Learning from Small Change: Clerkship and the Labors of Convenience

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Abstract

Convenience stores are atop the list of global retail chains blamed for homogenizing landscapes, deskilling labor, and eroding local cultural difference. Further still, their very ubiquity and ''nonplace''-ness is said to challenge conventional modes of ethnographic inquiry. In the following article, I move beyond such broad assumptions by examining how the convenience store constitutes a meaningful lifeworld and culturally embedded economic institution. Drawing on my training and experiences as a clerk, I explore in particular how impersonal familiarity is constructed and contested within the context of this retail environment.

Keywords: convenience, consumer culture, fieldwork, retail, work, Japan

Introduction

Daily Yamazaki is one of 14 convenience stores, or *konbini*, that surround the subway station of a particular business district in central Tokyo. Like its competition, the store offers more than just food and sundries. Customers can withdraw cash from its ATM, pay utility bills, make photocopies, purchase tickets, order flowers, send mail, discard recyclables, use the restroom, get directions, and even recharge their cell phones. Daily Yamazaki is a one-stop, round-the-clock lifestyle support station.

Service at Daily Yamazaki is swift and volume high. Customers normally spend less than 180 seconds in the store and the average sale is ¥417 – the equivalent of two rice balls (*onigiri*) and a can of sweetened coffee. On a typical weekday, the store handles 1,300 individual transactions. Customers converge at the front counter where store staff and four registers stand ready. At peak hours, queues form quickly and the aisles grow congested. Clerks respond by increasing their pace at the till. A single register may process four individuals a minute. Staff wave on impatient patrons, scanners chirp, registers regurgitate receipts, fingers snatch change from yawning drawers and tussle with stubborn plastic bags. Lines recede and the cacophony of transactions seeps out the door, merging unnoticed with the busy world outside.

Forty-three thousand *konbini*, like Daily Yamazaki, exist in Japan today. Their presence is essential to the ''normal'' functioning of everyday life for tens of millions of people. Similar to fast food restaurants, gas stations, and supermarkets, convenience stores are globally recognizable sites of consumer activity and routinized labor – the vanguard of an ever-expanding service sector. At the same time, this former American retail format stands in sharp contrast to prevailing notions of Japanese society and ethnographic depictions of its rich, highly formalized, and ritualized social fabric (see Dore 1958; Plath 1964; Wagatsuma 1984; Wagatsuma and De Vos 1984; Patrick and Rohlen 1987; Bestor 1989, 1993, 2004). The convenience store is, after all, one retail model hell-bent to reduce interaction to a one-size-fits-all commodity exchange. For many people, human interaction with convenience stores is as it should be – impersonal, momentary, undemanding, and lacking in reflection. Flushed clean of obligation and entailment, *konbini* are barrier-free retail at its best.

The speed and familiarity of the *konbini* makes these stores competitive and pervasive as retail locations, but seemingly less conducive sites for anthropological engagement and certain qualitative methods of inquiry. Researchers are content to explain the *konbini*'s rise in light of technological innovations, market deregulation, and demographic shifts (Flath 1990; Larke 1994; Ishikawa and Nejo 1998; Kawabe 2004; Larke and Causton 2005). Theorists bag convenience stores together with fast food chains, summarily categorizing them as cultural homogenizers (Ritzer 1998, 2000, 2004) or ''nonplaces'' (Augé 1995) that challenge the very premise of ethnographic study. None of these approaches adequately account for the convenience store's unassuming centrality in daily life and its cultural embeddedness as an economic institution. Nor do they interrogate the notion of convenience that underlies this particular retail site in name, concept, practice, and system.

To understand the *konbini*'s social significance and how the notions of convenience they embody are constructed, I chose to position myself within a store and take an active role in its daily operations. Clerking provided a valuable opportunity for delineating the contours of a service-oriented socioeconomic system that increasing defines life in Japan and throughout the globe. Work gave purchase on the dimensions of labor critical to the functioning of the convenience store and exposed the layers of socialization and training that accompany modern retail's continual effort to standardize processes, reduce error, and increase profit. The achievement of the *konbini* is not anonymity, I argue, but rather an impersonal familiarity that, while releasing both customer and clerk of certain obligations and entailments, is continually being improvised, rescripted, and challenged by actors on both sides of the counter.

Researcher and Worker, Customer and Clerk

Work as fieldwork is not new to anthropology. Since the Torres Straits expedition and even earlier anthropological fieldwork has entailed work in various forms: travel, language acquisition, personal participation in local activities, note taking, collecting, and cataloging. As the discipline expanded and societies change, work has emerged as its own legitimate subfield of study and ''work as fieldwork'' an accepted and necessary mode of engagement for particular projects. Work in the form of employment provides the researcher with access to informants, experiences, and the possibility of a more corporeal understanding of the environment and forces in which a particular population is immersed. The complexities and ethical issues that accompany this approach may in turn invigorate the ethnographic writing that follows, enriching monographs with a compel-

ling narrative structure or casting fresh light on old methodological questions. Work can be the catalyst for refocusing a study altogether. In the anthropology of Japan, work as fieldwork features prominently in numerous studies from factories (Cole 1971; Roberts 1994; Roberson 1998; Roth 2002) to sweet shops (Kondo 1990), white-collar offices (Rohlen 1974; Ogasawara 1998) to wedding parlors (Edwards 1989; Goldstein-Gidoni 1997) and department stores (Creighton 1988; Matsunaga 2000). Whether as paid staff or volunteers, ethnographers have located themselves in an impressive range of workplaces and contributed substantially to the understanding of contemporary lifeways in Japan.

I had yet to take a course in anthropology when I encountered my first *konbini* in the mid-1990s. I turned to the *konbini* to meet sudden cravings and last-minute needs during a post-college job as a language teacher in rural Japan. Later, as a graduate student, I became interested in the *konbini*'s importance as an everyday zone of social activity, economic transaction, and cultural translation. Particularly intriguing was the store model's rapid ''industrial'' expansion within a nation recognized for its vibrant local commerce. To my mind, it was not the Golden Arches but 7-Eleven that appeared to embody the localization of global processes. Yet the social science research on retail that I came across was predominantly fast food-related (see Reiter 1991; Leidner 1993; Ritzer 1993; Love 1995; Hogan 1997; Watson 1997; Newman 1999; Schlosser 2001; Talwar 2002). Further still, the researchers conducting these studies relied mainly on interviews and ''hanging out'' as customers. Flipping burgers and counterwork was not on most fieldwork menus.

The study of *konbini* demanded more than flaneurial, aisle-based observations or interview-dependent inquiry. The stores are product and service purveyors as well as employers. A truly substantive ethnographic account needed to explore these dimensions. Furthermore, as a seasoned *konbini* customer, I had grown inured to their convenience. I needed to reawaken my senses to the *konbini* and participate in its social rootedness firsthand. Becoming a clerk offered the chance for ''observant participation'' (Wacquant 2005) and Daily Yamazaki was the store that gave me my first opportunity.

My relationship with Daily Yamazaki started in October 2004 when my landlord introduced me to a family who owned a franchise. In the narrow backroom of the store, I met with the chief supervisor (*senmu*), the younger brother of the franchise's owner and a heavy smoker. Through a tobacco haze, I explained my academic affiliations and project, and said I was interested in working at a store as part of my study. I made clear that I had a research fellowship supporting me and was willing forego a wage in exchange for their time and support.

Senmu was less concerned about me working than about the appropriateness of Daily Yamazaki for my study. He pointed out how atypical their operation was from the store's busy downtown location to their nonchalant attitude toward the chain's manual. He scoffed at my use of the word, ''community'' in relation to *konbini*. Daily Yamazaki was in the middle of a ''neighborhood-less'' business district. ''Community'' might exist at some stores, but not this one he assured me. Not surprisingly, he also wanted to know why an American would come all the way to Japan to study a type of store that originated and still thrived in the United States. The questions *senmu* posed revealed some of the contradictory attitudes held about convenience stores in Japan. Our conversation exposed my assumptions about these stores as well. After finishing his fourth cigarette, *senmu* consented to my being at the store for a few months. Daily Yamazaki was fully staffed; I could work but would not be paid. The only other condition he set was that my research should not interfere with the customers.

''Daily'' Training

As a volunteer, I assumed that work would entail basic tasks requiring minimal instruction and responsibility: breaking down boxes, stocking shelves, cleaning, emptying trash, and the like. This was not the case. From my first day on the job nearly the same was expected of me as any fresh recruit. I received a new uniform to wear, an illustrated manual of basic store operations to review, and a trainee (*kenshûin*) badge to pin to my pocket. I worked out a schedule with the store manager (*tenchô*), who placed me in appropriate shifts – weekend mornings initially because they were much slower and the customers more forgiving. She asked me to be at the store 10 minutes before each shift and punch in and out on a timecard when ''working'' – a requirement of all staff in uniform and an easy way for the management to keep track of my comings and goings.

My initial four shifts were on-the-job training, with a focus on counterwork: greeting customers, managing transaction flow, bagging, and counting money. *Tenchô* instructed me on the use of the register, beginning with how to properly add up the money in the drawer. Standing to one side, I observed her glide through the task first. I then repeated it, or at least tried to. Suddenly the order of operations no longer seemed intuitive. I could not even remember how to open the register drawer. Sweat collected on my brow as actions that *tenchô* performed almost innately – folding stacks of bills over her fingers and counting them with her thumb or massaging coins in her palm before loading them into the plastic counting rack – became agonizingly complex pieces of manual choreography. To teach me to count the yen notes required actual ''hands-on'' involvement. *Tenchô* took my fists, positioned my recalcitrant fingers properly, and then inserted the bills between them as if feeding paper into an old typewriter.

Learning to process and bag an order was an equally detailed and exhausting experience. After a cursory explanation of how to use the register and its bar code scanner, we rehearsed. *Tenchô* played the role of customer and handed me a basket brimming with products. I rang up and bagged the entire order. Then she deconstructed it in front of me, critiquing my job item by item. She pointed out the correct size of bags I should have used, which products required special handling, how to arrange items in a particular order inside the bag, and even her technique for scanning the troublesome oversized barcodes on magazines. Learning the register was difficult at first, but she assured me that I would get better with practice and practice began immediately with actual customers.

My first victim was a young man in baggy pants and a baseball cap. As he approached the register with his purchases, my heart rate increased. The customer placed his items on the counter and watched patiently as I searched for the barcodes printed on the packaging. When I read the final total off the register screen he handed me a ¥1,000 note. I keyed in the amount and from behind me *tenchô*'s voice rang out, politely acknowledging that I had received the man's money. Already I had made a procedural error. I cleared my throat and focused on the register's keypad wondering why the cash drawer was not opening. *Tenchô* reached around and pressed a key. The cash drawer sprung open and I fumbled to make change. I handed the customer the coins and reached for a plastic bag, but locating the mouth of the bag with my now sweaty fingers was not as easy as it had been during my practice session. As my digits wrestled with the plastic, *tenchô* took the receipt from the register and handed it to the customer with a thank you. I hastily bagged the items and handed the man his purchase feeling deflated but relieved it was over. *Konbini* transactions were brief, but they could seem like an eternity when things were not going smoothly.

Gaining Speed

I waited on about a dozen customers my first shift and three times as many on my second. By my third shift, I lost count. Before my fifth shift, I traded my trainee badge in for a more official one bearing the chain logo, my name (written in Japanese), photo, and title, ''researcher'' (*kenkyûin*). However, I still needed several more weeks of practice before *tenchô* would let me handle the register during the store's peak hours. She suggested I begin assisting on weekday mornings in order to acclimate to the more intense selling environment. Thus a second phase of training began: apprenticeship.

Apprenticeship entailed shadowing seasoned staff as they restocked shelves, cleaned, and tidied up around the outside of the store. When the registers grew busy, I worked behind the counter bagging items and heating food in the store's microwave ovens. Laboring shoulder-to-shoulder with experienced clerks, I picked up techniques (*kufû*) for making the job go smoother and avoiding potentially uncomfortable situations with customers. One woman, for example, kept a small supply of preopened plastic bags on hand to save her time when things got busy. I immediately embraced this practice and used it even when business was slow. A different clerk stacked ¥1 coins on the lip of her register in neat piles of three in order to make counting change faster. She also deviated from the common practice of placing change on the receipt and handing both to the customer at once. Instead she put the receipt on the counter with a slight flourish of the hand and left the choice of taking it up to the customer. When I later asked about this practice she explained the danger of handing a receipt and money at the same time. Occasionally a patron, typically a businessman in a rush, would refused the receipt and pull away his hand sending coins showering onto the counter and floor. Placing the receipt on the counter might not seem courteous, but it avoided a far more embarrassing situation. All customers were treated the same by the clerk. Even the store managers had to pluck the receipts for their purchases off the counter.

While clerks found ways to make transactions speedier and less encumbered, working at the register also demanded that they take part in reducing the transaction into byte-size pieces of consumer data. At the end of a sale, a clerk records the gender and approximate age of the customer on the Point of Sales register by pressing a ''clientele key'' (*kyakusô ki*). The register's cash drawer will not open until such a key is pressed. Clientele keys stand separate from the number pad and are divided by gender (male and female) and age category in descending order (senior, adult, young adult, child). With each purchase, customer data and information from the barcode reader is fused with other details – the exact time, date, and location of the transaction, the outdoor temperature, and local weather conditions. The digital information package is instantly relayed from the register, through the store's computer, to the chain headquarters, where other computers analyze the figures and feed the digested statistics back out to the store in a matter of hours. The data appears in the form of easy-to-read graphs and charts on the store computer. The information acts as guidelines for the store staff to follow in placing new orders, managing inventory, and fine tuning the store's offerings to better suit customer tastes and needs on a daily – even hourly – basis.

I gained an appreciation for how streamlined this system is when I began stocking the fresh food shelves in the morning. Fresh food orders arrived three times per day and bread twice a day. Dairy, dry goods, store supplies, and drinks also came daily. Each delivery appeared on time and was coordinated so as not to interfere with the store's busiest hours. Freshly prepared food arrived in reusable plastic flats and trays. As many as 20 or 30 trays might be wheeled into the store on one delivery. Inside the trays the products were grouped but not in an order that corresponded with their shelf arrangement. The trays were bulky and created obstacles for customers so there was a subtle urgency to process the products quickly before someone tripped. The clerk's job was to migrate the products to the shelf with relative speed then haul the trays outside and restack them in condensed columns at the side of the store for pick up after the next delivery. This final step of ordering the empty trays offered an opportunity to reflect on just how much product had been stocked.

Facing the task of stocking products demanded that each worker find his or her own rhythm and approach. Particular products were assigned particular areas in the store for display, but the worker who stocked that product could play with location and tweak display. There was both a fungibleness and clean slate effect with the prepared food display in particular. Every seven hours a new shipment of products arrived and clerks could arrange the products in a logic that they deemed appropriate. By looking at a rice ball (*onigiri*) display, noting the time of day, and placement of the plum-filled rice balls, I could usually tell who had stocked the shelf. Like a name written in the sand before the advancing waves, however, the order would grow illegible. After the lunch rush, for example, the rows of *onigiri* were so ravaged that their initial order was completely lost. Entire flavors might be missing and what remained was distributed across the shelf to make the shelf appear as full as possible.

Sandwiches were yet another zone of personal order. Daily Yamazaki typically stocked 10 varieties of triangular sandwiches (*sankaku sando*). Packaged like *onigiri*, with a

similar pull-tab release system, sandwiches were a popular item for people interested in a fast midday meal. Takaoka Emi, a middle age housewife and part-time worker who first taught me how to refill the sandwich shelves, organized the products by price, starting with the most expensive – a fried port (*tonkatsu*) sandwich. Maeda was guided by a different product logic whereby any new flavor of sandwich was displayed at the front of the line-up. Once again, it was possible to notice a clerk's style of display and thus read workmanship in a place that to the customer might seem utterly generic.

The registers also had a personalized dimension to them that was only visible to the workers. The store's four registers were numbered and the number appeared on the receipts that the register produced. But among the staff, the registers had nicknames that corresponded with the employees who primarily used them. Register No. 1, was called ''*senmu*,'' Register No. 2 ''*tenchô*,'' Register No. 3 ''Maeda'' (after Maeda Susumu, the store's third-in-command), and Register No. 4 ''Hide'' (after Nakamura Hide, a 19-year-old male part-timer who was attending night school to become a beautician). Nakamura treated Register No. 4 as his canvas. He tastefully accessorized the plastic frame around the flat panel screen with various materials gleaned from current product campaigns like decals and free promotional trinkets (*keihin*) from drink packages. A seasonal sensitivity informed Nakamura's decorative creativity. Leftover red ribbon from the lackluster Beaujolais wine campaign became the screen's garland in November, miniature silver Christmas bows added a festive three-dimensional accent in December. From the customer's side of the counter, little of Hide's handiwork was ever visible.

Even in the most orderly place of all, the cash register drawer, the mark of certain clerks was discernable. *Tenchô* and Hasegawa Naomi, an older woman who worked evenings, disliked when the yen notes in the drawer were not facing in the same way. After *tenchô* and Hasegawa finished tallying the registers, the yen notes always appeared facing up and in the same direction in the drawer. When the two women had idle time at the registers, they would ''straighten up'' the drawer by counting and rotating bills.

Becoming Familiar

Three months on the job dispelled for me certain assumptions about *konbini*, work, and store sociality. *Konbini* were standardized retail spaces, but they were not all identical. Depending on the location, hour of the day, and who was working, the same store could appear a very different place. Familiarity with *konbini* as a customer did not immediately benefit one as a worker. Previous store employment experience might help one get a job, as it did for a number of my co-workers, but it did not alleviate the need for training, or rather retraining. Thanks to technology, most basic store operations were simplified and could be learned relatively quickly. Speed and accuracy increased with repetition and observation. By early November I was competent enough with the register to command one during the morning rush. I also knew how to stock shelves, buff the floor, brew coffee, and operate the soft-serve ice cream machine. The more social aspects of the store took longer to take in. The way to inhabit the *konbini*'s space, attitudes toward machines and fellow workers, and where the store did and did not follow the manual were absorbed through exposure, unconsciously drawn into the body's muscles, the vertebrae, vocal cords, and nostrils. They settled in at a cellular level and became normal in the same way that I no longer noticed Daily Yamazaki's stale oily odor when I came to work.

My index finger, for example, learned at what angle to strike the plastic bag stacks hanging on hooks beneath the counter in order to tear the bag off of the bunch and render it partially open in the same stroke. Shortly after I started working weekday mornings, my back began to hurt. It was an insidious pain that crept into my lower back after lunch and again at night when I lay down to sleep, I was not the only sufferer. One afternoon in the backroom, Maeda, who was about my height, saw me massaging my spine and showed me an effective way to stretch. He also revealed the pain's culprit – the store counters. They were built several centimeters lower to accommodate elderly patrons and young children. The more I worked at the store, the more the store was working on my posture.

Language was another critical site of clerk embodiment. Clerk talk was peppered with convenience store-specific vocabulary (*konbini yôgo*). Some words were direct imports from the American manual: ''backyard'' (backroom), ''gondola'' (store shelves), and ''reach-in'' (drink refrigerator), and ''crew'' (store staff). Other terms were Japan-specific: *sutoakon* (store computer), *rejiten* (counting up the money in the till), *orikon* (collapsible plastic containers), *ichi-bin, ni-bin, san-bin* (fresh food deliveries Number 1, Number 2, and Number 3). Further still, there was also a store-specific vernacular that I began to pick up and use. There were the register's nicknames and the nicknames that the store staff gave to certain regular customers. Workers referred to the store as simply, ''Daily'' and used the code word, ''Number Ten'' (*jûban*), when they need to visit the restroom. When *tenchô* said, ''cherry blossom'' (*sakura*), she meant the preschool on the opposite block where the store delivered bread orders several times a week.

My internalization of *konbini* speech and practices gurgled to the surface at embarrassing off-duty moments. When visiting other *konbini* or supermarkets I had to resist the urge to straighten items on shelves and pull bottles and cans forward on the refrigerated racks. I once caught myself answering my home phone with the standard greeting used when answering the phone at the store: ''Thank you for your continuous support. This is Gavin Whitelaw of Daily Yamazaki.'' Another time I was thumbing through a magazine at a Lawson *konbini* near where I lived when I heard the store's door chime sound. I lifted my head instinctively and greeted the customer walking into the store with, ''Welcome, good evening'' (*Irrashaimase, konbanwa)*. The woman gave me an odd look and wide berth.

The apprenticeship period began to fade as December settled in. I knew enough about the store's operative flow that I did not need reminding about what to do or when to do it. *Tenchô* did not emerge from the backroom whenever a customer approached me at the counter. My stomach no longer tensed up when a line formed at my register. The clerks I was assigned to bag for started bagging for me. Then one morning, *tenchô* asked apologetically if I could fill in on an evening shift because Maeda had an appointment and

the store would be shorthanded. I happily accepted, brushing aside her offer to be paid for filling in. The following morning I sensed a slight shift in my interactions with both individuals. *Tenchô* bought me a hot cup of store coffee and Maeda wanted to know if I had ever ridden on a Harley. That month I received two more emergency requests and similar offers to be compensated. I took the extra shifts but continued to refuse money party out of principle: I had agreed not to be paid and was doing fine without a wage. Moreover, I appreciated the freedom and flexibility that my voluntary status provided. But an arrangement that I found to be convenient was growing more uncomfortable for the people I was serving. By filling in shifts for actual workers and refusing pay I was throwing a delicate, reciprocal relationship with the store and its management out of kilter.

A balance was renegotiated Christmas Eve when I agreed to dress in a synthetic Santa Claus suit and hock Christmas cakes in front of the store. Christmas cake selling is part of an industry-wide seasonal sales campaign that pits chain against chain, *konbini* against *konbini*. At Daily, Santa responsibilities typically fell on *senmu* who had the girth to give the jolly red costume its requisite fullness. He came to hate the job more with each passing year. Raised the youngest son of a local confectioner, he had fond memories of making seasonal sweets and eating them, but he dreaded selling Christmas cakes in the depths of December on a cold street corner. When *tenchô* offered the job to me and I accepted, it was as if Christmas had come early for *senmu*.

Daily Yamazaki cakes that year retailed for between ¥1,050 for the no frills chocolate Christmas cake to ¥2,200 for the double layer whipped cream (*namakurîmu*) deluxe cake with candles and a plastic Father Christmas face perched at the top. The store sold 147 of the 150 *senmu* ordered. My efforts contributed to nearly half of those sales and helped our store place third among all Daily Yamazaki franchises in the Tokyo metropolitan area.

When I retired the nylon beard and returned the red suit to the store's backroom near midnight Christmas Eve, *senmu* gave me one of the unsold deluxe cakes to take home. Later that week, he handed me an envelope with my name on it containing money for the nine hours I spent as Santa. He used the opportunity to mention how increasingly hard it was for the store to find dependable help and properly fill shifts. Then came his request. He wanted to add me to the books and be able to count on my labor more regularly. With *senmu* making the offer, it was more difficult to decline. Would a wage alter the reciprocity and flexibility that volunteering had afforded me? I revisited my earlier concerns and realized they had grown less significant as my research progressed from an abstract project proposal into a daily routine. What would accepting a wage change at this point? Many of the lines distinguishing me from other workers had faded. Like other staff, Daily clothed me (in a uniform made from recycled plastic bottles) and fed me (with unsold food that had passed its ''sell by'' date). The store structured my week and contributed to my exhaustion. My familiarity with the store deepened as my presence behind the counter grew more familiar. The sight of a blue-eyed, Japanese-speaking Caucasian ringing up orders still caught a few customers off guard, but the greater fluency with which I served at the counter offset the occasional stares and questions.

The largest risk in being hired might be a bureaucratic one, so I brought *senmu*'s request before the foundation overseeing my research fellowship. The administrators said that they were concerned about recipients teaching or consulting and receiving a salary, but my *konbini* clerking did not appear to be that sort of issue. They told me to treat the ¥840 I received per hour as a research-related ''transportation reimbursement'' (*kôtsûdai*) and thus starting in January I became, officially, a paid part-time employee.

Impersonal Familiarity

My work at Daily Yamazaki continued for nearly one more full year. The speed I had achieved as a worker, my familiarity with the workplace, and the wages I began receiving combined to further normalized and routinized what was taking place around me. The job no longer had an overwhelming feel to it, in part because I no longer paid such close attention to details. I felt a stronger responsibility, even obligation, to conform to the comportment of the staff with whom I worked as well. The employee badge on my chest still read, ''Researcher,'' but I was self-conscious about openly jotting down notes, particularly at the counter. I left my notebook in my pocket and, when necessary, scribbled short reminders on the back of discarded receipts, a practice I borrowed from *tenchô* who used store receipts for writing memos to herself and other staff.

More than the notes that I took on the receipts themselves, the forces that drew me toward disguising my note taking later proved useful in considering the performance of convenience taking place within the *konbini*. Part of the convenience of the convenience store is the impersonal familiarity that the store creates. At Daily Yamazaki, people were constantly observed, identified, monitored, and tracked, and yet this collection of information was done in ways that did not disturb the impersonal dimensions of the store and its interactions. One way this was achieved was by letting people know they were being observed. In the backroom of the store, employees sat and ate their meals in front of a video monitor connected to the store's surveillance cameras. Customers watched which age category clerks chose for them on the register keypad. One afternoon I received a text message from Kurafuji Miho, a 31-year-old female friend living in the outskirts of Tokyo.

> Yesterday I went to 7-Eleven. It was morning and I walked over just as I was – in my pajamas and with no makeup on. I couldn't believe it. The clerk at the register pressed the button for ''under 29 years old'' when he rang me up. I went home and proudly told my husband. He then said, ''Me, too. The clerks press the same button for me.'' My husband is thirty-six. What is up with this? I suppose [age] is a more or less sort of thing, right? Perhaps it is a [*konbini*] service (*sâbisu*) – [clerks] must select the customer button that is younger than what greets their eyes (laugh).

Indeed, data collection can unwittingly add a touch of affect to a seemingly banal transaction. Kurafuji became aware of the *konbini* industry's data mining efforts on a recent television documentary about the industry. She felt that the clerk paid her a compliment.

The production of impersonal familiarity requires work and attention. Customers were some of the strictest instructors that clerks faced. They paid close attention to the rules of the ''interaction ritual'' (Goffman 1967). During lunch hour, a woman came to the counter with some food items. Her total came to ¥936. The woman gave me ¥1,041 and I returned to her two ¥50 coins and one ¥5 coin. The woman stared at the money I had given her then thrust her hand back in my direction. My first thought was that I had made a mistake and short changed her. But the issue was not the amount of money but the number of coins she had received. ''Don't you have a one hundred yen coin?'' she asked, with a slight look of annoyance. I was avoiding using the ¥100 coins because I was running out of them in my drawer. My apology did little to help.

Another time I had a run in with a customer about my use of Japanese. The customer was an older, well-dressed gentleman who purchased a meal. I welcomed the man with, ''*Irrashaimase, konnichiwa*.'' His total came to exactly ¥1,000. ''One thousand yen, please'' (*Sen-en chyôdai itashimasu*), I said. The man gave me a ¥1,000 note from his wallet. I accepted the note with both hands using the expression ''*Sen-en chyôdo oazukari itashimasu*.'' When I returned the receipt and thanked him, he stared at me and said I had made a mistake. Embarrassed, I looked at the register screen expecting to find that I had misread something and not given him his change. But the mistake was a grammatical one, not a mathematical one. When verbally acknowledge receiving the man's money, I combined two polite phrases – *Sen-en chyôdo itadakimasu* (''I am receiving exactly ¥1,000'') and *Sen-en oazukari itashimasu* (literally, ''I am minding ¥1,000'' – the understanding being that change will be returned) into a statement that sounded polite but did not make grammatical sense. The man explained my mistake then pressed me to divulge where I had learned it. I did not know. Perhaps I had heard it as a customer at another store and unconsciously committed it to memory. Maybe it was simply the sort of error common to a nonnative speaker of Japanese.

The expression, ''*Sen-en chyôdo oazukari itashimasu*,'' is one of nearly a dozen phrases identified by Japanese linguists as *konbini keigo*, new patterns of erroneous polite speech and odd phrasings some of which were introduced purposefully to the Japanese lexicon when the concept of ''friendliness'' was translated into Japanese from American service industry operations manuals during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Interestingly, the customer who corrected my grammar did not mention the very first words I said to him, ''*Irrashaimase, konnichiwa*,'' a phrase that is also *konbini keigo*. *Irrashaimase, konnichiwa* is an awkward cobbling together of two different forms of greeting that in standard Japanese are normally kept separate. *Irrashaimase*, *konnichiwa* has become so routinized through its use in *konbini* that it is an accepted everyday phrase (Kobayashi 2004). In correcting my grammar, the man who confronted me at the counter was, at the same time, passively accepting some of the very linguistic changes he was fighting to prevent.

Konbini workers were as enmeshed in the store's impersonal familiarity as the clientele. Just as customers reacted when clerks deviated from certain forms of communication, clerks were constantly involved in negotiating the degree of familiarity that some customers sought when they entered the store. The most obvious and dramatic examples were the occasional times when a customer took strong interest in a particular staff member. One 22-year-old clerk, Tanaka Miyuki, who worked previously for Lawson, a rival chain, related one customer story.

> During a break in the afternoon the telephone rang. I answered and a voice at the other end said, ''Umm, I was just shopping at your store and I fell in love with you at first sight. How about going out for a cup of tea?'' What!!! This can't be happening, I thought. How scary! He asked my age, so I told him that I am 22. Then he said, ''I am a little bit older than you are. . .'' What the hell did he mean by ''a little bit''!!! In his 30s!? That's NOT ''a little''! That's ''a lot,'' right??? Man, how scary. Of course I declined his offer. . . It should be obvious to him that such an offer would be seen as more than just going out for a cup of tea. Maybe I was mean to reject him. But, he should realize I need to know his face and he has to remember my face. If he came in regularly we might see and get to know each other. And if we got closer maybe then he could ask me on a date . . .

Clerks, particularly female clerks, were more actively on guard for strange or predatory behavior. The entire staff was brought to attention when incidents arose. Ishii Miwa, a 21-year music education student who worked weekends and holidays found that she was increasingly trapped in long, unnecessary conversations with one particular male customer. *Tenchô* took notice of the man when he began asking for Ishii by name. *Tenchô* euphemistically dubbed the man, Ishii's ''fan.'' He was nicknamed ''The Giant'' by Ishii and other staff members, apparently because of his size. The Giant's appearances were carefully documented in a collective journal that store's younger crew kept in the backyard. *Tenchô* and *senmu* allowed Ishii to take a lunch break and retreat to the backroom whenever The Giant appeared in the store. They would politely serve him at the register and give vague responses to the questions he asked about Ishii's whereabouts.

More commonly, clerks dealt with occasional customers – in many cases elderly – who visited the store and wanted to chat at the counter, sometimes oblivious to customers waiting in line behind them. Such patrons came to the store with a different customer habitus. They were not familiar with the *konbini* and asked a lot of questions. In their interactions at the counter they might greet the clerk, complain about the weather, or ask for instructions on how to microwave the single portions of white rice they bought for dinner. Most clerks accepted this behavior, although when the store was busy their answers grew shorter and postures more rigid. Indeed, by no means were all interactions and advances uncomfortable, negative, or spurned. Get-togethers among the younger staff were especially common and actual dates between clerks were know to have occurred although usually after the fact. One 18-year-old male clerk had a brief relationship with a secretary who worked at a nearby business who came in regularly to purchase lunch at Daily. According to the clerk, the woman approached him after several days of visiting the store and chatting with him. She handed her cell phone email address to him on the back of a store receipt.

Conclusion

Konbini are more than simply vendors of food-on-the-fly or places to pay bills and flip through magazines. They are a locus of human activity, interaction, and societal introspection whose local integration relies on the negotiation of tensions at the heart of the modern economy and contemporary social life. *Konbini* are at the forefront of what Daniel Bell (1973) long ago coined ''postindustrial'' society, in which tertiary (service) sector employment constitutes half or more of the workforce. Yet they are also distinctly ''traditionalistic,'' sticking to a small, family-operated store format that provides everyday goods and services to ordinary people at the neighborhood level. Stores like Daily Yamazaki combine speed with familiarity, anonymity with intimacy, and personal routines with an increasingly universal set of products, arrangements, and practices. As such they play a central role in the transformation of Japan's small, family-run retail sector by meshing local needs with industrial efficiency. They redefine the meaning of ''convenience'' (*benrisa*) not just nationwide, but worldwide.

Clerking at Daily Yamazaki allowed me to see more clearly how convenience is produced within the context of the *konbini*. As a customer I had taken the *konbini*'s convenience for granted. Working in the store, however, revealed the care, training, effort, and struggles that lie behind the store's seemingly seamless functioning. As a worker, I was trained for and came to participate in an ongoing production of impersonal familiarity. Through speech acts, product placement, and even ''authentic'' displays of invented holiday traditions, I took part in the creation of a particular kind of atmosphere that releases clerks and customers from certain obligations and yet differentiates the *konbini* from other species of local retail. Impersonal familiarity is not the negation of social relations, rather it is the reconfiguration of these bonds.

Six months after my full-time research at Daily Yamazaki concluded, the store closed. Physically exhausted and facing weakening sales, the owners decided to back out of their contract. On May 31st, I joined the store's staff in shutting down Daily Yamazaki. At 6 PM we removed the store's trashcans from the sidewalk, turned off the store's music, dropped the blinds on the windows, locked the door, and extinguished the glowing neon sign on the street. Inside the store, we buffed the floor and wiped down the empty shelves for the last time. Every few minutes a pair of shoes appeared outside the door, just beneath the blinds. A tugging sound or knocking inevitably followed. For the first hour or so, it was hard not to look up and watch the silhouettes of customers struggling at the entrance. Impersonal familiarity was a comportment we had come to accept as workers, but locking people out of the store felt strange and almost inhuman.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the owners, workers, and customers of Daily Yamazaki for their support during my period as researcher and clerk. This paper has also benefited from the input of numerous individuals. I am indebted to Rebecca Prentice, co-organizer of the 2007 AAA panel ''Embodying Labor: Work as Fieldwork,'' and the other panel participants who contributed to the event's success. Finally, I wish to thank Professor William Kelly and the members of the Japan *zemi* at Yale University for their feedback and encouragement.

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Working the Field: Kumasi Central Market as Community, Employer, and Home

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Abstract

The huge Central Market in Kumasi, Ghana is a prized workplace for more than 20,000 traders. Being physically present is a primary work method for market traders, and also for an ethnographer. Lending a hand in various trading tasks clarified the decisions and intentions associated with them, their physical demands, and the politics of the market. The market also made intellectual demands; it immediately challenged the assumptions of homogeneity and boundedness still then rarely problematized for re-