

Communicative behavior and conflict between African-American customers and Korean immigrant retailers in Los Angeles



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ABSTRACT. Face-to-face interaction between Korean immigrant retailers and African-American customers in Los Angeles often leaves members of each group feeling as if the other has behaved in insultingly inappropriate ways. Twenty-five service encounters involving both African-American and immigrant Korean customers were video-recorded in a liquor store and transcribed for analysis. These encounters reveal divergent communicative patterns between immigrant Koreans and African-Americans. The contrasting forms of participation that occur in these encounters are used by both storekeepers and customers to explain negative attributions that they make about each other. I argue that the differing forms of participation documented in service encounters – and the ways in which they are interpreted – are simultaneously a result of (1) cultural and linguistic differences between storekeepers and customers in service encounter behavior and expectations; and (2) social inequality in America, which shapes both the local context in which these encounters occur and the social assumptions that storekeepers and customers bring to the stores.

KEY WORDS: *African-American, interethnic communication, Korean, language and identity, service encounters*

Introduction

Conflict between immigrant Korean retail merchants and their African-American customers has been documented by the media in various cities across the United States since the early 1980s. The 1991 killing of unarmed African-American teenager Latasha Harlins by an immigrant Korean storekeeper and the events of April 1992 in Los Angeles (referred to variously as 'riots', 'uprising', 'civil disturbance', or, by many immigrant Koreans, *sa-i-gu* ('April 29') cast a media spotlight on relations between the two groups.¹ By the time of the highly publicized unrest in Los Angeles, there had already been African-American boy-

cotts of immigrant Korean businesses in New York and Los Angeles, politicians had publicly addressed the issue, and academics (e.g. Stewart, 1989; Chang, 1990; Jo, 1992) had begun to write about frictions between immigrant Koreans and African-Americans.

There are multiple, intertwined reasons for these frictions and multiple perspectives from which they can be analyzed. In this article I examine them through the lens of communicative behavior in actual service encounters, linking particular micro-social communicative patterns to larger-scale social relations. Specifically, I argue that divergent communicative patterns in these everyday service encounters simultaneously represent (1) an on-going *source of interethnic tensions*; and (2) a *local enactment of pre-existing social conflicts*. Both of these perspectives can account for systematic differences between immigrant Korean storekeepers and African-American customers in service encounter communicative patterns; both are consistent with the sentiments expressed by individual storekeepers and customers about such service encounters and intergroup relations more generally; and both can be linked to larger scale social constellations such as race.

The first of these ways of relating face-to-face communicative behavior to larger scale conflicts – in which contrasting communicative patterns represent a *source* of frictions – has roots in the sociolinguistic and anthropological study of interethnic/intercultural communication (Hall, 1973; Kochman, 1981; Tannen, 1981; Scollon and Scollon, 1982; Gumperz, 1982, 1992). In this tradition, individuals' cultural background is seen as determining communicative patterns and assumptions about a wide range of dimensions of interaction. Gumperz (1982, 1992), in particular, has shown that even the most basic communicative exchanges rely on sociocultural background knowledge and assumptions that systematically suffuse communicative behavior, frequently at levels that are not available to conscious recall or articulation. Because so many of these communicative conventions and interpretive processes are socioculturally specific and unconscious, they are not a readily available explanation for breakdowns in communication or for stilted, asynchronous interactions. Participants instead resort to negative attributions about the character of the other to explain these disjointed face-to-face interactions:

Difficulties in intercultural communication are seldom seen for what they are. When it becomes apparent to people . . . that they are not understanding one another, each tends to blame . . . [the other] for their stupidity, deceit, or craziness. (Hall 1973: xiii)

From this perspective, empirically documented differences between immigrant Korean storekeepers and African-American customers in service encounter behavior are a result of differing, culturally specific communicative conventions for such encounters. The negative attributions that each group make about the other – citing specifics of service encounter behavior – are thus a form of interethnic/intercultural *miscommunication*, in which members of each group interpret the others' behavior in terms of their own frameworks for appropriate service encounter interactions.

The second explanation for divergent communicative patterns in actual service encounters – that they represent *a local enactment of pre-existing conflicts* – emphasizes the political nature of these encounters between African-Americans and Korean immigrants, and the sociohistorical relations of inequality that permeate them. From this perspective, individual social actors are not simply unwittingly reproducing culturally determined scripts, but are using language to assert the legitimacy and positive value of the social identities associated with particular communicative practices. Language and communicative practices are a primary means of marking and maintaining group social identity (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Gal, 1989), and reproducing the boundaries that divide social groups more generally (Barth, 1969). Issues of inequality – whether racial, ethnic, or class – are intertwined with ethnicity in modern class societies, so interethnic communicative behavior thus regularly involves elements of contestation and conflict. The interethnic communication model foregrounds idealized, inherited cultural beliefs and practices and sees them as the source of conflict. This second, more constructionist approach does not privilege these categories, but rather highlights the divisive sociohistorical bases of the categories themselves, e.g. inequality traceable to historical European domination of the world. The very forces that have led to the construction and maintenance of such social categories as ‘African-American’ or ‘Korean immigrant’, are thus identified as the root of conflict between the two groups. From this sociohistorical perspective, language and communicative behavior are simply the medium through which these pre-existing conflicts are enacted at the local level.

In this article, I first review the rhetoric of ‘respect’ through which many African-Americans and African-American media have publicly addressed encounters and relationships between African-American customers and immigrant Korean storekeepers in Los Angeles. Using interview data, I then delineate sharp divisions in the way storekeepers and customers characterize each others’ behavior and the negative characteristics that they attribute to each other. These disparate, first-hand ways of talking about intergroup relations offer insight into local ways of articulating the conflicts and can be linked to both actual micro-level communicative patterns and larger-scale social conflicts. The structure of service encounter interactions as speech activities is then described. Segments of transcripts of encounters between immigrant Koreans and between immigrant Koreans and African-Americans are used to illustrate systematic differences between the two groups in communicative patterns in these encounters. Two intertwined explanations for these divergent communicative patterns are made: (1) they are the result of cultural and linguistic differences between storekeepers and customers; and (2) these differences are a means for storekeepers and customers to highlight social boundaries between themselves – even though they could accommodate communicative behavior to each other more – because of the charged context in which they encounter each other and because of pre-existing, negative assumptions about each other.

Data collection

Fieldwork for this study took place in Los Angeles between July 1994 and April 1995. The stores investigated are convenience stores selling wine, beer, and liquor in addition to soft drinks, cigarettes, lottery tickets, newspapers, and some groceries and household supplies. Data-collection methods included observation of dozens of hours of service encounters in the stores, interviews with proprietors and cashiers in stores, audiotaped interviews with African-Americans outside of store-contexts in the Crenshaw neighborhood, and videotaping of service encounters in stores.

Over 20 stores were visited for observation and interviewing with repeated visits to six stores in Culver City centered on Venice Boulevard, five South Central stores centered on Western Avenue, and two stores in Koreatown. Service encounters were videotaped for 4 hours in both a Culver City store and a Koreatown store, yielding a record with which to document details of communicative patterns. Videocameras were set up in view of customers, but drew virtually no comment, perhaps because there were already multiple surveillance cameras in each store.

Tapes from the Koreatown store are used for this study because the Culver City store had no Korean customers and fewer African-American customers. During the 4 hours of taping at the Koreatown store, there were 12 African-American customers and 13 immigrant Korean customers. The encounters with African Americans were transcribed using conventions of conversation analysis (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). Encounters in Korean were transcribed, translated, and interpreted by a bilingual Korean-American assistant. The storekeeper who appears throughout the recordings also viewed some of the encounters and gave background information on the customers appearing in them.

Rhetoric of respect

Face-to-face interaction in service encounters between African-American customers and Korean immigrant retailers often leaves members of each group feeling insulted. Rather than resulting in improved relations through individual, interpersonal contact, such encounters appear to exacerbate relations. When I asked African-Americans in the Crenshaw neighborhood of Los Angeles, for example, about relations with Korean immigrant storekeepers, I commonly got responses such as the following, from a man in his 30s: "In my experience dealing with Korean merchants . . . the one basic problem is: no respect. No respect. Period". This perceived lack of respect has been stressed in African-American accounts of tensions, and it is considered a serious offense by many. The *Los Angeles Sentinel*, an African-American weekly, for example, mentions 'disrespect' in a paragraph of interethnic offenses that include murder, arson, and extortion:

In addition to these widely-known cases, there were other less publicized killings, including that of an African American robbery suspect by a Korean/Korean

American autoparts store owner, and two Korean/Korean American liquor store employees by an African American robber. There were also reported instances of arson, vandalism and extortion against Korean/Korean American merchants. All the while, African American residents continued to report incidents of disrespect by Korean/Korean American merchants. (*Los Angeles Sentinel* 17 October 1991)

Similarly, a coalition of African-American politicians and activists who put together a set of voluntary guidelines for businesses operating in South Central Los Angeles indicate the high value given to respect by making the relatively abstract demand for courtesy and respect in parallel with concrete legal and employment demands:

The agreement states that all establishments planning to conduct business in South Central Los Angeles must agree not to sell alcoholic beverages or pornographic materials to minors. It also states that merchants will not sell any drug or gang paraphernalia; merchants will maintain clean, well-stocked stores; merchants will be courteous to all customers. Further, merchants will treat African American customers with dignity and respect; merchants will hire at least one African American ... (*Los Angeles Sentinel* 17 October 1991)

Rap artist Ice Cube, in the lyrics to his 1991 song 'Black Korea', explicitly demands respect from Korean immigrant storekeepers and threatens dire consequences for those who don't show respect: "pay respect to the black fist or we'll burn down your store". This threat to burn down immigrant Koreans' stores because of disrespect was repeated elsewhere (J. Chang, 1993: 93) even before the highly publicized burning of immigrant Korean businesses in Los Angeles in April 1992.

Although media attention has focused on African-Americans' perceptions of disrespect in stores, many immigrant Korean retailers are distressed by what they perceive as the rude and inappropriate behavior of many African-American customers. Stewart (1991: 20) details specific African-American customer communicative behaviors that storekeepers report as inappropriate, e.g. speaking at relatively high volume and using profanity, and concludes that respect is important for both African-American customers and immigrant Korean retailers:

The underlined themes for both groups appear to be respect and courtesy shown toward each other. Each group felt that more respect should be accorded when communicating with each other, and that courtesy should be shown through verbal and nonverbal interaction by being more congenial, polite, considerate, and tactful toward each other.

African-American perceptions of disrespect: lack of sociable involvement

Interviews with retailers and customers reveal a distinctive pattern of divergent perceptions regarding behavior in stores: while African-American customers focus complaints on the relative *lack of interpersonal engagement and involvement of*

Korean immigrant retailers, the retailers emphasize the relative *lack of restraint* on the part of customers. Respect can be displayed through seemingly opposed types of symbolic acts, which can account, at one level, for storekeepers and customers using seemingly opposite criteria in judging behavior inappropriate. Durkheim (1915: 337–8, 366), for example, describes how sacredness or value can be accorded either through avoidance or through intimate contact ('positive' and 'negative' cults). Goffman (1971) and Brown and Levinson (1987) apply this notion to human interaction in ways that are useful for understanding the particular opposing expression of appropriate behavior in this case. Expressions of approval, solidarity, and interest, i.e. personable involvement, can be ways of paying respect to one's interlocutor, as can displays of restraint, i.e. not interfering or making undue demands on the other (Brown and Levinson 1987). Since both involvement and restraint can be used to display respect, the relative lack of either can be perceived as inappropriate or insulting.

African-Americans in the Crenshaw neighborhood described to me how they were disrespected in immigrant Korean stores by emphasizing perceptions of what the store-owners do *not* do, e.g. greet with a smile, maintain eye-contact, and make small talk, i.e. personably engage the customer. The relative taciturnity and restraint of immigrant Koreans is not seen as polite, but as rude:

When I went in, they wouldn't acknowledge me. Like if I'm at your counter and I'm looking at your merchandise, where someone would say "Hi, how are you today, is there anything I – " they completely ignored me. It was like they didn't care one way or the other. And if I ignored their attitude and I picked up something and I said how much it was, then they would sell it to me. (46-year-old woman)

Another African-American woman, aged about 50, detailed specific behaviors that were lacking at one store:

This other store, they're not so nice, they're kind of mean, there's only one particular person in there that's nice, and the rest don't treat you right, they don't look at you, they don't smile, they don't speak, they don't do anything. I don't want to go in there. (50-year-old woman)

This perceived lack of interpersonal engagement is particularly galling to customers when they feel as if they are being watched. 'Being watched like a shoplifter' in the stores was a frequent complaint of African-Americans in my interviews and the most frequent complaint in surveys done by Stewart (1989). Ironically, immigrant Korean retailers are simultaneously seen as 'not looking at you' but at the same time 'always watching you'.

The relative lack of interaction and engagement from immigrant Korean retailers makes many African-American customers feel as if they are not being recognized as human beings:

They wouldn't look at you at all. They wouldn't acknowledge you in any way. Nothing. You were nobody. . . . They'd look over you or around you. (46-year-old woman)

you're tolerated. . . . I'm going in your store, paying my money and you're going to tol-

erate me just because you want my money. I'm less than anything to you, just a vehicle. (man in his 50s)

African-Americans whom I interviewed attribute this restraint not to cultural or linguistic differences or personal idiosyncrasy of storekeepers, but rather to racism:

Quite a few of the Koreans have a preconceived notion of what a Black person is or isn't . . . to me, many, not all, many of them perceive Blacks as a non-entity. We are treated as if we do not exist. (man in his 50s)

In this context, being 'respected' in a service encounter implies being recognized and treated as a valued human being through specific forms of interpersonal engagement.

The interpretations of storekeepers' behavior presented here – while having some basis in empirical aspects of storekeeper behavior – are channelled by both the broader historical context of the encounters as well as the immediate history of immigrant Korean retailers and African-Americans in Los Angeles. Racism permeates American society, and it provides a cogent explanation for a wide variety of historical, social, and economic conditions, including behavior in face-to-face interaction (Feagin, 1991). African-Americans have historically been treated as less than equal to other Americans, so experiences of racism, e.g. being ignored in stores, are familiar to many and provide a readily available explanation for the lack of interpersonal involvement of immigrant Korean retailers. More immediately, these comments were made during 1994 and 1995, after years of conflicts between African-American customers and immigrant Korean storekeepers in Los Angeles and other American cities, and after the highly publicized shooting of Latasha Harlins and the saturation media coverage of the events of April 1992. In this charged atmosphere, few African-Americans, except for community leaders (Park, 1996), look beyond racism for explanations of immigrant Korean storekeepers' behavior in face-to-face interaction. Few, for example, cite limited English proficiency of storekeepers or cultural differences in expectations of service encounter behavior and relationships as possible explanations for Korean immigrant storekeepers' relative taciturnity in service encounters.²

Immigrant Korean retailers' perceptions of inappropriate behavior: lack of interpersonal restraint

Whereas African-Americans' complaints about their treatment by immigrant Korean retailers focus on what the merchants do *not* do, store-owners' complaints about interactions with African-American customers focus primarily on what customers *do*. The behaviors that storekeepers find objectionable are different from the ones cited by customers, and storekeepers describe them in different terms. Storekeepers, for example, use the term 'respect' only in describing what they perceive as the inappropriate behavior of children and teenage customers toward adult storekeepers, particularly elderly ones. This English usage of the

word 'respect' (storekeepers were interviewed in English) corresponds to the Korean term *chonkyong* which is used to describe the reverent respect of looking up to a superior in a hierarchical relationship, but not the concept of treating someone as a valued equal.

Most storekeepers framed criticisms of customer behavior not in terms of 'respect', but in terms of the 'self-centeredness' and, more frequently, lack of 'education' of the individuals involved. When immigrant Koreans say the word 'education' in this context in English, they are typically referring not to formal academics, but to a sense of social propriety and refinement. The corresponding word for 'education' in Korean – *kyoyuk* – implies not only academic, school learning, but – just as importantly – one's training in the proper forms of social and personal conduct. This immigrant Korean usage of the English word 'education' to mean 'social training' is evident in the speech of a Korean-American consultant, for example, in describing how an 8-year-old child would greet a storeowner: "If the child is well-educated [i.e. well-bred], he would say *annyong haseyo* ('Hello/How are you?')".

The specific behaviors that immigrant retailers who were raised in Korea find socially appropriate grow out of ideals of education and interactional propriety with roots in Confucianism, the dominant moral philosophy in Korea for the last 600 years. In Confucianism, proper conduct is thought to arise in part from the suppression of the seven passions of joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hatred, and desire (Yum, 1987: 74). While a person may experience these passions, they should not be displayed, or only displayed in a moderated form. Thus, the more 'educated' the person, the less affect he or she will display in many everyday situations. This can reach an extreme (by African-American standards) in behavior of older adults, for whom the cultural ideal is relatively unsmiling and taciturn:

If you express yourself you're too light. If you laugh or smile you don't have enough in your head. You're supposed to be stoic and expressionless which means you're thinking a lot. By saying 'hi' you're putting yourself down to a lower level. (23-year-old Korean-American male)

Behaviors that many African-Americans might interpret as signs of sociable involvement in service encounters, e.g. unsolicited small-talk about the weather or jokes about current events, are considered an imposition and a sign of poor manners by many Korean immigrants. The relatively forceful and dramatic interactional style displayed by many young African-American male customers in low-income neighborhoods seems to retailers to be particularly self-centered and recklessly inconsiderate of others. Immigrant Korean storekeepers do not feel that they are being treated as less than an equal human being in such situations, but rather that such customers are committing offenses against social propriety, thereby proving themselves to lack proper social training and manners (Kochman, 1984).

Immigrant Korean storekeepers' judgements of customers' behavior – while having some basis in observable interactional patterns – are shaped by a broader

social context which frequently devalues ways associated with African Americans. Just as African-American experiences of racism prepare them to interpret Korean behavior as racist, the dominant American discourses that disparage African-American race, language, and culture provide Korean immigrants with a template through which to evaluate African-American service encounter interactional style negatively, particularly when it violates their own assumptions about appropriate service encounter relations and behavior.

Contrasting communicative patterns in service encounters

Face-to-face contact between immigrant Korean storekeepers and African-American customers takes place overwhelmingly in *service encounters*. Merritt (1976: 321) defines a service encounter as:

an instance of face-to-face interaction between a server who is 'officially posted' in some service area and a customer who is present in that service area, that interaction being oriented to the satisfaction of the customer's presumed desire for some service and the server's obligation to provide that service. A typical service encounter is one in which a customer buys something at a store . . .

As a form of goal-oriented talk, service encounters are organized around the achievement of particular ends, i.e. 'the satisfaction of the customer's presumed desire for some service and the server's obligation to provide that service' (Merritt, 1976: 321). The speech activities involved in service encounters must thus minimally include those required to achieve these ends, in this case the exchange of the customer's money for the storekeeper's goods.

Service encounters in this corpus vary widely both in length and in the types of talk they contain. In my data they range from encounters that involve only a few words and last just seconds to interactions that last as long as 7 minutes and cover wide-ranging topics. The following encounter, in which an immigrant Korean woman aged about 40 buys cigarettes, illustrates the speech activities that are minimally common to nearly all my recorded service encounters:³

- Cash: *Annyǒng haseyo.*
Hello/How are you? ((Customer has just entered store))
- Cust: *Annyǒng haseyo.*
Hello/How are you?
- Cust: *Tambae!*
Cigarettes!
- Cash: *Tambae tŭryǒyo?*
You would like cigarettes? ((Cashier reaches for cigarettes under counter))
- Cash: *Yōgi issŭmnida.*
Here you are ((Cashier takes customer's money and hands her cigarettes;
customer turns to leave))
- Cashr: *Annyǒngghi kaseyo.*
Good-bye
- Cust: *Nye.*
Okay

The basic communicative activities of this encounter are: (1) greetings, or openings; (2) negotiation of the business exchange; and (3) closing of the encounter. Greetings in these stores typically occur as the customer passes through the doorway, and include “Hi”, “Hello”, “How’s it going”, “How are you?”, or, in Korean, “*annyöng haseyo*” (“Hello/How are you?”). The second basic activity is the negotiation of the business transaction, which includes such elements as naming the price of the merchandise brought to the counter by the customer or counting out change as it is handed back to the customer. While explicit verbal greetings and closings do not occur in every recorded encounter, each contains a verbal negotiation of the transaction. The negotiation of the business exchange can be long and full of adjacency pairs (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973), involving requests for a product from behind the counter, questions about a price, repairs (Schegloff et al., 1977), requests or offers of a bag, etc. The third and final activity of these encounters, the closing, often includes formulaic exchanges: “See you later”, “Take care”, “Have a good day”, or “*annyöngghi kaseyo*” (“Good-bye”).

The encounter transcribed here is typical of those among Korean immigrant customers and storekeepers in that it is limited to no more than (1) greetings or openings; (2) negotiation of the exchange; and (3) closings. The talk in the encounter centers on the business transaction and does not include discussion of more sociable, interpersonal topics, e.g. experiences outside the store or the customer’s unique personal relationship with the storekeeper.

Of the 13 service encounters between Korean immigrants that were recorded on videotape in this store, 10 follow this terse, impersonal pattern, with no small talk or introduction of personal topics.⁴ This pattern is consistent with observations in other Korean immigrant businesses with Korean clientele, consultants’ descriptions of Korean interactional style in service encounters among non-intimates, and with ethnographic descriptions of public service encounters in Korea/East Asia (Scollon and Scollon, 1994: 137). Of the three service encounters among immigrant Koreans that involve talk that is not directly tied to the business exchange, two are with personal friends of the cashier from contexts outside of the store, and the third is with a child aged about 10 years who is a regular customer at the store.

Service encounters with African-American customers, in contrast, typically involve speech activities beyond greetings, negotiation of business exchange, and closings. These additional speech activities – which include making jokes, commenting on the weather, discussing personal experiences from outside the store, commenting on interlocutor’s demeanor, referring to commonly known third parties, and alluding to the history of the relationship between customer and storekeeper – highlight the interpersonal relationships between storekeepers and customers. Whereas only three of the 13 encounters with immigrant Korean customers included such speech activities, nine of the 12 service encounters involving African-American customers included them. These activities, which index and reinforce interpersonal intimacy, were thus much more common

between African-American customers and immigrant Korean storekeepers than among immigrant Koreans. Unlike their African-American counterparts, immigrant Koreans generally do not engage in the practices, e.g. making small-talk, through which they could display and develop a more personal relationship during service encounters.

Although the service encounters with African-American customers contain relatively more speech activities that reinforce interpersonal intimacy, customer and storekeeper forms of participation in these encounters are very different. Overwhelmingly it is the African-American customers who make the encounters more than terse business transactions. They achieve this by initiating communicative activities that are not directly tied to the execution of the business exchange, e.g. they introduce talk of weather and current events, make jokes, talk of their lives outside of the store, laugh, and display affect in making evaluations. Immigrant Korean retailers in these encounters are interactionally reactive, rather than proactive, in conducting conversation that is not directly tied to the business transaction. Videotaped records reveal, for example, repeated instances of African-American customers finishing turns at talk during such personable speech activities, and then re-initiating talk when no reply is forthcoming from the storekeepers.

When immigrant Korean storekeepers do respond to such talk, many of their responses display an understanding of the referential content of utterances but no alignment with the emotional stance, e.g. humor or indignance, of the customer's talk. Evaluative statements such as assessments (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1992), for example, are not met with second-assessments of agreement. When storekeepers do respond to assessments with affect, e.g. smiling at a customer's joke and subsequent laughter, their levels of displayed affect are typically lower than the customers', a pattern which suggests disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984).

To illustrate one form that these differences in participation can take, I present four excerpts from a transcript of a service encounter that took place on the same April afternoon in 1995 as the Korean-language encounter transcribed earlier. The customer's talk and communicative behavior in this encounter are in sharp contrast to that of the immigrant Korean storekeepers. He not only engages in interactional practices that increase interpersonal involvement, e.g. talk of personal topics, he also explicitly states that he wants the store-owners to know him. This customer's explicit expressions of solidarity and intimacy with the storekeepers are matched with an interactional style that includes many of the characteristics, e.g. relatively high volume, volubility, and use of profanity, that immigrant Korean retailers have characterized as inappropriate and insulting (Stewart, 1989, 1991).

The customer, a male in his 50s, has visited the store just once before, the previous night. African-American consultants viewing the videotape judged him to be of low socio-economic class. His strong expressions of co-membership with the storekeepers as he talks to them, and the jerkiness of some of his arm motions suggest that he has been drinking alcohol, which is not uncommon among customers at such convenience/liquor stores in low-income neighborhoods.

The 40-year-old storeowner has been in America for 20 years, and has an undergraduate degree from UCLA. He is more outgoing and talkative with customers than most other storekeepers of his age, or older, that I observed. The cashier is a 31-year-old male employee who attended college and graduate school in Korea and has been in America for four years, working in this store for about 3.5 of those years. He is more outgoing and talkative with customers than other storekeepers who have been in America for only 4 years.

This first excerpt illustrates the way that African-American customers take the initiative to frame service encounters as opportunities for sociable, interpersonal talk when storekeepers are treating the encounter as no more than a business exchange. In this case, the cashier is ringing up the customer's purchases when the customer instantiates a new speech activity, introducing a personal topic from outside the store context (his recent move to the area) and referring to his personal relationship with the cashier ("I talked to you the other day. You remember me?").

- Cash: two fifty ((Cashier rings up purchase and bags beer)) ((4.5))
 Cust: I just moved in the area. I talked to you the other day. You
 [remember me]?
 Cash: [oh yesterday] last night
 Cust: yeah
 Cash [(o:h yeah)] ((Cashier smiles and nods.))
 Cust: [goddamn, shit] [then you don't-]
 Own: [new neighbor, huh?] ((Customer turns half-way to the side toward the
 owner))
 Cust: then you don't know me
 Cash: [(I know you)] ((Cashier gets change at register))
 Cust: [I want you to know] me so when I walk in here you'll know me. I smoke
 Winstons. Your son knows me

The cashier has recognized the customer – he immediately identifies their last meeting when the customer introduces the topic – but he fails to treat the customer as someone he recognizes until the customer explicitly requests such recognition. This African-American customer wants to be treated as if he is known without having to remind the storekeeper of their shared history.

After getting change, the customer again takes the initiative to increase interpersonal involvement with the storekeepers by explaining that he has come to Los Angeles for job retraining because a knee injury forced his retirement from his previous work. In the following excerpt, the customer makes the joke that he is spending some of his disability money at this store on liquor:

- Cust: I had a total knee so my company is retiring my- old black ass at fifty-four
 ((Customer smiles and gazes at owner)) ((.6))
 Own: (mmh) ((Owner shakes his head laterally and gazes away from the customer))
 Cust: and they give me some money
 Cash: huh ((Cashier bares his teeth briefly in a smile))
 Cust: so I'm spending my money at your store on liquor heh heh heh heh hah hah hah
 hah hah ((Customer laughs animatedly, turning toward the owner who does not
 smile, but who continues lateral headshakes as he takes a few steps to the side))
 Own: you still can work?

Neither the cashier nor the owner laughs in response to the customer's joke, even though they are benefitting from the activity that he is joking about, his liquor purchases. The owner not only fails to smile or laugh, but he reframes the activity as a serious discussion of the topic, which is commonly interpreted in America as a form of disapproval or disaffiliation (Jefferson, 1979: 93).

The customer then explains that he can still work, but that his company is forcing him to retire to avoid re-injury of his knee, and that he is being retrained in another trade:

- Cust: . . . so I gotta go get another trade for them to pay me the money. So I'm gonna get another trade. But then like- after I get another trade they pay me (a sum) a lump sum of money? And I'm gonna do what I wanna do. ((.8))
- Cust: they only gonna give me about sixty or seventy thousand. ((1.4))
- Cust: plus- my schooling- ((1.0))
- Cust: so- I got to take it easy for a little bit. ((Customer moves toward exit))
- Cust: that's why I'm gonna buy enough of your liquor (so I can take it)
- Own: alright, take care

In a pattern typical of such encounters, the customer repeatedly finishes turns at talk in discussion of non-business-transaction topics, but then resumes talk when no response is forthcoming from the storekeepers. In this case, the lack of response from the storekeepers is particularly salient because the customer's statements invite seemingly obvious comment, e.g. "How much money are you going to get?", "That's a lot of money", "What are you going to do with that money?", and "We appreciate your business".

Even though the customer in this excerpt has reached the doorway and the owner has said goodbye, the customer re-initiates talk, proceeding to introduce himself by name to the storekeepers, learning their names and shaking their hands. He tells them that he saw 'them riots and things' on television in Chicago, and that he will come to their aid should there be such future disturbances. He discusses his beliefs about the basic sameness of people, regardless of race, and his criticisms of those who make society racist. Over the final minutes, the conversation becomes increasingly one-sided as the customer utters more than 10 words for each of the store-owner's words. The service encounter comes to an end with the following turns:

((The customer speaks with high volume and animation, and sounds almost angry during these penultimate two turns. He is gesticulating so strongly that his sunglasses come dislodged from atop his head and he has to reposition them as he talks))

- Cust: Okay what I'm saying is if you throw five kids (in the middle of the floor) and don't tell them what they are nothing like that they just grow up to be people.
- Cust: They don't even know that they Black. They don't even know they Korean, they don't know that they White, they don't know this and that. It has to be an old person like you or me, George Washington and all these motherfuckers. Martin Luther King and all these motherfuckers.

((The customer has begun moving toward the exit. His vocal register shifts suddenly to one of low volume and affect for his final turn. He gazes first at the owner and then the cashier as he waves goodbye and utters his final words))

Cust: anyway- have a good day.
 Own: later ((Customer turns and exits))

As this interaction progresses, the storekeepers become more and more reticent while the customer becomes more and more outspoken. Although the customer has dominated the talk throughout the interaction, his volume and affect level get higher as it progresses, and he holds the floor an ever higher proportion of the time. In the final two minutes of talk, the customer is literally following the owner from spot to spot in the store, leaning over the shorter man, and repeatedly touching him on the chest as he makes his points. The more that this African-American customer cheerfully talks and stresses his camaraderie with the store-owner through speech activities unrelated to the business transaction at hand, the more the retailer withdraws and declines involvement. This asymmetrical pattern of participation in service encounters – although frequently much more subtle than in this case – is characteristic of the interactions I observed and videotaped.

Divergent communicative practices and conflict: two explanations

The divergent communicative patterns described here are a function both of linguistic/cultural differences between individual storekeepers and customers and pre-existing American social conflicts. These two sets of factors are intertwined and operate simultaneously in these encounters. Both explain divergent service encounter behavior and link communicative behavior in face-to-face interaction to larger-scale tensions between African-Americans and immigrant Koreans.

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STOREKEEPERS AND CUSTOMERS

On one level, differences in participation in service encounters are clearly a function of cultural and linguistic differences between African-American customers and Korean immigrant retailers (Bailey, 1997). Such differences can account for many details of the communicative patterns documented in these service encounters, and storekeepers and customers alike cite specifics of each others' communicative behavior as significant in explaining interethnic tensions and/or making negative attributions about each other.

The prevalent form of service encounter between storekeepers and *Korean* (immigrant) customers in Los Angeles is much shorter and less personable than the corresponding interactions with African-American customers. Even as language and cultural barriers fall away, Korean–Korean service encounters typically follow a relatively terse, impersonal pattern focused solely on carrying out the business transaction. This pattern is consistent with ethnographic (Park 1979; Yum, 1987) and consultants' descriptions of public interaction among non-intimates in Korea.

I have no recorded data of service encounters involving African-American

store-owners with which to compare these encounters with immigrant Korean ones. I did, however, observe many interactions between African-American customers and African-American cashiers who were employed in immigrant Korean owned stores. Interactions between customers and such African-American cashiers were consistently longer and included more introduction of personal topics and personable small talk than the corresponding encounters with immigrant Korean cashiers in the same stores. The relatively high level of personable involvement displayed by African-Americans with both Korean immigrant and African-American cashiers suggests a cultural expectation for service encounters that involve personable speech activities beyond those which are minimally necessary for executing the business transaction.

Both storekeepers and customers publicly interpret each others' behavior in terms of their own standards for appropriate behavior in service encounters. Storekeepers' relative restraint and lack of sociable, interpersonal engagement with customers would not be perceived as disrespectful in a Korean cultural and linguistic context. It is precisely such restraint, however, that many African-Americans cite as proof of storekeeper disrespect and racism ("They wouldn't look at you at all. They wouldn't acknowledge you in any way. Nothing. You were nobody" and "to me, many, not all, many of them perceive Blacks as a non-entity. We are treated as if we do not exist"). On one level, African-American perceptions of taciturnity as disrespect and racism are misperceptions that result from miscommunication, i.e. from interpreting Korean immigrant behavior in an African-American cultural and linguistic context.

Culturally specific conventions for carrying out communicative activities, including displays of respect, are typically unconscious (Gumperz, 1982, 1992), and few individuals can abstract the precise conditions and speech activities that would constitute an unmarked service encounter for them. Because it is so difficult to recognize details of one's own interactional expectations and practices – and to perceive them as culturally specific rather than universal and natural – it is easier to account for another's divergent behavior in intercultural situations through reference to negative intentions or traits. African-Americans have historically been treated as less than equal to other Americans, and experiences of racism in everyday encounters, e.g. being ignored in stores, are familiar to many. Because racism is so familiar to African-Americans – and such a familiar explanation for others' behavior – it is not obvious that other factors, e.g. linguistic and cultural differences, can explain storekeeper behavior.

Similarly, the levels of affect and interpersonal involvement displayed by many African-American customers, which many immigrant retailers experience as inconsiderate imposition, would be perceived as appropriately personable in many African-American linguistic and cultural contexts. On this level, storekeepers are misunderstanding African-American customers because they are interpreting those customers' behavior in a Korean cultural and linguistic framework. Just as African-American experiences of racism provide them with a ready explanation for storekeeper behavior, American racial hierarchy and disparage-

ment of African-Americans provide a template through which to evaluate customer behavior negatively without considering cultural and linguistic differences.

Behavior that is (mis)perceived as impolite or disrespectful is particularly damaging to intergroup relations because it is frequently interpreted as actively threatening: 'non-communication of the polite attitude will be read not merely as the absence of that attitude, but as the inverse, the holding of an aggressive attitude' (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 33). When conventions for appropriate service encounter behavior differ, as they do between immigrant Koreans and African-Americans, individuals may read each other's behavior as not simply strange or lacking in social grace, but as aggressively antagonistic. Everyday service encounters can thus serve as an ongoing source of intergroup conflict at a larger scale.

COMMUNICATIVE DIFFERENCES AS THE ENACTMENT OF SOCIAL BOUNDARIES

Cultural and linguistic differences between immigrant Korean storekeepers and African-American customers explain much about the patterns that their service encounter interactions take, but they cannot entirely account for them. Different forms of participation in these encounters persist over time, for example, even as storekeepers and customers ostensibly have time to become familiar with each others' conventions for service encounter behavior. Many Korean immigrant retailers have maintained businesses for years in African-American neighborhoods, giving them the opportunity to learn to approximate the conventions of their customers in service encounter interaction. Despite contact over extended periods of time, many storekeepers do little to approximate the relevant communicative conventions of their African-American customers. This maintenance of differences suggests that there are reasons other than cultural and linguistic habit that prevent storekeepers (and customers) from greater communicative accommodation.

A second aspect of service encounter behavior that linguistic and cultural differences fail to account for is the intensification of opposing behaviors as individual encounters proceed. In the encounter partly transcribed earlier, for example, the storekeepers become increasingly reticent as the customer becomes increasingly outspoken, a pattern observed numerous times in such stores. This pattern implies that participants in these service encounters recognize, at some level, differences in communicative styles. Instead of accommodating communicative behavior to each other, however, they intensify displays of communicative difference in response to each other.

These particular aspects of communicative behavior in service encounters – the lack of accommodation displayed by parties over time, and the intensification of opposing behaviors in single encounters – are better explained by the socially, racially, and economically charged context in which African-Americans and Korean storekeepers encounter each other in Los Angeles. Most immediately, such stores are widely identified as a site of interethnic conflict between African-

Americans and Korean immigrants. Media in various cities, including Los Angeles, reported on conflict between Korean immigrant retailers and African-American customers as early as the 1970s. In a widely publicized 1991 case, a dispute between a female shopowner and an unarmed African-American teenager, Latasha Harlins, escalated into the storekeeper's shooting and killing Harlins. The incident was captured on surveillance camera videotape and broadcast repeatedly on local television news. The April 1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles drew an even greater media spotlight to portions of South Central Los Angeles and focused even greater attention on relations between immigrant Korean retailers and African-Americans in low-income neighborhoods. Storekeepers and customers have invariably been exposed to racialized framing of intergroup and service encounter relations, and few storekeepers and customers could encounter each other in 1994–5, when this fieldwork was conducted, without strongly pre-conditioned assumptions about each other.

Such pre-existing assumptions can explain much of the asymmetrical communicative patterns documented. In this highly charged and divisive context, there is often great social incentive for individual Korean immigrant storekeepers and African-American customers to mark and maintain boundaries between each other. One way to mark such boundaries is through contrasting interactional styles. Differences in communicative behavior are frequently taken to mark and represent differences in social identity (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 1982). Storekeepers and customers in low-income Los Angeles neighborhoods differ in cultural, racial, and, frequently, class identities. Individuals who perceive differences between themselves can use communicative behaviors associated with specific social identities to reproduce those social identities and differentiate themselves from others. Thus, even when African-American customers and Korean immigrant retailers might approximate each other's communicative conventions – resulting in more synchronous interactions – they have social incentives *not* to do so.

Communicative behaviors that represent unmarked cultural and linguistic standards in some contexts become political statements of identity in situations where power or identity are at issue. Many African-Americans, for example, use varieties of African-American English and distinctively African-American interactional features as a 'political sign of solidarity and resistance' when in contact with those outside the community – most commonly white Americans – who are associated with social and racial oppression (Morgan, 1994: 132). The use of such contrasting behaviors is an everyday assertion of positive identity and a form of resistance to opposing and disparaging discourses. Accommodation of communicative style to another can be experienced not only as a modification of linguistic behaviors but as a tacit recognition of the other's social perspective and legitimacy (Connor-Linton, 1995). Individuals who display behaviors and linguistic forms associated with the groups to whom one is in opposition are frequently sanctioned by the in-group, thus maintaining group boundaries and internal solidarity (Gal, 1989: 354).

A confluence of social, historical, and economic conditions particularly encourage storekeepers and customers to highlight differences between themselves. Social and economic conditions that exist outside the stores, such as segregation and economic inequality, create economic niches for these stores and then shape their specific characteristics, channelling the interactions that take place within them. Prices in such convenience stores are high, many customers are low-income, and the storekeepers are seen by many as the latest in a long line of economic exploiters from outside the African-American community (Chang, 1990, 1993). Shoplifting is not uncommon, and the late hours and cash-basis of the stores make them appealing targets for robbery. Nearly all the retailers I interviewed had been robbed at gunpoint, for example, leading some to do business from behind bullet-proof glass, making verbal interaction with customers difficult.

Customers and storekeepers frequently differ in class background, encouraging the accentuation of social difference. Korean immigrant storekeepers are disproportionately from educated, middle-class backgrounds in Korea (Park, 1996: 497). They are downwardly mobile in the United States because non-transferable professional qualifications and limited English proficiency prevent them from seeking professional or white-collar work. America is a land of opportunity for economic and social advancement not for these immigrant entrepreneurs, but for their children. Storekeepers generally see themselves as sacrificing themselves with long hours – often working over 100 hours per week – in dull and dangerous work for the benefit of their children, who achieve social mobility through education, many attending competitive colleges and getting advanced degrees. Low-income and African-American neighborhoods have historically attracted such immigrant entrepreneurs (Drake and Cayton, 1945; Sturdevant, 1969) because of lower start-up costs and discrimination faced by immigrants in other sectors of society. The long hours, danger, and marginal profitability of operating such stores make such entrepreneurship unattractive to native-born Americans who can parlay social and financial resources into greater social and economic advancement in other vocations (Bates, 1994).

As immigrants and entrepreneurs from middle-class backgrounds, storeowners align themselves with the dominant-class ideology that individual work and self-reliance lead to social and economic advancement. Korean immigrants are encouraged in this alignment by the dominant society that has dubbed them a ‘model minority’, according them higher status than other non-European groups and implying deficiency in less socially mobile ones.

The history of slavery, segregation, and discrimination in America, on the other hand, has given many African-Americans, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, a very different perspective on race and opportunities for socio-economic advancement. Service encounters in stores run by Korean immigrants in low-income, African-American neighborhoods thus bring together individuals with differing cultural backgrounds, differing experiences of class and racism, and differing assumptions about discrimination and opportunity for economic

and social mobility. For many Korean immigrant entrepreneurs, the mercantile activity in which they engage represents an opportunity for advancement, at least for their children, while for many African-Americans these stores are symbolic of an ongoing history of discrimination and economic exploitation by outsiders (Chang, 1990: 201–2).

The immediate history of relations in and around these stores as well as the larger-scale social context of inequality thus encourage African-Americans and Korean immigrants to highlight differences between each other when they meet. From this perspective, divergent patterns of communicative behavior in service encounters are not a *cause* of interethnic tensions, but rather a *local enactment of pre-existing social conflicts*. This perspective can account for specific aspects of communicative behavior in such encounters that are poorly accounted for by an idealized linguistic/cultural difference model. This model can also account for the links made by participants between patterns of communicative behavior and negative social traits they attribute to each other. Storekeepers and customers cite specific patterns of communicative behavior in explaining their mutual negative stereotypes, but this does not mean that those behaviors *cause* the stereotype or tensions. Descriptions of communicative differences can simply provide a local vocabulary through which to talk about social conflict that would exist regardless of the specifics of communicative patterns. African-American assumptions of Korean racism, for example, can pre-exist actual service encounters with Korean immigrants. Distinctive behavior by immigrant Korean retailers, e.g. their relative lack of interpersonal involvement in service encounters with non-intimates, subsequently becomes 'proof' of the racism that was already assumed. In the absence of such salient differences in communicative patterns, other traits or activities of the storekeepers could be cited as proof of racism.

Similarly, the African-American customer behavior that storekeepers describe as inappropriate can simply provide convenient terms with which to disparage African-Americans. Dominant American discourses disparage African-American race, language, and culture. Regardless of how individual African-American customers behave in service encounters, store owners have a template with which to judge that behavior as inappropriate and a sign of poor socialization. Those aspects of African-American service encounter interactional style that violate Korean assumptions about appropriate service encounter relations and behavior provide convenient 'proof' of negative African-American attributes. In the absence of such salient differences in communicative patterns, other traits or activities of the customers could be cited as proof of their lack of proper social training.

Social inequality and conflict that pre-exist individual service encounters can thus account both for much of the specific patterns of service encounter behavior and for the explanations that participants present for each other's behavior. The perceptions of intergroup difference and conflict that customers and storekeepers bring to their encounters encourage them to highlight differences in identity through contrasting communicative patterns. These differences in com-

municative style are highly salient to both customers and storekeepers, and they subsequently serve as a readily available idiom through which to talk about social difference and conflict. Everyday descriptions of inappropriate behavior in face-to-face interaction provide a more concrete and experience-near way of talking about conflict than abstract descriptions of sociohistorical processes which are highly naturalized, e.g. the construction of race and the production and maintenance of inequality.

Conclusion

The divergent communicative patterns displayed by immigrant Korean storekeepers and African-American customers in Los Angeles are best explained as a result of both cultural/linguistic differences and pre-existing social conflicts. These divergent communicative patterns contribute to ongoing interethnic tensions in Los Angeles at the same time that they serve as an enactment of pre-existing intergroup conflicts. There are clear cultural bases for the relative taciturnity and restraint of storekeepers and the relative personable involvement of customers in such encounters, and these differences serve to daily inflame relations. The maintenance of such differences over time, however, and the intensification of opposing behaviors in single encounters suggest that it is not just cultural and linguistic habit that leads to these divergent patterns of interaction.

A confluence of socio-historical conditions encourage storekeepers and customers to highlight their differences, which they do in part through their communicative behavior. Large-scale social and economic inequality create a niche for these stores and then shape their operation in ways that lead to resentment. Storekeepers and customers bring differing experiences of class and racism, and differing assumptions about discrimination and opportunity to their encounters with each other. In this socially, racially, and economically charged context, intergroup tensions and perceptions of difference are constituted and reconstituted in everyday service encounters.

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NOTES

1. Media coverage of these events frequently racialized them, portraying them not as the result of social and economic ills, but as the result of inter-racial enmity. Coverage of the Latasha Harlins shooting focused on the racial identities of the perpetrator and victim rather than the violence typical of liquor stores in low-income neighborhoods, and coverage of the events of April 1992 was presented ahistorically, with little reference to the tinder-box social conditions in South Central Los Angeles. Television coverage of both events was driven by sensational video footage: the killing of Latasha Harlins was captured on surveillance camera videotape and broadcast repeatedly over

- the news. During and after the events of April 1992, television news repeatedly featured a set of video segments of immigrant retailers firing weapons around their stores.
2. Limited English proficiency clearly plays a role in the interactional restraint of many immigrant Korean storekeepers in encounters with English speakers. Many storekeepers who have been in America for 20 years – but arrived as adults – have incomplete comprehension of English that is spoken at native speed, and many express embarrassment about speaking English because of limited proficiency. African-American customers, who seldom cite limited English proficiency as a reason for storekeepers' relative taciturnity, may not realize the difficulty of achieving English fluency for speakers of non-Indo-European languages such as Korean.
 3. Transcription Conventions:

The speaker is identified with an abbreviation on the left, e.g. 'Cust' for 'Customer', 'Cash' for 'Cashier', and 'Own' for 'Owner'. A question mark in this column indicates that the speaker's identity is not clear to the transcriber. Descriptions of nonverbal activities are in double parentheses, e.g. ((Customer enters store)).

((4.3)) Numbers in parentheses indicate the length of time in seconds during which there is no talk. Single parentheses are used for intra-turn silences, double parentheses for silences between turns.

:

A colon indicates that the preceding sound was elongated in a marked pronunciation.

?

A question mark indicates a marked rising pitch.

.

A period indicates a falling pitch.

()

Parentheses that are empty indicate that something was said at that point, but it is not clear enough to transcribe. Words in parentheses indicate doubt about the accuracy of the transcribed word or words.

[]

Brackets enclose those portions of utterances that are spoken in overlap with other talk. The overlapping portions of talk are placed immediately above or below each other on the page.

!

An exclamation point indicates an exclamatory tone.

,

A comma indicates a continuing intonation in the sound(s) preceding the comma.

text

Text that is underlined was pronounced with emphasis, i.e. some combination of higher volume, pitch, and greater vowel length.

'

A single apostrophe replaces a letter that was not pronounced, e.g. 'col' for cold when the 'd' is not pronounced.

-

A hyphen or dash indicates that speech was suddenly cut-off during or after the preceding word.
 4. The high profile of relations between African-Americans and Korean immigrant storekeepers distracts attention from the fact that only a small percentage of Korean immigrant entrepreneurs operate businesses in neighborhoods that are primarily African-American. Park (1996: 498) cites Eui-Young Yu that only 10 percent of the customers of immigrant Korean-owned businesses in Los Angeles are African-American.

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