

# TENDING TO MOBILITY: INTENSITIES OF STAYING AT THE PETROL STATION

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**Abstract.** This article reports a study of ongoing social activities at a petrol station. Petrol stations constitute a nexus for mobility. Through ethnographic observations it is tested how the continuous flow of vehicles, commodities, money and people is sustained and made accountable. The fieldwork demonstrates that despite its transitory character, the petrol station offers a wide spectrum of ‘duration of stay’. The station was used while being on-the-way as well as providing a possibility to disembark from automobility, i.e. being off-the-way. However, the most important finding is that the station tends to mobility, from the production and recognition of fluency, the constant negotiation and articulation work of situations, to continuous maintenance and repair of movement. Accomplishing a flow of people, vehicles, money and commodities is a complex and delicate task requiring subtle negotiation between staff and visitors as well as among visitors themselves. A negotiation supported and hampered by available materialities of the place.

The petrol station's "solidity as *place* is founded by its flexibility as *frame* for varying practices of space, time – and speed."(Morris, 1988, page 7, italics in original)<sup>1</sup>

## **MOBILITY AS SITUATED ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

Researchers are increasingly looking at mobility as highly crucial for achieving e.g. a company region (Laurier, 2001), medical specialisation (Bardram & Bossen, 2003), youth culture identity (Weilenmann, 2003; Lægran, 2002), or architects' sense of place (Büscher, 2004). These studies at the same time reveal that mobility requires considerable articulation work to be accomplished by its practitioners. Studies on automobility in particular highlight the mutual accomplishment among co-present drivers in the process of creating ordered traffic (Garfinkel, 2002; Juhlin, 2002; Katz, 1999; Laurier, 2004; Livingston, 1987; Lynch, 1993). Despite the virtues of these studies, their observations are tied to following people around in their cars, constraining the perspective of road-use to the passenger seat.

The mundane work and interactions performed in conjunction to driving also constitutes, it is suggested, a vital part of accomplishing mobility. The petrol station offers an intriguing illustration of this, as a site permeated by a dual mobility; capturing the specific movements performed

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<sup>1</sup> Morris essay describe a Motel, however there are striking similarities between her description of the Motel and the findings regarding the petrol station.

at or around the station as well as the continuous flow of people, money, vehicles and commodities intersecting through the place. Places in between the static and the mobile are different from traditional ‘anthropological places’ (Augé, 1995). An excellent study of such places is found in Morris’ (1988) essay on the everyday life at Hendry Parks Motel. Morris moves away from descriptions of the place as properties of static dualisms (mobile/fixed, touristic/everyday, itinerant/domestic). Instead she shows how activities and accomplishments at the Motel take place “along a spectrum divided by degrees of duration, intensities of ‘staying’ (temporary/intermittent /permanent)” (ibid, page 8).

In accordance with that, this article aims at describing the role of the petrol station in relation to the everyday accomplishment of automobility. The assemblage of artefacts, spatial arrangements, routines, visitors, staff etc. composing ‘the station’ collectively *tends*, it will be argued, to mobility. Tending, as a term, emphasise the accomplishment, or the process practice perspective up heaved in several current strands of sociological enquiries (see e.g. Garfinkel, 2002; Laurier, 2001; 2004; Latour, 1992; Pickering, 1993). These approaches underline the importance of studying the situation as it unveils (i.e. in the making). When here used in relation to the petrol station, tending is also descriptive since it incorporates a wide spectrum of involvement from production and recognition of flow (Ryave & Schenkein 1974), continuous negotiation and articulation (Gerson & Star 1986), as

well as the ongoing maintenance and repair of movement (Orr, 1996; Suchman 1987).

However, accomplishing fluency of people, vehicles, money and commodities is a complex and delicate task. Constant negotiations and reformulations are necessary to balance between diversity on the one hand, and the predictability of a smooth flow on the other. These negotiations are accomplished through mutual cooperation between staff and visitors as well as between visitors, supported or hampered by the petrol station design, and the whole array of technologies from computers, pumps, vehicles, to counters and signs. Much of the accomplishments of the petrol station rely on the stations' quality as a global entity standardised and repeated in similar form throughout the roadside with a branded totem and the same collection of commodities, making the petrol station familiar even when abroad (Augé, 1995). Interestingly the very standardisation enables variation and heterogeneity of utilising the place.

The author approached mobility by becoming a member of a petrol station on the west coast of Sweden between April and June 2002, following a shift from 06:00 and 22:00. Working as a staff member was considered important in order to be treated as an insider and to experience the life cycle of the petrol station setting (Harper, 2000). During the last two weeks, the role altered to one of an observant, either standing at a café table or sitting

on the grass outside; changing *costume* to get a different perspective of the site (Zuiderent, 2002).

This strategically situated (single-site) ethnography (a method to study mobility suggested in e.g. Marcus, 1995; Weilenmann, 2003), provided a continuous flow of floating relationships passing through the forecourt. The fragmentary interactions making up those relationships can be understood as *the* petrol station life while also reproducing a wider mobile life form. Marcus points out that “strategically situated ethnography attempts to understand something broadly about the system in ethnographic terms as much as it does its local subjects” (Marcus, 1995: 111). Hence, bearing in mind one can only expect a partial picture from an ethnographic pursuit (Hine, 2000), the encounters at the petrol station offers insights to automobility.

## **THE SETTING**

The station is placed right beside a highway junction, in a no-mans-land between a large industrial area and suburbia, with a McDonalds restaurant as the closest neighbour. The small building, located in this odd landscape, is far from an architectural splendour, on the contrary, it looks more like a box or shackle surrounded with a forecourt of asphalt. Instead, a huge totem, several flags and signs dominate the view of the place. The combination of large signs beside a shackle looks like a school example from Venturi et al’s

(1972) seminal book *Learning from Las Vegas*. This building, situated at the outskirts of a Swedish city, houses the petrol station where the study was conducted during a few month in 2002. Nearby, there is also a large entertainment complex with sporting facilities and a swimming pool, as well as the second largest trotting track in the country.

The station is equipped with seven pumps, all customer operated, offering round the clock service. The forecourt has three areas marked as parking lots, two along the left and the right side of the entrance to the store (which is located at a corner of the building), with a narrow pavement between the building and the parking lots. The third parking area follows the outer rim of the backside of the forecourt towards the main road. There is a pavement in front of the entrance. There are large windows facing the forecourt on the store parallel to the two counters inside the store. The station has a car wash in a separate building. Rental-trailers are parked along one side of the forecourt and beside them, a metal-cupboard containing gasoline tubes.

Inside, the store is equipped with a grill, two counters, one shelf with video, CD and DVDs and one shelf with rental-movies, a coffee machine and an oven to bake or heat up bread. In one corner of the store, you can find windscreen cleaners, light bulbs, oils, cleaning liquids and other products for car maintenance and repair. The store also has a small 'square' where seasonal commodities are sold.

Most of the stations 1600 daily visitors arrive by vehicle. Some of them enter on motorcycles, bicycles, and rollerblades or they enter by foot, even though there is no pavement along the entrance of the area. However a path has been created on the grass between the McDonalds restaurant and the station entrance. Visitors of this place, both women and men, are men in suits, women in dresses, postmen, gardeners, construction workers, road inspectors, policemen, university students, salesmen, children, seemingly homeless alcoholics, teenagers on bikes, Polish truck drivers, German tourists, transvestites, people with horse-trailers, officials of the Volvo Ocean Race, Danish salesmen, elite athletes and many more. In short the visitors are a diverse cohort of different people that should not be mistaken or seen as a crowd of homogeneous 'strangers'. Rather, they recognise each other for what they temporarily are seen as during the floating relationships at the station (Davis, 1959; Laurier et al, 2001; Ryave & Schenkein, 1974). Most visitors are unfamiliar to the staff, but there are also regulars, for example a car salesman and those security guards working in the area who visit the place ten to fifteen times a day.<sup>2</sup>

## **ETHNOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNTS**

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<sup>2</sup> In spite of this variety, the author will consistently refer to the people visiting the station as visitors.

Keeping in mind that the co-present cohort in each situation see and recognise each other as a variety of different people.

Automobility represents in fact a contradiction in terms of mobility, enabling as it does huge physical displacement under a condition of complete immobility for the road-user while driving (Beckmann, 2001). Paying a visit to the petrol station is almost the opposite; enabling the driver to move around while the vehicle has been brought to a complete stop. This is a predicament for all the visitors of the station. Given the transit conditions that they share the visitors' still display very different modes stretching from primarily just being to purposefully doing.

### **Intensities of staying**

On a sunny day a man stopped on forecourt, just outside of the entrance. He rushed into the store, leaving the door on the drivers seat open. Walking straight to the counter he asked: "Do you have pacifiers?" Daniel<sup>3</sup>, the staff member at duty, replied, while pointing: "Yes, I think so, down by the aisle in the middle." The man walked further into the store. Outside, still strapped in the high chair in the front seat of the visitor's station wagon a young child looked tear-eyed. Very quickly the man returned to the counter with a parcel of pacifiers. He paid and returned the station wagon and drove off.

The man's behaviour - parking outside of the entrance, leaving the door open, increasing his pace, his determined movements and his question

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<sup>3</sup> All the names in the article refer to members of the staff. The names are fictional, apart from Daniel, which refers to the author, who during the research also worked at the station.

– stood out as traces or ‘documents of’ rendering him account-able as a ‘fast & smooth’ visitor (Wieder 1974). A transit doer rather than a transit resident. Assumably the possibility of keeping an eye on the vehicle while in the store was also an important reason for the man to park just outside the entrance, since the child was crying in the vehicle. In order to tend to his child<sup>4</sup>, probably screaming in the car, he was forced to stop and to act very swiftly. The petrol station provided the possibility to do something for the child (supplying pacifiers), enabling the father/driver to resume driving afterwards (without a child in desperate need of comforting).

Other visitors did not present the same speed and determination while visiting the petrol station. For example, a father and daughter while walking around passed a large refrigerator. The father asked: “We don’t have any milk home, do we?” The daughter answered: “No, I finished it this morning.” The father opened the refrigerator-door and picked up a box of milk.

Since the conversation took place as the daughter and father passed the refrigerator it is likely that the purchase was opportunity-triggered (an

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<sup>4</sup> In this example, as in many others, the researcher did not obtain clear proofs of any kinship between visitors of the petrol station. The assumed kinship here, as other assumptions in the research, is based on the mutual production and recognition work conducted within the situation of which at least, the child, father and Daniel was part of.

observation consistent with studies focusing on shopping behaviour, see e.g. Underhill, 1987). Here, the accessibility of milk, while wandering up and down the store, provided the visitors a possibility of satisfying their needs to acquire milk for their breakfast. The conversation between the two, just as numerous other conversations at the station, revealed how *accessibility* foremost attracted visitors; accessibility of the station both in relation to the road - i.e. easy access for road-users on a 24 hours basis - and to the commodities and services offered there. Notwithstanding the impression that the father and the daughter didn't rush asking for milk, they still made themselves account-able as passing by on their way somewhere.

Sometimes, people simply choose to relax at the station. For example a man was eating a hotdog out on the pavement by the entrance. A woman parked outside the entrance, walked into the store and bought a ticket to the car wash. The man greeted her as she left the store. And they started a conversation while the man kept on eating his hotdog. During their conversation the woman opened the driver's seat, even though she remained standing on the pavement. They stood beside her car and talked for approximately 5-7 minutes, then the man moved away and disposed the trash around the hotdog. Simultaneously the woman sat down in the car. But the conversation did not end, the man walked back to the woman and they

continued to talk for another 10-15 minutes before the conversation ended and the woman drove off to the car wash.

Sitting down on the driver's seat, with the car door open, during the conversations could be interpreted as an indication of her doing 'being-on-the-way'. Whereas the man, by standing beside the car, talking while eating his hot-dog, could similarly be seen as doing 'being-off-the-way', temporarily relaxing from the accomplishments of mobility.

### **At the counter**

Sooner or later most visitors end up at the counter, where, collaboratively a negotiation process is triggered. Here, the staff meets the visitors. As for example when Visitor1 entered the store and walked up to the counter where Philip was ready to operate the cashier machine.

CONVERSATION	* = ACTION
1 <b>Philip:</b> Hi, Hi*	Taps on the cashier machine
2 <b>Visitor1:</b> I'll take petrol on this one*	Hands over a credit card
3 <b>Philip:</b> Three, wasn't it?	
4 <b>Visitor1:</b> Probably ... yeah* that's right	Upward intonation
5 e' that's it, ( ) (and soo)*	Dials a code on a number-pad
6 <b>Philip:</b> Is that all?	
7 <b>Visitor1:</b> Yes, that's all ... *on <u>that</u> one	Turns away from the counter and walks away

### **Excerpt 1: Purchase sequence for petrol<sup>5</sup>**

Through Lines 1-6 and the beginning of line 7, this excerpt illustrates a recurrent sequence of purchasing petrol. At the core of this, is the *negotiation* regarding what product the visitor was buying (lines 3-4). Since Visitor1 had bought petrol, he as well as Philip had to link the outdoor activity of refuelling to the activity of paying at the counter. Philip made a statement linking a location (a pump number) to what he assumed was the visitor's car (line 3). This statement was followed by a question requesting the visitor to verify. The latter was thereby given leeway to question the statement.

The response from Visitor1 (line 4) can be divided into two sections. First, "probably", reveals that Philip's statement raises some (but not a lot of) doubt. There is here a certain ambiguity in Visitor1's effort to confirm the purchase. The second part of the response, "yeah, that's right", started with an intonation, as if the visitor after all was ready to verify Philip's assumption in the course of the conversation. Behind the counter there was a

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<sup>5</sup>The conversation, (mark 10:00:56-10:03:04) was approximately two minutes long and originally held in Swedish and German. The author has translated the transcriptions into English and selected parts of the conversation to represent the situation. For an analysis of the entire excerpt please contact the author. In the recorded transcriptions the following symbols were used: '[' – indicates simultaneous utterance bridging two lines, '( )' – indicates that something was said but not distinguishable, '(word)' – indicates what probably was said, but not clear. Categories suggested by Schegloff (1972). Additionally '...' – indicates a brief period of silence.

large window, providing a good overview of the forecourt. Therefore between the two sections of his response, the visitor had the opportunity to survey the forecourt. One could assume that the initial hesitation was based on his unfamiliarity with the place, i.e. he didn't know how the different pumps were categorised at the forecourt. However, by looking out he could see a big number (3) painted on a pole beside his car. The spatial arrangements thus enabled the visitor to make the same assessment as the staff regarding the whereabouts of the car.

Studies of 'doing being customer' highlight the part of the social interaction between visitors and staff, revolving around the queue and the counter (Brown, 2004; Laurier et al, 2001; Underhill, 1987). Accordingly, the counter at the station staged the relations between staff and visitor, to be further articulated through their interaction. Even though paying was mundane, it induced uncertainty requiring a certain attention both from the staff and the visitor. To support this and to sustain a dialogue, the counter was divided into a 'before' and an 'after' section; goods moved from right to left as they became registered in the cashier machine. Equally important were the in-between-objects themselves, i.e. the commodities. Often visitors handed over the objects that they wanted to buy, gesticulating, as symbolically displaying their purpose 'I'm here to pay for this'. At times this gesture was also seconded by a verbal comment such as "this one" (see e.g. lines 22-23 in Excerpt 2). Thus the symbolical and practical role of both

counter and goods were used as resources connecting the visitor and the staff in their co-operative accomplishment of the purchase sequence.

The purchase became more complex when the in-between-object was missing at the counter. The only traces of the refuelling were two lines of numbers on a display at the pump representing the amount of petrol and its total price (in case nobody else started to use the same pump). At the counter the same two items were simultaneously listed in a computer. As Excerpt 1 showed, outdoor activity of refuelling was here re-presented at the counter. Seeking further confirmation, the staff often tried to find indexes for the purchase referring to e.g. the amount of petrol, its price, the location of the pump, or model of the visitor's car. To attain sufficient unambiguity in the purchase sequence, full collaborative attention was called for.

Excerpt 1 also provide conversational clues demonstrating how the visitor did not end their floating relationship, as the purchase sequence was about to become finished. As Visitor1 turned away from the counter, he commented: "on that one" (line 7). This created a juncture point (Jefferson, 1972) between the petrol purchasing sequence and a side sequence, where the visitor entered the store to buy something else. "That" (line 7), probably refers to the credit card that Visitor1 used for purchasing petrol; introduced when the visitor said that he wanted to buy petrol on "this one" (line 2). Philip continued his work by assisting the next visitor, whereas Vistitor1

walked into the store and picked up some commodities. Visitor1 resumed his purchase sequence as he returned to the counter:

	CONVERSATION	* = ACTION
18	<b>Philip:</b> [good bye*	To another visitor
19	<b>Visitor1:</b> [The receipt did you (save) it for me, the	
20	petrol receipt just recently or?	
21	<b>Philip:</b> Nnno but I can print it out	
22	<b>Visitor1:</b> Thank you ... then I would like this	
23	one* on my private card that receipt on the other	Holds the object he is
24	hand you can ... discard	buying
25	<b>Philip:</b> Nno, they aren't too delighted of that huu?	
26	<b>Visitor1:</b> Petr-Petrol receipts are good ehaaa' the	
27	company doesn't require it but I like to save them	
28	to double-check cause I'm taxed for the petrol	
29	then ah'	
30	<b>Philip:</b> aha, yes, okay	
31	<b>Visitor1:</b> so I want to keep track ... so that one	
32	doesn't mix up the expenses	

### Excerpt 2: Negotiating a request for receipt

By asking for a receipt (lines 19-20), the visitor divided his transactions between out-door and in-door purchases. He even used two different credit cards. This division of payment was made 'legitimate' by saying: "so that one doesn't mix up the expenses" (lines 31-32). Visitor1 referred to taxes (line 28), to his company (line 27), and to the money they provide for his work along with those available through his private credit card (lines 22-24). This way his request became account-able to Philip. The division of the

two payments was an ordering between private and corporate money. At the same time the division of tasks, paying petrol first then walking into the store, could also be understood as a way to finish the refuelling sequence so that the car no longer was needed as an index confirming the purchase.

The complexity of the floating relationship by the counter took a considerable amount of time. In the next excerpt, printing the receipt became more problematic than expected, causing the build up of a queue behind Visitor1. Charles, a colleague to Philip, opened the second cashier machine adjacent to Philip, and the queue regrouped:

CONVERSATION	* = ACTION
33 <b>Philip:</b> WHAT! ... can not print out the	Is said while facing the cashier machine
34 terminal receipt again ... of course you can*	
35 <b>Charles:</b> can I help the next one?*	Is said at the adjacent counter
36 <b>Visitor2:</b> yea, small Marlboro[light	
37 <b>Visitor1:</b> [stupid of me perhaps*	Said in a low voice but clearly hear-able

**Excerpt 3: Cashier machine problem and re-formation of the queue**

The cashier machine did not respond the way Philip expected. He expressed his reaction aloud, making his action (and the action of the cashier machine) visible and audible (lines 33-34). As Philip was facing the terminal of the cashier machine it was visible that Philip was talking to and about the machine. Visitor1 in turn apologised for his request (line 37). As if he was in the way of the queuing visitors behind him. Brown (2004) points out that

staff balances between good and quick service. But working the queue at the petrol station was a highly collaborative activity, where the staff either walked away from the counter with visitors that required extra time or jumped in beside each other to make the queue “move”. Visitors sometimes overtook the queue, leaving money for their purchase beside the counter while the staff was busy serving other visitors. The staff would then account for the purchase afterwards.

### **Making sense of pumps acting strange**

In the previous situation, staff and visitor actively attended to each other at the counter in the effort of balancing a smooth flow of vehicles, people, money and commodities. In another section of the petrol station, far from coming out as smooth, the sequences by which the self-servicing visitors attempted to refuel, caused uncertainty and frustration – calling for another fine-tuned act of coordination. Somewhat irritated, a woman (Visitor3) entered the store, walking straight towards Philip, who once again was standing by at the counter:

	CONVERSATION	* = ACTION
1	<b>Visitor3:</b> Four*	Puffs
2	<b>Philip:</b> Hmm	
3	<b>Visitor3:</b> Why can't I make the card work (when)	
4	out there? ... I	
5	<b>Philip:</b> It said* that you refuelled	nods at screen
6	<b>Visitor3:</b> Yes, I got one litre and then it just	
7	stopped	
8	<b>Philip:</b> I can't answer why, it can [be something	
9	temporary]	
10	<b>Visitor3:</b> [It ... It sounded] then there was no	
11	petrol and then one liter was pumped, and then*	Places visa card on
12	<b>Philip:</b> then?	counter
13	<b>Visitor3:</b> It [stopped	
14	<b>Philip:</b> [can be a million different things it can be	
15	something temporary I hope ... Here you go ...	
16	Sometimes the pumps act strange [dhehehe*	Controlled lather
17	<b>Visitor3:</b> [Yeahh*	Puffs
18	<b>Philip:</b> Well, now it worked well any way ...	
19	Thanks	
20	<b>Visitor3:</b> Thanks	

#### **Excerpt 4: Comments on the pump acting strange**

In this situation, the petrol purchase sequence was swiftly taken care of. As Visitor3 approached the counter she provided the index necessary for Philip to link her refuelling to the purchase sequence (line 1). Visitor3's preparation of the purchase sequence, providing an index for the refuelling at once, can, in contrast to Visitor1's ambiguity, be seen as a familiarity of the place. From thereon the purchase sequence was smoothly coordinated

with only a few verbal comments (e.g. end of line 15, lines 18-20). Instead the conversation revolved around the malfunctioning pump (lines 3-17).

Visitor3 presented the pump as a conversational topic (lines 3-4). Her question indicates that she, before entering the store, tried to pay for the petrol outside by the pump. Refuelling was a self-service activity where visitors, such as Visitor3 parked beside a vacant pump, opened the lid, lifted the petrol hose into the tank and pressed a couple of buttons on the pump. The sequences in which to start the pump turned out to be many and in this situation a misunderstanding occurred along the way, either by Visitor3, Philip or the pump. This increased the level of uncertainty as expressed by Philip (lines 8-9, 14-16). First, neither Philip nor Visitor3 could be certain that the problems with the pump was due to the pump – in any stage of the refuelling sequence a misunderstanding could have occurred that neither the pump, Philip or Visitor3 was aware of – a problem that was due to e.g. Visitor3's credit-card instead.<sup>6</sup> Second, if the pump caused the problem, neither Visitor3 nor Philip was able to determine what problem with the pump that could have caused the situation. Philip's remark - that the "pumps act strange" (line 16) - is a reflection on the uncertainty in the situation.

The irritation of Visitor3, observable through the puffs (lines 1 & 17), her remarks on the malfunctioning pump (lines 3-4, 6-7,10-11, 13) together with her swift preparation of the purchase sequence (line 1) and her

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<sup>6</sup> What Suchman (1987) called 'garden path' misunderstandings.

initial remark on the malfunctioning pump (lines 3-4) where she wondered why she couldn't use her credit-card outside by the pump, could all together be interpreted as 'documents of' her doing 'being-on-the-way'. In fact the frustration and the initial remark regarding the pump (lines 3-4) indicate that the temporary stop at the petrol station was not fast enough. But it was not other visitors that where in the way, instead it was the pump that hampered the fast and smooth service.

The situation presented in Excerpt 4 also showed the limitation of the work by the staff. There was an entire forecourt where situations occurred, that were out of reach for any negotiation from the staff. Much of the service at the petrol station was delegated to machines (Latour, 1992) e.g. to pay with your credit card in a machine at the pump instead of at the counter. But delegating the work to machines does not reduce ambiguity, only shifting focus of it. Instead, visitors had to rely heavily on their own work of tending to the petrol station and to the technologies available.

## **DISCUSSION**

Having showed the ongoing accomplishment and intensities of staying at the petrol station, it remains to clarify *what* petrol stations do especially in relation to mobility. To tend, short for attend, refers to both paying attention, apply oneself, to acting as a attendant (i.e. to serve, service), the word also refers to the activity as a caretaker or overseer as well as it refers

to the activity of managing the operations of e.g. a store. All these different senses of the word fit as a description of the petrol station.

Sharing the place required mutual attention by everyone present, and especially to the mobility of each visitor. The tension and ambiguity when using the place required a subtle negotiation, between visitors and staff as well as between visitors, which e.g. was exemplified in Excerpt 1 where Visitor1 and Philip negotiated the price and amount of petrol that has been refuelled in to Visitor1's car.

Tending, also highlight self-accomplishments (i.e. tending to oneself). Much of the repair and maintenance work was of this 'self-serving' character, by the pump, in the store and on the forecourt. For example when cars broke down and needed fiddling with, the petrol station provided the possibility to tend to them. Mostly by providing the products in the store that could be useful to fix minor problems with the vehicles, such as light bulbs, windshield wipers, oil, cleaning equipment, start cables etc, or by lending out tools and batteries so that the visitors could do the necessary repairs. The petrol station provides accessibility to tools and commodities – whereas the visitors become responsible for the activity of repair and maintenance.

However, at times the staff assisted and helped with minor repairs and maintenance – i.e. they were acting as attendants. If they had the time, staff assisted visitors with the problems they had. The staff offered

hotdogs, salads, baked bread and buns, but also provided help for minor wounds and headaches. They also assisted requests such as heating a bottle of gruel for a woman that found herself on the move when it was time to put her baby to sleep.

The staff monitored the flow of people, vehicles, commodities and money that moved through the store and the forecourt. As they stood at the counter they monitored all the pumps, trying to keep in mind the refuelling of each visitor, (at least until the petrol was paid for). They acted as overseer of mobility, but not by ‘dominating at a glance’, they were rather ‘aligning’ and helping people to align (Latour 2003).

Tending is also a wide term incorporating both notions such as ‘articulation work’ and ‘maintenance work’. As before mentioned, previous studies have revealed that mobility requires considerable articulation work (Bardram & Bossen, 2003; Juhlin, 2002; Weilenmann 2003). Articulation work can be described as the alignment and tailoring of tasks to carry out once work in face of local contingencies (Gerson & Star, 1986). There is also a considerable maintenance work necessary to maintain the motion of cars from one location to another. Maintenance work has been described in detail regarding the work of service technicians (Orr 1996). However, whereas the work of the service technicians bear some resemblance to the maintenance work of the petrol station, the self-servicing aspect of tending to mobility also makes the petrol station very different. The work of the

petrol station involved both articulation work and maintenance work to enable mobility. Thus, the station tended to mobility.

As part of the petrol stations effort of tending to mobility, but also an accomplishment in the situation, were the patterns that emerged in relation to how visitors utilised the place in the light of each other's different interests. Here the production and recognition work (Ryave & Schenkein, 1974), guided the visitors and the staffs effort of sharing the place. Whereas some move through it *on the way*, others seek tranquillity there attending the station *off the way*; a difference that makes a difference by causing the risk of being *in the way* of each other.

To illustrate, consider the father that purchased pacifiers, he was account-able as being on the way due to his pace, leaving the car door open etc. His behaviour made him accountable as being *on the way* even though he stopped at the petrol station. Similarly, practises tending to *speed* also require the production and recognition of relaxation. 'Relaxed' visitors were account-able as such for those that were co-present at the petrol station. Parking the car far from the entrance; walking slowly around; sitting down on the trailers or on the lawn; parking and eating lunch in the outskirts of the forecourt – all these observable details accomplished the impression of being *off the way*.

Further, as the example when the woman and the man that met each other on the forecourt show, the production and recognition work of either ‘fast & smooth’ visitor (i.e. the woman) and ‘relaxed’ visitor does not necessarily conflict with each other. However there was a tension of maintaining the appearance of the place as providing fast and smooth service. In the conversation between Philip and Visitor1 we could see a tension in Visitor1’s behaviour particularly when he seemed to be *in the way* (see e.g. Excerpt 3). Both in the way Visitor1 divided his purchases, enabling visitors to ‘go in-between’, and how Visitor1 apologized for his request of a receipt, when it took time. The accomplishment of a fast and smooth place changes the conditions – even for activities that are treated differently in retailing, such as queuing.



**Figure 1: A petrol muff with a note: “OBS! KINDLY PAY PETROL IMMEDIATELY AT THE COUNTER break queue”**

Queue jumping at the petrol station can be perceived as somewhat different from previous studies on queues (Brown, 2004; Garfinkel, 2002; Laurier et al, 2001; Livingston, 1987). From the perspective of the petrol station that favours fast flow of cars and visitors, jumping the queue is a way of getting things done quickly. As Figure 1 shows, petrol stations can, through signs at the pump, urge their visitors to jump the queue in the store when paying for petrol. The usually ‘bad’ act of jumping the queue can at the petrol station even be judged as perfectly justifiable.

Excerpt 4 also provided an interesting example of the tension of creating a fast and smooth service. Visitor3’s effort to pay for the petrol with her credit card by the pump, which indeed was accountable as doing being-on-the-way, was hampered by the pump. Here it was the technology that caused tension and not co-present visitors or staff. The delegation of tasks from the staff to technologies does not necessarily reduce ambiguity and the need for negotiation and repair. In Excerpt 1 Philip and Visitor1 were obliged to negotiate the whereabouts of the petrol in the purchase sequence. Moving the purchase sequence out to the pump on the forecourt, as in Excerpt 4, reduced this uncertainty, however negotiation and repair was still called for.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Petrol stations play a vital role in automobility. Many activities taking place at the petrol station are also found in traffic. We can therefore argue that petrol stations mirror automobility. Among the observations at the petrol station, several revealed mirror images of the everyday accomplishments of driving. First, the heterogeneous gatherings at the petrol station, from female athletes to Polish truck-drivers, were also members of the cohort embarking on automobility. Thus people in traffic cannot be reduced to a homogeneous crowd of 'drivers', a lesson found e.g. in Katz (1999), when he describes the drivers' accounts on different 'illicit' co-drivers.

Second, in line with Morris (1988), visitors accomplished a spectrum in intensities of 'staying'- ranging from 'fast & smooth' to 'relaxed'. Which in turn support the rejection of preconceptions of the petrol station as either an anthropological place or a non-place (for a critique on the concept of non-places, see e.g. Merriman, 2004). This is similar to the different flow of cars in traffic. While driving speed can be seen as a continuum in which drivers use "'slow' and 'fast' as relational assessments of the way their car relates to other cars"(Laurier, 2004: 271). This selection of findings reveals how the petrol station provides different access to automobility.

The petrol station is a place of the transition between 'fixed' and 'mobile'. Through this duality (as both flexible and stable) it tended to mobility, a mobility partly accomplished through the mutual co-operation necessary to

use the road (Juhlin, 2002; Katz, 1999; Laurier, 2004), but equally accomplished through temporary stops at the petrol station. This article has highlighted partial accounts of how social activities at the petrol station supports mobility. Through the ongoing tasks from production and recognition work, articulation work, to negotiation and repair, staff and visitors alike tended to the petrol station, the machines and materialities of the place but also to the flow of money, people, vehicles and commodities. These initial findings open up a wider scope for researching and investigating mobility. Detailed studies in the ongoing work of the visitors and the staff ought to be promoted. Other modes of constructing the loosely coupled networks of the petrol station are suggested, such as following the milk (Marcus, 1995; Latour, 2003). The various translation and delegation chains of people, machines, cards and networks necessary to accomplish, e.g. a purchase sequence of petrol, are also a feature of the petrol station that requires further investigation (Latour, 1992). Another topic for research is the historical transition of the petrol station into convenience stores, particularly in relation to the petrol station as a gendered place. Much is still to learn regarding the details of accomplishing mobility

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