UNPREDICTABLE BAR AND GRILLE: IT’S GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH FOOD

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF

THE SUBCULTURE OF RESTAURANT WORKERS

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UNPREDICTABLE BAR AND GRILLE: IT’S GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH FOOD
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF
THE SUBCULTURE OF RESTAURANT WORKERS

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This study focuses on restaurant workers as a social group. A major objective of this research is to empirically demonstrate the existence and components of a unique restaurant worker subculture. Components of the subculture consist of subcultural implications, including indicators such as hours and turnover, and subcultural customs, especially workers’ carousing habits. Other factors important in creating the subculture are teamwork, work as performance, and the company’s role in the development and maintenance of the subculture. The theoretical backdrop of the thesis stems from Erving Goffman’s discussions of teams and dramaturgy.

Data were collected using a multi-method approach: survey distribution, interviews, and participant observation. This combination of data collection procedures provides an extensive amount of information that is useful for an exploratory analysis of the subculture of restaurant worker.

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Introduction

In the post-industrial world, the service industry has grown immensely. We have shifted from industrial production to a service economy, and in the United States this sector has risen to 70% of the gross domestic product (Young 2001, 29). One of the fastest growing sectors in the service industry is the restaurant and bar business. According to a 1995 New York Times article, the number of restaurant and bar employees grew by almost five and a half million workers in 30 years. In 1964 1.7 million Americans worked in restaurants/bars, and in 1994 the number had reached 7.1 million (Dickinson and Schaeffer 2001, 58). The vast increase in restaurant workers over the last 30 years generates a need for an inquiry that focuses on those who are serving our meals day in and day out, because these workers have become such a fundamental part of American life. Our society eats out more than we ever have before, and the waiter/waitress figure often becomes a very crucial part of our day through interactions in these establishments, and the basic delivery of food and drink. The importance of studying restaurant workers becomes explicit when their crucial function in both the economy and daily life is considered. This study focuses on the workers as a social group, and their interactions with each other, rather than with the clientele. The manner in which this interaction is carried out has some effect on our dining experience as Americans.

Sociologists have studied several facets of occupations for well over a century. A wide variety of occupations and professions have been examined from both macro and micro approaches and inspected for an assortment of characteristics. Typically, studies of occupations focus on a particular work practice or on the industry itself. Although quite a
few studies situate their focus on the workers as a social group, few work groups have the capacity or lifestyle to constitute a subgroup of the broader population, or subculture. By sociological definition, a subculture exists when the lifestyles, values, and norms of a group are somewhat distinct from those of the dominant culture; a segment of the larger society (Andersen and Taylor 2002, Mooney, Knox, and Schacht 1997). The research question asks if restaurant workers are a distinct subculture, relative to the larger society, and if their shared lifestyle, in particular, is quite different than that of other work groups. A major indicator of this may have to do with the hours that restaurant people work.

The restaurant subculture is one that has been widely overlooked by sociologists who study both occupations and culture, although there is a wide array of literature dealing with restaurant workers from a variety of fields beyond the social sciences. It was essential for the breadth of this study that other disciplines be examined for substance since the social sciences offer such little insight. The lack of sociological literature presents a challenge to original research that includes innovative investigation, concise conceptualization, and a thorough exploration. One objective of this research is to bring a sociological perspective to the literature on restaurant workers.

The research reported here is exploratory and therefore, it became clear early on that the focus must be narrowed to ensure that the study was of manageable proportions. It is important that certain aspects of the culture are well defined before beginning. For these purposes, it is important to make a distinction concerning eating and drinking establishments. There are three types: restaurants that serve food, but not alcohol, such as the wide variety of family-style restaurants and smorgasbords; bars that serve food, such as the neighborhood pub that serves cheeseburgers and fries in a bar atmosphere; and
finally, the “bar and grill” type of establishments – where patrons can enjoy a cocktail or a variety of domestic and imported beers with their meal. Distinguishing the differences of work and/or workers in these three different types of establishments is an intriguing research question, but the workers of the “bar and grill” division are the focus of this study. One reason for this is the availability of alcohol and the occupational acceptability of its use in a restaurant atmosphere; another is that choosing one of the three types allows for a more focused inquiry.

It is also important that the “who” is clearly defined as well. Due to the exploratory nature of this project, it is necessary to limit the possibilities of who is under surveillance. For this particular study, the main focus is on front-of-the-house (FOH) employees, who include waiters, waitresses, bartenders, and when appropriate, hosts and bussers. Gender non-specific terms used to describe waiters and waitresses are *waitron*, *waitpeople*, and *servers*. Although back-of-the-house (BOH) employees, such as cooks and dishwashers, play an integral role in the general operation of the restaurant, and certainly are a part of the subculture of restaurant workers, they typically fit into the group in a way that is not part of the objectives of this analysis. When appropriate or essential, accounts of these individuals are included. Again, the dynamics of the relationships between FOH and BOH is another potential study. Job title was not a source of discrimination during survey completion; therefore, FOH and BOH workers were both represented in the survey data.

**Research Objectives**

There are a number of phenomena with regard to restaurant work that could easily be a topic of research. What, specifically is under investigation for this study lies in the
hands of front-of-the-house (FOH) workers, especially waiters and waitresses. It is important to emphasize the roles that they are expected to fulfill as waitpeople both on and off the job, as well as the lifestyles and social norms that create the subculture of restaurant workers. As previously stated, back-of-the-house (BOH) workers are also a part of this subculture, but they will be excluded from the analysis, except when absolutely necessary. In addition, it is becoming far more likely for restaurant workers to be cross-trained to perform a variety of tasks. It is possible for many workers to identify themselves as both waitron AND cook, or host AND dishwasher.

The study is designed to empirically demonstrate that a subculture of restaurant workers exists while describing its components. The following questions are under investigation:

- What are the subcultural implications? What makes workers in the restaurant industry a subculture? What role do hours, turnover, and workplace atmosphere play in the development and maintenance of the subculture? How do restaurant workers cope with the potential stigma attached to their work?

- How are these subcultural implications enforced? In what ways are restaurant workers integrated into the subculture? Do the customs of the subculture include socializing, substance consumption, and sexual involvement?

- What is the relationship between the subculture and the workplace? How are the subcultural norms produced on the job? What role does the subculture play in the general operation of the restaurant, specifically with regard to teamwork?
• What is the company’s influence on the development of and the maintenance of the restaurant worker subculture? Does the company’s employee alcohol policy have a direct effect on the general working environment or worker productivity?

Do the workers recognize a relationship between at-work drinking and teamwork?

By answering these questions I hope to gain a better understanding of restaurant workers and the subculture to which they belong by virtue of their employment. The results of these queries may be of significant value not only to the field of sociology, but to the restaurant industry as well.
Chapter One

Literature Review

There is a clear distinction to be made between scholarly and popular literature regarding restaurant work. The professional literature described here concerns itself with customer relations, specifically related to performance, emotional labor, and gender issues. The popular literature offers a variety of naïve ethnographies that typically illustrate the excessive alcohol and drug use, and other carousing habits of restaurant workers. In other words, the popular work expresses the components of the culture of the workers, rather than a focus on customer interaction. In support of these first person accounts exists a small amount of scholarly evidence that substance abuse is a problem among restaurant workers.

Performing Work

Erving Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) offered tremendous insight into human social action of everyday life. One of the basic premises of this incredible monograph is the distinction between front and back regions. This is the theoretical backdrop of this study. Goffman asserts that social action is much like a theatrical performance. The individual is the actor, those he presents himself to represent the audience, and everyone else is an outsider. All of this acting (performance) occurs in the front region, according to Goffman, while the back region or “backstage” is reserved for the individual who is no longer acting. The audience is not allowed to go backstage unless they are invited. This is where the actor conceals his performance props and where he participates in activities that “might discredit his performance out front” (MacCannell 1973, 589).
Another focus of Goffman’s work that is essential for these purposes is his discussion of teams. He makes a distinction between groups (cliques) and teams that is meaningful. The team’s function is greater than the clique’s because the team has a common interest in a specific performance and its members must work together to ensure its success without letting the audience backstage. “There is a bond of reciprocal dependence linking teammates to one another” (Goffman 1959, 82). Cliques on the other hand are simply a “small number of individuals who join together for informal amusement” (p. 84). They are able to act as a team and may need to at times, but Goffman emphasizes that the major difference is that teams achieve ends by no other means than dramaturgical cooperation (p. 85). In other words, the team literally acts together to achieve the shared goal. Teamwork is a crucial component for the success of the restaurant business in general, and on a shift-by-shift basis.

**Emotional Labor**

A central concept for this study emerges from Arlie Hochschild’s *The Managed Heart* (1983), a study on flight attendants. Here Hochschild coined the term *emotional labor*, and numerous researchers (Steinberg, Figart, Wharton, Kunda and Van Maanen, Leidner, Himmelweit, 1999) have followed her example, adding their own interpretation and focusing on a variety of sectors of the service industry such as care work, academia, paralegals, and interactive service work. Hochschild emphasized the need for employees to “induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (1999, 10). Subsequent authors build on this insight. Steinberg and Figart were the special editors for an entire journal issue dedicated to emotional labor, which the editors defined as work “involving face-to-face or voice-to-
voice contact, especially in service work” (1999, 8) where it is the worker’s responsibility to make the customer feel good or bad. Steinberg and Figart express concepts of surface acting presented by Hochschild. Surface acting is quite similar to a Goffmanian performance. It requires the individual to feign emotion so that what is really being felt is not displayed to the audience (1999, 11). This sort of acting may include a forced smile and lots of “thank yous” when interacting with customers. The employee is not alone in this feigned social acting; there are service scripts to assist them. Often these scripts are gendered and implemented by managers.

Robin Leidner also adheres to the definitions of emotional labor presented by Hochschild, and expresses that sometimes managers attempt to control not only the workers’ appearance (uniforms, hair style, fingernails), and demeanors, but also the workers’ moods and feelings (1999, 85). Managers also have control over hiring practices and so are better able to hire a certain type of worker. For example, a manager may assume from the appearance and manner of a cocktail waitress applicant that she will assimilate to the flirtatious environment he/she thinks their customers expect and appreciate (1999, 84).

Service scripting is a key ingredient for regulating emotional labor. Leidner asserts, “Scripting of speech, movement, and body language is especially common… and can range from simple instructions (injunctions to smile; requirements to welcome customers at the beginning of an interaction and request return at the end) to remarkably detailed directions for longer more complicated transactions” (1999, 87). Leidner also argues that the unpredictable and complex nature of some kinds of interactive work prohibits managers from pre-specifying all interactions (1999, 88).
Leidner finally adds the customer to the interaction process and notes that sometimes their wishes are different than those of the manager or organization (1999, 89). This puts the service worker in a tough spot. It is the general rule to please the customer, but there are times when the customer does not recognize his/her prescribed script for the service interaction and the interaction may become problematic. Most customers, however, are “willing to play their parts by waiting in line, making appointments, and not ordering things that are not on the menu” (1999, 90).

Amy S. Wharton finds it important to make the distinction between emotional labor and “work feelings” using the definition of Mumby and Putnam. “Work feelings represent the ‘spontaneous and emergent’ consequences of social interaction at work, while emotional labor refers to the managed and more instrumental expression of emotion in the workplace” (1999, 159). A dissatisfied customer may be acting very rude to the server, causing her work feelings to boil on the inside and probably backstage among her teammates. In the dining room, however, her feelings should be highly managed so that customers cannot tell she is enraged or has hurt feelings.

Wharton describes an example of anthropological research by Paules (1991) that challenged Hochschild’s insistence that emotional labor can be psychologically damaging. Her research on waitresses reveals that “they fully resisted assaults on their selves…Like all social actors, the waitress monitors her projected personality and manipulates her feelings in the course of social interaction, but she does so knowingly and in her own interests” (1999, 164). This suggests that although emotional labor can be dangerous, it is possible for the laborer to control its dangerous powers.
Bulan, Erickson, and Wharton studied feelings of workers’ inauthenticity and gender. Both genders agreed that when their job required them to ‘handle people well’ they felt the most inauthentic (1999, 169). On the other hand, they also discovered that women feel they can “be themselves” in service work due to the nature of the people-oriented work, while “men need frequent interaction with others to feel authentic only when they are not otherwise highly involved with their jobs” (1999, 169-170; emphasis in original).

**Gender and Waiting**

Cultural anthropologist Greta Foff Paules (1991) reveals the strategies used by experienced waitresses to manage a variety of situations experienced in a family-style restaurant. “It is about women who don’t take no junk” (2). The author offers a detailed discussion of the significance of the waitress as a research subject, pointing out the lack of research in the social sciences on several non-professional service jobs, despite the incredible growth of the service sector. She does, however, reveal some of the potential factors for this disregard of waitresses and other service workers in the United States, including the history of emphasis on the industrial working class as an influence of social change in the social sciences (18).

Paules worked as a waitress at a family-style restaurant in New Jersey to assist her role as participant observer. Over the course of eighteen months, she conducted twenty-one interviews, fourteen of which were with waitresses. She argues that although the study was only conducted in one restaurant, it was broader than it seemed because many of the workers had been employed at other restaurants and spoke of their experiences at them frequently in interviews and casual conversation. She was able to come to various
conclusions about the nature of work and the women’s role in it, the tipping system and how waitresses work for it, and how waitresses adopt a great amount of autonomy on the job to manage interactions with customers and managers. As previously stated, this study is about waitresses who “don’t take no junk” from anyone.

Anthropologists James Spradley and Brenda Mann (1975) explore social behavior at a college bar from the perspective of *The Cocktail Waitress*. Although the data for this ethnography were collected over 30 years ago, the scenarios are typical and offer a rich source of observational anecdotes. Spradley and Mann acknowledge the potential difficulties with bias that they may experience, specifically with regard to gender. To combat this, they collaborated at each stage of the study. Mann was employed as a cocktail waitress in the setting and although the workers were aware of her research project, her co-workers insisted that she become a part of their social group. While Mann took the role of the participant, Spradley served the role of the detached observer and every couple of days they would convene for a lengthy debriefing session.

Through the thorough investigation of several facets of “Brady’s”, a Midwestern college bar, Spradley and Mann were able to generalize their findings to other college bars in the Midwest, based on the fact that many of the waitresses as well as the customers, existed in a network that was connected by a variety of bars in the college area via employment, patronage, or both. They were able to give a detailed analysis of the life of the waitress coupled with various aspects of her job such as interaction among fellow workers (including other waitresses and male bartenders) and a variety of customers. They stress the social nature of the job and explore the dynamics of interaction between workers and customers, from how joking plays into the scene to how
a drink should be ordered. They also go to great lengths to describe how labor is divided, both among the workers, and for each individual worker, assessing the variety of tasks a waitress is required to complete, seemingly all at once.

Men and women are not only different in their feelings about work and authenticity; they often are required to behave differently in certain settings based on their gender. Elaine Hall (1993) argues that servers of both genders do gender through emotional labor (457), using their “bodies, emotions, and personalities to create a pleasant dining experience for the customers” (1993, 457).

Hall interviewed 19 waiters and waitresses from 5 restaurants of varying prestige. A waiter from a prestigious restaurant in Hall’s study expressed the utter importance of smiling as a central feature to giving good service regardless of his emotional state or how he is being treated, “I always smile at them...they treat me bad...they treat me good...[the smile] is part of my uniform” (1993, 460). Many servers discussed their preference for waiting on customers of the opposite sex, because flirting is often “part of the provider-customer interaction” (1993, 464). The majority also agreed that there is a competitive vibe when waiting on same-sex patrons. Hall suggests that in the traditional restaurant literature, waiters are expected to provide “professional” service, while the waitresses wear sexy uniforms and are expected to give friendly service (1993, 457). In accordance with other research, LaPointe (1992) found that waitresses are expected to wear revealing or sexy uniforms and to present themselves as sex objects (Hall 1993, 456).

There appears to be a shared notion in the restaurant and bar world that says women should and do use their bodies and their charm to make money. It is not as
exploitative as erotic dancing or pornography; but it does build on displaying stereotyped gendered behaviors such as being cute or sexy, fun, and efficient as waitresses. In 1977 Kanter suggested that in order for women workers to cope with working conditions, they enact conventional gender stereotypes and that “by performing these ‘roles’ of mother, seductress, pet and iron maiden.... women [exhibited] traditional gender performances” (Hall 1993, 453). Customers desire a pleasant dining experience and it is the server’s duty to ensure that by smiling, taking pleasure in serving, and exhibiting management techniques (Hall 1993, 456-7). Hall concluded through her exploratory research that regardless of restaurant type, good service providers are expected to be friendly, subservient, and flirtatious, but she encouraged future research addressing the nature of flirt, especially considering the fact that it can be seen as a job-prescribed form of sexual harassment that is seen as acceptable and therefore omitted from work place policies (Hall 1993, 468).

Another discussion of sexual harassment in restaurants outlines the identification of behaviors labeled as harassment while exploring the boundary lines between these and behaviors that are labeled as flirtation. Patti Giuffre and Christine Williams (1994) revealed that restaurants are “highly sexualized” work environments and that although most people accept this atmosphere and many enjoy it, there are exceptions where the fuzzy line becomes quite clear (239). According to their analysis of respondents’ comments, behavior is labeled by the victim as harassment when it is perpetrated by someone in a more powerful position, perpetrated by someone of a different race or ethnicity, or by someone of a different sexual orientation (228). It is important to point out that those who were victimized by someone of a different race were all White women
who were harassed by Black or Latino men. “They draw boundary lines differently” [for White men and Latino men] (233). The authors point out that men of color are typically concentrated in the kitchen or are employed as busboys (232). This makes for an interesting, yet subtle contribution to the notion of latent racism that exists among restaurant workers. This concept will be discussed in Part One of Chapter Three.

When sexual orientation was the basis for labeling behaviors as harassment, the accounts were described by heterosexual males who were harassed by homosexual males (236). The authors call attention to the fact that sexual orientation is not typically researched in cases of sexual harassment and suggest that in this study it was a very important characteristic to explore (236).

**Working for Tips**

Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) is an account of her study to see if she could make it in America working low-wage jobs. Her experience as a waitress at a hotel restaurant, and as a low-wage earner in general, enabled her to see the disparities that exist in our nation and share them with a large audience. She discussed her difficulty adjusting to the tip income, and detailed her experiences of waitress work and the lives of those around her at the restaurant. Ehrenreich reveals that according to the Fair Standards Labor Act, tipped employees are not required to be paid more than $2.13 per hour in direct wages (16). During her time at the *Hearthside Restaurant*, a new policy was adopted forbidding employees to both drink alcohol at the hotel bar and to eat at the restaurant when off duty, for fear of at-work intoxication and/or gossip. This made for some interesting comparisons to my own research, in that one facet of the industry under investigation is the company alcohol policy.
Kimberly Garrity and Douglas Degelman (1988) conducted a study to determine whether server introduction has an effect on tipping. The participants included forty-two 2-person parties eating Sunday Brunch on two different occasions, and one waitress. The waitress was instructed to smile and greet her customers as usual, but to only give her name to those parties that were randomly selected by the researcher. “The major finding of this study was that having the server identify herself by name resulted in a large, statistically significant effect on tipping behavior” (Garrity and Degelman 1990, 170).

The Waitress

Part journalism and part oral history, Allison Owings (2002) provides a collection of diverse characters’ stories discovered during her travels around the United States. She calculated (with the help of the national bureaus of labor statistics and wage estimates) that over one and half million waitresses are employed in the United States today (2). When asked why her study did not include waiters, she concluded that other than the fact that women outnumber men three to one in waiting jobs, that waitressing is recognized as a “woman’s common remedy for financial desperation…waiters have it easier” (3).

Owings traveled around the country asking waitresses to tell their stories. She was able to obtain subjective histories of waitressing from women who had been waitresses for decades, as well as fresh anecdotes from those who had only been in the industry a short time. She collected tales of customer relations, struggles with management, and relationships with fellow waitresses. Sometimes their accounts were told with deep affection, others were told with frustration. The women told her about the effects waitressing has on one’s body, mind, and heart. This book is an account of waitresses
who offer their version of American history and general societal events from their perspective as the nation’s food servers.

Leon Elder and Lin Rolens (1985) collaborated to produce a naïve ethnography that glorifies waitresses all over the globe. The presentation of the data resembles a waitress’s photo album complete with captions concerning their work as waitresses. However, for this particular work, the lack of systematic observation offers a unique and very personal story of the life of a waitress, and alludes to the reality of the waitress as a public figure who caters to our thirst, hunger, and desire for small talk with strangers. They too, exclude waiters because they tend to come off as “functionaries, businessmen even – impersonal, detached and efficient and not to be bantered with” (12). The authors described facets of waitress life including friendship, cattle call type interviews, and brief encounters that every waitress is sure to experience.

Debra Ginsberg (2001) provides a tremendous amount of insight to this task as she tells her story of life as a waitress. Ginsberg has waited tables for twenty years to support herself through college, and while waiting for her writing career to take off. She came to a riveting conclusion that almost every waitperson is waiting to do something else. “This is why a “real job” is commonly accepted restaurant slang for anything other than waiting tables” (70). Waitpeople are reluctant to admit that waiting tables is their profession (69). This particular notion, along with several others, offers an important cue to investigate through my own research. As previously mentioned, she too was a victim of waiting; that is, for her to become a writer. She even joked about the fact that when she finally wrote a book, it was about her experiences as a waitress.
Ginsberg offers a variety of insights on life as a waitress including her experiences at a variety of restaurants in different geographical locations, experiences with customers and co-workers, incidents that were quite soap-operatic, and tales of great friendship. She details the art of waiting and discussed the symptoms and cures for waitron burnout, as well as the incessant transience of waitpeople.

**Carousing Habits**

On the other side of the hot-food window is Anthony Bourdain’s autobiography *Kitchen Confidential* (2000). What is useful about these memoirs is that no one is better at describing restaurant life than those who have committed themselves to the industry as professionals for several years. This one in particular struck me because it is a classic explanation not only of the restaurant world, but also of the perceptions of servers by cooks. A comedic trek through his life as a chef, Bourdain offered an interesting perspective on the lives and work of restaurant workers in general, but specifically of servers, and admitted that “the waiters and bartenders could always be counted on for funny personal anecdotes of sexual misadventures” (129), and that they would often be found sitting on milk crates, smoking, and talking about each other (197). He revealed the abundance of drug use by himself and other restaurant people in graphic detail and made several remarks about the regular occurrence of workers “humping” in the dry-goods area of the restaurant. He expressed what is so subcultural about the restaurant industry; “a secret society with its own language and customs” (p. xiv), and how “never having a Friday or Saturday night off, always working holidays, and being busiest when the rest of the world is just getting out of work, makes for a sometimes peculiar worldview” (4). *Kitchen Confidential* is a very raw look at the inside of the restaurant world, including
analyses of interaction both on and off the job among restaurant workers. Although this piece particularly focuses on cooks and chefs, it offers a rich source of evidence supporting the claim that the subculture of restaurant workers is alive and kicking.

As Bourdain experienced and revealed the vast amount of alcohol and drug consumption among restaurant workers, some Scandinavian researchers have found the same in their research. Svein Larsen (1994) and Kristina Kjærheim, Reidar Mykletun, Olaf G. Aasland, Tor Haldorsen, and Aage Andersen (1995) offer compelling similarities and evidence of heavy alcohol use among restaurant workers. Their findings were quite similar and affirmed my supposition that restaurant workers tend to consume alcohol frequently and in large quantities. Both of these articles were concerned with the dangers of alcohol abuse (to the individual and their employers) and why workers in these types of service occupations are prone to drinking more heavily than other business sectors. In 1992, Klebanow and Eder “asserted that employee substance abuse was a particularly acute problem for the hospitality industry” (Larsen 1994, 734). There is a notion that alcohol and drugs are more readily available as well as more socially acceptable among hotel and restaurant employees, hence the frequency of use and abuse among them will increase (Larsen 1994, 735).

Kjærheim (1995) and her team of researchers were interested in the structural factors and social modeling of heavy drinking in the work place. They suggested the following:

- Work schedule, type of work place, and company alcohol policy were considered to be important structural factors.
- Modeling factors were the frequency with which co-workers went out together after work, the frequency with
which co-workers took an end-of-work drink at the work place, and the perceived pressure to drink (1488).

This assertion is consistent with many of my observations and concerns with my own research on the topic. Kjærheim’s team defined and stated questions to measure structural and modeling factors, and then distributed a self-administered questionnaire to 7542 waiters and cooks who had been organized in the Norwegian Hotel and Restaurant Workers’ Union for at least 1.5 years. The response rate was 64%. The factors listed above were significantly related to heavy alcohol consumption among restaurant workers. The researchers concluded, “the variables ‘co-workers take an end of work drink at the work place’ and ‘co-workers go out after work’ were the strongest predictors of heavy drinking” (Kjærheim, et al. 1995, 1491). Company alcohol policy and household type were also strong predictors, but work schedule and type of work place were not predictive of heavy drinking.

Svein Larsen’s measurement device was the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT), which has been validated and yields reliable results (Larsen 1994, 735). He sampled students from three different colleges: a university center, a teacher’s college, and a college for hotel and restaurant management (NCHM). The students at NCHM scored considerably higher on the AUDIT than the other students (Larsen 1994, 736). This refers back to the assumption that availability will increase use. Hotel and restaurant workers are more exposed to alcohol than workers in other service jobs, and “they depend on alcohol for overall revenue and consequently the survival of their business and employment” (Larsen 1994, 738). There is an argument in the defense of the industry that says heavy drinkers may be attracted to the hospitality industry because of
the availability of alcohol and the social acceptability of heavy consumption (Larsen 1994, 739). Yet another interpretation may hold true for the causes of the relationship between hospitality workers and alcohol consumption. “Factors such as unstable working hours, work-related stress, low emotional support within the working environment and even alienation may be important explanatory factors” (Larsen 1994, 739).

Another alcohol related matter that occurs in the restaurant business is that involving the customers. It has already been stated that workers rely on alcohol sales to make a living. Douglas Kaufman and John M. Mahoney (1999) explore “haptic stimulation” in relation to alcohol use. The authors sought to determine the effect a brief touch from a waitress may have on a customer’s subsequent alcohol consumption. They hypothesized that touch would increase alcohol consumption by the individual who was touched. These researchers organized an experiment in the natural environment of two taverns where five waitresses (who were in no way affiliated with the field of psychology) were trained to administer the touch treatment in the appropriate fashion and place (near the shoulder) on the patron’s body. These “confederates” were blind to the hypothesis of the study (Kaufman and Mahoney 1999, 2). Of 144 patrons, 96 were male, and 48 were female. Their results demonstrated that patrons who were touched “consumed significantly greater amounts of alcohol than those who were not touched” (Kaufman and Mahoney 1999, 3). In 1991 Hornik suggested that a patron who is touched may take a liking to the initiator; Kaufman and Mahoney concluded that this increased liking for the waitress caused by the touch may result in increased alcohol consumption (Kaufman and Mahoney 1999, 4). They also realized that taverns in the United States are environments where intimate behaviors (such as touching) are acceptable, and had the
study been done in another type of environment, results may have been drastically
different (Kaufman and Mahoney 1999, 4).
Chapter Two

Research Strategy

How this all began

Restaurant work sparked my interest during the summer before entering graduate school. I had been waiting tables and bartending for two years with a bachelor’s degree because the “real job” I got after college was not paying the bills. Besides, I had been doing restaurant work for years during college, and was good at it, and I was making a lot of money, so it was not a major decision, nor did I feel it to be a major set back as my parents did. They played right into the notion that for some girls, waiting tables is a great thing, but for me, well, they just assumed I was too good to be “just” a waitress, that I should be above it all because I went to college. This is a potential stigmatization restaurant people face, especially those who come from families that “expect more out of their children/siblings”, etc. It was the best decision I ever made, though, because it really did put things into perspective for me. Eventually, I got to a point that I had to “get out” of the business, and I found myself in graduate school studying the very subculture I was once a part of.

During one of the many goodbye parties with my fellow servers, three of us came to a decision, half in jest at the time, that I should do a study on restaurant workers and our “wacky lifestyle”. We all laughed at the thought of it, but I placed a little note in the back of my mind, thinking that, sociologically speaking, that wasn’t such a bad idea. My friends were thrilled when I told them that their humorous suggestion was quickly
becoming a reality, and I owe them great acknowledgement for their idea, even if it was a joke at the time.

As I began to generate ideas for a research design, I realized that I could use my own experiences as a restaurant worker to my advantage as a researcher in several different ways. For one, I knew that anywhere I went I could get a job waiting tables, if they were hiring, for participant observation purposes. Second, having worked in the industry for eight years, I have several personal stories of my life in a restaurant, and a general sense of what goes on in one. This not only allows me to know what types of questions to ask, but also allows me to use myself as an informant, both during observation and analysis. Finally, because I am “one of them”, I knew that I would be able to communicate with them about their jobs and their lifestyles in a very person-to-person sort of way rather than an impersonal researcher-subject relationship. At the same time, I have become aware of the potential hazards of bias insiders tend to experience and have taken measures to eliminate these such as maintaining my role as researcher while participating in social activities so as not to become completely immersed in the culture as well as continually reminding myself to simply take notes in order to limit the possibility of shaping the observations to fit what I was looking for. Additional bias eliminating measures are detailed in the methods section of this paper.

Given the fact that there have been no studies to replicate, it has been extremely challenging to conduct this research. The data collected has offered a wide variety of possibilities for analysis, inference, and future research. The possibilities are seemingly endless and I hope to conduct future research on this issue.
Methodology

I employed a multi-method approach to data collection for a well-rounded analysis. These methods include a survey, participant observation, and interviews. Using more than one research method technique is the best guard against contamination (Denzin [in] Emerson 2001, 165) and can strengthen measurement significantly (Brewer and Hunter [in] Schutt 2001, 84). The methods used for this study are described in detail below.

After administering a pretest questionnaire to 20 restaurant workers nine months prior to the official administration, I was able to redesign the survey to better suit the needs and interests of the research, with language and questions suitable to the subjects. This pretest contained several open ended questions that were used to formulate fixed choice responses to similar questions. It also revealed the irrelevance of some questions and the absolute necessity of others. Certain trends were discovered in this pretest that were not expected and I was able to include the inquiry of these as well in the revised version. In addition, my work as a participant observer exposed other trends worthy of inquiry, and yet another revision was necessary before administration.

Self as Informant: A Brief Subjective History

Before beginning with a detailed report of the findings of this research venture, it is essential that a subjective history of my personal restaurant experience be presented to provide a backdrop and to describe the insight I have obtained. In the last nine years I have been employed by four different restaurants: a suburban sports bar, “Drifter’s”, an Irish pub in a college town called “The Celtic Room”, a corporate franchise restaurant/bar “Flo’s”, and currently, a Blues restaurant/bar. The majority of my restaurant experience
has been in the front-of-the-house (FOH), specifically as a waitress and a bartender, though I have cooked, hosted, bussed, and washed dishes. The reason for working in a restaurant was much like the reasons of the research participants, money. I was 18 years old and on my way to college in the fall. Earning a lot of money over the summer was imperative. Coming from a relatively conservative upbringing I was surprised at what I encountered: young women who wore too much make-up and very short shorts and older women who had families. There were no waiters. A few of my co-workers had been to college, but were currently taking some time off. They all smoked cigarettes and cussed like sailors. I learned more about sex over a coke and a smoke in the back room than I ever did from sex education week in health class or my mother for that matter.

I learned a lot about life in the three months that I worked at Drifter’s. I learned how to flirt subtly with lonely customers, how to take a beating, verbally, from an irate customer, how to give them what they wanted, when, and how they wanted it. It was my first taste of “abnormal” human behavior. If I would be doing this for a while, I had a lot to learn on my own.

Drifter’s was the place where I became a smoker. Sure, I had smoked my fair share of cigarettes in the rebellion of my teens, but never had actually smoked an entire pack, smoked on my way to or from somewhere, or felt this overwhelming feeling that I needed a cigarette. I remember the “girls” asking me to watch their tables, to let them know if they “got sat”\(^1\), or if anyone suddenly needed anything, and to let them know; they’d be in the back. The smoke room at Drifter’s was a little area by the back door that was crowded with milk crates and 5-gallon buckets. These became chairs. There was

\(^1\) “You just got sat” is common terminology for, “A party was just seated in your section.”
almost always someone back there. This was one of my first customer service jobs, so I hadn’t realize yet the importance of taking a break when you could get one. I figured it out soon enough. Going away from the madness for three to five minutes on a busy night can do wonders for your morale and your attitude. It gives you a chance to readjust your bra straps, reapply lipstick, put your mind at ease, and refuel for the next round. Even boxers get breaks between rounds. I had sat back there while the girls were smoking a few times during down times. I usually just sat quietly, not smoking, and listened to them jabber on about their crazy lives. I heard stories about drug use that I never thought imaginable. I heard tales of sexual escapades and whispered accounts of a cook’s pass at the bartender. I’d never heard women talk like this before; cussing like sailors and describing events in graphic, sometimes pornographic, detail.

One night I was in dire need of a break. I wanted to get a coke, sit down and think about how to reorganize my station for when the next rush comes. It was a pretty busy night, but all my tables were taken care of, and would be ok without me for a few moments while I refueled. Little did I know, I should’ve just taken a break, but instead, I asked my manager if it was ok. He responded as if I had asked if I could leave for the night! Needless too say, I did not get that much needed break that night.

Shortly after that incident I was taking something towards the back and I saw a couple of waitresses sitting on milk crates, smoking, and talking. I couldn’t believe my eyes. In retrospect I realize that maybe I just caught the manager at a bad time, maybe he wanted a break but couldn’t take one so he decided to not let me take one either. I also think the waitresses were smart enough NOT to ask, and just went. It wasn’t a personal attack against me, the newbie, the young girl. It was about smoking. A few shifts later,
the same manager on duty, I tried a new angle. I asked him if I could go smoke a cigarette real quick, after I had bummed one from a waitress. He said, ‘sure go ahead. Get yourself a coke and sit down. I’ll watch your tables.’ I thought, ‘wow, all I had to do was smoke to get a break?’ Seems strange. To this day I wish I had just lied about smoking and never lit up. I smoked for seven years and finally quit a year ago. That manager was a smoker. His rationale must have been something like, you don’t need to sit down, you don’t need to take a break, but you do need to smoke. No one understands that better than a smoker. That’s the excuse, the smoking. Someone not smoking, but breaking, isn’t doing anything, and they might as well be out there working. The next summer I returned, still smoking, to work at Drifter’s. Not much had changed except a few of the faces. I quit before the summer was over for reasons I have since forgotten. A few years later, Drifter’s went out of business and left Sinclairville all together.

I left the restaurant business for about two years after that. I was in college and not working. Eventually I needed to find work and before I knew it I was back. A popular Irish pub called the Celtic Room was hiring a dishwasher; I applied and got the job. I wasn’t a disher for long because soon, the FOH manager and owner offered me the chance to become a hostess. Suddenly I was able to leave my dingy disher clothes in the hamper and trade my rubber apron in for panty hose. I always thought being a hostess was a rather glamorous job. It didn’t seem too difficult from where I stood and every hostess I ever saw was well kept, charming, and smiled a lot.

While I was perfecting my hosting abilities (which are harder than they appear), I was also learning the art of bussing. A busser is assigned to a few servers and basically becomes the server’s gopher for the evening. Whether they need refills at their tables,
plates cleared, or tables reset, the busser is there to answer to them. In turn, the servers
tip the busser out at the end of the night. At the Celtic Room, there were very few people
who became servers who had not put in their time bussing. It was certainly a hierarchy
without a doubt, and I was moving up it. I eventually became a server, which was a big,
important step in the Celtic Room pecking order. I worked there for a little over a year,
and towards the end of it, was doing a little bit of everything including bar-backing²,
which is where I learned how to tend bar. A waiter pointed out once that I had clocked in
under every possible job code there is, except for manager, and rewarded me with well-
rounded compliments.

During the year I worked at the Celtic Room I was forced to withdraw from
college and was given a taste of the real world with regard to supporting myself. I turned
22 that year and was interested in little else but having a good time. Working in a
restaurant was perfect for this because I was surrounded by people who also loved to
party. There were lots of drugs and even more drinking. To top it off, I never had to be at
work before four o’clock so it was painless to party until the very wee hours of the
morning with the rest of them. Frequently, servers would arrange to meet in the alley to
smoke a joint. Ironically, the employees from the restaurant/bar next door would often be
out there doing the same thing. One night I went upstairs to retrieve my street clothes
from my locker and turned the corner to find a bartender and a waitress bent over a few
lines of cocaine on a steel table.

There were always some sort of after hours going on somewhere. I never really
paid much attention to it at the time, but this is where I began to take a very active part in

² A bar-back is like a bartender’s assistant; one who fetches ice, beer, and other items needed by the
bartender. Bar-back is to bartender as busser is to waitron.
a restaurant subculture. I had several outside friends when I started working at the Celtic Room, and over time, I saw them less and less. Some other friends were restaurant people, in fact, a couple of them worked next door at the Wild Pony and we saw each other more often. I was totally committed to the restaurant subculture before I had any concept that one existed. The hours were not conducive to hanging out with our non-restaurant friends. They worked “normal hours” and we were typically heading to work as they were on their way home. Sometimes my friends would be so disgruntled because I could not go to a party with them on Saturday night or to dinner on Friday. This is where I began to understand the stigma that is placed on restaurant people as well with regard to hours. It is here that I noticed how very different the hours of restaurant people are from the rest of the world, but it wasn’t until Flo’s that I really understood the hours, the partying, and the camaraderie to be subcultural.

Flo’s was the third restaurant I worked in. During three years of employment I, again, held many job titles. Hired as a server, I also hosted, cooked, dished, and tended bar throughout my tour of duty. I became integrated into the restaurant world quickly and made several friends almost immediately. Flo’s is where it all began to come together and where many subcultural aspects of the lifestyle I was living were acknowledged. There was a unique bunch working there when I began and they were all great friends. They were very friendly and work seemed like a game they were playing together. Not against each other, but together. The teamwork was like nothing I’d ever seen before, and it wasn’t necessarily dictated by management, the employees just did it, and were having fun!
During the training, my trainer, April, invited me up to the bar after work to have a beer and hang out. There I met many other employees in a social environment that was much more casual than in the dining room. Receiving and accepting an invitation from an established member of the group is almost like an initiation ritual to the subculture. This type of activity went on frequently, and before I knew it, I was a trainer and was inviting my trainee up to the bar for some drinks and conversation. We used the bar as a meeting or gathering place. Rarely did we get drunk there, though a few did from time to time, but that was not what it was intended for. It was simply for gathering. We met there for birthday parties, or going away parties (which restaurant people get to be very good at because someone is always leaving), or for “parties” that are thrown together because we all had a wild night at work and we wanted to play a little before going home. There were always after-hours parties going on, and trips to the bar on the corner, Marty’s, or the gay bar next door, the Brass Giraffe. There was canoeing, shopping, and lunch dates. Some of my best friends I met working at Flo’s, including the man I married.

I left Flo’s to get married and go to graduate school in another town. As previously mentioned, some friends and I came up with the idea for this research project during one of our going away parties. It has since become a reality.

**Going into the Field – Participant Observation**

I considered conducting this research in my current home, Athens, Ohio, but then I realized how unrepresentative it might be, given that it is a college town prone to extreme alcohol consumption, and that I was to collect data in the summer, a time when Athens is very quiet. Additionally, Athens is predominately White (93.5% according to
the U.S. Census Bureau), and this would offer an extremely unrepresentative view of restaurant workers. I decided that a metropolitan area would be better for research with the hope that there would be more ethnic diversity in a city. And where better to go than a place where I’d been before and have a place to sleep for free. I went home to “Sinclairville” and stayed with my parents.

I was able to gain access easily by obtaining a job as a waitress at Flo’s, the very place I’d left about one year earlier. I had a good reputation there, and was well liked by the manager, so entrance was painless. I saw no need to disguise my role as researcher, so I filled in the managers as much as I could on my research objectives and promised them a small report when I was able to produce one. I planned to be there for one month, beginning in mid-June. They asked me if I’d like to bartend, but I declined because bartenders have too much autonomy and not enough interaction with the wait staff at this particular restaurant. I wanted to be in the trenches with my subjects.

Not much to my surprise, the majority of the staff had turned over since I had left the restaurant less than one year before. I knew almost no one, but I took comfort in this because I was suddenly feeling a little awkward with a notebook in my apron and an inquisitive ear positioned in almost every conversation. I was sure that I could fit in as a waitress who was doing research with strangers, but was not so sure about doing so with people I knew. I was actually happy to see mostly new faces. It also reduced possibilities of bias or distorted interaction because I had no prior relationship with most of them. It was obvious that I had worked there before because I did not receive any training and I appeared to know almost everything about the menu and where to find the “whatever was missing at the time”, but it had been a while. I discovered a role that I had not anticipated
I was both a newbie (a new person) and a veteran simultaneously, depending upon the situation and the company I was in. To clarify my actual role, it is important to point out that, especially in the beginning, I was “just another waitress” to most of the staff. In time I began to tell some of the servers about my research, and there are still some who barely remember that I was there at all, much less to investigate.

I was truly thrust into the job again beginning with my first shift. Early in the day I was instructed to “pick up” shifts, meaning, there were none available technically, except those shifts that belong to other servers who are looking for days off for vacation or dentist appointments. I went to the message board and found a plethora of little yellow slips complete with the person who needed off, the date they needed off and the shift they were to be working. I pulled several off the board and signed up for them, but many of them were not until July meaning I was left with only a few shifts before then. A server gave me some advice about how to get more shifts earlier, and I followed it. At the start of the dinner shift, I stood around in uniform asking servers if they would like to go home instead of work. This is a common practice, apparently, and it was not difficult. Three people offered to let me work. I ended up working in the smoking section as the “closer” and was literally thrust back into the life of a waitress in a matter of hours. It was a busy night and it really got me back into the swing of things. I felt that it was very important for me to be relatively immersed in the work and the social atmosphere for research purposes, and although I struggled to maintain my role as researcher at times, I managed to take several detailed notes.

In my apron I carried a small notebook that fit perfectly and was not conspicuous. Every chance I got I would jot things down in my notebook. I also carried a micro
cassette recorder, but I felt awkward using it at work, so I kept to writing at work, and would often talk to myself, recording, about the events of the night during the twenty-minute drive home. When I had the chance, typically in the morning with coffee before getting ready to go back to the restaurant, I would sit at the computer and type up the notes that were scratched all over my notebook, and sometimes even on napkins or random pieces of paper. This gave me a chance to reflect and elaborate on what I was experiencing. I realized quickly how tiring this work is and how completely exhausted I would be when I made it home and climbed into bed, my feet and legs aching, my hair smelling of smoke and food, but my brain still going a thousand miles a minute. It was hard to relax.

Through participant observation I was able to obtain a variety of information about the interactions and relationships among the workers, as well as things that go on outside of work as well. I participated in several trips to the neighborhood bar for after work drinks, and a handful of what I call, “instant parties”. Typically these occur ‘after hours’, are spontaneous, and are often decided upon when the bartenders are ordering people to leave the bar so they can close up. Through these social interactions I was able to collect information about the work relationship of those at the social event, and then reevaluate the relationships on the job for similarities.

The Survey

I have mentioned the survey briefly already in that it has been revised numerous times, as most surveys are. Many of the questions were chosen based on my experiences and observations as a restaurant worker. Some of the questions were asked to quench some of my curiosity about restaurant workers, but did not produce any significant
information and were not included in the analysis. Still other questions were selected with the hope of generating further research questions.

I administered the surveys toward the end of the participant observation portion of the study. At this time, those who had no idea I was a researcher became fully aware. I passed out several surveys at the research site and instructed them to seal the questionnaires in the provided envelope before returning them. I planned to collect 50 surveys, and wanted a more representative sample. In other words, I did not want the surveys to be *only* from those I worked alongside. For validation and reliability, I administered the questionnaire at two other sites: a restaurant in a more urban suburb and one in a rural suburb. The original research site is in an urban area. I gained access easily at both through friends who were working there. I was able to meet the manager and assure him that it would not take long, and that I would patiently wait, so as not to disrupt the server’s service to his/her tables. They agreed, and I offered them the opportunity to respond as well, but most declined.

The survey asks for a wide variety of information and a copy of it can be found in the appendix. Some of it is simply demographic such as sex, age, race, education, etc. I also asked more personal questions that may or may not have anything to do with their employment as restaurant workers, such as cigarette smoking, alcohol and drug use, etc. The questions that specifically ask for information in reference to restaurant work are broad and cover a lot of potential material including questions pertaining to turnover rates, sexual involvement among workers, after work habits, customer relations, and on-the-job interactions with other workers, especially with regard to teamwork. The survey yielded a fair amount of quantifiable data as well as some qualitative information.
Again, the surveys were distributed with a cover page consent form and an envelope attached. They were directed to take the consent form for their files, and to seal the questionnaire in the envelope before returning it to me. It was suggested that they complete the form in private, due to the sensitive nature of some of the questions. It was reiterated for me how incredibly open restaurant folks tend to be, for I witnessed some of them sitting around a table swapping forms and reading each other’s before submitting them. In other cases I overheard one respondent say to the other, “Hey man, how many drinks do I have a week?”, or “God, do you know how many people I have slept with at this place?” Several people did not bother to take the consent form, and several people asked me if they really needed to read it. The question I heard the most banter over was question 32: “Describe the industry in one word or phrase”. Many people were pining over it out loud and asking other people what they put. The responses to this question can be found later in the text.

The Interview

The third method employed for this study is the interview. I selected eight individuals, both bartenders and servers from the original research site to complete one-hour interviews. All but two have both serving and bartending experience at the site. And all but two of them had worked at the site for a year or more at the time of the interview. There were five men and three women interviewed. These interviews were loosely structured and were recorded. I allowed the respondent to choose the interview site for their comfort, and interviews were held in a variety of places. I visited three homes, two restaurants, a coffee shop, and two bars.
The interviews were designed to gather narrative data on similar topics that the survey collected. Many of the questions were the same, but the responses were not fixed, and there was flexibility to discuss certain matters further than one would on a questionnaire. There were also several questions asked during the interview that were not asked on the questionnaire. I asked for some anecdotal scenarios such as an account of a particularly memorable shift, or a comical (or horrible) scene that was made by a fellow worker getting fired or quitting in mid-shift. We discussed the various types of managerial styles and restaurant lingo. Sometimes the interview would merely result in “shop talk”, and that was all right because the recorder was on. When people are just talking, often very rich information is revealed and discovered through their conversation.

The interviews were collected approximately one month after the completion of the participant observation. This gave me time to reflect on my observations so that I could contour the interviews to include some of the issues I uncovered during my work in the restaurant. For example, I found that many servers seemed to have somewhat racist attitudes when it comes to waiting on African Americans, and I wanted to know why and how wide spread it is. This turned out to be a significant portion of each interview, and I heard a variety of discussions on the matter.

All of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed for content. All names have been changed for confidentiality purposes.³

According to Brewer and Hunter, “every investigation can benefit from including different research strategies (Schutt 2001, 399). Not only does this multi-method

³ The questionnaire, the guided interview sheet, and consent forms for participation are included in the appendix.
approach improve reliability, “methodological pluralism allows new light to be shed on
topics…the mix of different methods has an interactive impact” (Bloor [in] Emerson
2001, 387). Furthermore, exploratory research is more productive when multiple methods
are employed to examine the research question because a multitude of hypotheses and
theories can be generated from the responses.

**Moving Forward**

The next portion of this document will be the results of the study including a
detailed analysis of the interviews and participant observation for qualitative data, as well
as a descriptive statistical analysis of various variables investigated through the
questionnaire. I plan to discuss, throughout, any problems I encountered during the
research process when they are relevant. I will also discuss some of the literature in more
depth as it pertains to the results or additional queries. I plan to take an active role in
developing theory on the subculture of restaurant workers and hope to generate further
research in Sociology. In addition, I hope that the results will lend answers to at least
some of my questions, and leave me with more questions to ask in the future. With the
increasing number of waitpeople in the United States, it is essential that they no longer be
neglected by the social sciences. Many have focused on particular aspects of the industry,
but few have systematically explored the subculture that exists by virtue of employment
at a restaurant.
Chapter Three

Flo’s: A Description of the Research Site

Flo’s is a popular chain restaurant that has spread throughout the Midwest and the Northeast since the 1970s. It is a bar and grill type of establishment offering a wide variety of menu items, both food and drink, in a casual dining environment. There are three Flo’s restaurants in the “Sinclairville” area. The original store was the research site and is located by the city’s major university in a quaint neighborhood called Peakton, named for its location at the top of the hill that overlooks downtown Sinclairville. The Peakton store just celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2001, and was the 13th Flo’s to open in the United States in 1981. In 1985 the franchisee, Carl Goldberg, opened another Flo’s in a suburban area called Maplewood east of Sinclairville. In the late 1990s, a third Flo’s was opened. It is situated in downtown Sinclairville, conveniently located to a popular theater venue, the professional sports stadiums, and of course, the rush of the city.

The physical structure of Peakton Flo’s is unique. Upon entering from the street, the bar is in an enclosed area just to the left of the main doors. In the bar there is a large, squared U-shaped bar, five tall bar tables and, in an area called the lounge, there are 10 small cocktail sized tables. There are two televisions and two video game machines in the bar area. Customers can order food in the bar, from the bartender or from the cocktailers (servers who work in the bar). Just past the enclosed bar area is a long set of stairs that leads directly to the host stand. This is typically where carryout orders are picked up and where customers are greeted by a host or hostess and seated at a table in the large dining room. The dining room is a long, deep room, and the smoking section is situated in the very back. The kitchen is behind a wall on the left side of the room and there are two
entryways. The kitchen is not visible from the dining room. This provides the setting for the theoretical front stage/back stage dichotomy to be discussed shortly.

The Results: Introducing the Sample

According to the United States Department of Labor there were 2,008,760 restaurant waiters and waitresses in the year 2000 (Owings 2002, 329). Nearly 80% of these workers were women. The majority of the group under observation at Flo’s was between 18 and 20, white, and beautiful women. Some of the interview participants attributed this to manager bias in hiring, as Leidner’s (1999) work has already demonstrated (85). In the past, the make-up of the Flo’s team has been a lot more diverse, and this homogenous group took me by surprise. Most of them were college students, though not all, and there were some servers who were closer to or over 30, but not many.

The survey sample, however, was more heterogeneous than the observed sample at the participant observation site and is likely due to the fact that surveys were distributed at three different places. The mean age for survey respondents was 24 years with a range of 19-41. Just over 71% were of typical “college age”, 19-25, while only 10% were aged 30 years or older. Had the research been conducted in fine dining or in family style restaurants, the mean ages would likely have been higher because younger people tend to work in casual dining environments.

Racially speaking, the sample was more homogenous. I expected to find very few African Americans working in the FOH, and was surprised to find that there were none in the sample whatsoever, unless they are biracial and checked “other”, which only accounted for six percent (three people). All of those who marked “other” also said that
they were servers and held no other job codes. There were only two Asians and one Hispanic in the sample. 88% (44 people) of the sample was White.

There were 27 females and 22 males. The questionnaires were distributed in a casual dining environment, which may be more heterogeneous than both fine dining and family style restaurants which are not only more homogenous by age, but also by gender. Rarely will a waiter be found serving eggs and hash browns at the corner diner, while women are still few and far between in fine dining, leaving the “professional” table service to waiters. “When you go into fine dining there’s something about a waiter…I don’t say a woman isn’t qualified to do it, but there’s something elegant about that tuxedoed [male] arm [carrying a tray]” (Owings 2002, 182). Although Flo’s employed considerably more waitresses than waiters, the distribution evened out when the other restaurants were included.

Contrary to a typically accepted stereotype, restaurant workers are not only skilled, but are also educated. 26% of the sample has earned a Bachelor’s degree, while 66% has completed “some college”. Those who checked this category include those who are currently undergraduates or who have taken some college courses but are currently not attending. Only six percent of the survey sample marked “high school diploma” as their highest level of education completed. The following table (3.1) describes the educational characteristics as well as the basic demographics of the survey sample.
Table 3.1: Worker Characteristics  
N = 50

<table>
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<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Age = 24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>54%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Grad</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended Some College</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade/Technical Degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages of gender distribution do not add up to 100 because of missing data.

Alison Owings (2002) relayed a story of a waitress who earned her PhD while using restaurant work to support her financially and socially. She was a full time folklorist, but still waited tables part time. The waitress recalled a time that she served a group of people from a cultural conference who were discussing a topic she knew a lot about. She reflected, “I know as much or more about this than they do, and they are treating me like shit” (227). Another waitress, a film instructor, who is also a lesbian, admitted, “I’ll sooner come out to the class as a lesbian than as a waitress” (Owings 2002,
Many restaurant workers have been stigmatized simply because they work in a restaurant. The stigma attached to restaurant work in general will be discussed in Part One of this chapter, which discusses subcultural implications.

Although the research focuses on FOH employees, BOH employees were not discriminated against during survey completion. Several respondents stated that they hold more than one job title. The make-up of the sample is as detailed in Table 3.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Server</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bartender</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager/Assistant Manager</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These do not add up to 100% because 34% hold more than one job title.

There is a recent trend in the restaurant industry that is becoming useful to the industry on several levels. That trend is cross training and is demonstrated in the above table. Cross training employees makes them more versatile workers, which in turn makes them better and more useful to the team. For example, if Johnny can serve, cook, or tend bar, he will be able to fill in wherever he is needed. The restaurant industry is an unpredictable business with a highly transient staff. It is impossible to foresee when someone will decide to quit mid-shift or not to come to work at all. If there is an arsenal of well-rounded employees, it will be easy to manage a potentially disastrous situation.
What if the entire kitchen crew decides to walk out during a busy shift? If the staff is well-rounded, management will be able to move a server or two, a host, and a bartender to the kitchen to cook for the rest of the shift. These scenarios are indeed extreme, but simply illustrate the effectiveness of having a cross trained staff.

Cross training also allows workers to feel more valuable which in turn makes them more productive. Servers who are trained to cook may pick up kitchen shifts for extra money, or to get away from some of the frustrations that build up on the floor. Cross training acts as a guard against worker burnout, which is at the top of the list of reasons why employee turnover is so high. Thirty-four percent of the sample answered that they hold more than one job title. Most of these employees said that they are servers and bartenders. Although a very small percentage (10%) of respondents answered “no” when asked if they enjoy their job overall, all of these reported to only holding one job code. On the whole, though, 86% said they do “enjoy their job overall”.

All of the interviewees were servers, bartenders, or both. A few of them held other job titles too including host, manager in training, trainer, and training administrator. I was previously acquainted with six of the eight interviewees due to my employment at Flo’s prior to the research period. They were key informants because they had been employed by Flo’s for a long period of time, and were able to discuss past and present occurrences at Flo’s including changes in the employee alcohol policy, changes in management, and how these and other events shaped the character of the team today. There were five males and three females, which slightly contradicts the current gender distribution. Interviewees were selected on the basis of their familiarity with Flo’s and the restaurant business in general rather than their representativeness of the observed sample.
The age range of the interviewees was 19-39, with the average age 26, which is slightly higher than the survey sample. All of them are White except for a young woman who is Hispanic. Half of them are college students (one who is a graduate student), and one of them has a degree in English. All names have been changed and interviewees will be referred to by the following names: Brad, Jana, Jared, Jill, Kevin, Mark, Sandy, and Will. Table 3.3 details the characteristics of the interviewees.

Table 3.3: Interviewee Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Years in business</th>
<th>Years @Flo’s</th>
<th># of Stores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brad</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>College Student</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jana</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>College Student</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jared</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>BA; Graduate Student</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandy</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>College Student</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>High School Grad</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Some information is missing from these interviews due to inaudibility. (#) indicate approximations based on other information given.

The following section will discuss the subcultural implications. The interviewees described above will be an important part of this discussion.
Part One

Subcultural Implications

“I’m asked a lot what the best thing about cooking for a living is, and it’s this: to be part of a subculture. To be part of a historical continuum, a secret society with its own language and customs” (Bourdain 2000, xiv).

It may be difficult for outsiders to understand the complexity of working in a restaurant. As the quote above illustrates, there is an element of subculturalism that exists complete with its own language and customs. The language is a mixture of restaurant-speak that workers must develop and learn to perform their jobs, with a bit of vulgar humor to lighten the mood of potentially hectic work environments. “There is enormous pressure on every food server to juggle an astonishing variety of mental and physical tasks over short, intense periods of time”, Ginsberg (2001) insisted after wondering how waiting tables had not come up on any of the top ten lists of most stressful occupations (121).

Subcultural Indicators

Hours

One thing that is certainly a catalyst to the forming of this secret society or subculture of restaurant workers is the hours. Restaurant workers work when the whole world goes to lunch, or out for dinner on Saturday night. They work holidays and every weekend. In college towns if there is a big game, or parent’s weekend, everyone works if
they want a job come Monday morning. Bourdain (2000) advised those who dream of being a chef,

If you’ve been working in another line of business, have been accustomed to working eight to nine-hour days, weekends and evenings off, holidays with the family, regular sex with your significant other, then maybe you should reconsider what you’ll be facing (289).

I overheard a bartender berating a food runner one night for needing to leave early because her car had broken down and she couldn’t get a ride home past 10 o’clock, “This is the restaurant business,” he shouted at her. “You don’t get to choose your hours! I don’t care if you don’t have a ride. That’s not my problem. This is the restaurant business! The hours are unpredictable. I’ve lost many girlfriends because of this business!” The bartender was “out of line” according to the manager and was sent home early. The food runner, surprised at the attack, was also allowed to catch her ride at 10.

During the research period I was faced with the stress of the hours and the effect it had on my ability to write down my observations in a timely manner. The idea was to write a little bit everyday about the events of that day, or the day before, or both. There were a few times that I spent my entire day “off” trying to catch up on this task. I was truly exhausted, and was quickly reminded what it is like to live life as a waitress. Also, because the hours are so unpredictable and I had little say in the shifts I worked, there were times that I worked until midnight on Friday and was expected to open on Saturday at 10 am. This is often typical for many restaurant people and it makes it very difficult to be productive in other areas of life. It is hard to see family, or non-restaurant friends, or movies, or concerts. It’s hard to make plans for vacation or get-togethers, and even the dentist.
Restaurant people also have abnormal eating habits. It is impossible for restaurant workers to eat dinner at the “normal” societal dinnertime because, likely, they are involved in some way or another, in serving or cooking dinner for America. Restaurant workers don’t get lunch breaks. “It’s never pretty watching waiters eat; you’d think they had no money the way they dive into any available trough” (Bourdain 2000, 197). During participant observation, upon entering the kitchen I came across two waiters standing near the dish pit stuffing their faces with a few slices of pizza that had been left by a table. One of them said he does it all the time, “unless the customers are really gross or something”. The other waiter added, “besides, these people only tipped me 10%, now we’re even”. Restaurant people cannot simply eat when they are hungry. There is a menu item at Flo’s called “Steak and Cheese”, and I remember a waiter once saying during a busy night, “it’s about time for a ‘Mistake and Cheese’”, suggesting that if the cooks “mistakenly” prepared a Steak and Cheese, it would be up for grabs among the waitstaff. I was eating considerably less during the research period than usual and this is attributable to the limited opportunities to eat and sometimes being around food constantly does something to make one’s appetite virtually disappear.

Turnover

Yet another indicator of restaurant subculturalism is the extremely high turnover rate. According the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “there is substantial movement into and out of the occupation because education and training requirements are minimal” (Ginsberg 2001, 130). One might wonder where the stability for maintaining the subculture is if the staff is constantly turning over, but the transient nature of the workers is part of the restaurant lifestyle and is quickly and widely understood by those who
belong. Much like individuals who followed the Grateful Dead from venue to venue as part of the subculture of “Deadheads”, restaurant people expect a certain amount of co-worker migration. Like the Deadheads, restaurant workers are constantly dropping people off and picking others up at the next stop, so to speak, but they always know that they will find friendship and acceptance in other groups of restaurant people no matter where they come to meet them. The subcultural elements are much broader than the scope of each individual restaurant. It encompasses the industry in its entirety.

A manager at Flo’s, looking at employee numbers that are assigned in order of hiring, estimated that Peakton Flo’s hired approximately 400 new employees in the last four years. Seven months after the research period had ended an informant told me that of the 38 employees I had inquired about, eleven of them had quit and six of them had been fired. This is almost 45% of the group I had inquired about, though a manager estimated that a “full staff” consists of about 50 or 60 employees total. In the same seven-month period after the research, 61 new employees had been hired, 36 of who were no longer working at Flo’s as of the end of March 2003. In other words, 59% of new hires lasted less than seven months.

It is impossible to report why these 36 individuals did not remain at Flo’s. I was told that six of them did not complete the training, a few of them were fired, several executed the age old “no call/no show” quitting tactic that is an ever-present situation in the restaurant business. This could have been their first taste at restaurant work and perhaps noticed that they are not cut out for it. A waitress told me once, “Everyone in the world has a predetermined number of tables they can wait on. For some it’s 2,000, for others 200, and for many, 2. Once you reach your number, you are just finished. You
can’t do it anymore.” I have heard stories from lots of people who tried waiting tables and gave it up almost immediately. It is my assumption that at least some of these 36 short-lived employees were servers, who were predestined to wait on only a few tables.

Ginsberg (2001) said that there is always “that whiff of parole in the air when a fellow server ‘gets out’”, but also acknowledged that the recidivism rate of servers is “pretty high” (291). In support of this claim to recidivism, a waitress interviewed by Owings (2002) said that waitressing is “very hard to get out of…the pluses outweigh the minuses so much that you get sucked into it” (310; emphasis in original). Will told me that he had recently waited on a couple that had been living in Africa for that last five years. One of them was a bartender for years before moving to Africa and shared with Will how much he missed it. “It’s like, you do it for the money initially, but then once you build regulars, its like a fantastic, spiritually rewarding position, even though you are watching an alcoholic drink his life away, you are a big part of their life.” Perhaps this is part of the reason that so many restaurant workers are “sucked in” and find it very difficult to leave the business.

The survey sample statistics on turnover were similar. The mean scores for employee turnover are illustrated in the figure 3.1 on the next page.
The interviewees also have had their share of high turnover, but are not quite as drastic as the figures above. Collectively, they have nearly 60 years of restaurant experience in 33 different restaurants, though the range of years is from two months to 24 years, and between one and 10 restaurants. The average then, is seven years in the restaurant industry, at four different establishments per person. This is approximately 1.75 restaurants per year.

Motivating Factors

What motivates people work in restaurants to begin with? The questionnaire offered the following choices to this question: “flexible schedule”, “quick cash”, “fast paced environment”, “work with people”, and “other”. Seventy percent agreed that quick cash and a flexible schedule were motivating factors to restaurant work, while 62% said
working with people was important. Forty-two percent said they enjoy the fast paced environment. Some of the other motivating factors written in include, “great social atmosphere”, “ambiance, lackadaisical nature of the people”, “lack of responsibility”, “criminal record”, and “beautiful girls”. Other motivating factors might include the fun nature of the business and the fact that it is quite possibly the most amount of money for the least amount of hours worked, for “unskilled labor” that is.

**Dealing with Stigma**

In American society there is a stigma that is attached to unskilled labor and working class jobs in general. For waitresses, however, there is a double stigma because waitressing is frequently considered to be “a woman’s common remedy for financial desperation” (Owings 2002, 3). Like the waitress who stated that she’d sooner come out a lesbian to her class than a waitress, “the waitress epitomizes the position of women in low-reward, traditionally female occupations. Her work is rated among the ‘least skilled lower-class occupations’ (Montagna 1977, 372; cited in Paules), and falls at the bottom of the occupation prestige hierarchy, ranking below butcher, coal miner, file clerk, telephone operator, and delivery truck driver” (Paules 1991, 7).

**“Oh, you work here?” and Other Stigmatizing Situations**

Though I did not experience personal stigmatization during the research period, I have a very poignant memory of an incident when I ran into a high school friend. I was working in the kitchen during lunch one day and went through the lobby to retrieve something from the storage room. The old high school “friend” was waiting in the lobby for the rest of his corporate lunch mates to arrive. He looked at me with downright disgust and laughed pompously while asking if I really worked there. There I stood in my
checkered pants, old sneakers, slightly dirty kitchen apron, and backwards hat feeling totally humiliated for what I had chosen to do for income. I told him I had a bachelor’s degree and was starting graduate school in the fall. All he could see was the girl he knew from high school who was working in a restaurant kitchen of all places. It was all over his face. He needed a bib to catch the utter disdain dripping from his mouth and big head. He eventually joined his fellow businessmen and I never saw him again. I have always wondered if it would have been better or worse if I had run into him at the table as his waitress.

Jill had a similar experience with some of her classmates from her undergraduate career. She said it was the same sort of thing, “oh, you work here?” As soon as she told them she was a graduate student, they recovered, “oh, ok.” Jill also mentioned that when she tells people she works in a restaurant, “most people are like, ‘aehhhh, really’ [with condescension], but if I tell them I’m a bartender, they’re like, ‘oh really?! Where do you work?’ For some reason that’s most prestigious than [being a waitress].”

Debra Ginsberg (2001), career waitress, or lifer, said she was confronted with a general societal attitude towards waiting tables during an episode of the Family Feud. “What occupation would you least like your wife or girlfriend to have?” The number one answer, much to her dismay, was “waitress”; not stripper or prostitute, waitress (112). Moreover, Ginsberg considered a comment from a Woody Allen movie, during which a prostitute, when asked how she manages to do what she does, responded by saying that “it’s better than waitressing” (Ginsberg 2001, 7).

All of the interviewees, males included, have experienced different forms of stigmatization. The interviewees in their later 20s who have attended college said they get
pressure from their families to get a “real job”. According to Ginsberg (2001) “a ‘real job’ is commonly accepted restaurant slang for anything other than waiting tables” (70). On the other hand, Brad, who is 28, suggested that, “any job should be considered a real job because at least the people are working to earn the things they have, and restaurant employees work hard for their money.” Mark and Kevin both had similar takes on the “real job” paradox. Mark said that some of his family looks down on it, “being that I’m 27” and said that it was ok when he was 21 or 22, but they think he should be doing “something better” by now. He agreed, “I’d rather be doing something better”. When I asked Kevin if he ever felt stigmatized because he worked in a restaurant, he echoed, “only in the last couple of years because I’m older and at this point, if I don’t want to be doing this, I should reasonably be doing something else.” Mark and Kevin are 27 and 28, respectively, and Kevin has a degree in English. He said he wants to be a writer, but is considering going to law school. Ginsberg (2001) argued that many waitpeople are in fact, ‘waiting’ to do something else. “They never seem able to admit that waiting tables is their profession...[they are] an actor/artist/model/musician...it’s temporary living at best” (69). She suggested that it isn’t quite socially acceptable to say, “I’m a waiter” (69) because of the stigma attached to it.

<‘Snap! Snap!’> “Oh Waiter!”

There is another type of stigma that often puts restaurant workers, specifically FOH workers, at risk of public humiliation. This stigma is not at the hands of relatives who wish a better life for the worker, or by friends who think they could have a better job. This stigma is placed on the worker by the very people who provide their income: the customers. Most customers abide by the rules and treat their server with at least a
smidgen of respect, but there are some who “treat the waiter like shit because it’s going to change their status…everyone’s above a waiter” (Owings 2002, 309). I have yet to meet a server who has not had an experience at the table that made them feel an attack at their dignity. When I asked Jana about it, she jumped, “you mean this kind of thing?, (She snapped her fingers as if to get someone’s attention)”. During the participant observation period I had a horrific experience at the table that left me disgruntled and truly wounded. The worst part of it that it was at the hands of children. There was a large party in my station that appeared to be a team of some sort because there were eight girls, about 11 year olds or so, and two adults. The adults were rude, and this allowed the children to behave condescendingly as well. They were difficult to wait on for a variety of reasons and they were not my only table at the time. They ran me, quite insolently, and my other tables suffered. They never said please or thank you, and eventually I felt as though I was being bossed around by a bunch of 11 year olds, which was humiliating enough without what happened next. After delivering the bill that came to $57, I was clearing some dishes off of the table and saw a dollar bill with a nickel on top of it. One of the children said, “Hey, you can take your tip now.” The rest of table laughed hysterically, including the adults. I was mortified. One of the nicer girls told me not to worry, that they weren’t finished putting the tip money down. I thanked them reverently, as I am prescribed to do, on their way out. Upon returning to clean the table, I found the nickel, and a total of four one-dollar bills. Seven percent on top of utter humiliation was more than I could stand⁴. Paules (1991) articulated the symbolic statement that is clearly made when change is left as a tip: “so down, so

⁴ A standard tip is equal to 15% of the bill amount.
destitute is the waitress that she will be pleased to accept what, to the customer, is bothersome change” (46). She also explained that come customers leave small tips “with the intent to insult the server and that others undertip on the assumption that for a [Route] waitress even fifty cents will be appreciated” (36).

Humiliation and degradation are unfortunately occupational risks for waiters and waitresses, but most have developed mechanisms for dealing with the psychosocial consequences of this. For example, Jill said that she gives her customers the best possible service, and if they don’t give her a fair tip, “then that’s their problem. They suck, not me.” Others however, have more aggressive mechanisms. Paules (1991) described an incident she witnessed, where a waitress followed a couple of customers outside calling after them, “Excuse me! You forgot this!” as she held the coins up that they had left as a tip. The customers motioned for her to keep it and continued walking away from the restaurant, which prompted the waitress to throw the coins at them and return to work (37). This is something that every server has likely wanted to do at one time or another, but few have been able to get away with.

Worker Interaction

Shoptalk as Remedy

Another way that restaurant people deal with stigmatization, difficult customers, or other forms of work stress, is through shoptalk. Shoptalk exists when individuals of a similar position or workplace discuss work related events such as interactions with customers, co-workers, difficulties with management, or simply ordinary venting. Shoptalk often occurs during after work socializing, but it also occurs on the job. It can be a quick, passing comment at the soda fountain about the difficult person at table 24, an
out loud comment to one’s self about the crumby mood of the manager tonight, or it could be a drawn out saga of a situation occurring somewhere in the restaurant that is presented to a group of smokers, for example, in the back room during a cigarette break. Jill insisted that smoke breaks are not only designed for smoking, they are also for bitching.

You bitch about tables, you get stuff off your chest that you can’t say in the dining room, and you bitch about management, about what’s going on in your life. Yeah, it’s mostly about bitching…or maybe what happened last night.

When the interview participants were asked about shoptalk, they gave a variety of answers. Most insisted that they didn’t really like talking about work, but agreed that it was certainly a topic of conversation when they were with co-workers. Sandy said that she likes to talk shop for “like 10 minutes and then it’s out of the way…it’s like a transition to normalcy”. Brad said that more shoptalk goes on during smoke breaks than in non-work settings. He stated that talking shop is sometimes an important part of his winding down process, but that other times, he just wants to be done and not talk about it. Will insisted that talking shop is important because “if you can’t talk about it, and laugh about it, it’ll bring you down. Even if something horrible happened…you are laughing about it later”. Mark, on the other hand, had a different perspective on shoptalk. “And they need to bitch about the whole evening? Yeah I hate that.” He attributed his lack of need for shoptalk to his generally laid back work persona. We agreed that perhaps shoptalk is a mechanism used by employees who are wound a little tighter and more likely to be stressed out by the job. Jana also said that shoptalk happens frequently, that she tries not to get into it, but “what are you gonna do? McAffee was an asshole tonight,
surprise, surprise. What’s new?” She also agreed that most of the shoptalk is of a negative nature and that “you can have 18 good tables, but then you’ve got that one shitty table and it makes you forget about the 18.” Kevin was firm in his position against the importance of shoptalk. “There’s a thing, when I come to work and when I leave work, I’m in street clothes. It’s a psychologically important thing for me. Work only exists in work for me.” He admitted that when he’s out with co-workers, he’ll talk shop, but he’s not “enthused to”. Although some of them may reject the idea of talking shop when out of work, they seem to agree that it occurs often, and that given the right circumstances or company, they too will participate. Others maintain that it is important to their psychological well being to participate in shoptalk so that when they return to work, they have shed any brooding memories that may taint their ability to perform their job as expected.

**Goofing Off**

Humor and goofing around are other cures for stress or boredom that can come from serving tables. There are frequently pranks being played on someone during the down times like putting olive juice in someone’s coffee, salt in someone’s Coke, whipped cream in someone’s apron, or olive oil on the doorknob to the manager’s office. Debra Ginsberg (2001) told of dancing around the kitchen with other servers during slow times and making the “cooks laugh out loud” (109). Upon entering the kitchen after delivering drinks to one of the four tables in the entire restaurant I found almost the entire staff, both male and female, cook and server, singing along to Aretha Franklin’s “Natural Woman” that was playing on the kitchen radio. When I rounded the corner, all that could be heard was “You make me feel like a natural woman… WOMAN!” that was followed by fits of
laughter. I am certain the entire dining room heard this too and hoped that they were amused. Working in a restaurant can really be a lot of fun.

Elder and Rolens (1985) relayed a joke a truck stop waitress told to lighten the mood at her restaurant, “You know what the difference between a waitress and a toilet seat is? A toilet seat only waits on one asshole at a time” (72). Humor must be found or one’s mental state may be permanently damaged.

*Endearing Dialogue and Other Mechanisms for Blowing off Steam*

There are other ways to fend off stress in a restaurant. Ginsberg and Bourdain both described ways they take anger and frustration out on those whom they are in close proximity with all night, and whom they are literally on top of. “Servers touch constantly and attempting to protect one’s personal space soon becomes futile” (Ginsberg 2001, 235). Servers also share their emotions with each other, both negative and positive in the following ways,

“I know you stole that fork from my table, you swine, I hate you, you’re evil”, and “Thank you so much for running the food out to table 10, I love you, you’re wonderful (Ginsberg 2001, 235)

Bourdain, being a chef, offered a cruder version of this method of frustration release. He described them as “terms of endearment, all perfectly acceptable in casual conversation between cooks: *motherfucker (a compliment), sunofabeech, dipshit, rat-bastard, goofball, love-chunks, shit-stain, scumbag, whining little bed-wetter*” to name a few. It goes along with that age-old remedy to say a string of curse words or to count to ten to make the potentially enraging situation come to a calmer state.
Stress can breed intimacy whether it is sought after or not. A busy night in a restaurant is like a hurricane sometimes and often seems to come out of nowhere. The team must band together to keep the place intact, and the hungry people out there fed before they are swept away. As Bourdain (2000) put it quite frankly,

We’re too busy, and too close, and we spend too much time together as an extended, dysfunctional family to care about sex, gender preference, race, or national origin (221).

It’s true to a point. I have found that most restaurant people are typically quite liberal in their views, not racist or homophobic, and do not regularly participate in any of the terrible behaviors that form these isms in the larger society. However, during the participant observation period of the research, I was abruptly reminded of a widely accepted attitude among servers when it comes to customers that seem to contradict harshly with their usual freethinking selves.

**Stereotyping and the Practice of Tableside Isms**

When servers are tableside, some of them can be racist, classist, ageist, and sexist. The questionnaire asked respondents to describe their ideal table to serve and their least ideal table to serve based on the following characteristics: age, gender, ethnicity, and general make up (i.e. family, couple, friends, etc.). This question produced a wide variety of responses and several of them were spread across the board. What turned out to be the most intriguing replies were those concerning the “least ideal” table to serve. Children, teenagers, and senior citizens were, by far, the least ideal ages for the respondents to serve. The mean age of the ideal tables was 31, but there was wide variation. It also seemed that although 78% prefer waiting on “opposite sex patrons”, the written responses were not significantly swayed toward a preference of either gender. Class and Race are
the issues that servers seem to be most concerned with when analyzing their preferences at the table. Eighteen people (36%) included a race category when describing their least ideal table, and all of them listed “Blacks” or “African Americans”. Of the 20 people who included a race category when describing their ideal table, only three of them said, “it doesn’t matter”, or “Black or White”, while 15 of them explicitly stated that they prefer to serve Whites. Ironically, those who expressed classism in their answers (24%) used phrases like hillbillies, rednecks, and trailer trash, which are typically derogatory terms for lower class Whites. Once again, the race/class dichotomy is vague.

It was shocking to discover that so many White, supposedly open-minded individuals held so many stereotypes about people who are different from them. Like Bourdain (2000) said, “we’re too busy, and too close, and spend too much time together…to care” (221). Perhaps that was a chef relaying a message that does not apply to servers. Owings (2002) experienced some of these, mostly racist and classist, views from her participants,

Loud New Yorkers, rightly or wrongly assumed to be Jewish, infuriating the waitresses in various ways, which in turn led to anti-Semitic remarks…I think there’s a cultural bias to begin with (140).

Black middle-class people were treated as nicely as White middle-class people would have been…but in Alaska, some of the waitresses were really racist toward native people…there’s a lot of overt racism in restaurants (226).

This waitress seemed to have a stereotype for every kind of person,

Spaniards are afraid to make mistakes, Italians and French are more confident and very generous, Israelis are cheap, men from India and Egypt are very arrogant, Germans are wonderful and like to sing, Norwegians are cheap, and the Irish and English are identical: they want their well-done
meat and they don’t tip…most African Americans under-tip, even the Black waiters say it. Mother’s Day is a major Black holiday [at the View] and most people have requested it off… because you don’t make any money (162-163).

On the other hand, this waitress suggested that although Black customers are difficult to wait on, they still tip well,

I have found that it takes a lot longer to get a Black person’s order because they want to change their order all the time…but I love ‘em, sure do. Also they tip real good (96).

All of the interviewees were questioned about this phenomenon of racism, and the responses were explicit. Although the survey data revealed a more diversified representation of isms present at the table, the interviews exposed a more racially motivated antagonism, which indicates that although servers may also be ageist and classist, the first characteristic that comes to mind when asked about their least ideal tables to serve, is in fact, race. There is no better way to describe this pigeonholing than to present it from the horse’s mouth so to speak. When asked to describe his least ideal table, one responded,

More than two ‘ghetto people’. two is alright, but it gets exponentially worse. (What’s a ghetto people?) In this city it’s Blacks, but maybe in other cities it would be different. It’s mostly just uneducated lower class minorities.

Others said that Sinclairville Blacks are “tip challenged” and uneducated on proper restaurant conduct:

I don’t think it’s Black people everywhere, I think it’s Black people in [Sinclairville]. I think that the Black people here are suppressed a lot more here than they are in [other cities].
I do have a belief that they [Blacks] tip less...for the most part, they come in later, they tip less, and they run you more, in general.

Still others chalked up the supposed “bad customer” behaviors of Black customers to class and culture.

I don’t think it’s a stereotype. I think there are more lower income African Americans, and other, you know Mexican, Spanish, whatever, that actually, whether they can or can’t afford to tip a lot, came up in a lower income family where that would be considered throwing money away to give a percentage tip.

I definitely have a certain amount of racism involved when I see my tables. It’s just my experience. I don’t know why it’s a cultural difference, and it is definitely a cultural difference that different cultures, different races, tip a different amount. I’ve found that most African American restaurant clients tip less, but I’ve totally gotten really good tips from Black tables too. A lot of people just don’t know any better. I don’t really blame them for not tipping; I blame the fact that they don’t know.

I’m just thinking on a business standpoint. I’m gonna warn a Black person that they are gonna end up buying this drink if they don’t like it. I’m gonna warn a Black person they’re not gonna like these wings, because it’s a professional thing. I don’t want to take it back...as a bartender, and this is totally racial, when I get a [mixed] drink back, 29 out of 30 drinks I’ve remade are for Black people. It might be a culture thing that we get to try things and not pay for it if we don’t like it...I tell the servers not to sell our Sangrias to Black people, because they’re not gonna like it...We do get ran ragged by a higher percentage of Black people based on nothing.

There is much inquiry needed on this issue of tableside racism. Too many servers have these generalizations in their heads, and whether they are true or not, certainly have an ill effect on the quality of service.
During the participant observation period I witnessed several servers complaining about the African Americans at their tables, and watched them approach the table begrudgingly and speak with them curtly. Perhaps this attitude is not intentional, but the customers must be able to sense the fact that their server sees them as less desirable diners than others. This may lead the customer to exhibit “bad customer habits”, and may in turn lead to a bad tip. It is indeed a vicious cycle and further inquiry into this matter is vital.

I heard blatantly racist comments about African American customers, such as “black-top”, that are much like “2-top”, or “8-top”, describing the number of people at the table. Upon peering out of the kitchen into the dining room to see a large amount of African American customers dining, the manager groaned, “It must be Welfare Monday”. Much to my dismay I overheard a waiter say, “Damn, I just got the gold-tooth treatment”. I had to ask. He told me that when a Black table gives their server a bad tip, it’s like giving him the gold-tooth treatment. Will told me that a friend of his, who is an African American waitress, said that she too receives lower tips from African Americans. There could be a variety of reasons for this and as previously mentioned, demands more inquiry. Most of the African Americans that work in restaurants are typically found in the BOH and perhaps they have not, as a group, been educated through experience on the customs of tipping. Years I ago I worked with an African American waiter, and I asked him once why there are so few Blacks working in the FOH. He said, “I can’t speak for all of the Black people, you know, but do you have any idea how much humbling it takes for a Black man to be a server?” I hadn’t, and perhaps I still don’t. It didn’t occur to me at
the time to ask him about how his Black customers treated him at the table, or if he held the same frustrated stereotypes that so many servers do.
Part Two

Subcultural Customs

The restaurant subculture is not only constituted by the fundamental principles and characteristics of the members as related to work. There are also social foundations as well. Like any other subculture of society, the restaurant worker subculture has its very own docket of customs and practices.

Carousing Habits

It is important to conceptualize what is meant here by ‘carousing habits’. According to the dictionary⁵, ‘carousing’ means, “to engage in a drunken revel; to drink deeply and frequently; to revel, celebrate, drink, live it up.” This textbook definition epitomized the lifestyle behaviors of many restaurant workers throughout the nation. There is a certain amount of substance use that exists solely for the purpose of winding down. During a busy shift, a restaurant worker’s mind is going a thousand miles a minute, and there is little that can slow it down faster, or more easily than an alcoholic beverage or a joint. During the participant observation period I was hanging out with some co-workers after work on Marty’s patio when I saw a disheveled pair of servers stumble onto the patio with a pitcher of beer and two frozen mugs. They looked like they had been run over by a truck. They were still in their Flo’s uniforms, but were dirty and untucked. Their white oxford shirts were unbuttoned, revealing sweaty undershirts. I asked them if they had been busy tonight, and they both looked at me with sighs of desperation and exhaustion and agreed without hesitation. They started to talk about their

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⁵ Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language
night of chaos, but quickly changed the subject, agreeing that they did not want to revisit the evening, and had been trying to forget about it since they left the restaurant. Shortly after these disheveled waiters stumbled onto the patio, the bartender arrived. He had the same tousled look, his clothing identical to the servers; dirty, untucked, and unbuttoned. In one hand he held a cold mug, in the other, a pitcher of beer. He slumped into the chair at our table in the exact manner the waiters had 10 minutes prior and with the same sigh of exhaustion. He said, “Ahhh, finally. I can sit down and have someone pour ME a beer”.

Sometimes that makes all the difference. There is something incredible about the first moment of sitting after being on your feet all night, running in a hundred different directions. The first pitchers of beer disappeared quickly that night, and shoptalk became a sporadic topic of conversation throughout the evening. It isn’t necessarily about drinking for everyone. It is about winding down with friends and getting work funk off the brain. However, that doesn’t mean that they don’t get carried away and consumed by a life of revelry. Wendy, who I worked with at Drifter’s in the beginning and was reacquainted with at Flo’s, told me that she had to leave her last job of three years because there was too much partying going on and she couldn’t handle it. She was a cocktail waitress at a bar and she said there were a lot of drugs going on there, “like you wouldn’t believe”.

**Alcohol Consumption and Tobacco Use**

The survey sample produced results similar to the observations and the interview comments. Only 10% of the sample admitted that they do not drink alcohol at all. Concerning alcohol consumption alone, 52% said they drink between one and 10 drinks
per week (34% of that being the 1-5 drinks group). 10% reported consuming 11-15 drinks per week, while 24% of the sample reported drinking more than 15 drinks per week. For an illustration of this distribution see Figure 3.2 below.

Similarly, all eight interviewees stated that they drink alcohol on a regular basis, though some said they drink less than they have in the past. Brad offered, “It’s pretty much an accepted thing that most everybody that works in restaurants is involved in drinking or partying of some sort.” It is much more acceptable in restaurants and hospitality sectors in general.

**Figure 3.2**

*Alcohol Consumption in Drinks Per Week*

![Alcohol Consumption in Drinks Per Week](image)
Svein Larsen (1994), who explored facets of the “availability hypothesis”, explained that, logistically, the more available a substance is the more frequently it will be used (735). In further support, because restaurant employees are dependent on the sale of alcohol for the survival of their employment and business in general, “attitudes opposing alcohol use would be relatively low in this particular group” (Larsen 1994, 738). Attitudes about alcohol and other substances are typically relaxed among restaurant industry workers. Several authors have attested to these lax attitudes on drinking and drug use including Barbara Ehrenreich’s (2001) experience at a family style restaurant during which she realized that, “the only recreation ever referred to is partying, which requires little more than some beer, a joint, and a few close friends” (36). This proved to be a relatively mild account of partying when compared to tales from the front line presented by autobiographers such as Anthony Bourdain and Debra Ginsberg. Ginsberg (2001) saw a pattern of heavy drinking in every restaurant she worked in and said she’d “never met a [server] who could work a [hurricane-like] shift and not need some sort of release at the end of it, whether it be through alcohol, drugs, sex, or, for the luckier ones, bursts of creative energy” (125). Bourdain (2000) confessed to “a lot of after-work drinking, sitting around reviewing the events of the evening…and pondering the mysteries of this Life We Live” (211).

There are a variety of reasons why restaurant workers are prone to drinking. In my experience, drinking has been a part of winding down after a busy night. When you are literally running around, answering to people, carrying heavy and awkward things, while still managing to smile and be polite for several hours straight, you cannot simply just stop working and be glad about it. There must be some sort of process that goes into
it. It’s almost like taking a dip into a cold swimming pool. If you ease into it, you will eventually get used to the temperature of the water and can swim with only a vague memory of how cold the water was when you first entered. There are those, however, who just jump in and deal with it. How does this compare to sitting down after work and having a drink? If you immediately stop working and attempt to go to sleep or to go about the rest of your out-of-work life, it is like jumping into that cold water. Most of us ease in to it by having a drink or two, and talking about the night. Owings (2002) speculated, “one reason for after-shift drinks must be the anticipation of completing a sentence” (4). The same author told another story about a waitress who wasn’t much of a drinker, but, through the friendship with some of her co-workers, “learned what beer is. It’s what makes your legs stop hurting after Saturday night” (284).

Many restaurant workers smoke cigarettes. The sample dictated that 58% are smokers, but Barbara Ehrenreich editorialized that, “almost everyone smokes as if their pulmonary well-being depended on it” (30). I overheard a waitress at Flo’s say, “One more dollar. I have to make one more dollar and then I can buy a pack of cigarettes”. A few minutes later I heard her ask someone if she could bum a cigarette from him.

**Drug Use**

There is also a wide variety of drug use in the restaurant industry. Drug use among restaurant workers provokes a classic chicken-and-egg debate, and as there are only speculative answers and theories on this, so it is with restaurant worker drug use. Some argue that people who are drug users, or who have the propensity to use drugs are likely to seek employment in the industry because it is more acceptable, there is typically no likelihood of drug screening, and the hours are conducive to partying. Others,
however, adhere to the availability hypothesis, suggesting that the more a person is exposed to, or made available, the more likely a person will consume. In actuality, it is most likely a combination of these that makes restaurant workers part of a subculture of carousers. Six of the eight interviewees admitted to occasional or frequent use of marijuana, and four of them admitted to using other drugs occasionally.

According to the questionnaire results, 70% had smoked marijuana in the last year, 24% had used some sort of hallucinogen, and 20% had used a prescription drug not prescribed to them; 20% had used cocaine and/or ecstasy, but only 2% had used heroin. Figure 3.3 expresses the drugs that were used by respondents in the last year.

Figure 3.3
Drugs Used in the Last Year

Marijuana = 70%  Cocaine = 20%  Hallucinogens = 24%
Heroin = 2%  Ecstasy = 20%  Rx Drugs not Prescribed = 20%
Overall, 26% stated that they had used none of the drugs listed in the last year, meaning 74% admitted to using at least one of the drugs listed in the last year. Nobody admitted to having used all six categories of drugs in the last year, however, 35% of those who use drugs admitted to using three or more on the list. On the other hand, almost 49% of drug users in the sample stated that they have only used one of the listed drugs in the last year. When Brad was asked about the hours he keeps, he said his typical day ends with a few beers almost every night, and a bowl. “I smoke a lot of marijuana”, he admitted with a laugh. On the night of our interview, I went to meet him at Flo’s and heard that he had just left. I called him and he was on his way home. He’d forgotten about our interview, which we had planned for 10 pm. He gave me directions and told me to go to his house. When I arrived he introduced me to his roommates, also restaurant people, and told me that when he got home, his roommates were doing a few lines of cocaine. From the time I called him to the time I arrived, Brad had drank a beer, smoked a bowl of marijuana, and done a couple of lines of cocaine. He said to this, “wow, I wasn’t expecting to come home and get so fucked up on a Monday night.” According to societal standards, Monday is an unlikely day to participate in this kind of behavior, however, for restaurant people, Monday is a likely day because it is literally the end of their busy workweek. The standard weekend, Friday through Sunday, are the busiest days of the week for restaurants. Almost every restaurant person works on at least one, if not all three of these days because restaurants must be fully staffed on these days, and they are typically the most lucrative.
**Instant Parties and Other Social Events**

During the data collection phase I attended a handful of after-hours parties, or what I like to call “instant parties”. Instant parties are not planned or organized. There is not a menu or a dress code, or even written invitations. Instant parties simply require a few people and some beer, and usually occur after the bars close. Although not all of the hanging out that co-workers do together is in this capacity, Figure 3.4 suggests that they do in fact spend a significant amount of time together outside of work.

![Figure 3.4](image-url)

*Figure 3.4*

*Frequency of Hanging Out With Co-Workers*

- N = 50
- Frequency of "Hanging Out" with Co-Workers:
  - never
  - seldom: 32%
  - sometimes: 38%
  - often: 26%
Seventy-six percent of the survey sample admitted that they “go out after work” at least some of the time, whereas 38% of those said they “go out after work” always or often. Meanwhile, 64% said they “hang out with co-workers” frequently.

Most of the interviewees said that although the reasons for after-hours are mostly about drinking, there are often drugs there, and usually, it’s marijuana. One particular party occurred earlier than most because one of the servers was not 21 and so could not go to Marty’s. He decided to have people over to his apartment that was nearby. Over the course of the night, 14 people were there, but never all at the same time. They seemed to come in shifts, and all but two of the 14 were Flo’s employees. One of them used to work there, but now works at another restaurant. He was there because he’s dating a Flo’s waitress. I realized quickly that this was a pot-smoking crowd, but had to laugh when the person who brought the pot didn’t have a smoking apparatus. He assumed the host would have one, but he didn’t. The host made a phone call and within 10 minutes, a waitress wearing a backpack entered and pulled out a glass water pipe that was wrapped in a towel. All of this occurred on a Sunday night after midnight.

The next night there was another instant party at Nathan’s house. Prior to his position as manager, Nathan threw these types of parties frequently. Again, most of the people were Flo’s employees, and many of them were the same people from the night before. Besides Nathan, there was another manager there. They were both drinking, but I did not see either of them smoking marijuana, though it didn’t seem to bother them that it was going on around them. The fact that store managers were socializing with employees further illustrates the lax attitude about substance use in the restaurant industry. Although fraternization between managers and employees is frowned upon, it is certainly not a rare
occurrence. The employee handbook states: “although it is understood that employees may interact socially with both co-workers and managers, this social interaction may jeopardize the professional relationship and cause workplace disruption” (12).

**Romance in the Restaurant**

With few exceptions, the restaurants I’ve worked in over the years have all been breeding grounds for amorous liaisons. There seems to be an almost chemical reaction that occurs when food, alcohol, and heat are combined in an enclosed space with the freewheeling movement of people in a restaurant (Ginsberg 2001, 212).

The professional literature offered virtually nothing on the topic of restaurant romances, but the popular literature, personal experience, observations, and survey and interview data all indicate that restaurant romances are as much a custom of the subculture as drinking or socializing. During an after work gathering at Marty’s, some fellow employees and I were discussing this trend with other restaurant workers who were at the bar. A restaurant romance was defined as “a romantic relationship, sexual or otherwise, between two people who worked at the same restaurant at one time or another, and that the restaurant was the reason they knew each other.” We agreed that we have all seen other romances spark between Flo’s employees and a friend of another Flo’s employee at social gatherings. Nathan’s girlfriend, for example, has never worked in a restaurant, but her relationship with Nathan was sparked when she accompanied a friend (a Flo’s waitress) to an after hours party. She told me that although she has no restaurant experience of her own, she is interested in my research because she too is immersed in the restaurant subculture by virtue of her boyfriend’s involvement and commitment to it.

The survey results revealed that 74% of restaurant workers have “dated or been
sexually involved with a co-worker”. Twenty-six percent of those who have been involved with a co-worker admitted to having said relations with only one or two partners. Sixteen percent said they have had between three and five partners, while 10% admitted to dating or being sexually involved with six or more co-workers in a restaurant workplace. Ten people who said, “yes” to having romantic relationships did not respond to the question asking “how many”. Seven of these were males; the other three were females. Ninety-six of the sample believed that there are at least “a few” romances going on in the workplace, 22% of these believed that there are “many” romances stirring.

The interviews produced very similar information. Although Will admitted that he hasn’t been involved in any workplace romances, he said he “sees it everywhere. I see people hop from people to people”. Brad confessed to being involved in at least six of these “romances”, but rejected this terminology. “I wouldn’t call them romances, I would just call it, like, people hooking up, flings.” At the time of the interview Brad was dating a waitress, but when I spoke with him seven months later, he was no longer seeing her, and admitted, “I have not “dated” any other co-workers, but I have fooled around with two of them.” Seven of the eight interview participants admitted to having “romantic” relationships with at least one co-worker, while three of them (all males) admitted to having more than 10 of these “relationships.” Debra Ginsberg (2001) summed up the foundation of these attractions to each other:

Servers are a unique breed. They are addicted to a certain element of risk: every night is a bit of a gamble, both monetarily and situationally. They are gregarious… creative… athletic… and seek stimulation of every kind. Put a large group of these types together and you are bound to generate a charge or two (234).
The Line Between Flirtation and Sexual Harassment

Dating and sexual involvement is a common occurrence among restaurant employees, but sometimes the line between flirtation and sexual harassment becomes fuzzy. Giuffre and Williams (1994) explained that the identification of behavior as harassment or not “depends on the intention of the harasser and the interpretation of the interchange by the victim”, and that these perceptions are “highly influenced by workplace culture and the social context of the event” (226). In other words, sexualized behavior is only considered harassment if it is intended to be and/or understood to be harassment of some sort. In restaurants, the social atmosphere is very casual, and “are about as informal a workplace as there is, so much as to actually encourage, or at least tolerate, sexual banter” (Anders 1993, 48). Therefore, the definitions of sexual harassment and flirtation are more loosely adhered to causing the line between them to blur. “Many waitresses have accepted a certain amount of sexual harassment as an occupational hazard” (Ginsberg 2001, 237). Ginsberg (2001) purports that is has something to do with the “atmosphere” of the restaurant, “a little slap and tickle in the middle of a busy shift is just plain exciting” (235). This is where the fine line between flirtation and sexual harassment is sometimes crossed. There is a lot of flirtatious behavior going on, and although some people may consider it harassment, and in some work settings, it would be harassment, in a restaurant, it is typically viewed as just goofing around.

Because it is such a fast paced setting, and the space to move around is typically small, workers are constantly in physical contact with each other. In the kitchen, a server

6 Cited in Giuffre and Williams (1994 p. 227)
laughed when we bumped into each other and said, “We need to get some traffic lights in this place so we don’t always keep running into each other.” I laughed imagining it, and argued that we’d all get too many tickets for running red lights. We both laughed and scurried off to whatever it was that we were doing at the time of the collision. The thought of it was absurd, but definitely humorous. Later that day a hostess was making a lot of salads for a carryout order. When I leaned over her salads to get vegetables for the one I was making, her hand grazed my chest. She said, “Damn girl, get your boobs outta my salad!” This is a prime example of how tight the space is and how many people are in it. In a fast paced environment with a lot of people, it is hard to get people out of your way because they are using that space too.

Many servers have developed a method to move someone over an inch. I call it the “effective hip-tap”. Tapping the person who is in the way on the hip in the right direction is an easier and more effective method than asking them to please move to the right one inch. Many servers have picked up on this, but many haven’t. Those who haven’t find themselves waiting their turn nicely or literally shoving people out of the way. The hip-tap is a happy medium. There is a lot of touching. Regardless of the meaning behind it, servers must learn to accept this as part of the job. Often times, since they are already bumping into each other all the time, they choose to make it a little more fun, by making it a flirtatious jab rather than a malicious shove. This is why Ginsberg (2001) said, “protecting one’s personal space becomes futile” (235).

When the survey respondents were asked, “how frequently do you flirt with co-workers”, 94% answered “always” or “often”, indicating that restaurants are flirtatious
work environments. Brad said, “it’s weird, because I wasn’t, to this degree, as flirtatious as I was before I got into the restaurant business…you just joke around a lot.”

This topic was discussed with all of the interview participants in detail and they all yielded similar responses. Most agreed that the line between flirtation and sexual harassment is fuzzy in a restaurant workplace, though Jana thinks that because most people are outgoing, it is easy for them to put a stop to it if it becomes a problem. Jared said that behavior “crosses the line way too much”. The respondents did not indicate when or how the line is crossed, but Giuffre and Williams (1994) suggest that restaurant workers label experiences as sexual harassment when the behavior is “perpetrated by someone in a more powerful position, someone of a different race/ethnicity, or by someone of a different sexual orientation” (229). Jill suggested that the line gets fuzzier when “the friendship thing enters into it”. She elaborated:

When you are all so close on an outside level I think that you can be more flirtatious. You become so close with these people, you get drunk with these people after work and who knows what happens when you’re drunk. And then you have to go back and work with them the next day, so you think it would be weird if you weren’t totally comfortable with them.

Other researcher’s (Giuffre and Williams 1994) data indicates that restaurants are “highly sexualized” environments and the majority of their respondents agreed that they enjoy this aspect of their job (228).

As the Restaurant Turns

When the interviewees were asked if they think the restaurant business is like a soap opera, there were a variety of answers. All agreed that there is definitely a dramatic tone, Will said that it is dramatic indeed, but the “story lines seem to be a lot shorter and
not as drawn out.” Brad put it quite frankly, “people that work in restaurants live
dramatic lifestyles. Most of the time I feel like I’m living in a soap opera.” Jana said that
it used to be

    a lot more soap opera-y when you weren’t supposed to be
dating the manager, and what do you know, you’re getting
married. Liz and Jimmy were doing their thing, and then
Jimmy’s wife found out…drama. There’s nothing that fun
anymore.

Mark thinks it’s like a David Lynch movie. “I swear he hires people to film me”. Kevin
on the other hand laughed and said the restaurant business is more like a sit-com, but Jill
said she didn’t know how it could…

    “NOT be a soap opera. I mean, you have so much raw
emotion when you’re serving people because you’ve got
whatever their attitude is mixed with [everyone else’s
attitude] and you’re all reacting upon each other’s
emotions…yeah, major soap opera time.”

Ginsberg (2001) agreed that, “a restaurant without some kind of ongoing soap opera was
an anomaly” in her experience (217).

    As these comments point out, there is a fair amount of drama stirring in the
restaurant. It is questionable whether or not social events are dramatized by the workers
to enhance the working environment, or if these events are in fact melodramatic
themselves. It is possible that, in an effort to produce the subcultural setting, and
stimulating work environment, workers use gossip and rumor to dramatize the workplace.
The social nature of the job and the workers insist that there must be something to discuss
other than cheeseburgers and Shirley Temples. Sandy said that during her first week at
Flo’s the restaurant’s rumor mill had already included stories about her. Bourdain (2000) revealed that just before the shift starts, servers could frequently be found,

Sitting on milk crates, smoking and talking about each other; who got drunk last night, who got thrown out of [a club] and woke up in the bushes outside of his house, who probably takes it in the ass this week, and [remembering] the time the busboys got into a fight in the middle of the dining room (197; emphasis in original).
Part Three

Working Amid the Drama

What role does all of this play in the operation of the restaurant? How are the carousing habits and the soap opera resemblance linked to the performance of the workers on the job? Erving Goffman (1959) used restaurant work to explain his theory of social dramaturgy. Goffman theorized that all people are social actors, and that each individual has front stage and back stage settings.

Performing Work: The Art of Serving Tables

Comparative to a restaurant, and the servers as social actors, the front stage indicates the area where servers perform their role as a server. In other words, the server is in the front region in the dining room, and especially when s/he is tableside. The back region, however, is where the kitchen is. Most of the time it is behind a wall, out of sight and earshot to the audience, or customers. Observations made by Spradley and Mann (1975), “the kitchen is kind of a ‘backstage’ area” (93) support this notion. The constant transition from front to backstage to front again can be emotionally draining for the actor. It has been suggested that emotional labor can result in burnout, which has been defined as the “numbing of the inner signals of emotional feeling, reflected in the inability to create or feel any emotion” (Wharton 1999, 162). However Wharton (1999) suggested that burnout levels were more influenced by job stress and number of hours worked rather than by emotional labor (165). It is more likely a combination of the physical and mental demands that causes worker burnout. Regardless of its influence, the “attitude of
the burned out server is the first casualty” (Ginsberg 2001, 261). Goffman (1959) provided an example of the front to back to front stage process from the point of view of a dishwasher who is irrevocably in the backstage:

The maid and two waitresses were behaving like people acting in a play. They would sweep into the kitchen as if coming off stage into the wings, with trays held high and a tense expression of hauteur still on their faces; relax for a moment in the frenzy of getting the new dishes loaded, and glide off again with faces prepared to make their next entrance. The cook and I were left like stagehands among the debris, as if having seen a glimpse of another world, we almost listened for the applause of the unseen audience (122).

This is a very effective example. Working in a restaurant is much like acting in a play only it is a different play every night. It depends greatly on who comes in the door to dine or drink at the establishment.

Setting up for an expectedly busy night is much like opening night of a theater production. Workers begin to plan ahead for the unpredictable events the shift may bring. Preparing salads and dollops of mayonnaise; making fresh coffee and stacking the mugs nearby; stocking “backups” of items that may be used quickly so that refilling is convenient; and putting silverware and ashtrays on the empty tables are all important steps for getting the stage, both front and back, set up for the night’s performance. “We used to take an hour to set up, and when it was time to open, the lights would go down. It was very show business-y” (Owings 2002, 107). Goffman (1959) stated that at the end of the show, the director (in this case the manager) views the performance in terms of whether or not it went “smoothly”, and “without a hitch” (97-98). Rest assured, the actors

7 Goffman cited this from Monica Dickens’ One Pair of Hands, 1952.
(servers and bartenders) assess the evening all the same, and often make judgment
while counting their tips.

Goffman (1959) shared a discussion of philosopher Jean Paul Sartre concerning
the awkward yet quite precise movements of a café waiter. Sartre, attempting to
understand these movements, interpreted them as an effort by the “actor” to realize his
condition. “He is playing at being a waiter” (Goffman 1959, 76). When the interview
participants were asked, “do you ever feel like you’re acting when you’re serving
tables?” there were a variety of answers from “I’m totally acting”, “Always. That’s part
of the fun,” and “I’m a better actor than most actors” to the total opposite. Jana said she
thinks it’s her “natural personality to be like, fun and bubbly. Maybe that comes out in
me more when I’m [at the table]”. Kevin insisted that rather than being overly nice to his
customers he just acts like himself. “I’m kind of strange and I’ve found that for some
reason, people respond to that.” Sandy and Jill both said that there is an element of role
playing in their serving styles, but typically they do not resort to acting unless they are
having a bad day for one reason or another. “It’s important for me to constantly maintain
happiness because that’s what’s going to make me money. If I’m having a bad day I’m
gonna be fake.” Acting is not a required skill, but it is certainly handy to have the ability
in one’s repertoire. “I think waitressing [requires] multiple personalities” (Owings 2002,
214).

Acting at the table is not just about feigning one’s emotions in order to deliver the
expected performance from the audience. It also establishes the role that each is supposed
to play to ensure that the dining experience is positive for the “audience.” Lin Rolens
(1985) suggested that when America goes to a restaurant to eat, “the person serving acts
as a guide, and [the waitress] conducts [the guest] through the rituals of eating and depending on the need, acts as a Geisha-Nurse-Mother figure” (16). Other servers use the opportunity a restaurant offers to their own advantage. “An aspiring actress [I worked with] would rehearse for other roles at the table. For her, the restaurant literally became her stage. Every shift was an opportunity for an improvisational performance” (Ginsberg 2001, 173).

**The Show Must Go On**

Paired with the dramaturgical performance that takes place tableside and the front stage/back stage parallels to the world of theater, there is yet another comparison that cannot go unmentioned. As the old show business saying goes, “the show must go on.” When something does not go as planned, or there is some unforeseeable circumstance, like a worker’s injury or walk-out, the rest of the group must band together to put on the show that the audience is paying for. “The only thing to do is to treat each shift as a one-time only emergency: you’ve got fifty starving people out there, lying scattered on the battlefield, so get out there and feed them” (Ehrenreich 2001, 33). The unpredictable nature of the restaurant business demands that the staff be prepared for anything. Sandy told me that she was working the night a waiter grabbed the “fajita thing” (a sizzling hot skillet). “He was automatically in tears. Everyone was worried about him for a second, but then it was like, ok, what are we gonna do about your tables?” Injury is not the only thing that puts the team in jeopardy of being one player short. Kevin told a story about an unforgettable shift at the Celtic Room, where we knew each other before Flo’s.

It was kinda early, like maybe 4:30, and there were only two of us on, and it was really busy for two of us. Lloyd [the owner] was there, stirring up trouble. We were
absolutely busting ass, the cook’s getting all over us, ‘get the food out’…we were definitely in the weeds, and yeah, this is pretty funny. Lloyd gets on O’Brien [the other waiter] for something really petty, like he didn’t get rid of a soup cup before he brought the salads on one of his fucking twenty tables you know? O’Brien got pissed off, then Lloyd got more pissed off and O’Brien yelled at Lloyd, “you are fucking asshole and everybody knows it!” Lloyd yelled back, “you get the fuck out of here!” O’Brien stormed out, and so suddenly, I have all of his tables too! I was the only server, no busser, no manager yet. Suddenly I’ve got like 70 people to wait on…I’m like, instant panic, like holy shit!

Kevin was thrust into an even more chaotic situation because his teammate was fired in the middle of an already chaotic state of affairs. The uncertainty of it all is the only certainty.

**The Vitality and Significance of the Team**

The only way to combat this dreadful uncertainty is by establishing steadfast devotion to the team. Goffman (1959) defines a team as “a set of individuals whose intimate co-operation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained” (104). In other words, a team is a group of people who cooperate to project a particular performance. He made a clear and important distinction between teams and groups (cliques) that is meaningful for this analysis. The team has a greater function than the clique because it has a common interest in a specific performance and they must work together to ensure its success without letting the audience backstage. “There is a bond of reciprocal dependence linking teammates to one another” (Goffman 1959, 82). Cliques on the other hand are simply a “small number of individuals who join together for informal amusement” (84). They are able to act as a team and may need to at times, but
Goffman emphasized that the major difference is that teams achieve ends by no other means than dramaturgical cooperation (85).

It is important that restaurant workers, specifically FOH workers, maintain a particular role when they are in the front region. Goffman (1959) emphasized the power that any member of the team has to “give the show away or to disrupt it by inappropriate conduct” (82). Servers develop conversational voices and clever wit when they are required to, or driven to speak to each other in front of the audience. Sometimes this is simply thanking a co-worker reverently for following you with a plate or two of food for your customers. During the participant observation period, a waiter was helping me clean up a giant mess in my station after an extremely busy lunch. He overheard one of the few remaining customers say to me, “You are a great waitress! Good job!” The waiter laughed and said, “Yeah, she’s pretty good when she takes her medication!” We all laughed briefly and returned to our original functions. The waiter was not required to say anything, but it was a way to involve the audience in our performance, by allowing their comments to be a part of the script. This situation also illustrated a version of Goffman’s (1959) “unofficial communication”, which can be carried on by “…well-placed jokes, veiled hints, purposeful kidding, expressive overtones, etc.” (190).

A Shared Mission

As far as restaurant work is concerned, the team consists of individual actors who have a shared goal. At Flo’s, that goal is “to create an environment and dining experience that promises and delivers personal guest satisfaction” (Flo’s employee handbook, 1). Although many servers would scoff at the idea that they adhere strictly to the company’s prescribed mission statement, the message is clear. No matter how it’s said, this is
ultimately the goal of any restaurant. “We have the ability to make people feel special. It has nothing to do with food. It’s just service. It’s entertainment service,” expressed Jared. It takes a team that understands this concept to deliver it without a hitch.

**Playing the Game**

Not only does restaurant work carry an odd parallel to theater performance, but it also is comparable to sporting events. In actuality, it’s a combination of the two. The workers must be athletic, quick on their feet, able to improvise and multitask, all while maintaining a smile and polite conversation voice. Rolens (1985) insists that, “the job is to get places in a hurry without looking like you are in a rush. This requires developing a walk that is all business from the waist down, but looks fairly relaxed from the waist up” (20). According to Elder and Rolens (1985), the average waitress walks eight to ten miles per shift based on pedometer readings (8). Elder and Rolens (1985) argue that a true waitress has the “peripheral vision of a basketball player and the anticipation of a quarterback” (8). Most managers I have worked for are gung ho on promoting teamwork among the staff and there is even a discussion about teamwork in the employee handbook. McAffée (Flo’s general manager) is such a teamwork advocate that pre-shift meetings almost seemed like pre-game pep talks. Jill agreed with this tactic to some degree, “you have to psyche yourself up! If you don’t your attitude is a little different.” Servers must prepare themselves physically and mentally before a rush begins; do their stretches so to speak. It takes a careful arrangement of dramaturgical discipline and cooperation to win the game. Although each individual player has a specific role to play, he must posses dramaturgical discipline and exercise it while presenting his own part for the maintenance of the team’s performance (Goffman 1959, 216).
Ninety-eight percent of the survey sample believes that teamwork is important to get through a busy shift (76% of these answered “very important”). The interviews, however, yielded somewhat different takes on the issue of teamwork. Most agreed that teamwork is very important to the success of the restaurant business, but decided that there are always those few who aren’t part of the team because they don’t exhibit team player qualities. Brad said he tries to call people out on it if they are not being a team player, “hey, we try to be a team here.” Will expressed a different way that team players deal with those who aren’t. “If you see them after work, you don’t say hi to them. Everybody works together and if you’re not part of it then you won’t last long. People won’t like you.” People who do not exhibit teamplayerness put themselves at risk of sanction by the social group. The team and the group, or clique, are very intricately connected with regards to the worker’s role in both.

Some of the interviewees expressed a tendency toward selective teamplayerness. Selective teamplayerness occurs when members of the staff are selective about the tasks and/or individuals they perform in the interest of the team. Typically, the selectiveness is more likely to be directed toward certain individuals. Mark said that he’s a team player with “certain people; with certain parts of the team,” but if he sees co-workers helping him out, he’ll help them out “even if they’re not on my team.” He admitted that he is more likely to help his friends out before he’d help someone else. Kevin confessed that he is not a team player because he doesn’t “give two shits…and because I feel like if I can’t do this job by myself then something is really wrong with me.” He said that he is more likely to play for the team if he is working alongside friends. Jared said that he has no tolerance for people who allow themselves to get buried and will not ask for help. The
previous statements indicate the importance for members of the team to be on friendly
terms with one another. The employee handbook suggests that although employees may
interact socially with each other, “this social interaction may jeopardize the professional
relationship and cause disruption in the workplace” (12). Perhaps this statement is geared
more toward those seeking romantic relations, which, in that case, workplace disruption
may be an issue.

In agreement with the interviewees’ statements of selective teamplayerness,
indicating that they are more likely to exhibit team player behaviors among people they
consider to be friends, 84% of the survey sample stated that they believe “teamwork is
enhanced by friendships with co-workers.” There are a variety of ways that restaurant
workers attempt to enhance friendships with their teammates. As the previously presented
data on the carousing and socializing habits of restaurant workers has exhibited, this
group has shown that they are interested in developing friendships with their co-workers.
Trips to the local bar or bowling alley, after-hours parties at someone’s apartment,
canoeing, and shopping trips that are organized by workers as a social group, rather than
as a work group, indicate that this communal development is important. This suggests
that friendships with co-workers should be encouraged for team building to occur, which
may, in turn, have a direct and positive effect on worker productivity.
Part Four

The Company’s Role

The company plays an integral role in the development of these friendship groups. Although the Flo’s handbook states, in a section called our beliefs, “we will work together as a team and we will reward our team members for their contributions to the company’s mission and goals” (2), there have been no indications of what these rewards are or how to obtain them or that they are committed to team development.

As a restaurant worker, I have been fortunate to be acquainted with an owner who understands the importance of team building and maintenance. The current owner I work for actively assists the development of team spirit because he recognizes and acknowledges the advantages of the team being a social group. During the summer, the two restaurants he owns closed for a week for “training.” There were a variety of activities planned for the days of what we began to call “mandatory drinking…I mean training”. There was a motivational speaker who talked to the staffs of both restaurants about what it means to receive a positive, memorable dining experience, and expressed how lucky we are to be able to provide it. Another speaker talked to us about the mechanics of giving good service; how to multitask, and manage an armful of dishes, a mind full of orders, and still smile. Her discussion was on gaining control of one’s position as server. There were beer tasting and wine tasting nights that were both educational and delicious. On the final day of our “training”, the owner forced us to go on a mandatory canoeing trip, which he paid for. There were about 40 people on the trip. We were instructed to return back to the restaurant promptly after canoeing for a cookout.
party. This was his way of getting the staff to bond with each other, while thanking us for our hard work, and preparing us for the busy fall season. The same owner throws a party around Thanksgiving, and after graduation, providing food and drink, to celebrate a successful season, or shake off a stressful one. This tactic has proven to be quite effective. The employees that were actively involved in the week of training became better friends, which led them to work better together on the job. Turnover rates are significantly lower in both of his restaurants as well when compared to Flo’s where there are no such activities.

The company’s employee alcohol policy has a lot to do with on the job camaraderie among employees. After work drinking is more or less encouraged by my current employer by offering domestic bottled beer to employees for just $1. There are several people who might stay at the workplace for an after work drink who may not go to another bar. There are also those who not old enough to drink, but may just hang out in the restaurant bar getting to know other employees, whereas if the other employees went to a different bar, the underage workers would not be able to join the group. There are many advantages to the management in allowing employees to consume alcohol at the workplace when they are off duty. If employees are allowed to gather in the bar after work, wearing street clothes, they will not only be spending money in the establishment, but they will likely bring business in, by asking friends to meet them there, who may in turn, bring more friends.

Advantages and Disadvantages: The Employee Alcohol Policy Debate

From a business standpoint, the disadvantages of allowing employees to drink on the premises are certainly present. There is a greater likelihood of employees becoming
intoxicated at their workplace and then possibly driving home (putting the business in jeopardy). There is a greater risk that bartenders will give away free drinks to their co-workers. There is further opportunity for the workers to bad mouth the company, the management, or customers in earshot of other customers at the bar. There is the chance that customers will mistake off duty employees for on duty ones because of uniform or conversation and assume that employees are permitted to drink while working. There are ways that the management may combat all of these potential problems.

If the employees are offered a “deal” of some sort like a free shift drink or $1 domestic beers, there leaves little reason for the bartender to give the employees free drinks. Most restaurants that allow their employees to drink when they are off duty require that they wear street clothes and not their uniform. There are other rules that require staff to sit at bar tables, rather than at the bar. Another stated that employees were only allowed to drink if they were dining in the dining room, and were prohibited from the bar area all together. One restaurant stated that their employees were allowed to drink at the restaurant’s bar on their day off, or two full hours after the end of their shift, meaning if they wanted to drink at the bar after work, they would have to leave and come back in two hours. Still, another restaurant implemented a two-drink limit for all employees. This restaurant has since changed the rule stating that the staff can have as many drinks as they want, but they are not to be served past midnight. Many of these rules are frequently bent or altered occasionally in response to the behavior of the staff, good or bad. If the staff is exhibiting good behavior while they are drinking at the bar, the rules are sometimes less enforced, while if they are “bad”, the entire staff will be punished by the implementation of harsher regulations.
As a restaurant employee, I share the view that the *advantages* of allowing employees to drink on the premises outweigh the disadvantages to this. The clearest advantage is one of finance: the sale of product. If employees are permitted to drink alcohol in the restaurant bar on their own time, they are not only spending money at the restaurant, but they are also able to try items that the restaurant offers on the menu. Many restaurants offer an extensive wine list and a wide variety of rare and imported beers. If the employees are going to drink anyway, as the data indicates, it would be to the advantage of the business to allow them to try menu items that will assist their selling abilities. Servers are better at suggestive selling if they believe in the product’s worth. Customers are more likely to purchase an item they are unfamiliar with if their server says they’ve had it and enjoyed it.

Another advantage to the company, specifically to the managers, is alcohol as incentive or reward. If an employee or a group of employees does an outstanding job in an extraordinary situation (like being extremely busy when short-staffed), it is common for a manager to buy the group or individual a drink after they shift to say thank you, and good job. It can also work as an incentive to increase worker productivity. In some businesses, there are stock options and financial bonuses used for incentives. In the restaurant business, there is beer.

Furthermore, there is more camaraderie and friendship developed among workers when they are permitted to gather at the workplace. The bar is often where the team gets to know each other on a non-work basis. Will suggested that the bar is the “meeting place, or the first date so to speak.” There are frequent opportunities for workers to
become friends over a meeting/gathering in the bar after work if they are permitted to gather there.

Because it is a meeting place, workers from different areas of the restaurant (bar, kitchen, etc.) will get to know each other on a non-work basis, therefore the staff is less likely to remain segregated by their position at work. A cook told me that when he used to work at a restaurant that prohibited employees from drinking at the bar, “the staff was extremely cliquish. Those three would go one place, these three would go there, and us three would go somewhere else. We never hung out. It really sucked.”

Drinking at the restaurant bar is also a good way to get to know the bartender (who has so much autonomy and own space at work that he/she is not likely to interact much with all of the workers). During my original tour of duty at Flo’s, when employees were allowed to drink there, it was nice to be able to change clothes, go upstairs to the bar for a beer, a cocktail, or a glass of wine and wait for others to get off. Sometimes other workers would already be off and sitting at the bar. Employees would always sit together regardless of their friendship status. It is the social nature of the job. If a server clocked out and went upstairs and found a cook sitting at the bar that he/she didn’t know very well, employees would likely use this as an opportunity to bond with their teammates. By near closing time, more than half the staff from that night would be gathered in the bar having a good time and talking about the night. Sometimes it was negative shoptalk, but for the most part, it was just shoptalk in general, and eventually, it was just talk without the shop.

A lot of funny or interesting things happen throughout the course of a shift in a restaurant. Talking about and sharing experiences with co-workers is important. It was
also nice to have (non-work) friends meet at the Flo’s bar. This way, he/she could already be at the place we were hanging out at when I got off. We used the bar to meet for functions like birthday parties because it was a central place to meet and if you were the first one there, you wouldn’t be sitting there alone because, chances are, you’d know everyone working there. Besides, the under 21 members of the group would be allowed to be there as well, though not drinking.

As I have mentioned before, it is not necessarily about drinking, it is about socializing. Everyone really got to know each other this way. Jana reflected on the time when employees were allowed to drink at Flo’s,

*We hung out* at work, partied together after work, went upstairs for a drink together because we *knew* each other, and now it’s like, there are so many people that I don’t know… It takes me an hour to drink a beer, that’s an hour I just talked to this person, and an hour more that I know them.

During the research period, it seemed much less fun and not as much like a family than it had in the past. There are certain people who are close and those who make a point to spend time outside of work together at different places, but the whole team is not close like it used to be. “We all used to be friends…some of my best friends I know because we worked here,” remembered Mark. This may not be an explicit advantage for the business, per se, but it certainly is for the staff. I also believe that the business ran very smoothly and efficiently when we were all very close. Turnover was relatively low in the core group and there were people who had worked there for a long time. Kevin commented on this:

*The turnover rate has been outrageous, and that’s contributed to shittier service, which has lowered business.*
People make less money and they’re less happy and we do less together… We’re definitely a less cohesive unit than we used to be. We all hung out together in a group…As elitist as this is, we almost had our own weeding out process for new people because if you weren’t interesting or cool enough to hang out with us then you would have a pretty shitty time there, and so you’d quit and someone else would come. It’s not just like me, or anyone, it’s like a group of 15, you know? I wouldn’t even call it cliquish because there was only one clique and it included BOH and FOH people…it was its own process of getting rid of people that sucked. But we’re definitely less close. It’s always been less close since that happened.

Turnover certainly has an effect on the quality of service, so the less turnover there is, the better the service will be in both theory and practice. In addition, it appears that turnover occurs at a lesser rate when employees are committed to and immersed in the social atmosphere of the work group. Therefore, it is important that employees are permitted to and encouraged to become involved in the subculture for the sake of their personal job satisfaction as well as their commitment to the business. This is key to the efficient operation of a restaurant. Shortly after the new rule went into effect, some regular bar customers asked where all the employees were. When I told them what had happened, they sighed. They told me how they always loved to see the employees hanging out together, because most jobs are not so social that you actually become close friends with your co-workers.

Although only 38% of the survey sample works at restaurants where they are allowed to drink at the workplace, the percentage of those who drink frequently at the workplace was very low. Only 31% of those who are permitted to drink at the restaurant’s bar said they take advantage of the privilege. On the other hand, of those who are prohibited from drinking at the restaurant bar, 58% stated that they wish they were
permitted. These statistics indicate that, although a small percentage of employees may exercise this freedom, more than half of those who are prohibited wish that they at least had the opportunity to drink at the restaurant bar. Much like voting in a democracy, many people who fight for the right, do not go out to the polls. Whether or not the employees would take advantage of their right to drink is another question, perhaps to be answered at another time.
Chapter Four

Conclusions

Much has been said about the subculture of restaurant workers in the preceding pages. The major objective of this research was to empirically demonstrate that a subculture of restaurant workers exists while describing its components. The components consist of a variety of behaviors, norms, customs, and initiation practices including a mixture of carousing habits, team building efforts, and other forms of worker interaction both on and off the job. How the subculture is developed and maintained, how new people are integrated into the subculture, and the departures of members were also discussed in the text. In addition, various attitudes were explored as well as the company’s role in the development and maintenance of the subculture.

After making a case for the existence of a subculture, I must ask myself if the data supports it? Does the information presented here constitute a true subculture or is it simply a lifestyle paired with work culture?

According to Sociologist Joan Ferrante (2000), subcultures are segments of society that “share in some parts of the dominant culture but have their own distinctive values, norms, language, or material culture” (112). She goes on to explain that although members of the subculture are cut off from others in society in some ways, the separation may be limited to selected aspects of life such as work, school, or religion (112; emphasis added). This demonstrates that a single portion of one’s life (in this case, work) may be the foundation for membership to a subculture. Lisa McIntyre (1999) reiterates,

Some subcultures are occupational in nature. As a result of their work, for example, police officers tend to see the
world in similar ways…and so tend to socialize exclusively with other officers (119).

This supports the notion that restaurant workers may, in many ways, be a distinct subculture by virtue of their employment. Though they are not totally removed from the dominant culture, as the Amish are, for example, they do share norms, language, and customs. They are not a counter-culture\textsuperscript{8} like the Ku Klux Klan or Hell’s Angels because they are able to co-exist in both the subculture and the dominant culture simultaneously. By virtue of their job-created work culture paired with their shared lifestyle, the workers described in this paper constitute a subculture by sociological definition.

But to what extent are these workers a subculture? This is a question that demands more inquiry. It has been suggested above that subcultures can and often do co-exist with the larger culture, and that various facets of life (i.e. work, religion, geography) can contribute to the formation of subcultures. Restaurant workers spend most of their time with other restaurant workers, absorbing themselves in the norms and lifestyle practices of the subculture. While co-existing within the dominant society and as members of the subculture of restaurant workers, they are able to participate in both the subculture and the dominant culture (Andersen and Taylor 2003, 49). The data presented here suggests the existence of a subculture, but is not ample enough to elaborate on the extent of subculturalism that exists among restaurant workers.

Rebecca Adams’s (2000) study analyzing the Deadhead subculture offers a rich reminder of this co-existence that is so central a characteristic to many subcultures.

Members of the subculture consulted her when Jerry Garcia died; they wondered how the

\textsuperscript{8} A counter-culture is a segment of the population that is not only distinct from the dominant culture but is in opposition to it as well. Other examples include Anarchist and Communist groups; however, a group of “young Republicans” would be considered a counter-culture in a Socialist country (McIntyre 1999, 119).
A central theme throughout Ginsberg’s (2001) memoir was a dual meaning of *waiting*:

> They are not only *waiting* on tables, but also *waiting* to get out of the business. They are putting themselves through school or making a few extra bucks on the side. They are in the arts or trying to open a business of their own. Even the few who do consider themselves “lifers” usually have something else on the side that they are *waiting* for, such as the dream of opening their own restaurant (71; emphasis added).

Whether it is something “better” or different, that restaurant people are *waiting* for, this tendency is prevalent and is part of the culture they share.

A waitress described her respect and affinity toward waitresses everywhere as her “tribe…there was never any other group of people in the world that I had an immediate affinity with” (Owings 2002, 231). There is a bond that is indescribable. Restaurant people have radar for their fellows, and can spot them at the table, and outside of any restaurant. We are a people. There is no doubt about that. Ginsberg (2001) described it as the “ultimate dysfunctional family, but a family nevertheless” (273).
The restaurant worker subculture is a unique alliance that exists solely by virtue of one’s employment and devotion to the shared mission of the group. That shared mission is the delivery of food and drink to paying customers in a pleasurable environment. A fully committed member is immersed in the way of life the subculture has created. To be fully committed requires the member to be a teammate on the job and a friend both on and off the job to the other members of the group. He or she attends regular social outings for the sake of team building and growth of friendship and the general maintenance of the group. In addition, members understand that other members will come and go, and that they will likely leave one day as well.

Transience is a characteristic that is intricately woven into the subcultural dimension and simply must be understood. Only eight percent of the survey sample stated that their current job is their career, while 80% stated that it is, in fact, a temporary means to survival. Many restaurant people have gone on and will go on to do remarkable things in life after leaving the restaurant business. I am quickly realizing that my current restaurant job is quite possibly the last that I will have for the sake of income. I plan to return to the business for further research purposes in the future. I have said that on my very last day, I will likely be crying while doing cartwheels - not a surprising mix of emotions for this unpredictable industry. Like any lifestyle you may leave behind, be it college, bachelorhood, or even summer camp, it is hard to make that final exit, no matter how wonderful and exciting your future will become.

The primary, pretest survey asked, “Do you think the restaurant and bar industry represents a subculture of its own?” 19 of 20 said yes and listed a variety of “whys”,

including, “we are wild and crazy, outgoing and friendly, unusual”, “we work weird hours”, and “it takes a certain kind of person to be a server”.

The questionnaire represented throughout this paper asked the respondents to “describe the industry in one word or phrase.” The answers were frank and amusing:

A burn out job, chaotic, craziness, dramatic, drinking drug fuck feast, easy, entertaining, exceptionable, fast, flexible, fun, hedonistic, helter-skelter, insane, money, one of a kind, party!!, people oriented, rush, satisfactory, service, soap-opera like, tired feet, undying, [and lastly], unpredictable.

Indeed, a range of responses that signify the bonds, the way of life, the utter madness of it all. The shared lifestyle and understanding of it most likely exists in nearly every restaurant, in every city, in every state. Each restaurant constructs its own subgroup, but all members of each subgroup make up this phenomenal, eccentric, and unique group: The Subculture of Restaurant Workers.

What The Future Holds

This research has contributed important literature not only to the field of Sociology, but to the restaurant industry as well. Now that there has been sociological inquiry of this growing industry within the service sector, the possibilities for future research have become virtually endless. There is much more exploring to be done, but I have taken the first step of understanding restaurant workers as a social group.

There are a multitude of concepts, customs, and practices that demand further investigation. Research can include other types of restaurants and bars, managers’ role in the subculture, bartenders, and back-of-the-house employees. Further questions can explore, in much more detail, the phenomenon of tableside racism and classism among restaurant workers as well as the fuzzy line that lies between flirtation and sexual
harassment in the workplace. The company’s employee alcohol policy and its affect on worker productivity is an investigation that will be beneficial to both the sociological literature and to the restaurant industry. The variables described above could be coupled with other factors and compared to new data, collected in new cities for relationship discovery. There are a variety of angles to be taken and I am prepared to continue this research in the near future.
Bibliography


APPENDIX

Contents in Order of Appearance:

- Survey Consent Form
  - Survey
- Interview Consent Form
- Guided Interview Sheet
Ohio University

Consent Form for SURVEY Participation

“The Culture of Restaurant and Bar Workers”
Sarah E. Rusche, Principle Investigator
Department of Sociology

Federal and university regulations require us to obtain consent for participation in research involving human subjects. After reading the statement below, please state your consent to the investigator. Then you may keep this page for your protection. You may contact the investigator or the Director of Research Compliance at any time at the phone numbers listed below.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research is to gain a broader understanding of the culture to which you belong by virtue of your current occupation. The assessment of this culture includes analyses of the work environment itself, the complex interactions and processes of providing a positive dining environment for the customers, the coping mechanisms of the workers, and the socializing habits of the workers on and off the job.

The survey will take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. Please follow the directions below.

**Risks and Discomforts:** You will be asked a few questions concerning sensitive topics including illegal activity such as drug use as well as questions pertaining to sexual involvement. You may choose to skip these questions if you are uncomfortable answering them.

**Benefits:** The major benefit you will be offered through this research is a better understanding of the social processes of your occupation. Another benefit is the opportunity to share and discuss the unique character of the culture of restaurant and bar workers.

**Confidentiality and Records:** To insure your confidentiality and anonymity DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME ON THE SURVEY and be sure to place the survey in the envelope as instructed after completion. You will not be identified in any way for any reason. All data records will be stored in a locked cabinet at the site and in a locked safe in my home office. I will keep the data for 15-24 months, and then all information will be destroyed.

**Contact Person:** If you have questions or concerns you may contact the principle investigator, Sarah E. Rusche at (740) 592-2590 or se_rusche@msn.com. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Director of Research Compliance at Ohio University, Jo Ellen Sherrow at (740) 593-0664.
Do NOT write your name on this form to insure anonymity. Be honest. You may skip questions you wish not to answer. Completing this survey implies consent. You must be 18 years of age to participate. This information is being collected under guidance of Ohio University. It should take 10-20 minutes to complete. Thank you for your time.

1. Position (circle all that apply):
   Server  Bartender  Host  Cook  Manager  Assistant Manager

2. AGE: _______

3. SEX (circle):  Male  Female

4. ETHNICITY (please circle one):  White  Black  Hispanic  Asian  Other_________

5. How much education have you completed? (Circle one)
   Some High School  High School Diploma (or equiv.)  Some College
   Trade/Technical Degree  BA or BS  MA or MS  PhD

6. What is your parents’ occupation?  Mother _________  Father _________

7. How would you describe your socioeconomic status from childhood?
   Poor  Ordinary  Comfortable  Rich

8. How many years have you worked in the restaurant industry? ____  At this store?_____

9. How many total restaurants have you been employed by? _______

10. What motivates you to work in the industry? (circle all that apply)
    Flexible Schedule  Quick Cash  Fast Paced Environment  Work with People
    Others (please list) _____________________________________________________

11. Is this occupation temporary or is it a career for you? (circle one)
    Career  Temporary  Unsure

12. If this occupation is temporary, what do you plan to do in the future? _____________

13. Do you smoke cigarettes?  YES  NO  If yes, how many per day? ________

14. How much alcohol do you consume in a week? (circle the amount)
    None  1-5 drinks  6-10 drinks  11-15 drinks  more than 15 drinks

15. Have you used any of the following drugs in the past year? (circle all that apply)
    Marijuana  Cocaine  Hallucinogens  Heroin  Ecstasy
    Prescription Drugs NOT prescribed to you  Others (please list) ______________

16. Have you dated or been sexually involved with any of your co-workers in the restaurant business?  YES  NO  If yes, how many? _____________

17. How many romances do you believe are going on between employees at your restaurant? (Circle one)  Many  Some  Few  None
18. What time do you usually go to bed? (circle one)
   Before Midnight   Midnight – 2 am   2 am – 4 am   After 4 am

19. Are employees permitted to consume alcohol at your place of employment?
   YES   NO

**For questions 20-24 please use the following scale. Write the number on the line.

1 = always   2 = often   3 = sometimes   4 = seldom   5 = never

20. If you answered YES to question 19, how often do you drink at your restaurant? _____

21. How frequently do you “hang out” with co-workers after or before work? ______

22. How frequently do you “go out” after working a shift? ______

23. How frequently does flirtatious behavior among co-workers on the job occur? _____

24. How frequently do you flirt with customers? ______

25. Whom do you prefer to serve? (circle one)  Same Sex Patrons   Opposite Sex Patrons

26. Describe your ideal table to serve. Please include age, gender, ethnicity, and general make-up (i.e. family, couple, friends, etc.) ______________________________________

27. Using the criteria from question 26, please describe your least ideal table to serve.
   ______________________________________________________________________

28. Who are the best tippers? _______________   Who are the worst? _______________

29. Do you have many regular customers?  YES   NO

30. How important is teamwork to get through a busy shift? (circle one)
   Not Important   Somewhat Important   Very Important

31. Is teamwork enhanced by friendships with co-workers?  YES   NO   UNSURE

32. Do you enjoy your job overall?  YES   NO

33. Describe the restaurant industry in one word or phrase_________________________

34. What is your hourly wage? ___________

35. How much money do you earn in tips per week? ______

36. Describe the industry in one word or phrase: ________________________________

Thank you for completing this survey. Your time and cooperation are greatly appreciated. If you have any further comments or questions, feel free to contact the principle investigator, Sarah Rusche at the number or email listed on the cover page. If you would like to be interviewed to further assist this research project, please ask Sarah Rusche for details when submitting this form or contact her via phone or email.
Ohio University

Consent Form for INTERVIEW Participation

“The Culture of Restaurant and Bar Workers”
Sarah E. Rusche, Principle Investigator
Department of Sociology

Federal and university regulations require us to obtain consent for participation in research involving human subjects. After reading the statement below, please state your consent to the investigator. Then you may keep this page for your protection. You may contact the investigator or the Director of Research Compliance at any time at the phone numbers listed below.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research is to gain a broader understanding of the culture to which you belong by virtue of your current occupation. The assessment of this culture includes analyses of the work environment itself, the complex interactions and processes of providing a positive dining environment for the customers, the coping mechanisms of the workers, and the socializing habits of the workers on and off the job.

The interview will take approximately one hour to complete.

**Risks and Discomforts:** You will be asked a few questions concerning sensitive topics including illegal activity such as drug use as well as questions pertaining to sexual involvement. You may choose to skip these questions if you are uncomfortable answering them. This interview will be tape recorded for accurate representation. Please do not mention your name or the names of any other persons while being tape recorded. You may choose to turn the tape recorder off at any time for any reason.

**Benefits:** The major benefit you will be offered through this research is a better understanding of the social processes of your occupation. Another benefit is the opportunity to share and discuss the unique character of the culture of restaurant and bar workers.

**Confidentiality and Records:** To insure your confidentiality your name will be changed when data is documented. You will not be identified in any way for any reason. All data records will be stored in a locked cabinet at the site and in a locked safe in my home office. I will keep the data for 15-24 months, and then all information will be destroyed.

**Contact Person:** If you have questions or concerns you may contact the principle investigator, Sarah E. Rusche at (740) 592-2590 or se_rusche@msn.com. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Director of Research Compliance at Ohio University, Jo Ellen Sherrow at (740) 593-0664.
1. How long have you worked in the restaurant business?
2. How many restaurants have you been employed by?
3. What motivates you to do this job?
4. Do you support anyone beside yourself? A family? Children?
5. Do you have a retirement plan? IF yes, does your employer provide it?
6. Do you have health insurance? IF yes, does your employer provide it?
7. Tell me about the hours you keep. When do you work, when do you sleep, etc.
8. Have you worked many holidays? Which are the best/worst to work?
9. Do you drink alcohol or use drugs? Tell me about some of your experiences.
10. What are advantages/disadvantages of employees being permitted to drink at the workplace when off duty?
11. Do you like to go out with co-workers? How often do you do this?
12. Have you ever dated or had sexual relations with a co-worker?
13. Is the line between flirtation and sexual harassment fuzzy working in a restaurant?
14. Would you consider yourself a team player at work? Is this important? What about your co-workers? Are the team players?
15. On a busy night, which worker has the biggest responsibility? (i.e. server, cook, manager, etc.)
16. Do you ever feel like you are acting while you are working? Explain.
17. What is your uniform like? Does the manager enforce this?
19. How well do you get along with customers in general? Other workers?
20. How do you perceive the relationship between servers and cooks? Servers and other workers, i.e. hosts, bar, managers?
21. How is the management? Do you think there is a difference between FOH people who become managers, BOH people who become managers, and managers who become restaurant people? Explain.
22. How do non-restaurant workers (customers or otherwise) perceive you or your status as a restaurant worker? Do you ever feel stigmatized because of your job?
23. How much money, on average, do you earn in tips. What is your hourly wage?
24. Do you enjoy your job overall? What else might you like to do?
25. Tell me a scenario of a typical night at your restaurant as you see it.
26. Have you had an experience at work that was unforgettable?
27. Do you have any good firing or quitting stories? One that was a big production or unusual circumstances?
28. Do you participate in shoptalk with your co-workers? If so, when?
29. Have you made many/any lifelong friends working in restaurants?
30. Do you think most restaurant people are waiting to do something else?