.

Two different formats were used for the employee interviews. The first method is individual interviews, where I was able to control the direction of the answers and seek out the information pertinent to research. Occasionally, I would stumble upon interesting facts or facets as the employees elaborated upon a topic. I also conducted several group interviews, one early in the research process. This group interview was with a core group of six employees after work. The information flowed a lot smoother than speaking with just one person because people would feed off of each other's experiences and add information that would deepen my understanding and spark new ideas. Additionally, subjects came up that I would not have thought to ask about, but proved useful in later research and analysis as well as providing a better format for conducting the individual interviews. The downside is that I got the feeling there was more information to be had, but the flow of conversation (shifting from topic to topic naturally) probably cut off relevant data. The individual interviews were generally more focused due to direct questioning, as well as more in-depth. The drawback is that information I could have found useful was probably not brought up because the interviewee did not consider it relevant, that any and all data might provide an unexplored avenue or confirm previous research. Through both group and individual interviews of employees, I was able to direct later research, especially participant observation, as well as gain insight into the grocery-store errand as they provided accounts and experiences of behavior. The data indicates a certain dynamic between people as they enter the setting of a grocery store and how that dynamic changes based upon the situation.
I decided to interview employees first since they spend the most time in a grocery store and therefore are party to many different interactions. However, they can only speculate how customers feel and give accounts; the information is second-hand. Therefore, I sat in a chair at the entrance of the stores and asked people if they would answer a few questions about grocery shopping. As I did with the employees, I briefly stated that my senior project was studying behavior in grocery stores, and asked open-ended questions. What I found was that the interviews took a lot longer because they became conversations. As the interactions developed, we strayed to talk about details about each other's lives including work, family, opinions, philosophy, and the like. Several dimensions were involved in this research. The first aspect is the actual information obtained via the customers' perspectives. Another aspect is how others react when witnessing the interview take place, relating to background expectations, norms, and deviance. The unanticipated activity of a visible conversation violated other customers' norms of regular behavior in a grocery store, and they were clearly affected. Finally, the reactions of people when asked to answer questions provides information, though they are probably unaware of that fact. Both the employee and customer interviews rendered useful data about interaction, specific behaviors, accounts for actions, and meaning placed upon the various deeds that occur within the context of a grocery store.

Research Methods: Unobtrusive and Participant Observation

18 Sixty-three percent of those asked agreed to participate.

19 This violates one of the fundamental norms of customer non-interaction as appropriate grocery-store behavior, and will be discussed in depth later.

20 When planning customer interviews, I did not anticipate the strength or the number of reactions that would occur as a result of this interaction.
After gathering information based upon interviews, I felt competent to observe behavior through the one-way windows in one of the stores. What I found was confirmation of the data as well as an over-all picture of how people interact. Though I could not hear what took place, I could see how customers moved within the aisles and behaved in the checkout line. I discovered graceful, almost choreographed patterns of movement that lent credence to the norms described. I then took the next step: participant observation. As a grocery shopper, I moved through the aisles and waited at checkout, all the while observing others’ reactions and interactions with myself and other customers. With the norms in mind, I also set out to commit deviant acts and observe others’ reactions. The benefit was the first-hand proof and further delineation of how people label and respond to deviance. One of the problems was not being able to fully observe the reactions of others because I could not step out of the role of an ordinary grocery shopper. As researcher, I engaged in minor deviance, testing the boundaries of what other customers would accept as appropriate behavior. Within the aisles, I made eye contact, violated others’ personal space, impeded shopping through blocking the lanes or displays with my body and/or cart, and started conversations, all subtle breaches of normative behavior in the grocery store. I opted not to engage in blatant deviance, such as shopping from others’ carts, in order to maintain my focus upon discovering where people draw the line. At checkout, I did not place the bar that distinguishes one person’s items from another’s, encroached upon others’ personal space, engaged in conversation, and brought too many items into the line. All of these behaviors and their analysis will be addressed later. Not all of my behaviors were deviant. Several field expeditions were spent acting as a normal customer, following the norms and observing how other did the same. The data revealed is a combination of employee
accounts of customers' behavior, shoppers' confirmation of that account verbally, and the behaviors I witnessed both through accounts of others' behavior as well as awareness of my own. Whereas I found the interviews useful in determining norms, using participant observation allowed me to discover people's reactions to deviance and where the line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior lies.

An issue that arose while conducting participant observation was the ethics of my behavior and of my project in general. Interviews allow the person to give whatever information s/he desires. When observing behavior, the one being watched does not have a say in the resulting data; research is being done without consent. Of course, this is the dilemma in field research versus laboratory research. Experiments are contrived, and people do not always act naturally. However, they almost always volunteer to participate in the experiment. Field research catches people in their natural habitats, yet the collection of data that they provide the basis for has not been consented to. Whether or not the collection of information without someone's permission is ethical cannot depend upon the purpose, even if it is such a noble purpose as research. Other factors entering into this debate are the ethics and meanings of acts of deliberate deviance. In engaging in this behavior, I am deliberately trying to create a reaction through the violation of norms essential to the errand. I am very aware of how my actions have caused frustration, irritation, and annoyance as well as surprise, pleasure, and good feelings. However, in both information collection without prior consent and deliberate deviant acts, I set a limit on how far I would go. This limit was based upon my observations of behavior and both employee and customer accounts upon normal behavior. From this guide, I limited my deviance to what customers would be likely to do in minor deviance, bending the norms
within the grocery shopping context while still shopping. I also tried to maintain the
demeanor of an ordinary customer, one who is unaware of the effect of his/her breaching
of the norms has upon others’ errands. In any situation where gathering data involves
studying people, researchers need to set limits based upon how they would feel if they were
the ones being researched.

Defining the Errand: Behavior Norms

People “run errands” so often that they hardly seem a significant activity in and of
t Themselves. They are often found on lists of things to do: pick up dry cleaning, get gas,
purchase stamps, go to the bank, take the car to the mechanic, and many other activities,
including grocery shopping. Errands are “tasks that need accomplishing, the busywork of
day-to-day existence, the time-consuming, ever-present, usually dull necessities of social
life.” These are all menial duties that need to be carried out in order to maintain material
existence. They are not done for their own sake, but to enable the pursuit of something
else. Errands are “unlike ordinary work tasks in that their failures are more notable than
their successes. One is less please by an errand accomplished than annoyed by an errand
protracted, delayed, or not completed.” Furthermore, the completion of an errand is
never realized because the task will have to be done again in order to provide the means by
which to accomplish other goals and “real” activities in life.

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22 Wenglinsky, Martin. “Errands.” p. 85. In the grocery store, the deviance is labeled by one’s perception of
another shopper as slow, thus delaying and frustrating the errand. It goes against the background
expectation of a quick errand. Many of the employee accounts of customer expectations included an
example of a slow customer that was irritating those behind him/her.
Errands are worthy of notice in their own right because of the behavior that occurs within the context of accomplishing them. Unlike other tasks where status is externally determined, those engaged in errands all occupy the same position or role: a customer expecting a service to be rendered. This view is formed through previous experiences in running errands, creating background expectations of meaning of this activity and what behavior it entails. Because these chores are a means and not an end unto themselves, people want to spend less time upon them so that they can do the things they want. The meaning forged is speed: errands are a task to accomplish as quickly as possible. Anything that delays or slows the completion of an errand is met with frustration, hostility, exasperation, and annoyance.

A multiplicity of norms governs the behavior of errands from these expectations and previous experiences. They are established and maintained through watching the behavior of others, or informational influence. Conformity is maintained in errands because an individual acts in accordance with how others respond to the situation. One of these norms is waiting one’s turn for a service. It entails forming a line or some other method of determining order based upon the principle “first come, first served.” People wait behind those who have arrived before them. A second norm is that of minimal interaction. Errands are usually comprised of strangers all waiting for the quick completion of the same goal in


24 As I discovered through my research, the main meaning of grocery shopping is an errand. However, I found a significant number of people who had a supplementary definition of the errand as an outing or pleasant experience. Future exploration comparing the two expectations is necessary, but for now, the focus is upon the errand as the primary definition of the grocery store experience.

a given situation. There is no need to interact with other customers, only people necessary to accomplish the task, employees. Related to non-interaction between customers is non-verbal communication, body language used to express feeling. This is particularly important regarding deviance. Because of the norm of non-interaction, which has been and is currently being sustained by other customers in any given errand, any act of deviance places that person wanting to react while being caught by a norm. Reacting to deviance is deviant itself, and will cause others to label any abnormal interaction as deviant. To further explain, normal interaction occurs between clerks and customers and familiar customers, those who know each other. Thus, to maintain the norm of non-interaction, people use body language and facial expressions to demonstrate their feelings towards deviance. Another aspect of non-interaction is avoidance of eye contact. The most fundamental norm of errands is completing one’s task as fast as possible, and letting others do the same. Eye contact violates the “live and let live” policy that governs those who run errands because it does not let people keep to themselves. All of these norms combine to create a standard of appropriate behavior in any errand.

**Background Expectations of the Grocery Store and Its Employees**

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26 Symptomatic of this norm of quickness is the advent of the Automated Teller Machine (ATM), which has significantly reduced interaction in larger establishments. Many people have never seen the inside of their bank, using the “cash machines” outside only. At gas stations, customers never have to see an employee when paying at the pump. Grocery stores have also been affected as people carefully punch numbers into a small pad, shielding the transaction from others. Conversation has been significantly reduced as more and more people interact with a small machine and view that as the only necessary interaction, clerks reported.

27 When people are verbal in their reactions, it is because significant non-verbal cues exist in order to provide a safe environment for such a breach. In this case, the verbal person is expressing others’ sentiments as well as his/her own, and will not receive a deviant label. That person also draws attention to the one paying in line as extremely slow, possibly including the clerk in this definition.
An essential aspect of the errand experience is that it is the means by which one accomplishes another goal. The background expectations of grocery shopping by the customers are framed in the context of running an errand, the goal being the accomplishment of the task quickly so that the person can do something else they want to do. This is the cornerstone of what customers expect when they enter a grocery store: to get in and out as fast as possible. This includes finding all the items, waiting in line, and getting checked out. Anything that delays or slows down this process goes against the expectation, thereby preventing the errand from progressing as quickly as possible. This attitude often manifests itself against the clerks who are expected to know every item in the store, how much each item costs, and where all items are located (out of over 40,000 items). Additionally, checkout clerks felt the pressure for the shopping experience to be quick and problem-free. Several accounts of the clerks mentioned visible customer frustration, body language, when the checkout line was slow. Because the clerks are part of the establishment and have the most interaction with the customers, they are the recipients of customer frustration when the shopping process has slowed. One checkout clerk reported being yelled at because the store was out of particular item, and this experience was not uncommon. All of the employees interviewed felt that the customers expected them to have control over all events in the store, and were met with frustration when this expectation did not match reality. Clerks also provide a vent for customers’ frustrations. This includes when the customer is in a hurry, feels frustrated by another patron’s slowness, and any other issues the person might have.

Another aspect of customer expectations comes from the store itself as well as the people working within. Previously mentioned is the expectation of employee knowledge of the
store and its items. However, while the key expectation of the grocery store is quick service, they also want a hospitable atmosphere to make the shopping experience as painless as possible. A clean store with quality items and employees construct this image and are definitely desired by customers, but it goes beyond that. All the employees thought a critical aspect to the shopping experience was their service and the manner in which it came. In grocery stores, the corollary to fast service is friendly service. When customers feel welcome and are treated well, they tend to respond in kind, thus reducing any frustration from any delays in the shopping process. The rapport established between customer and clerk is an important factor in determining the attitude of the customer, as demonstrated by the friendliness and tolerance of regulars versus irregulars. For the employees, customer satisfaction is not something that they just pay lip-service to; it is something that is practiced for good business. The lobby supervisor, with twenty years of grocery-store employment, pointed out that “most people won’t complain. They just won’t come back. They shop around until they find a place that treats them right.” When the customers have been treated right, their demeanor is different from that of the errand-runner in a hurry. Shoppers acknowledge their satisfaction through politeness, friendliness, and saying, “thank you,” a sharp contrast to others who treat the clerks disrespectfully when the shopping process is slowed for reasons beyond the clerks’ control. Being friendly and quick is good business and guarantees regular shoppers. As the lobby supervisor points out, “In this business, the customer is always right, whether they are right or wrong. Our job is to meet their needs.” The goal of the store and the clerks is to make

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28 The construction of a new or corollary meaning to the errand has occurred.
the task of shopping as painless as possible: meeting the expectations of customers who
desire fast, friendly service where one can obtain the items needed and be on their way.

**Grocery Shopping and Non-Interaction in the Aisles**

To apply the fundamental errand norm, the goal of grocery shopping is to “come in, get
what you need, and get out” while letting other shoppers do the same. Both customers and
employees confirm this verbally, and the proof lies in the manifestation of this norm: non-
interaction, nonverbal response, and lack of eye contact. To watch the entire store full of
customers appears like a choreographed ballet. Carts move around each other without
touching, their owners not seeing the other customer, even though they may be looking
directly at the other. People traveled on their respective sides when they passed each other,
on the right as they do in cars. Traffic jams that form at the intersection between two aisles
untie themselves as people take turns without a word said. When looking at a display, the
person will magically and silently move to the side to allow the other to view the selection
as well. People park their carts towards the sides of the aisles to allow others to pass. One
might call it courtesy, but these behaviors maintain non-interaction. “Getting out of the
way” gives other customers no reason to say anything. As one clerk stated, “[Customers
interact] hardly at all if they can avoid it. They have nothing to do with each other.” This is
displayed by the care in which people maneuver around other’s carts when a traffic jam
occurs. The customers act as if they are alone and avoid eye contact despite the close
proximity of a number of people. Additionally, dodging others is likely to speed the errand.
The less time spent waiting for someone to move or talking when one could be selecting
items is a delay, violating the expectation of the doing errands as fast as possible. Grocery
shopping, and any situation, is about maintaining norms based upon expectations, and
violations of those constitute deviance because someone is engaging in inappropriate behavior.

How people react to inappropriate behavior sheds light upon what norms actually exist, how people react when those norms are breached, and how people react to other behaviors that do not interfere with the goal of a fast errand. Non-interaction is a norm, yet when people do interact, they are over-polite or very friendly. When I was looking at a display for a prolonged period of time and not moving for others, violating a norm, a woman finally said, “Excuse me,” causing me and my cart to make room. Her tone was very polite, eyes hopeful. It did not occur to me not to move, which is the effect of the norm of courteous interaction when it does occur. However, it took her some time to actually say something; the force of the non-interaction norm is strong and typical. For either of us to have acted differently would have caused many people to apply the label as deviant because of the interference with another’s errand or rude interaction. Another time, I was waiting in the checkout line, and blocked the front horizontal aisle with both cart and body. The man approached, waited, and finally said, “Excuse me,” at which point I moved. The phrase is polite and so was his tone, but it was a bit more demanding because I had caused a delay in his errand. His body language expressed impatience in his eyes and posture, but the polite interaction had existed, and I moved out of his way. When the behaviors that maintain mutual avoidance fail or do not exist, customers resort to polite interaction to correct the deviance and continue upon their errand.

Deviance that interferes or slows the goal of the errand generates a negative response. One girl went the opposite direction through a checkout line, causing people to jostle to get out of her way, yet they smiled. She did not affect their errand, and her demeanor was
pleasant. Demeanor has an effect upon how we respond to deviance; however, most people are so focused upon the completion of the errand that they do not present a positive or negative demeanor to react to\(^\text{29}\). This focus is important, for most customers within a grocery store do not realize their deviance, the fact that they are slowing the errand of someone else. This is because people work to maintain non-interaction within a grocery store, and it takes a lot of work to ignore others. "Unless they have to, they won’t interact," one clerk notes. The delay of the errand, an act of deviance, breaks the focus upon the errand and brings it to the source, often unwitting\(^\text{30}\). The reactor has three choices: to ignore the other person, communicate non-verbally and wait, or to speak to the deviant. Decisions are based upon the demeanor of the deviant and the frustration level of the reactor, whether or not s/he cares about breaching the non-interaction norm.

**Personal Space and Territories**

Another factor that influences how people interact within the aisles as well as where deviance is likely to be defined is the norm of personal space. Personal space is a mobile territory around the individual which acts as comfortable sphere between the self and others. Violating this space causes the individual to feel discomfort and usually causes a hasty retreat in order to re-establish the satisfactory amount of distance from the other\(^\text{31}\). However, the boundaries of personal space are completely subjective to others and the

\(^{29}\) The effect of a deviant’s demeanor upon other's reactions will be discussed in a later section, Shoplifting.

\(^{30}\) A certain difficulty existed in my participant observation. Through unobtrusive observation and employee accounts of behavior, I ascertained that people who are labeled as deviant by others are often unaware of that label. Because I was deliberately engaging in deviance, I was aware and my reactions are slanted as a result. It deserves further study to see how those labeled yet are unaware of that deviant label react to others.

situation. Strangers are usually kept at a further distance than friends. Crowded areas shrink personal space. The bubble is also shaped to form more of a preserve in the front, slightly less at the sides, and an even smaller area in the back. In the aisles, the effects of maintaining personal space are clear. At a display, customers shift to make room for the other, but to maintain their own space so that both can shop comfortably. Additionally, people that have come in together form a group space that others respect. These groups are marked by conversing with each other and walking together in closer proximity than two strangers would as well as a battery of non-verbal hints that indicate "togetherness."

Personal space serves to maintain a norm of non-interaction typical among strangers. The further apart people are, the easier it is to ignore others in the area and focus upon the completion of grocery shopping. In the aisles, people are spread out, and the norms of ignoring and non-interaction take little work to maintain. Also of note is the work it takes to ignore people when a particular area is crowded. At this point, personal spaces shrinks and people are more conscious of others because their boundaries cannot extend as far as they would like. Usually, the errand is slowed due to the number of people all trying to accomplish their respective tasks simultaneously. Frustration increases because personal space is limited and their errand is delayed. While this occurs in the aisles, the phenomenon is especially prevalent in the checkout line where many people are occupying a small space.

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34 Employee accounts referred to customer's increased agitation when the store was busy. People tended to exhibit more non-verbal impatience in line and their demeanor was different that customers who had plenty of space to shop. While customers expect to be in close proximity in the lines, they do not have that same expectation in the aisle, and thus frustration increases because non-interaction is difficult to maintain.
Another related issue is that of territories, the spaces that individuals claim that others recognize as belonging to them. These domains are significant because people respect these spaces as belonging to others. Territories can be temporary, like a table at a restaurant, or permanent, like a house. However, the primary feature of territories is not how long they exist but how they are marked and defended. Several types of dominions are relevant to grocery stores. The first is use space, “the immediate area around or in front of an individual, his claim to which is respected because of apparent instrumental needs." In the aisles, such space is claimed when someone is looking at a display or by a hand-carried basket. The person is shopping and trying to select items, and others will make an effort to not disrupt. Another type of territory is a conversational preserve, “the right of an individual to exert some control over who can summon him into talk and when he can be summoned.” In the grocery store, this is a critical aspect of non-interaction. Each person is engaged in grocery shopping, all focused on completing an errand, and does not believe s/he has the right to summon another without a cause. An appropriate reason is when someone delays a person’s grocery errand, but even then not everyone feel comfortable violating another’s conversational preserve. This is due to the fact that the deviant, as defined by the reactor, is usually not aware that s/he is impeding the progress of another, and is therefore closed to interaction from a stranger. Additionally, the non-interaction norm also prevents people from saying something lest they be defined as deviant by someone else. The choice is one of two reactions: an over-polite communication or a non-verbal response, to be discussed later. As previously mentioned, the decision is based upon

35 Goffman, Erving. Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order. p. 34.
the demeanor of the other, or how the reactor thinks the deviant will react. Thus, when people do invade the conversational preserve to correct the deviant behavior, they are over-polite to minimize the appearance of the intrusion and lessen the chances of a negative interaction.37

Another aspect of territory is the use of markers, visible signs to others of another person’s possession. Carts are unique in that they act as both markers and are marked. The unique assortment of groceries claims a cart as one’s own. Since the various items are clearly not theirs but someone else’s, people respect carts as an exclusive territory. Shopping out of someone else’s cart will be defined by the owner as deviant because it violates this known boundary. Additionally, others might also define the person as deviant because it deviates from the norm of how one selects items in a grocery store. Carts also act as markers of territory. Sometimes they are in close proximity to the owner, thereby establishing more personal space for the person to shop in. Additionally, carts are used as avoidance mechanisms, a boundary marker, delineating a given space around people. Moving through the store, the cart becomes part of the personal space bubble that people avoid entering. Customers take great pains to maneuver carts around each other so that they do not touch. Another aspect of marking is the side trip: leaving the cart at the end of the aisle when getting an item. By leaving their cart, they are establishing a point to which they want to return to continue grocery shopping. Place-marking of the cart also occurs in

37 It should also be noted that non-interaction is not a negative behavior, just the norm that exists within a grocery store. The fact that it does exist indicates that a significant number of people desire this norm as part of their grocery-shopping experience. The supporting norms that help maintain non-interaction are also in place because they are comfortable, desired, and serve a purpose.

38 Goffman, Erving. *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*. p. 41. Goffman also notes that people can be markers of personal space and the turn as well as personal effects.
line. The cart is left to secure a spot in line while the owner runs off to grab a forgotten item. Because people respect the cart as a marker of space just as they respect a person as marking one in line, the place is held. Territories, like personal space, maintain the norm of non-interaction and ignoring others. They form a protective bubble around each customer that facilitates mutual avoidance. Customers bounce off of each other’s personal space, conscious of the boundaries necessary to maintain avoidance.

**Waiting and Waiting... Norms and Deviance in the Checkout Line**

“Every rule, then, creates a potentiality for deviance\(^\text{39}\).” In order for people to interact and know how to interact in a situation, rules must exist, and people need to be able to assume that these rules, or norms, will be followed. Appropriate behavior in a grocery store follows a set of norms geared towards the purpose of completing the errand as quickly as possible. Deviance in a grocery store is comprised of two parts: the violation of non-interaction and anything that causes a delay, both factors which violate norms and hinder a smooth shopping process. This explains the stark difference in how much people interact in the aisles versus when they are in line. While customers are in the aisles, they still have items to find, and do not want to be slowed. Once this first part has been completed, customers find themselves in the checkout line waiting to pay. Already geared to talk with the employee (a necessary interaction) some will pass the time by making small talk with others also waiting. Though this is a breach of non-interaction, it is not viewed negatively because it does not slow the shopping process in any way. Others pass the time by reading

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magazines, chatting with others within their group, or simply staring off into space, all mechanisms of non-interaction with strangers.

Other norms also govern behavior in line. Once people are able, they place their items on the turntable, placing bars before and after their groceries to indicate possession, and then step further in line to make room for the next person. They walk along with their groceries in line but leave a gap for the person currently paying for groceries. Two factors change how people relate, according to employee accounts. First, some people tend to frequent the same stores on a regular day at a set time and get to know the employees of that shift. They become familiar with the store and the people there, and begin to feel comfortable. Instead of grocery shopping being an errand to accomplish as quick as possible, these customers have found a bit of enjoyment within the task through conversations with employees. It does not take much more time, especially when conversing with a checkout clerk who is ringing up items. Employees enjoy these interactions as much as customers did. Clerks were flattered by familiar customers who got in their line when shorter lines existed. The visits are pleasant, bringing a bit of friendship into the drudgery of both work and errands. These “regulars” often shared their lives with the clerks, and vice versa. Furthermore, these customers were more tolerant of delays in their errand. While they also wanted to accomplish the errand as quickly as possible, having a relationship with employees made the errand less of a task. A supplementary norm has developed for these people: sacrificing part of the speed component in favor of the familiarity aspect, being checked out by someone they know and like. However, not all

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40 Both places I researched used turntables. However, when carts are involved, the customers themselves are used as bars to mark territory, each person serving as a bar.
customers are friendly. One checkout clerk considers most of the customers “very open, but they are either friendly or cold—there is no in-between.” Whether or not people decide to maintain non-interaction, even though clerks are “safe” and will not cause a deviant label, often depends upon how focused they are upon the goal of a speedy errand.

At checkout, people are almost done with the grocery errand, and a sense of rush develops. The customers are ready to be finished. The line is the place where the most interaction occurs for several reasons. First, people are in close proximity for a prolonged period of time, thereby increasing chances for interaction. Second, interaction is more accepted in a line, whether chit-chat or venting frustration upon the clerk. Third, the checkout stand is where people are the most aware of others’ behavior. While the norm of non-interaction is still in place, the circumstances have changed. In the aisles, customers are working separately to complete their shopping; their behavior is governed by this separation for each to accomplish their respective goals. At checkout, the people in a given line all have a mutual goal: to pay for their groceries. More importantly, their behavior is dependent upon each other and affects one another. How quickly one person is checked out influences how long others have to wait in line. The checkout line is where attributions, labels, and certain types of deviant behavior is identified because people are aware of others’ behavior instead of making a conscious effort to ignore them.

The Loophole of Non-interaction: Body Language in the Line

The norm of non-interaction makes it difficult to react to deviance. People work to ignore other customers so that they may proceed with their shopping smoothly. However, there are times when people do react to others, and certain means by which to do so. Any visible emergency is likely to engender a response since that person is clearly not shopping
but in need of assistance. Interestingly, the norms that govern behavior vanish during the crisis, partially resume afterwards with customers talking about the experience, until finally, the norms are back in place once all of the interactants who witnessed the situation have completed their errand and left the store. A clerk related the story of a man who had a heart attack in the parking lot. People ran out of the store, including a nurse, to help, and later conversations occurred in the store with people wanting to know what happened and comparing information. However, such occurrences are rare. The norm of behavior is non-interaction; people actively work to ignore one another and become irritated by those who have made that difficult. This includes customers that are causing scenes or those that are slowing down the errand. In the former situation, the customers are not keeping to themselves; attention is being drawn to them by their behavior. A deviant label is applied because these customers are keeping others from ignoring them. In the group interview, one of the clerks mentioned the reaction to a child crying in the store, “there are people that literally say, ‘I wish that lady would shut that kid up.’” However, in order for the customer to be able to verbalize this reaction without receiving a deviant label, a sympathetic audience must be present. The way to discern that audience is through the accepted mode of reactance in a grocery store: body language and facial expression.

People rarely confront one another about their feelings within a grocery store. Deviance is met with frustration and annoyance, but the non-interaction norm prevents people from saying things directly lest they become defined as deviant as well. The checkout line is where the people are the most aware of others as well as dependent on others, and slow lines often cause sentiments that cannot be directly expressed. Instead, feelings manifest themselves in the body, both in the posture and in the face. The body stance is how people
carry their emotions. Feelings of frustration and impatience manifest themselves in shifted or shifting weight and crossed arms. This is the waiting stance most visible while people are in line and ready to leave. Some people tap or fidget. Others "get ready" by filling out checks or digging out money, credit cards, or ATM cards. Most telling are the facial expressions accompanying this posture. People look unhappy, frustrated, and disgusted. Eyes shift frequently, looking for a shorter line or a new line to open up. Customers look at their watches, which increases frustration because they are even more aware of time. They also glance at the person paying for their groceries, willing them to go faster. Within the eyes, the feelings of impatience, exasperation, and annoyance are clear, even encompassing dirty looks at times. Sighs express running out of patience. The mouth is either stretched into a thin line or the lips are pursed, both signs of displeasure. When people are in a hurry, these expressions are stronger and are usually accompanied by anxiety. Checkout clerks noticed many of the same expressions, all communicating a similar message about waiting in line: "I can't believe this," "This person is wasting my time," and "Get out of my way."

Not everyone is sending non-verbal hate messages to other people in slow lines. A courtesy clerk notes that regular customers tend to have more patience while waiting in line. They are more likely to sympathize with the clerk and find ways to occupy their time, such as reading a magazine or talk to companions. Checkout clerks noted that infrequent customers usually come in with a chip on their shoulders, expecting more and faster lines. Additionally, intolerance is higher when the store is busier, when it is more difficult for customers to avoid and ignore each other. Intolerance also feeds on expectations, especially

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regarding the express lane. People anticipate a faster line, and have a lower level of acceptance of others. They are more likely to define deviance in what they consider to be slow. Very seldom does one customer speak out to another; instead, the disgruntled customer takes out his/her frustration out upon the clerk. One checker described a sort of process. The longer the customer stands in line, the more frustration and impatience that builds. By the time s/he reaches the checkout clerk, the source of exasperation (other customers ahead of him/her in line) is gone, but the delay and feelings are still there, and thus the clerk is faced with a bad attitude. Sometimes, indirect comments are made to other customer or to no one in particular, such as "Is anyone going to open another line?"

However, the key to interaction between customers is non-interaction; the clerk acts as an involuntary vent of customer frustration when the shopping process is delayed.

Primarily, the checkout line is where most encounters that are labeled deviant occur. Usually, the "deviant" is not aware of being so; others in line label him/her as such, through mainly non-verbal behavior, for the amount of time s/he is taking and how it is slowing them down. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, it was not any specific behavior in and of itself that was considered deviant; others' perceptions defined it so. One checker described an elderly lady digging for exact change, much to the growing frustration of everyone else in line who rolled their eyes and gave the "I can't believe this" look. However, this behavior is not labeled as such if it does not take too much time. Similarly, coupons were not considered deviant unless the person had an excessive amount, with excessive defined by the people in line behind the person. This indicates how reliant the labeling of deviance is upon perception and meaning forged from interaction between people. Conversely, check writing, ATM usage, and special means of payment (i.e. certificates, food stamps,
or special checks) almost guaranteed a deviant label from others because of the amount of time consumed. This was especially true in the express lane, where a lower line of tolerance seems to exist. One of the ways that this label could be minimized or even eliminated was by being prepared when the final total came. By having the check already made out and identification ready, the person could avoid a deviant label and the subsequent reactions consisting of dirty, impatient looks, shifting eyes, and exasperated body stance with the occasional over-emphasized sigh.42

Another area where perception plays into one applying the label of deviance is in terms of quantity as viewed by others in line. Again, the express line is where perception and impatience are magnified. Express lines generally have a limited number of items that can be checked out. However, not everyone who has more items is defined as deviant by the clerks or customers. It is also not true that persons labeled as deviant actually have more items than allowed. It is the perception of many items that causes people to count items and define someone as deviant. Another aspect of the express line is that since there is a lower line of toleration, there is also a higher frequency and less subtle response to deviance. Others in line may make comments about the limit to no one in particular or sigh very loudly and mention that they are in a hurry.43 At this point, the clerk has to politely tell the customer to “please use another line when they select so many items” in order to satisfy others in line. Behavior in lines, especially in the express line, include in the notion

42 Important to note about behavior in the checkout line is that the labels are non-verbal and generally expressed to the clerk in the form of impatience and curtness once that person’s turn to pay comes. However, no specific behavior caused the labeling of deviance but the subjective perceptions of others’ actions in relation to the self.

43 The same sort of behavior also occurs when one is writing a check in the express lane.
of appropriate behavior as well as fair behavior, and violations of this norm generated the most interaction. Here, the conflict lies between getting in and out of the grocery store quickly and being fair to others in public places. One of these norms is how people are "supposed" to wait in line. One checkout clerk noted anger when another line opened, and the first person in that line was not the next person in the former line. Cutting and cart-jamming was another source of hostility as people vied to be first in line. The correlation between customer interaction (in violation of the non-interactive norm) and angry confrontations was made clear by several employees. Cart-jammers often got into verbal confrontations, and any conflict that began in an aisle was found to have escalated by the time both customers had reached checkout. One clerk recalled two customers shouting at each other from two separate lines. The spark of the conflict was apparently one refusing to get out of the other's way in an aisle. Others witnessing the scene tried to ignore it or avoid it, but were always interested in what had happened after the fact. This after-interest carried to any observable conflict. All of these instances of deviance are defined by others' perceptions.

In this context of the checkout line, the link between theory and reality becomes clear. No one definition of deviance can be applied to grocery store behavior of any sort. Instead, meaning is created through interaction and non-interaction within the situation. Most of the time, customers do not interact, and a neutral meaning is applied because everyone is adhering to the norms of the situation. However, in the checkout line, people cannot help but be aware of others' behavior because how fast someone pays for their groceries affects how quickly others can complete their errand as well. Thus, judgments and attributions are made based upon this indirect interaction, which foster reactions. Defining deviance is the
process of applying a specific meaning to a person because they are violating the norms based upon background expectations of an interactant in a situation. At checkout, the person paying may be defined as deviant because of the length of the line, the rush of the reactor, frustration due to unrelated events in someone's life, or because the person is "taking too long," whatever meaning that entails. However, definitions of deviance are purely subjective, dependent upon the players in a situation. A person who suddenly starts pulling items because they do not have enough money may cause one person to label him/her as deviant, but not another. The type of interaction, who is involved in the interaction, and the expectations of the players in the situation determine how behavior is interpreted.

Accounts of Shoplifting

Shoplifting is defined as deviant by the law, the employees of the store, and many of the customers as well. However, whether the person is labeled as a shoplifter and how s/he is treated depends upon the shoplifter and what is stolen. The object being lifted becomes an interactant in the situation and plays a large role in punishment. Cigarettes, alcohol, and cosmetics are the most frequently stolen of any item, and are punished because of the amount lifted and because they are not necessity items. One store calls the police and bans the person from the store. However, if food is stolen, the person is let go, and told not to return. In almost all cases, the shoplifters maintain that it is not their fault, and provide a variety of justifications to excuse their behavior. Some of them claim they were just going to use the phone outside, they have no money, or they forgot to pay. A few even try

to turn the blame upon the clerk, saying that s/he “forgot to put it in [his/her] basket last time,” and thereby “justifying” the behavior. Once the shoplifter realizes that excuses are not working, s/he switches tactics. Some threaten the clerks, others cry, and still others apologize and promise to never do it again. The lobby supervisor found that the people who steal generally have no remorse, and come back to steal again. The only remorse lies in being caught. Additionally, there is a boldness to stealing. Shoplifters will grab as much as they can and head for the door, even with a cart; not very often is food stolen. This attitude of the shoplifter has a definite effect upon other customers who respond and react to his/her deviance.

Other customers tend to regard shoplifting as a negative behavior. Not only is it against the law, it also drives up prices for other customers and can even put a grocery store out of business. Thus, customers who frequent a particular store have a vested interest in preventing shoplifting. According to a clerk in the meat department, “Most people just really despise shoplifters. If they find someone, generally they’ll tell us. We have legal liabilities as far as what we can do to shoplifters, but most customers will tell us, “Hey, that person has something.” Employees themselves can often spot shoplifters; they are the customers looking to see if anyone is looking at them. Both customers and clerks look down upon those stealing. Not only is it a hassle for employees, it slows the shopping process for other customers by tying up employees. Shoplifting also deviates from normal

45 It is important to note that not every customer who witnesses stealing reports it. Some customers may confront the shoplifter, others may say nothing to anyone. Whether or not a customer reports shoplifting to the store depends upon whether or not the customer views theft as deviant. Regular customers who know the clerks and the store, thus having an investment in the store, will tend to report theft because the deviance affects the customer as well.
and expected behavior in a grocery store: the selection and purchase of food and household items.

How the store handles shoplifters determines how much reaction will be generated from the other customers. One store deals with shoplifters in the back, thereby taking care of the situation as quickly, quietly, and efficiently as possible. This store does not usually call the cops due to all the paperwork involved; the goal is to get the object back and punish the person by banning him/her from the store. In this store, the customers do not really have contact with shoplifters after they have been caught and labeled such. However, the fact that the customers report the shoplifters indicates disapproval of the activity as well as the maintenance of normal customer-to-customer relations. By telling the clerk instead of saying something to the shoplifter, the customer uses normal authority channels and continues non-interaction with other customers by using the employees as a vent for their frustration with deviant behavior.

Conversely, the other store handles shoplifters in public, calling the police and making a spectacle of the shoplifter. In doing this, the goal is to embarrass the deviant (especially if the shoplifter is an adolescent) and deter him/her from future stealing. Additionally, customers have the opportunity to judge the individual because s/he has been identified as deviant by the store. A stigma is attached to the shoplifter, identified to other customers by the clerks watching over him/her or because of the shoplifter’s loud defense. The stigma

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46 In this setting, other customers’ reactions to the deviant can be twofold. The customer may have alerted the store to the deviant behavior, and later witness the apprehension of the shoplifter. In most cases, the customers meet the shoplifter after s/he has been already caught and labeled. The difference between the two is that the customers who reports the deviant behavior originally “met” the shoplifter as just another customer. The act of stealing led to the customer’s reinterpretation of his/her demeanor and caused the reporting of the behavior.
is heightened when the police arrive. While the store seldom prosecutes, the police presence makes the situation more serious to the shoplifter and reduce the likelihood of a repeat occurrence. However, this stigma is dependent upon who is shoplifting, the shoplifter's demeanor, and what the item is, which is not always obvious to the customers.

A double standard exists when customers judge someone who has been labeled by the store as a shoplifter. While most adult shoplifters are viewed with distaste, children often receive sympathy. The courtesy clerk caught a ten year-old boy who tried to steal a pair of socks by putting them on in the bathroom. The clerk noticed the clean socks weren't the dirty socks he wore in and confronted him. The boy responded that he hadn't done anything wrong and was going to call his mother. The store reacted by calling the police to scare him as well as his parents. Shoppers who witnessed the situation were "shocked, surprised, and sympathetic." While it was never said, the courtesy clerk recalls receiving many looks with the expression, "Let him go- he's just a kid." These customers reacted not to the act of shoplifting, but to who was engaging in the behavior. The courtesy clerk added that when adults are caught, they are given looks of disdain, distaste, and a look conveying the expression, "How stupid." However, judgment of the accused shoplifter is also based upon the person's demeanor. Customers who see clerks being threatened or yelled at in impolite language will likely view the shoplifter more negatively, whereas someone who has an apologetic demeanor might invoke sympathetic reactions from other customers such as, "They wouldn't have taken it if they didn't need it." A shoplifting incident illuminates the range of customer-to-customer behavior. Many customers

47 No mention of race or class ever came up in my interviews regarding shopping. Whether that is due to a lack of a stereotype or unwillingness to express a "prejudiced" viewpoint is unclear.
demonstrate their feelings through body language while others ignore the situation completely, attempting to reset the shopping experience back to normal.

Future Expansion of Research

Obviously, there are always more books to read, more journal articles to peruse, and more studies to examine. However, a more useful endeavor would be to apply the findings presented in this paper to other situations and discovering how adaptable this model is and where adjustments should be made. Data and analysis is pointless if it is not tested in other contexts. Additionally, more research can be done upon behavior in grocery stores. Interviewing kids, solicitors outside stores, shoplifters, store detectives, and the like can result in more information supporting the present claims. A focus upon a single or several behaviors would also strengthen the array of topics covered in this survey. Another related area that has not been addressed is the committing of major, obvious deviant acts as a participant observer. Included in this category is shoplifting, stealing from another person, playing pranks, and other behavior where the researcher is being deviant by not shopping.

Another aspect of grocery shopping that bears further research is the non-interaction norm. During several interviews with customers, I noticed that we ended up talking about things other than the interview, engaging in real conversation. This, of course, drew reactions from other people who witnessed two strangers talking at the entry of the grocery store, not a common place for interaction. As a test, I began to say hi or strike up conversations (usually product-related) with other customers. No one was down-right rude;

48 Generally, other customers did not directly interact with shoplifters once the store had caught them. In order for customers to interact with each other, one had to feel wronged by the other customer. From this, a verbal conflict might or might not occur.
their reaction was of surprise. Asking people about products, such as how to tell if a certain fruit was ripe, usually resulted in help or an apologetic, “I don’t know. Sorry.” All of the conversations were short-lived, generally made in passing, but I was intrigued by the response. In violating the norm of non-interaction, I discovered that people seem friendly and not too disturbed by my deviance. This fact was confirmed by customers who had engaged in chit-chat with others waiting in line and found it pleasant. This finding makes me wonder if people really want non-interaction in a grocery store, that the norm between strangers having been established, has just been maintained. Clerks and regular customers get to know each other; regular customers have even adapted their expectations of grocery stores to include that familiar interaction. However, this is not the case with customers because the interaction that occurs is not a set one. People expect to associate with clerks, but not with strangers. Despite this, customers did not seem to mind my breaching. An interesting experiment would be the attempt of establishing and maintaining friendly relations with customers. Given that regulars usually shop at a given time on a specific day, it seems that such an endeavor might prove successful. Perhaps a project such as this could result in more interaction in the grocery store. I would also like to delve into dueling expectations within the errand. Some people clearly demonstrated the errand approach to getting groceries while others viewed the experience as an outing, a more pleasant activity. This would probably be influenced by what time one observed behavior and who was interviewed. Yet these different background expectations could lead to interesting interaction not addressed here. It is an avenue worthy of study both for the behavior in grocery stores and as a reminder of openness to all possibilities in attributions of behavior when researching a topic.
Participant observation enabled me to gain a significant amount of data as well as confirm and discover new aspects of information provided by the interviews. The firsthand perspective is a valuable tool, and more data could be obtained to provide a deeper understanding of behavior in grocery stores and other related errands. A research partner would also provide additional insight because they could witness all interactions and reaction that take place between the participant observer and other customers. Along with this data collected should be an examination into the ethics and meaning of deliberate deviance, acts committed with the intention of getting a rise out of others. Another aspect of this research is the collection of data without consent and if this behavior is ethical simply because it is for research. This would consider deliberate deviance done for the fun of it as well as field-study questions. The most important question to consider in field research is whether there is a limit to what one can research and how far the researcher can go in collecting “pertinent data.”

Concluding Remarks upon Deviance

Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, deviant behavior is in definition of the observer. Upon entering a grocery store, one enacts a set of background expectations as to what the grocery store errand is supposed to be and appropriate behavior in this setting. For most, grocery shopping is a task to be accomplished as quickly as possible, and anything getting in the way of that can easily be labeled deviant behavior by other customers. However, customers must find ways to express their displeasure without violating another norm of grocery store behavior: non-interaction between customers. Those who violate this norm risk being labeled deviant themselves, especially if there is conflict. Thus, the normative behavior for the expression of dissatisfaction is either
through body language or complaints to the employees, most often the checkout clerk since s/he is the final gate to completing grocery shopping. Grocery shopping is an errand, a necessary task for people to accomplish. As such, customers expect fast and friendly service to make the errand as painless as possible. Additionally, customers also hold personal expectations of normative behavior in grocery stores. When these expectations are violated, a norm has been breached. Whether or not the customer chooses to label this deviant is a part of the interaction that occurs in everyday errands.
References


