

SMILES ON FACES AND THUMBS IN THE BREAD:
SELF-ESTEEM MAINTENANCE IN A SERVICE OCCUPATION

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"Dr. Jekeyll and Mr. Hyde" was a term used by an informant, a grocery store cashier, to assess accurately how a cashier's attitudes, actions, and self-esteem change with each customer. Every day a cashier will have to deal with many customers. Each customer is categorized, defined, and serviced differently; most importantly, each customer has a different effect on the cashier's self-esteem. The research explores the means by which service sector employees, cashiers in a grocery store, maintain their self-esteem when interacting with customers. As cashiers interact with customers, they categorize them emically and redefine their identity vis a vis each customer. The ethnographic research was conducted at a mid-size chain grocery store, in a college community, in the southeastern United States. The store consists of eleven aisles and seven checkout lanes, two of which are express lanes.

The grocery store has a variety of employee categories, including stocker, bagger, front-end supervisor, manager, head produce clerk, and cashier. Being an employee of the store, I knew that cashiers had the most contact with customers since they must pass through the checkout line before they leave the store. For this reason, cashiers

seemed to be ideal candidates for research concerning customer relations.

The methods and techniques used for research included participant observation and (to a larger extent) ethnographic interviews. Pad and pencil were used to record all data collected from the informants. The bulk of the data were collected from three main informants, two females and one male. However, data were also collected from other employees through casual conversations, while they were working or while they were taking work breaks.

Being an employee and an ethnographer had its advantages and its disadvantages. One advantage was that good rapport had already been established with the informants and ethnographic interviews were relatively easy to obtain. However, at the same time, due to the sensitivity of the data collected, I had to be wary of management. If management had known, for example, that informants pinched holes in customers' bread, the informants' jobs could have been in jeopardy. Thus, all informants were guaranteed anonymity, and management was only generally informed about research conclusions.

The "cultural scene" (Spradley 1979: 21) of a corporate grocery store contains numerous possibilities for research. For example, job duties are decidedly segregated by gender: all deli clerks are female; all meat department employees male; and seventy-five percent of cashiers are female. Baggers are mostly male, and they frequently skip the step of being a cashier to become more highly-valued

stockers. The store employs about seven full time stockers, of which only one is female. It is interesting to note that the female stocker is assigned to stock health and beauty aids, "feminine products," candy, cookies, light bulbs, and panty hose, while remaining males stock the rest store.

From my own experience as a cashier, I knew that there were various types of customers, that each was defined by different characteristics, and that there were various services given to each type of customer. This was the point at which I started my investigation.

The most prevalent type of customer was the "regular customer" who shopped at the store on a regular basis. Informants described this type of customer as friendly and very personable towards the cashiers. One informant who characterized them as being like "family" said, "I see them as much as my own family. They come in the store every week. I know what they are going to buy and what they are going to say." This particular type of customer was also described as "middle class." An informant elaborated: "They are two income families with latch key kids which is the same environment I grew up in. I can relate to them and this makes me feel very comfortable around them." The types of services given to regular customer accurately reflects the favorable way in which the cashier viewed the regular customer. The informants said that they would get them fresh produce, cash their payroll checks, and

let them write checks for cash. As one informant stated: "We generally try to be more accommodating to them. This means bagging their groceries the way they liked, letting them know if they had a leaky gallon of milk, and making sure that they got another one."

The next category of customer was "the rich." This category was broken down into two types: the "rich/down to earth" and the "rich/housewife or not so nice." The rich/down to earth wore nice clothes but not "showy," which was described as "mink coats and top designer clothes." This type of customer would ask the cashier personal questions like "how are you doing?" One informant said he likes the rich best because, "They have lots of money. Rich old ladies smell good. They have lots of pretty jewels to look at and they are clean. They buy lots of interesting things like Caviar."

Thus, the "rich/down to earth" received special types of services. For example, the store may keep in stock specialty items for certain customers- like pink light bulbs. The informants also said that if the customer had an item that was broken, they would replace it right away. They would also talk to this type of customer more than others. This was done because, "they have influence in the community, so you want to give good service and give the store a good name." Another informant explained the "extra" service this way: "I don't mind doing extra stuff for people who treat me as a friend and not a servant."

For the "rich/housewife or not so nice," however, services declined. This category was said to wear flashy clothes, diamonds, and had manicured nails. It was said that they were "snobby." They wouldn't speak to the cashiers and were described as wanting the cashier to put groceries on the check out stand for them, and they slammed their groceries on the counter. As one informant said: "Generally they are rude to the cashiers."

The informants said that they only do what this type of customer asks of them and that they do not smile or carry on a conversation. One informant said:

I do only what she asks. I don't want her head to get any bigger than it already is. If she wants to drive her car around for her groceries to be loaded into the car, I do it. She's used to getting what she wants and will get mad if she doesn't, which in turn gets me in trouble. So I figure it's best to give her what she wants. She will at least come back and spend more money.

Another type of customer was the "food stamp customer." The food stamp customers were divided into two categories: The "food stamp/deserver" customer and the "food stamp/don't deserve" customer. The food stamp/deserver customer was described as dressing "cruddy." They wore dirty clothes, lacked personal hygiene, and had rotten teeth or no teeth at all. They were also characterized as buying "essential" items such as flour, milk and no-name brand groceries.

The informant said that they were nice and friendly with this type of customer because "I don't want them to think that I think they are trash." Another informant described it this way:

They are people too and have feelings. They are just not as fortunate as some, so I make them feel welcome and important. I bag their groceries like they were mine. If they forgot something, I always have someone to go get it for them.

In contrast, the "food stamp/don't deserve" customer was also seen as dirty with rotten teeth and lacking in bath, but further described as a "welfare fraud." Informants felt they bought expensive cuts of meat and junk food. This type of customer had "fifteen snot-nosed kids" and informants despised having to serve them. As one informant said: "Not only are you checking them out, but you are buying their groceries." Informants felt that the taxes that they were paying to the government were being used to support "welfare frauds" on the food stamp program.

For service, the informants would greet this customer but would "never invite them back." As one informant said: "It just makes me mad to think that these people could work if they wanted to and they are living off my money. I don't like these people very much."

The "winos" were another type of customer. Winos looked like they "just got out of bed." They were described as wearing "old second hand clothes from Goodwill," and reeked of alcohol. They consistently bought "Wild Irish Rose Wine in the 1.75 liter bottle for \$2.09." They were also characterized as being loud and clumsy.

"Fast" characterized the service given to winos. The informants said that they tried to get winos through the

check out line quickly so they would not be a "nuisance" to the other customers. As one informant said:

You know by the look on their face when they walk in that they are going to be a problem. They are bouncing off the walls. They are loud and shake hands with everyone they meet. Everyone is beautiful. If you tell them they are not sober and that they can't buy the wine, they say they know Govenner Dalton or your manager, and that they will have your job.

The next category of customer was the "old people." The old people were described as "old, wrinkled, and wearing out-of-date clothes." They were also described as smiling, always joking, and telling stories. The informants said that they would be friendly to the old people and play along with their jokes. As one informant said: "I treat them with respect because they have probably had a job with the public and lived through it." The informants also said that they would bag their groceries lightly and make sure that they had help unloading their groceries.

The "college student" was another category of customer. This category contained two types: The "college student/regular" was seen as being "friendly." This type of college student would respond to the cashier if she said hello. They always had proper identification and if under age would not try to buy beer. The college student/regular was also money conscious in that they would buy a lot of peanut butter and "ten cent" (day old) bread.

The informants tried to answer these college students' questions as best as they could and were friendly to them. As one informant said:

I am always nice to these college students because they are usually nice with me. If they have a question about an item or services we offer, I try to go out of my way to answer their questions because I'm dealing with the future of America. If you go out of your way to help them, maybe they will do the same for you when they get into the business world.

On the other hand, the "college student/spoiled brat" was defined as "cocky." They dressed "preppy" (in the latest fads), and were loud and rude to the cashiers. As one informant said:

They get mad and cuss you out for asking for identification for their beer. They have had a smooth life and everything their heart desires. They blow money because they know Mommy and Daddy will give them some more.

The "spoiled brats" are also described as coming in the store in packs of fifteen people to buy a six pack of beer; frequently they throw their order on the checklane and demand the bill be split five ways, an irritant for the cashiers.

Service for the college student/spoiled brat differs. One informant said:

I make them pull out all their identification and if they don't have proper identification I say "Oh! Well!" I don't care if I have to put back \$15.00 worth of their groceries! They are on my turf! They have to do things my way." the informant said that they rarely smiled or spoke to this type of customer because they were usually very "obnoxious."

Informants preferred to ignore them as much as possible. One informant summed it up this way: "I just check them out and look at them with the expression 'where in the world did you come from'."

The "problem customer" seemed to be evident amongst all the informants as a type of customer. The problem customer crossed all boundary lines and could be any other type of customer as well. This customer always complained to the cashiers about "everything." The informants said this type of customer would argue over a penny and blame the cashier for things over which she had no control, such as the use of the (laser) scanner system, a wrong shelf price, or the store's use of plastic bags. Informants also said that this type of customer thought that their time was more valuable than anyone else's. As one informant said:

No matter at who's expense they think that you should drop everything and cater to them. If I am on break and I have a pop, a cigarette and a moon pie half in my mouth, they think I should stop right then and go wrap their bloody chicken. It's not right! They are infringing on my time.

The informants tried to treat the problem customer with patience. They would answer the problem customer's questions as best as they could and would ignore them the rest of the time. This was done by not speaking to the customer, not even saying "hello." As one informant said:

Not speaking to the customers lets them know that you won't put up with them. If you say 'hello' it opens you up for attack. It gives them the chance to riddle you with accusations.

The "dirty old man" was another type of customer. He was described as always staring at the female cashiers or trying to touch their hands when money was exchanged. He would also try to "grab" the cashiers whenever he got the chance. Informants said that the dirty old man would always

tell the cashiers how pretty they looked, and he would ask them questions like what time they got off work and if they were married. As one informant said, "I have to stand there and check out his order and put up with unwanted attention. I feel uncomfortable and disgusted with the whole situation."

Informants tried to avoid talking to this type of customer as much as possible. This was done so that the dirty old man wouldn't get the idea that the cashier was "interested" in him. The cashiers also said that they would bag his groceries behind the counter so that he would not have the chance to grab them.

"Foreign people" were the last category defined by my informants. They were described as having a different skin color, having accents, and speaking a foreign language. Foreign people were seen as questioning and untrusting of the cashiers. Informants said foreign people watched the cashier ring up every item and that they checked their receipt before they left the store. One informant said: "I feel like they are trying their best to find something wrong with the way I rang their order and get me in trouble." The informants said that they tried to put this type of customer at ease by smiling and explaining their receipt to them as clearly as possible.

In general, cashiers regarded customers in a variety of ways. Some, like the "rich/down to earth", drew respect because they respected the cashiers. Others, like the "regular customers," were highly regarded because they were

like "family." Still others, like the "spoiled brat," were denigrated for being snobs. The common link for these varieties of customers lies in how they view the cashiers. Customers who respected the cashiers, regardless of their own status, were regarded highly, while customers who downgraded cashiers were scorned. As long as cashiers perceived that customers treated them as due their status, then cashiers regarded them well. In other words, customers who respected the self-esteem of cashiers, received, in turn, good service. One informant related how he felt customers regarded cashiers when he said:

Customers feel you should bow down and serve them. They demand your attention when you are involved with another customer. They want you to make exceptions for them, like giving them sale price for an item on sale last week, or give them credit for expired coupons.

Another informant put it this way, "Some customers are insulting. They make you feel guilty for sending someone to check the price. They say, 'Do you think I am lying, or I can't read'." Another informant related an incident that illustrated very well how she felt customers viewed cashiers. In this particular incident an informant had told a customer how tired she felt. The customer replied, "Imagine how you would feel if you had a real job."

A few types of customers seemed to threaten the informants' self esteem more than others. The dirty old man, for example, made informants feel trapped and threatened. As one informant said, "He makes a game of trying to make you feel uncomfortable. They know you can't walk off your job."

All informants who mentioned the dirty old man admitted being propositioned and/or physically touched by these customers. One informant said:

He makes you feel dirty. I ask myself if I did something to deserve that. He knocks my self esteem on the ground. I try not to dwell on it. It is very painful.

The same informant related a poignant episode she had had with such a customer. An old man befriended her when she first began working at the grocery store as a bagger. She said he would come every week with his wife on Tuesday mornings. When she would go outside to gather up the grocery carts he would make a point of talking to her and even began to bring her little gifts. She said she would always look forward to seeing him every week and that she would worry if he and his wife did not show up as usual on Tuesday mornings. This went on for about two months. One day when she was loading the old man's groceries he grabbed her between her legs. She said that she was taken totally by surprise and didn't know what to say to the old man. She related:

I hadn't been on the job long enough to be hardened to this sort of thing. He broke my heart. I went home that day and bawled. I always thought I would be one of the superwomen and would fight back when someone did something like that to me, but he took me totally by surprise.

Another type of customer that affected an informant's self-esteem was the poor. Informants felt that this customer's inadequacies only made the cashier look better. When in conflict with poor customers one informant said:

They insult you and call you stupid. They try to break you down, but they acutally bring you up because they buy groceries with food stamps which I helped pay for with my tax money. They will spend all their change on a bottle of wine instead of buying a bar of soap.

College students also affected the informants' self-esteem. One informant said that the college students call the cashiers "townies", and they think lesser of the local residents. She described the students as "staring the cashiers up and down" and "cussing out" the cashiers when they were asked for identification for alcohol purchases. One informant said, "They have a 'holier than thou' attitude. If a college student doesn't have proper ID they will say, 'But I am a (college name) student' like that is their ticket to anything they want in life."

Further damaging to one's self-esteem is the uniform worn by all female cashiers. One informant said, "The uniform brands you, its the (company name) stamp and not of excellence." The uniform provides no individuality; everyone looks the same. In fact, if informants went somewhere else in their uniform everyone knew where they worked. They felt as if they could not escape. Informants would compensate for the impersonality of the uniform by fixing their hair and applying makeup, and by wearing "real clothes" like a shirt underneath their uniform jacket or khak pants instead of the required uniform pants. One informant said, "I do this to draw attention away from the uniform and to my own personality."

Cashiers have many threats to their self-esteem. Because of these, they fight back when their self-esteem is threatened in several ways, direct and indirect. Direct ways involve avoiding interaction, both verbal and nonverbal, with the customers. Cashiers might fail to say "hello", "thank you", or come back. One informant said that when the customer held out his hand for change, she would lay the money down to the side and not give it to him directly in his hand. In a more dramatic example, a black cashier had a white male customer who would refuse to go through her check out line because she was black. This cashier confronted this prejudice by closing off all checkout lanes except hers so that he would have no choice but to go through her lane.

There are also indirect or "sneaky" ways of maintaining self-esteem. Being "sneaky" means, "The customer thinks they are getting one over on you, but you are really getting one over on them." Being sneaky is done to get "revenge" when a customer upsets a cashier. However, it is done discreetly so that the cashier will not be pinpointed. If the cashier was pinpointed the customer could get her in trouble with management. By being sneaky the cashier achieves revenge without losing her job.

Some examples of being "sneaky" are damaging groceries without appearing to do so. For example, a cashier might pinch a hole in the customer's bread, might bang around their potato chips, might put "groceries in their bags with

more force", might insert a thumb in the watermelon, or might bag eggs underneath some cans. Sneaky cashiers might also bag bread next to a can so that the can will roll on the bread during the trip home. Also cashiers might drop coupons on the floor and not pick them all up. As one informant said, "This is done so you won't have to give them credit, especially when they have coupons for items they don't have." Retaliation can be as extreme as over-charging the customer by ringing up items two or three times. This can easily be done because "nine chances out of ten customers do not pick up their receipt unless the cashier gives it to them."

Being sneaky helped informants maintain or enhance self-esteem, for they said that being sneaky made them feel "good." They also said that it made them feel like they were getting "revenge" and had more "power and control" over their customers. As one informant noted: "Management says that the customer is always right no matter what, so you have to play along so you won't get in trouble, but if you are sneaky you can secretly feel good."

However, retaliation against customers by employees who are supposed to provide cheerful and competent service ultimately proves destructive. Employees remain disgruntled and discouraged by customers and despise even more a job which increases that contact. Customers receiving grumbling or incompetent service may not return, ultimately jeopardizing the cashiers' jobs. A compromise needs to be found, providing competent service even to troublesome customers, while simultaneously supporting employee self-

esteem. Cashiers have agreed that to remedy this situation, management could take several steps.

First, management should support the cashiers when there is a conflict between a customer and cashier if the latter is right. One informant said that when she has a conflict and she knows that she is right and the customer is wrong, and the manager knows it too, the manager will still back up the customer because store policy is that "the customer is always right." Even though the cashier accepts this she feels that the manager should at least tell her something like, "Sorry, I knew you were right, but I had to keep their business." Also the informant said that giving customers free hams, pies, or sending flowers to their homes when a customer got angry at a cashier only makes the cashier feel "stupid." One informant explained it this way:

When I am right and the manager takes the customers'side even though he knows I'm right, it insults my intelligence. It makes the customer think 'this girl don't know what she's doing and the manager could care less how I look as long as he looks good.

Informants also feel that management should protect them from sexual harassment by warning or barring dirty old men from the store if necessary. One informant told of a particular situation in which a dirty old man had repeatedly "stalked and pawed" the cashiers when he came in the store. In one particular instance he "grabbed" a cashier while she had bent over to stock some cigarettes. The cashier warned him never to do that again and he replied, "Oh! Honey! You're so sweet!" She immediately went to the office and

complained to the manager. The manager simply said, "He gives good business and we have to give him what he wants." Informants said that in situations such as this, "management should protect the cashiers even if they may lose a customer because a good worker is of more value."

The informants also feel that there should be better screening of cashier applicants and that only those who would be good with the public should be hired. As some informants have said, "It is the most demanding type of job because you have to associate with so many different types of people, their moods and idiosyncrasies. Better training would prepare cashiers for these problems and situations."

Comparative research on other service-sector jobs would prove to be insightful as well. For one reason, "the greatest number of openings are being created in the service sector (food, health, business services), where wages are low." (Harrington 1984: 47). Since these jobs are increasing, and since wages are low, it would seem that self-esteem would also be low. It may be possible to suggest ways to increase worker self-esteem in these jobs as well, based on the research here. Such research would benefit employees, management and customers.

During my research on customer relations, I found that a love/hate relationship existed between cashiers and their customers. From my own experience as a cashier, and from the comments of informants, there is nothing in the world that compares to a customer who comes in every week, greets you

with a smile, chats, and even sometimes brings you a jar of homemade jam or a handmade pillow. However, there is also nothing times during your five hour shift, and who stands in your check out lane an extra five minutes even though there are three lanes open. There is also nothing like the threat of the angry college student who calls you three four-letter words in front of everyone because you would not let him purchase beer without an ID. Also, there are some customers who for whatever reason are just plain irritating or simply "rubs us all the wrong way."

Hence, it is unrealisitc to believe that cashiers could and would treat every customer with the same "courteous" service. It is an ideal that cannot be met in the real situation in which cashiers find themselves every day. However, because of the types of customers with which cashiers must deal, sneaky tactics must sometimes be used to maintain self-esteem in the reality of the check-out lanes. Cashiers are forced to become "Dr. Jeckylls and Mr. Hydes" in disguise in order to maintain self-esteem. It is hoped that perhaps some reasonable solutions could be found to preserve the cashiers's self-esteem while increasing the quality of the service customers receive. Cashiers, like other service employees, appreciate above all the respect and dignity they feel they deserve.

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