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University of Aberdeen Business School

**The Socially Organized Basis of Everyday 'Economic'
Conduct: Evidence from Video Recordings of Real-Life Pre-
Verbal Salesperson-Shopper Encounters in a Showroom
Retail Store**

By

Colin Clark and Trevor Pinch

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Introduction

This paper reports the results of an analysis of the ways shoppers regularly occasioned (or attempted to occasion) or avoided (or attempted to avoid) verbal encounters with salespersons in a retail store. These everyday events are of vital importance for retail researchers and practitioners as they not only precede and influence but also make possible the various economic outcomes (notably product sales) that comprise the very *raison d'être* of the type of retailers we examine. More specifically, our study reveals that the different kinds of pre-verbal encounter conduct the shoppers engaged in to accomplish these actions is underpinned with and managed through a complex, integrated framework of *socially* organized communicative practices that, along with the interactional 'rules', expectations, obligations and other situational factors which also inform these actions, comprise a highly economically consequential, under-explored and commonly misunderstood dimension of the retail shopping and selling process.

Our work builds on a growing body of research illustrating the fundamentally social and interactional basis of buying, selling and consumer conduct in real-life settings as diverse as street markets and TV infomercials (Pinch and Clark 1986; Clark and Pinch 1995a, 1995b, 1998), auctions and mock auctions (Clark and Pinch 1992; Heath and Luff 2007), street entertainment and street vending (Mulkay and Howe 1994; Clark and Pinch 1995; Llewellyn and Burrow 2008), telephone sales (Clark, Drew and Pinch 1994; Mazeland 2004), business-to-business selling (Mulkay, Clark and Pinch 1993; Clark, Drew and Pinch 2003) and retail and service encounters (Garfinkel and Livingston 2003; Brown 2004; Clark 2004). In contrast to the more traditional methods researchers and practitioners usually employ to understand retail shopping and selling (surveys, interviews, direct observation, personal experience, focus groups, secret shopper studies, etc.)¹, the data base and methodology we have employed – the detailed analysis of real-life video recordings of retail shoppers' and salespersons' own evident interactional practices – provides perhaps the only way that the subtle conduct and the largely

tacit, underlying communicative processes we examine could ever be captured and properly appreciated. Indeed, as we shall see, our findings cast doubt on many of the shopper contact-related assumptions widely held by retailers as well as much of the prescriptive advice that retailing companies, trainers and authors of 'How to' books tend to provide for the salespersons working in the type of store we studied. This data, research focus and research findings also provides a novel and systematically different foundation by which it is possible to more accurately i) understand how and why shoppers and salespersons actually behave in the ways they do; ii) determine the causes and consequences of their particular conduct; and iii) formulate practicable solutions to any problems that arise out of this conduct and the encounters these parties have with one another. In these respects our study also has direct relevance for researchers working in the areas of consumer product involvement, service quality and, more generally, for organizations seeking to better understand how their employees could interact more effectively with other persons, particularly members of the public.

(Mis)Understanding Retail Encounters

In the predominantly prescriptive literature on retail selling there is an almost ubiquitous assumption that encounters between salespersons and shoppers begin from the point at which verbal contact commences between these parties.² However, by making this assumption – even though, intuitively, it has an 'obvious common-sense' ring of plausibility about it – the authors of this literature commit three fundamental errors. First, they tend to place more weight than appears justified on the importance of the first words a salesperson says to a shopper, claiming that, when wisely chosen, such words are likely to have a major influence on whether a shopper accepts a salesperson's approach and, ultimately, whether a contacting salesperson can persuade a shopper to make a purchase. For example, Bodle and Corey (1977: 241) claim that "The first five to ten words spoken to a customer are the most important words in a sale". Many authors also argue that retail salespeople must avoid using

clichéd, contact-opening utterances such as ‘Can I help you?’ when approaching shoppers and list the verbal gambits salespersons should employ to forestall dismissive shopper ‘I’m just looking’ types of responses and generate sales (e.g. ‘Would you prefer that [i.e. the product the shopper is looking at] in the black or the silver colour?’ – see e.g. Bodle and Corey 1977; Rogers 1988; Brown and Tilling 1997; Kennon 2006). In our data, however, these verbal gambits and, indeed, the salespersons’ first words more generally, had no discernible impact on whether a shopper accepted a verbal encounter initiated by a salesperson or subsequently made a purchase.

Second, this literature tends to ignore or pay only cursory attention to the verbal encounter-related activities that take place *before* any verbal contact occurs between a salesperson and a shopper. Occasionally, mention is made of the importance of a salesperson establishing eye contact with or smiling at a shopper prior to making a verbal approach (Bodle and Corey 1977; Rogers 1988; Kennon 2006), or ‘sizing up’ a customer by observing, for example, their clothing, the way they walk, their facial expressions or which particular merchandise they pause to look at or touch (Charters 1922; Rogers 1988). The main objective of a salesperson establishing eye contact or smiling is usually said to be that of conveying ‘politeness’ or ‘confidence’ (e.g. Kennon 2006: 40), informing the shopper that ‘you know that they are there’ (e.g. Rogers 1988) or to generate a friendly, pleasant atmosphere (e.g. Bodle and Corey 1977: 241), and the aim of such shopper observation or contact is typically stated to be to assist salespersons to achieve sales rather than to help them make better decisions about how, when or if a shopper should be approached. In our data, though, a great deal of crucially important encounter-related shopper activity – particularly the establishment of mutual eye contact with salespersons, and shoppers’ displays of involvement with store merchandise – occurred before any verbal contact between these parties took place. This almost exclusively *bodily* conduct, the various manifestations and social organization of which forms the focus of

our paper, had a decisive influence on whether a salesperson and shopper ever established a verbal encounter with one another (and therefore whether a sale became possible) and the kinds of service quality perceptions the shoppers were likely to form about the store or the sales staff.

Third, the assumption that persons are only engaged in an encounter with one another when they have started to talk with one another also rests on a fundamental misunderstanding about what actually constitutes an interpersonal encounter. This assumption flies in the face of a well established sociological research literature, pioneered by Erving Goffman (e.g. 1959, 1963) and subsequently conducted by other researchers, primarily conversation analysts, via the analysis of recordings of the deployment of bodily conduct in naturally occurring interactions (e.g. Goodwin 1981; Heath 1986; Schegloff 1998; Robinson 1998). One thing this research has demonstrated is that when persons “who are in one another’s presence, subject to the contingencies of mutual monitoring” (Goffman, 1963: 13-30; Schegloff 1998: 565) – that is, when they can see or hear one another and realize they may, in turn, be seen or heard by those other persons – their conduct is liable to be influenced by those persons, even though they may not verbally or formally be interacting with them or even able to see one another. As we will see, the shoppers and salespersons we studied were regularly in such ‘non’ encounters with one another. Furthermore, the highly distinctive forms of pre-verbal encounter bodily conduct the shoppers engaged in embodied systematically different types of socially and economically consequential shopper identities that were routinely undertaken with particular regard to the sales staff, even when no explicit recognition or acknowledgment of the latter’s presence in the store was apparent.³

Data Analysed

Our data comprises video recordings of one 9.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. working day’s worth of naturally occurring shopping and sales activity involving 317 shoppers and five ‘roaming’ sales staff in a UK showroom retail store.⁴ Because there were important differences in the pre-

verbal encounter conduct of the shoppers depending on whether they were on their own or in groups, we occasionally use the terms ‘shopping units’ (‘SUs’) when referring to individual shoppers or shoppers in general, and ‘multi-person shopping units’ (‘MPSUs’) when referring exclusively to shoppers in groups. 253 SUs were studied, of which 74 (29.3%) made a purchase.

With respect to the particular subject of our study, these SUs comprised two types of shoppers – those who established a verbal encounter with a salesperson (i.e. where verbal contact was initiated by one party and accepted by another) ($n=156$; 61.7%) and those who did not ($n=97$; 38.3%). Each SU also tended to adopt and to maintain one of four distinct forms of pre-verbal encounter bodily conduct via which they displayed their different encounter-related and purchase/non-purchase related shopper identities, particularly when they were stationary and looking at store merchandise: i) ‘Open-to-Contact SUs’ ($n=61$) – who established a verbal encounter with a salesperson in what transpired to be a relatively straightforward and unproblematic way; ii) ‘Actively Seeking Contact SUs’ ($n=98$) – whose bodily conduct was characteristically the same as open-to-contact SUs except they engaged in additional work on one or more occasions to establish a verbal encounter with a salesperson; iii) ‘Browsing SUs’ ($n=35$) – who neither actively sought nor tended to occasion a verbal encounter with a salesperson; and iv) ‘Actively Avoiding Contact SUs’ ($n=59$) – whose bodily conduct was characteristically the same as browsers except they engaged in additional work on one or more occasions to avoid verbal contact with a salesperson.

One finding which hints at the economic importance of the subject matter we examine is that only those SUs who established a verbal encounter with a salesperson made a purchase. On this basis we start by reporting i) the various interrelated ways the verbal encounters between the salespersons and shoppers regularly were established or avoided, and ii) the main social and communicative principles that enabled and underpinned these interpersonal

accomplishments. We then provide additional evidence that affirms the fundamentally social and interactional basis of this shopper conduct. Finally, we outline the potential economic consequences of this conduct and, more generally, the implications of our findings for researchers and retailers.

Establishing and Avoiding Verbal Retail Encounters

The Importance of Mutual Eye Contact

In our data the activity that is commonly deemed to signify the beginning of a retail encounter – namely the first words that are exchanged between a salesperson and a shopper – was most often *not* the beginning of such retail encounters at all. Sequence 1, which shows one (shopper initiated) way the salespersons and shoppers regularly established verbal encounters with one another, illustrates a common ‘pre-verbal’ feature of these encounters and an important underlying organizing principle via which many of these encounters were established and, on other occasions, avoided – that, ordinarily, mutual eye contact not only precedes, but also *ought* to precede, verbal contact:⁵

[See sequence 1 – page 32]

The arrowed shopper has just entered the store and is walking towards a salesman (S) who is leaning on a sales counter examining a hand-sized computer. In picture 1.1 this shopper, who already has noticed the salesman, is scanning the merchandise displayed along the left-hand wall of the store (from our viewpoint) and searching his pockets for what transpires to be a battery. While continuing his walk into the store, he glances at the salesman (1.2) before looking at other display goods nearer to and just behind the salesman (see the shopper’s gaze in 1.3). He then stops walking and stands about 1½ metres away from the salesman (1.3). Approximately 0.5 second after doing so the salesman raises his head – a move that, although we can only see the back of his head, appears to culminate in him looking at the shopper’s face (1.4). As this is happening the shopper turns his head towards the salesman and, judging by the relative alignment of their heads and the focus of the shopper’s gaze, they appear to establish

mutual eye contact (1.4). Around 0.3 second afterwards the shopper lowers his head, breaking eye contact as he does so, and recommences walking towards the salesman (1.5). The salesman then says “Hello” – a greeting which the shopper returns. In 1.6 the shopper, now standing directly in front of the salesman, presents a battery from his pocket, glances at the salesman’s face and asks “Have you got a couple of those please? They’re out of a calculator”.

In this sequence, and in the vast majority of the 156 verbal encounters that were established between a salesperson and a shopper ($n=125$, 80.1%), such mutual eye contact preceded or, at the latest, occurred in conjunction with the first words spoken between these parties. This “glance exchange” (Kendon 1990: 180) served as a means by which the salespersons and shoppers – like persons in other types of face-to-face situations – reciprocated a first “taking account” of each other’s presence (Kendon 1990: 88), ratified their openness and willingness for a verbal encounter (Goffman 1963; Kendon 1990: 202) and occasioned verbal encounters with one another.

But, typically, these verbal encounters were not only preceded by and ratified with mutual eye contact, there was much evidence that indicated they were also *conditional* upon mutual eye contact. That is, mutual eye contact recurrently was treated by the salespersons and shoppers as invoking an obligation on them to enter into a verbal encounter with one another and in this regard had a “promissory” character (Goffman 1959: 14-15). Four observations lend support to this claim. First, in 122 (97.6%) of these encounters the salesperson and/or shopper(s) broke eye contact almost immediately after mutual eye contact was established, as happens in picture 1.5 of sequence 1. (Such mutual eye contact tended to last for well under a second.) The ensuing period of no mutual eye contact, which lasted at most for a few seconds, was typically spent by the shopper(s) or salesperson moving closer to and aligning themselves more squarely and frontally with one another, as happens during 1.4-1.7 of sequence 1. These actions suggest that the salespersons and shoppers were treating their encounter as already

being sufficiently established at this juncture to not immediately require any further visual confirmation or direct, encounter-initiating monitoring of the other party.

Second, the aforementioned 125 instances of mutual eye contact were in each case the first occasion, during these shoppers' visit to the store, that mutual eye contact took place between the salespersons and shoppers that established a verbal encounter with one another. Third, aside from seven cases where a salesperson who was already engaged in a verbal encounter briefly acknowledged the presence of a shopper waiting to be served next, there were no occasions where a verbal encounter was not then established after a salesperson and shopper had exchanged mutual eye contact. Fourth, the tendency for mutual eye contact to precede verbal contact also contrasted dramatically with the experiences of those SUs that did not have a verbal encounter with a salesperson ($n=87$) as well as those encounters where contact was verbally initiated by a salesperson but was not accepted by the contacted shopper ($n=10$). In the former cases no mutual eye contact with a salesperson occurred at any point during each SUs' visit to the store.⁶ In the latter cases no mutual eye contact occurred at any point before *or during* the salesperson's contact initiating utterance.

In sum, the manner in which the vast majority of the verbal encounters were established between a salesperson and shopper, as well as the actions and experiences of every one of the 97 SUs that did not have or did not accept a verbal encounter with a salesperson – that is, for 222 (87.8%) of the SUs studied – strongly indicated there was an organizing principle or social 'rule' underlying and influencing the encounter-establishing conduct of the salespersons and shoppers that mutual eye contact *should* be established before or, at the latest, in conjunction with any verbal contact. As we shall see, this fleeting, prefatory action and this apparently minor and otherwise insignificant communicative principle had a major and economically consequential impact on the pre-verbal encounter conduct of the shoppers we studied.

Nevertheless, there was an evident exception to this organizing principle which manifested itself most starkly in the 31 (19.9%) verbal encounters that were established – and established quite unproblematically – without prior mutual eye contact. In 28 of these encounters the contacted person’s displayed level of involvement with something or someone other than the person that had initiated contact with them appeared to be the basis why verbal contact had been accepted and initiated without prior mutual eye contact. Here, the particular types of involvement-attributable bodily conduct, displayed by contacted persons and acted on by others, most noticeably by contacting persons, highlights another organizing principle that also underpinned the pre-verbal encounter conduct of the shoppers and salespersons, particularly with respect to how and when their verbal encounters were established and, in other cases, avoided.

Shopper and Salesperson Involvement

In sequence 1, as the salesman and shopper move from being in a situation of “mere co-presence” to “full-scale co-participation” (Goffman 1963: 102) and establish their verbal encounter, there are changes in their bodily conduct with respect to i) the object of their gaze; ii) the orientation of their head/eyes, torso and legs/feet; iii) their proximity to one another; and iv) their bodily alignment to one another. These changes not only embody the heightening level of interpersonal involvement between these parties, they also provide an excellent example of the prototypical features of ‘low’ and ‘high’ involvement bodily conduct more generally. Compare, for instance, the low interpersonal involvement of the salesperson and shopper in 1.1 (taken after the shopper has noticed the salesman but before mutual eye contact is established) with their higher level of interpersonal involvement in 1.7 (taken at the end of the shopper’s utterance “They’re out of a calculator”, shortly after their verbal encounter has commenced). In 1.1 the salesman and shopper are distant from one another and looking at (and thus currently involved with) different things. And although the shopper’s torso and legs are oriented towards the salesman, thereby projecting an involvement with that salesman as a potential next

involvement (Schegloff 1998), these parties are not otherwise aligned to or involved with each another. By 1.7 the salesman and shopper are standing closer to one another and each person's head, torso and legs are in alignment, both with the principal elements of their own body and with the other person. Moreover, while only the shopper is looking at the salesman, the latter is now displaying his higher current involvement with the shopper by looking at the battery the shopper has just presented to him.

Twenty five (81.3%) of the 31 verbal encounters that were established without prior mutual eye contact were initiated by a salesperson, and 21 (84%) of these encounters were initiated while the contacted shopper was looking at merchandise displayed in the store.⁷ One reason why these shoppers may have accepted verbal contact and the contacting salespersons may have initiated verbal contact without prior mutual eye contact was the high level of involvement the shoppers displayed, via their bodily conduct, not directly to a salesperson but, rather, to the product(s) they were looking at before the contact-initiating salesperson's approach. This type of high involvement shopper conduct and subsequent verbal approach from a salesperson occurs in sequence 2:

[See sequence 2 – page 33]

- [Verbal transcript: 'S' = salesperson, 'Sh' = shopper]
- S: Can I help you at all?
(0.4)
- Sh: Oh, (0.3) I want a new fitting.
(1.0)
- Sh: (For that please.)

The arrowed shopper has been standing in the same position, at the same sales counter, looking at the same product(s) for over ten seconds. In 2.1 salesman A, who has already noticed this shopper (and appeared to be about to initiate contact with her before being side-tracked by salesman B), is talking with salesman B and another salesman who is out of camera shot beyond the bottom right-hand corner of the pictures. In 2.2, salesman A has now finished talking with the other salesmen and is approaching this shopper. Pictures 2.3 and 2.4 were

taken, respectively, at the start and completion of salesman A's contact-initiating utterance "Can I help you at all?" Prior to and during this utterance the shopper has not moved from the position first shown in 2.1. It is only at 2.5, after the start of the shopper's contact accepting response "Oh . . .", that the salesman and shopper first establish mutual eye contact. Thus, in this verbal encounter, mutual eye contact occurs *after* verbal contact.

However, we can also see that this shopper, prior to and while being contacted, is displaying almost the same high involvement bodily conduct relative to the product(s) she is looking at that was i) eventually displayed by the shopper in sequence 1 relative to the salesman with whom he established a verbal encounter (see 1.7) and, indeed, that ii) she also displays to salesman A just after her verbal encounter has commenced (2.6). The shopper in sequence 2 is standing close to a sales counter; her head, torso and legs are all in alignment and she is positioned square-on to that sales counter and the product(s) she is looking at. This type of high involvement bodily conduct with respect to merchandise, store furniture (display cabinets, sales counters, etc.) and/or a salesperson was the most common way in which open-to-contact SUs made themselves 'seeable' as being open to and available for a verbal encounter with a salesperson and, on this basis, appeared to have occasioned a verbal approach from a salesperson. Figure 1 shows four other similar examples of the typical bodily configurations adopted by individual open-to-contact shoppers ($n=39$) when stationary and looking at display goods.⁸ The timings under each picture indicate the duration each arrowed shopper's featured stationary position was held. In each case a verbal encounter was initiated by a salesperson (and accepted by the shopper) shortly after the featured bodily configuration and before any major changes in that bodily configuration:

[See figure 1 – page 34]

Open-to-contact shoppers often displayed other forms of even higher involvement bodily conduct. For example, the arrowed shoppers in pictures 1, 3 and 4 are standing much

closer to the product(s) they are looking at, and the shoppers in pictures 2 and 3 are, respectively, touching and leaning over the sales counter at which they are standing. The shopper in picture 4 is not only touching but also using the product he is looking at. In other sales settings such high involvement conduct relative to merchandise and sales related furniture is often treated, by salespersons and shoppers alike, as conveying a high level of interest in the product(s) being looked at, aligned to, etc. and comprise accountable and obligating actions that regularly precede (and sometimes are invoked by salespersons to constrain) not only verbal encounters but also a purchase (Clark and Pinch 1988, 1992, 1995a; Brown 2004; Clark 2004).

Browsing shoppers

In contrast, browsing shoppers tended to display systematically different and relatively lower involvement bodily conduct and, by doing so, they identified themselves as shoppers that were not inviting and were not open to a verbal encounter with a salesperson. This can be seen in figure 2 which shows four examples of the bodily configurations typically adopted by individual browsing SUs ($n=31$) while stationary and looking at display goods:

[See figure 2 – page 35]

In these cases, as was typical, each arrowed shopper is standing further away from the product(s) they are looking at and the sales counter/product display at which they are standing. Furthermore, only their head is oriented to what they are looking at – their torso and at least one of their legs/feet are directed elsewhere. This type of torqued, non-aligned head-torso/legs configuration (Schegloff 1998), by virtue of the vast majority of their body being directed away from what they are looking at, projects that the shopper's current involvement (looking at display goods) is likely to be only a passing, 'side-' and low-involvement level of interest (Goffman 1963; Schegloff 1998) that, at least at that juncture, neither requires nor warrants a verbal approach from a salesperson. More generally, browsing shoppers tended to avoid looking towards or making their eyes available to be caught by a salesperson (thereby avoiding

encounter-obligating mutual eye contact) and walked around the store in a furtive manner that reduced the likelihood of drawing attention to themselves.

Open-to-contact and browsing MPSUs

Multi-person shopping units bring into play the added dimension of how the relative bodily conduct of each shopper within an MPSU could reinforce or dilute the level of involvement collectively displayed by their MPSU and their identity as shoppers that were open or not open to a verbal encounter with a salesperson. Figure 3 presents four examples of the bodily configurations typically adopted by open-to-contact MPSUs ($n=22$) when stationary and looking at display goods. Again, in each case a verbal encounter was initiated by a salesperson (in pictures 1-3 by the marked salesman) and accepted by the shopper shortly after the featured bodily conduct and before any major changes in that bodily conduct:

[See figure 3 – page 36]

In these examples, as was typical, each shopper in an MPSU tended to display a high level of involvement relative to the product(s) they were looking at *and* spend most of their time looking at the same product(s) – characteristics that synergistically amplified their identity as an SU that collectively was open to a verbal encounter with a salesperson. In contrast, members of browsing MPSUs ($n=7$) usually adopted the same type of low involvement bodily configurations as individual browsers (see figure 2) but also diluted the low level of involvement and product interest collectively displayed by their SU by tending *not* to look at the same product(s) as the other member(s) of their MPSU. This can be seen in figure 4 which features two browsing MPSUs. Each shopper in each MPSU (and in each picture) displays, and most often displayed, separate and low product involvements:

[See figure 4 – page 37]

There were two other aspects of browsing shoppers' bodily conduct that regularly served to dilute even further their characteristically low level of displayed involvement with

and interest in the goods they were looking at, thereby reinforcing their identity as shoppers who were neither seeking nor open to a verbal encounter with a salesperson. First, they tended to have their hands placed fixedly in 'closed' positions. In figure 2, shopper 2 has his hands in his pockets, shopper 3's thumbs are hooked in his pockets and shopper 4's hands are clasped behind his back. (Similar closed hand positions can be seen in each picture in figure 4.) By doing this the shoppers displayed it was unlikely that they would, at least imminently, engage in the particularly high involvement, buying implicative and encounter-warranting conduct of touching (let alone using) any merchandise in the store (Clark and Pinch 1988, 1992, 1995a; Clark 2004).

Second, browsing shoppers also tended to move around the store more, look at a higher number of different products (both within and between different product categories) and spend less time than open-to-contact shoppers looking at each of the products they did look at. For instance, one browser – who was by no means unusual – adopted eight separate low-involvement stationary browsing configurations, all at different product displays, and looked at a minimum of 46 different products during his 94 second visit to the store. In contrast, the shopper in sequence 2, after briefly walking around the section of the store we studied, stayed at the same sales counter and looked at only three different products (while remaining in the same stationary position) during the 76 seconds that elapsed before being contacted by salesman A. We can get a further sense of this difference by comparing the timings of the stationary positions adopted by the open-to-contact shoppers in figures 1 and 3 with those for the browsers in figures 2. In figures 1 and 3 all of the shoppers, aside from the shoppers in figure 3 picture 1, remained in their featured stationary position for a longer period of time.

Actively Seeking and Avoiding Verbal Encounters with Salespersons

On many occasions the open-to-contact shoppers' high level of involvement in the product(s) they were looking at seemed enough to prompt a verbal approach from a

salesperson, as happened in sequence 2 and figures 1 and 3. On other occasions, though, such shoppers more actively sought a verbal encounter with a salesperson.

Actively Seeking a Verbal Encounter with a Salesperson

Most of the SUs that actively sought a verbal encounter with a salesperson did so by modifying their high involvement bodily conduct after hearing sounds or seeing activities in the store that had potentially imminent contact relevance for shoppers, like themselves, that were not already engaged in such a verbal encounter. The most common contact implicative sounds/activities immediately preceding the changes that took place in these shoppers' bodily conduct were: i) the cash register being opened, closed or ringing up a sales transaction; ii) a verbal encounter or phone call involving a salesperson reaching a conclusion; iii) a salesperson who was alone but ending a preoccupation; iv) the stockroom door opening, thereby heralding a salesperson's entrance into the main showroom of the store; or v) a salesperson who was approaching or passing nearby. One of the most common ways these shoppers actively sought and regularly occasioned a verbal encounter with a salesperson at these contact implicative junctures was by heightening their already high level of involvement in the product(s) they were looking at – for example, by moving even closer to the product(s) they were looking at and/or starting to touch or use the product(s), particularly when a salesperson was looking in or heading towards their direction. In this way they more explicitly drew attention to themselves as shoppers that were seeking a verbal encounter and warranted an approach. Another way these shoppers regularly occasioned such a verbal encounter was by managing to 'catch the eye' of (thereby establishing encounter-obligating mutual eye contact with) a salesperson that was passing nearby or had just finished, or was just about to finish, a verbal encounter with someone else. Shopper 2 does this with Salesman A in sequence 3:

[See sequence 3 – page 38]

[Verbal transcript]

Sh1: Anyway, (0.5) thanks for your help.

SA: Okay -Mister Sm-ith,

Sh1: -Great. - Right, chee-rio.
SA: -See you. Bye.
(1.0)
Sh2: [Makes a loud throat clearing noise.]
(1.0)
SA: [Addressing shopper 2:] Hello.
[SA and shopper 2 continue their verbal encounter]

At 3.1, taken at the start of shopper 1's "Anyway, thanks for your help", salesman A and shopper 1 are ending their verbal encounter. Shopper 2 is waiting to be served by salesman B who is at the cash register processing shopper 3's purchase. Shopper 2 is stationary and displaying high involvement, open-to-contact bodily conduct by standing close to a sales counter and, judging by the position of his head, also looking at salesman B. His head, torso, legs and feet, which are all in frontal alignment with and oriented towards salesman B, display, like the shopper in sequence 1, the potential object of his next involvement – salesman B. Shopper 2 is also displaying his buyer status and thus his high worthiness of being contacted: he is holding the product he will purchase in one hand and the money to pay for it in his other hand. 3.2 is the end of the salesman A's ". . . Smith" and the start of shopper 1's "Right". By the end of salesman A's "Bye" (3.3), shopper 2 has already started to turn towards salesman A – a move he commenced just before salesman A's "See you". By 3.4, taken at the end of the ensuing 1.0 second silence, shopper 2 is now looking at salesman A and can see that he is not looking at him. Indeed, salesman A appears to be starting a new involvement – he has begun to look at something on the sales counter in front of him. Shopper 2 then makes a loud and somewhat theatrical throat clearing noise and, as salesman A turns to look at him, has already started to turn the rest of his body and take his first step towards salesman A. In 3.5, taken 0.7 second into the subsequent 1.0 second silence, this salesman and shopper appear to establish mutual eye contact. Approximately 0.3 second afterwards (at 3.6) the salesman commences their verbal encounter by saying "Hello". Thus, in this sequence, shopper 2 appears to have occasioned a verbal encounter with salesman A by virtue of having recognised the verbal

exchanges between salesman A and shopper 1 as being encounter-terminating exchanges (Schegloff and Sacks 1973) and then, as a result of turning towards salesman A and ostentatiously clearing his throat, attracting the visual attention of that newly non-engaged salesman. Furthermore, by starting to walk towards the salesman as encounter-obligating mutual eye contact is established, shopper 2 makes it more difficult for the salesman to decline a verbal encounter with him.

Other ways shoppers actively sought a verbal encounter included searching for a salesperson, looking at and orienting their body towards a passing salesperson, visually tracking the movements of a nearby or passing salesperson at head height, and doing quick 'double-take' glances between two or more (usually preoccupied) salespeople or two or more places in the store from where a salesperson may emerge. In most of these cases the shoppers were not only offering their eyes to be caught by a salesperson but also, via their head and/or bodily orientation, their potential next involvement. Sometimes these shoppers would also occasion a verbal encounter with a salesperson after displaying their dissatisfaction or impatience with the length of time they had been waiting for a verbal encounter by, for example, ostentatiously playing with money or a shopping list, emitting a deep sigh, studiously looking at their watch or, more ominously, the store exit, slowly and resignedly shaking their head, tapping a foot, drumming their fingers on a sales counter, switching their body weight from one leg to the other, or restlessly pacing back and forth about where they were standing.

Actively Avoiding Verbal Contact with a Salesperson

The aforementioned contact implicative sounds/activities, particularly those projecting or occurring at encounter-ending junctures, also comprised the most common resource browsing shoppers relied on when actively attempting to avoid verbal contact with a salesperson. What distinguished these shoppers from those who actively sought contact with a salesperson was the nature of their reactions to these sounds/activities and, in particular, their general aversion to look towards the likely source of these sounds/activities. By doing so they

reduced the chance of their eyes ever being caught by a salesperson thereby rendering themselves under an obligation to accept a verbal encounter. One common reaction was for such shoppers to lower their involvement in the goods they were looking at just before a salesperson was able to or more likely to witness their bodily conduct, the net result of which made it more apparent that an approach from a salesperson was neither warranted nor likely to be accepted. Shopper 2 does this in sequence 4:

[See sequence 4 – page 39]

In 4.1 the salesman, who is serving shopper 1, is searching for something behind the top sales counter that shopper 1 had asked for on a previous visit and has returned to the store to collect. Shopper 2 is browsing the computers. In 4.2 the salesman (now arrowed) has found what he was looking for and is moving behind the sales counter, en route to handing this item to shopper 1 (see 4.5-6). Shopper 2 has already started to stand up straight, thereby abandoning his more involved, closer inspection of the product(s) he continues to look at. By 4.3 shopper 2 has finished this move and is now sidling slowly (and somewhat furtively) to his right, further away from the approaching salesman – a move which ends at 4.5. Thus shopper 2 lowers his displayed involvement in the product(s) he is looking at, apparently after hearing the salesman ending his own involvement. (Shopper 2 never looks at the salesperson, even peripherally.) He also completes the bulk of his standing up straight and his move away from the salesman while the latter is preoccupied and his view of the shopper is still largely obscured by the left hand side of the wall on which the computers are displayed. From 4.3 onwards shopper 2 presents himself as someone who is less involved or interested in the goods he is looking at and therefore is less likely to accept a verbal encounter with a salesperson, doing so prior to the point at which the approaching salesman could more readily witness his bodily conduct and be more likely to consider whether he was a shopper that warranted contact. Like the shopper in

sequence 3 and other non-engaged shoppers in general, this shopper aurally monitors for contact implicative sounds/changes in the store.⁹

Shoppers Being Served by a Currently Absent Salesperson

Another form of bodily conduct, that both affirms and relies on the previously described bodily configurations via which shoppers regularly occasioned or avoided verbal encounters with salespersons, tended to be adopted by those shoppers already in a verbal encounter with a salesperson whilst the latter had temporarily left their encounter and was elsewhere in the store (e.g. in the stockroom). These shoppers, upon being left by their serving salesperson, would usually be exhibiting (at least initially) high involvement, open-to-contact bodily configurations similar to those of open-to-contact shoppers (e.g. in sequence 2 and figures 1 and 3). One everpresent consequence of such shoppers maintaining their high involvement conduct was their increased vulnerability to receiving an approach from another salesperson that may not have been aware they were already being served. On the 52 occasions where SUs were left on their own in this way, 41 (78.9%) quickly modified their conduct after their serving salesperson had left them and adopted a particular high-and-low involvement bodily configuration that further demonstrates just how subtle and interrelated the type of interactional organization we have described actually is. Figure 5 shows two examples of this bodily configuration – the first involving an individual shopper, the second an MPSU. In each case the serving salesperson was visiting the stockroom (situated just past the bottom right-hand corner of the pictures):

[See figure 5 – page 40]

Here, as was typical, the arrowed shoppers display a combination of high involvement conduct (by standing very close to and, in many cases, touching a sales counter) and low involvement conduct (by facing away from the sales counter at which they are standing, adopting closed body/hand positions, and looking at goods from an even greater distance than

that typically adopted by browsing shoppers). This very specific high-low involvement configuration served as a way in which the SUs i) distinguished themselves as shoppers that should not be approached by a salesperson because they were already being served by someone else, and ii) could make themselves seeable as such by virtue of this particular bodily configuration being both a distinct but also visually related element of the wider bodily involvement organisation we have described earlier in this paper.

Discussion

The bodily conduct we have documented forms the principal components of an integrated communicative organisation that provided the shoppers and salespersons with the fundamental “tool-kit” of resources (Schegloff 1999) to accomplish establishing and avoiding verbal encounters with one another in an orderly and unproblematic fashion.¹⁰ As we have seen, this conduct and the organizing principles that underpinned it is not exclusive to the particular shoppers or retail setting we studied but, rather, forms part of a wider, conventionalized “body idiom” (Goffman 1963: 33-4). Mutual eye contact regularly precedes and occasions verbal contact in other face-to-face encounter-initiating situations and eye contact avoidance is a common means of circumventing verbal encounters (e.g. Goffman 1963: 90; Kendon 1990; in sales and service encounters see Brown 2004: 6).¹¹ Similarly, visual displays of a person’s involvement with something or someone manifest themselves and are acted on by others in quite standardised ways in many diverse interpersonal situations (e.g. Goffman 1959, 1963; Goodwin 1981; Heath 1986; Kendon 1990; Schegloff 1998; Robinson 1998; Heath and Hindmarsh, 2002; in sales encounters see Clark and Pinch 1995a; Brown 2004; Clark 2004). Researchers have also highlighted the importance of peoples’ bodily involvements with regard to the material features of an interactional setting – for example, furniture as well as other objects and artefacts – as a means by which they can reliably understand one another’s conduct and accomplish many kinds of social actions (Heath 1986;

Clark and Pinch 1995a; Robinson 1998; Heath and Luff 2000; Heath and Hindmarsh 2002; Brown 2004; Clark 2004). In this respect the communicative organization, processes and actions we have described are both generic and context free (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974). But there were a number of ways these actions and processes also, and simultaneously, displayed the shoppers taking into account of and being influenced by the local, store-wide 'context' within which their conduct was produced.

The Local, Situational Basis of the Shoppers' Conduct

By 'context free' we do not mean to suggest of course that the shoppers' bodily conduct was oblivious to or produced independently of local, encounter-related contingencies occurring within the section of the store we studied. In fact, our data strongly indicates that, prior to a verbal encounter with a salesperson, wherever shoppers walked and dwelled in the store, whatever products they looked at and how they did so (and for how long they did so) was regularly, if not predominantly and principally, influenced by such considerations. To demonstrate this we provide six examples that embellish the communicative organization we have reported and highlight the characteristically encounter-related, salesperson oriented basis of much of the shoppers' pre-verbal encounter conduct work.

First, at least 40% of the 156 SUs that established a verbal encounter with a salesperson had, prior to their encounter, looked only at products that had nothing to do with the expressed purpose of their store visit. The products these shoppers *did* look at seemed primarily to derive from the encounter-related consideration of being in a place or position where they could more easily i) monitor and be available for a particular, already engaged or preoccupied salesperson (as happens in sequence 1, particularly at 1.3) and/or ii) be seen by any salesperson as being open to or seeking contact (as appears to happen in sequence 2).

Second, in most of the cases involving open-to-contact and actively-seeking-contact shoppers, verbal encounters were ratified and established by the shopper looking away from the product(s) they were involved with and offering their eyes to an approaching or passing

salesperson. The readiness by which these shoppers abandoned what they were looking at and, routinely, had exquisitely synchronised the onset of their gaze on the salesperson to coincide with the point at which the latter was looking at them or had reached the distance – usually around two metres – where mutual eye contact ordinarily would be (and usually was) first established, suggests two things. First, that these shoppers had been aurally or peripherally monitoring that salesperson (or the salespersons *per se*) while looking at product(s); and second, that their prior, characteristically high level of product engrossment had also been, to some significant extent, affected for the salespersons to witness and act on the contact inviting shopper identity it embodied.

Third, although browsing shoppers' bodily configurations were almost identical to that displayed by the open-to-contact shopper in sequence 1 (in 1.1-1.3), there was one regular and important difference: browsing shoppers' projected potential next/main involvement (embodied in the orientation of their torso, legs and usually one of their feet) was almost without exception *not* directed at a salesperson, particularly a salesperson not already in a verbal encounter with another shopper. (See the shoppers in Figure 2.) Whenever a salesperson stood in the projected line of a browsing shopper's main, potential next involvement the latter usually quickly modified the orientation of these elements of their body or moved elsewhere in the store. The systematic absence of such a bodily orientation is consistent with these shoppers attempting to reduce the chance their conduct could appropriately be viewed by a salesperson as inviting or warranting a verbal encounter.

Fourth, another type of absent-salesperson, high-low involvement bodily configuration – adopted by 16 (72.7%) of 22 SUs while their serving salesperson was elsewhere but, on these occasions, still visibly present in the same section of the store – was that the shoppers' gaze, torso and legs/feet (i.e. the means by which they displayed the object(s) of their current *and* their main, potential next involvement) had been re-oriented not in the direction of some

distant product but, instead, to the salesperson that was still serving them. (Shopper 1 is doing this in sequence 4.) This alteration of bodily conduct seemed consistent with these shoppers, faced with this particular and temporary situation, actively discouraging approaches from other salespersons by making the source of the object with whom they are still involved (their salesperson) more apparent.

Fifth, figure 3 shows examples of the typical differences in the relative level of displayed product involvements between the 'principal shopper' in an MPSU (marked as 1) – who talked most with the salesperson that served them and usually announced the purchase/non-purchase decision during their subsequent encounter – and their companion shopper(s) (marked as 2). The latter routinely adopted a slightly lower level of involvement, or lowered their involvement just before or during a salesperson's approach, seemingly to encourage that salesperson to contact the principal shopper. By so doing, these shoppers revealed their fine grained sensitivity to the non-equivalent potential impact on the salespersons of displaying even minor differences in their level of bodily involvement (see also Brown 2004: 6-7).

Sixth, almost all (>96%) of the contact seeking and shopper impatience displaying actions the SUs engaged ($n=>1,325$) in occurred only when one or more salespersons were present in the section of the store we studied and were able – at least potentially – to hear or see their conduct. When there were no salespersons in this showroom such shoppers consistently did not engage in such conduct. This strongly suggests that these actions had been produced with at least one eye (and not just a metaphorical eye) on them being witnessed and acted on by at least one of the salespersons.

Although the bodily conduct the shoppers adopted and engaged in provided the salespersons with the means to recognise and appropriately act on their displayed encounter-related identity it by no means guaranteed such treatment.¹² The type of database and research

approach we have employed provides an original and accurate way of discovering the extent to which the salespersons did or did not recognise and appropriately act on the shoppers' encounter-related conduct. It also enables researchers to determine the impact and consequences of two other types of context-related situational factors that, in our data, also evidently influenced the shoppers' conduct: i) their reactions to the anticipated or actual treatment of their bodily conduct by the sales staff; and ii) the impact of factors deriving from decisions made by the retail company's senior management.¹³

Implications of the Research Findings

The shoppers we examined systematically displayed and regularly altered their bodily conduct to take account of the presence and preoccupations of the sales staff and to deal with encounter-related changes and contingencies in the store. This conduct and the identity it embodied and projected was not simply, solely, or even primarily, a manifestation of the shoppers' inner, 'psychological' or 'emotional' state(s) that stemmed from anything like their consumption related motivations or from what they 'really' thought about the products they looked at, enquired about or purchased. The shoppers were not passively playing out some abstract, pre-constituted consumer role or revelling anarchically in their newly ascribed status of 'customer is king' (cf. the type of consumer commonly portrayed in the organizational studies literature, e.g. Du Gay and Salaman 1992; Sturdy 1998; Rosenthal and Peccei 2007). By actively and most often delicately working, first and foremost, to manage the manner in which they attempted to occasion or avoid verbal encounters with salespersons, and by regularly and subtly modifying their shopper identity in the light of local situational contingencies within the store, the shoppers were also displaying the fundamentally social, inter-actional and accountable nature of their conduct and actions. In this respect our study highlights the existence and the importance of a fundamental dimension of marketing and consumer behaviour that, because of the general reluctance or antipathy of researchers and practitioners to examine recordings of actual, real-life occurrences of, say, retailing activity,

consumer product involvement and service quality evaluation – and to do so from the perspective of the participants’ own *evident* practices – has been all but neglected or ignored. We hope to have shown that the type of data base and research approach we have adopted is not only a viable method of inquiry but can also yield original, important and eminently practicable insights about the actual, real-life nature of marketing, retailing and consumer conduct.¹⁴

Another issue that arises from our findings, which also merits further study, is how the assumptions held and decisions made by senior members of organisations (particularly executive level managers) may not only negatively influence the type of training that employees (e.g. salespersons) receive but also the latter’s subsequent ability to recognise and appropriately act on the displayed conduct and ‘needs’ of the persons outside their organisation (e.g. shoppers) with whom they routinely interact. Our study suggests that such factors can compromise the ability of an organisation to achieve its principal objectives (e.g. product sales and positive customer service quality evaluations). For example, fulfilling a directive to ‘contact all shoppers’ would be likely to place the salespersons in a situation where they alienated browsing shoppers by not having treated them in an appropriate manner.¹⁵ The pre-verbal encounter conduct we have documented is one of the first junctures where shoppers systematically displayed what type of (encounter-related) shopper they were, and the subsequent treatment of their conduct by salespersons constitutes a central basis upon which the shoppers were liable to form (or re-evaluate) first impression service quality evaluations of the store and the staff employed within it and act on these evaluations in consequential ways. This shopper conduct, and the social and interactional organizing principles, expectations and obligations that underpinned, informed and influenced this conduct, comprised a vitally important resource where the retailing company and their salespersons could recognise, and, in our data, could certainly have better understood and more effectively served both the evident

economic, encounter- and sales-related ‘needs’ of the shoppers we studied and the organizational objectives they were employed to achieve.

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Figures and Sequences

			
1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4
	+ 1.0 second	+2.0 seconds (+3.0s)	+1.5 seconds (+4.5s)

		
1.5	1.6	1.7
+0.5 second (+5.0s)	+1.7 seconds (+6.7s)	+1.6 seconds (+8.3s)

Sequence 1: Establishing verbal contact

		
2.1	2.2	2.3
	+3.0 seconds	+0.8 seconds (+3.8s)
		
2.4	2.5	2.6
+0.7 second (+4.5s)	+0.4 second (+4.9s)	+1.2 seconds (+6.1s)

Sequence 2: Salesperson initiating a verbal encounter with shopper displaying high involvement body conduct



1

(Stationary 12.6 seconds)



2

(Stationary 55.0 seconds)



3

(Stationary 10.7 seconds)



4

(Stationary 54.1 seconds)

Figure 1: Characteristic body configurations of open-to-contact shoppers when stationary and looking at display goods



1

(Stationary 6.0 seconds)



2

(Stationary 6.1 seconds)



3

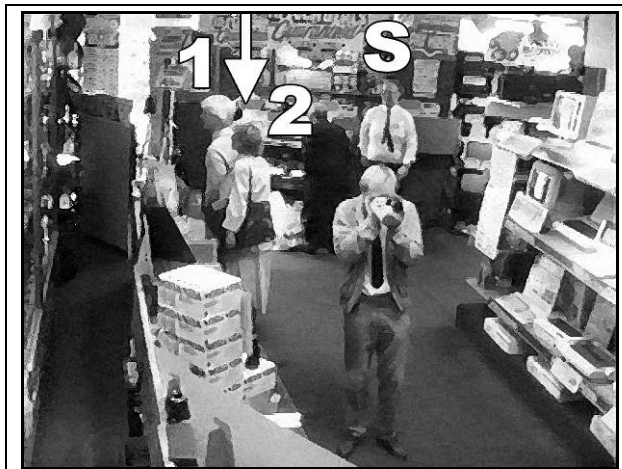
(Stationary 9.6 seconds)



4

(Stationary 5.3 seconds)

Figure 2: Characteristic body configurations of browsing shoppers when stationary and looking at display goods



1

(Stationary 9.5 seconds)



2

(Stationary 16.0 seconds)



3

(Stationary 18.0 seconds)



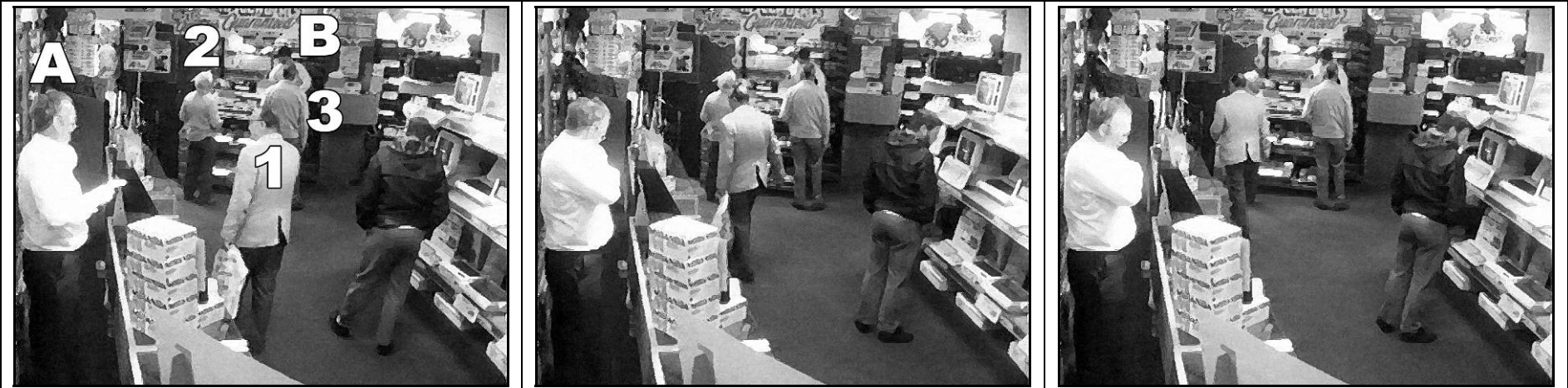
4

(Stationary 33.4 seconds)

Figure 3: Characteristic body configurations of open-to-contact MPSUs when stationary and looking at display goods



Figure 4: Characteristic body configuration sequences of browsing MPSUs when stationary and looking at display goods



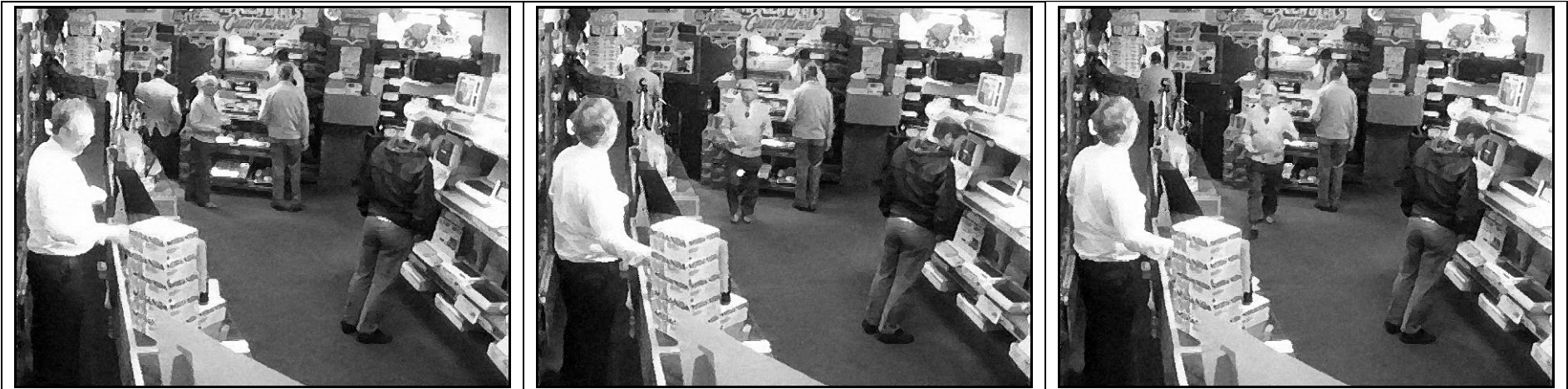
3.1

3.2

3.3

+2.3 seconds

+1.0 second (+3.3s)



3.4

3.5

3.6

+1.0 second (+4.3s)

+1.1 second (+5.3s)

+0.3 second (+5.6s)

Sequence 3: Shopper occasioning a verbal encounter after reacting to contact implicative sounds



Sequence 4: Browsing shopper lowering his displayed involvement with store merchandise



1: (Individual shopper)
(Stationary 17.7 seconds)



2: (MPSU)
(Stationary 11.4 seconds)

Figure 5: Characteristic body configurations of shoppers in a verbal encounter while serving salesperson is currently absent

Footnotes

¹ For a review and examples of these kinds of methods in business research see Aaker *et al.* 2004.

² There is almost no academic literature on this subject. Nevertheless, this assumption is often made, or implied, in the research into service encounters/quality (e.g. Solomon *et al* 1985) and this prescriptive advice is often reproduced in the trade literature (e.g. Bolen 1970) and student textbooks on retailing (e.g. McGoldrick 1990; Levy and Weiss 1998).

³ For other examples of similar misunderstandings and their negative impact in selling and retailing situations see Clark, Drew and Pinch 1998; Underhill 1998. The extent to which these types of misunderstandings stem from an over-reliance on intuition, personal experience or the more traditional, predominantly hypothesis driven, research methodologies being deemed to be an adequate or more accurate substitute for the analysis of shoppers' and salespersons' own real-life conduct is beyond the scope of this paper, but is probable.

⁴ This store offers the public a range of electrical goods (cameras, computers, TVs, Hi-Fi's, etc.) and the consumables and peripherals associated with these products. The recordings were made with a small video cam-corder which provided the authors with a near-full view of the store's main showroom. This section of the store included the only cash register, sales floor telephone, entrance and exit to/from the store, and door to the stockroom. The camera was positioned on top of a high display cabinet, out of the normal viewing range of the salespersons and shoppers, and was set to record automatically using the available light in the store. Only those shoppers that remained in this showroom for their entire visit to the store were analysed.

⁵ To give readers a sense of the pace and flow of these sequences we have provided timings under each picture indicating the number of seconds that elapsed (to the nearest 1/10th second) between each successive picture and, in parentheses, a running total of the elapsed time since the first picture in each sequence.

⁶ These cases involved SUs that i) had no verbal contact with a salesperson and where there was no indication that the shoppers had attempted to establish verbal contact with a salesperson ($n=81$) or ii) had attempted, unsuccessfully, to establish verbal contact with one or more salespersons and then left the store ($n=6$).

⁷ The other six encounters, verbally initiated by shoppers, were all problematic from the start. In each case eye contact seemed to have been withheld by the contacting shopper and its absence appeared to serve to herald ‘a problem’ to the contacted salesperson by virtue of breaking the organising principle that mutual eye contact should precede verbal contact.

⁸ By ‘stationary’ we do not mean statuesque. On most occasions the shoppers made small movements while in their stationary positions – usually of their head/eyes (e.g. the minor shift in the shopper’s gaze/head between pictures 2.2-2.3 in sequence 2) and, to a lesser extent, their legs and feet. But these movements did not undermine the bodily configurations they characteristically held and we, consequently, have featured.

⁹ One common occurrence, which adds much credence to the shoppers’ modifications of their bodily conduct at contact implicative junctures as *not* being coincidental, was that more than one SU tended to react, independently, to the same contact implicative sounds/activities in the store at the same time. For example, in sequence 4, as shopper 2 lowers his displayed involvement in the product(s) he is looking at, shoppers 3 and 4 (who are not together) modify their conduct in a way that is consistent with them seeking contact with this salesman. In 4.3 and 4.4 shopper 4 is skewing her head round to look at the returning salesman. In not catching his eyes she then turns her head the other way to look at the salesman and offer her eyes to him as he ends his encounter with shopper 1 (4.6). Between pictures 4.4-4.6, shopper 3, without ever looking towards the salesman, heightens his displayed involvement in the product(s) he is looking at by aligning himself more squarely and more closely to the sales counter at which he is standing and touching this counter with both of his hands. Similarly, it was not unusual to

see two or more browsing SUs lowering their involvement or starting to head out of the store just as a salesman was reaching the end of an encounter with another shopper.

¹⁰ For a detailed example of one type of communicative organization see Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974. For a more general account of various types of communicative organization see Schegloff 1999.

¹¹ Indeed, in our study, eye contact avoidance was the most common way the sales staff managed to avoid verbal encounters with shoppers.

¹² By ‘appropriate’ we mean treatment by the salespersons that was consistent with the encounter-related identity displayed by the shopper(s).

¹³ A research report containing findings on these two topics is available from the authors.

¹⁴ Reviews and examples of this research, which almost exclusively relies on data obtained via more traditional research methodologies, can be found in Bitner *et al* 1990 and Hess *et al* 2007.

¹⁵ This directive was in effect during the period when we collected the data for this paper.