

## COURTEOUS SERVICE: ITS ASSESSMENT AND MODIFICATION IN A HUMAN SERVICE ORGANIZATION

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We evaluated strategies to increase behaviors associated with courteous provision of service by 3 staff members of a human service agency. Training included written instructions, practice, and performance feedback. A lottery procedure was introduced to maintain courteous service after training. The results of a multiple baseline design across the 3 participants showed marked increases in courteous behaviors following training. These effects were maintained at 3-, 5-, and 8-month follow-ups. Consumers' satisfaction with service also increased. These findings suggest that simple training and reinforcement procedures can enhance courtesy afforded those who receive service from public and nonprofit organizations.

DESCRIPTORS: courteous behavior, organizational behavior management, lottery, behavioral community psychology, social validity

Courteous and responsive treatment of customers is characteristic of "excellent" private-sector organizations (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Courteous treatment is important because it can reinforce consumers' initial approach to the service providers and reflects a basic value that all consumers are due respect regardless of income or status.

Private-sector employee training programs (e.g., Trans World Airlines, 1982), as well as research in organizational behavior management (Douglas & Poorman, 1973; Levitt, 1972; Taylor, 1971), suggest the importance of courteous service to customer satisfaction. Various attempts to improve customer service have been reported. For example, the management of Emery Air Freight noted that praising employees for responding to customer queries within 90 min resulted in a three-fold increase

in the occurrence of prompt service ("New Tool," 1971).

Improvements in courteous service have been reported by researchers using a variety of antecedent and consequent events. Luthans and Krietner (1975) reported a case study in which supervisors used contingent social reinforcement and feedback to improve the quality of customer service provided by airline ticket agents. Crowell, Anderson, Abel, and Sergio (1988) similarly increased verbal behaviors associated with customer service of bank tellers. Wydra (1972) used a token economy combined with a lottery reinforcement procedure to increase the frequency of supermarket checkers telling their customers to "have a happy day." Rettig (1975) obtained similarly positive results by using a lottery reinforcement technique to increase the frequency of appropriate customer-service behaviors and the number of routine tasks completed by employees in a fast food chain. In a similar study, Komaki, Waddell, and Pearce (1977) used a treatment package consisting of feedback, goal setting, and time off work with pay to increase the frequency of three specific customer-service behaviors performed by clerks in a small neighborhood store.

These studies suggest that performance of certain customer-service behaviors may improve when antecedent and consequent stimuli are used in private-sector settings. Anecdotal reports (e.g., Quinn, 1976) of improved customer service and treatment

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of consumers notwithstanding, few studies have documented how to produce and maintain courteous treatment of consumers in public or nonprofit organizations. In the private sector, courteous service may improve business and related profits, but few such natural reinforcers are available in the public and nonprofit sectors, where increased activity may only extend response requirements for service providers. Despite claims of applicability to the public and nonprofit sectors (Center for Excellence in Local Government, unpublished data), whether the effects of courteous treatment programs designed for private sector settings will generalize to settings in the public and nonprofit sectors is unknown.

This study examined the effects of training and lottery procedures on courtesy behaviours performed by service providers in a human service organization. Ratings were also obtained from consumers to assess satisfaction with their treatment by the service providers. The human service agency where this study was conducted requested staff training from the researchers following feedback from the local United Way about some staff members' occasional discourteous and nonresponsive treatment of consumers.

## METHOD

### *Setting and Participants*

An antipoverty agency funded by the United Way (Penn House) served as the setting for this research. Penn House provides free used clothing, emergency food, information and referral, and other support services to over 400 low-income families annually. Penn House is run by and for low-income adults and their families. Six regular volunteer staff members worked at Penn House during the study.

Three women, who served as the agency's primary receptionists, served as the participants in this study. The other three staff members did not participate, because their jobs provided little contact with consumers and they were at the agency on an irregular basis. The rationale for focusing on receptionists was that they typically had the initial contact with clients. Ann was a 56-year-old high

school graduate who had worked for the agency for 14 years. Sue was 38 years old and had worked for the agency for 18 years. She had completed the 10th grade. Connie was 63 years old and had worked at the agency for 12 years. She had completed the 7th grade. Because each participant signed an informed consent statement, it can be assumed that they were aware that courteous behavior was being observed.

All training sessions were held in an agency meeting room that contained a table, two chairs, the training manual, and other writing materials. Observations took place either at or near the front (receptionist's) desk or in an adjacent area.

### *Observation*

An event-recording procedure was used to record interactions between the receptionist and clients in the natural context of agency operations. Four trained observers (the first author and three graduate students) scored the occurrence of specific behaviors associated with courteous service. Observers recorded every interaction that occurred between the receptionist and clients entering the setting during 2-hr observation sessions three times each week. An interaction was initiated with an approach by a client to the receptionist with a request for services. If two consumers entered the agency at the same time, the observer was instructed not to record the interaction, because it was often difficult to observe two interactions at one time.

Observed interactions ranged from 1 to 15 min, with an average interaction time of 6 min. An average of three interactions were recorded during each session. Data were collected during mornings (from 8:00 to 10:00 a.m. or 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon) and afternoons (from 12:00 to 2:00 p.m. or 2:00 to 4:00 p.m.).

Observers used a checklist that listed the specified courteous behaviors. The categories included beginning the interaction with the consumer, gathering information and filling out forms, active listening, asking questions, handling special situations, and closing the interaction with the consumer (Johnson & Fawcett, 1987). Table 1 displays the specific responses for each category of courteous behavior.

Detailed response definitions (available from the first author) were developed for each response associated with courteous service. Two training sessions were conducted with each observer using the written response definitions. During the first session, each observer individually reviewed the recording procedures. They read the definitions and scoring instructions, answered questions regarding the procedures, and rehearsed the recording procedure by observing videotaped mock staff–client interactions. The second training session was conducted at the experimental site. Each observer used the recording sheet and a stopwatch for 1 hr. During training, if there were any disagreements between the observer's recording and the trainer's, the observation was stopped, the issue was resolved, and the written instructions were modified. Observers had to reach 100% agreement during three consecutive 1-hr sessions before initiating formal observations.

In order to reduce the obtrusiveness of the observations, observers (some of whom had been affiliated with the agency for several years) attempted to blend into the normal flow of the setting. That is, during most interactions the observer sat in the waiting area and read a magazine or talked with other clients. For interactions in the clothing area, the observer looked through clothing while watching the interaction. During counseling sessions, the observer read the bulletin board next to the office while observing interactions.

Consistent with agency operations, staff members rotated serving as the receptionist at the front desk every hour or so. If a staff member was not sitting at the front desk, she was either in the large open area of the agency where free clothing was available or in an office adjacent to the front desk. The majority of interactions observed were either at the front desk or in the clothing area. The observer also stood just outside the office adjacent to the front desk and observed these semiprivate interactions. The focus of these interactions was usually on requests for financial assistance to pay for food and shelter.

During all interactions, the observer recorded the occurrence, nonoccurrence, or nonapplicability of the courteous behaviors. For example, for the re-

Table 1  
Courteous Service: Behavioral Categories and Discrete Responses

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1. When *beginning an exchange*, a service provider should:
    - a. Make an initial greeting.
    - b. Ask if help is needed.
    - c. Request the consumer's name.
    - d. Ask the consumer to have a seat (or, if in a wheelchair, direct the consumer to a waiting area).
  2. When *gathering information and filling out forms*, the service provider should:
    - a. Describe his or her role to the consumer.
    - b. Address the consumer by name.
    - c. Ask the consumer to provide the needed information.
    - d. State the rationale for requesting the information.
    - e. Provide within or outside agency referral when necessary.
  3. When talking with the consumer, the service provider should *listen actively* by:
    - a. Maintaining an active listening posture.
    - b. Maintaining eye contact.
    - c. Making nonverbal and verbal encouragements.
    - d. Using good verbal quality.
  4. When a consumer is talking the service provider should *ask questions courteously* by:
    - a. Asking close-ended questions when asking for factual information.
    - b. Asking open-ended questions when asking investigative questions.
  5. When a consumer is talking, the service provider should *handle special situations* by:
    - a. Providing assistance with incomplete information forms.
    - b. Removing obstacles in the physical environment.
    - c. Excusing interruptions.
    - d. Offering assistance to consumers having difficulty reading and/or understanding information forms or instructions.
    - e. Offering assistance to consumers having difficulty writing.
    - f. Listening actively to consumers having difficulty in speaking clearly, and if necessary, requesting that the consumer write the message on paper.
    - g. Offering assistance to consumers having difficulty seeing.
    - h. Offering assistance in the form of speaking louder and more clearly and/or using sign language (if known) with consumers having difficulty hearing.
    - i. Directing comments to the consumer (if he or she is with a personal care attendant, not talking to the consumer through the attendant).
    - j. Using appropriate language when referring to consumers with disabilities.
  6. When *closing the interaction*, the service provider should:
    - a. Request questions from the consumers.
    - b. Offer further help.
    - c. Provide additional service, if requested.
    - d. Schedule the next appointment, if necessary.
    - e. Direct the consumer to another service provider, if necessary.
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sponse "excuse interruptions," the observer recorded "X" if the staff member said "Pardon the interruption," "O" if the staff member did not excuse the interruption, and "N/A" if no interruption occurred during the interaction. Follow-up measures were collected 3, 5, and 8 months after the intervention.

### *Interobserver Agreement*

Interobserver agreement was measured by having a second independent observer record the occurrence, nonoccurrence, or nonapplicability of courteous behaviors. Interobserver agreement measures were collected during two sessions in each condition (baseline, training, lottery, and follow-up). An agreement was counted whenever both observers scored either an occurrence, nonoccurrence, or nonapplicability of the same courteous behavior. The percentage of interobserver agreement was calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the number of agreements plus disagreements multiplied by 100%. The average reliability was 95%, with a range of 85% to 100%.

### *Social Validity Assessments*

Two types of social validity were assessed: client satisfaction with the effects of the procedures (i.e., with the courtesy shown to them by staff members) and staff members' satisfaction with the training (Fawcett, 1991a; Wolf, 1978). To assess client satisfaction, staff report cards were made available to clients by the first author during all conditions. Consumers leaving the agency were asked to provide a written letter grade that best represented their opinion of the service provided by agency staff members. Letter grades consisted of A = excellent, B = above average, C = average, D = below average, and F = poor. The researcher approached every fifth consumer leaving the agency and asked him or her to provide a letter grade for the staff member's provision of courteous service. Consumers could grade agency services on more than one occasion. Whenever a consumer declined to provide a grade, the next consumer was asked to provide a rating.

To assess satisfaction with and importance of the training, Ann, Sue, and Connie were asked to re-

spond to six questions on a 7-point Likert-type scale. They rated training on various dimensions, such as satisfaction, where 1 was "very unsatisfied" and 7 was "very satisfied." The questions asked were: (a) How easy was the training? (b) How acceptable was the amount of time involved in the training? (c) How important was the training to you? (d) How helpful was the training in providing courteous service to consumers? (e) How likely is it that you would recommend this training to other staff members? and (f) Overall, how satisfied are you with the training?

### *Courtesy Training*

A training manual (Johnson & Fawcett, 1989<sup>1</sup>) was developed to teach courteous service behaviors. The manual consisted of separate lessons, each containing descriptions of each behavior to be taught, and study guides that allowed the participant to review each skill and test her knowledge of the skills. Six skill areas were trained: (a) listening actively, (b) asking questions, (c) beginning an appointment, (d) gathering information and filling out forms, (e) closing the appointment, and (f) handling special situations, such as how to interact courteously with an individual with a hearing or visual impairment.

Training was conducted individually. The first author met with each participant for two sessions during a 1-week period. The first training session provided an overview of courteous service and training in the first three skill areas; the second training session focused on the last three skill areas. Each training session began by reviewing the lessons in the training manual, completing the exercises in each lesson, answering questions from a study guide, and practicing in a series of role-playing exercises. The participant played the role of the receptionist in the agency. For example, the researcher might walk into the agency and the participant would be

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<sup>1</sup> The manual is available for the cost of reproduction and mailing from the Research and Training Center on Independent Living, 4089 Dole Building, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045.

expected to make an initial greeting, such as "Good morning, may I help you?" The researcher, playing the role of client, might then request assistance.

Using a checklist provided in the training manual, the researcher checked off all of the skills that the participant demonstrated during the role-playing scenes. The researcher provided praise for performance of courteous behaviors and corrective feedback when needed. Participants were required to demonstrate mastery of the skills in each lesson before going on to the next lesson. Mastery was defined as demonstration of 100% of each skill in the lesson two times consecutively during the role-play sessions. Each checklist was cumulative, in that each checklist included the skills taught in the current lesson as well as in all previous lessons.

Ann required 4 hr to complete the training, and Sue and Connie each required 6 hr of training. Sue and Connie required more time to read the material, perhaps because of their more limited formal education.

#### *Lottery Incentive Procedure*

After posttraining data had been collected for approximately 2 months, the agency's Executive Board voted to introduce an external consequence. To provide an incentive for staff members to continue to provide courteous service, a lottery was introduced. The lottery consisted of observations of five staff-client interactions per staff member each week. Staff members received one entry into the weekly lottery for each interaction, up to five, in which they demonstrated all of the specified courteous behaviors that should be performed (i.e., 100% on the checklist). The entry consisted of the completed observational checklist with the staff member's first name and last initial at the top. At the end of each week, one entry was drawn from the lottery box and the winner was announced. The winner received a \$10 cash prize made available from the agency's training fund.

#### *Experimental Design*

A multiple baseline design across 3 service providers was used to examine the effects of training procedures on the provision of courteous service. Training was implemented sequentially after 1

month of baseline observations of the courteous behaviors of each of the 3 staff members. Following training, the lottery condition was implemented with all 3 participants simultaneously. Follow-up measures were then taken 3, 5, and 8 months after training to evaluate the long-term effects on provision of courteous service. The lottery procedure continued during these follow-up measures.

## RESULTS

### *Observation*

Figure 1 shows each participant's courteous behaviors for all observation sessions. Ann performed a mean of 25% of the courteous behaviors during baseline. After training, she demonstrated a mean of 73% of the courteous behaviors; after the lottery was introduced, her mean percentage increased to 98%. At the 3-, 5-, and 8-month follow-ups, she performed 95%, 100%, and 100% of the courteous behaviors, respectively. During baseline, Sue performed a mean of 14% of the courteous behaviors. Following training, she performed a mean of 77% of the courteous behaviors; after the lottery was introduced, her mean percentage increased to 98%. At the 3-, 5-, and 8-month follow-ups, she performed 95%, 100%, and 100% of the courteous behaviors, respectively. Connie's baseline level of courteous behaviors averaged 12%. After training and the lottery were introduced, she performed a mean of 72% and 99% of the courteous behaviors, respectively. She performed at 100% at the 3-, 5-, and 8-month follow-ups.

### *Ratings*

Ratings data were obtained on consumer satisfaction with service provision on a 5-point scale, with 5 = A, 4 = B, 3 = C, and 2 = D. The 26 ratings obtained during baseline averaged 2.2. The 15 ratings collected after courtesy training averaged 3.75, and the 15 ratings collected during the lottery procedure averaged 4.75. At 3-, 5-, and 8-month follow-ups, consumer satisfaction ratings averaged 5.0 (with eight, six, and five observations, respectively).

Ratings by participants (on a 7-point scale) averaged 6.0 for ease of training, importance of the

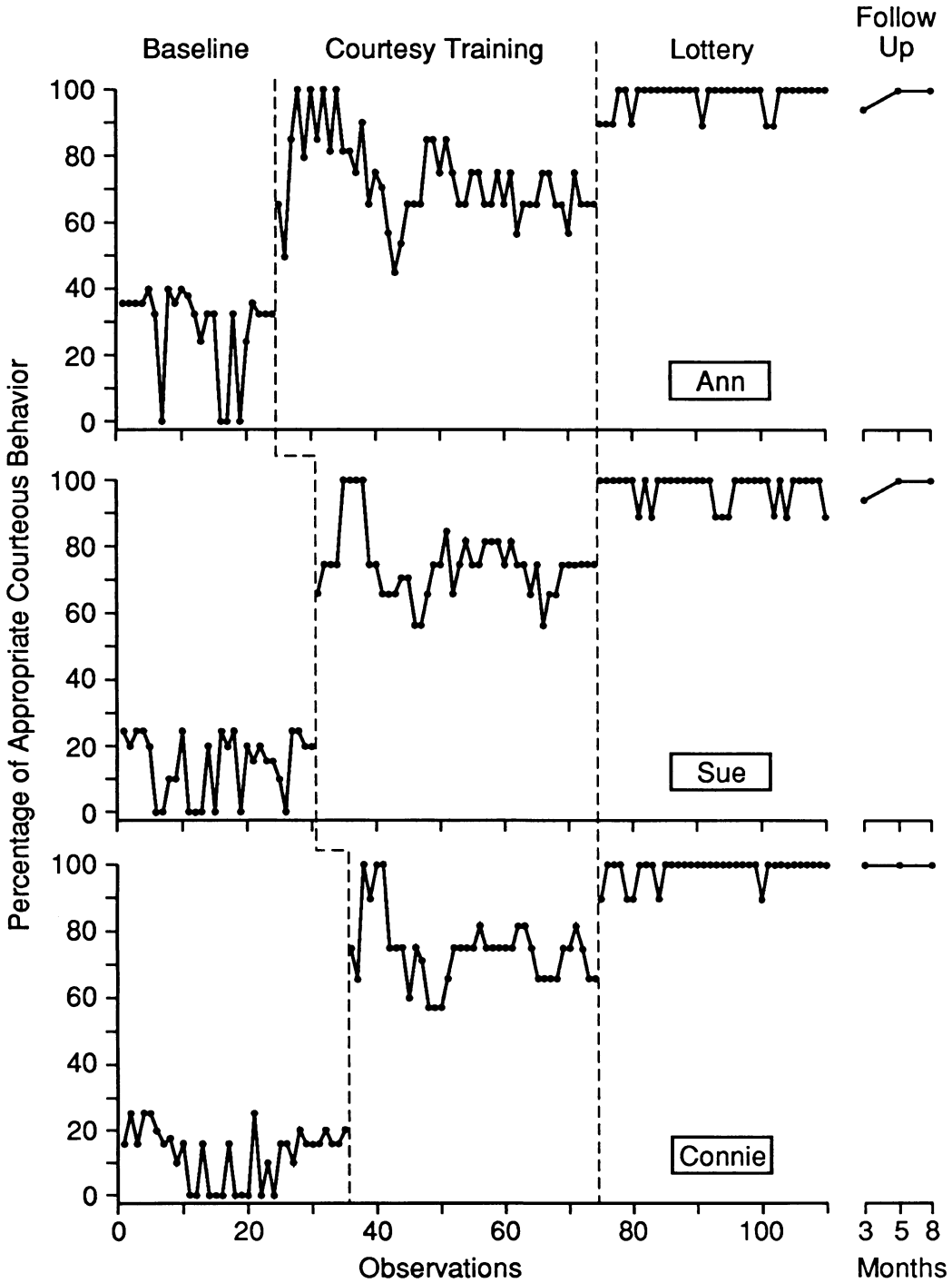


Figure 1. The percentage of appropriate courtesy behaviors for each of the participants during each observation session. Baseline data were collected during February, courtesy training data were collected during March and April, lottery data were collected during May and June, and follow-up data were collected during July, September, and December.

training, and overall satisfaction with the training. Ratings averaged 7.0 for helpfulness of the training in providing courteous service, the likelihood that they would recommend the training to another staff, and acceptability of the time involved in training.

## DISCUSSION

Results suggest that training was effective in increasing provision of courteous service to consumers. The percentage of appropriate responding increased for all participants following courtesy training. Participants also indicated their satisfaction with the training procedures, and all agreed that the training was important and that they would recommend it to other service providers.

Although courteous responding increased to nearly 100% shortly after training, within a few weeks it began to decline. When the lottery procedure was introduced, courteous responding again increased to nearly perfect levels and was maintained in follow-up sessions up to 8 months later. Although courtesy training may be necessary for some service workers, it may be insufficient to maintain high levels of courteous behavior in public and nonprofit organizations. Perhaps prevailing natural reinforcers, such as approval from clients, are sufficient to maintain moderate, but not optimal, levels of courteous behavior.

This study does not provide an analysis of the respective contributions of intervention components. One could argue that the courtesy training may not have been necessary and that reinforcement and performance feedback alone may have been sufficient. Although the relatively low baseline levels of courteous behaviors are suggestive of the need for training, reinforcement procedures, perhaps combined with a simpler discriminative stimulus, may have produced similarly high levels of performance.

Consumer satisfaction with service provision showed positive increases after courtesy training and introduction of the lottery procedure. It appears that as courteous responding increased, so did consumers' satisfaction with services. This secondary finding warrants replication to rule out other plau-

sible explanations. It is possible, for instance, that the small sample of consumers ( $N = 75$ ) who provided ratings was not representative of the broader population of consumers who frequent the agency (approximately 400 monthly). Although the researcher attempted to obtain a random sample and not alter his style of asking for or responding to satisfaction ratings, researcher interactions with clients and other factors might have contributed to the results obtained. Perhaps collecting ratings through alternative means, such as anonymous written grades, might help to control for any potential researcher influence.

Future research in this area might consider examining the generalizability of the procedures to other public and nonprofit organizations, such as welfare and employment offices, where reports of discourteous and nonresponsive treatment of consumers are all too frequent. These training procedures could be introduced in a sequential manner with different agencies in different communities to determine whether the procedures can produce increases in courteous provision of service similar to those observed in this study. Also, given the potentially reactive nature of the observations of courteous behavior, there is the potential that the observer's presence facilitated courteous behavior. If possible, future observations of this type might be conducted covertly.

Future research might also address other questions raised by this experiment. These include discovering effective and sustainable alternatives to external consequences, such as the lottery, to help maintain courteous provision of service. Perhaps staff recognition techniques (such as employee of the month) and access to privileges (such as special parking spaces) could be provided contingent on consistent observation of courteous service. In addition, strategies for how to fade involvement of change agents and the challenge of implementing courtesy training with new staff members in high-turnover organizations should also be examined. Future research might also assess administrators' and funding agents' satisfaction with the training and results. Such intervention strategies, if refined, might be useful to a variety of nonprofit organi-

zations concerned with removing unnecessary social barriers to service, such as public welfare agencies, hospitals, and United Way agencies.

This study addresses the basic right of clients to be treated with dignity. Clients of public and non-profit agencies—often of marginal income status—are particularly at risk for loss of dignity (Roessler, 1972) and sense of empowerment (Fawcett, 1991b; Fawcett et al., in press). Low-income and other disadvantaged clients control few reinforcers for staff members of public and nonprofit agencies. Unlike the private sector, there are no profit incentives for showing courtesy to encourage clients' use of the service. Indeed, increased clients' requests typically result in more work for staff members. Degrading treatment may even be functional for welfare and other public organizations, decreasing the probability that others eligible for services will request them (Piven & Cloward, 1971).

This study describes a practical intervention for contributing to the preservation of dignity, a critically important human value. It offers an alternative to the sometimes demeaning treatment that those of marginal status often endure. Should clients' control of public services be more common, there may be a greater market for innovations designed to preserve the dignity of clients.

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