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# Checking Out: A Qualitative Study of Supermarket Cashiers' Emotional Response to Customer Mistreatment

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Checking Out: A Qualitative Study of Supermarket Cashiers'  
Emotional Response to Mistreatment

by

Michael E. Lawless

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Sociology  
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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to the hundreds of cashiers, baggers, and other supermarket employees I have had the privilege to work with, during almost thirty years in the supermarket industry. I hear you.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

To my son Joseph, this marks the culmination of nearly eight years of work since I returned to complete my college education. I hope that you come to see my perseverance in completing this research as my commitment to you of the value of education. To Dr. Margarethe Kusenbach, I thank you for your patience, understanding and unyielding support. Dr. Donileen Loseke and Dr. Laurel Graham, I thank you both for your helpful comments and interest in my subject. To the staff and graduate students of the sociology and women's studies departments at the University of South Florida, I would like to thank each of you for opening my eyes to the world.

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## **ABSTRACT**

In Western culture, and especially the United States, the increasingly service based economy focuses on creating an emotionally positive experience for customers. This leads to increasing pressures on service workers to hide and suppress their emotions even when mistreated by customers, in order to meet their employers', and general cultural, customer service standards. This thesis investigates the questions of what kinds of emotional challenges supermarket cashiers experience as a result of mistreatment from their customers, how do they manage to cope with these challenges, and whether there are any differences in challenges or coping strategies between younger and older cashiers, and those with less or more work experience. Researchers have studied the strategies and effects of emotion management in a variety of work settings, as well as private and other institutional settings, including airlines (Hochschild, 2012), animal shelters (Arluke, 1994), and abortion clinics (Wolkomir and Powers, 2007). However, the role of customer mistreatment in the development of emotion management strategies among service workers has remained relatively unexamined to date.

For my research, I conducted semi-structured, qualitative interviews with nine female cashiers of different ages who work at large supermarkets in two counties of southwest Florida. As illustrated and discussed in the analysis chapters, most commonly, participants described three different types of mistreatment they experience from their customers and resulting emotional issues: stigma, verbal abuses, and sexualized mistreatment. In order to cope with these mistreatments, cashiers employ two types of emotion management strategies: interpersonal

and personal. Interpersonal strategies in the workplace include peer support and enlisting the manager, personal strategies include what I call acting professionally and forgiving the customer.

In the concluding chapter, I summarize my research findings and describe how my study contributes to the current state of the literature on workplace emotion management. I also discuss the limitations of my study. Lastly, I discuss implications for policy and some recommendations for protecting cashiers from customer mistreatment, and the associated emotional suffering, in the future.

## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is a late April afternoon and I am working a 7-5 shift managing a supermarket. I am preparing to leave for the day and I see Brittany, a twenty something cashier, in tears as she returns from carrying out a customer's order to his car. I ask her what is wrong. She tells me through gasping breaths and tears that the elderly customer she just carried-out made lewd remarks to her about not being married, forced a hug upon her and attempted to entrap her in a kiss by his open passenger car door. Panicked that he was about to abduct her, she ran back into the store to report the incident. I immediately attempt to calm her while at the same time contacting the sheriff's department. When the deputy arrives, Brittany provides her witness statement and description of the vehicle the man was driving, and I burn a CD-ROM of him exiting the store with Brittany pushing his groceries. On the video, I notice him place his arm around her shoulders as he walks with her. (Author's personal experience, 2011)

Due to the nature of her job dealing with the public at large, a supermarket cashier often does not know what to expect next from her customers. And while many cashiers, including those in this study, report satisfaction and even enjoyment about interacting with their customers, most report having been mistreated by customers at some point in their careers (Gettman and Gelfand, 2007). Though most cashiers may not have had the terrifying experience Brittany reported to me this April afternoon, situations like this one do happen and each cashier has her own stories to tell about serving difficult customers.

Supermarket cashiers do more than just ring up and bag groceries. The cashier can be described as the face of the store, providing one-on-one personal service in a mostly self-service retail establishment. During a typical eight hour shift, she may interact with well over a hundred customers of all demographic categories, each with the expectation of having her full attention

and dutiful submission. She may be responsible for the safety of a customer's children while their father retrieves his wallet from the car, take interest in listening to an elderly customer's financial and medical concerns, refuse an underage customer's beer purchase while being cursed at for spoiling his evening plans, decline a customer's personal check while at the same time maintaining her dignity by sharing it with her in a hushed voice, ring-up an order for a customer with 23 items in the 10-item-or-less express lane anticipating the cutting remarks she will receive from those next in line, listen to complaints from visiting tourists who tell her how much better the service is and how much lower prices are back home, and refrain from commenting about the difficulties of working a 2-11 pm shift without proper childcare while a customer laments about the store being open *only* until 10 pm. All of this, and more, await the individual who performs the job of supermarket cashier.

Cashiers experience a multitude of emotions while performing their jobs, including anger, happiness, guilt, tiredness, caring, joy, satisfaction, sympathy, pride, embarrassment, humility, jealousy, disdain, empathy, spite, envy, pity, among many others. Regardless of the type or intensity of emotion she might be feeling, the cashier must continue to perform her role as a pleasant, attentive, and efficient representative of her employer's service standard. It is important that she learns to manage her overall well-being through the use of emotion management strategies while on the job, for if she does not learn to manage her emotions, she risks not only physical and emotional impacts but the potential financial impact of loss of employment, due to her employer determining that she lacks customer service skills. The cashier oftentimes has little protection from disciplinary job action that is based on her perceived service.

Delaurier (2001:27-29) wrote that in 1979, fewer than 14 million people were employed in retail trade in the United States. However by 2000, that figure had risen to over 23 million, while during this same period, manufacturing jobs decreased from 22 million jobs in 1979 to fewer than 19 million in 2000. Among this growing sector of employment, he found that women, people of color, poor people, teens, and recent immigrants are the ones most likely to work retail jobs at some point during their working years. Additionally, this workforce is also largely union free, which can limit workers' ability to effectively advocate for higher wages and better working conditions. Given these aspects, Delaurier concludes that because this marginalized workforce has a limited ability to advocate on its own behalf, effort must be made by the employer to assist employees with customer initiated workplace issues.

Gettman and Gelfand (2007:757-770) performed a quantitative analysis of a survey completed by 3,445 employees of a mid-Atlantic supermarket chain. Of the respondents, seventy-three percent were female and represented employees from 144 of the chain's stores. Among these women, fifty percent reported some form of sexual harassment from their customers. Their study concluded that sexual harassment of women by their customers "is prevalent and represents a major barrier to women's success that has been overlooked in the scholarly literature" (Gettman and Gelfand, 2007:768). Given this and the growth of the retail job sector in the United States populated primarily by women and minority groups, research into emotion work due to customer mistreatment among female supermarket cashiers warrants attention.

In 2010, I began my journey as a part-time sociology graduate student while at the same time celebrating twenty-five years of service with a large supermarket chain. Having moved up the ranks from bagger, to cashier, to stock clerk, and then into entry level management, I have

performed the role of store manager at a number of the chain's supermarkets in Florida since 2001. I had always realized that working with the public could be difficult and that, sometimes, customers crossed the line from difficult to just plain inconsiderate, harassing, or even worse, threatening. In the past I have been (and I continue to be occasionally) on the receiving end of such treatment. I have been cursed at, bitten, spat upon, and punched by customers over the years, among other indignities. But thankfully, mistreatments toward me are few and far between due to my position as store manager.

As I progressed in my sociology studies, my thinking about mistreatment by customers changed. I had always felt that in my position as store manager, I was being compensated to handle such situations. But for my employees and in particular my cashiers, I began thinking they should not have to endure mistreatment. In my dual role as store manager and sociology graduate student, I began to think about why some cashiers handle confrontations with difficult customers "better" than others, why they generally "accepted" such treatment and why I, as store manager, "allowed" customers to sometimes mistreat my cashiers. In 2012, soon after I had dealt with Brittany's experience with a customer, and connecting it to studies on emotion work by Hochschild (2012) and Paules (1991), I decided that attempting to understand customer mistreatment and emotion work of supermarket cashiers would be the topic of research for my thesis.

Understanding the job as an insider, and being witness to some of the customer service challenges cashiers faced, led me to the main questions I investigate in this research. What types of emotional challenges do cashiers face when dealing with customers who mistreat them? What strategies do they use to manage their emotions on the job? Additionally, I want to understand if age and work experience influences reported incidences and type of customer mistreatment as

well as coping. As a veteran of the supermarket industry, my position and experience have certainly influenced my interest in this topic. Understanding what customer-driven emotional challenges cashiers are confronted with and the techniques used to manage emotion, will allow me, as a store manager, and hopefully my industry, to better understand and deal with the types of emotional stress this type of job can inflict.

My research investigating cashier emotion work was qualitative in nature and included intensive interviews, along with incorporating my own experiences as a cashier, and now store manager, during the interview process and data analysis. My research purpose was to interview cashiers to discover what types of mistreatments they are confronted with from customers, and how they manage the emotional challenges that result from these mistreatments.

I conducted my study with cashier participants who work at supermarkets in a two county area of southwest Florida. All of the cashiers worked for Magnolia Markets, a service oriented supermarket chain, and were recruited through signs posted in selected store locations, as well as at a local university. Magnolia Markets places a strong emphasis on customer service, and cashiers and all employees are encouraged to ensure that customers leave pleased.

In the chapter that follows, I first review the related literature on cashier service work and its related challenges. Next, I review previous research on emotion work, and lastly, I describe my research questions. In the next chapter, I describe my method and data, and in the following one, the setting in which my research was conducted. Then, I describe my research findings, with a focus on the types of mistreatment faced by cashiers, and on which emotion management strategies are used by Magnolia Market cashiers. In the concluding chapter, I discuss my study's implications, future research topics related to my findings and what strategies could be used to

further strengthen the results of my study, and I end with some comments on the policy implications of my study.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this chapter, I discuss scholarly research that has been conducted within the field of cashier service work and related topics. First, I examine data related to cashier service work, including the job responsibilities of the cashier and her working conditions. Next, I analyze how researchers have contributed to an understanding of the concept of customer mistreatment toward cashiers and other service workers. Then, I review the scholarly research on emotion work and emotional labor. Finally, I close the chapter discussing the research mandate and goals of this study.

#### **Cashier Service Work**

What supermarket customers expect to be as customer service can vary by establishment. Experience in the industry has informed me that smaller neighborhood food retailers and regional supermarket chains often place a priority on cashier services such as a friendly greeting, answering questions, providing information, and maintaining short checkout lines through management presence and appropriate scheduling of cashiers-the fast and friendly checkout experience promoted in many advertisements.

However, I have also learned, larger “big-box” retailers that have entered the food selling arena tend to focus less on customer service and place a greater emphasis on customer’s handling of the checkout experience with “self-checkouts”, and an absence of employees

managing the front end operation. As such, the type of establishment (larger versus smaller, service intensive versus less service intensive) in which the cashier works may determine the level and what kind of customer service her customers and employer expects from her.

For cashiers, the supermarket workplace often does not allow for individuality. Soares (1995), in his studies of both Brazilian and Canadian supermarkets, identified that the organization at the supermarket checkouts is characterized by rigid discipline and control which can be seen in the special distribution of cashiers, the control of their bodies, and the control of their emotion. In Soares' analysis, he likened the supermarket check-out area to prison surveillance described in Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, where instead of prison guards, store supervisors are placed behind or above the checkout line either physically or via closed circuit camera, producing panoptic access and views which may cause in the cashier "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power, to arrange things so that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (Foucault, 1977:201-202).

Rafaeli (1983), in his study of supermarket check-out interactions in Israel, found the cashier is physically closer to the customer than most any other employee in the supermarket. About two feet typically separate the cashier from her customer, while she may be over six feet away from the next closest cashier. Israeli supermarkets typically expect the customer to bag their own groceries eliminating the need for baggers, and the structure of the checkout area means that cashiers only see the backs of their colleagues, limiting interaction with co-workers. This allows the layout of the front end of a supermarket to constrain communication to customers, a primary objective.

In short, the supermarket cashier is always on display, and always being monitored. Mobility is limited and interaction with others outside the cashier/customer transaction is constrained. She is, in effect, somewhat trapped. The cashier cannot avoid potentially negative expressions of emotion from being observed by her supervisors or customers and there is the potential to receive a variety of customer mistreatments. I delve more deeply into the concept in the following section.

### **Customer Mistreatment**

Cashiers are often the only persons within the store that customers actually interact with and, unfortunately, sometimes cashiers are forced to deal with any variety of mistreatments. For cashiers who work in the supermarket industry, having to deal with difficult customers and the accompanying emotional toll is often considered to be just part of the job. This can be particularly true in the United States. Rafaeli (1989) who examined interaction of the cashier and the customer, found that while in other parts of the world it is not expected that supermarket cashiers maintain a smile and pleasant demeanor at all times, in the United States this is the expectation. For example, “consumer rights and the concept of service are not as in Israel as they are elsewhere in the West. Cashiers and other service employees are often argumentative, and rudeness is common” (Rafaeli, 1989:248). Among the conclusions of his study are that cashiers experience strain from a lack of control of the service encounter with customers and sometimes seek out ways to regain control, among them ignoring customers, and reacting unpleasantly to customer requests.

The cashier/customer experience can range from pleasant to threatening. Soares (2001), who studied cashier/customer interactions in Brazil and Canada, found that customers are not

only a source of satisfaction, incentive and social interaction, but also a source of violence and suffering for supermarket cashiers. Schat et al. (2006), who researched workplace violence in the United States, cited statistics that show disrespectful and aggressive behavior is more likely to originate with organizational outsiders, such as customers, than with organizational insiders. And while it is a limited percentage, Delaurier (2001) cited OSHA statistics that found twenty-two percent of workers who have contact with the public think that they are likely to be threatened, and ten percent of staff who have face to face contact with customers think that they may be assaulted at some point in their career (Delaurier, 2001:27).

Mistreatment toward cashiers and other service workers can also be sexual in nature. In her six month field study of the relationship between sexuality and the gendered organization of employment, Adkins (1995) concluded that retail service work can be both highly interactive and highly sexualized. She argued that dominant notions of sexuality are embedded into many service jobs, leading the women who largely fill them to be viewed as “sexual commodities.” As a result, women have no alternative but to accept this.

Additionally, Hall (1993) explored what she labels the “job flirt.” She defines this as a job-prescribed form of sexual harassment. Her in depth interviews of servers in five types of restaurants found that waitresses (female) were more likely than waiters (male) to be sexually approached and harassed by customers. Servers who provided what was considered to be “good service” were expected to enact the roles of friendliness, deference, and flirting. While both female and male servers were expected to enact these three roles, women were required more frequently to exhibit sexual availability as part of their job and in doing so, the job flirt encouraged customers to harass female staff in a sexual manner.

Hughes and Tadic (1998) studied the prevalence of customer initiated sexual harassment among female workers in Canada. Their research, consisting of in-depth interview and survey data obtained from eighty three retail and security workers, posited that workers are left with few choices but to “normalize” sexual exchanges as a routine part of the job. The authors argued that tension exists between policies that protect workers’ right to a workplace free of intimidation and those which promote customer satisfaction. They found that policies requiring service workers to engage customers in a friendly manner, and the general norms surrounding customer service work, resulted in employees’ feeling that they could not use assertive behavior toward customers for fear of a negative complaint or receiving a poor job performance review by management. In short, mistreatment by customers becomes what Adkins (1995:134) found to be a non-economic relation imposed on an economically-structured labor market.

Bishop and Hoel’s (2008) research, which consisted of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with forty-nine British job center workers along with participant observation data, found that customer behavior is often reported as being offensive, terrible, personally insulting, degrading, abusive, and aggressive. The authors add that the increasingly prevalent notion that the customer is “king” indicates customer’s needs are prioritized over the needs and feelings of workers. Lastly, Folgerø and Fjeldsted (1995) who conducted ten in-depth interviews with Norwegian hospitality workers found that workers tend to label as sexual harassment only those behaviors which are severe enough to deviate from work experiences that they deal with on a daily basis, thus limiting their reporting these events to management.

In this section I have discussed the various ways previous researchers have found that service work supports, and perhaps encourages, incidents of mistreatment of workers by the their customers. In the next section, I discuss the responsibility the employer has toward protecting

workers and research which seeks to explain reasons why some service workers tend to accept customer harassment and mistreatment as part of the job.

### **Protecting the Workers**

The question arises of who has direct legal responsibility for the prevention of workplace violence and other mistreatments of workers. In the United States, the employer does.

According to Section 5(a)(1) of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration Act of 1970 (OSHA act), all employers must “furnish to each of her (or his) employees, employment and a place of employment which are free from recognized hazards that are causing or likely to cause death or serious physical harm to her (or his) employees” (Delaurier, 2001:28). Also, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2011) has established guidelines which read in part that, “it is unlawful to harass a person because of the person’s sex and the harasser can be the victim’s supervisor, a supervisor in another area, or someone who is not an employee of the employer such as a client or customer.”

Warner (1994) found that there have been legal cases where employers have been liable for customer-initiated sexual harassment, including *Magnuson vs. Peak Technical Services* (automobile dealership workers), *EEOC vs. Sage Realty Corporation* (real estate office staff), and *Powell vs. Las Vegas Hilton Corporation* (cocktail waitresses). Clearly, appropriate laws are in place. However why do supermarket cashiers continue to be subjected to mistreatment by customers in their workplace? The answer, perhaps, may lie within the culture of the supermarket itself.

Retail supermarket managers, in keeping with the mantra of “the customer is always right” may simply ignore the assaults their cashiers face from abusive customers. Korczynski

and Ott (2004:594-595) posited that inherent in the notion of customer sovereignty is the idea of relational superiority and individual autonomy and choice. This is used to manage the organization's need for an efficient provision of service, while at the same time, convincing the customer that they are in control as the sovereign.

Also, management legitimization of cashier mistreatment by customers may lead cashiers to accept their actions simply as part of the job. Hughes and Tadic (1998:216-217) in their study of female clothing store workers in Canada found that while customer mistreatment tends to be similar in some ways to coworker and management sexual harassment in the workplace, mistreatment from customers may be more frequent but less extreme; meaning there is more general rudeness, more leering and suggestive comments, rather than requests for sexual favors and physical assault. This may lead workers to be less apt to share their experiences with employers, accept them as part of their employment, and may cause employers to more frequently ignore those instances of which they have knowledge.

In sum, displays of friendliness and good cheer are expected when one plays the role of supermarket cashier, or other service industry worker, in the United States, even when faced with difficult customers. Though laws have been enacted to protect workers from it, and courts have ruled employers have a liability to protect workers, the acceptance of customer mistreatment is enhanced by notions of customers' superiority over workers. The concepts of emotion work and emotional labor can assist us in better understanding how cashiers respond to these challenges as the "face of the company," despite being mistreated.

## **Emotion Work and Emotional Labor**

While it may be one thing for cashiers to treat their customers as sovereign, it can be quite another to keep up the emotional displays required by management under the stress of encountering an offensive customer. Supermarket cashiers are still expected to suppress their feelings in the face of offensive customers and display emotions desirable to management.

In this section I provide an overview of the concept of emotional labor. In the groundbreaking book first published in 1983, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* emotion labor is defined by author Hochschild (2012:7) in part, as labor which “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.” It is the ability of one to manage one’s feeling in order to create a certain facial and bodily display that is observable to the public.

This describes what cashiers do daily in their jobs, above the physical process of ringing up the customer’s order and related tasks. In the case of the supermarket cashier emotion labor means that she interacts with the customer as is expected by her employer, and thus treats her/him with deference, care, and concern for his/her well being through smiles, tone of voice, and pleasantries such as asking how their shopping experience was, etc. It is a type of labor she sells and it is included in her wage, thus it has exchange value. In contrast, similar actions a cashier might perform outside of the workplace, are identified by Hochschild as private emotion work or emotion management, done for use value (Hochschild, 2012:7).

The cashier’s emotion labor is therefore a skillfully choreographed performance, an act if you will. Acting has long been identified with the study of emotion management. For instance, Goffman’s (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* provides an analysis of how the outside world affects one’s behavior, through the acting out behavior expected by others. But as

Hochschild pointed out, Goffman did not account for how acting is grounded in feeling (2012: 228). She identified that, now, institutions such as corporations not only control their workers behaviors, but also control what they must feel, forcing the worker to manage feeling to meet the needs of the employer. Acting both outwardly towards customers and inwardly toward self allows the cashier to meet this job qualification.

As identified by Hochschild, there are two types of emotion work typically performed in the private realm that may sometimes be utilized at work, “surface acting” and “deep acting”. She defined surface acting as utilizing the body, not the soul, to elicit the desired response. “The actor’s body evokes passion in the audience’s soul, but the actor is only acting as if he had feeling” (2012:37). It is a deception of feeling. In the case of the cashier, this could be interpreted as an insincere greeting, a forced smile, or the static farewell given to each customer of “have a good day.”

The cashier must utilize much more effort to perform deep acting than surface acting. Here the cashier works upon her emotions to develop a feeling of warmth and caring toward her customers, rather than just a “put upon smile.” For example, she might think of customers as members of her own family or think about treating them as if they were invited into her home. But when she performs deep acting, does the cashier understand she is deceiving herself for the company’s benefit? Hochschild (2012:19) argued employers have taken the private skill of managing emotion and incorporated it into workplace rules. This “transmutation of an emotional system” defined by Hochschild as how what we do privately to our feelings is regulated at times by employers. The result of social engineering and the profit motive, transmutation results in an alienation of true feeling. She wrote:

Surface and deep acting in a commercial setting unlike acting in a dramatic, private or therapeutic context, make one's face and one's feelings take on properties of a resource. But it is not a resource to be used for the purposes of art, as in drama, or for the purposes of self-discovery, as in therapy, or for the pursuit of fulfillment, as in everyday life. It is a resource to be used to make money. (Hochschild, 2012:55)

Hochschild found that in deep acting, "we must dwell on what it is that we want to feel and on what we must do to induce the feeling" (2012:47). However, this may not always be an undesirable "deception" and not all researchers find this to be a negative emotional process. In the supermarket, cashiers often utilize the phrase "fake it till you make it" to describe the "game face" they utilize when dealing with difficult customers. According to Tolich (1993), deep acting skills are used by supermarket employees when dealing with customers, not only to benefit the employer by providing good customer service, but to benefit clerks themselves as a mechanism to induce their own positive emotional feeling. Tolich quoted one cashier as saying, "I can trick my brain into believing something that might not be true...I might say, well she has had a hard day"(Tolich, 1993:373).

Surface and deep acting among workers has thrived as the United States moved from an individual, to industrial, and now to a service oriented economy. This has forced workers to move past structures that encouraged pride of production to structures that force workers to maintain an aura of pleasing the customer, client, patient or audience, regardless of the workers own feelings, in order to succeed in the workplace. In earlier times, a worker could succeed by following the rules, keeping their head down, and maintaining production of the assembly line or upon their own family farm etc. However, the new realities of the service centered workplace require the worker to adhere to a method of manipulating the emotions of others, while at the same time managing their own.

A number of studies have supported Hochschild's view and shown that, regardless the type of modern workplace, workers utilize surface and deep acting tactics to survive this new reality. Smith and Kleinman (1989:59), in their study of medical school students' contacts with the living and the dead, found that medical students must maintain an aura of non-emotionality in front of their colleagues, mentors, and patients. The code of silence rules, and students do not verbally express disdain toward repugnant living patients or corpses under dissection. They learn to suppress the emotions they initially have.

Arluke (2007) found that workers in animal shelters similarly need to develop strategies to maintain control of their emotions when euthanizing animals and develop strategies to "learn to live with it," including seeing animals as "virtual pets" (Arluke, 2007:340) in much the same manner as medical student transform the patients they come in contact with into esoteric body parts (Smith and Klienman, 1989:60).

In their study of emotion work among fashion models, Mears and Findly (2005:329) reported that when on a shoot, models state they are actually actors, "hiding their true feelings from others and creating illusions for others." This is an informed mindset that allows the model to separate her reality from the emotional toll of being objectified and limits the expression of true emotion due to workplace constraints.

But is emotion labor necessarily negative for the worker? Hochschild (2012:187-188) believes that there is a human cost to emotional labor. She found that when a worker offers personalized service, she "becomes identified with the -ized part of it" which limits her ability to depersonalize inappropriate behavior toward her, resulting in stress, emotional numbness and job burnout. She further found that those workers who successfully combat job burnout brought on

by acting have developed skills which allow them to develop a clear separation between self and role, when they are acting and when they are not.

As I pointed out earlier, Tolich (1993) found that the emotion work of deep acting provides benefit to both employer and employee. Other subsequent research found benefits to emotional labor as well. Mears and Findlay's (2005:317-343) study of fashion models, and Smith's (2009:157-176) study of professional wrestlers both found that there are some benefits to emotion labor. Mears and Findlay reported that acting allows models to gain control of the photo shoot, resist objectification, gain self-respect and achieve career goals. Thus acting allows the model to transform themselves from passive object to an active subject and maintain dignity when subjected to humiliating comments. Smith found that in the arena of professional wrestling, the joint production of passion work generates emotional bonds between workers which are not detrimental to their true selves. He argued that the mutual emotion labor performed by professional wrestlers is akin to that of stage actors and other performers as well, with two people working as a team to create a workplace product based on trust and mutual respect, both desired human emotions.

Though researchers differ on whether or not emotional labor is harmful to the worker, Hochschild's argument, that we have become actors of emotion within the modern workplace, seeking to make money by pleasing the employer, client and customer through emotional performance work, is well suited to the study of mistreatment of cashiers by customers. In the next section, I describe my research questions in detail, focusing upon how cashiers handle the emotions brought upon by certain types of customer interactions.

## **Research Questions**

This study investigates the emotional challenges and coping strategies utilized and reported by supermarket cashiers in varied locations throughout Southwest Florida. It will differ from the majority of published research on workplace conflict since it emphasizes the accounts of cashier's interactions with their customers, in contrast to the well-developed body of work documenting the prevalence of employer-employee or co-worker sexual harassment. This study's focus on cashier reported instances of customer mistreatment and the ensuing emotion work appears to be relatively unexplored in previous research.

While the focus of this research is emotion management within the context of customer interactions, it does not imply that supermarket cashiers are not subject to other workplace emotion variables. For example, Tolich and Briar (1999) found that many female cashiers expressed bitterness about gender-based allocation of tasks within the supermarket, resulting in being forced to work long hours in a confined space, while males were allowed to roam the entire store. Scheduling, pay, home life and other variables are also recognized as having the potential to affect a cashier's emotional well being and are important areas of study as well. However, I have chosen to focus on the concept of emotional labor performed by cashiers who are mistreated by customers due to its relative unexplored nature, as well as my own experiences with this issue, both as an observer and victim, within this particular workplace.

My study explored two main themes. The first aim of this research was to explore issues of emotion work among supermarket cashiers. Cashiers may be subjected to varied mistreatments by customers while performing their job and I wanted to learn how such treatments affect them. My research sought to discover the major troubles a cashier may face from her customers and how she navigates through them, including her coping mechanisms. At

the micro level, as a store manager, I wanted to understand the types of workplace challenges supermarket cashiers face, as well how cashiers handle them. I could then use the findings to provide a better work environment for my own employees. At the macro level, this research provides insights to emotion work not currently available, perhaps enlightening the supermarket and customer service industry as a whole.

The second aim of the research was to examine ways in which a cashier's age or years on the job influences the expression of customer mistreatment in the workplace. I had originally focused on the question of how place possibly influenced cashier reported instances of customer mistreatment. Handy (2006) identified that in large, populated areas, people and organizations are fairly loosely connected to surrounding areas and the physical separation between one's place of work and one's private life is significant. Soares (2001), in his study of supermarket cashiers in Brazil and Canada, found that violence, racism, and sexual harassment occurred more frequently in richer, more urban areas compared with poorer, rural ones. The result may mean that people's experiences of what constitutes victimization of harassment or violence varies based on the location of the business, as well as the organization's customers, their own beliefs, and other structures. Despite my inability to examine this issue presently, I feel that this is still an interesting hypothesis for future research.

Due to the workplace location of the cashiers who agreed to participate in this study (most from suburban locations), I shifted my second focus to mistreatment type reported by cashiers based on their age and experience on the job. This was due to my impression of different types of mistreatment faced by those cashiers aged late teens to young adult, to those middle aged and older, and, my sense that experienced cashiers are more apt to rebuke mistreatment by customers compared with those who are less experienced. Previous research

among service workers supports this theory. Dahling and Perez (2010:574-578) found in their quantitative study of service workers, there is a positive correlation between age of respondent and deep acting and a negative correlation between age of respondent and surface acting, possibly implying that older workers are better than younger workers at performing emotional labor, and this may mean a greater ability to balance work and home. “These findings are also important for the well-being of older employees in service positions; we know from past research that employees who engage in more deep acting and less surface acting tend to experience better personal outcomes, including less burnout, less work-family interference, and greater affective well-being” (Dahling and Perez, 2010:577). Paules (1991:10-13) found that among the waitresses she studied in a New Jersey restaurant, “rookies” are more submissive to customers, while both full and part-time experienced, waitresses are more apt to act defiantly toward impolite customers, as well as being less fearful of management. However the links between age, experience on the job and reports of mistreatment and emotional labor among supermarket cashiers appear to be relatively unexplored among supermarket cashiers.

This study is important. It is important for it attempts to recognize the difficulties cashiers sometimes face, understand in what ways cashiers cope with such actions, and understand how age and experience may play a part in these occurrences. Understanding the dimensions of customer initiated abuses against supermarket cashiers may assist in developing methods of assistance and protection for the over 23 million, largely female and ethnic minority front line retail workers in the United States (Delaurier, 2001).

In this last section, I identified my research questions. First, what types of mistreatments do cashiers experience from customers and second, how do cashiers manage their emotions when these situations occur. Lastly, I seek to identify if there are links between a cashier’s age and

experience on the job and occurrences of mistreatment and coping strategies. In the next chapter, I will discuss, in depth, the methods I used in conducting this study.

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **METHODS**

In this chapter I describe the methods I used to conduct my research with female supermarket cashiers. My data sets consist of nine individual interviews collected over five months between March 2013 and July 2013. The names of all individuals used here are pseudonyms. The name of the individual's employer has also been changed to Magnolia Markets. As my research questions primarily focus on how participants manage their emotions during their interactions with customers at work, I chose to perform intensive interviews with a sample of cashiers. I did not include an observational data set for a variety of reasons, including mistreatment may not happen all the time, my presence as an observer might alter that cashier or customer's behavior during the transaction, and observations was not permitted by the cashier's employer either in person or via closed-circuit camera. Though my data set does not include observations, my personal experience within the supermarket industry, including time spent as a cashier, informs this research and allowed me to understand not only what cashiers do, but also relate to the situations they experience, and understand the layout and design of the space in which they work.

#### **Interviews**

I decided to use qualitative interviews as a primary method because of the richness and the descriptive nature of the data they can provide. Qualitative case studies are useful for generating

theories and describing experiences and processes of emotion where they occur (Meanwell et al., 2008). Descriptive language can persuade the reader, it shows that the researcher understands the setting, and it provides the reader the ability to “make sense” of the situation (Firestone, 1987). Of particular interest to me are accounts of cashiers’ experiences in their own words.

While this study utilizes only qualitative data, not all researchers have relied solely on qualitative data to study emotion in the workplace. For example, the General Social Survey (1996) includes data on emotions that allow for quantitative analyses of workplace emotion. Researchers such as Sloan (2004) have utilized these survey data, finding that occupations which demand high levels of interaction are related to increased odds of employees experiencing anger. Additionally, Meanwell et al. (2008) believe that network analysis may be useful in collecting new data on emotions in the workplace, positing that network analysis can help answer emotion questions by revealing how emotion style and individual characteristics change as people become members of networks. They further contend that sociologists should follow other research areas and utilize mixed methods to shed light on emotion.

Prior to beginning my interviews, I reviewed the chapter on interviewing in Amir Marvasti’s book *Qualitative Research in Sociology* (2003:15-33). I found it helpful to understand the various techniques of interviewing research participants. I discovered that combining structured and open-ended interview techniques into an “active” interview could “encourage respondents to elaborate on their own answers,” and view the interview process “as an occasion in which researchers and their respondents jointly assign meaning to various social experiences” (Marvasti, 2003:32). I found this could be beneficial to my research. Additionally, I developed an open and broad interview schedule to enable the participant had a hand in shaping the interview instead of me promoting my own concepts and expectations. This allowed me the

additional flexibility I felt I needed to obtain meaningful data. The interview schedule can be found in Appendix A. I also reviewed Marvasti's tips for interviewing women in order to remind myself of the potential for gender bias in my research (Marvasti, 2003:26) and Warren's (2012:129-142) analysis of interviewing as social interaction to enhance my interview skills further, with specific intent on learning how to recognize cues to delve deeper into participant responses. .

My original goal was to conduct ten or more interviews with cashiers working in supermarkets equally divided among rural and urban locations. However, only nine interviews were ultimately conducted, primarily in suburban locations, with cashiers who responded to posted flyers in their workplace and at a local university. The lack of rural workplace participants led me to discontinue my plan to compare reported occurrences of mistreatment based on location of the cashier's workplace.

My sample for this study consists of nine female cashiers (see Appendix B for age, race, education and level of experience of the participants). The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 69. All interviewees identified themselves as Caucasian. All were high school graduates, with four cashiers holding college degrees in Funeral Science, Mathematics, Psychology and Fine Arts. The least amount of experience as a cashier in my study sample was four months (Cindy) and the most experience was 24 years (Wanda). Informal networks among cashiers who work at retail supermarkets located in the area of study also led to individuals who agreed to participate, resulting in multiple snowball sampling. While I had hoped to find a more diverse group of participants by ethnicity, the group is representative of cashiers working in the larger research area (two counties in southwest Florida). Additionally, though I did not seek only female participants, their gender is representative of the majority of cashiers as well.

Research did not begin until consent was received from the university's institutional review board (a copy of the first notice of approval for research can be found in Appendix C). Signing an informed consent form was required from all participants; all were informed that all information collected will remain confidential. Participation in the research was limited to supermarket cashiers aged 18 and above, was completely voluntary, and was not performed during the participant's work time. Cashiers did not have to be employed by Magnolia Markets; however all who decided to participate did. This was due to participant recruitment taking place primarily at several of the chain's stores.

The interviews took place in a public or private place of the cashier's choosing and were voice recorded by me on both my laptop computer and a handheld digital recorder. Interview locations included restaurants, a university study room, a school teacher's lounge, a public library and an office. The length of the interviews ranged from twenty-two minutes to one hour and fifteen minutes. Later, a friend and I fully transcribed the interviews.

In my first two interviews, I focused primarily on how cashiers experienced customer mistreatment and how they themselves managed these challenges, but after these two interviews I realized that cashiers wanted to discuss other types of problems they encountered and probed further into these concerns with additional questions. Most often, cashiers wanted to discuss issues they were having with store management regarding job assignments, work schedules, and problems with other employees. Though I continued to focus on my specific research questions, I found the cashiers additional concerns important in understanding the entirety of supermarket cashier emotion work and I utilized these other concerns in forming my ideas for possible additional research.

During each interview I asked questions about the cashier's prior work experience, how they came to be a supermarket cashier and how they handled situations involving customers, co-workers and managers. In line with the technique of semi-structured interviewing, throughout these interviews I was careful to listen for markers in order to pursue experiences and feelings from participants. I utilized probing questions to gain further insight into these experiences, as I had learned previously during my course in research methods because this type of questioning allows for rich data.

For example, during my first interview, when I asked Suzie to tell me a little about her customers, she responded, "Um...most of them are very nice, my store's like around a lot of retirement type communities." I followed up by repeating that she had said "most of them are very nice" and asked about examples of customers who were not so nice. Suzie responded, "We have a couple of slower (mentally challenged) people at our store. And I hear comments all the time about how they are horrible at their job, (pauses). They just don't know. They're not very nice about it." Probing Suzie's response about "most customers" allowed me to discover that she was concerned about the treatment of her "slower" co-workers by customers unaware or intolerant of their different abilities.

After completing my interviews I invited each participant to contact me if they had any additional information they would like to share, or any concerns or questions. One participant contacted me for advice on a workplace issue concerning her manager and I advised her that I would share her concern with the company's human resources department, and she did so. Additionally, I followed up with two other cashiers informally within the workplace while shopping at their store locations. Neither had additional information to provide, but each stated they were glad to have assisted in my research.

## **Reflections**

I experienced several difficulties during the course of my interviews, including issues with recruiting participants, locations selected for interviews, my personal reactions to the information I obtained, and ethical considerations due to my position as a store manager. Below I discuss these difficulties and my attempts to overcome them.

The recruitment of participants was the first difficulty I faced in this project. While it was not difficult to obtain permission from management to post flyers in Magnolia Market break rooms, it was difficult to maintain the signage. When I first began the recruitment process, I posted a sign in the break room of seven stores. The flyer I posted can be found in Appendix D. I then spent about an hour in the break room of each site discussing my project with potential candidates before or after their shift or during their meal break. This resulted in only one candidate who ultimately agreed to participate and schedule an interview. After two weeks of receiving no additional responses, I contacted each store to ensure that my flyers were still posted and received responses that they were no longer there at several locations. I then visited each store again, replaced the flyer and solicited management support in maintaining it. I was concerned that maybe the signs were taken down deliberately and one manager asked whether any cashiers at his/her location had agreed to participate in my research. I replied that participant information was confidential which satisfied the query. I received no other questions regarding my research from store management. I did not check the signage again, but did post another flyer at a local university.

Participation interest slowly increased (from April until July) and I ultimately was contacted directly by seven cashiers who participated in my research. Two others were made

aware of my research through the informal networks of cashiers who participated, resulting in a total of nine participants.

My second challenge was the location of interviews. I was fairly comfortable with the interview process for the most part, having spent many years as a manager interviewing cashiers at work. There were a few situations, however, that I did not anticipate. First, when I arrived for my scheduled interview with Suzie at her fulltime job at a local charter school for inner city youths, we discovered that the room she had originally planned for the interview to take place in was not available. Suzie was sincerely apologetic and we were relocated to the teachers' lounge. During the interview, I found I was distracted by nearby conversations and did my best to remain focused on my interview participant and her responses; however I was agitated by the constant conversation in the background. Suzie must have noticed my frustration and apologized again for the lack of a private space. I assured her that it was fine and thanked her for her participation, adding that it added to the adventure of performing research in an attempt to recover from my faux pas. Later, when I reviewed my recordings for transcription, I found that the third party conversations at times made our interview difficult to transcribe, however having two recordings of the interview assisted me to obtain a high quality transcript.

This same type of situation occurred during two other interviews conducted at a casual dining establishment chosen as an interview site. During these interviews, prior to discussing the informed consent document, I asked the participants if they were comfortable proceeding considering the noise level and proximity of other diners. Both agreed to continue. I feel addressing the distractions with the participants immediately helped put them at ease and lessened the chances of my exhibiting body language interpreted as frustration. It did, however, make the recordings difficult to transcribe.

A third difficulty I encountered was my emotional reaction to some of the examples of mistreatment by customers that were shared with me by participants. I have been the recipient of verbal threats, damage to personal possessions and some physical violence by customers during my almost 30 years in the supermarket industry. I still felt upset, as I did when responding to Brittany's encounter with mistreatment described at the beginning of my thesis, to hear of personal attacks against cashiers. I found it difficult to not to become engaged in conversation with the cashier about these events, and sometimes I voiced my own thoughts and opinions regarding a customer's actions or manager's response to it. Though I have witnessed and/or heard about many cases in which cashiers had to deal with difficult customers over my years in the supermarket industry, I still feel emotions such as anger, disgust and guilt when hearing, witnessing, or dealing with them. I feared that my own feelings might have influenced the cashier's responses during the interview process.

Additionally, some participants became emotional themselves either through words, facial expressions or tears. During these times I offered participants consoling words and my thanks for sharing these difficult experiences with me. I feel that having an understanding of the job the cashiers perform allowed them to open up to me and allowed me to open up as well, understanding not only where they were coming from, but also how they felt. This soothed my concern that I was influencing responses with my comments.

Another difficulty I encountered during this study concerned my employment. I work as a store manager for Magnolia Markets, and I identified my occupation and relationship to the company to all participants. Most already knew this. I made every attempt to act in an open and neutral way. My position as a store manager invited some participants to ask my own opinions about situations I had encountered with customers in the past, along with workplace questions

such as scheduling concerns and how to go about changing jobs within a store. Warren (2012:129-142) in her analysis of interviewing as social interaction, writes that participants sometimes have their own agenda, particularly after the interview, and bring their own concerns to the forefront. Evelyn provides an example of this. Before and after our interview session Evelyn described in detail concerns regarding her position as a cashier, schedules, and management favoritism. I was careful not to provide her or any participants with specific job advice; rather I directed them to discuss these issues with upper management or the company human resource department. Also, though I was not asked specifically what I would do as a store manager, when asked about particular situations they had or were encountering in their stores, some participants shared negative experiences with store management and coworkers. When participants shared these experiences with me, I listened attentively and again referred them to their store manager or human resources department for additional assistance. None of these situations consisted of allegations of illegal behavior.

A last concern was that I might potentially release proprietary or confidential information about my employer in my research. As a store manager, I am bound by ethical guidelines in my position as an agent of the company I work for. As an academic, I am bound by the ethics of academic research. I ensured that all information shared about Magnolia Markets was commonly known, public information regarding the company, its front end layout and cashiering positions, while I maintained research ethics as well. No privileged or proprietary information regarding Magnolia Markets was knowingly included in the research and thesis.

## **Data Analysis**

After collecting and transcribing all data, I began the process of coding and analyzing. I began by reviewing my interviewee's general descriptions of any type of mistreatment and coping mechanisms mentioned. After creating a rough table identifying each participant's experiences, I began to code and analyze the nine transcribed interviews in more detail. Keeping with the methods I had learned previously in a qualitative research methods course, utilizing Neuman's (2010) text, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, I read each interview carefully, identifying what each small section was attempting to convey while taking notes in the margins of the transcription. I paid special attention to details regarding interactions with others, descriptions of feelings, word choices, and pauses in conversation, as I felt each was important to a truer understanding of what was being conveyed.

Once I completed my initial round of coding, I began to look for connections between the themes of mistreatment and the methods of coping in the margin notes of the transcribed interviews. Next, I used a system of symbols chosen by me to code some themes and I ranked excerpts by symbol with a number system from most illustrative example of the theme to least useful. The top rated examples were then included in this thesis. These excerpts, which are discussed in the following sections, represent the best examples I obtained during the interview process.

To answer my second question, I looked at the types of mistreatments mentioned by each participant during the interviews and listed them next to each participant's name. I then recorded mistreatment types experienced by each individual. Without using formal statistical analysis, I used this data to examine whether there appeared to be patterns related to age and the level of experience.

In the next chapter, before proceeding to the data analysis, I describe the setting the cashiers work at, Magnolia Markets. I include information about the company, the cashier job description, roles and responsibilities when on duty, and how cashiers typically process customer transactions.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **SETTING**

Magnolia Markets started as a single store in the 1930's in Florida. Throughout the years, it has grown into a chain of over 1,000 stores of various sizes throughout the southeastern United States. The company is the market leader in a number of areas in which it operates, including the area examined in this study. It is a privately held company, offering stock only to current employees and members of its board of directors. The company offers a benefit plan to both full-time and part-time employees to encourage employee "ownership." It also offers a fully, company contributed, employee stock ownership plan; employee stock purchase plan, and 401k plan with a company matching contribution. Part of the reasoning for offering these plans is that the company seeks to engage employees as "owners" of the company, ensuring they are sensitive to its continued success. This also assists in reducing the high level of employee turnover typically found among retail employees. The company is non-union, which is typical of many, though not all, retailers it competes with in its trade area. Cashiers typically begin work at the company's supermarkets with either no job experience or having worked at other companies in cashier or customer service roles. Some become cashiers after having worked in other areas of the same store. A part-time cashier will typically make \$8.00 to \$12.00 per hour and a full-time cashier can make around \$15.00 per hour depending on experience and job location. Cashiers receive pay reviews twice a year corresponding to their hire date. At Magnolia Markets, the requirements and qualifications for this job include: being at least age 14, passing a criminal

background check and pre-employment drug screen, the ability to provide customer service and follow instructions, and have the ability to read, write, and perform simple arithmetic.

Participants in this research worked in seven out of thirty-eight stores the company owns in a two county area of Florida on the southwest Gulf Coast.

To the outsider, one might think that the most important part of the supermarket cashier's job is to "ring up" grocery purchases, usually involving the use of electronic scanners, to receive money, and provide change to their customers, along with peripheral duties including bagging groceries, processing returns and exchanges, cashing checks, resolving complaints and maintaining a clean and orderly checkout area. However, a cashier posted on a website devoted to employees describing their jobs in retail unrelated to Magnolia Markets what she thinks is the most important responsibility of a cashier in a different way, writing:

The most important part of being a cashier, though, is being the face of the company. It is a heavy responsibility. In many instances the cashier may be the only store employee with whom the customer interacts and his or her demeanor, actions, level of customer service, and ability to help solve problems could make the difference between a lost customer and a lifelong patron...A cashier must, first and foremost, be a people person. (Cashier job description, 2013)

This description is similar to what Magnolia Markets seeks from its cashiers. Some job duties for a Magnolia Market cashier are listed below. The cashier:

- Assists customers and delivers customer service
- Greets customers and responds to their questions
- Weighs and scans customer product
- Accepts payment and counts back change
- Handles cash and other tenders
- Bags groceries
- Keeps the register area neat and clean and
- Assists in other duties when assigned

Thus while it is important that a cashier receives proper payment for the company’s goods, it can be just as important, if not more so, that she performs her duties with the level of “customer service” expected by both customer and employer. Though I could not include the complete Magnolia Market cashier job description due to its being proprietary to the company, in Appendix E, I have included an example of a supermarket cashier job description.

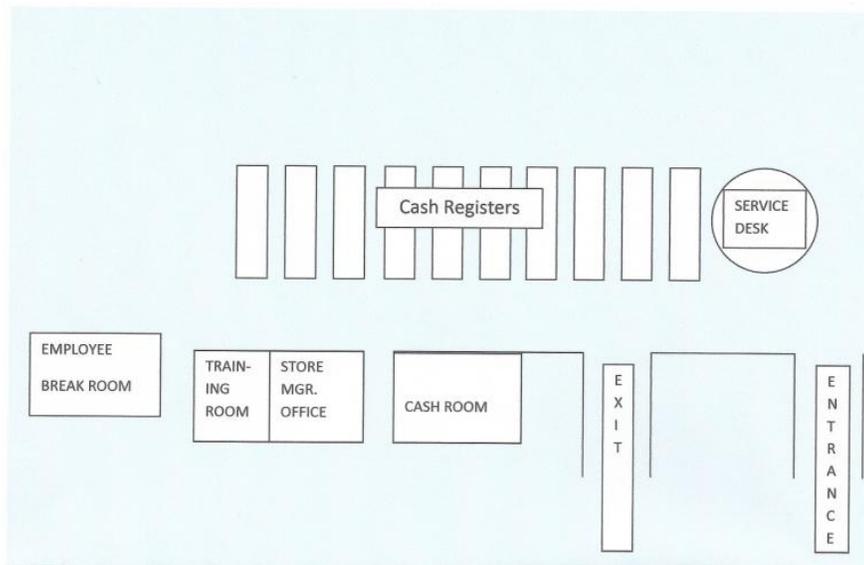


Figure 1. Magnolia Market Check-out Area

There are two levels of cashiers within the store, “line cashiers” and “office cashiers”. Cashiers generally work “the line”, meaning the registers located at the front of the store, but may also assist in other duties such as straightening displays, shelves, bagging, or collecting shopping carts from the parking lot. Office cashiers generally work at the customer service desk and the “cash room”. Figure 1, a map of a typical Magnolia Market’s check-out area, shows areas primarily used by line cashiers, and office cashiers to perform their duties. Office cashiers are responsible for directing phone calls, handling customer inquiries, money services, bank

deposits, tobacco and lottery sales, processing returned product, and ringing small orders. They may also be scheduled for line shifts. Both positions consist of full and part time employees. The position of office cashier is considered one of greater responsibility and has a higher wage scale that tops out several dollars higher than that of line cashier. Both line cashiers and office cashiers, regardless of gender, receive engraved nametags, uniform pants and shirts free of charge from the company. An office cashier receives an additional uniform piece consisting of a vest, used to identify their position as different from that of cashier.

Most Magnolia Markets are open from seven in the morning until nine at night or later. Opening and closing duties mean that some cashiers arrive as early as six in the morning and may work as late as midnight. Cashiers do not generally work the same schedule from week to week and cashiers are rarely asked to work overtime. A typical cashier work shifts ranges from five to eight hours. Cashiers are provided a thirty or sixty minute unpaid meal break, along with ten minute paid breaks, depending on the length of their shift. The workday generally involves standing for long periods of time in one place, repetitive arm movements, frequent lifting, bending, and interaction with customers and other employees. Cashiers receive periodic training to help prevent occupational injuries related to their job.

At the beginning of their shift, line cashiers are assigned to a checkout lane. If no customer is present, the cashier might stand at the front of the checkout lane and greet each customer who walks by until one enters the lane. If there is a significant amount of down time between customers, she may perform duties such as assisting with bagging at a neighboring register, straightening the magazines and candy racks, or clean the register belt and bag stand. However, when a customer enters her checkout lane, she will immediately discontinue these activities in order perform her primary job duty.

During the checkout transaction, the cashier typically follows an informal script in her interactions with the customers. This is taught to the cashier during training. She asks the customer how s/he is doing today, if s/he found everything on their shopping list today, if they would like their order in paper or plastic bags, and if they have any coupons. If the customer has a small child with them, she or her bagger will often offer to get them a balloon or coloring book. During a large transaction, she will usually interact with the customer through continued conversation about banalities such as the weather or neighborhood events. Cashiers usually keep conversation light and refrain from sharing their personal opinions on potentially divisive issues such as politics, religion, or social issues. She will also be sure that all interaction with her bagger is related to serving the customer, except during down times between customers when they may both engage in other types of conversation. She will check that each item is rung up correctly, bulk items are correctly identified and that all items are packaged by the bagger or her, watching that potentially harmful chemicals are kept separate from foods and perishable and fragile items are handled with care. Last, she tenders the order correctly, being sure that any cash given to her is legal tender and that checks and electronic transaction are approved. The cashier typically closes the checkout experience with a thank you and an invitation to return again, with the bagger then taking the customer's groceries to her or his vehicle. She then begins the same cycle with the next customer in line.

When confronted with problems during the above transactions, the cashier will typically attempt to handle it herself. Training on how to handle customer confrontations is basic in nature, with emphasis placed on remaining calm and making the situation "right". Magnolia Market employees are given wide latitude to ensure that the customer is satisfied during their shopping trip, however the cashier is sometimes unable to address their concern. If she is unable

to correct the situation, she will either send a bagger to obtain a manager for assistance, or will excuse herself from the register to seek one. It is during these instances that supermarket cashiers are often confronted with emotional challenges resulting from customer mistreatment. I discuss some of the challenges that were identified in my research in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER FIVE:**

### **EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES**

Though the cashiers in this study all report having experienced emotional challenges brought on by customers in one form or another at some point in their time working at Magnolia Markets, many have worked for the company for several years. And though some plan to pursue other job opportunities in the future; all said that they enjoy working with customers, most of the time. However, in order to succeed in dealing with the emotional difficulties brought upon by some customers during their work, cashiers must develop coping strategies. In this chapter, I describe the most frequently described emotional challenges faced by the cashiers who participated in my research and include examples of each. I also discuss differences in the types of challenges faced by cashiers of different age and level of experience.

Throughout the interview process, cashiers discussed a variety of emotional challenges they face when confronted with difficult customers, including hearing negative comments about their job, their abilities or intelligence level, being sexually harassed, yelled at, cursed at, shamed, ridiculed due to their physical appearance, threatened with bodily harm, having merchandise thrown at them and being stalked on and off the job. I have grouped the most frequently mentioned emotional challenges that cashiers reported during my interviews into three categories. These categories are stigma, verbal abuse, and sexualized mistreatment. In this section I describe these categories in detail, while also providing examples.

## **Stigma**

Cashiers expressed experiences of being stigmatized based on stereotypes associated with their job. Wildes (2004:214) found that though much research has been performed on groups who experience stigma due to stereotyping, little research has been conducted on occupational stereotypes. Job stigma has been identified by researchers as a component of work in fields such as animal shelter workers (Arluke, 2007), abortion clinic workers (Wolkomir and Powers, 2007), and restaurant workers (Paules, 1991 and Wildes, 2004). Wildes (2004:214) found that jobs within the restaurant industry suffer from a “servitude” perception, supported by the assumption that restaurant work is only a stopping point in one’s career toward better work that leads people to show a lack of respect toward the industry’s workforce. Paules (1991) went even further, including all service workers, as she explained in this excerpt.

In all branches of the media, she and other service workers, like household domestics before them, are portrayed as ignorant, incompetent, apathetic, lazy, and slow. Apart from the damage that negative stereotyping can inflict on the waitress’s self worth, it heightens the tension between server and served, predisposing the public to expect the worst from anyone on the employee side of the service counter. (Paules, 1991:9)

Some participants felt their customers have such perceptions about them. During the interviews, cashiers mentioned that some customers “looked down upon them” due to the customer’s privileged status, assuming they were uneducated and failing to acknowledge them as “fellow human beings”. Paules (1991) found that even in academia, cashier and other service workers have received little attention. She wrote at that point, “Since its founding in 1974, Work and Occupations (formally the Sociology of Work and Occupations) has published articles on male strippers, ‘taxi dancers,’ and butchers, but none on cashiers” (Paules, 1991:16). However, in the twenty-three years since Paules made this statement, some research regarding cashier service work has been published including that of Soares (1995,2001) and Tolic and Briar (1999),

Several participants noted they feel that some customers do not respect their position as cashiers and them as human beings. Some possible explanations for this that the cashiers shared were the perception that their job was unskilled, that customers assumed cashiers lacked education, and the affluence of the customers. For instance, Allie shared the feelings she had when a customer did not believe she had rung up an item at the correct price. When she explained to the customer that it was the correct price she was told she was “confused”.

And I said, it’s not a scam, I can bring a manager over here I you like (pauses) and she was like, well no, it’s ok. It’s ok now. I was like, ok (laughing) well I was only trying to help her understand. It’s frustrating, because, you know I’m much more than a cashier at Magnolia Markets. There are many dimensions to me (pauses) and the customers don’t know that. When they see me, I’m, you know, just a young girl working behind a register and there’s probably a sense of superiority for them and um, (pauses) they also know that if I say something, they can go get a manager and a manager will probably tell them something different. (Allie, 21)

Allie, a student at a state honors college, went on to explain further that she wished sometimes that her customers knew she had other interests outside of being a cashier and finds the role of cashier a limited use of her knowledge. She adds that the challenge of being viewed in her mind as low-status hurts her ego because customers (and her employer) see her as “only” a cashier.

One of my challenges is being in a role as a cashier which is a very limited use of my knowledge, knowing that I am a college student who plans on going to get a Ph.D. and no one else knows that. So, I (pauses) I’m kind of just like (pauses) lumped in with a bunch of other demographics and (pauses) I do sound really conceited now that I’m saying it (laughs) but this is how I feel- that some of my knowledge (pauses) is not (pauses) used. No one cares at Magnolia Markets. You know. No one really cares (laughs) I think, but no one really cares you know, that I’m a Ph.D. hopeful (chuckles). Things like that. (Allie, 21)

Evelyn, also college educated, chose not to find employment in her mathematics degree field or continue employment in her nursing certification career, and became a cashier due to the job’s flexible hours, in order to assist with her family’s finances. She shared some of the same emotions as Allie regarding customer’s perceptions of her.

I've had customers tell me that I apparently don't do many transactions (when errors happen) because I don't know what I'm doing. Well, the mistakes aren't my fault, usually they read a sign wrong or it was in the wrong spot. And as a cashier, just the lack of decision making and not being able to really (pauses) handle things, not having the responsibility, Um...intellectually, I feel that sometimes I'm dying out there. You know I just want to express (to customers) that I have to be learning (pauses) things all the times. I have to be engaged. I have to be mentally engaged (pauses). Now I feel it's my brain, well it might as well be shut off...I'm a drone (to the customer). (Evelyn, 52)

Both Allie and Evelyn found it difficult to fill the role of cashier, understanding that customers are not aware that they are college educated and have a thirst to learn or have a position of greater responsibility in their store. Evelyn went even further, describing her position as cashier at times as "not stimulating" and "robotic". The perception of being "only a cashier" in the eyes of some customers weighed heavily on both.

The next example shows that customers can sometimes be blunt in their assessment of their job of cashier. Here, Becky described a transaction with a customer during which a mother disparaged the position of cashier to her teenage daughter and made assumptions of Becky's potential for career success. She vividly recalled the experience in this excerpt.

There was a younger lady that came in with her daughter a couple of weeks ago and I, she had red grapes and green grapes in the same bag. So I went to take them out of the bag, to separate and weigh them and, um, and she asked why I was doing that and I explained, you know, we have to do that for inventory purposes and I put them back in the bag. And she looked at her daughter and said, "This is why you go to college, you don't want to be the one to handle food. This stupid stuff about being picky about nothing." (Becky, 25)

Becky related that she was embarrassed about the comments the customer made to her daughter and that she did not want to say anything in order to avoid upsetting the customer further. Becky added, "That's something I don't like about my job, being talked down to at my job, because I'm (supposedly) not up to their level." The embarrassment caused by the customer's comments is shown further when Becky continued.

(Pauses) I was really embarrassed...she just kept on being snotty with her daughter and murmuring something under her breath and I just remained quiet throughout the rest of the transaction. I didn't want to say anything (chuckles). But I was thinking it though (chuckles louder). (Becky, 25)

A last example of stigma can be found in the following excerpt by Cindy who felt that upper class customers looked down upon her due to her position as "servant." Her store is located adjacent to an affluent master-planned community, and she found that some customers presumably from the neighborhood tend to treat her with little respect. This is supportive of Soares (2001) whose study of supermarkets in Brazil and Canada found an increased instanced number of customer initiated harassment in rich, urban neighborhoods compared with poorer, rural ones. Cindy said:

Specifically where I'm working, you get more the higher class. Like (pauses) richer, more affluent people. And (pauses) the problem I have with them is I think they tend to a, uh, it's, almost as if like some of them have the mentality that they are better than you. And obviously I don't do anything, it's my job. I say "yes ma'am", but that definitely gets to you sometimes when they talk down to you. Kinda like you're their servant. Just because they're not in a (pauses) I guess you can say, um, a blue collar job whatever. It kinda ticks me off sometimes (laughs). I'm not gonna lie. (Cindy, 19)

I asked Cindy to provide an example of how "they talk down to you." She said that it's their "overall" attitude and tone toward her that reflect this.

But, I mean (pauses) I don't take it personally cause, I don't think that (pauses)that, you're kinda getting paid to get that attitude, that's the service industry, so I kind of expect that to come with the job. Cause a lot of times they don't get really personal, especially if you smile and "yes ma'am" them to death. I mean how can you get mad at somebody being nice to you. (Cindy, 19)

Cindy felt that because of her position, and because of her customer's affluence, she is placed in a more subservient role than she would be if her store was located in a less affluent area. By working in this community, she is more apt to be "talked down to" by her customers. She seeks to counter this with extra efforts (acting) toward creating a more identifiable and subservient role, for herself through displays of smiling and word choice (yes ma'ams) in order to change her

customer's behavior while at the same time, evaluating their behavior as not personal toward her as a person most times.

In sum, the above examples show that due to their job, cashiers perceive some customers treat them disrespect due to perceptions of the cashier's abilities and or class.

### **Verbal Abuse**

During my interviews, several participants related having been on the receiving end of profanity and verbal abuse by customers during their time as a cashier, making it the most reported type of emotional challenge among them. I define verbal abuse as comments made toward cashiers that are rude or profane yet not of a sexual nature. Several of the cashiers interviewed felt that they had no choice other than to accept this as part of their job. Some, like Cindy shared with me that they feel they are paid to accept it, concurring with the research of Hughes and Tadic (1998) discussed earlier in this paper.

Customer use of profanity, shouting, and loud complaints about cashiers abilities were the most common kinds of verbal abuse mentioned by participants. When asked if she had ever encountered a customer who used profanity toward her or her co-workers, Lori a veteran cashier responded:

Um, like there was a customer who used to come in, use to come in quite a bit and he, um he was, uh known for doing that (swearing) actually. For getting very angry and swearing at our associates, um. I usually just kinda avoided him, (laughs) if I could. (Lori, age 29)

I asked Lori how the cashiers who had to serve this customer handled being cursed at. She responded, "Usually, you just smile and finish the order and send them on their way. Invite 'em back even though you wanna, um just kinda tell them off" (Lori, age 29). Lori's experience with

this customer is hardly surprising to me because of the training cashiers receive to take care of every customer and make sure that they leave pleased.

Donna shared another example a customer who repeatedly verbally abused and used profanity when his money transfer could not be completed.

There is this one guy, um (pauses), I don't remember the whole story, something with (a wire transfer) and it wouldn't go thru or something and the guy started cursing at me and the office (cashier)..and then um...we got the manager involved and he started cussing and going out the door cussing and all of that. (Donna, 56)

In this example, Donna explained that sometimes when cashiers attempt to follow company policies, they are met with resistance from the customer. In this case, requirements for money transfers are guided by store policy as well as federal law, and all must be met to receive or send wire transfers. She also related that when cashiers seek assistance from management, sometimes the customer continues to be dissatisfied with the situation at hand, but the presence of a manager may aid in convincing the offending customer that it is in their best interest to leave. Many of the cashiers expressed their concern that customers "take it out on them" when they are only trying to perform their job correctly.

Over the years, I have repeatedly experienced customers who have a reputation among store employees for using profanity toward them often, typically in the context of phrases like, "This fucking store..." or "You fucking people..." and then completing the sentence with their complaint. I found it interesting that cashiers did not share the exact wording with me when recounting these episodes. All used terms such as "cussing," "cursing" or "swearing" when recounting their experiences. When pressed for specific details, they could recall the context of what led to the behavior, or what type of personality the customer had if they were a regular, however they could not, or would not, recall exactly what was specifically said to them.

In the next example, I show how sometimes verbal mistreatment results from the cashier providing a customer excellent service. Here, Becky explained one of the challenges that come with working the express lane.

This happened when I first became a cashier, but I always go back to it. Um, I was in the express lane and I was a cashier and he, I had a whole line. I was going at the best pace, you know, but you can only go as fast as your customers. So, I had a customer who had a problem finding her card, so she had to write out a check. Well, the guy at the end of the line *yells* at me, “Aren’t you on express?” And I say, yes, yes sir but we’re, you know we’re going as fast as we can. And he was like “Oh my God, I can’t believe this is express.” I broke down right there being embarrassed. And I cried so I had to have a manager come and take over for me. That to me was something, (pauses) for me; I can’t understand why people would yell at somebody when it’s out of their control. I can’t do nothing. Like be patient for her...then he even went to my manager and complained about me. He came up to me with (manager) and he was like, “You don’t need to have her on express.” (Becky, 25)

Becky explained that sometimes when you are performing your duties as best as you can, and are slowed down by some customers, other customers can become upset if you do not follow what they perceive to be “the rules”. She cannot understand why someone would treat her this way, when what happened was out of her control, and caused by another customer.

Not being able to control what and how comments are being delivered toward them is an emotional challenge most respondents mentioned. Lori, Donna, and Becky shared Cindy’s feeling, cited at the beginning, that dealing with verbal mistreatment was to be expected, but it did not mean that it did not affect them emotionally. For example, Becky explained to me that she has a co-worker with a disability that slows her ability to work as fast as other cashiers. She shared that her managers get complaints and that sometimes customers will leave her line and she can hear them talk about her when they check-out in an adjacent line, which makes the cashier very upset. When I asked her how this cashier and the others handle these situations, she

replied, “Um, it’s not something she or we have any control over and we try to make her feel better about it, and she, she understands that that’s just part of being a cashier (Becky, 25).

In sum, most cashiers reported that they had been recipients of verbal abuse by customers during their tenure as cashiers. This was the most frequently mentioned form of customer mistreatment identified in my research. Cashiers reported that customers have verbally abused them in different ways including use of profanity and talking in front of others about their perceived poor job performance.

### **Sexualized Mistreatment**

Last, as a store manager, I consider sexual harassment of cashiers to be among the most challenging forms of customer mistreatment to handle. Some customers I speak to, when made aware of a cashier’s distress, are of the opinion that they have done nothing wrong or did not realize that their comments were offensive. Handling harassment allegations promptly is important to ensure that cashiers are protected while working. Sometimes, however, cashiers do not make managers aware of their experiences with this type of mistreatment. During my interviews, participants related occurrences of sexualized comments ranging from verbal propositions, comments about their bodies and appearance, inappropriate remarks, and physical contact. Some reported them to their managers, others did not. Here I share some examples of these incidents.

In the first case, Cindy shared an experience with a customer she encountered at a store she previously worked at as a cashier.

I had a customer one time, and he formed kinda a fond liking to me (laughs), and it got kinda creepy, to the point that when he would come in, he refused to check out unless I

only checked him out. I usually wasn't on the floor, but I would help him when I was, and anytime he would want something or references a specific item or whatever (when I worked at customer service), he would have me come and help him, stuff like that. It was weird... It was a little bizarre (laughs) and he gave me like, his email address and his phone number (laughing). Like I kinda let it go for a little bit, cause (pauses) you know, he was a customer and, what happens, you know guys flirt with girls. (Cindy, 25)

In this example Cindy explained that while she recognized that the customer was fond of her, his continued interactions with her over time began to make her uncomfortable.

Allie, in the next excerpt, shared how she handled a similar situation.

I mean as a girl you get hit on a lot by a lot of different people and that's not pleasant. It's not invited (pauses) so, I mean that's uncomfortable. It happens fairly often. Some people (pauses) just think its ok. I try to joke with them and make it (a) more light hearted situation, so to let them know that, um, I'm not interested. And also that I'm not trying to be rude to you. (Pauses) cause I am still in my, um, professional role, so I, um, (pauses) I try to make a joke of it... It's kind of frustrating because it's like (pauses) you know if you were a man, that wouldn't be happening to you (laughs). (Allie, 21)

At the end of her description, Cindy, like Allie, characterized the customer's actions as a "normalized" sexual exchanged that is a part of her job she must deal with from time to time. And though Cindy eventually left her previous job to work at Magnolia Markets, this situation, she explained, did not contribute to her decision to do so. Additionally, neither Cindy nor Allie reported seeking assistance from management when experiencing these types of scenarios.

Sexual comments by customers about cashier's bodies and physical appearance were another area of sexual harassment reported by some participants. Such comments were recognized as more than just compliments by participants. Becky described an example of sexualized comments she was subjected to while interacting with an elderly, male customer and how she handled the situation.

As far as customers go, I do get a lot of harassment from the older guys. I just kind of shrug it off and um, there's one guy that comes in that's in a mart cart (motorized cart for customers with mobility issues) and he's always talking about my butt and red hair and I

kind of just try to be away from him when he's in the store, but he tries to follow me when he's in his cart. I go and tell my managers that I'm going to sit in the back and they're ok with that. (Becky, 25)

In this example Becky also recognized that mistreatments of a sexual nature are “a part of being a cashier”. I asked her if she had asked her managers to intervene or if they had ever said anything to this man. She said “no, I haven't” and after a pause, continued, “I just ask to be somewhere else when he's in the store (somewhere out of view from customers, such as the stock room).” She then explained that she deals with it by remaining out of sight from the customer whenever possible in order to not cause difficulty for anyone- customer, manager or herself.

In my experience, cashiers and other store employees utilize this type of avoidance quite often, and I have as well. For example, several years ago I when I first entered management, I worked at a store in which a bagger told a customer that I had reprimanded him for a performance issue. After learning this, the customer sought me out regularly to verbally admonish me for my physical appearance in front of customers and employees (I am overweight), stare at me while I performed my duties on the sales floor, and complain to upper management that I was an embarrassment to the company. Rather than confront the customer and ask him to stop this behavior (as I had done myself), upper management told me to go to the stock room or other “off the floor” areas to avoid this customer. I was told this after the customer had arranged a meeting with my superiors and asked that I be fired for confronting him. Rather than question this directive, I complied and spent the next several months avoiding the customer, until I was transferred to store in a different city. Avoidance practiced by Becky and me, is supported by some managers and provides the customer control. This strategy is in line with Rafaeli's (1989:260-261) theory that customers view cashiers (and other workers) as

liaisons between themselves and the retailer, and that since they pay the organization, customers expect to have the ability to influence how it functions.

In the next example, Allie described a conversation she had with a customer that she deemed uncomfortable due to its sexual nature. Allie began by stating that she did not feel that the customer meant to be rude but she still found his comments shocking.

Um, this older man, who, um, who I guess had some kind of surgery and he was in a mart cart and (pauses) he was saying how he was having a hard time getting up and walking and I said well that's ok, we have someone here that can help you... he (pauses) went into detail about how the operation he had affected his sex life (pauses) and I was just like, (pauses) I was taken aback. I was a little bit disgusted. (Pauses) I mean I don't think anyone should be subjected to (chuckles) hearing that. But especially as a young female, I just felt it crossed some kind of line and I was very uncomfortable, I'm sure I was like so many shades of red. (Laughs) It was really awkward. Um, I really didn't know how to resolve it so I just pretended to like I didn't hear and I continued on with my duties. (Allie, 21)

Allie reported that the customer's comments about his sex life made her uncomfortable but, like Becky's example, did not reach a level which caused her to seek assistance. Rather, she attempted to ignore them. Allie explained that she does think that the customer realizes that he is being rude or inappropriate and recognizes that he may need to be excused for his transgression.

Along with comments of a sexual nature, physical contact by customers was also reported by cashiers, including grabbing, hugging and pinching. When faced with this type of mistreatment, participants were likely to either report that they responded directly to the customer themselves or enlist the assistance of management in dealing with the situation. Cashiers explained that they felt this was a personal violation that they could not accept.

Shirley related an experience of this kind in the following excerpt.

Oh well, I had this one man that doesn't come in our store anymore because he was starting to be physical. I mean, he was an older man. Just (pauses) he wanted to hold

hands and hug me all the time so we finally had to tell him to leave (Ms. Shirley had notified management when these occurrences continued). They did view that on camera, it was the straw that broke the camel's back or however that expression goes. He just literally hugged me and wouldn't let go... That was resolved and he came up (later) to give me a hug. He came really, really close and I had to say, "Stop! You're not allowed to put your hands on me anymore. You know I'm a married woman". He never showed himself around again. (Shirley, 42)

Shirley not only reported to her manager that the customer had made continuous attempts to hold her hand and hug her but also, once told that he needed to stop this behavior, she had to tell the man directly to "Stop!," when he tried the same behavior again. Also, unlike in the previous example, the manager met with the customer on the cashier's behalf in an attempt to put an end to his behavior. Shirley felt supported by her managers when she enlisted their help and appreciated that they did so, however she did express a sense of regret for the customer, telling me that he only attempted to hug her that last time in an attempt to apologize.

Next, Wanda shared an example of inappropriate touching that she experienced while working. She told the story of a customer who had continuously caused problems with cashiers throughout her time at the store. This is how she related her experience.

Yeah, there's a guy who comes in, that's always asking (name of cashier) for money or if she has any cigarettes and he comes over and slaps me on the rear! And I said, 'Don't you ever touch me again. I don't know you, you don't know me. Don't you ever touch me!' and one of the girls were (sic) bagging for the guy next to me and she said, 'You really snapped.' I don't, don't, it's not right. He knew and then he finally came in again and (name of manager) said (to the customer) that he heard you slapped one our cashiers on the rear end and you've been talkin' to this girl, trying to get money. You don't need to come in here anymore. Well gee whiz, if I'd slapped him (the customer), I would've been fired (laughs). (Wanda, 69)

Here we see an example of a cashier handling the mistreatment directly and also reporting it to management for further investigation and action. Wanda forcefully informed the customer that it was not appropriate to touch her and let him know what he did was wrong. Later, when management interceded, Wanda questioned management's response to the assault, stating that

though the customer is told not to return to the store, she may have lost her job, had she slapped the customer for slapping her.

Similar to these instances in which cashiers received at least some help from their manager, I recently had a cashier share with me that a white, middle aged, male customer was making comments on a near daily basis to her that made her uncomfortable. Julie, the assistant manager who made me aware of this, asked that I speak to Paula, aged 22. Paula explained that the customer made continuous remarks about her hair, particularly if it was styled differently or in a style he did not prefer, commented on her physical appearance, stating she was “beautiful” or “very pretty”, asked about her ethnicity, and had asked her to join him for a swim at his house, adding “I bet you would look good in a bathing suit.” When he felt that Paula was attempting to avoid contact with him when he entered the store or was not fully engaged in conversation with him during the checkout encounter (which Paula attributed to her feelings of discomfort with the customer), he told her that he did feel she was providing good customer service and would ask why she was acting in such a manner. Julie reported that he acted similarly toward her (a manager) and another cashier. All are in their early twenties and female.

I asked those with knowledge of the customer’s appearance that I be notified the next time the customer was in the store. Within a few days, I was approached by Julie who pointed the customer out to me and I met him at his vehicle after observing him proceed through checkout. I identified myself and shared the concerns that I had with the behavior he had exhibited toward the cashiers, emphasizing that it was making them uncomfortable and that is was inappropriate to comment on their physical appearance or request they join him at his home for a swim. Further, I explained that if I received further reports of like behavior, I would need to have him banned from entering the store via a police-issued no-trespass notice. The customer

listened respectfully, shared that he meant no harm toward the cashiers, and asked that I apologize on his behalf. The customer, as of this time, has not returned to the store that I am aware of.

With these examples of sexualized mistreatment, we again see that cashiers face another emotional challenge that, should they choose to respond back to the customer, puts them at odds with the duties they are expected to perform. These interactions recall Korczynski and Ott's (2004) theory of the "customer as sovereign over the cashier", and perhaps this lends a feeling of "legitimacy" to the customer for acting in such a manner. However, compared with stigma and verbal abuse, cashiers seem less likely to tolerate such behavior from their customers.

All in all, through my interviews I found that cashiers experience a variety of challenges related to mistreatment by customers including stigma, verbal abuse, and sexualized behaviors. Among these challenges, cashiers appear more apt to attempt themselves or enlist management to stop sexualized mistreatment by customers and the resulting feelings. In the next section, I discuss if customer mistreatment are connected to the cashier's age or level of experience on the job.

### **Challenges by Age and Experience**

As part of my research, I wanted to identify if there was a difference in the emotional challenges participants reported based on age or time on the job. It has been my experience as a store manager that younger cashiers tend to report more incidents of all types of mistreatment, while older cashiers are less likely to. Additionally, in my perception, the most severe mistreatment from customers seemed aimed toward younger cashiers. When I looked at my participants' interview data by age, I found all of the younger cashiers reported mistreatments related to

stigma, while only half of the older cashiers did. When I looked at verbal abuse data, I found that for both age groups, about half of participants reported having experienced it. Last, when examining the interviews of those who shared sexualized mistreatment occurrences, again about half of participants in each age group said they had. In sum, both younger and older cashiers report experiences with sexualized and verbal abuse at about the same level, while double the number of younger cashiers experienced stigma, compared with older cashiers.

When I looked at the data based on job experience, I came to the same conclusions. This was because cashiers who were younger had much less experience on the job, which resulted in cashiers, grouped the same as they had been when I looked at age.

. A study of client/customer incidents of sexualized mistreatment among 3,445 female supermarket workers in a mid-Atlantic supermarket chain reported by Gettman and Gelfand (2007) with an average participant age forty- six percent over 40 or over, found that 50% of woman reported some type of sexual harassment by their customers. I found my data to be comparable. Gettman and Gelfand did not focus on the other forms of mistreatments I examined in this study. I realized that the usefulness of my analysis was limited due to its small number of cases, but I did find the data somewhat at odds with my preconceived notions of who is most often subjected to mistreatment and what types. In particular, I was surprised to see that there was little variation between the groups, except for stigma. My thoughts were that perhaps younger cashiers are more prone to report these behaviors to management or deem this type of mistreatment as more severe, than older cashiers. I believed this pattern occurs because with experience, older cashiers tend to “handle” these situations themselves, without providing management knowledge of them.

The above examples represent only three types of emotional challenges faced by the supermarket cashiers who participated in this study. Stigma, verbal abuses, and sexual mistreatments represent the largest categories of challenges that these cashiers reported in their interactions with customers. There were others, including threats of bodily harm, fraud, stalking, and ridicule due to physical appearance that were not discussed here. In the next chapter, I will discuss the emotion strategies I discovered cashiers utilize to cope with these challenges.

## CHAPTER SIX:

### STRATEGIES OF MANAGING EMOTION

Previous research into emotion management strategies finds that service employees utilize a variety of coping methods. These include Hochschild (2012) who found flight attendants utilize surface and deep acting skills in their dealings with passengers, Stenross and Kleinman, (1989) who found that police detectives face difficulty when they must sympathize with victims who then do not cooperate with prosecutors, and Arluke (2007), who found that animal shelter workers transformed shelter animals into “virtual pets” in order to handle their emotions due to euthanizing shelter animals. I have divided the emotion management strategies used by cashiers into two main types: interpersonal and private. Interpersonal strategies- those involving the cashiers along with others- include peer support, and enlisting the manager. Personal strategies- those involving the cashier alone- include doing service and forgiving the customer. Other, less common, strategies mentioned included changing jobs, talking to relatives who have worked or continue to work retail jobs, crying at home, and blaming other employees. Each cashier interviewed described situations where she had utilized some of these strategies. Next, I discuss in detail each category and strategy identified.

#### **Interpersonal Strategies**

In her 2008 book *Checkout Girl*, former supermarket cashier and now supermarket consultant Anna Sam wrote about the “the little incidents that fill the day of a cashier.” (Sam 2008:9).

Written in a comedic style, Sam describes dealing with customer mistreatment similar to many of the incidents participants in this research described. She goes on to acknowledge her appreciation of those whom she worked with and the support, training, and friendship they provided. She writes that these relationships were so deep, that even on her last day of her job as a cashier, when most might be only half-heartedly performing their job duties, she took special care to ensure that her conveyor belt and the rest of her checkout station was cleaned particularly good for the colleague that would take her place the next day (Sam, 2008:176-177).

A similar sense of co-worker bond was mentioned by several of the cashiers I interviewed. They mentioned that the cashiers and other employees looked out for one another in different ways and provide a sense of support. Realizing that others have had the same experiences, and that they “are on the line each day” like them, provides cashiers with emotional comfort that helps them manage their work day, as I show next.

### **Peer Support**

Should a cashier need support from a co-worker, one is usually available either at a nearby register, the customer service desk, or in the store break room. Each of these areas allows cashiers space to develop a network of co-workers to interact with. The flexible schedule of cashiers, which usually does not allow set shifts, also enhances these networks by “mixing up” which cashiers are working together at any given time. After working at the store only a few days, even novice or transferred cashiers begin to be included in peer group networking due to the flexible design of the workplace schedule. In her qualitative study of friendships Cronin (2013) found that the workplace is a key area for developing relationships. She argued that workplace friends help relieve the stresses of the job and provide understanding. She also found

friendships can influence employees' emotional experiences within the workplace, and these friendships tend to cut across social characteristics such as age and race, drawing together people who may not otherwise meet and "shapes friendships in distinctive ways due to work's structures, demands, hierarchies and, indeed, negative experiences" (Cronin, 2013:4).

Here I discuss how some participants describe their work based relationships. Some cashiers expressed that the people they worked with were like members of their family. They shared that they were comfortable coming to coworkers for advice and felt that they could count on them for support. This is how Lori feels about the people she works with.

Anyhow, when I come in, I speak to the others (employees) and say hello and see how they are doing. To me, I think it's a good way to build morale with everybody. I really love the people I work with and I think it makes it a lot easier to come in because you, for the most part, I feel that we have some really good people here. Even at the other stores I've worked at, I've always had a really good group of people that I've worked with. You definitely spend more time here than I ever did at the other two jobs I had with coworkers. I mean as a (substitute) teacher you're pretty much on your own. So you're with the students, you're not with the other teachers that much...But it's definitely, you hear a lot of people talk about your "Magnolia Market" family and I think there is a lot of truth to that. (Lori, 29)

Lori made it a point to greet the cashiers she works with each day when she arrives at work. And she spoke of how it helps maintain morale. She shared that she enjoys the increased co-worker interaction, compared to her previous work as a substitute teacher.

This "feeling like family" among checkout area workers at Magnolia Markets was mentioned by most participants. Here, Becky spoke about the relationships she has built with her co-workers.

Um, like my favorite thing about coming to work are the cashiers and the baggers. The relationships that I have with them are like you really can't compete with that. Some are better friends than you have outside. They are people you really want to see every day and make sure that they're doing ok. I like the fact that they like to talk to me and if they are having a bad day, they can talk to me and tell me what's going on. They have a

relationship with me. I think that's my favorite part of the job. They're not afraid to talk to me about these things, so I can kinda help them out. (Becky, 25)

Becky enjoyed interacting with her co-workers and felt that it is important to maintain these relationships. They helped her and her co-workers get through any difficult situations they might be experiencing, both at work and outside of work. She enjoyed knowing that she is there to provide assistance and that her colleagues feel comfortable coming to her. Her comments echo Cronin (2013:5) who found that the difficulties co-workers face at their work open up an emotional space to discuss personal issues, and that over time, the contact and shared experiences create strong interpersonal bonds.

I found it intriguing that Becky told me that she felt some of the friendships she had at work were even better than those outside of work. I asked her what she meant.

“It's just, (pauses) I can count on them every day. You have those friendships out of work, you want to get together with them for lunch and hang out a lot, but you don't always know where they are or they might have other plans. But when I'm here (work). I know they have to be here because they are on the schedule and they have to hang out with me because I'm here (chuckles). (Becky, 25)

Becky enjoyed the fact that she can count on seeing her work based friends on a routine basis and that she need only look at the schedule to see who she can make lunch plans with. Also, she liked knowing that “they have to hang out” with her because they are already at work. Though she chuckled that her co-workers “have to hang out because I'm here,” her comments point to the fact that there is a bond between her and colleagues.

In the next example, Becky explained how she attempts to maintain these bonds when dealing with customers.

The couponers like to fight about what they can and can't do, like I can do it at this store and you're not letting me do it here. And I, um, feel bad saying no, but I have to stand my ground. I was told what the policy is and I like to go by the book. So I like stand

behind the policy and I know my other cashiers are told about the policy, so when I come up and let the customer take the coupon, I feel like I'm betraying my cashiers. So I need to back them up like they do me. (Becky, 25)

If she were to make an exception for a customer who wanted to break store policy regarding the use of a coupon, Becky felt that she would be "betraying" the relationship she has built with her co-workers. Rather than bend the rules for customers and fulfill the prescribed notion of cashier as servant previously discussed, Becky used policy to "protect" relationships that are personally more important to her, those of her co-workers.

Becky added, "If the customer continues to complain, I'll get a manager." This is distinct from Paules' (1991:147-148) description of waitresses who fail to become involved with their co-worker's interactions with customer. Becky's refusal to bend the coupon policy when presented the opportunity to do so by another cashier's customer, contrasts with Paules' (1991:147) example of a waitress who failed to reprimand the customers who doused her friend with soda during a food fight.

In sum, I found that cashiers see their peers as surrogate family and utilize peer support to enhance their emotional well-being, either through helping others or being helped themselves. They reported that feeling good about the people you work with and having camaraderie made them feel better about their job. I believe co-worker support to be a common emotional coping device which is supported in part by Lively (2000) who studied paralegals and found that co-workers manage each other's emotions by providing colleagues the support needed to manage both clients and attorneys emotions. Also, Sloan (2004) in her quantitative analysis of survey data from a large corporation found that workers often seek the support of co-workers rather than dealing with emotions on their own.

## **Enlisting the Manager**

At Magnolia Markets, almost all store and department managers have been promoted from within the company's ranks, most having begun their careers as part-time cashiers and other employees. Employees and managers are both encouraged to maintain open lines of communication to avoid potential future problems. The hope is that this will allow employees to feel comfortable with their managers and that managers understand the concerns they have regarding customer mistreatment. In the following excerpts, cashiers share how managers have assisted them in dealings with difficult customers.

In the first example, Allie explained how the store manager was enlisted to deal with a customer who mistreated a cashier at the register next to her. She explained that the customer had entered Martha's register line and then picked up a candy bar and threw it, hitting her in the head.

Martha had a candy bar thrown at her. One day a customer was, (pauses) just very unhappy or something. I don't know, I was there, and nothing seems to be going amiss. And all of a sudden, she had a candy bar thrown at her and she was, you know, understandable, shaken up, but ok. (Allie, 25)

After my initial shock about hearing this incident wore off, I asked Allie how the situation was handled. She explained.

We don't expect, like, physical abuse from customers. So, like, nothing like that has ever happened to me but uh, I know that she was upset because she was re-telling the story later and she was (pauses), you know, obviously upset about it. But, um I don't know how she handled it while the customer was still there. The store manager was told and the next time the customer came in he was called. He told the customer to leave and not come back. (Allie, 25)

Allie added the following when I asked her if she can count on her manager's support when difficulties with customers happen.

I can honestly say since I've been at this store (pauses) I've had almost the same set of managers...I haven't had any issues. Every, any issue I've had has been resolved. They've actually cared about it. Which felt (pauses) nice. So you know, that someone cares. I've had a good experience. (Allie, 25)

Cashiers reported managers used different methods to handle cashier mistreatment that was reported to them. Some participants said that when customers mistreated them or their coworkers, their managers were often ready and willing to respond directly to the offender in order to protect the cashier, insisting that the customer leave the store. Others said some managers avoided direct contact confrontation with the customer or attempted to appease customers to get them to leave as soon as possible. Suzy reported the following incident.

Um, there's just a couple of managers in the store that I really don't think understand half the stuff we go through (enforcing office policies). They do or say anything to them (when customers complain) to make them happy and I'm not the only one who feels that way, but, um (pauses). It just doesn't make sense to me...it's like hypocritical. They say they support you (cashiers), and then go back on their word. (Suzy, 23)

Here, Suzy shared that not all managers support cashiers who receive complaints. The hypocrisy of being trained and told to perform tasks in a specific way, and then witnessing some managers allowing deviations from the rules to complaining customers was upsetting to her. Not all cashiers experienced this though.

In the next example, Becky explained how her manager helped her deal with the stress that comes with managing her emotions when upset by a customer.

Sometimes I'll get help, um if it's really bad. I'll talk to my store manager. The store manager I have now, I have a really good relationship with. So if something is getting to me I'll go sit in his office and tell him what happened. And he is really good at kind of explaining, um, I guess why these things happen and what he's done in this situation. And he helps me get out of it. (Becky, 25)

When responding to my question about how she handles her emotions when customers make her upset, Becky acknowledged that her manager was there for her and that she could count on his

support for offering assistance which not only allowed her to share her feelings, but also provided answers. She sought him out as an experienced mentor who has faced similar predicaments. He not only was offering explanations, but also added his own practical experiences when speaking with her. By doing this, Becky said she felt better, knowing that her manager understood the emotional upset that can be created by customer conflicts, and that he himself has experienced them, which allowed for additional conversation about how to work through them on her own.

The strategy of enlisting the manager is useful in not only diffusing disruptive situations and reducing the potential for future ones at the check-out stand, but is also useful as a learning tool, as Becky's example shows. Managers who listen, teach, and explain have the opportunity to provide cashiers with not only some of the tools needed to manage emotion, but also provide practical outcomes of protection and prevention of retaliation from customers. Combined, the strategies of enlisting the manager and peer support offer alternatives to the personal strategies I will discuss next.

### **Personal Strategies**

Other strategies that I found in my research include the personal techniques participants use to manage their emotions on their own, such as acting professionally and forgiving the customer. Cashiers used these strategies to protect themselves from taking mistreatments directed toward them personally. These strategies allowed the cashiers to deflect the words or actions directed toward them, thus creating an emotional shield of sorts. Combined, both sets of strategies are forms of Hochschild's (2012) concept of acting, where workers suppress their emotions in order to fulfill the image expected by employers and customers. Here, I describe learned processes

cashiers have developed in order to deal with their jobs and become part of their daily work habits, habits that are taught in training such as smiling, not speaking about non-service related topics to others in the presence of customers, word choice and tone when interacting with upset customers, and being sensitive to one's body language. Through the development of these and other habits, cashiers explained they are better skilled at handling negative customer experiences.

### **Acting Professionally**

Several of the cashiers reported that they utilize the following technique to control negative emotions brought about by their customers.

More than just pretending to be cheerful, cashiers reported that they had developed rituals, voice inflections, body language and mental skills that they use to “act the part” of the cheerful, supermarket cashier, even when it conflicted with their actual feelings. By focusing on the goal of moving the customer on away from them, they feel that this type of acting not only prevents customers from complaining to management, but it also aids in not taking the mistreatment personally.

In the first example, Lori explained how she starts her shift and how social expectations of her personality at work guide her acting.

Um, I mean, I feel like when I come in, if there is something going on with me outside of work, I can simply leave it at the front door. If I am in a bad mood, I don't think it ever shows. Um, it's like as soon as I get to work, I change. It's odd. It's as if you hit the door, it's a different person. I guess. Uh, I'm a happy person most of the time. I feel like I definitely put on more of a front when I'm here, if that makes sense. It's like a mask. Working in customer service you're supposed to be happy and helpful and nobody wants to talk to you if you are in a bad mood. (Lori, 29)

In this example, Lori's told me that expectations of her personality are sometimes at odds with how she actually feels. Lori understood, as an experience cashier, that she needed to "do service" even when she did not feel up to it, because it is a requirement of her job. In order to combat this, Lori created a mental line, the front door of the store, to delineate where her true emotional self ends and her work self begins. By putting on "more of a front" when she is there, she limited her exposure to negative interactions with customers who expect cashiers to be happy and helpful.

Lori shared another example of "acting the part" when she explained how she dealt one on one with a customer she presumed to be disrespectful of her knowledge and abilities.

I was checking the price for a customer, um, in the wine section which can be (pauses) crazy. Um, so I was looking over the Pinot Grigio. I'm looking over the Pinot Grigio, and, well there are two sections of them. So I'm looking for one and she comes over and says, "Um, the Pinot Grigio is over here." You know. Just the way she said it. (Pauses, softer tone). And I said, "Oh. Ok. Well there are some over here as well." So you know you have to be nice about it and not, um, snap back. Which can be hard sometimes, but I guess, It's a way of you know, you're not being nasty about it, but uh, just kinda telling them, but it does make you feel a little better sometimes. To say those things, but it's all in the way you say it. (Lori, 29)

Again in this example, Lori realized the importance of acting in her defined role of cashier.

Though irritated that the customer assumes she cannot determine where Pinot Grigio is located, Lori was determined to prove that she does, while at the same time teaching the customer that imported and domestic wines are found in different locations. Using a softer voice and cooing "oh, ok" reinforces the concept of "the customer is always right" while saying, "well, there are some over here as well" in the same voice, lessened the emotional weight of being talked down to. In effect Lori had "mouthed off" to the customer without it being recognized. This is reminiscent of Hochschild's (2012:111-112) experience with flight attendants who "reframe" confrontations with customers utilizing deep acting skills of word choice and tone.

Not all cashiers said that they are as careful to employ the techniques like Lori used, but some used a similar method to communicate with the customer. In this example, Allie was more direct toward her customer but she still remembered that she must be professional.

I don't remember the specific scenario...the customer said something rude and profane to me and I just said, I'd appreciate it if you didn't use that kind of language (says it with a smile and cheery voice). Um, I'm doing the best I can and (pauses) I was actually proud of myself that I handled it that way because, sometimes, you can be too aggressive, or sometimes you can be a push over and I felt like I found a happy medium for that. (Allie, 21)

Allie expressed her displeasure with customers who are rude or use profanity immediately when it occurred. She did so by changing her level of voice as a means to disarm the customer. She used a professional tone but was direct in her word choice, succinctly expressing her displeasure with the customer's language. She added that by doing this she usually gets her point across and sometimes the customer apologizes as well. Yet she also made sure to not deviate too far from her prescribed role.

In the next example, Becky utilized deep acting to control her emotions when she was mistreated. She explained that after she felt embarrassed by the male customer who complained to her manager because she allowed another customer to write a check and then cried, she decided she would not let that happen again. She explained:

I, like, progressed in my job and learned how to handle it better. I just know, like it's I feel like to break down and cry is unprofessional. And I always want to be at best at all times, so, if I am faced with a moment that I feel like I'm breaking down, I put my A game on and I think about why my job is important to me and I don't want anybody to see me weak. I, I wait until I get home. By that time, it's out of my head anyway. I always tell myself to push it, push it back; don't worry about it right now. Just breathe and do your job. Done. (Becky, 25)

Becky shared it is important to her that customers do not see their remarks have an effect on her emotions. She worked to remain focused on the job at hand and bury any negative emotions

away until after her shift with the hope that she would forget them by then. She also reminded herself of the importance of her job and her need to control the image that others have of her. She told me it is experience on the job led her to develop these coping skills. This is not unlike Smith and Kleinman (1989:59) who studied medical school student's contacts with the living and the dead, and found that students tend to invoke a "code of silence" that encourages them to keep feelings private and think about their problems individually, outside of the medical school experience.

These examples of acting professionally show how cashiers perform the role of cashier, while at the same time, managing their emotions. Participants utilized "acting" skills in their work including pre-shift rituals, voice inflections, body language and deep thought that are similar to those used by service workers in previous research advanced by Hochschild (2012), Smith and Kleinman (1989) and others. By acting professionally, cashiers are able to fulfill the customer's and employer's expectations while at the same time; they can move past the mistreatment and focus on their next tasks at hand.

### **Forgiving the Customer**

A final common theme among many cashier's personal strategies of coping with customer mistreatment in my research was to "forgive the customer". Sometimes, cashiers believed that it was not the customers' fault that they were treating them poorly. Thinking in this manner helped the cashiers manage their reactions to being treated poorly. Instead of becoming upset or taking the mistreatment personally, participants shared that by "explaining" to themselves why their customer treated them poorly allowed them to move past it.

In my first example, Allie explained her reasoning for why customers sometimes mistreat her.

Um, some customers, I try not to take it personally because I always try to tell myself that there's probably something going on outside of the situation that's affecting them and I don't know the whole story, but some customers are just not (pauses) pleasant. They don't want to be helped. (Allie, 21)

Here Allie related that sometimes, no matter how much she tries, some customers will not respond to her pleasantries. Rather than allow the customer's reaction to upset her, Allie concluded it is not her fault and thus she lets the situation run its course, rather than dwell on it. Suzie takes a similar approach in the following excerpt.

I try not to take it personally because of a few reasons. A, I would like to keep my job (laughs) and B, at the end of the day, I mean they're really no one to me. They're just a customer and so after I leave there, they are not going to be coming home with me and (pauses) you know what I'm saying. So you kinda have to take it with a grain of salt and realize that it's not personal. It's probably, they treat everybody that way. Either that or they're taking it out on you because they had a bad day and they can't take it out on anybody else. (Suzie, 19)

Likewise, Suzie took the approach that it is the customer, and not her, who is responsible for the mistreatment aimed toward her. She says that "it's not personal" and recognized that some people are just not friendly or having a bad day and used her as an outlet to release their negativity. Suzie described these types of situations as having no influence on her emotions because, to her, they are "no one" outside of the role she plays while being paid.

In my final example, Shirley described yet a different point of view toward handling this type of customer, in part due to her religious beliefs.

You know, they do come in with their mood swings, but I brighten up, brighten up their day. You know, I can say sense that they're lonely. I can (pauses) I just feel like (pauses) I'm a Christian, so God gave me the gift to encourage people. So I enjoy doing that. (Shirley, 42)

Shirley saw forgiving her customers for their “mood swings” as part of her being a Christian. She explained to me she feels she has a “God given gift to help those who are lonely and of forgiveness” and when she senses loneliness when confronted with customers who are displaying negativity, she attempts to cheer them up or give words of encouragement. Her belief that it is part of a Christian’s role to assist customers through their day with friendliness and forgiveness, and the thought that she is helping them emotionally helped influence positive emotional reactions to the mistreatment she faced.

The strategy of forgiving the customer was found to be a very effective tool of emotion management. Cashiers developed reasons why customers acted they way in which they did toward them that did not include personal responsibility, but put the blame on other influences outside the customer’s control. This strategy of empathy toward the customer is a form of deep acting similarly used by flight attendants (Hochschild, 2012:95, 105-106) that involves visualizing the customer’s emotional state and needs, and then either explaining away the mistreatment or attempting to improve the customer’s emotions, another deep acting skill.

### **Strategies by Age and Experience**

It is important to note that those cashiers without prior retail experience did not come to work at Magnolia Markets with all of the emotion management strategies I have mentioned. These are strategies that are developed in a variety of ways including formal job training (appearance and behavior standards), manager conduct (the approachability and compassion of the manager to assist her cashiers and other employees), observation of others, and discussion with peers. For some, such as Shirley (religion) and Becky (inner strength), personal strategies which were learned outside of work, have become incorporated with their workplace activities.

I did notice some differences between the participants strategies based on age or experience. While both newer and more experienced cashiers mentioned that they often utilize interpersonal and personal strategies, younger, less experienced cashiers reported they utilize enlisting the manager more often than older, more experienced cashiers. Additionally, younger cashiers, both experienced and less experienced, seemed to utilize the strategy of acting professionally more often than older cashiers. Finally, both older and younger cashiers reported utilizing peer support and forgiving the customer strategies equally.

To conclude, cashiers manage the emotional challenges of customer mistreatment through the utilization several strategies which I described in this analysis. First, I investigated the interpersonal techniques cashiers use to perform their job duties and deal with the emotions caused by these types of customer interactions. I examined the role that Magnolia Market co-workers play in maintaining networks of emotional support among cashiers. I found that work based relationships allow cashiers to feel comfortable sharing their concerns with each other. Cashiers expressed how much they appreciate their coworkers and how they look forward to spending time with them. Additionally, I found that by helping each other, some cashiers are able to feel better about emotional issues outside of work as well.

Next, I examined the role that managers have in assisting cashiers emotions at work. I found that managers not only assist cashiers by involving themselves in immediate situations of customer mistreatment, but by following up with them, and then speaking to offending customers about these situations at a later time, cashiers develop confidence in their managers' ability to assist them at these times, possibly protecting the cashier from further customer harm.

Third, I examined the strategy of "acting professional" and in particular, how Hochschild's (2012) notion of acting assists a cashier's ability to manage emotion. I discovered

that cashiers attempt to block negative emotions through productions including utilization of body language and vocalization and utilize “deep thought” techniques. Some cashiers were more direct than others in their efforts to mediate the customer encounter, however each recognized the need to remain professional.

Last, I found that in order to deal with the mistreatments they are sometimes confronted with cashiers sometimes forgive their perpetrators. Here, the cashier denied that the customer was at fault for their offensive behavior, yet instead allowed that circumstances beyond either person’s control caused it. Cashiers determined that events outside of the store were to blame for the customer’s behavior toward them and decided not to let the behavior affect their job performance, and in Shirley’s case, even found an opportunity to fulfill their personal mission to assist others.

In the next chapter, I summarize my findings, point out limitations of my study, provide suggestions for future research, and offer ideas for future policy.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN:**

### **CONCLUSION**

Performing service work in any context requires the careful balance of meeting both the customers' and the employers' needs while, at the same time, maintaining one's ability to perform work effectively. For supermarket cashiers and other service workers this can be especially challenging due to the constraints of their jobs, particularly the frequency of service encounters, relative immobility while working and socially prescribed service expectations. Other people's respect for service jobs and those who fill them are marginalized due to the stigma of negative portrayals in media of service workers which have created a societal expectation of "service as servitude" (Paules, 1991:138-139). At the same time, supermarket cashiers have the expectations of their employer to act as ambassadors of the image that the company seeks to portray, and do this in a position generally thought of by most outsiders as low status and temporary and not a respectable choice of career.

Cashiers face numerous challenges each day at work including long hours of standing, work shifts that constantly fluctuate, a large volume of customers, relatively low pay, and surveillance by customers and their employers. In addition to these challenges cashiers sometimes face mistreatment by customers. Such mistreatment can come in many different varieties and cashiers have developed a number of emotion work strategies to help overcome them.

In this study, my primary interests were first to find out what types of mistreatments cashiers face during their workday at the hands of customers, and second, how cashiers manage the emotions associated with them. Having once been a supermarket cashier myself and having almost thirty years of work experience in this industry, I knew at the beginning that situations involving employees and customers can sometimes be difficult. However, as a male, and now a supermarket store manager, I understood that both of these attributes prevented me from having a fuller understanding of the situations faced, and the coping skills used, by the majority female workers in this profession. Though I was not surprised by the examples of mistreatment cashiers reported, I was moved by the candor and honesty each participant exhibited when relating these experiences to me. Additionally, I was encouraged by the fact that several cashiers saw not only their peers but also their managers, as part of a support network that helped them through the emotional upheaval customer situations can cause.

The qualitative data collected in this research show that cashiers primarily face three types of emotional challenges when dealing customers. These are stigma, verbal abuses, and sexualized mistreatments. Stigma was reported most often as an overall failure of the customer to value the cashier as a human being and as low status, uneducated, unintelligent and without ambition in accordance with existing cultural stereotypes. Verbal abuses were most often reported to be the use of profanity and rudeness by customers. Sexualized mistreatments were usually reported as either requests for dates, crude remarks with a sexual tone, and customers grabbing, pinching or hugging cashiers. All cashiers who participated in this study had experienced at least one type of these challenges, with verbal abuses and lack of respect (stigma) being the ones most often reported. In sum, there was little difference among the number of reported incidents by age group.

To respond and overcome these challenges, cashiers develop emotion management skills, or a series of strategies. The data show that cashiers in my study utilized two types of emotion management skills, interpersonal and personal strategies. Interpersonal strategies at work consist primarily of peer support, which allows the cashier to both assist herself and others based on the experiences they share. At times, cashiers also enlist the managers for support. In these instances, cashiers seek not only immediate support when mistreatment incidents occur, but also seek advice based upon the manager's own experiences dealing with these situations.

Personal strategies consist of cashiers "acting professionally" and "forgiving the customer". Acting professionally consists of surface and deep acting skills first described by Hochschild (2012) in order to fulfill service work expectations, which includes friendly smile, cheerfulness, and subservient demeanor. Here, cashiers described things like "psyching themselves up" for the day's events and utilizing differing vocal inflections and body language to suppress negative emotion in order to maintain a cheerful disposition. Cashiers also identified "forgiving the customer" as an effective strategy to reduce the likelihood of personal insult or injury. In these cases, cashiers reported that they blamed the customers' bad behavior not on the customer themselves, yet on outside influences that have caused these actions.

In sum, the research I conducted found that all supermarket cashiers have experienced customer mistreatment at one time or another, and all have developed ways of managing the emotions that come with them. I hypothesize based on the interviews I conducted, as well as my own experience, that cashiers normalize these mistreatments after they start working and begin developing ways of handling these challenges.

If I could go back and change some aspects of my research, I would have asked all participants when they experienced their very first customer based challenge as a cashier and how they handled it. This would have allowed me to better understand when and how they developed their coping strategies. Additionally, I would have been more thorough in my follow up questions during interviews, paying more attention to the subtleties of the participant's experiences by asking more probing questions, particularly what the customers' specifically said.

My research has several limitations. The study group consists of cashiers working at only one supermarket chain in a two county area of southwest Florida. Additionally, study group participants did not include persons of multiple ethnicities or genders, greater diversity of participants would have allowed me to compare and contrast experiences and coping among these various groups in more.

Next, the research does not address possible differences between Magnolia Market cashier experiences and those of cashiers from competitors. Magnolia Markets places a high priority on customer service while other supermarket chains do not, including workers at chains which place a lower priority on customer may have resulted in different findings.

Lastly, this study does not include observational data. Rafaeli (1990: 627-628), who studied cashier/customer interaction, included observations of 194 transactions between customers and cashiers at five Israeli supermarkets in his research. Covert observation of cashier and customer interactions, such as those performed by Rafaeli, would allow richer ethnographic observation data of mistreatment occurrences and thus allow the researcher to include descriptions of word choices, tone, body language, and other characteristics important to this research.

My research fills gaps noted by Paules (1991), Hochschild (2012) and others who argued that previous workplace research tended to focus on higher status occupations or those that tend to be filled by men. Additionally, Gettman and Gelfand (2007:757) found that research into women's experiences of harassment in the workplace has tended to focus primarily on those working within the organization, not customers. They argued that the growth of service industry employment warranted more investigations of harassment by customers.

The number of employees working in the service industries continues to grow. In 2000, over 20 million people were employed in these jobs (Delaurier, 2001). This research contributes insights to literature that are not readily available. The supermarket store cashier has been a ubiquitous part of daily life since the opening of the first self service grocery stores in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For over 100 years, cashiers have rung up customers' orders and throughout this time, they have most likely experienced situations similar to those described in this research. Yet, thus far, academics have paid little attention to investigating these concerns. My research attempts to help fill this gap.

Among other things, further research should explore how managers can better serve their employees who are subjected to the situations mentioned in this research. Knowing that cashiers are subjected to customer mistreatments, and given that companies can and have been found responsible for damage inflicted upon workers by customers, it would be helpful to know more about the long term emotional and physical problems veteran cashiers may experience due to performing their work. Next, we need to know what supermarket companies can do to develop formalized procedures that not only teach cashiers what to do when customer actions cross certain boundaries, yet also prescribe how and what managers must do to protect the company, and more importantly, the workers. Cashiers in my study reported that their managers responded

to situations in many different ways. Leaving it up to the cashier to handle issues on her own should not be the most common option. Last, greater attention should be paid to the possible policy implications. My evidence shows that harassment of female cashiers by customers is prevalent, and that it may represent a barrier to women's advancement in the workplace. Increased attention to this behavior may lead to government driven education, policies, and stiffer penalties for employers that sometimes do not intervene when they have knowledge that an employee has been harmed.

To protect cashiers and other service workers, I believe that the following policies should be enacted by employers. First, managers must receive training and be provided guidelines on how to assist cashiers in cases of customer mistreatment. Managers should be trained that "good service" consists of caring for both customers and employees. Both should be treated as "sovereign" by management. Neither should be permitted to mistreat one another and bad behavior warrants an immediate response by management. Managers must understand the need to intervene when made aware of serious customer/cashier incidents and be given guidelines and the latitude to address these situations without fear of reprimand for addressing a customer's bad behavior. Next, cashiers should receive formalized training that provides them with knowledge of the types of mistreatments they might encounter while working and be trained in appropriate ways to handle these situations. Cashiers must be able to trust that their company does not tolerate violent, harassing or demeaning behaviors by anyone entering their establishment, employees or customers. Cashiers should be able to count on their managers for appropriate support when needed, and cashiers should know how to best locate immediate help when serious issues arise. Last, companies can develop policies that are communicated to customers that outline their commitment to a shopping environment that respects all individuals and does not

tolerate bad behavior. Much like internal harassment and violence policies that have been developed by supermarket operators, these companies should also enact similar policies communicating customer behaviors that will not be tolerated by store management and inform offending customers that failure to comply will result in their being asked to leave the store or, when appropriate, calling law enforcement. These are only a few examples of how supermarket and other service based employers can better protect their workers from customers' bad behavior.

The respondents in my study considered interacting with the majority of their customers as one of the best parts of their job. They enjoy “their regulars” as well as the diversity of customers that comes with working in an area of the country heavily dependent on “snowbirds”, retirees, tourism and newcomers from other parts of the United States. But this study shows there are challenges in working with some customers, and that much still needs to be done to protect cashiers who are mistreated by these people. It is my hope, as a person who works with these individuals, that my study creates an opportunity for additional research into this important social and legal issue.

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## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix A: Interview Guideline

### I. Background

1. Can you tell me a little about your life? Where were you born, where did you grow up? What about school? (College)?
2. Now tell me a little bit about your work history. What was your first job and what did you do afterwards for money?
3. How did you get to be a cashier?

### II. Current Job

1. Now let's talk a bit more about your current job. How did you start here? How long have you been working as a cashier at this store?
2. What are your job duties? What do you do? Do you have a routine?
3. How many hours do you work? What is your schedule? How much do you make?
4. Is there anything that you like about your job? What are the advantages?
3. What do you like most about your job? And what else? (Can you give me an example? Can you say a bit more?)
4. And if I asked what you least like about your job, what would that be? ( And what else? Can you give me an example?)
5. What about your customers, can you tell me a bit about them? (keep open)
6. Have you ever had any problems with a customer? What exactly happened? (And what did you do? How was the situation resolved? How did you feel about that?)
7. Can you give me another example?
8. Can you tell me if a customer has ever mistreated you? In what way? How did you handle the situation?
9. (If no personal example) Have you heard of customers mistreating other cashiers? Do you know how they handled it?
10. Are there any other issues or challenges that you run into at your work? How do you deal with that?
11. With management or supervisors? How do you deal with that?

12. With colleagues/cashiers or other people working in the store? How do you deal with that?

13. What are your future plans? For the next 5 years?

14. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your work as a cashier that I didn't ask you about? Would you like to ask any questions about me?

### III. Demographics

16. Lastly I'd like to ask you a few background questions if it is o.k.?

17. What year were you born?

18. What do you consider to be your race or ethnicity?

19. How many people live in your household? Do you have children?

## Appendix B: Overview of Participants

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race or Ethnicity</b>	<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Time as Cashier</b>
Suzie	19	Caucasian	High School	3 years
Cindy	21	Caucasian	High School	4 months
Allie	21	Caucasian	Bachelors Degree in Progress	3 years
Becky	25	Caucasian	High School	9 years
Lori	29	Caucasian	Bachelors Degree	6 years
Shirley	42	Caucasian	Associates Degree	20 years
Evelyn	52	Caucasian	Bachelors Degree, Graduate Work	12 years
Donna	56	Caucasian	Associates Degree	15 years
Wanda	69	Caucasian	High School	24 years

## Appendix C: IRB Approval



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE  
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669  
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799  
(813) 974-5638 • FAX (813) 974-7091

February 14, 2013

Michael Lawless  
Sociology  
13999 Parkstone Way  
Sarasota, FL 34240

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**  
IRB#: Pro00011663  
Title: A Qualitative Study of Emotion Work among Supermarket Cashiers

**Study Approval Period: 2/14/2013 to 2/14/2014**

Dear Mr. Lawless:

On 2/14/2013, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents outlined below.

**Approved Item(s):**

**Protocol Document(s):**

[Lawless-thesis proposal](#)

**Consent/Assent Document(s)\*:**

[Consent Document.pdf](#)

\*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category(s):

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

## Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer



eIRB #11663: A Qualitative Study of Emotion Work among Supermarket Cashiers

# Supermarket Cashier Experiences Needed!

A University of South Florida (USF) Sociology Graduate Student is conducting a study of the challenges of your work as a supermarket cashier including how you cope with difficult customers. This is a research study and participants will be asked to take part in an interview with the researcher in a public place of your choosing. Interviews will last approximately one hour.

Volunteer participants must be at least 18 years old.

For further information please contact Mike Lawless at XXX-XXX-XXXX or XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Participation is completely voluntary and your confidentiality is assured.

## **Appendix E: Cashier Job Description**

### **Job Duties**

#### **What Are the Responsibilities of a Grocery Store Cashier?**

Grocery store cashiers assist customers with final purchases and answer questions at the checkout counter. Primary job duties include ringing up purchases, scanning coupons, answering specific questions about products, services, or policy, and ensuring customer satisfaction. Cashiers typically work with computerized cash registers and credit card machines as well as conveyor belts. Training for cashier jobs typically involves hands-on and visual instruction and generally takes place over the course of a couple days.

### **Job Qualifications**

#### **What Are the Requirements for a Grocery Store Cashier Job?**

For entry-level cashier jobs, most stores require no educational qualifications or work experience. Some work history in sales or customer service may prove advantageous during the hiring process. Ideal candidates exude friendly, courteous, and positive attitudes and demonstrate professionalism at all times. Average minimum age requirements for cashier positions fall around 16. Other job requirements, based around appearance and availability, may vary by location and employer.

### **Salary & Compensation**

#### **How Much Can a Grocery Store Cashier Make?**

Grocery store cashiers typically receive starting pay between \$7.25 and \$10.00 per hour. Depending on state minimum wage laws, cashiers may earn better starting wages in some states. A more experienced cashier may earn a salary of \$30,000 per year, or roughly \$15.00 an hour. On average, supermarket cashiers earn about \$10.00 per hour. Hourly pay and salary options vary by employer and location. The areas with the highest-paying grocery store cashier jobs include California, Illinois, New York, Oregon, and Washington.

### **Employment Benefits**

#### **What Kinds of Job Benefits Can a Grocery Store Cashier Earn?**

A typical shift for a supermarket cashier lasts around 4 to 6 hours. Most cashiers work part-time, about 15 to 30 hours per week. Entry-level positions, most cashier jobs accrue limited employment benefits. Many grocery stores offer part-time cashiers in-store discounts, basic

medical coverage, and paid time off. Full-time supermarket cashiers may earn several additional employment benefits, such as comprehensive healthcare coverage and 401(k) retirement plans.

Source: (<http://www.job-applications.com/grocery-store-jobs/grocery-store-cashier-job/>)