

The Ticket Writer's Lot

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Introduction

Even in an egalitarian society, some will be more equal than others. Social theorists who espouse a functional view of societies contend that inequality is not only a reality, it is a functional necessity (Davis and Moore 1945). Accordingly, some occupations--the medical professions, for instance--are more critical to society than others. Those willing to undertake the lengthy and costly training, and assume the often weighty responsibilities, are generally compensated in terms of prestige and salary. In other words, a society's members are more concerned about the provision of doctors than of, say, garbage collectors. Although we recognize the importance of garbage *collection*, we may be less concerned about finding the right person for the job. However, as Tumin (1953, 1970) has pointed out, until the 19th century garbage collection probably contributed far more to public health than doctors.

Dirty Work. If we can think of status as a concept employed in sociology to make sense of observed inequalities, then we might say that jobs such as garbage collector or sewer worker have relatively low occupational status. Yet societies produce waste, and such jobs, which E.C. Hughes (1971) has called "dirty work," must be filled. We need doctors, but we also need people to dig graves, sweep floors--to do the "dirty work" that, though it may be lacking in prestige and financial reward, plays an essential role in societies with deep divisions of labor. Hughes' example of the S.S. in Nazi Germany lies at the dark extreme of "dirty work." Raymond Gold (1964) studied apartment building janitors, describing their efforts to enhance their occupational status by accepting more skilled duties, such as fixing tenants' leaky faucets (formerly a plumber's job). Somewhere between these two cases is the farmer's son in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, who drives the tractor, day and night, row upon row, plowing under the houses of evicted neighbors who lost their farms to the bank. "Can't think of that," he says. "Got to think of my own kids. Three dollars a day, and it comes every day (Steinbeck 1970:39)."

Consider the institution of law enforcement. In some societies (e.g., South Africa, Haiti, Chile of the 1970s and 80s, former Eastern Bloc states) it has had a very visible role in enforcing inequalities of one kind or another. Clearly there are places and times in almost all societies where not every group is being served or protected equally under the law.

The S.S., the farmer's son, and law enforcement in police states differ somewhat from the janitor or sewer cleaner. The formers' duties may require, in a sense, turning against fellow citizens or former neighbors, in the name of some recognized authority. We may wonder how some people could choose such an occupation. Yet rather than risk distinguishing ourselves as somehow different from those who do dirty work (with the possible exception of the S.S.), perhaps we should first investigate the question from their own points of view. I have chosen to examine a rather innocuous type of "enforcement" dirty work at Washington State University--ticket writing at WSU Parking Services (PS). Specifically, this study explores how ticketers feel about a task--writing parking tickets, mostly to students--that some might consider distasteful. By telling the story through the eyes and words of the ticket writers, this example may lead us to deeper sociological insight into one type of "dirty work."

The Data--Collection

The three principal sources of data for this study are interviews (six in all) with ticket writers and the PS supervisor, unobtrusive field observations of ticketers (6 hours), and documents provided by the supervisor of PS. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Field observation included watching ticketers during special events (e.g., during WSU football games) and during routine shifts. The respondents I interviewed were mostly students ("time slips"--a reference to their employment status with the university), working part-time to defray costs of a university education.

Interpretation. In interpreting the data I relied on the respondents' own words and ideas to suggest the categories that could provide a structure of meaning to their responses. Observations and secondary sources helped to confirm interview data, as well as to describe the parking "system."

The Setting

The complexity of the WSU system demands vast resources and organization. Student enrollment is over 17,800. Staff and faculty number well over 5,000.¹ To accommodate those who choose to commute to campus by car, the university sets aside parking areas. Of the 8,799 parking spaces on

¹This information comes from the personal communications with the Department of Institutional Research at Washington State University.

campus, roughly 40% are reserved for day to day functioning--service access, delivery and loading areas, drivers with mobility-limiting disabilities, etc., as well as space reserved for students residing on campus (WSU Parking Services 1992). The remaining 60%--5,374 spaces in 137 lots (WSU Parking Services 1992²)--is managed by zones, access to which is purchased. Spaces are valued based on a lot's proximity to the campus core. Those wishing to park legally in a certain zone must buy the proper permit, pending availability. Permits and lots are color-coded from orange (the most expensive) to green to yellow to red to blue (the least expensive). WSU Parking Services is located within the Safety Division of the university. PS' employees include office personnel and "lot," or enforcement personnel. The latter are the central focus of this study.

The Parking System. To satisfy permittees, parking without permits must be discouraged--hence a system of fines, assessed by the ticketers. The tickets are entered into the PS computer system by office employees who begin work after 5:00 pm. Once in the system, the office keeps track of violators, the supervisor keeps track of ticketers, and the remaining office staff hear complaints and settle accounts. Yet PS implies *service* as well as enforcement. But what services, and to whom?

The previous lot management system, overhauled in the last five years, gave preferential access to faculty and staff. The new system addressed this appearance of favoritism by making all lots open to anyone willing to pay the permit price.³ In terms of "ownership" structure, the change may have been negligible. Eighty percent of the permits for the 2,500 closest spaces still belong to faculty and staff.

In a sense, the ticketer's job is to ensure the privileges of membership, of belonging to the "in" group (Hughes 1971). Permit sales generate over \$600,000 in annual revenue for PS--a substantial portion of its yearly operating budget. Not coincidentally, providing this service generates the remainder of PS' operating budget through fines. However, with staff limitations (there may be one or two time slips working at any given time), enforcement must be allocated. Most often it is goes to the

²All statistics related to parking were provided by the supervisor of WSU parking Enforcement.

³Prices for lots vary from \$177.38 for orange, \$150.50 for green, \$118.25 for yellow, \$86 for red, and \$48.38 for blue.

premium lots and the meters. In general this makes sense, but it also suggests that ticketers, whose jobs are subsidized by parking violators, are serving faculty and staff.

The ticketer often finds him/herself in an unusual and unenviable position. Like the police officer, s/he serves a constituency--in this case the permit holders and meter parkers at the university. The nature of the job often leaves ticketers, as the visible, uniformed field representatives of PS, caught between paying customers and "free riders." As the PS supervisor put it:

. . . you've got two types of people. You've got the person with the permit, that can't find the parking space, so *they're* upset. You've got the person who doesn't have a permit, and gets the ticket, so *they're* upset. So we're [smiling] very high on the upset side of the list.

To the permit holder looking out of her office window, the uniformed ticketer patrolling the lot is comforting. To the student who overslept and parked as close as he could get to his classroom building, the prowling ticketer may more closely resemble a gestapo agent. Ticketers are acutely aware of negative public perception--three different respondents referred to the "gestapo" image, and two said they had been called "parking nazis."

Yet inevitably the student who was late for class comes out, having just realized he left the last page of the exam he just took blank, gets in his car, bumping his forehead on the door frame, slams the door, turns the key in the ignition, and only *then* sees the ticket carefully pinned against the windshield by the wiper blade. Or worse yet, he tries to leave and discovers his car has been wheel-locked . . . Add another voice to the parking nazi chorus, whose numbers grow one ticket at a time. For while there are slightly over 6,000 permit holders, in one month alone--September of 1992--the enforcement office wrote 5,959 tickets.

Findings and Interpretations--The Ticketer's Perspective

Job Skills. How do ticketers do their jobs, in a sometimes hostile environment, serving a constituency whose expectations seem to far exceed their appreciation? The easy answer is that they do them very well. Ticketers develop specialized competencies that make them more efficient at what they do. Experienced ticketers, not wanting to "weave" between cars, learn to read permits from behind the car when they "walk" a lot. Experience and repetition also make them adept at playing "What's wrong with

this lot?" As one respondent mentioned, ".. if you go through lots enough, you get a pretty good idea of what cars should be there and which ones shouldn't."

Ticketers also seem to develop sharp memories for certain cars, license numbers, even (among a few) what might be called "rude violator recall"--the ability to connect faces from memorable confrontations with their cars or plate numbers. These skills develop with experience. There is also a low level of competition among ticketers to maintain their ticket production (at the department average--between 8 and 10 tickets per hour). But this is more of an expectation. The real *coup* is finding a stolen permit. This requires good recall, or thorough checks of the list of stolen permit numbers (each ticketer walks lots with this list, which also includes "wheel locks"). There may be no more than 10 or 12 found in a year. Finding "wheel lock" vehicles--those with several outstanding tickets--while more common, seems to be another yardstick of achievement.⁴ Two "legends" from PS' past illustrate this "competency status." One was notorious for writing tickets, the other for his uncanny ability to spot stolen permits and wheel locks. Of the two, the latter is referred to with reverence by time-slips, while the former's overzealousness was considered counterproductive within and outside the department.

Another key acquired skill involves dealing with "irates" (my own term)--the more irritated of those who've just been ticketed. One respondent said that irates can provide an outlet for stress release:

I know people don't like what I'm doing, and who I am. And in a way it gives me . . . a way to vent my frustrations . . . cuz we get to argue with people sometimes, you know you can always walk away and leave 'em stuck with a ticket, and they can't do anything about it.

Another respondent emphasized the learning process of dealing with irates:

. . . you say a few things a couple of times and if that backfires on you, you don't do it again. You don't stick your hand in the burner twice . . . we get a lot of negative comments. But you just, you have to learn not to take it personally. Because if you do this isn't the job for you.

While the ticketer's personality obviously influences how s/he will deal with irates, in general the more experienced ticketer is more likely to refer them to the office, rather than exchange unpleasanties.

⁴During the current spring and fall semesters, the number of wheel locks per month has ranged from 41 to 94.

Stress and Power. While only one respondent explicitly referred to stress on the job, and some went so far as to deny it, many comments suggest otherwise. For instance, matter-of-fact attitudes concerning public perception were overshadowed by responses directed at the more hostile--rude violators in general, and more specifically varsity athletes, athletic staff and "Greeks" (members of the Greek system), suggesting a certain frustration with specific groups that ticketers contend harbor disproportionate numbers of irates. The supervisor was more willing to discuss the stress of the job:

I try to feel 'em out, try to see how they'll work under stress, under pressure . . . I know there's a lot of stress that goes with this job.

More evidence of stress concerns the ticketer's productivity. Two respondents mentioned that one of the things they liked least about the job was having their weekly "ticket trail" computer printouts posted in the supervisor's office for all to see. They complained that tickets production varied considerably depending on the assigned route (there are six), the time of day, effort spent checking for wheel locks and stolen permits, etc. One respondent had this to say:

I just don't worry about it. I'm out there doing my job the whole time, and that's what counts. I can't create more tickets, or more infractions.

Two respondents discussed the ticketer's "power trip"--the ability to put people in debt to PS. Conversely they can defuse a hostile confrontation by merely voiding the ticket. Whether they choose to do so may depend as much on the violator's attitude as their own.

Vocabularies of Motive. Ticketers are faced with an occupational dilemma--a "productive" worker is one who writes a lot of tickets that other people must pay. How do they justify ticket writing to themselves and others? C. Wright Mills (1963) suggested the process of justifying one's acts leads to a "vocabulary of motive." As Mannheim (1940:249) suggests, "both motives and actions very often originate not from within but from the situation in which individuals find themselves." Weber (1978) defines motives as "a complex of meaning, which appears to the actor himself or to the observer to be an adequate ground for his conduct." Thus the construction of vocabularies of motive represents an effort, in Mills' (1963:445) words, "to line up conduct with norms." Here is a collection of vocabularies of motive employed by respondents:

"I'm just doing my job"--This was the most common response. Doing the job means writing tickets.

One respondent went further when chided by a bystander for giving tickets to "poor students." "If I don't do my job," she said, "I'll be poor, too."

"The office is self-sustaining"--Thus it depends in part on revenue from tickets--as do the ticketers' jobs. Two respondents mentioned that on days when they wrote a lot of tickets, they felt they'd done their job well. While writing tickets in metered lots is an easy way to maintain a reasonable ticket per hour ratio, these tickets generate less revenue than other types of violations. Some of the respondents seemed to take pleasure in writing more expensive tickets, calling in wheel locks, finding stolen permits, etc. . . . making more money "for the department." As one respondent said:

I'll void any ticket where somebody comes out while I'm still writing it--it doesn't matter. But I will admit that, when someone's parked in a fire hydrant spot, you know it's a \$25 ticket, when I'm writing that ticket out I'll write it out [smiling] a whole lot faster than when I'm writing a normal, you know meter ticket . . .

The law enforcement analogy--Ticketers see their position as one of enforcement. Statements include:

-*"If you're speeding, it doesn't matter what your car looks like, or what your financial position is."*

-*"It would be like if they were a police officer and I were a drunk driver. They couldn't just let me go because they knew me."*

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse"--The idea is that those who park on campus should be familiar with the rules. There is a booklet and a two-page "survival guide," both put out by PS, in which the rules are outlined. PS also advertises in the paper at the beginning of the semester. Thus, violators who *don't* know the system *should*; those who *do* should know better.

"People don't want to take responsibility for their own actions"--It's easier to blame PS. As one respondent said, "they get upset about a parking ticket and it's like 'look, you broke the law, this is what happens.' And when they throw a tantrum like a three-year old, it's discouraging to see adults look like children."

"We have to follow the rules, too"--i.e., "Do to others what they should do to you (if you park without a permit)." Ticketers aren't expecting people to do anything they wouldn't demand of themselves, whether parking legally or paying fines. As one respondent said, ". . . every time I parked somewhere I wasn't supposed to, I knew."

"We're serving our customers"--Some ticketers often stress that they're there to keep spaces free for permit holders. They may try to distinguish between those making an honest mistake and those taking advantage of the system. They get plenty of practice. What follows are views from two respondents about showing discretion, i.e., voiding a ticket already written because the car owner came out to move the vehicle:

Oh, just someone comes out and sez they'll move their car before I get done writing the ticket, and that's okay. You know, because the whole point is not to get money, it's just to keep the, you know parking, uh how's it you know enforce the rules. If they're moving, they're not breaking the rule anymore.

You know if you .. really feel that these people are taking advantage of the system, that they really, you know really have been there for a long period of time, you go ahead and write the ticket out. It doesn't matter.

"We're much more than ticket writers"--Respondents focus on other job duties, such as giving directions, finding stolen permits, etc.

"It's [not me, it's] the system"--More experienced ticketers refer to the "system." In this system, PS supports itself through permit sales, protects its permit holders by ticketing violators, which in turn helps support the department and maintain its user funded base. As the supervisor points out, those who don't drive or park on campus shouldn't have to support PS activities. Ticketers may take time to try to explain the basics of the system to a violator (or even someone whose ticket they just voided), but good advice from the ticketer may sound like a lecture to the ticketed.

The Structuring of Ticket Writing

For the ticketer working within the system, frustration comes with the turf, or more precisely with the proper functioning of the parking system. PS is sensitive to public criticism. Yet the department seeks to ticket every car that is in violation of the rules. What follows is a description of how the structuring of ticket writing serves to minimize friction between ticketers and irates, while at the same time maximizing ticket production.

Anonymity. Ticketers identify themselves by number, and this to some extent protects the identity of the ticketer. Many respondents also consider that they are ticketing cars, not people.⁵ Of course this doesn't mean that ticketing a BMW isn't a little more satisfying than, say a '74 Dodge Dart.

Discretion. The supervisor does not question voided tickets, allowing ticketers to make judgment calls. Discretion allows ticketers to "be nice to those who are nice to them." As one respondent said,

⁵Although the following quote from the supervisor suggests a concern for the driver as well: "I find almost all our people, they may know someone's abusing the system, if they feel that someone is knowingly abusing the system, they would much rather get that person, than say someone who's made a dumb mistake."

The attitude has a lot to do with whether they get a ticket or not, and that's sad to say, but it happens .. if I have somebody coming out and say, you know just real cold, 'I'm leaving,' you know or 'don't write me a ticket, or they just get in their car, and don't say anything, that ticks me off.'

On a departmental level, ticketer discretion, used wisely, is a valuable public relations tool. As the supervisor said, "There's nothing worse [for public relations] than a bad ticket."

The Radio. The radio gives ticketers immediate access to the office and the police department should a confrontation with an irate become ugly, increasing the likelihood that the car will be cited.

The supervisor said, " ... use the radio; don't lower yourself to that person's level [at that time]."

The PS office and separate appeals process deflect attention from ticketers. "Take it up with the office" is a common phrase when tempers escalate. Only 35 out of 965 appeals were approved last year, the rest either paying full (51%) or reduced (17%) fines, or receiving warnings (28%).

A Broader Perspective--Making Sense of the Ticketer's Lot

In trying to explain both how ticket writers *do* their jobs, and how they *deal* with them, there seem to be several influences. Much of their stress and frustration stems from their effectiveness as ticketers, which is in large part made possible by the structure of ticket writing. This leads to confrontations that no respondent highlighted as particularly rewarding. One said

... I don't see any reason to get so fired up about ruining that many more people's day (chuckling), you know?

The *ticketed* person's behavior may also influence whether the ticketer pulls out the pen. In differentiating "the public," respondents focus on repeat or rude violators, the majority of which they allege come from athletics and the Greek system. One respondent said:

People that really abuse the system, and they know they do, and they try to get at you, you know verbally or otherwise, and you write'em a ticket, it's satisfying for me. You know I have to admit it is.

Ticketers' attitudes can change over time, though:

... we all went through that stage when we loved the power of being able to write down that somebody owes us money now. I kinda went through that stage. It was fun to be able to have that power. But that always wears off. In every case I've seen it wear off at least.

The supervisor also is able to motivate the ticketers, and even instill a certain pride in doing a difficult job well. Perhaps not surprisingly, work habits also seem to influence how ticketers "see" the

lots and their jobs. Several reported that sometimes even when they're driving home, they'll automatically scan a lot for violators, or cars on the wheel lock list.

Ticketers feel frustration they say because some don't understand the system. It is also possible that resentment comes from those violators who *do* understand the system. After all, they find themselves in the particularly rankling predicament of helping to underwrite the jobs of those who write them tickets. Perhaps the combination of restricted parking access and a publicly subsidized institution and good--education--leads to some resentment. Would these violators be so irate if they had been ticketed for illegally parking in a private corporation's parking lot?

Ticketers are enforcing a status hierarchy at the university. Though similarities exist, the kind of "dirty work" they perform differs from that of the janitor or garbage collector. It is "enforcement." The concern is not with occupational status--the job compares quite favorably with other student jobs, such as in food service. In some ways the ticketer's job resembles that of the tax collector or reposessor. Collection agencies "enforce" repayment. Bank officers foreclose on mortgages. In the 1960s, the National Guard was often dispatched to "enforce" the peace by quelling anti-war and civil rights demonstrations on college campuses. These are all jobs, presumably done by decent people filling niches within the workforce, enforcing parking rights based on an ability to pay.

There are management alternatives to making parking access a market commodity. Permitting could be based on a job-related merit system rather than ability to pay. Access could be by lottery. Permits could be proportionally allotted to campus departments. Yet alternatives might be more costly *and* meet with resistance from those within the university whose objections make a difference to more than ticket writers. Nor is parking an isolated symbol of status hierarchy. Witness faculty lounges, staff/faculty functions, staff/faculty access to departmental facilities and equipment (offices, photocopiers, computers), etc. The irony is that, in a market system, someone will always be found to do "dirty work," either through physical or financial coercion, but that it makes a difference who fills the position.

As Steinbeck's tractor operator says, "I don't know. Maybe there's nobody to shoot. Maybe the thing isn't men at all. Maybe like you said, the property's doing it. Anyway I told you my orders."

I would like to thank those at Parking Services, who took time out from their schedules, for their willingness to submit to mysterious interviews with the sociologist, who gave me the opportunity to view both sides of this issue (by writing me a few meter tickets during the course of the study) and especially to the supervisor, whose good-natured cooperation and insight proved invaluable.

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