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Consumer-to-Consumer Conversations in Service Settings

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This article contributes, in two ways, to our understanding of the nature, scope, and significance of conversations between strangers in service environments. First, a framework is introduced that provides both academics and practitioners with a summary of the key issues associated with the stimuli, manifestations, and consequences of such conversations. Second, the article reports a market-oriented ethnography of a specific service—rail travel—that locates stranger conversations within a broader categorization of consumer travel behaviors. This has resulted in the identification of a stabilizing effect of conversations between strangers through consumer anxiety reduction, the enactment of the partial employee role, and the supply of social interaction. The stabilizing effect can act as a “defuser” of dissatisfaction in services where consumers are in close proximity for prolonged periods in the service setting and regularly express dissatisfaction with service provision.

Keywords: *consumer-to-consumer interactions; ethnography; utilitarian services; stabilizing effect; consumer dissatisfaction*

Service consumption in many on-site settings takes place in the presence of other consumers, so consumer-to-consumer (C-to-C) conversations frequently occur (Bloch, Ridgeway, and Dawson 1994; Grove and Fisk 1997; Harris, Davies, and Baron 1997; Martin 1997;

McGrath and Otnes 1995; Parker and Ward 2000). Empirical evidence suggests that the frequency and impact of oral interactions *between consumers* (who were strangers prior to entering the service delivery system) is underestimated by academics and practitioners (Harris, Baron, and Parker 2000; Martin 1999; Rodie and Kleine 2000). Attention has also been drawn to the differences between conversations that occur between strangers in service settings, compared with those that occur between employees and consumers, and with those that occur between friends or “purchase pals” (Baron, Harris, and Davies 1996). Whereas conversations between friends are likely to be in the private domain, consumers are generally willing to relate their conversations with employees and with strangers. Such oral participation has been labeled *observable*, with observable oral participation between employees and consumers abbreviated as OOP1 and observable oral participation between consumers who were strangers as OOP2 (Harris, Baron, and Ratcliffe 1995).

Different consumer segments have been identified that vary in both their willingness and ability to engage in OOP2, on-site conversations with strangers (Goodwin 1994; Harris, Baron, and Davies 1999; McGrath and Otnes 1995). Most significantly for service providers, all the studies have been able to identify a range of operational and social benefits that can result from conversations between strangers (Aubert-Gamet and Cova 1999; Harris, Davies, and Baron 1997; Martin and Clark 1996; Rodie and Kleine 2000). Consumers demonstrate,

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through their conversations, that they can make a unique contribution as an additional human resource for the organization. "Consumers appear to add value to the service experience of other consumers through oral contributions (for example offering honest opinions, independent product knowledge, and reassurance about purchase decisions) that contact personnel cannot provide" (Davies, Baron, and Harris 1999, p. 52).

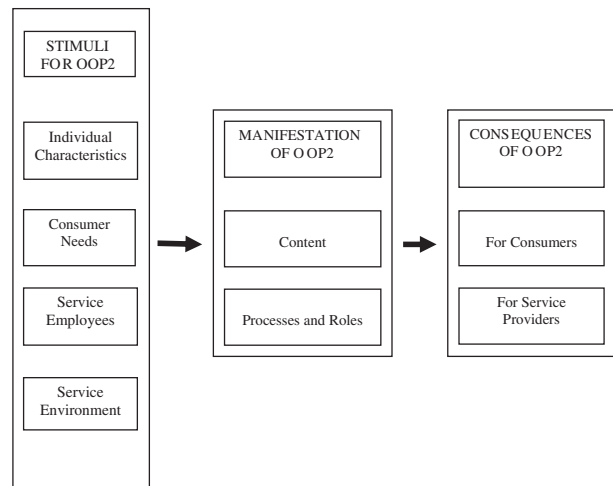
Observable oral participation between strangers (OOP2) is one form of customer participation in service delivery systems. In the 1980s, Mills and Moberg (1982) drew attention to customers' contributions in terms of effort and information, provided through physical activities and oral exchanges. This was reinforced by Bowen (1986), who noted that "on-site customers are not just attentive spectators in the Game between Persons: they are active players as well as supplying labor and knowledge to the service creation process" (p. 377), and by Kelley, Donnelly, and Skinner (1990), who highlighted the impact of *customer* technical and functional participation on service quality. Technical participation ranged from the labor performed to the information provided, and functional participation focused on the interpersonal aspects; how customers behaved during the service, for example, in terms of friendliness and respect. Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1982) came closest to a specific mention of C-to-C conversations with reference to what they termed *interactive* quality. One component of interactive quality was the content and delivery of oral exchanges between customers and employees and between customers.

Historically, the research on OOP2 has been fragmented and has sources in the social interaction and conversational analysis literatures, as well as in the marketing literature. Despite the interest in customer participation in the 1980s and the fact that Kelley, Skinner, and Donnelly (1992) and Kellogg, Youngdahl, and Bowen (1997) provided empirical confirmation that service quality is improved through increased customer participation, Rodie and Kleine (2000) noted that although customer participation has "accorded substantial conceptual importance, it has received little empirical attention" (p. 122).

The first contribution of this article, therefore, is to provide a unifying framework that gives structure to our current understanding of C-to-C conversations in service settings. The second contribution, resulting from the findings of a market-oriented ethnography of a specific service—rail travel—is the identification of a stabilizing effect of OOP2 and the development of conceptual categories and propositions associated with the effect.

The article is structured as follows. The unifying framework is presented diagrammatically, with tabular summaries of the key findings. The context, methodology, and findings from the ethnographic study are then outlined, to-

FIGURE 1
Observable Oral Participation Between Strangers (OOP2) in Service Settings



gether with the development of a model of the stabilizing effect of OOP2. The discussion and managerial implications relating to the two contributions are presented, and directions for future research are offered.

C-TO-C CONVERSATIONS: A UNIFYING FRAMEWORK

The unifying framework (Figure 1) locates research relating to C-to-C conversations according to stimuli, manifestation, and consequences of OOP2.

Four stimuli have been identified: individual characteristics of the consumers, consumer needs, service employee actions/inactions, and the service environment (or servicescape). Individual characteristics of consumers that influence OOP2 include demographics, the level of personal interest and involvement, and the willingness and ability of individuals to respond to requests for product-related information. Consumer needs stimuli are of two main types; risk reduction and social contact making. Service employees (e.g., the guide on a group hiking expedition) can encourage or discourage OOP2 between the group members, but also, in other service environments, the inaccessibility of service employees can create a situation where another customer is the only source of information. Also, the servicescape itself, together with the amount of time spent in it, acts as a stimulus for OOP2. It would be very unusual, for example, for patients in an

TABLE 1
Stimuli for OOP2

<i>Stimulus</i>	<i>Key Insights</i>	<i>Literature Sources</i>
Individual characteristics	Women more likely to engage in OOP2	Harris, Baron, and Ratcliffe (1995); McGrath and Otnes (1995)
	Consumers who engage in OOP2 also tend to engage in OOP1	Harris, Baron, and Ratcliffe (1995)
	Consumers can be categorized as friendship seekers, receptives, or privacy seekers, based on their efforts to seek communal relationships	Goodwin (1994); Stone (1954)
	Consumers vary in their willingness and ability to engage in OOP2	Harris, Baron, and Davies (1999)
	Off-site word-of-mouth stimuli (e.g., intrinsic and situational product involvement) can add to understanding of OOP2 stimuli	Venkatraman (1990)
Consumer needs	Two main inter-related needs for engaging in OOP2: Risk reduction	Bettman (1979); Bowen and Jones (1986); Czepiel (1990); Hugstead and Bruce (1987); Mills (1990); Moore and Lehmann (1980); Newman (1997)
	Social contact making	Berry and Wilson (1976); Forman and Sriram (1991); Harris, Baron, and Parker (2000); Tauber (1972); Zeithaml and Gilly (1987)
	High perceived risk commonly experienced in services; OOP2 can contribute to on-site risk reduction	Gummesson (1990); Hanna and Wozniak (2001); Harris, Baron, and Parker (2000)
	Retail/service encounters, via OOP2, can be regarded as surrogate social contacts; social contacts and relationships are important to society	Forman and Sriram (1991)
Service employees	Behaviour of service employees can act as stimulus/deterrent for OOP2; employees often perceived as less credible than fellow consumers	Adelman, Ahuvia, and Goodwin (1994)
	Many situations when service employees not accessible to consumers	Harris, Baron, and Davies (1999)
	Role/script adoption of service employees affects likelihood of OOP2	Ashforth and Ravid (1986); Martin and Pranter (1989); Pranter and Martin (1991); Solomon et al. (1985)
Service environment	Talking to strangers most likely to occur in service environments	Parker and Harris (1999)
	Servicescapes can (should) be designed to facilitate OOP2; friendships partly based on chance contact and proximity	Aubert-Gamet and Cova (1999); Dallos (1996); Fehr (1996)
	OOP2 dependent on time in system	Davies, Baron, and Harris (1999)
	OOP2 dependent on product/service range and availability	Harris, Baron, and Ratcliffe (1995)
	OOP2 dependent on elements of the physical environment	Bitner (1992)
	Theatrical techniques for audience participation can be applied to determine level of consumer participation in service settings	Harris, Harris, and Baron (2002)

NOTE: OOP1 = observable oral participation between employees and consumers; OOP2 = observable oral participation between strangers.

open-plan hospital ward not to talk to each other. Table 1 provides a summary of the main literature sources and key findings on the stimuli for OOP2.

The manifestation of OOP2 is considered in terms of the content of the conversations, the processes that occur, and the roles adopted by consumers. In terms of content, research has concentrated on the scripts, language, and meanings employed by consumers and employees in both OOP2 and OOP1 and has examined the frequencies of task-related OOP2 compared to other forms (e.g., pleas-

entries). Consumers often go through several stages in a service process. The opportunities to engage in OOP2 at the various stages, together with the potential importance of such engagements for service providers, have been investigated. In terms of consumer roles, that of the "partial employee" has received the most attention in the literature (see Table 2).

In Table 3, the identified consequences of OOP2 for both consumers and service providers are summarized. For consumers, there can be both positive outcomes (e.g., anxiety reduction) and negative outcomes (e.g., privacy

TABLE 2
Manifestations of OOP2

<i>Manifestation</i>	<i>Key Insights</i>	<i>Literature Sources</i>
Content	OOP2 is often task related; other main form of OOP2 is pleasantries	Baron, Harris and Davies (1996); Martin and Clark (1996)
	Content of OOP2 is underresearched, but some evidence that OOP2 has similarities with off-site word-of-mouth (WOM)	File, Judd, and Prince (1992); Frieden and Goldsmith (1988); Gremler (1994); Murray (1991)
	Benefits of WOM, such as personal relevance, may also apply to OOP2	Herr, Kardes, and Kim (1991)
	Language supports and shapes context; use of language is a means for individuals to shape personal and social worlds	Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998)
	Nonverbal language subject to cultural patterns learnt over time	Radley (1996)
	Conversation is a ritual: distinction between utterance meaning (what a speaker means) and sentence meaning (what the words mean)	Blakemore (1992); Tannen (1994)
	Employee/consumer dramatic scripts are theatrically very complex; OOP2 tends to have greater subjective content	Baron, Harris, and Davies (1996); Harris, Harris, and Baron (2002)
	Consumers may go through six phases in retail settings: entry, social, appraisal, orientation, consideration, and purchase	Davies, Baron, and Harris (1999)
	OOP2 can take place at each of the phases, but consideration phase is of particular interest to store format retailers	Davies, Baron, and Harris (1999)
	Roles performed by consumers in conversations with strangers include help seeker, proactive helper, and reactive helper	McGrath and Otnes (1995); Parker and Ward (2000)
Processes and roles	Treating customers as "partial employees" is a recommended service/retail strategy; requires customer role clarity, ability, and motivation	Bowen (1986); Mills, Chase, and Margulies (1983)
	Formal environmental cues can socialize customers into roles they might be expected to perform in servicescapes	Dubinsky et al. (1986)
	Accumulated evidence that conversational style differences are influenced by gender	Hinde (1996); Tannen (1994)

NOTE: OOP2 = observable oral participation between strangers.

intrusion) from the employment of OOP2 within the total consumer service experience. For providers, there are benefits to be gained through consumers acting as partial employees offering oral assistance, as well as through physical assistance, especially when service employees are inaccessible.

The framework in Figure 1 (and the details provided in Tables 1, 2, and 3) provides, for the first time, a means for academics and practitioners to assess systematically the place and potential of C-to-C conversations in servicescapes in general.

This generic aspect of Figure 1, however, may hide important context-specific elements of OOP2 in service settings. Although they have not been highlighted specifically in the literature, it is clear that context-specific observable consumer behaviors have the potential to be stimuli for OOP2. For example, it has been observed that, in theme parks, consumers spend a large part of their time in lines, and Grove and Fisk (1997) have confirmed that many C-to-C interactions occur while consumers are waiting in lines. Martin (1997) observed that in the 10-pin bowling context, actions of bowlers include watching one another bowl, clapping or cheering, slapping one an-

other's hands, and patting one another on the back. These behaviors can all stimulate C-to-C conversations, but they are not behaviors that would be applicable to a doctor's surgery, for example.

Also, the context, especially the time consumers spend in the service setting, is believed to affect some of the outcomes of OOP2. For example, in extended hedonic service encounters, Price, Arnould, and Tierney (1995) have noted "authentic changes of feelings and connections" that develop between groups consisting of the consumers and the service providers, with conversations reflecting the emerging friendships (p. 89). Despite an intuitive feel that the time in the system will affect C-to-C conversations and their outcomes, in nonhedonic, utilitarian service encounters, little is known what the effect might be.

The framework in Figure 1 also highlights some limitations of the research to date. First, much of the work has concentrated on analyzing specific incidents of OOP2, through surveys and experiments. In the servuction system (Langeard et al. 1981), C-to-C interactions were identified explicitly as one of the behaviors that take place, in service settings, that are "visible" to consumers (the others being consumer-to-contact person interactions and consumer in-

TABLE 3
Consequences of OOP2

<i>Consequences for</i>	<i>Key Insights</i>	<i>Literature Sources</i>
Consumers	There has been a tendency to focus on negative consequences of OOP2; negative OOP2 can be a major source of consumer dissatisfaction	Grove and Fisk (1997); Martin and Clark (1996)
	Some studies concentrated on positive outcomes of OOP2; risk reduction, feeling part of society	Harris, Baron, and Davies (1999); Parker and Ward (2000)
	Fellow customers are willing and often able to provide information and/or advice	Harris, Baron, and Davies (1999)
	The distinction between chance acquaintances and friends depends on the quality and quantity of self-disclosure	Price and Arnould (1999)
Service providers	Fellow consumers, acting as partial employees can encourage purchases and "close a sale"	McGrath and Otnes (1995)
	Service productivity can be enhanced when customers are regarded as partial employees and their participation is planned and managed	Bettencourt (1997); Bowen (1986); Rodie and Kleine (2000)
	Consumers can be regarded as an on-site human resource	Lengnick-Hall, Claycomb, and Inks (2000)
	Early studies emphasized voluntary physical effort of consumers; recent consideration of OOP2 demonstrates its contribution to a pleasant service environment	Langeard et al. (1981); Marshall and Heslop (1988); Parker and Ward (2000)
	Fellow customers are often the only accessible and available on-site human resource	Wener (1984)

NOTE: OOP2 = observable oral participation between strangers.

interactions with the physical environment). Such a categorization of consumer interactions has been a catalyst for much research on service encounters, and the research on the separate behaviors (especially consumer-to-contact person interactions) has been seen to have immediate management relevance, as the interactions can affect consumers' perceptions of service quality (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990). When OOP2 is considered explicitly, the components that make up the stimuli, manifestation, and consequences have been identified in Figure 1. However, studies that examine the behaviors separately fail to take account of the relationships between OOP2 and other customer behaviors within a given setting, and specifically the impact of these behaviors on the frequency, nature, and content of stranger conversations. The importance and meaning that consumers attach to OOP2 relative to other behaviors in a servicescape has not been explored systematically. Such an exploration would support the call for services marketing research to address the potential psychological responses by consumers to their participation within service encounters in order to complement research on the economic implications of consumer participation (Bendapudi and Leone 2003).

Second, prior research has tended to categorize OOP2 as either task related or pleasantries—the latter being a catchall for a wide variety of conversations on a range of subjects. Understandably, in retail settings (in which many of the prior studies had taken place), most attention and importance has been given to task-related OOP2, particularly at the purchase consideration phase of service delivery (Davies, Baron, and Harris 1999). Here, OOP2

supports purposeful on-site shopping behaviors. However, in prepurchase utilitarian services, especially those, such as air and rail travel, where there are sizable time periods for conversations, pleasantries with a fellow consumer will affect, and may even determine, the consumer experience. Many of these conversations may be unconnected with consumers' purposeful service-related behaviors. If so, a greater understanding of the effect of OOP2 in respect of both purposeful and nonpurposeful consumer behaviors would give service providers a more informed basis on which to devise strategies that regard consumers as an on-site human resource (Lengnick-Hall, Claycomb, and Inks 2000).

A context (rail travel) and a research approach (market-oriented ethnography) were chosen deliberately to undertake empirical work that addresses the gaps and limitations expressed above.

THE MARKET-ORIENTED ETHNOGRAPHY

Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) use the term *market-oriented* ethnography to describe "an ethnographic focus on the behavior of people constituting a market for a product or service" (p. 484). The focus of this research is stranger conversations within an extended service experience. A market-oriented ethnography was chosen to explore the meaningful behavioral constellation that surrounds and influences these conversations within a single consumption experience (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). The key advantage of ethnographic research is its

closeness to the reality of the topic under investigation. It can provide significant understanding of the phenomena being researched as well as produce new, previously unrecognized phenomena and insights (Carson et al. 2001).

Ethnography gives primacy to collecting data on consumer behavior in a *natural* setting. The setting chosen was the train travel arena where passengers travel for personal and work-related reasons. Research was carried out on the trains and stations controlled by a regional rail franchise operator in northern England. Field-workers recorded observations of all behaviors as they traveled as real passengers on journeys to and from work. Participant observation constituted the main means of data collection and was carried out by two trained field-workers (one of whom was one of the authors) traveling as passengers on trains and platforms controlled by a rail-operating company. More than 300 pages of field notes were taken on journeys on a variety of routes covering different times and days of the week.

The ethnographic method, according to Arnould and Wallendorf (1994), "involves incorporating multiple sources of data collection" (p. 485). This was achieved by including data from 28 unstructured passenger interviews (INT 1 to INT 28). They were conducted with travelers waiting for trains on the platform of a station controlled by the train operator. The interviews involved individual travelers participating in a conversation with a researcher, guided by a general, rather than specific, a priori topic structure. Although the agenda for the interviews was designed to explore issues and themes that had emerged from the participant observations (their travel experiences and the range of behaviors they had engaged in, and specifically instances of conversations with strangers), they turned out to be more like conversations than interviews (Burgess 1984). The additional data set had properties that complemented the participant observation. Consequences of OOP2, such as enjoyment, were specifically expressed by respondents, rather than being inferred by field-workers, for example, through passenger smiles or laughter. The interview process allowed consumers to reflect on OOP2 in rail travel based on many journeys, and it also provided a means for the views of passengers who did not engage regularly in OOP2 to be considered. It was, however, dependent on the quality of recall of the respondents.

A major consideration when designing the research was to identify a service setting that would allow stranger conversations to be studied as they occurred naturally, across an extended time frame (Lincoln and Guba 1985). It was important to be able to observe the cumulative effect of stranger conversations as well as explore the relationship between conversations and other observable behav-

iors. The rail environment presented an ideal setting with many travelers present in the service system for a prolonged period. During a 9-month period, the field-workers made 65 journeys with an average journey time of approximately 180 minutes. After 9 months, the same behaviors began to occur repeatedly on the different journeys at the different times of the week. In this sense, saturation had been reached by a "combination of the empirical limits of the data, the integration and density of the theory, and the analyst's theoretical sensitivity" (Glaser and Strauss 1967, pp. 61-62). Although data analysis was an iterative process, with reflexivity encouraged via labeling, the major part of the analysis and interpretation took place after both the observation and the interviews had taken place.

Consideration was given to defining the role of the researchers in the research process. This was considered to be a critical issue with the objective being to obtain access to "participant perspectives but at the same time minimizing the dangers of over-rapport" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1996, p. 112). Although, as Penaloza (1999) noted, ethnographies "vary in their degree of self reflection, as a result of type of study and the philosophy of the researcher" (p. 354), in this study, reflexivity was encouraged with the use of labeling (Schatzman and Strauss 1973). Observations were recorded by field-workers as theoretical notes (TNs), observational notes (ONs), and methodological notes (MNs). Extracts from field-worker observations that relate to these categories are provided in Table 4.

There were three main stages in the analysis. The first stage involved a detailed examination of the transcripts and field notes, to become familiar with the mass of data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe 1991, p. 108). It was clear even at this early stage in the analysis that a significant amount of conversation with strangers had taken place in this environment and that stranger conversations were an integral part of a range of other observable behaviors.

In the second stage, attempts were made to identify some stable themes or categories across the corpus of data. It was here that distinct behavioral categories began to emerge. The concepts and categories were identified from the content of the field notes and from the respondents themselves through the ethnographic interviews (Lofland and Lofland 1984). Initially, it was possible to generate a set of concrete categories from the data, for example, "passenger drinking cup of coffee," "passenger running across platform," "passenger eating sandwich." The constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was then used to redefine the behavioral categories and clarify their key properties, as well as their relationships with stranger conversations. Some of the key properties of the concrete behavior included frequency, duration, and intensity. Us-

TABLE 4
Labeling of Field-Worker Observations

<i>Type of Note</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Example^a</i>
Methodological note	Notes on the feelings and emotions of the researcher and on the methodological process	“The train is delayed by 30 minutes by the time we leave T. which makes a change. Normally when the train is delayed the conductor announces what time we’ll arrive in M. but he doesn’t, so. When I hear people wondering I tell them. . . . This is unusual for me but I feel like the milk of human kindness today.” (F2/MN) “I started to feel annoyed as the lad opposite had his bag under the seat all over my feet.” (F1/MN)
Observational note	A statement of who said or did what and where. The observable behaviors	“The man in front began by reading a paper. After 10 minutes he started to stare out of the window.” (F1/ON) “The 4 passengers in the other seats had cans of coke and crisps laid out in front of them.” (F1/ON)
Theoretical note	Inferential declarations’ interpretations, inferences, hypotheses, and conjectures of observational meaning	“Although people spend a great deal of time staring out of the window after they have read their paper, are they happy with this or would they like something to do?” (F1/TN)

a. F1 = Field-Worker 1; F2 = Field-Worker 2.

ing this procedure, the concrete categories were then reorganized into more meaningful clusters of behavior. This resulted in the 10 behavioral categories discussed later. Also, at this stage, a separate analysis was made of the detailed dimensions and properties of the stranger conversations, the behavioral category that was central to this piece of work. The conversations were considered in light of existing research, and an attempt was made to identify the contribution of the ethnography to the understanding of the stimuli, manifestations, and consequences of stranger interactions that are summarized in Figure 1.

In the third stage, stronger links were made between the concepts and indicators, and evidence was selected from the data to support explanatory claims. Explanations, and relationships that were proposed, were checked with rail users to ensure that the actors, whose beliefs and behavior they are describing, recognize the validity of those accounts (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) remind us that “as in all data analysis, ethnographic interpretation also requires researcher creativity and insight rather than rote adherence to a sequence of steps” (p. 495). Any interesting/unusual patterns in the data were noted and explored in more detail as they emerged.

FINDINGS FROM THE ETHNOGRAPHY

The rail ethnography highlighted additional context-specific dimensions to Figure 1. First, it defined the nature and impact of other observable passenger behaviors on OOP2. These behaviors emerged as stimuli within the framework. Second, it provided qualitative insights into the similarities and differences in the manifestations of OOP2 in a prepurchase extended service encounter. Third,

it identified the existence and importance of a *stabilizing effect* of conversations between strangers that acts as a “defuser” of consumer dissatisfaction. The findings are discussed below.

The Nature and Impact of Other Behaviors on OOP2: Context-Specific Stimuli

The data analysis revealed 10 clusters of observable passenger behaviors, which both involved and surrounded OOP2, the stranger conversations: ticketing, eating, reading, settling/unsettling, filling time, sleeping/dozing, journey/delay related, personal grooming, working, and talking. They are not presented here in any order of importance, nor should they be viewed as mutually exclusive.

- *Ticketing*—Behavior related to passenger confusion as to how often, and in what part of the journey, tickets should be presented for inspection, and disruptions caused by searching belongings for tickets.
- *Eating*—Behavior related to what was eaten by passengers, where it was consumed, and the amount of time spent in the process of consumption. It also included hunger-stimulated conversations between strangers about the refreshment service and discussions about the mobile trolley and its contents.
- *Reading*—Behavior related to the reading, by passengers, of books, newspapers, timetables, and work-related documents, while either sitting or standing, including the amount of time spent reading.
- *Settling/unsettling*—Behavior related to passengers marking the space they wished to occupy at journey outset and finding places to store baggage, and to the reverse process on reaching their destination.

- *Filling time*—Behavior characterized by passengers staring out of the train window, either blankly (deep in thought) or purposefully (at the scenery).
- *Sleeping/dozing*—Actual sleeping/dozing, together with the asking of strangers sitting next to them to wake them up at certain stops.
- *Journey/delay related*—Behaviors associated with the journey and delays, usually caused by some form of service breakdown of the trains.
- *Personal grooming*—Behaviors, mainly by female passengers, that included putting on their makeup, brushing their hair, and getting access to and from the washrooms.
- *Working*—Behaviors that involved the reading/editing of paper documents or those on laptop computers.
- *Talking*—Passenger behaviors relating to conversations with friends, strangers, and rail employees on the platforms and in the carriages, and mobile phone conversations.

There was a constant interplay between the two main sets of data: the data that generated the behavioral categories above and the conversations between strangers. This led to some major findings. For example, in the first iteration of data, conversations emerged as a separate behavioral category. However, from continued reading, rereading, and sorting the data, it became clear that OOP2 (as one form of conversation) *existed in all other categories*.

Some examples from the field notes and interviews demonstrate the incidences of OOP2 across the behavioral categories.

Ticketing

A foreign couple got on at C on their way to the airport. They were drinking small bottles of red wine. The conductor appeared and told them that their tickets were out of date . . . there was some discussion about where they had bought the tickets . . . the couple told the conductor that they were not thieves. . . . but were informed that they had to get new tickets. . . . They said they would but wanted information about how to claim compensation . . . the lady behind the couple leaned forward and told them that she thought the conductor had been very curt. (F1/ON)

Working

Oh, we talk to people all the time . . . one example this morning . . . we talked to a computer operator . . . when we sat down, she had her work spread out all over the table . . . and she apologized and said she would move it . . . we told her not to bother and then we started to chat . . . my husband said he didn't like computers. (INT 23)

Settling

I spoke to a stranger last time I went to London. He spoke to me first . . . he offered me help on with my luggage. I asked if he wanted to sit with me at a table . . . it seemed polite . . . he was nice, and we chatted most of the way home. (INT 6)

Delay Related

An elderly woman voiced her concerns about missing her connection in Y to the young lad next to her. He responded by reassuring her that Y was a nice place to pass the time anyway. They started to talk about the performance of football teams at the various locations. They clearly shared an interest in football. They talked nonstop for 20 minutes about various aspects of their lives and seemed to speed up as the train got closer to Y . . . the pace of the conversation seems to be linked to enjoyment. (F1/ON/TN)

Eating/Drinking

The woman at the coffee stand advised the man in the queue in front to drink his coffee from the gap in the lid in the front of the cup . . . she then turned to me and told me that it was what you were supposed to do to stop it from spilling. She expressed her frustration at the fact that people still didn't seem to get it "no matter how often she tried to tell them." (F1/ON)

The ethnographic study provides extensive evidence that context-specific behaviors (as identified by the other behavioral categories) act as stimuli for OOP2. From the consumer/passenger perspective, some of the behavioral categories are purposeful (i.e., relate to the anticipated consumer participation in service production), whereas others are nonpurposeful. Also, some behavioral categories are related to the core service of transporting consumers and baggage from the departure point to the destination point in a fixed period of time, whereas others are not. In Table 5, the observed passenger behavioral stimuli for OOP2 are categorized according to the two dimensions.¹

Conversely, OOP2 *contributes* in varying degrees to the total service experience of passengers across the four quadrants of Table 5. Examination of the role of OOP2 across the quadrants resulted in the identification of a *stabilizing effect* of conversations between strangers that acts as a "defuser" of dissatisfaction. This was particularly apparent in quadrant 3—nonpurposeful consumer behaviors in core-service-related activities. Prior to the ethnography, little consideration had been given to the effect of OOP2 on consumer behaviors in quadrant 3, even though such

1. The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for the suggestion leading to this categorization.

TABLE 5
OOP2 Stimuli Categorized by Observed
Consumer Behavior and Relationship
to the Core Service

	<i>Purposeful Consumer Behavior</i>	<i>Nonpurposeful Consumer Behavior</i>
Core-related service	1 Ticketing Settling/unsettling	3 Journey/delay related Filling time
Non-core-related service	2 Eating Working Reading	4 Sleeping/dozing Personal grooming

NOTE: The other dimension, talking, is evident across all other behavioral categories. OOP2 = observable oral participation between strangers.

behaviors have an impact on the core service. The stabilizing effect and its components are described in detail later.

Manifestation of OOP2 in an Extended Prepurchase Service Setting

The rail ethnography supported the earlier findings that the content of OOP2 is often product/service related. Unlike earlier studies in retail settings, where it may be natural for consumers to talk to fellow consumers about the merchandise that is displayed all around them, this study took place in an environment in which the purchase had been made prior to many of the opportunities to OOP2. Nevertheless, despite the absence of an on-site purchase consideration phase, there was still a predominance of service-related conversations between strangers. They consisted of mutual moans and groans about the service, advice on destination and journey times, or general comments about other travel experiences.

Previous studies had identified and explored three roles performed by consumers when engaging in conversations with strangers (Harris, Baron, and Davies 1999; McGrath and Otnes 1995; Parker and Ward 2000). They are *help seekers*, *proactive helpers*, and *reactive helpers*. The three roles were identified in the rail ethnography, but in this context, there was more evidence of the enactment and contribution of the proactive helper role than has been identified in retail environments. This, in part, can be explained by the widespread belief by U.K. rail travelers that it is difficult to obtain "official" journey information. This point has been made forcibly by the BBC's "rail commuter champion" and published on the BBC's Web site in October 2002.

It's impossible to overstate the need for good communication in times of trouble. You can be on a train, delayed for half-an-hour and no one tells you a

thing. Tell us why we are stuck, what's being done to fix the situation, how long the delay is likely to be. Use the PA system or install scrolling text screens. It's the same when you're waiting at the station. Just tell us what's going on.

In contrast to previous studies, the ethnography also revealed insights into the sequencing and pace of OOP2. Passenger conversations appeared to be characterized by a predictable pattern. They start with a sharing of pleasantries or mutual moans about the service. This is followed by a gentle inquiry about the other's travel destination, that is, "Where are you travelling to?" or "How far are you going?" Such questions were considered acceptable for a stranger conversation in this setting. If the conversation progressed further, with "Why are you travelling to x?" it required a level of disclosure in the response that signaled that further conversation was acceptable to both parties. Passengers who did not want to get involved in a conversation withheld information at this stage. The detailed observation also enabled field-workers to identify differences in the pace of conversations.

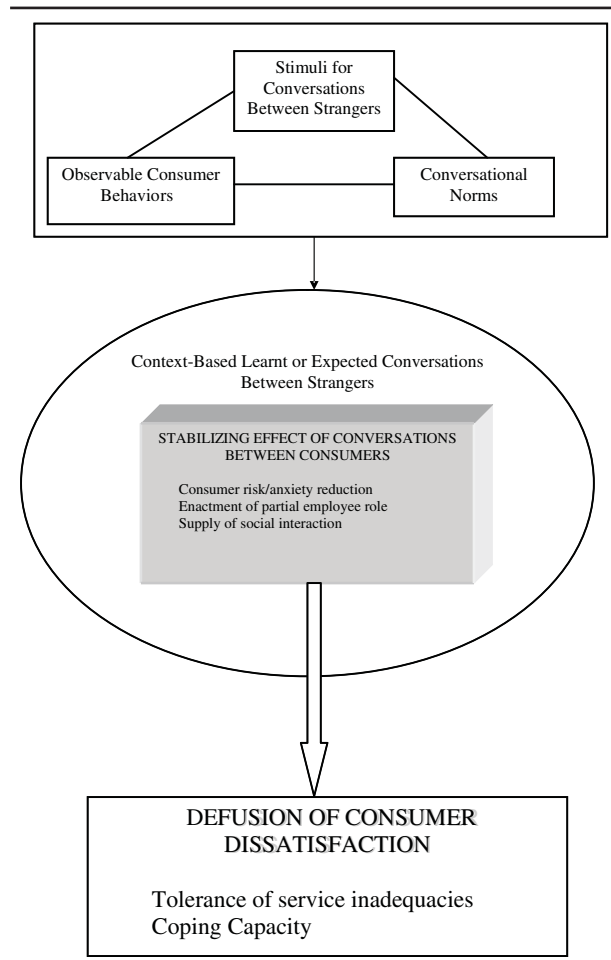
The Stabilizing Effect of OOP2

The components of the conceptual scheme outlining the impact of the stabilizing effect of OOP2 are identified in Figure 2 and described below.

Findings suggest that conversations between strangers have a stabilizing impact on consumer expectations and perceptions of their service experience, which results in a reduction in dissatisfaction. The stabilizing effect is evident in three main components: consumer risk/anxiety reduction, the enactment of the partial employee role, and the supply of social interaction. Each of these components can have both a cognitive and affective dimension. The stabilizing components positively influence consumers' expectations and perceptions through raising the threshold of tolerance of service inadequacies and increasing the capacity to cope with them.

The impact of positive expectations and perceptions of service provision on satisfaction is the subject of much debate and has been widely documented in the services literature (see, e.g., Cronin and Taylor 1992; Oliver 1997; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1993). For the purposes of this study, Bendapudi and Leone's (2003) research, which explicitly explored the impact of customer participation on satisfaction in service settings, lends support to the importance of the stabilizing effect. Their findings highlight the positive impact of customer participation on satisfaction in services characterized by high levels of customer dissatisfaction. According to Bendapudi and Leone (2003), where there is "some chance that the outcome will not meet a customer's expectations, encouraging customer

FIGURE 2
Stabilizing Effect of OOP2



NOTE: OOP2 = observable oral participation between strangers.

participation may be a reasonable strategy because the firm will receive less blame for the outcome.” Furthermore, “The impact of a worse than expected outcome can be reduced anywhere from one-third to as much as five times when the customer participates in production” (p. 25). These findings are particularly relevant to the U.K. rail setting, which at the time of writing is infamous for high levels of consumer dissatisfaction. Survey work, undertaken by the United Kingdom’s Strategic Rail Authority in June 2002, revealed that only 42% of passengers were satisfied with the value for money of rail services, and, for many rail-operating companies, less than two thirds of passengers were satisfied with the information on their journeys.

THE COMPONENTS OF THE STABILIZING EFFECT

As detailed in Figure 2, the stabilizing effect of conversations between strangers is evident in three main components: consumer risk/anxiety reduction, the enactment of the partial employee role, and the supply of social interaction.

Consumer anxiety often occurred because of uncertainty about travel times, journey destinations, and train platforms. This stimulated many stranger conversations. “Do you know if this train goes to M . . . I don’t want to end up in N” (F1/ON). “Should I carry on to M, or change at N?” (F2/ON).

In this service setting, passengers (as help seekers) needed accurate and immediate personal reassurance at the point of departure about all aspects of their journey. Interpersonal information provided by fellow travelers was particularly valuable and important for well-being when the service provider did not adequately supply the information. Knowledge provided by consumers was used to gain an important “place” and “function” orientation to their setting (Wener 1984). There was also evidence that the acquisition of this knowledge stimulated an affective response, a sense of relief in many cases.

A lady got on the train puffing and panting. She asked another lady if it was the train for S . . . The lady confirmed that it was. . . . “Oh thank goodness,” she replied, “It’s just that I have had really bad day with connections and I thought this would be the last straw.” (F1/ON)

Conversations also provided an opportunity for many passengers to display their expert knowledge as *partial employees* within the service delivery system. This was evident through the contributions of “proactive helpers.” It was clear that due to their experience and knowledge of regular train journeys, many passengers offered advice and information to fellow travelers without being asked for it. Again, because an employee was not there to provide it, this role seemed to be performed more frequently by fellow consumers.

The man was talking very loudly to other passengers on the crowded train . . . he was telling everyone about the connection at S at 4.30 . . . he talked about a previous occasion when he had missed a connection due to a similar problem. He said that another train was due out of the station straight after this one, so he didn’t know why this one was waiting . . . he said what they should do is send the train direct to S and all those going to intervening destinations should be asked to get off and go on another train. He then proceeded to work out times for people who were worried about connections. (F1/ON)

The evidence suggested that the information offered by proactive helpers, in their roles of partial employees in this environment, could be considered by fellow passengers as more accurate and reliable than in other settings. Because an employee was not there to provide information, this role seemed to be performed frequently by fellow consumers—thereby providing an additional on-site resource. Every piece of information provided by proactive helpers and recorded in the field notes was reliable (i.e., factually accurate). This runs contrary to the findings of Harris, Baron, and Davies (1999), who found that proactive helpers in a home improvement retail setting were not as effective in terms of providing product-related information to fellow consumers as were reactive helpers.

The role of reactive helper was also evident in the field notes but less significant in this setting. “I find that people often talk to me, but I don’t particularly enjoy this as I like time to read . . . and not talk” (INT 24).

The supply of social interaction through conversations with strangers in the setting contributed to passenger enjoyment and was often stimulated by boredom. By studying the sequence of behavioral activities, it was clear that passengers wanted a range of activities to fill the time spent in the system. For many, a conversation with a stranger provided a better alternative than sitting doing nothing. Time in the system was clearly a major influence on the frequency and depth of stranger conversations. Many conversations did not begin immediately but emerged after passengers had shared some element of the service experience. “It’s nice to talk to people . . . it passes the time of day. I usually find someone friendly to talk to on a long journey” (INT 22).

The ethnography provided significant evidence that passengers were clearly adding value, through enjoyment, to the service experience of other consumers through OOP2 (Davies, Baron, and Harris, 1999). “He enjoyed the conversation so much that he nearly missed the train” (INT 16). “Yes, the conversation was a very positive experience. We sat facing each other . . . we were both curious about the other one . . . we were right there . . . it was very comfortable and polite” (INT 9).

Although these examples are explicit statements of enjoyment, the field notes illustrate the impact in other ways.

The girl with an American accent was sitting next to two other girls and an older lady. They discussed cultural differences between Americans and British. The American girl commented that “pissed” to an American meant fed up, not drunk. The other girls laughed out loud. The two girls asked the American girl to take a photograph of them. The American got off at the next stop and one of the remaining girls commented on the fact that she was a “really nice girl.” (F1/ON)

DEFUSION OF CONSUMER DISSATISFACTION

The data highlighted the predominance of product/service-related OOP2 in this setting. The stabilizing components help defuse consumer dissatisfaction through raising the threshold of tolerance of service inadequacies and the capacity to cope with them. “We talked about this and that . . . we talked about the state of the carriages . . . they need sprucing up, and we had to keep asking each other about the announcements because you couldn’t hear them” (INT 6).

Passengers make frequent comparisons between the rail travel experience and other travel experiences, most notably bus or air travel, both in the United Kingdom and abroad. Passengers also demonstrated an awareness and understanding about the problems facing train-operating companies, as well as an appreciation of the social benefits of getting people out of cars and onto trains.

The four women moaned loudly about the rail operator . . . they were regular travelers . . . they talked about the government’s efforts to get people onto trains and out of cars . . . they made comments about the trains in Spain . . . one said that if the train was delayed by 10 minutes you could get your money back. (F1/ON)

When the trains run on time, the service is excellent. . . . I would like to see more people out of cars and on the train. (INT 22)

Consumers also give each other information and advice about aspects of the service, which, as well as reducing uncertainty, enables them to get the most out of their travel experience. Although moans about the service dominated the content of conversations, there was evidence that, for many, the opportunity to discuss and share frustrations with fellow passengers improved their service experience. Passengers appeared to feel better if they received empathy from fellow passengers.

A man got on and asked the two men in front if this was the train to S . . . they turned to each other and commented that although they hadn’t been told for certain they hoped it was . . . all three men started to laugh. (F1/ON)

ANTECEDENTS

The scheme shown in Figure 2 proposes that there are three interrelated antecedents for OOP2—the stimuli for conversations (as identified in Figure 1), the observed categories of consumer behaviors (as specified in Table 5), and the norms of conversations—that result in context-based learnt or expected conversations between strangers.

They, in turn, create the conditions for the stabilizing effect of conversations between consumers.

In the rail setting, the individual characteristics and consumer needs were the main stimuli for OOP2. Evidence from the data strongly supports the proposition that there is a polarization in terms of people's willingness to engage in conversations with strangers. There are segments of passengers who have frequent conversations with strangers and view this behavior as a normal and acceptable part of a journey. "I talk a lot to strangers on the train . . . usually about railways . . . sport . . . football . . . the state of the nation" (INT 16).

In contrast, there are others who do not engage in conversations. Some do not talk because they keep themselves occupied with other activities during their journey. Others consider it to be inappropriate social behavior and are concerned about the social and physical risks associated with stranger interactions. "I never talk to people on trains as I don't think it's safe" (INT 26).

The ethnographic approach also enabled an identification of passengers who had multiple stranger conversations with different people during the same journey.

The lady got on and sat next to the young girl . . . she started to ask her questions . . . how far was she going . . . the girl told her she was going to M, and the lady commented that it wasn't that far. . . . She started to tell the girl about problems she had had on an earlier train. . . . The young girl got off at the next stop and a man sat in her seat. The lady proceeded to ask him the same questions that she had asked the young girl earlier. (F1/ON)

Interestingly, passengers who engaged in frequent mobile phone conversations also appeared to be happy to talk to strangers openly on the train. The data seem to support the proposition that there are certain people who just like to talk to someone to pass the time, whether the conversation is on the telephone or face-to-face.

A major stimulus for stranger conversations was *breakdown or failure in service delivery*. Passengers frequently used the breakdowns as an opportunity to share frustrations and opinions about the overall quality of the rail travel experience: to indulge in a "mutual moan and groan" (Baron, Harris, and Davies 1996).

The lady sat down and commented loudly to the stranger next to her "I have done really well haven't I? She told her that she had asked for a window seat and a seat facing the direction of the train and that they had 'got it wrong both times.'" (F1/ON)

Service employees, in the form of ticket collectors and food trolley salespersons, often unwittingly became stimuli for OOP as indicated in the behavioral categories of

"Ticketing" and "Eating." The service environment acted as a stimulus for OOP2 because of the close proximity of the passengers. It appears that body language can be an indication to others that some passengers wish to start a conversation. Prolonged eye contact or physical movements toward a fellow passenger are obvious signs of interest. However, some are subtler and understood by travelers themselves, although not recognized immediately by observers.

Two women were talking about all of the interesting people they had met on trains. . . . They were both in their 60's with grandchildren. One of them explained that "if you just sit there on the train looking sorry for yourself someone's bound to talk to you." (F2/ON)

The ethnography enabled us to develop a deeper understanding of the conversational norms that give culturally embedded meaning to the content of many stranger conversations.

Often, stranger conversations began with a question from one passenger to another: "Is anyone sitting there?" or "Is this anyone's seat?" A superficial analysis of the content of the conversation would identify the stimulus for the conversation as information search. In reality, passengers are making a statement rather than asking a question. They are saying "Take your bags off that seat so that I can sit down." This became clear from the analysis of the behaviors that occurred before and after the conversation. Although bags were not mentioned in the conversation, they were always on the seat prior to the question being asked and removed following the question. The bag-on-the-seat conversation becomes a manifestation of the *train culture*, in the sense that passengers have a shared understanding of what is acceptable behavior on the train in a given situation.

DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Insights gained from the framework in Figure 1, the rail ethnography and the recognition of context-specific elements of OOP2, especially the stabilizing effect of OOP2, suggest new challenges for service management.

The Impact of OOP2 on the Service Experience

Where C-to-C conversations and other forms of interaction lie at the *core* of a service—for example, sporting events, conferences, group holidays—the service providers organize and manage the consumer interactions. The

specific service in the market-oriented ethnography, rail travel, may be seen to be similar to many other services, for example, other travel forms such as bus, tram, or aeroplane; retail stores; self-service restaurants; hospital outpatient units. These services are characterized by reductions in the number of contact personnel and the on-site presence of many other consumers in close proximity spending a considerable amount of time in the service system. Providers of such services should also consider managing C-to-C interactions, even though they do not form the core of the service. Figure 1 and the accompanying Tables 1, 2, and 3 provide a basis for examining the potential impact of OOP2. The importance of OOP2 has been highlighted because of its contribution to a whole range of behaviors that can occur in such settings, and it can have a considerable impact on the service experience, especially where expressions of consumer dissatisfaction are not uncommon (as with the U.K. rail service).

Roles of Consumers and Employees

A potentially more significant finding, from the various analyses of the content of OOP2, is that consumers often supply each other with product/service-related information *that employees would normally be expected to supply*. Consumers truly do act as partial employees in terms of information provision. In the rail setting, consumers acting the role of proactive helpers emerged as the most visible and valued surrogate employees. Through OOP2, they demonstrated knowledge about breakdown procedures, destinations, journey times, and interesting features on route. At least part of the value attributed to their contributions can be explained by the relative lack of information being provided by the train-operating company. Coupled with earlier findings that consumers have the potential to be more credible as an information source than employees (Adelman, Ahuvia, and Goodwin 1994) and that consumers are often both willing and able to perform as partial employees (Harris, Baron, and Davies 1999), the findings strongly point to the need for an explicit recognition, at a strategic level, of the value of consumers as a knowledgeable resource. There is a major opportunity for service providers to harness the knowledge and expertise of consumers and incorporate it within their human resource management strategy. The findings also highlight the need for a reappraisal and redefinition of the traditional roles of both consumers and employees as interpersonal sources of information in service settings. At present, consumers expect employees to possess product-related information, and employees feel that they should possess it. Strategies could be developed that explicitly involve knowledgeable consumers in the provision of advice and information to other consumers *and* employees (Anon 1999), but this

would entail a cultural shift in the expectations of both employees and consumers. This would represent a major challenge for service organizations, but one that is worth considering given the lack of availability and product knowledge of many service employees. The aim would be to align the consumer role more closely with that of the employee and to encourage employees to adopt a more natural, realistic, and honest on-site performance on the understanding that consumers and employees together make up the on-site human resource.

Conversational Pattern and Consumer Enjoyment

In the general word-of-mouth literature, there is an awareness of some sequencing of the different elements of the conversation. For example, Hanna and Wozniak (2001) noted how product-related dialogue sometimes occurs as an "outgrowth of a more general conversation that touches on the product category" (p. 264). The ethnography revealed insights into sequencing of OOP2. Passenger conversations appeared to be characterized by a predictable pattern. They start with a sharing of pleasantries or mutual moans. This is followed by a gentle inquiry about the other's travel destination—an acceptable question for a stranger conversation in the setting. If the conversation progressed further, normally with a question asking for the reason for traveling to the particular destination, it required a level of disclosure from the recipient that would signal to both parties that further conversation was acceptable. Passengers who did not want to converse would withhold information at this point. A detailed understanding of the sequencing of OOP2 in a service setting should be more than simply "interesting" to that service provider. It can provide a means for devising strategies to facilitate OOP2 that fall within the boundaries of culturally accepted behavior.

Conversations that go beyond the initial pleasantries may require sizable conversational time units. This has been recognized in conversations between employees and consumers (OOP1) in servicescapes such as hairdresser salons (Goodwin 1994; Price and Arnould 1999) and also in previous studies that focused on C-to-C interactions; for example, Grove and Fisk (1997) noted how much OOP2 takes place while waiting in line, and McGrath and Otnes (1995) talked of areas where shoppers could take a break as offering the best opportunities for such interactions. The study of the prolonged conversations in the extended orientation phase of the rail setting suggests that the time actually spent on OOP2 can influence the enjoyment of the conversation and hence of the service experience. A longer conversation can lead to a greater level of disclosure and a more enjoyable experience. Here, a special form of

commercial friendship between consumers is being created. Such friendships are important, as, when they occur between service providers and clients, they are linked to the marketing objectives of satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word of mouth (Price and Arnould 1999).

Provider Benefits From OOP2

Although not ignoring the negative impacts of OOP2 on consumers and service organizations, the findings in the article contribute to a deeper understanding of the potentially beneficial outcomes for each. From a provider's perspective, there is support for the view that OOP2 can generate a substantial amount of product/service-related information that can be used within a servicescape. In this sense, OOP2 is linked to the enhanced productivity that results when consumers are regarded as partial employees (Bettencourt 1997; Bowen 1986; Lovelock and Young 1979; Mills, Chase, and Margulies 1983; Rodie and Kleine 2000). Other provider benefits identified in the participation literature include organizational citizenship and repatronage (Lengnick-Hall, Claycomb, and Inks 2000). Beneficial outcomes for consumers, such as consumer enjoyment and the meeting of consumer needs for information, have already been identified. However, the richness of the data in the ethnography suggests that the focus on individual consumer and provider benefits may be too narrow. The value of stranger conversations should be viewed not just in terms of individual company-based objectives, such as customer satisfaction and retention. As Czepiel, Solomon, and Surprenant (1985) pointed out, in one of the first systematic studies of service encounters, "Service transactions are a form of human interaction, important not only to their direct participants, but to society as a whole. Whatever perspective is taken, it is vital that the encounters be good" (p. 14).

In the rail setting, it became clear that OOP2 was helping to maintain the stability of a rail passenger culture—a culture that included sitting in reserved seats until requested to move, putting bags on adjacent seats if the train was relatively empty, offering to wake up passengers who wished to sleep between stops, and not being abusive to rail employees. Consumers found social support through OOP2 that was not being provided by the service operator. Even mutual moans and groans, which might be conceived as negative interactions from a provider perspective, were valued by consumers as a source of social support and provided a mechanism for tolerating service inadequacies. These observations help draw attention to the social nature of many service experiences, rather than on the actions undertaken to meet specific consumer product needs.

SOME DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Rodie and Kleine (2000) called for more empirical research on customer participation in services. Here, some directions for further research in one particular form of customer participation, OOP2, are presented that arise from the market-oriented ethnography and the literature review.

First, the organization and description of the empirical world of the U.K. rail passenger, and the emergent theory of a potential stabilizing effect of OOP2, require some formalization (Locke 2001; Miles and Huberman 1994). The following propositions may be tested with other data sources and provide a focus for systematic further research. Proposition 1 suggests conditions for the range and limits of the applicability of the stabilizing effect of OOP2 (Wells 2001). It would be especially valuable to conduct research in another servicescape where the conditions apply (e.g., a hospital outpatients department) in order to synthesize and verify the conceptual scheme of Figure 2.

Proposition 1: In service settings, where (a) there are consumers in closed proximity, (b) consumers can spend considerable time in the system, and (c) consumers regularly express levels of dissatisfaction, conversations between strangers act as a stabilizing effect on the service operation.

Proposition 2: The positive consequences of stabilization through conversations between strangers are that consumers become (a) more tolerant of service inadequacies and (b) more capable of coping with service inadequacies.

Proposition 3: Stabilization occurs because conversations between strangers (a) help reduce consumer risk/anxiety, (b) aid the enactment of the partial employee role adopted by some consumers, and (c) provide social interaction.

Proposition 4: The nature and form of conversations between strangers are context based and depend on (a) stimuli such as individual characteristics of consumers, consumer needs, service employee presence/actions, and the servicescape; (b) observable consumer behaviors that occur frequently in the service context; and (c) conversational norms and/or rituals.

Second, understanding of the stimuli, manifestations, and consequences of OOP2 is still limited. Much more can be learnt about the stimuli for stranger conversations, in particular about the character of consumers who engage in the behavior. McGrath and Otnes (1995) highlighted the prevalence of OOP2 between women. What factors can be found to explain this finding? Future research could encompass the insights on C-to-C conversations to be

gleaned from the biennial Association of Consumer Research conferences that are devoted to "Gender, Marketing, and Consumer Behavior" or from considering gender differences in the use of OOP2 in information search strategies (Laroche et al. 2000).

It has long been recognized that management, by addressing the organizational socialization of consumers in service environments, can encourage consumers to perform in an appropriate manner during service production and delivery (Kelley, Donnelly, and Skinner 1990). Further empirical research on how consumers are socialized into the various *pro-social OOP2 practices* would not only increase knowledge of organizational socialization but also would give insights on the role of consumers within the total on-site human resource. Following the discussion around Table 5, a focus on C-to-C conversations in nonpurposeful, core service-related activities would provide a fruitful direction for the research. In retail environments, where consumers have the opportunity to purchase merchandise in the service setting, there is a need to investigate the relationship between OOP2 and purchase behavior or purchase intentions. Retailers are clearly interested in this connection.

Finally, the whole area of *online* communities is interesting practitioners and academics alike. The power of online C-to-C communication has been acknowledged, especially as customers are said to be forming their own virtual brand communities, independent of the (service) company (Maclaren and Catterall 2002). Can the unifying framework in Figure 1 be applied to the opportunity of speaking to strangers that the Internet offers? Could there be a *destabilizing* effect for companies, given the threats posed by immediate communication to many others by dissatisfied customers? This whole field is open to the application of innovative research methodologies that may determine motives for, and influences on, consumer behavior with online communities.

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