“We Must Be out of That”: Deflective Labor and Frontline Service Work

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Abstract
Drawing from ethnographic data gathered in a large U.S. supermarket, the author develops the concept of deflective labor to further our understanding of customer service work as more than providing service to the customer. In an effort to maintain dignity on the shop floor, workers learned to simultaneously deflect and fulfill customer service inquiries. Rather than viewing deflection as the logical conclusion of a low-skilled workforce, positing deflective labor as an actual form of assistance allows us to better understand the realities of interactive service work. It is suggested that the retailer may allow deflective labor to assuage worker dissatisfaction and maintain the store’s reputation as a “good place to work.”

Keywords
deflective labor, service work, customer service, retail work, supermarkets, food system

Introduction
There is a nostalgia about work in American supermarkets—the teenage boy whose first job is to sack groceries and clumsily push them to the happy housewife’s car or the experienced female cashier who knows her customers by name and works the same Saturday morning shift every week. And then there is the reality—a rotating group of employees who are given timed bathroom breaks, refuse to direct you toward the lettuce, and are underpaid, erratically scheduled, and devalued. And we must not forget about the legions of customers who refuse to make eye contact, hide packages of half-eaten cookies behind the pasta sauce, and ask employees if they are stupid or just don’t speak English.1

The concept of the informed green-grocer became obsolete with the innovative technology of free-standing shelves that created aisles within the stores. The accompanying emphases on self-service required instead “low-skill” clerks who could replenish the shelves and have little substantive interaction with customers (Humphery 1998). A necessary component of consumption, frontline customer service work is uniquely interactive because of the physical presence of customers (Pettinger 2011). In a large busy supermarket, the customer service work required to facilitate the shopping experience can be relentless. In order to endure the interactions with the consuming public, an immense amount of mental dexterity on the part of the worker is compulsory.

The characterization of this low-wage retail work as low skill, however, obscures the competency required to perform this particular type of laboring (Newman 1999). Even highly rationalized tasks such as stocking the shelf or bagging groceries require further emotional work (see Tolich 1993). In order to create a fuller understanding of the “complex skills and work involved in service jobs” (Gatta, Boushey, and Appelbaum 2009), we must begin by gathering empirical data through the experience and practice of working (Korczyński and Macdonald 2009). And by looking at the service interaction from the perspective of the worker, we can see the “physical effort, emotional stamina, and self-control” required in the retail sector (Williams 2006:93).

Millions of low-wage service workers, and hence the work that they do within the supermarkets, have been rendered invisible by the omission of retailing from larger studies of the food system. But as the food retailing sector consolidates, fewer and fewer corporations make decisions that shape how, when, and where we shop and how, when, and where we work (Schwartz and Lyson 2007). Food retailing in the United States is a $600 billion industry (Food Marketing Institute 2013), yet few sociological studies have

1These examples are from fieldnotes gathered for this research.

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examined the supermarket superpowers that exert a considerable amount of control over the movement of food from farm to fork. In his study of supermarket shopping in the UK, Miller (1998) ventures inside of a supermarket but sees only love and devotion in the highly gendered task of food provisioning (deVault 1994; Zukin 2004). In a critical analysis of the global food system, Patel (2009:231) homogenizes supermarket workers as “mind-numbed and unhappy,” obscuring the complexity and skill required to do interactive service work under neoliberalism.

By examining the customer service interchange as it occurs today on the supermarket shop floor, I illuminate the complexities of a taken-for-granted social interaction dominated by the internalized consumerist ideals of modern capitalism (see Bauman 1998). Supermarket work has become highly rationalized, and the process of performing tasks has been reduced to the assumptions of key components. Observing a variety of employees performing the tasks in a wider variety of styles indicates that although a process may have distinct steps on paper, it is often executed in a uniquely individual manner. Tasks may have become highly rationalized, but employees are not, and the skills required to follow directions while caring about following directions should not be assumed to be universal or simplistic.

This article is based on an ethnographic study of work in the food retailing industry and illuminates the complexities of the taken-for-granted social interaction of customer service. What emerges from an analysis of over eight months of data from working on a supermarket shop floor is evidence of a technique I refer to as deflective labor. During my time on the shop floor, I noticed a certain style of customer service work that occupied a complex space between not doing the job and the definition of “customer service” as presented by the food retailing corporations. Rather than the absolute absence of assistance, deflective labor appears to service the customer’s request but upon further analysis actually only “deflects” the inquiry into a customer service purgatory.

My goals with this article are twofold. First, the more general goal is to contribute empirical evidence to the analysis of these highly rationalized jobs through illustrating the work as actually done by the workers involved in interactive service work. Although the picture painted here may seem bleak, we need to better understand the realities of the millions of retail workers before we can effectively advocate for labor reform. Second, the more particular goal is to add complexity to the understanding of the customer service interaction, often conceptualized as a back and forth, by developing the concept of deflective labor. Rather than viewing deflection as the logical conclusion of an inept, low-wage, low-skilled, workforce, positing deflective labor as an actual form of assistance allows us to better understand the realities of frontline customer service work within the food retailing industry.

**Where Is the Lettuce?**

One of the most important aspects of contemporary retailing is to provide information, assistance, and sales help to shoppers. This definition of customer service is often assumed by customers and explicitly proclaimed by the corporations’ public relations department: Words such as helpful, friendly, warmth, love, excellent, great, and outstanding appear on many of the top retailers’ websites in their descriptions of the service their employees provide to customers. Employees, however, often have a very different perception of the interaction, and “customer service” work only occasionally involves providing this particular type of service for the customer.

I have developed the concept of deflective labor in order to understand the work that employees put in to cultivating a set of practices and techniques that allow them to simultaneously disengage from the customer service encounter while fulfilling enough of the service prompt to satisfy the customers. Deflective labor is a particular type of assistance that falls somewhere in between “not doing your job” and “doing your job well/according to policy.” Whereas a customer service approach might answer the question “Where is the lettuce?” with directions for locating it, an employee engaging in deflective labor techniques would respond with a shrug of the shoulders and an emphatic “We must be out of that” as she walked away from the customer. The most elemental component of my conceptualization of deflective labor is the ability to successfully, without any tangible, negative consequences, redirect a customer-prompted interaction into an information quagmire. The customers emerged from these deflections relatively satisfied, but the employees would not have provided accurate and appropriate information. Customer service thus becomes a strategy to get away from customers rather than a goal of servicing a customer’s request.

The daily toil of interacting with numerous strangers who are socialized to treat retail workers as nonexistent is incredibly difficult to deal with, and the ability to effectively and efficiently deflect is one of the most highly crafted skills of a successful (i.e., still currently employed) employee. In her ethnographic study of work in a toy store, Williams (2006) describes the process of bracing herself for the customer service interaction. Customers often vocally attacked and criticized everything from a worker’s attitude to her body to her credibility, an experience that Newman (1999) describes

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1Words taken from the websites of Safeway, Walmart, Trader Joe’s, Whole Foods, and Albertsons.

2This is an actual example observed in the store. I did check that the produce section had lettuce in stock.
as “character assassination.” Most of the conversations I overheard in the back rooms were pep talks to help a recently “assassinated” worker gather the fortitude to return to the sales floor.

Korczynski and Macdonald (2009) point out that customer service interactions can simultaneously be both a nuisance and a pleasure; many employees, myself included, were visibly excited when particular customers entered the store. Customers known for being polite, interesting to chat with, or even just alert and present in the interaction were appreciated. These customer interactions provided a nice respite from the others who had the potential to cause irritation and/or frustration.

Overall, the service interaction between customer and employee reinforces the presumed social value of each component actor—the customer demanding attention on her schedule and the employee then put in the position of defending her ability to be a legitimate actor in the interaction. One customer in a rush who ignores an employee does not feel the impact of the hundred customers prior and the hundred customers post who will treat the cashier in a similar fashion. The experience of repeatedly being disregarded by the other component in the social interaction of customer service can take a physical and mental toll on the person (the worker) attempting the communication. Even at a store with an emphasis on strong customer service, there was a plethora of employees who routinely complained that the job “makes me want to die.”

It has been suggested that employee alienation is lower when relationships exist with repeated customers rather than a multitude of “encounters” with numerous anonymous customers (Korczynski and Macdonald 2009). Unlike the customers of luxury services in Sherman’s (2003) study of high-end hotel workers who preferred customized service and to be called by name, the majority of customers where I worked preferred the ability to move through the customer service encounter anonymously.

One particularly frustrating aspect of working in the service sector is the assertion by customers that their interpretation of interactions is the legitimate reality of the situation (see also Hanser 2007). Customers rarely reacted positively to being asked to wait a moment while employees finished a task. The workers may have known that they were in the middle of a task, but because they did not appear to the customers to be doing something worthwhile, shoppers became very frustrated and irritated that the employee was exerting her own dominance over the shopping interaction that they were instigating. A story about how an employee who hit a customer was visibly excited when particular customers entered the store. Customers known for being polite, interesting to chat with, or even just alert and present in the interaction were appreciated. These customer interactions provided a nice respite from the others who had the potential to cause irritation and/or frustration.

Deflective labor is also a deflection of the “feeling rules” described by Hochschild (1983 2003) in her essential study of service work. Rather than manage one’s emotions in order to do a better job, the workers observed in this study used deflective labor as the customer service strategy that effectively ends any semblance of service (for the customer) in order to do a “good enough” job to not be reprimanded.

The examples of deflective labor as detailed in this article are not the only types of interactions that workers experienced. Some workers were able to provide actual service and provided informed responses to customer inquiries. These moments of helping are not of note here because they are the most basic manifestation of the job description. Likewise, a few workers did not provide any semblance of service at all and routinely did not fulfill their basic job requirements. Those moments of non-work will also be omitted. This article will deal only with the moments in which the customer service work prompt was responded to with deflection.

Method

This article is based on data gathered while working as an entry-level retail clerk in a large U.S. supermarket, hereafter referred to as The Supermarket. The Supermarket is a transnational chain that operates full-service supermarket stores selling fresh, prepared, and processed foods as well as household items, personal care goods, and pet supplies. Although no food retailing chain sells in every major U.S. market, The Supermarket is one of the largest food retailers in the country. The Supermarket ranks consistently in the Supermarket News list of the top 75 supermarkets in the United States and is known for its focus on quality foods. More important, The Supermarket prides itself on being both a good place to work and providing excellent customer service.

I entered the field site as an undisclosed observer and applied for, interviewed for, and earned my job the same way my co-workers did—applying online through a third-party vetting system and then a face-to-face interview with my potential bosses. I worked in a subdepartment within The Supermarket common to all of its outlets as well as all major

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5The Supermarket is the pseudonym chosen to represent the food retailing corporation as well as evoke a sense of an Orwellian, all-encompassing being. Supermarket, food retailer, and food retailing are used interchangeably within the article, and I am deliberately not using the term site of consumption following Williams’s (2006) argument that this type of classification eliminates the processes and practices of work. The more benign label of supermarket allows the workers, customers, and retail to semantically coexist.

6This study was approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and declared exempt from the guidelines governing human subjects participation. Accordingly, I was not required to obtain written consent from those I observed and interacted with in the supermarket as my research relied on “serendipitous conversations” that I heard or in which I participated.

7See Leidner (1993), Reiter (1996), and Sallaz (2009) for discussions of entering the site top-down; see Ehrenreich (2001) and Williams (2006) for discussions of entering the site bottom-up.
supermarkets. The responsibilities of the position included but were not limited to stocking the shelves, assisting customers, working a cash register, and preparing the store for opening and closing.

Not being “out” as a researcher allowed me to complete all of the tasks assigned to me as an entry-level retail clerk and make note of the “ongoing social act” in which I was participating (see Smith 2005). My ability to be a “real” employee was never questioned, and likewise, why others chose to work at The Supermarket was never explicitly discussed (for discussion of a similar lack of interest, see Williams 2006). Furthermore, as Williams (2006:19) argues, “In the world of low-wage retail work, no one assumes that people choose their occupations or that their jobs reflect who they really are.” My co-workers did know that I was “in school,” but of those who asked me about it, none expressed a familiarity with sociological analysis, and none cared to know more (see also Wacquant 2005).

Once hired and oriented, I stayed at the job for eight months. Data for this study derive from fieldnotes taken as a participant observer in two roles—an employee and a shopper. From the moment I began applying for jobs through my final days as a shop floor sales clerk, I accumulated over 300 single-spaced pages of notes. I wrote fieldnotes (see Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) after every shift, and because I was encouraged to keep a pad and pencil in my apron, I was able to make notes on the shop floor without drawing attention to myself. I also jotted down reminders while in the bathroom and break room. Additional observations were made during weekly shopping trips to other stores in the chain (located in the same urban area). I would often purchase my own groceries during a shopping observation in order to observe the point-of-purchase interchange from the other side of the cash register. Occasionally, especially at the beginning, like Sherman (2003:138) notes in her dissertation about luxury hotel workers, “the logic of the job takes over and I forget to take notes.”

Like Wacquant (2004) learning the pugilistic arts and O’Connor (2005) learning to blow glass, I eventually became proficient at my chosen craft. I refused to quit before experiencing saturation in my experience as a service-worker. I stayed employed until I felt I had learned to manage, as proficiently as the majority of my co-workers, the stress, anxiety, and complications that arise from doing customer service work in the retail sector. I knew I had reached saturation in my immersion when I ceased to shiver at the thought of going to work again and learned from my co-workers the ways in which to produce and reproduce my body and my self in order present myself as a successful worker (a la Goffman 1959; Woolkowitz 2006). The saturation was mirrored in my fieldnotes as evidenced by a cursory coding that showed no new topics or themes being introduced.

Due to the distinctive nature of the research style, representativeness of workers’ experiences becomes an issue. Although the notes are written from my perspective, the sentiments are not mine alone. Gossip proliferated on the shop floor and allowed me to “observe” how other employees made sense of workplace dynamics. Rather than claim the ability to generalize, I posit that the unique experience of seeing service work from the front line makes a significant contribution to the field. The larger project from which this material is drawn examines the multiplicity of interactions between the workers and shoppers. In particular, the study examines the processes and practices of “producing consumption” such as staffing the store, customer service, knowledge and social networks, and sociability among workers.

In order to maintain the anonymity of the field research site and the people who worked there, I will not describe it in any particularity. There were over 400 employees at The Supermarket and just over 20 in my department, including 3 department managers. We were a diverse racial and ethnic group8 representative of the urban environment in which the store was located. The age range of the workers was approximately 18 to 45, with most people in their late 20s. Approximately 60 percent of the workers in my department were women, which appeared unique compared to store-level observations. Most of the employees in my department had at least some college experience, including a few with a college degree and one who had an advanced degree. A handful of co-workers completed some parts of their education outside of the United States.

All entry-level clerks were paid the same hourly wage, which at the time was approximately 40 percent higher than the state minimum wage. After a “probationary period,” workers were eligible for benefits such as subsidized health insurance, vacation days, and a retirement plan. All employees received a small discount on their store purchases. Like Williams (2006) and Ehrenreich (2001), the purpose of this study was not to live off of my wages, and having a supplemental income was something I did not take for granted. Most, if not all, of my co-workers were working to support themselves and oftentimes contribute to their immediate family’s household expenses. A handful were supporting children, whether with a significant other, alone, or with support from their own parents. A few were mainly supported financially by their families and were working for supplemental income to cover personal expenses such as saving for college or their own apartment.

A few of the employees in my department had been with The Supermarket Corporation over five years, but most had worked there for less than two years. Almost all of the workers had worked in a different field prior to their jobs at The Supermarket. During the months of my fieldwork, no one in my department quit or was fired, although one employee was transferred to a different department in a different store.

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8I have approximated the demographic details of my co-workers to the best of my abilities while working within the constraints of the study’s exemption by the IRB. In most cases, the information was gleaned from discussions I overheard; I took my co-workers’ self-declared statements of self as facts.
Isn’t That [Bottle of Oil] Lovely!

When employees did not respond immediately to customer inquiries, they were assumed to be incompetent, and a more knowledgeable replacement worker was demanded. Always fearful of the dreaded customer complaint to a manager, employees were quick to develop “good enough” answers to placate the customers. My colleagues developed a variety of strategies that allowed them to quickly and efficiently extricate themselves from the customers while maintaining a façade of providing the excellent customer service. The Supermarket was known for. Deflection techniques mainly took the shape of stock phrases such as “We must be out of that.” “We don’t carry that product,” or “Yes, that is a lovely choice” that were used to inhibit the expansion of a customer’s question into a longer and larger dialogue. Oftentimes, these statements were provided regardless of evidence (supportive or to the contrary). The acceptance by customers of these vague and meaningless statements was surprising at first but quickly became normalized after hundreds of customers accepted them without hesitation. Most customers preferred a quick, (probably) inaccurate response rather than a longer, (possibly) considered one, and it was to the employee’s benefit to develop a stockpile of these deflection techniques to successfully field a variety of customer service interactions.

During a shopping visit to another store in the same chain, an employee deflected my customer service inquiry by using the “we must be out of that” strategy:

The clerk, when I asked her about the particular chocolate bar that was out of stock, told me that it was out of stock. Yes, I replied, I can see that. I am actually wondering if you know when it will be back in stock. Uh-uh, she replied and then was able to entirely end our interaction by turning her back to me and going back to her task. Had I pressed her further, she probably would have just walked away as it seems one of the most effective means of ending an unwanted interaction.

“We must be out of that” was the standard retort when a customer mentioned not being able to find a particular product in the store. I knew from the official training sessions at The Supermarket that the product was out of stock, not just sold out on the shelf (the shelf tags are placed upside down when items are out of stock), but oftentimes employees at the store were alerted about when out-of-stock products would be available. The information was provided to all employees, but how it was incorporated into their respective customer service interactions varied. There is, of course, the distinct possibility that she really did not know when the chocolate bar would be back in stock. Her non-answer of “uh-uh,” however, can be understood as a strategic answer to summarily deflect the inquiry (in this case into a dead-end alley). In this example, the clerk deflects by acting as gatekeeper and denying access to the information desired. The “uh-uh” response is much easier to provide than the multi-stage process required to check stock availability and does not require a complex understanding of the distribution process—she did not need to know how to read the shelf tag, check the log book for product updates, or contact a supervisor over the intercom for assistance, all possible and appropriate courses of action for a shop floor worker. The deflection is not without its complexity, however, and employees providing this type of answer to a customer inquiry had to develop strategies for appropriately dealing with customers’ anger, frustration, and worst of all, persistence. In the illustration provided previously, the employee physically inhibited further interaction by turning away.

“We don’t carry that product” was the typical retort to a customer’s inquiry about an unfamiliar product. When customers were looking for something in a broad category—the milk, the bakery, or the soap—it was relatively easy to satisfy their inquiries. When something more specific was wanted, however, the propensity of the social interaction to turn contentious increased exponentially. Locating an unfamiliar product for a customer could be a satisfying challenge (if you like puzzles), but more often, it was a source of frustration for all involved. “We don’t carry that product” had an inherent risk associated with it—the customer might reply, “But I bought it here last week.” The employee, already in the motions of deflecting the inquiry, would then respond, “Well, we probably stopped carrying it.” Although turnover of products is common in a supermarket that sells tens of thousands of items, the employees’ response was rarely based on factual evidence.

A customer asked a co-worker why the price of a certain product increased, and the employee responded:

“Obviously they (the company) raised their prices, so we had to raise ours.” It was just a made up answer, there was no concern for the customer that the price is now much more expensive. [The packing slips don’t contain product prices and she isn’t in charge of ordering products so I really don’t think she knew the answer.]

The coherent linearity of her explanation belies the complicated relations that structure pricing, availability, and a clerk’s access to this information. What is remarkable about the example is the employee’s ability to successfully deflect inquiry by presenting a belief in the validity of her response regardless of the vague nature of the logic. My fieldnotes belie a customer service truth: “The general rule of thumb with customers is to tell them yes, even if we suspect it isn’t true.”

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9As a shopper, I did not alert her to my status as an employee.

10Shelf tags are the price tags located on the front of the shelf directly below the respective product. The 1.5” × 2” tag contains a plethora of information, including item price, price per unit, manufacturer, and Universal Pricing Code (UPC). When shelf tags are turned upside down, it indicates that there is no additional supply in the warehouse and the store is awaiting a new order. This code is used to signify to the other workers that someone has already noted the lack of inventory.
“Yes, that is a lovely choice” was used to compliment a customer’s decision but was rarely based on any actual experience with the product. Rather, it was a stock phrase used to describe everything from dish soap to orange juice to shampoo. When customers would ask for assistance choosing between two similar items, it was never as simple as choosing the “better” one. First and foremost, you had to deduce which one they had already subconsciously chosen and then affirm that choice all the while acting as if you were making the decision as a means to free them from the burden of that responsibility.

Deflective labor also allows workers to divert the tasks they do not want to do, and many of the male workers would pass along any customer service requests they found to be too feminine, such as ringing on the cash register or handling requests for body care products. One employee being a bad cashier would be a personality quirk; the majority of male workers in the department deflecting these tasks illustrates a latent sexism in the workplace. Because many of the male workers in my department were in management positions, their deflection further reiterated a gendered power hierarchy.

Deflecting the request for personal care products to the female workers went against the store training policy that all workers should be equally competent. Furthermore, that my male co-workers would deflect to me in my first few days and weeks contradicts the supposition that they really were trying to “service the customer” by diverting the inquiry to the newest worker as the person who could provide “better” customer service.

**Learning to Deflect**

No small amount of time and energy was spent training me how to properly do my work at The Supermarket. Even in highly rationalized jobs that have been broken down to their base component pieces, new hires must learn a series of steps to complete a multiplicity of tasks. The co-worker assigned to train me on my first day had no particular expertise in training, but she was, however, competent enough at her job to be able to communicate the component pieces of the job. She knew both the expectations of the position and how to maneuver throughout the day—the explicit and implicit mandates of the retail clerk. Unlike the official training processes detailed in a case study of a leading supermarket firm (Hughes 1999), employees at The Supermarket did not receive a certificate of accomplishment or have to meet a certain number of training hours to be a shop floor clerk.

Training sessions were also provided by The Supermarket in order to formally socialize new employees into their new roles as customer service agents. During the official, management-led training sessions, I was told that I was expected to take advantage of the benefits offered (health care, sick days, training opportunities), but I was not to date co-workers in my department or engage in “inappropriate” interactions with customers. Unlike corporate training sessions at call centers (Fleming and Spicer 2004) and insurance agencies (Leidner 1993:103), the training sessions at The Supermarket did not intend to “spur people to work toward their goals without being held back.” Because the official training sessions at The Supermarket offered little more than pat responses for dealing with the anxiety and frustration surrounding the customer-employee interaction, any dissatisfaction felt by employees was understood to be the result of personal shortcomings.

Although impossible for a new employee to learn everything in one day, donning a company apron on the shop floor masked this unpreparedness. The Delta flight attendants in Hochschild’s ([1983] 2003) study were reminded that when customers become irate, they are mad at the uniform, not the actual person enrobed in it. But because I was the actual person enrobed in The Supermarket’s apron, I had to quickly learn how to handle difficult and/or challenging customer inquiries. As agents of the retailer, workers were expected to know, respect, and enact the corporate credo of satisfying the customer. Official trainings on how to do this type of customer service work can prepare the interactive service worker in merely a cursory way.

All workers at The Supermarket were socialized, subtly and overtly, from the onset of their interest in a position to engage in deflective labor. Current employees strongly enforced the chain’s norms by not allowing deviation from them. For example, I attempted to hand deliver a print version of a cover letter and resume but was shamed by the workers for not following the rule—my resume was refused multiple times (“What would I do with it?!”), and I was told repeatedly to apply online. The message conveyed by the current employee to the novice—you can work like us or you can not work at all—coupled with an insecure job market and an arduous application process left many workers with no option except consent to the (il)logic of the process.

Unlike many other customer service workers who are required to follow a customer service script (Deery, Iverson, and Walsh 2010; Leidner 1993; Lopez 2006), The Supermarket employees did not have corporate-produced lines, but what they did say to customers did not vary widely. The “unofficial” socialization process that endorsed appropriate behavior was equally intense (compared to the formal training sessions), and co-workers doled out both negative and positive sanctions accordingly. A written rule, no matter how specific, was always bent through expression. In other words, no matter how rationalized the job is, the person doing the job is still a manipulating human being. As Gatta et al. (2009:977) said, “The success of the interaction lies with the worker.”

When I first began working, I made the conscious decision to follow all the rules and regulations of The Supermarket to the best of my ability. This soon proved to be unwarranted, unnecessary, and not so subtly discouraged by co-workers, managers, and the customers. To my surprise, one of the
managers in the department told me that first and foremost I should compliment a customer’s choices, regardless of any factors to the contrary (e.g., that tastes disgusting). My field-notes are peppered with my surprise at watching my superiors disregard the official policies. And then soon enough, I found myself saying things such as “This is a lovely bottle of oil” in order to deflect the customer service interaction.

Attitudes toward “interactive” performance varied widely, especially toward the formal training sessions. Every so often, we were required to take training tests on the products we sold in the stores. I once got 9 out of 10 questions correct on the exam, and I remember feeling a sense of pride at my accomplishment. I had been palpably nervous going into the exam and felt the pressure to succeed so that my employment would not be terminated (the first product training occurred during the trial period when my employment could be terminated without cause and at will). A few months later, I was chatting with a much younger employee, and she confided that she never even listened to the product training podcasts and just answered randomly on the posttest. When I saw her a year later during a site visit, she reported that she was happy and thrilled to have been transferred to a different store (I did not ask her if she had begun listening to the trainings).

The scripted lines “read” on The Supermarket shop floor were not sanctioned by the corporate management but nonetheless were developed and used in an effort to control the customer service interaction to the benefit of the worker. Customers were quickly sized up, and lines were delivered, often to an accepting audience. Occasionally, the larger script would come undone, and if the employee was unable to handle the ad lib sales exchange, he or she would seek assistance from a co-worker who might have learned the “lines” for a service strategy that worked.

Most, if not all, of the employees seen incorporating the techniques of deflection, as detailed here, into their larger repertoire of customer service skills did not appear to be acting out of vindictiveness. In fact, it was some of the kindest employees (off the shop floor) that used deflection most often. During shopping and working observations, I witnessed a high level of employee divergence from the corporate-produced procedural guidelines. The rarity of customers versed in the corporate policies of The Supermarket or the nuances of the food retailing industry allowed workers, in most situations, to authoritatively present their personal deflection “scripts” as officially sanctioned.

Getting Away with It

Customers often did not want to know anything about the product; rather, they were in search of affirmation of the decision that they had already made. Bolton and Houlihan (2005) note that customers didn’t necessarily expect that they would be provided customer “service” in their calls to a call center. The Supermarket did not appear to expect anything different. And because they were usually asking about a specific product, it was easy just to repeat that it was a good choice. Or, if you detected any hint of doubt in their voice, you could easily suggest something else—rarely a substantive informed decision. I found myself suggesting products that others had suggested regardless of my own experience with them.

Deflecting to a standard phrase such as “This is a nice one” is less about the inability of the worker to answer the question and more about the corporate culture of interactive service work that privileges the physical presence of the worker over the potential intellectual capabilities of an individual. For example, customers often asked questions seeking not an honest answer, such as “I would never eat that item that you have chosen,” but affirmation of the decision they had already made. Acting as the agent of the supermarket corporation, the worker is therefore able to assuage consumer doubt and reiterate the role of the retailer as an authority figure (see Dixon 2003). As “service” becomes more about the affirmation of customers’ predetermined (by the corporation) choices than an actual interaction, the physical presence of the corporate representative (i.e., employee) is all that is required to complete the transaction. The proliferation of deflective labor seems to support the neoliberal assumption of a replaceable and interchangeable low-wage workforce.

When workers would get in trouble on the floor, it was almost never for not doing their jobs and almost always an issue of their “personality” becoming too apparent. The employees who got in the most “trouble” were acting inappropriately towards co-workers, not customers. Generally, there were no real consequences for those infractions—the co-worker who won an outstanding employee award rarely did any work, nonetheless deflect it. The mentions I have of management-sanctioned discussions of the “rules” are in regard to arriving late and/or missing a scheduled shift.

When deflection uses misinformation, it is rarely done in a malicious style. Rather, it is that the risks to presenting false information were low. I made note of a corporate trainer waving his hand toward a particular section of the store and unabashedly proclaiming, “I know nothing about that stuff.” One of the most prolific users of this type of deflective labor practice seemed to truly believe what she was saying to customers.11 The main reason I had different ideas about the accuracy of her comments was my background in social science theories of nutrition and global-agro food systems. The familiarity with foods, ingredients, and brands I had previously cultivated wasn’t available in a 30-minute “training session” at the store. And because I was restricted to observing what was happening around me, I rarely interjected. I also learned to keep my mouth shut: At a training about ingredients, I knew a lot of the information

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11Most of my co-workers would cite their research on Google.
that is not surprising given Wharton’s (1993) finding that a reduced state of attention that limits not job performance but basic human excellence. The workers on the shop floor who dull their reactivity fall prey to the state of mindlessness that is not surprising given Wharton’s (1993) finding that service workers with low job autonomy experience a greater sense of emotional exhaustion. The experience of workers on the shop floor is then effectively compartmentalized into that assumption of retail work rather than explicitly challenged, amended, contested, and resisted. Deflection is a technique that supports and is supported by a state of mindlessness. Employees were essentially rewarded for maintaining a sense of mindlessness by not being fired (by the retailer).

It is important to note that the crux of Langer’s (1989) argument is not that we have all become passive absorbers of social life but rather, the state of mindlessness reproduces dominant categories that were constructed during someone else’s mindful moment. In this case, the mindful moment belongs to the retailer. Langer (1989) warns of the long-lasting impacts of mindlessness such as shorter life expectancy and less elaborate recall about previous experiences, suggesting a possibly lack of complexity and decreased satisfaction among interactive service workers. The potential risks of doing frontline service work must be incorporated into our analyses of our low-wage, retail-based capitalist system of distribution.

Tolich’s (1993) concept of emotion management is a useful tool for analyzing the deflection techniques developed and reiterated by the shop floor clerks. Tolich (1993), in his study of emotions and customer service, argued that cashiers were doing both emotional labor and emotion work (see Hochschild [1983] 2003) when they presented an embellished corporate customer service script. The augmentation of the standard performance script complicated the classification of the cashier’s behavior as emotional labor (a commodified exchange value) or emotion work (personified use value) because although the work was being done by the cashier, the labor was being paid for by the retailer. His focus on control rather than ownership, however, overlooks two important details. First, the deflection techniques used at The Supermarket seem like poor choices to convey a helpful, positive customer service experience. The use of deflection on the shop floor indicates that either management did not comprehend the ubiquity of the scripts or that they were not concerned by the customer service presentation style. Returning to Langer’s (1989) concept of mindlessness, is the employee really in control of his or her own emotion management when (encouraged to be) operating in a diminished state of being? Second, Tolich (1993) argues that emotion management provides cashiers with a sense of satisfaction and decreases their alienation because of the increased sense of control they experience by conceiving of and employing their own customer service scripts. The moments of deflective labor illustrated herein seem to inhibit and terminate interactions rather than foster communication. Although there is the possibility of worker satisfaction emerging from the cessation of interaction, the dismissal of the actual task at hand is also denied, and this complicates an understanding of satisfaction as pride in a job well done.

Supermarket work is not as dangerous as manual labor such as mining, and it is more prestigious than other food

being presented, and my co-workers all laughed at my right answers (and me).

The deflection techniques detailed in this article were overheard and then repeated by others, yet these vague statements do not necessarily expose a willful ignorance or lack of training. Williams (2006:114) states that workers earning low wages know relatively little about the products they are selling, and like the employees at The Supermarket, the advice she and her co-workers gave, they “literally made up.” When an employee responds to a customer’s inquiry with a response such as “We must be sold out” or “We don’t carry that product,” they are, intentionally or not, presenting themselves as knowledgeable. By expressing “comprehension” of the larger systemic workings of the supermarket and providing what appears to be a concrete and knowledgeable response, they are able to end the customer service interaction or, at the least, extricate themselves from it. Otherwise kind, caring, and intelligent individuals become dispassionate and disengaged on the supermarket shop floor; the demands of self-preservation on the shop floor inadvertently perpetuated the myth of the ignorant, unskilled, low-wage worker (see also Gatta el al. 2009).

The retailer may have allowed deflection to propagate in order to assuage any potential employee upset before it could happen. The lack of sufficient training from The Supermarket suggests that coping skills are something that can be learned and encourages workers to internalize dissatisfaction with the stresses of customer service work as a personal problem rather than a social one. The subordination of the workers expected by The Supermarket is furthered through the categorization of retail work as “just the way it is.” Then, if the employees can control the customer service interaction just a tiny bit, just for a few seconds, then that sense of “sticking it to the customers” deflects their anger from the realities of their bodily functions being timed and recorded, and the retailer’s reputation as “a good place to work” emerges unscathed. And possibly more important to the retailer, as long as the customer, who is still king in customer service (Bolton and Houlihan 2005; Hochschild [1983] 2003), buys the “nice” item, the retailer benefits (as also seen in Johnston and Sandberg 2008).

Conclusion

Use of the established deflection techniques, responses such as “That’s a nice choice” or “This is a top seller,” can be understood with Langer’s (1989) concepts of mindfulness and mindlessness. The active state of mindfulness is of awareness and engagement in the construction of categories and distinctions, yet it should not be assumed to necessarily be a more “effortful” state. Mindlessness, on the contrary, is a reduced state of attention that limits not job performance but basic human excellence. The workers on the shop floor who dull their reactivity fall prey to the state of mindlessness that is not surprising given Wharton’s (1993) finding that
jobs such as fast food work, yet this makes it in itself neither easy nor pleasurable. Workers, myself included, were able to find satisfaction working at The Supermarket, but it was almost always despite The Supermarket rather than because of it. The language of employment—“join us,” “work with us”—denigrates the social contract between employer and employee by positioning the relationship as mutually constructed. Then, by restricting the ability of the employees to have their own needs met (scheduling, wages, benefits, etc.), the responsibility for satisfaction is transferred from retailer to employee, essentially trapping the workers in an untenable stronghold.

The impersonality of the mass retailer does have its benefits for the customer. Each customer is assured that he or she will pay the same price, regardless of the discriminatory attitude of the grocer (see Humphery 1998). By not standing out, the retail customer is able to demand preferential service while remaining disengaged from the mundane service of grocery shopping and the demands of the social interaction of customer service. The norms of the customer service interchange have been so internalized that a self-reflexivity was rare even when the individual was both the customer and the employee. Otherwise kind, caring, and intelligent individuals as workers became rude, dispassionate, and disengaged shoppers on the supermarket shop floor. This interconnectedness of consumer knowledge and worker job satisfaction, as mediated by the retailer, is an area ripe for further investigation.

It cannot be overlooked that the low-wage retailing service sector may be something unique. Workers at The Supermarket are not being transformed to fit into the luxury world illustrated in Otis’s (2012) study of service work in China. Nor are they bringing their middle-class habitus into the airplane to make customers feel more at home (Hochschild [1983] 2003). The employees in Otis’s (2012), Hochschild’s ([1983] 2003), Fleming and Spicer’s (2004), and Kunda’s (1992) studies worked in higher-classed fields, meaning above the working class, and the retail clerks in Williams and Connell’s (2010) study had reliable middle-class support systems already in place. But what happens when the employees exist in a space of consumption detested by most of its consumers12 and living a life where having money for food and rent is unpredictable?13

Deflective labor is something more than just employees being “bad” at their jobs: It is a definitive yet often implicit strategy in which workers engage in order to maintain composure and dignity on the shop floor. Deflective labor assuages a triad of harsh realities as experienced by the frontline service worker. First, deflection provides a coping strategy as armor for managing the threat of character assassination from the customers. Second, deflection moderates the relentless boredom often experienced by service workers. And finally, deflection allows employees to exert control in dealing with the unmanaged wild cards of frontline service work—the customers.

Working backward from Otis’s (2012) concept of “market embodied”—we must use the evidence of deflective labor in order to construct better understandings of the inequities inherent in early twenty-first-century service-work capitalism. Moving forward, our examinations of low-wage customer service work must be broadened to include the process of deflective labor—as both a customer service and coping technique—in order to reconceptualize low-wage work as skilled labor.

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12A quick search on Google for “least favorite chore” or “hate grocery shopping” will pull up hundreds of thousands of webpages of discussions of how much people dislike going to the supermarket. On the other hand, a search for “hate sweeping” pulls up mostly gibberish.

13Conversations about food shopping almost always included the local ethnic and discount food stores. Few employees discussed doing their main grocery shopping at The Supermarket. Toward the end of the pay period, there would be employees discussing their lack of funds and trying to subsist off of the free samples in the store and the almost rotten produce left in the break room for our consumption.
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