On the Culinary High Seas: Coworkers, Aesthetics and Culture in Service Work

DISSENTATION

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By

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Abstract

Through an ethnographic treatment of retail workers, I explore three aspects of service work that have largely been underdeveloped: coworkers, aesthetics and culture. I show that coworkers are a valuable but often fickle resource for service workers as they navigate the interactive service terrain. Coworkers collaborate to bring service interactions to life, ground ambiguity and regulate the labor process, but also each other. Ultimately, the horizontal relations among coworkers shape the end form of service work. I also draw attention to aesthetic labor in service work. Despite the strong focus on so-termed designer boutiques, I show that aesthetics are equally significant in other contexts. Moreover, some service organizations provide spaces for aesthetic liberties and freedoms, raising the question, is this actually laborious? I argue it is not. Lastly, I emphasize the role of culture that makes service work meaningful and rewarding for workers. The cultural preferences of workers are shared and expressed within the service labor process, buttressing organizational structures. Without these culturally significant elements, workers would all but disengage, leaving service organizations and the labor process depersonalized.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This is a project about work. More specifically, this is a project about service work. The inspiration behind it probably emerges in part from my own work experience in service jobs. I found them (and continue to find them) highly rewarding, but also undeniably frustrating. Often staffed by workers who do not appear to care about an occupational trajectory (if one assumes they even consider it) and certainly peppered with demanding customers who hold fast to the mantra that they are “always right”, service work, in short, gets a bad wrap. Moreover, our collective sense of service work is quite mixed. On one hand, service jobs (particularly those at the lower end like fast food) are more than acceptable for teenagers wanting to earn discretionary income. On the other hand, such jobs are not exactly the marvel of achievement for the adult, working population. While these assumptions condition our conventional understanding of service work, one cannot deny the fact that the service sector is a tremendous economic force, staffed by a growing number of employees.

Scientific inquiry has kept pace with the rising service sector. Here I look to add to these larger discussions in three specific ways. First, consider what “service work” actually is. Obvious as it may seem, it entails providing a service to a paying customer or client. The service itself unfolds across a multitude of forms: performing surgeries, learned instruction, attending to dining guests and pouring drinks among many others. What these activities have in common is the presumption they are performed one-on-one; between worker and customer\(^1\). This is not exactly

\(^1\) To be clear, I indeed recognize that service generally, and most likely takes place under a managerial umbrella in the context of a bureaucratic hierarchy.
the case. A better conceptualization of service work needs to consider the role of coworkers in the service labor process, which I do here. Remember that exquisite dining experience along the oceanfront while vacationing? I show that service encounters like it are a product of the interpersonal dynamics that exist between a team of service employees, what I call the horizontal relations.

Second, consider the elements of the service experience. In a very obvious sense, it is interactive. Given one party provides a service to another, they must necessarily interact. But there are also sights, sounds, feelings and the like that play to our sensate capacities. Under this experiential veneer is a range of taken-for-granted items that make the experience possible. Key visual features, or aesthetics, often go unnoticed, but let us know what we are in for. An apt phrase that comes to mind is that “life is a stage”, and here the service participants (especially workers) must look the part. Insofar as the service experience is aesthetic, it can promote particular styles. How one looks is as central as how one feels. Towards this end, I highlight the importance of aesthetic labor (Nickson et al., 2001) or the embodied capacities of workers used to make things look how they should\(^2\). Here we can see a considerable emphasis placed on appearances and visual cues, from both the organization and of course, service workers themselves.

Third, given that service work is organized, it follows that structural arrangements shape the labor process. This is no different than other occupational forms as all work needs organized (structured) in some fashion. Less addressed in studies of service work are the cultural manifestations that parallel structural forms. I map the landscape of culture (and status) in relation to service work, showing that culture (and status) adds a renewed depth to understanding interactive service work in three significant ways. First, many service workers do not find the

\(^2\) A much larger discussion is presented in chapter two.
economic rewards that other occupations might. Lacking economic power, it stands to reason other job rewards might become more meaningful. Second, many service workers are not often engaged in larger decision making processes that shape the labor process. When voice is stifled, one might seek out a different set of ears. Third, status (part and parcel of culture frameworks) is highly visible from one service interaction to the next. Combined, a unique configuration of economic, political and cultural powers overlay the service labor process. As I show from this perspective, it is less about pay scales and policymaking, and much more about, “being cool.”

**Key Sociological Foundations**

Previous analyses with an eye towards service work establish the backdrop for understanding the concepts and processes presented here. These classic and contemporary works provide the theoretical core that grounds my discussion. Items are presented throughout where they are further developed in relation to specific themes, but it is imperative to establish the conceptual framework here. Introduced above are the three substantive themes addressed in this analysis: the role of coworkers (horizontal relations), the role of aesthetics (aesthetic labor) and the role of culture. The discussion presented below serves as the basis whereby I disentangle the ways in which each configures into service work and the service labor process. The three are addressed in turn.

At first glance, it might appear that service work is individualized between two interacting participants: a worker and a customer or client. This masks the complexities that allow for the service labor process to unfold. One such complexity, relevant to all discussions of service work including this one, is the concept of *emotional labor* as coined by Hochschild (1983) in a groundbreaking investigation of airline attendants. From the perspective that workers were (are) required to maintain a particular outward display, emotional labor serves as the vehicle through which it was (is) possible. As defined, it entails working to “induce” or “suppress” one’s inner
feelings to promote the expected and appropriate experiential state (7). Only briefly does Hochschild (1983) suggest (in passing) that other workers, engaged in the same activities, may draw on one another for support. The larger implication is that processes of emotional labor and altering one’s inner feelings for acceptable public display (i.e., service interactions), is done individually. But others have called attention to the degree to that organizationally prescribed feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983) are simply accepted by service workers. In a return to that very service occupation, Bolton and Boyd (2003) show workers are much more active agents, effectively negotiating different emotional states and play more fluid roles depending on the particular service recipient. This very sentiment is echoed by Paules (1991) in her discussion of autonomy among a waitress staff. So, as active agents, it stands to reason that service workers are not as individualized as thought. They might very well draw on each other to navigate the emotive terrain of the service labor process. I show that indeed they do, highlighting the presence and importance of horizontal relations, those connections between and among coworkers, as backbone of the service labor process.

Two additional conceptual frames underlie this discussion of what I have termed the horizontal relations. What Leidner (1993) outlines as a triangulation of interests and routinization. Regarding the former, unique to service work is the addition of a third party not found in other occupations3. The role of customers is crucial for Leidner (1993) insofar as they enter the service labor process with their own expectations and preferences. As it stands, a three-pronged set of interests emerges: those of management, those of customers and those of workers. Each party is vying for control (and implicitly power) that often creates shifting alliances between the different groups. To illustrate here briefly, sometimes workers align with management (i.e., follow managerial policy) in order to make their time on the clock easier. Other times, workers will

3 For one prominent example, manufacturing work.
“align” with customers, for example, going out of their way to offer little extras. Similar dynamics also exist between management and customers. From this, a lingering question emerges: what about coworkers? Surely they also have their own sets of interests that reconfigure the former triangulation. I add to this conceptual framework and show that coworkers are a fourth party that rearticulates control, power and shifting alliances.

Regarding the latter, routinization, Liedner (1993) well documents the existence and effects of work routines in service occupations fraught with unpredictability. After all, it is working with (and sometimes on) people, a potentially volatile lot. But what I find is something of the opposite. Rather than routines, I discovered ambiguity. The absence of a script to follow (something important for Liedner’s (1993) workers) made for some confusion, but also a creative solution. Drawing on the horizontal relations, I show how coworkers turned to each other to make sense of the non-routine. Again, the presence and importance of coworkers within service work is centrally evident.

A brief return to emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), and subsequent reconfiguration, works to establish the second substantive arena, aesthetic labor (Nickson et al., 2001). Noted prior, emotional labor has service workers operating under feeling rules that are prescribed by the organization, and designate which sets of emotions are appropriate for display (or not). More often than not, emotional displays are directed such that service experiences are pleasant. This is arguably coercive. Who of us has not felt bad at work where frustration was the order of the day? But given the requirements of emotional labor, these feelings must necessarily be suppressed. However, Lopez (2006) sheds new light on the range of emotions that are permissible. He shows that organizations need not be coercive and impose strict feeling rules, but can create spaces where employees are free to express, even cultivate expressive relationships (Lopez, 2006). Important for purposes here is that it is possible to situate emotional labor along something of a
spectrum. At one end sits the coercive, top-down, rule-driven emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). At the other end sits organized emotional care (Lopez, 2006), or those organizational frameworks that allow workers to form expressive relationships, without calling for only certain feelings or displays.

Lopez (2006) provides an effective analog for deconstructing aesthetic labor (Nickson et al., 2001); those presentational elements spattered across the service labor process. By definition, aesthetic labor is the mobilization, development of the embodied capacities and attributes of employees (Nickson et al., 2001). In addition to displaying the proper emotions, service employees are increasingly called upon to display the proper aesthetic. In short, they must look the part, much like they must “feel” the part. While this is not uncommon for many occupations (the business suit and tie readily come to mind), it is particularly conspicuous in service work as workers are the instruments through which the product (service) is made (enacted). Not only are their emotions on the front lines, their appearances are too. To these ends, some organizations are likely to maintain what I refer to as appearance rules, situated at the coercive end of the spectrum, and placing strict demands on service employees. Alternatively, some organizations might leave considerable room for workers to fashion their own styles. I find the latter, which calls into question the degree to which aesthetic demands are just that, demanding.

The items presented heretofore are similar in that they emerge from the structural arrangements that organize the work lives of service workers and the service labor process. However, I find equally important an under-addressed parallel framework for understanding: culture. Over the course of my tenure as an embedded researcher (addressed in detail below) is the centrality of culture to service workers, conditioning many of the choices about work and careers they made. From this perspective, disentangling the structural effects from the cultural

4 In addition, these authors ultimately suggest the commodification thereof.
5 I designate this term as the aesthetic-based equivalent to Hochchild’s (1983) feeling rules.
ones commands renewed attention. A unique frame emerged from an unlikely source (teenagers!), but nonetheless serves as the conceptual vehicle moving understanding forward.

Consider the structural arrangements typical retail service workers face; one might even call them barriers. An obvious starting point is pay. Wages, or in other words the economic power of service workers, particularly those at the low end of the occupational spectrum can be comparably meager. Two additional items are autonomy, i.e., self-direction, and access to decision making (at the organizational level). In other words, the political power afforded service workers is not necessarily something that emerges as a so-termed selling point\(^6\) for those in retail jobs. What this leaves us is a set of workers that are arguably confined along both fronts, but return to their daily work lives with fervor. This raises an interesting question as to why? Here I argue that culture (and more specifically status) provides the lens for understanding.

Milner (2004) sketches a *theory of status relations* that calls unique attention to the ways in which cultural themes configure into subgroup dynamics and interpersonal relations. Under the so-termed theory of status relations, Milner (2004) shows that status, and its association with cultural power (my central focus) becomes increasingly important when other forms of power are not readily available, in particular, the economic and political. Take for example (as Milner does) the high school teenager. Here we have an individual that is largely confined in economic and political terms. Regarding the former, teens are essentially dependent upon parents for financial support. While they may have part time jobs that afford them some discretionary income, by no means are they their own economic providers. Regarding the latter, teens are more or less directed by authoritative figures throughout most of their time spent awake. Parents direct the home, and school officials tell them where and when to be particular places and times. Clearly

\(^6\) To be clear, I suggest this with respect to those at the lower end of the service spectrum, and can concede that autonomy can be both present and alluring. For one example noted above, see Liedner’s (1993) discussion of insurance salespersons. It is clear that autonomy is part and parcel of their work, and appreciated.
they do not have access to much decision-making. As our teenager is limited economically and politically, culture becomes the key source of exercised power. A cursory glance around a typical high school very obviously reveals a set of subcultural groups, differentiated by particular statuses seen through their outward constructions of these identities. Because teens are marginalized from economic and political power(s), groups seek out (and perhaps even create) alternative identities.

Convincingly, it well applies to service workers. Looking through this theoretical lens allows for increased explanation of their occupational choices. However, a few modifications are in order in that I am not dealing with teenagers. This fact significantly shapes the configuration of economic, political and cultural powers. The service staff can make a good amount of money; especially those full time. In addition, all workers qualify for benefits. So opposite the teenager, workers are financially independent. But this is only part of the story. Political power is also important and operates on two levels: the macro-level and the micro-level. Part time staff is largely cut off from access to macro-level decision-making processes the structure their work lives. This is arguably the case for full time staff too, considering they do not necessarily set organizational policy so much as follow and enforce it. At the same time, there is considerable autonomy over micro-level work duties and tasks. Free to do as they see fit, so long as the work gets done. Bridging the micro and macro is a modicum of influence towards the top, whereby employee input is solicited on occasion.

Given these qualifications, cultural power is also amended from Milner’s (2004) assessment. Unlike culture and status within a school setting, there is an umbrella framework put

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7 Some colloquial examples might include, jocks, preps, emo-kids, band geeks among others.
8 It is important to note that the store does not hire anyone without a high school diploma, and during my tenure there were no employees under 20 years of age.
9 Addressed in depth later on, suffice to say that input may or may not find widespread recognition. However, it is elicited.
forth by the principles of the organization. Related, formal events and structured work activities serve as a cultural introduction for new hires, and a refresher course for the tenured. Moreover, a symbiotic relationship exists between workers and the organizations. Insofar as workers take on the culture, they also make it up. Cultural preferences are brought to work, often with encouragement. Furthermore, (and somewhat similar to Milner) workers actively construct status hierarchies, separating themselves out as “experts” from non-employees. Ultimately, I show economic power is important and valued, political power is less important but still valued, and cultural power is most esteemed. It is the resource that conditions (and is conditioned by) employee preferences that makes service work alluring. These workers select into these jobs because of the cultural freedoms that afford them things they find meaningful. A place to refine their palate, have fun and be their unconventional selves.

**Method**

Data for this project were obtained over a fourteen month period beginning in the late spring of 2008 where I entered the field as a participant observer at a “gourmet grocery retail store” known hereafter as *Grocery Adventures*. Given the larger foci, particularly aesthetics and culture, I needed a place where each appeared central. Grocery Adventures was a purposive choice in this regard. I was introduced to the store initially as a customer in 2003 while doing my graduate work, making the occasional shopping trip with friends. With a bit of background, I began to see the degree to which the organization promotes a particular aesthetic theme and how employees seemed to be, for lack of a better phrase, really into food. In addition, a passing glance across the staff suggests that there is something that separates out these employees from other service workers. There is an air of non-convention that noticeably lingers; a colorful people.

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10 Grocery Adventures is a pseudonym as are all other names and designations used throughout.
When other equivalent choices failed to yield employment, it was agreed that Grocery Adventures would well serve my research purposes.

As a participant observer, I directly engaged work activities two to four days a week. Typical shifts were eight hours, though there were also shorter ones from six to two hours\textsuperscript{11}. All employees were/are expected to work at least one weekend shift per week, given those days see the most business. My experience was no different, and in fact, it was more likely that I was scheduled both weekend days, particularly in the beginning. I primarily worked closing shifts, from two o’clock in the afternoon, wrapping up around ten o’clock at night, an hour after the doors are closed for the business day. On occasion, I would begin at noon and work until 8pm. I also had a handful of morning shifts, starting at either six or eight in the morning and lasting until two or four o’clock in the afternoon. Added variation in scheduling might have been ideal, but given the constraints of availability and preferences (of both others and myself), I was by and large “night crew\textsuperscript{12}.”

The data itself came from three distinct sources: original field notes, semi-structured interviews with coworkers, and company materials given to all employees. A few comments on each are required. Collecting field notes proved challenging. Working does not often leave much time for writing, and being undercover meant discretion was paramount. Ultimately, I was able to develop several workarounds. I would carry a small notebook on my person at all times which enabled me to capture work processes in real time. As it turns out, this was not out of place. Others did similarly as it helped with work tasks; for example, taking note of what products needed restocked. At the same time I could not easily pull away from the labor process at my

\textsuperscript{11} A two hour shift happened only twice over the entire period. One was a case whereby I was mistakenly scheduled for a day I could not be at the store, and upon realizing this, was able to negotiate coming in to help with closing duties. The other time was a case of a storewide meeting whereby I did not actually work per se, but clocked in for the meeting.

\textsuperscript{12} “Night crew” is a designation taken from a fellow coworker who coined the term so to speak.
leisure, so I grabbed up any paper slips that I could get my hands on if and when needed. Paper rolls that filled the small receipt printers became quite an asset. I would record as many notes as possible during my shift and my breaks. Upon returning home, I elaborated on the day’s events, fleshing out the intricacies of what was observed during the course of each workday. This provided the detailed accounts, or “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), serving as the bedrock for analysis.

A second data source was a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with my coworkers. Formally, I was able to sit down one-on-one with about two-thirds of the staff. Sessions varied in terms of length and time. Some were very brief, hampered by other obligations my respondents had. Others were lengthier, and more in-depth and detailed. While I could not interview everyone, it seemed most were willing to talk about his or her work life, so I seized any opportunity for discussion that presented itself. I would ask questions while working in teams or pairs with my coworkers, chat with them during lunch breaks, meet them out for coffee (or equivalent) and even had a few chance encounters that proved valuable. Perhaps less conventional, this helped assuage the drawbacks of a staunchly formal approach. I was not limited by a set of prepared items, nor was there a feel of an interview, allowing voice to come through much more unfiltered. The fact that my role as researcher was undisclosed admittedly created limitations. But at the same time, it also gave me a degree of access to workers, and especially the work process, that can easily be stifled by the effects of a known presence. A convenience approach, yes. But one that effectively captures those critical voices, allowing for triangulation with my own observations.
A final source of data is the materials provided to all employees upon hire. I was given a “visa”\textsuperscript{13} and an employee handbook at that time. These outlined the essential work processes, value orientations and organizational policies among other important items. They became an excellent reference to the codified rules and procedures that governed work processes at Grocery Adventures. They also served as a reliable benchmark against which I could juxtapose the dynamics that emerged in the course of daily activities.

In the end, ethnographic embeddedness is needed for this analysis for several explicit reasons, related to each of the central themes. First, the relationships that exist among coworkers cannot be fully understood by the outside observer. They are conditioned by the shared endeavors that make up the work process and produce trust in and between workers. Second, while aesthetic presentations might seem obvious by simply looking in, it is impossible to ascertain their meaningfulness for and among employees. Deprived of a firsthand account of aesthetic labor, and the voices of those laboring, misunderstandings that workers are dressed up or uniformed without qualification are likely. Finally, cultural analyses run the significant risk of ethnocentrism. Only through systematic analysis of workplace culture can one contextualize its form and function as a supplement to structural arrangements. Without a status as worker myself, I could not have been, to borrow a colloquialism, part of the club.

**Grocery Adventures**

Grocery Adventures began as a small convenience store on the West Coast of the United States nearly forty years ago, flourishing into a national chain that continues to expand. A significant break for the company came approximately ten years after opening the original store. With growing popularity among an increasing customer base, Grocery Adventures switched

\textsuperscript{13} Visas are essentially knock-offs of real visas, briefly outlining helpful tips and many of the items that are detailed in the employee handbook. All employees are required to carry them on their person until they work through each of the different sections with their assigned mentor.
gears, moving away from typical images of “convenience” towards those that conjure notions of fun, leisure, travel and the exotic. Located in a sizeable metropolitan area in the Midwest, the store anchors the corner plaza of a strip-mall that bears its namesake. Caddy-corner through the well-trafficked intersection is a notorious competitor. As a full time staff member once jibed, “we don’t speak ill of the competition”, and indeed workers do not. I regularly suggested customers try the other store for items we did not carry.

The surrounding region is a wealthier suburb of the city. In the immediate area are numerous restaurants and shops, some along the lines of a superstore. Given the socio-economic status of the area, customers are typically higher income. But on occasion (and for two of my regular customers), lower income shoppers come through, evidenced by their use of food assistance programs. There is a degree of affordability, and certainly prices are reasonable, but suffice to say, Grocery Adventures does not widely appeal to the same crowd as Wal-Mart, favored by the price-conscious. In contrast to the customer base, the staff is considerably diverse; no images of an “organization man” (Whyte, Jr., 1956) here. Full time employees are roughly half women and half men

There is increased variation among part time workers given there is more turnover, but more importantly (and somewhat obviously), there are more of them. Part time staff included no teenagers, those in their 20’s, 30’s and up to 60’s, mothers, fathers, college graduates, working students, immigrants, those with second-jobs, want-to-be-artists, those on a second “career”, and those who have been in service all their working life.

Bureaucratically, the stores are relatively flat. Each Grocery Adventures is overseen by two top positions: a Skipper (first in command) and a Navigator (second in command). Below

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14 I say roughly because of the considerable rotation of full time staff between stores that can tip the gender balance one way or the other at any particular time. However, my experience was more or less equitable throughout.
15 This in part driven by the requirement that employee’s hold at least a high school diploma.
16 Here I refer only to within-store hierarchies, not the hierarchies within the overall company.
these individuals is a staff of full time employees with different designations (for example, a Tallyman) and numbers vary given store size\textsuperscript{17}. Full time staff is salaried (with benefits and ample vacation time\textsuperscript{18}), guaranteed nearly 50 hours per week and serve as mentors to lower level employees. Below these individuals are the part time employees, and numbers vary given store size and labor needs. All part time employees have (at least) a high school degree, work no more than 40 hours, paid better-than-average wages\textsuperscript{19} and immediately qualify for benefits. Further, part time employees often find career trajectories within the company, moving into full time positions.

While these distinctions are known, an authoritative hierarchy is far less obvious than one might assume. Workers know the Skipper and Navigator, but the full time designations are much less clear (if known at all). I did not know my first mentor was technically a Tallyman, and when I approached him about it, he suggested it is something of an empty title. Other part time employees were similarly surprised to find the full time staff held such distinctions. Also, the feel of a hierarchy is very under-pronounced. All employees, including those at the top, perform daily work tasks; for examples, checking out customers and stocking shelves. Management is certainly not set off behind a closed office door. Moreover, over time, full and part time statuses can blur, particularly among the more seasoned, part time veterans. They will be given tasks such as counting the day’s till or entrusted with keys that can unlock particular register functions (for example, giving refunds to customers); items supposedly reserved for full time staff and/or management.

\textsuperscript{17} This particular store had about 10 full time employees at any time over the course of my tenure. Numbers can fluctuate when employees move, get promoted and need to change stores and/or transfer.
\textsuperscript{18} For every two weeks worked without absence, full time employees accumulate one vacation day.
\textsuperscript{19} For example, I started at ten dollars an hour and found this similar across other part time workers. Additionally, raises of up to one-dollar are possible every six months, and are consistently fifty-cents or more.
Grocery Adventures is unlike typical chain grocers. In fact, part of the overall mission is to bear little resemblance to them. To this end, Grocery Adventures separates out along two distinct fronts. The first is with the food; the second is with the service (addressed in detail throughout). Regarding food, the store carries products typical of grocery items one would find in pantries around the country. But it also caters to, and actively promotes, the more adventurous (and often gourmet) palate by stocking items that are rather unique, if not unconventional altogether. Regarding service (addressed only briefly here), Grocery Adventures works to maintain the intimate feel of a “neighborhood grocer.” Stores maintain that all employees stay committed to “have all stores operate as true ‘neighborhood’ stores…wanting the customer experience to be personal and intimate…such that the customer thinks of stores as ‘their Grocery Adventures.’” In addition, stores aims to give every customer a “shopping experience” that is “rewarding, eventful and fun.”

Consistent with the intimate, neighborhood approach, the store is not spacious. There are no mile-long aisles to walk down, vacuous warehouse-size spaces to get lost in or white industrial lighting to gray the faces of shopping patrons. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Floor space is regularly cramped and congested with a flurry of activity from both customers and workers. Adding to this is the structural layout with offset angles that work to pull the corners of the store inward. Interior design is also noteworthy, with wood-paned walls giving a much softer essence. In addition, artwork and signage cover much of the store, including painted windowpanes (that are quite sizeable), ceiling decorations, a veritable arboretum in one front corner and support poles surrounded by product or artistic displays. To round it all out, food is prepared daily for (and often in front of) customers to sample, and coffee is always served, making “their store” as

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20 These items taken directly from the company’s value guide, contained in the handbook of materials given to all employees.
21 All artwork and signage is handcrafted by in-house artists who are employed specifically for this reason.
homelike as possible. At the same time it is cozy, it is adventurous, even exotic. To this end, each store is dressed up in one of three themes: a Polynesian theme, a Beachside theme or a Maritime theme. These larger umbrellas do not change, but are adapted at the local level, drawing on elements from the surrounding communities and regions. So while it is “your store”, it just so happens you live on a tropical island in far-away places.

At any given time, there are up to twenty employees working at Grocery Adventures, each performing different work tasks. A big split is, in the parlance of the store, between “reg folk” and those on the floor. The former run the cash registers to check out shoppers (addressed in more detail below). Those on the floor are engaged in a number of different activities. Some general examples include: stocking shelves, working through back-stocked products in the back room, tearing down and/or building new product displays, rolling out stacks of new products using a dolly, writing orders for needed items or “facing” the store, by pulling shelved products to the front. Some specific examples include working in the refrigerated sections exclusively (called “piloting”), working in the freezer doing “frozen pulls”, being something of a concierge (called “wheeling” or the “Wheelmaster”) or preparing and sampling products (and coffee) to customers in one designated corner of the store. Full time staff might also be attending to managerial or administrative tasks such as scheduling, phone calls or other organizational needs. Regardless of assigned duties, the work is physically demanding. There is a considerable amount of heavy lifting, stocking shelves, pushing carts, navigating close quarters, and standing on one’s feet for extended periods.

22 A brief overview of store design is provided here to set the stage. A much more detail discussion is offered in the chapter on aesthetic labor.
For those assigned to registers, the addition of customer demands makes it emotionally taxing in as much as it is physical. These individuals stand as the final frontier of the so-termed “Ahoy! customer experience”, Grocery Adventures’ approach to customer service. As the term implies, workers are charged with, for lack of a better term, wowing the customer. They labor to genuinely engage the customer in meaningful conversation, talk about the foods and products that come across the countertops and send patrons off with a bang. Surges in business, commonly referred to as “rushes” make for backed up lines, impatient customers, antsy children and frazzled nerves. Large orders (those that fill an entire cart or more) make for sustained interactions that can last for what seems like forever. In addition, forgotten items are requested, computer technologies fail and buttons are mistakenly pushed, complicating things further. They must find quick solutions to a dancing array of potential problems, think and speak on the fly, all the while maintaining their cool. For the newly hired, this seems all but impossible. Among the tenured, it is a skill to behold.

On the face of it, one might think this is a story that has been told before. That it is a story about service workers confined to the lower end of the industry hierarchy, passively shuffling from one temporal arrangement to the next, constrained by a lack of human capital that would enable them to move up the occupational ranks into something…better. But the significance of these workers is undeniable. These are not passive agents walking blindly through the service labor process. Nor are they uneducated, unskilled folks who lack creativity, substance and so-called “better options.” While there is no disputing that this is grocery retail (and thus service work), as it turns out, it rearticulates a number of longstanding assumptions about service

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23 To be clear, I do not want to downplay the physical nature of register work. Micro-shifts are often several hours at a time, meaning one is standing up and in place nearly the entire time, bagging groceries for each transaction that often entails lifting cases of wine or bottled water or equally heavy items.
workers, the dynamics of the service labor process, and (perhaps) the organizations that employ them.
Chapter 2: The Horizontal Relations in Service Work

“What exactly are we supposed to talk about?” (Stuart, part time employee)

I’m walking back to the stockroom when Jeana shouts over and grabs my attention. I saunter over to see what she needs. Orleans hears the call too, and turns around to see what the commotion is. An elderly female customer is visibly upset that she has seemingly lost her ring somewhere in the store. Jeana informs us she has looked all over to no avail, and suggests that it may have fallen into the trashcan set next to the massive display of wine that anchors the back end of the store. Jeana asks us to rummage through it and to see if it has fallen in. Orleans and I take the can to the stockroom, grab a set of latex gloves and look at each other as how to best proceed. His face is clear that this is not a task he had hoped to be charged with. The trash is quite messy: bits of food, dozens of paper cups with dribbles of coffee and numerous crumpled paper towels.

We improvise per Orleans suggestion that we take the bag out and dump the trash into another one to see if the ring falls out in the process. He pulls the bag out as I grab another one to re-line the trashcan. He dumps the trash out at a slow pace so we can see it fall in something of an itemized way. The process exasperates Orleans. He mumbles incoherently under his breath, occasionally letting out sighs of frustration. No ring. We look at each other in relative silence. A few moments pass and he says to me, “Dude, I don’t think its here…I don’t know.” I did not see the ring either, and nod back in agreement, and ask “What do you want to do?”

He thinks for a moment; and I mean really thinks. He suggests that we could dump the trash out onto the floor and dig through it piece by piece. I throw my hands up and raise my eyebrows as if to say, “If that is what you think is best.” But this idea is dismissed when looking around the stockroom that is cluttered with all sorts of items; not to mention the potential for foot traffic from other employees. Orleans remains standing there for a few moments, shaking his head and repeating, “I don’t know, dude, I don’t know.” After enough time has passed, I again ask what he wants to do. He responds emphatically: “I am done with this. I don’t get paid enough to dig through trash for work. Talk to people? No problem. I didn’t sign up for this…alright, I’ll go tell her we didn’t find it.” He indeed does and I replace the trashcan to its rightful place.

The above anecdote outlines a unique service interaction at Grocery Adventures. This particular passage shows that Orleans and myself condition the service provided to the distraught shopper. We could have spent more time and effort searching for the ring. We could have dug through the trash piece by piece. But as the consensus turns out, in the words of Orleans, we “don’t get paid enough to dig through trash.” This highlights the roles coworkers play in service work, what I here call the horizontal relations. In effect, it is we who decide the end form of
service. It is not management serving as the vehicles to promote compliance with policies at Grocery Adventures. It is not the customer’s demands for a certain service experience. Service here is a product of our interpretation of these items in the lived context of this service interaction. In other words, we decide how far to take it. This raises two interesting items missing from the larger discussions of service work. The first is in regards to Hochschild’s (1983) emotional labor. The second is in regards to Leidner’s (1993) notions of competing interests and routinization in service work.

Hochschild’s (1983) concept of emotional labor provides a base for grounding the personal, mental and emotive aspects of service work. In this groundbreaking work, she shows how employees work to align their inner emotions with a prescribed outward countenance. For her, the onus is on individual workers to take direction from so-termed feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983). Prescribed by the organization, these rules essentially tell employees how and what to feel so as to create the right customer experiences. But as Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) write, “there must have been some sociable means of helping each other prop those 15-hour smiles up (774).” Moreover, what happens when the feeling rules are muddled under an ambiguous concept of customer service? Here I argue that those “sociable means” emerge from the horizontal relations in service work, and work to rearticulate the feeling rules as coworkers help each other tackle the challenges of emotional labor.

Leidner (1993) raises two additional dynamics unique to service occupations considered here. The first is what I call a “triangulation of interests”, whereby three competing parties and shifting alliances shape “interactive service work” (1). At one point, management, directing workers to follow certain procedures, enforces organizational policy. At the second point, workers bring their skills, talents and abilities to the service labor process and serve the front lines. At the third point, customers place demands on workers as the service recipients, often
under the old adage of “the customer is always right.” Each respective party can both share and/or find contrasting interests within the service labor process. The second is that service organizations often look to routinize the labor process and customer interactions (Leidner, 1993). Here, service organizations standardize the service labor process by directing workers’ selves and interactions and by limiting the choices for customers. These effectively work to reduce inefficiencies and the unpredictability that come with working with (and on) people.

Again, coworkers are largely left out of this analysis, in (at least) two important ways. On one hand, they are part and parcel of the service labor process. If individual workers are part of the aforementioned triangulation of interests, the presence of their compatriots is also certainly felt. On another hand, what happens in service organizations that are significantly less standardized? In a place like Grocery Adventures, service interactions are far from routine. Moreover, the organizing premise that underlies customer service encourages flexibility. From this perspective, coworkers again become important for clarifying potential ambiguities.

Emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), triangulated interests and routinization (Leidner, 1993) are extremely useful concepts and do condition the service labor process at Grocery Adventures. But I find they do not explain the entire picture of service work, customer service and service interactions themselves. Calling attention to the horizontal relations within service work, I show that service work hinges on the ways in which coworkers draw on each other in navigating the service terrain. They help with physical tasks, engage face-to-face interactions, diffuse the stresses and strains of the labor process and even articulate the end form of the customer experience. In short, the horizontal relations between coworkers are a pillar upon which service work rests.

**Emotional Labor, Triangulated Interests and Routinization**
Hochschild’s (1983) seminal work attuned workplace scholars to the so-called emotional labor required of service employees. The thesis suggests that workers manage their inner emotions to project a particular outward countenance that aligns with organizationally prescribed requirements, or feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983). Coordinating inner feelings and public display is done one of two ways. Employees may engage surface acting, or essentially faking it to appear cheerful\(^ {24}\). Alternatively, employees may engage deep acting, or physically altering their own emotive states to align with organizational prescriptions. In this sense, the self becomes a tool for the work process. Hochschild (1983) also suggests that all service employees are required to perform emotional labor to some degree, and that managing emotions is increasingly guided by organizations and placed under the control of others, including customers.

From this, a host of studies elaborated the complexities of emotional labor in a range of service occupations\(^ {25}\). Several are noteworthy. Bolton and Boyd (2003) demonstrate that workers can effectively juggle various emotional states. Rather than rigidly following organizational prescriptions and feeling rules, workers actively manipulate and modify customers, performing more fluid roles. Paules (1991) shows that service workers exercise considerable autonomy over the emotive aspects of their work. Here workers resist both managerial prescriptions and the demands of (often unruly) customers. Korczynski (2000) documents the (often informal) emergence of “coping communities” that enable workers to express a range of emotions, rather than only the positive displays suggested by Hochschild (1983). What is more, Lopez (2006) juxtaposes emotional labor against “organized emotional care” (137), suggesting this is an alternative to prescribed feeling rules and “consists of organizational attempts to create hospitable

\(^{24}\) For Hochschild (1983) the emotive state was typically pleasant. However, this does not preclude the possibility that other emotive states are the appropriate ones.

conditions for the development of caring relationships between service providers and recipients” (137). Given these developments, emotional labor as Hochschild (1983) would have it is but one piece of the service puzzle. In addition, workers remain agentic and organizations need not be coercive.

A second conceptual arena within the service labor process centers on a so-called triangulation of interests, whereby three vested parties, management, customers and workers, shape and reshape the dynamics of service work (Leidner, 1993; see also Sallaz, 2002). Management enforces the prescriptions for service, as defined by the organization. Customers bring particular preferences and expectations to service interactions, making demands on workers and implicitly, the organizations. But customers are also “worked on” by the organization as choices are cut off to them (Leidner, 1993). Service workers themselves hold the front lines; actually performing the service. While each party serves a necessary role in the larger labor process, their interests can shift, compete and/or align with each other.

For one example, Sallaz (2002) shows how blackjack dealers will align with their clients’ interests, rather than those of the organization. The more winning the player finds, the more tips the dealer can make. Thus the interests of the dealer align with those of the player, and workers exercise a stronger service orientation. Alternatively, dealers might also align with the house, sticking to their organizational guns when players are not tipping well and it does not behoove them to provide service extras. For another example, Leidner (1993) shows how fast food workers align with managerial policy to buffer the effects of problematic customers. Here, they draw on the organizational routine and scripts that allow them to work without engaging, in effect distancing themselves from a subservient role as service providers. Alternatively, when the scripts seem obviously false (in presentation) workers go outside them, personalizing interactions with customers. In both examples, realignment of interests is clear.
A third conceptual arena to consider is routinization within service work. In short, routinization entails making all decisions for employees (and customers) to cut off the choices made available to them. In this sense, the service labor process is theoretically made more predictable and efficient. Workers know what to do; they simply execute. Customers also know what to do; they pick and choose from a limited range of options. For Leidner (1993), these processes are epitomized by McDonald’s, which was/is built on uniformity. Among workers, scripted dialogue is used to move through service interactions. Among customers, meals are packaged into pre-defined order sets. Each works to routinize the process, removing the unpredictable human component from the service labor process.

However, Leidner (1993) also shows that routinization is not without limitations. As service work expressly involves working with people, it is arguably never fully predictable (29). In addition, the active participants construct the very essence of service itself (29). That is, workers and customers necessarily bring their “behavior, attitudes and demands” (29) to interactive service work and these ultimately define the service requirements. At a place like McDonald’s, routinization can work relatively effectively even if the interacting participants define “service”. Products are standardized, work tasks are computerized, scripts keep interactions short and customers are comfortable with the process. Alternatively, other service organizations do not lend themselves neatly to routinization. At a place like Grocery Adventures, the service experience is championed, almost welcoming unpredictability, making routinization extremely problematic. This is not to say there is no standardization, rather that the end forms of service (routine or not) rest on the shoulders of those engaging the process.

Given potential drawbacks of these three conceptual frames, this analysis focuses on the horizontal relations within service work. That is, I ask and answer how do coworkers configure into the service labor process? A few others have tackled these relationships to some degree.
Korczynski’s (2000) concept of “coping communities” is a good starting point. Beginning with the notion that workers in the same occupation\textsuperscript{26} share similar understandings of the job, the stresses and strains of work led to the emergence of formal and informal groups (Korczynski, 2000). In these so-termed coping communities, emotionally charged situations are often diffused, pleasant experiences are shared and disdain for problem customers is expressed. In lieu of organizational feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983), workers draw on each other to manage the emotive aspects of the service labor process\textsuperscript{27}. Adding to our understanding of the informal underpinnings of service work, Seymour and Sandilford (2005) show how socialization among coworkers is critical. Rather than heavy reliance on organizational precepts, they show how training rests largely on occupational socialization, and specifically, that emotional labor is enacted without any real formal guides (Seymour and Sandilford, 2005).

While these developments are indeed valuable, this analysis can take them several steps further. First, I answer an important question raised by Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) in their critique of Hochschild’s (1983) work on the processes of emotional labor. These authors argue that scant systematic attention was paid to the interactions between service workers (774), and suggest that there must have been some sociable elements enabling workers to maintain the proper emotive states over extended periods of time. At Grocery Adventures, I show how these processes are grounded in the horizontal relations among coworkers. Second, paying systematic attention to the role of coworkers reveals a drawback to a triangulation of interests (Leidner, 1993). While management, workers and customers still vie for control, I show that coworkers are an important fourth party. They help to engender the proper emotive states, but also help with the physical and/or mental tasks that enable the service labor process to unfold. As a vested fourth party, I demonstrate the ways in which workers align with one another, working to rebalance the

\textsuperscript{26} For Korczynski (2000), workers also shared the same workplace.
\textsuperscript{27} To be clear, Korczynski’s (2000) analysis centers on call center work.
service equation, tipping it in their favor. Lastly, what happens when “service” is relatively ambiguous? At Grocery Adventures, flexibility (not routinization) is the order of the day. In the absence of a script to follow or a routinized service process, the horizontal relations become increasingly important. That is, coworkers serve as the key mechanism defining the end form of the very service they provide.

**Non-Routine Customer Service**

In order to disentangle the role of coworkers in the service labor process, it is important to outline exactly what that process is. So what does “service” look like in this particular organization? Answering this question will better illustrate the degree to which coworkers shape its end forms. As a starting point (and noted prior), Grocery Adventures is at the opposite of the spectrum from routinization. Upon hire, all employees are given a handbook that outlines the general thrust of the company and its goals. Most central to the organization is a so-called “Ahoy! customer experience” and a few items provide a modicum of substance. First, the organization grounds its approach in the experience of retail, committed to one that is “eventful and fun.” Second, to do so, they focus on both internal and external experiences. Externally, customer participation is key. Items include things like in-store displays, product sampling, interactive programs\(^28\) and the like. Internally, the focus is on the perceived experiences the customers are having. For examples, the manual posits several rhetorical questions for employees to consider: Do they care if I am shopping here? Do they respect me as a person? These items (in particular, the internal) are suggested to set the stage for the “Ahoy! customer experience.” In short, this experience (i.e., interactive service) is one that astounds the customer.

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\(^{28}\) One such program is a daily product demonstration, whereby different items are prepared on-site and sampled by customers in one corner of the store, set up like a service counter. This is done throughout the day, and the different foods correlate with different meal times. Importantly, this is different from product sampling as noted above. For product demonstrations, focus is on both the items and how one might prepare them. For product sampling, it is very common for employees to open up food items for customers to taste at any time.
On the face of it, these items might seem pretty straightforward. When entering the store, one can very obviously see displays, signage, food samples and product demonstrations working at the abovementioned external end. These are not uncommon to find in other retail grocers (albeit to varying degrees). But separating out Grocery Adventures is this “Ahoy! customer experience” that I soon realized is strongly conditioned by the service workers. Jerry, the Navigator introduced this approach to me during my first shift. We trolled the aisles, he would stop to do odds-and-ends here and there, and I followed with my visa\textsuperscript{29} in tow. Jerry strongly emphasized the section on customer experience, telling me that:

We do well here because we talk to our customers. And we hired you because you are the type of person we are looking for. You are personable and willing to talk to anyone who comes in. That is what we are looking for.

Over time, this notion of “talking to people” stood prominently as the single-most important element of the service labor process at Grocery Adventures. It permeates the workplace, often very literally. For example, over the course of my tenure, a particular news clipping hung in the break room: a report of the results of a national survey of best retailers for customer service. Grocery Adventures was slotted in at number five, with one bold, handwritten comment in the margin reading, “See, talking to our customers works!” But “talking to people” is more than simple rhetoric. I would come to find that this means \textit{really} talking to them, \textit{really} building rapport and relationships with customers, having \textit{real} conversations\textsuperscript{30} that are just that, conversational.

\textsuperscript{29} The visa is a miniature version of the larger handbook, which is regular sized. New hires will carry the visa around and work with full time employees from time to time on the different sections therein. For example, safety, product labels, checking out customers, where to find things among others.

\textsuperscript{30} I use “real conversations” with the understanding that some might argue service interactions cannot be, in the purest sense, real. Rather, inherently constructed within the service labor process. However, I find service interactions at Grocery Adventures are real in the sense they are not obvious “false friendliness” (Ritzer, 1993).
Despite the strong emphasis on “talking with customers” to promote the Ahoy! customer experience, this was not as simple as one might think. Ironically, it often clouded understanding of the process:

Adam calls the (nightly) huddle, something done at both the beginning and end of each day. We wait for a few remaining workers to come to the front, and discussion turns to the reviews that are coming up. Stuart is wondering out loud about how he is doing but remains unclear about what to expect.

Stuart: I want to know if I am doing what they expect. I have no problem talking with customers as we are supposed to, but I don’t know exactly what I am supposed to be talking about.

Sitting on top of cases of water he shouts over to Jerry who has popped out from behind the pit. Stuart: Hey, Jerry, what exactly are we supposed to be talking about?

Jerry responds with a percentage breakdown, suggesting he tries to talk 60 percent about himself and 40 percent about the products.

Important to note is that Jerry only tells us what he tries to do. This is not organizational policy. Grocery Adventures does want workers to talk to customers about the products during service interactions, but there is no hard and fast rules applied. More accurately, the products tend to serve as a default topic to get the ball rolling if need be. In essence, this passage highlights the ambiguity and subjectivity that permeate service interactions at Grocery Adventures.

Given that service is largely ambiguous, interpretive and subjective, it is also clearly not routine as Leidner (1993) would have it. The horizontal relations (i.e., coworkers) thus become increasingly important in navigating the service terrain. Consider the following:

The store is sampling sparkling wines and champagne at the front entrance behind a mobile countertop that faces the double doors. Stuart is assigned to this post, asking customers if they would like to try them and providing a basic background on each of the three. The language does not change much across each patron. “This one is a true champagne, this one is a bit dryer than the last one, this last one is going to be the sweetest, and most people are finding this second one very comparable to the real one.” As his shift on this station winds down, Ava prepares to take over. She is reluctant, admitting to me she has “no clue” about the products. Stuart reassures her it is easy, and gives her the very information he passed on to customers and says he is not all that informed, but that is what he was told. Ava responds with a drawn out, “Alright”, as if to say I guess that is what I will go with. As customers continue to stream in, she launches into the very same dialogue.
Part of the “Ahoy! customer experience” is making this product demonstration informative, but neither Stuart nor Ava really knows much about the nature of the product per se. Each can surely speak to customers as they come in; exchanging pleasantries, asking if they would like to try the product and taking care of the technical aspects of the task (for example, pouring cups and clearing waste). But in order to best round out the service interaction, they draw on each other, effectively constructing an informative (and authoritative) presentation.

Another example illustrates the importance of coworkers for enacting the customer service experience:

Che and I are working back to back on registers 5 and 6. Despite the fact it is nearing closing time, a steady stream of customers filters through. Orders are relatively small, and we both move them through pretty quickly to get back to talking among ourselves and cleaning up here and there as needed. While I am wrapping up a small transaction, a near full-cart’s order comes through Che’s line. When I finish with my own customers, I hop over to help bag his order. I excuse myself to the patrons as they stand blocking the areas below the countertop where bags are located. As I grab one to begin, we dialogue with each other:

Che: Well, this is a real treat. Here we have Paul to do our bagging for us this evening. One of the top baggers in the company.

I smile and nod at the customers as Che continues to scan the items.

Me: Give me something I can work with here!
Che: Oh I see, the protégé turning on the master…
Me: It worked for the Karate Kid. You all saw that movie series, right?

With the customers nodding in agreement and starting to grin, I parallel our experience with the film. I am Daniel, Che is Mr. Miyagi, and I am now catching the fly with the chopsticks. That is, my bagging skills are far better than his. The customers burst out into laughter.

Me: See, they know what is going on here!

We are all laughing as Che finishes scanning the items. He gives them their total and walks them through finalizing the transaction. When done paying, they say to us, “Always a good time here” to which Che responds, “We aim to please.”

In the end, the horizontal relations of the workplace operationalize an ambiguous concept in concrete (and organizationally acceptable) terms. Grocery Adventures charges employees with providing an “Ahoy! customer service” experience that is widely understood as “talking with
people.” At the same time workers have a sense of what this is, they often have no idea what this is. To clear up the disconnect between understanding and expectation, employees draw on each other. Employees exchange information, language, and performances and draw on general camaraderie in navigating the non-routine. Specifically, Stuart took a cue from Jerry in the huddle, Ava used the background information provided by Stuart, and Che and I transformed what could have been a routine transaction into an entertaining experience. In each instance, the horizontal relations among coworkers serve as the vehicle for service interactions.

**Collective (Emotional) Labor**

Hochschild (1983) briefly addresses collective emotional labor, noting that her airline attendants work in teams and on relatively close terms with each other (115). She argues this is partly driven by the “tone” (115) of work; that is, keeping friendly throughout of long flights. Workers also report that such collaboration allows them to maintain the expected demeanor (115). Moreover, Hochschild (1983) suggests that the structural requirements dictate how workers talk (115). In effect, they work to avoid the hostile in favor of the pleasant. I do not wholly disagree. But I also argue that collaborative efforts spread much wider than this. With respect to the tone as noted, I have already shown the opposite; that workers determine “talk” (i.e., make the ambiguous concrete) so much as the reverse. With respect to collaborative efforts, I find coworkers are much more central than Hochschild (1983) anticipated.

Under the larger umbrella of the “Ahoy! customer experience”, service interactions take place in two primary locations at Grocery Adventures. First, and most obviously is when customers are checking out. Second, is when one is assigned to the floor\(^\text{31}\). In both places, service interactions are might be very traditional. That is, one-on-one, face-to-face, between service

\(^\text{31}\) Here, “the floor” is the actual shopping floor where products are shelved and customers walk the aisles. Typically, one is assigned to a particular section and will restock those items, but this also places these workers in full view of customers who regularly seek their assistance.
provider and service recipient. But a deeper investigation reveals the degree to which these are collective processes, so much as individualized across workers. The corollary is that processes of emotional labor, which are part and parcel of service work, also often rest on the shoulders of coworkers.

I first turn to service at the checkout. Grocery Adventures uses a system of bells, which is something of a Morse code whereby employees can speak to each other at any time. Bells are mounted on the back of the rounded end-caps that front two registers, within easy reach of employees stationed there. The language is articulated in the employee handbook, but it is also intriguing to customers. New customers inquire as to what the rings mean; regular customers might even take the liberty to ring them! The code is simple; a call for help. Other employees will respond accordingly, but not without complication. When the store is a flutter of activity, the noise can drown out the bells when rung. Other times the number of rings does not match the help needed. The language takes some time to learn (and use), and mistakes are made that can detract from the service labor process. Complications notwithstanding, from the perspective that coworkers are central, the bell system is invaluable to service interactions at Grocery Adventures.

At a very basic level, the bells system enables service to proceed collectively by outsourcing part of it to other employees. Consider the following:

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32 It is important to distinguish between the sets of rings: one, two or three bells. Ringing one bell signals to all employees assigned to a register to return to their post as customers are backing up in the lines. At times employees are off doing other things, for example, writing orders or helping stock shelves, and need to come to the front and run transactions. Ringing two bells is a general call for help, responded to by any available employee. Several examples include fetching another item from the floor to replace one that is damaged in some way, grabbing an empty wine box to fill with loose bottles, checking for a price on items that are not scanning appropriately. A catch-all ring of sorts. Ringing three bells signals to a manager that help is needed at one of the registers. Several examples include discounting cases of wine, making a return or exchange and voiding unwanted items. Instances such as these require a key to make the register technology function appropriately.

33 On one particular occasion I responded to one ring and took up a few customers on a register assigned to Drexel. At the time, I was under the assumption that anyone could help out in this regard. In practice, only those assigned to registers during such times are expected to perform these actions.
I am working on restocking snack foods in the aisle adjacent to the registers when I hear a two-bell ring out. I leave what I am doing, round the corner and yell out “Two!” Ava turns in my direction and asks if she can have a wine box. I nod in affirmation, and move to grab one, when Crystal, who has also heard the call, waves me off. She shouts across the customers that she has it, and not to worry. I move to head back to the snack aisle, as Crystal hands the box to Ava and begins to bag groceries for her. They BOTH continue transaction, with Crystal bagging and Ava scanning, and each chatting and laughing with the customers.

On the face of it, here is an instance where a coworker assists another. But taking this as it stands masks the underlying significance. Service interactions involve BOTH physical tasks (working with things) and interactive tasks (working with people). Going beyond the surface, Crystal’s taking up the physical element of this particular transaction, in effect, de-individualizing the process, enables the service interaction to proceed as idealized. Fundamentally, the horizontal relations are needed for the help they provide. Moreover, the longstanding conceptualization of emotional labor (and perhaps service interactions themselves) is that it is one-on-one. But here the experiential, emotive service interaction is not dyadic, rather triadic. Crystal enters as the third party, engages the customer and she and Ava labor together. In the parlance of Grocery Adventures, they collectively provide the “Ahoy! customer experience” leaving the customer with the appropriate emotive experience.

Another example shows how coworkers can also rearticulate the negative feelings emergent from service interactions gone awry:

An elderly couple comes through my line with a handful of items to purchase. The woman is quiet, not saying much, whereas the man is quite talkative. Things are initially going quite well; pleasant and friendly. I ask them how they are, how their visit to the store went and we discuss their plans for the upcoming weekend. He pays with a card and runs through the series of prompts to complete the transaction. Things start to fail when the register gives back an error message. Seems the card is not taking. I say we will have to try it again, and our formerly pleasant interaction turns downright stern. Shooting me a disconcerting look from under his cap, he asks “What happened?” I tell him we have a technical error, it happens regularly and running the card again will take care of it. This does not sit well, as he responds with a drawn out “Umm, hmm” in effect putting the mistake on me. I feel like a child caught eating cookies before dinner, but he reluctantly pulls his card out. As things proceed, Stuart (who is refilling bags across the different registers) sees my concern and asks what had happened, if everything is okay. The man recounts the story, and Stuart and I reassure him again that this happens all the time. The customer’s concern is being charged twice, telling us this has happened before somewhere else. Again, Stuart very cordially reassures him that, “No receipt, no transaction.” The card takes the second time and
they leave as normal with their items. Stuart to my left, and closer to the couple, sends them off with a heartfelt, “You two enjoy the rest of your evening now. Take care.” I smile and nod to them, handing them their receipt and bags.

It makes intuitive sense that coworkers help each other out, regardless or work form. But it is also clear from these to passages that coworkers engender but also diffuse tensions that emerge out of the service labor process. In effect, the horizontal relations enable a collective representation (Eliasoph and Lichter, 2003) of emotional labor and its requirements. With Crystal and Ava, laboring together amplified the expected, outward countenance of service workers at Grocery Adventures. One that is fun, pleasant and perhaps even exciting. With Stuart and myself, laboring together effectively righted the ship. Through our horizontal relations as coworkers, and to borrow a colloquialism, were able to turn their frowns upside-down.

In addition, these illustrations are different from “coping communities” (Korczynski, 2003) as they more directly, and dynamically engage the processes of emotional labor. For Korczynski (2003), the communities emerged as safe spaces to express a range of emotions, and to diffuse tensions brought on by unruly callers. But the coping among coworkers occurred separate from the actual work process (i.e., before or after calls were taken). What I show here is that the horizontal relations are central and active within the service process, including the emotive elements that guide the dynamics that unfold. They provide the “Ahoy! customer experience” and concomitant emotional laboring. If there exist some “sociable means” to prop up needed smiles (Eliasoph and Lichter, 2003), the horizontal relations among coworkers is where they reside.

A final service space to consider with regards to collective emotional labor is the store floor. The floor is a social space at Grocery Adventures. Customers shop, workers restock products, and there can be a considerable degree of “hanging out” among employees. It is not uncommon for workers to shop after their shift or during their break, or make one last sweep to
give their best to everyone before they leave for the day. In addition, the product demonstrations are made in the back corner of the store, located right next to the restrooms. This creates a good amount of employee foot-traffic across the floor when they sample the demo, get coffee or use the restroom. From this perspective, employees are effectively drawn into service interactions throughout the course of the workday. Again, the centrality of coworker relations in terms of enacting service and triangulating interests is apparent:

Bob is readied to leave for the day and is making one last round before heading home. Coat and fishing-style hat on, he bears no markers of the pseudo-uniformed dress for the store. He saunters up to me in the grocery aisle where I am restocking products. We chat a bit. He wants to clarify some of his thoughts on my employee review. As he reiterates some of the points we spoke of immediately following the review, a customer asks for help locating a particular product.

Me: Yes, the Indian fare. It should be right down here.

I turn, pointing further down from where we are standing, motioning the items are in that direction. All 3 of us walk down the aisle. Maybe 10 feet.

Me: Is this what you are looking for?

The customer confirms and asks which ones I prefer. I have only had one of the lot, and making this known, I do say that I quite enjoyed it. Bob then queries me: “You haven’t had them all? You should do a tasting…(and turning to the customer)…I like this one here. Lots of chick peas.” He then gives the customer a brief run down of the others, suggesting one is rather bland, the one I mentioned was also good, but that people seem to like them all. Thinking for a moment, the elderly man decides on Bob’s preference, remembering his wife saying, and “it was a red one.” He thanks us both for the help, and Bob sends him off with a resounding, “Allllright! Not a problem.”

Much like service at the register takes on a collective form, service on the floor does the same. Bob is has no reason to help me provide service to this customer. However, we are both knowledgeable about the product (to varying degrees) and we do maintain a friendly relationship. Why he actually does though, I cannot explain with certainty. What can be said is that in

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34 It is important to note that employees are encouraged to sample the product demonstration daily and the practice of taking a small break from work to do so is expected. In addition, it is very common for full time staff to have coffee with part time staff when they are collaborating on a store project, for example, reworking a display or going over order writing procedures. In short, the abovementioned “hanging out” is an informally permitted.
situations such as these, service is clearly a collective representation; collaboration among Bob and myself born out of the mutual understandings we share as coworkers.

Grocery Adventures also uses the strategy of a “Wheelmaster.” Filled by a rotating cast of (typically) more experienced workers\textsuperscript{35}, the position is staffed for an hour on average by one individual. The Wheelmaster is something of a concierge. They roam the aisles, actively seek out customers and offer assistance; for examples, answering questions or finding wanted products. A distinction between customers who need help and those just browsing is of little consequence. At the very least, all customers should be welcomed and/or greeted cordially. But the degree of engagement varies considerably. Some employees stick to the basics, asking if customers need help without really pressing an issue. Others might prepare a small, product demonstration, for example, a tray of candies to offer patrons as they walk around. Most interestingly, some actively disengage from the process entirely. Consider the following example:

Che approaches me as I am working to restock some of the frozen items. He comments in regards to Hannah who is assigned to Wheelmaster.

Che: Is Hannah wheeling?
Me: I think so. She has been walking around quite a bit through here.
Che: If so, she is doing a terrible job.
Me: Oh yeah?
Che: Yeah! She is just walking around and not even talking with anybody. Plus she doesn’t even look friendly. I could do a better job than THAT!
Me: Don’t know what to tell you. I don’t get paid the big bucks.
Che: If that is what it takes to make the big bucks, I should be getting paid WAY more.

Lucy takes a similar approach to the position:

Sitting in the break room on lunch with Nelson and Cheyenne (also on break) and Joy, who is exiting to clock back in, Lucy enters the room. Joy comments to her that there is pie to eat. It was Joy’s birthday yesterday, and she was given this pie by the store in celebration. Lucy sits down between Burt and I and helps herself to a slice, commenting to me: “This is what a good Wheelmaster does. Comes back here and eats pie.” We all laugh.

\textsuperscript{35}The notion behind staffing the position with more experienced workers is that they have substantial knowledge of the store, it’s layout and products, where things are located, answers to question and the like. However, this is not always the case and more novice employees can be (and are) assigned as the Wheelmaster.
Both instances highlight the horizontal relations among coworkers in a different way than from above. None of us – myself, Che, Nelson and Cheyenne – do anything. This despite the fact we know that both Hannah and Lucy are not working as expected. This begs the question why? First, the horizontal relations are too important. At a fundamental level, coworkers help each other to accomplish work tasks. If we reported this behavior to management, it would certainly create conflict, leading to less successful collaboration. Second, this specific position is an emotionally laborious one. In addition, employees might be taken directly off registers and sent to the floor. In short, the staff member is (and perhaps has been) exposed on the front lines of service. Combined with a less watchful managerial eye, this position provides space to regenerate, so much as sell the “Ahoy! customer experience” (and oneself). Breaks (from service interactions) need taken, and coworkers know this. Here, implicit acceptance is a “sociable means” (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003); sometimes coworkers need left alone.

Triangulated Interests

Jack and Che are working some of the new beverage that has come in with tonight’s delivery. I am down the aisle from them doing the same with coffee and teas. They are joking with each other, with Che saying to Jack, “Hey, you’re actually getting some work done!” Jack replies, “And on my last day too! At least for a while.” Two customers round the corner and begin to look into pasta sauces, and call to Jack for help. BOTH he and Che stop immediately, and walk over to help them. In tandem, they give a basic rundown of nearly all the sauces – which ones are good, which ones are the best sellers and the like. The guy picks up four of the sauce that sells the most, saying he needs to stock up as they live farther away. Jack and Che inquire where, and the customer obliges, and then follows up with asking when they are going to get a store there and they really “love this place.” Jack and Che give him the basic background on store growth and empathize with him that they are not likely to ever get a store. After some general conversation (indiscernible), the man breaks off pointing ahead, indicating he needs to catch up with his spouse.

When they return to their stacks that need stocked, they are all smiles. I ask what the grins are all about:

Jack: I love customers like that!
Che: Yeah, better than some of the others…
Me: How so?
Jack: I like just walking around and talking with people. They were cool. I would work here all the time if they paid me to do that. I love that stuff.
This example illustrates the complexities involved with interest alignment in service work. As Leidner (1993) revealed, three distinct parties are vying for power within the service labor process: management, customers and workers. But as this example shows, the horizontal relations among coworkers (Jack and Che) add an integral fourth party to the service equation: coworkers. The key mechanism above is that Jack and Che work collectively. In doing so, they construct a degree of authority that supersedes a subservient status, shifting control in their favor. From this perspective, a so-termed triangulation of interests is, more accurately, trapezoidal. Management and customers are situated at the top and workers (individual) and coworkers are situated at the bottom. A final item to then address is the ways in which the horizontal relations rearticulate the dynamics of a triangulation of interests.

Given that coworkers maintain vested interests in the service labor process, I argue they actively negotiate the service terrain, forming alliances and wrangling power and control away from management and customers (their “superiors”). Recall a previous example where I was restocking shelves in an aisle within earshot of the registers. A two-bell was rung; a call for assistance from a staff member checking out customers. Another coworker and myself both respond, and Crystal (the other) politely turns me away, delivering the needed item. Upon doing so, she (Crystal) also engages the customer, chatting pleasantly and bagging groceries.

Here is a clear instance whereby Crystal (a coworker) becomes an ally of Ava’s (the explicit service provider). In colloquial terms, they tag-team the service interaction. But this is revealing in that service is not one-on-one (between Ava and the customer) whereby Ava is easily presumed subservient to the customer and her preferences. As Crystal steps in, a

36 I specifically use the term trapezoidal as it conjures a particular image of two points nested above two other points. This image best illustrates the four competing parties within the service labor process, and at Grocery Adventures. Management and customers are conceptualized on the top; the individual (e.g., worker) and coworkers on the bottom. I do this, suggesting management and customers initially hold a degree of power over workers (and coworkers) as management can terminate employment and, the old adage holds, “the customer is always right.”
phenomenological shift of power takes place whereby the odds are in the workers’ favor. They, not the customer, reconstruct authority by working together on the same person. Ironically, the interests of management and the customer are met too. Management (though not concretely present) is certainly pleased that service was provided accordingly, and the customer has the pleasant interactive experience as they expect.

However, it is not difficult to imagine multiple scenarios conditioned by the horizontal relations. For one example, coworkers could effectively resist managerial protocol as they enact collective agency. For another example, an unruly customer might be tempered by alliances formed between coworkers. In fact, the following items illustrate these very notions. First, reconsider the opening vignette in terms of resisting managerial protocol. Orleans and I were asked to dig through the trash to find a lost ring; not something Orleans felt was in the Ahoy! customer service experience at Grocery Adventures. He made this clear, stating:

I am done with this. I don’t get paid enough to dig through trash for work. Talk to people? No problem. I didn’t sign up for this…

Further, taking his lead, I follow along without pushing the issue any further. As noted we could have dug through all of the items in the trash can (more) thoroughly, but collectively decide we had done enough. Had management directly supervised this task, it is likely we might have been more thorough. However, management did not, and Orleans and I negotiate the terms of this service, doing what we see fit so much as what protocol might suggest. From this perspective, the horizontal relations (between Orleans and I) rebalance the vested interests in our favor, effectively resisting those of management.

A second example provides additional evidence that the horizontal relations among coworkers work to resist managerial protocol:

This particular closing shift has Quinn, a transfer from another store, in charge of delegating tasks. She, Nelson and Drexel converge near the snack aisle where I am restocking shelves. They ask her
if it is okay to start on closing duties as the new product load as they are ready to begin. She suggests the can start by bringing out the new product to the store, working the product onto the shelves, then moving on to the next stack. This leads to confusion between Nelson and Drexel and once Quinn leaves, they express this to me. Drexel remains unclear, asking rhetorically, “What was that?” Nelson is more direct, saying, “That’s not how we do it.” He is correct; this is a change from how things are normally done. I shrug it off saying, “I don’t know what to tell you.” Nelson however is frustrated enough and says to Drexel they will just do what they always do. Drexel does not disagree, and they head to the back and proceed as they normally would. Quinn does not seem to notice from the office area as she tallies the registers for the day.

Here, workers draw on each other to decide how best to proceed with their work tasks, and very directly resist a suggestion by management. Nelson in particular is reticent of the suggested changes to his routine, and Drexel is (easily) swayed in his favor. The fact that they proceed as normal (i.e., how they do it) again highlights the role coworkers (and their relations with each other) shape the labor process at Grocery Adventures.

A third item (per the suggested examples above) centers on the how the horizontal relations can (and do) temper customer interests as a vested party in the service labor process. Recall the anecdote of an unruly customer noted above. The man became visibly upset when the register spit out an error message indicating his card had not run through properly. Neglecting my suggestion that this sort of thing happens regularly, he directed his frustration at me (not the technology) essentially blaming me for the problem. For a moment I felt as though I committed the error. Stuart who had overheard us comes to my aid, corroborating what I had told the customer initially (that this is not a big deal). In this instance (and others like it) the customer was visibly upset and concerned, directing mounting hostility towards me. When Stuart steps in, working with me, we defuse the tension by reconfiguring the dyadic, one-on-one relationship, between the customer and me, into a triadic one. Collectively, Stuart and I regain control over the interaction (and from the customer) rather than blindly assuming a subservient role.

What is clear from each of the above items is that the horizontal relations among coworkers can (and do) effectively promote the interests of workers over that of management
and/or customers as all parties compete for control. And though these instances are arguably micro-level resistance, they nonetheless illustrate the importance of horizontal relations as a significant source of power in and between workers, and the shifting dynamics of the service labor process. In the end, with respect to Leidner (1993), management, customers and workers indeed make for a triangulation of vested interests, but I show that coworkers are equally fundamental within that conceptual framework.

The relations between coworkers empower them relative to management and customers. But a final point of discussion centers on the downsides of coworker relations within the service labor process. While the aforementioned are certainly positive outcomes emergent from horizontal relations, coworkers also serve a negative function. At the same time they work with each other (i.e., positive associations between one another) they also work on each other (i.e., negative associations within those relations) In short, coworkers sanction one another (of similar status) with the perception that someone is not upholding their end of the collective bargain.

Take the example of the one-bell. Ringing one-bell signals to all cashiers assigned to a register to return to their post as the customers load is backing up. At the same time, register work is often the most demanding. One is standing for extended periods of time with little actual movement. The customer stream can seem never-ending. Different registers attract different volumes of customers given their location. In relation, those assigned to registers with presumed lesser volume are often sent off (or simply take off) to do additional task; for example, helping to stock shelves. This creates a situation where the role of cashier is understaffed while the customer load is overabundant, especially when the store is busy. The following example illustrates the battle among register workers:

Customers are continuing to angle for the shortest line. Frustration is clear on their faces, as lines are not moving the speed in which they expect. There is inconsistent availability at the registers as Hannah and David continually leave their posts and wander off. This leaves Drexel, Ava, Freddie (female) and myself to handle most of the growing numbers of patrons. Freddie and I are
effectively planted on 6 and 7, facing each other and getting a steady stream of smaller orders. It is continuous, but relatively manageable. Ava is behind Freddie and is seemingly incognizant of the volume of customers, instead opting for more “personalized” service (i.e., give them that “WOW” experience). Drexel is one register over from Ava, separated by David (who is absent), with Hannah on the other side (also absent). Further, he is strongly aware of the bottleneck that is unfolding given that two workers are absent and Ava is not adjusting her pace to keep up. I can see his frustration mounting as he increasingly looks over his shoulder, (mostly at the empty register behind him, but also in Ava’s direction) across the customers and out onto the floor, craning his neck to see if help is on the way as he continues to ring one bells. With the growing numbers of bells, Rocky and Donovan start ringing them from the office area. Hannah finally emerges from the far side, sneaking on to her register, while David scurries up past the office, myself, Freddie and right towards a glaring Drexel. As David turns around, he is completely red in the face, grabbing the next available customer.

Instances such as these illustrate the breakdown of horizontal relations and the sanctions that follow from the very same coworkers. Drexel is visibly upset that work is piling up for him. Further, he well knows that others are assigned to registers but conspicuously absent. Looking over his shoulder and across the store is indicative of his frustration. Here, the bells system itself (and here, combined with stern glares) allows coworkers to negatively sanction each other. The sustained rings signal to specific employees and the entire store that someone is out of line; in this case, Hannah and David. In the same vein, it is clear that Hannah and David, in short, get it. Hannah sidles up to her register to remain as undetected as possible. David is the more revealing example; his quick pace back and blushing face reveal he was not acting as part of the larger team.

Discussion

Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) reasoned that there was surely some “sociable means” by which Hochschild’s flight attendants helped each other remain delightfully cheery throughout

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37 So as to not wholly romanticize the horizontal relations among coworkers, it is important to note that instances such as these surface relatively regularly.

38 In store terms, “reg folk” are permitted to leave their post at times. Typically, one indicates to the person next to them that they are using the restroom or the like. This does not always happen and does lead to confusion among employees, particularly when they are gone for an extended period of time.

39 This may well include customers who are familiar with the store and this system. I have observed instances where customers have made comments. For example, “Uh oh, who is not where they need to be?” In addition, I have witnessed customers reaching around the register fronts to ring one-bells themselves!
the course of their shift. Inspired by this thesis, I explore the centrality of coworkers to the processes of service work. I argue that the horizontal relationships within the workplace serve a variety of functions that have largely been under-addressed and suggest coworkers fill vital physical, emotional and mental roles within the service labor process. In doing so, service work is better understood as resting upon the collective representations emergent out of coworker relations.

To begin with, I illustrate the collaborative ways in which coworkers take an ambiguous concept, the so-called “Ahoy! customer experience” and make it concrete. In other words, they add routine to the non-routine. Grocery Adventures charges all employees with the task of providing a “fun and entertaining” customer experience, but falls short in explicitly outlining what this means. From this, the ambiguity surrounding the concept is thus often (mis)understood as simply “talking with people.” This is where coworkers connect the abstract to the enacted reality of work life. On one hand, workers will draw on the personal interpretations of others during formal group meetings. On another hand, information will be passed along a grapevine of sorts, constructing a shared rhetoric that grounds the experience for patrons. On yet another hand, service employees collaborate to transform a potentially routine service experience into one that is more consistent with organizational goals.

I also demonstrate the ways in which coworkers draw on each other in order to actually provide the service experience. In other words, they labor collectively; both physically and emotionally. Given the system of organization at Grocery Adventures, coworkers are needed in very obvious, but important ways to make service happen. They are regularly called on to help another worker complete a service interaction by freeing them from necessary physical tasks. In addition, coworkers will subsequently enter into service interactions, helping to construct an organizationally accepted form of service. It is here that we see coworkers engaging processes of
emotional labor (i.e., engendering an appropriate outward countenance towards service recipients) and surrounding dynamics that lead to service as expected. Moreover, in such instances, coworkers can diffuse rising tensions when service interactions go awry.

Lastly, I show that the so-termed triangulation of interests (Leidner, 1993) is limited. While the management-customer-worker framework is present, it is rounded out by the presence of coworkers as fourth vested party who conditions associations therein. As noted, coworkers draw on each other for a variety of reasons and are central to the service labor process. They use each other to enact customer service. They glean information from the strategies constructed by others. They call on each other to complete physical tasks. And they collaborate to construct the organizationally accepted form of service. So rather than a three-pronged, management-customer-worker arrangement, coworkers are an important pillar upon which the service labor process proceeds. In many ways, they decide the terms of service, including what activities are acceptable or not. But at the same time coworkers work with each other, I find they also work on each other.

The horizontal relations among workers surely help, but they also harm. Important here is that coworkers negatively sanction one another through individual (i.e., glances and glares) and structural (i.e., the bell system) mechanisms. But in the end, orientation (positive or negative) notwithstanding, the longstanding face-to-face service interaction is better elaborated as triadic so much as dyadic.
“He looks like a homeless person!” (Bob, full time employee)

I run into Crystal for the first time this shift, and we chat for a bit as I work some items into section on the very back wall of the store.

Me: New shirt?
Crystal: (looking down across the shirt)...Umm (quizzically).
Me: Well, new to me? I haven’t seen it.
Crystal: Yes, new to you…and apparently everyone else! (further indicating others were asking about it)

Crystal tells me this is her “Weston shirt”, named after the crew at her previous store, as they discovered over time that every full timer had the same one. From this, they all decided to use them as their “Saturday shirts” as they resemble the color scheme of the local college football team. So they initially wore them on game days “for fun” which ultimately turned into every weekend as the tradition stuck.

Crystal: Okay, so this is too much to talk about one shirt, am I wrong?
Me: Not at all. Its interesting.
Crystal: Yeah…it is interesting (reflectively).

The storied history of service work has long recognized the interactive framework wherein the labor process operates. The tools are not inanimate objects; rather, they are the human subjects themselves. In addition, the history has well documented emotive elements that are part and parcel of service itself, most notably, Hochschild’s (1983) “emotional labor.” Together, these items coalesce into an experience for the customer; ideally one that aligns with the aims of the organization. But in terms of the service experience, emotion is but one part. At the same time, it is also presentational. Not only are service organizations drawing on the emotional capacities of workers to facilitate the labor process, they also draw on visual cues and certain “looks” to engender particular experiences. Clear from this passage is that Crystal’s shirt is one such cue. It was not only very obvious to myself, but other employees. At her previous
store, an informal tradition emerged around it! One might suggest this shirt has taken on a life of its own. Instances such as these highlight another central element to the service experience and labor process, what some have called *aesthetic labor* (Nickson et al., 2001).

The concept of aesthetic labor is not new per se. A growing body of research has shown a range of dynamics that shape the presentation of service work (Wharhurst and Nickson, 2007, Nickson et al., 2001). Increasingly so, service work is framed by a set of aesthetic capacities, and operates on two fronts. First, at the individual level, often embodied in workers themselves. Second, at the level of the organization, guided by organizational and managerial policy. From the perspective of the individual, workers are shown to essentially work on themselves: dressing up, fashioning a particular look or cultivating a style. Like matching emotions to organizationally acceptable displays, workers personify an image that is consistent much the same. From the perspective of the organization, employers draw on the embodied (physical) capacities of workers to meet their goals. For a few examples: hiring based on appearance, setting grooming standards and/or requiring employees to dress in a particular style or uniform.

Given this dichotomy, two related questions emerge. First, to what degree is aesthetic labor just that – labor? There are very obvious differences between placing demands on workers, and employing a modicum of organizational criteria as to how they should look, dress or present themselves at work. Regarding the former, workers are held to exacting standards. Regarding the latter, workers have considerable agency over the process. At Grocery Adventures, I show that while aesthetic labor is certainly present, the picture is a bit more complicated. Given the physical nature of the work, one can get quite dirty. Maintaining a clean-cut image is problematic. Also, it is important to consider the culture of the organization. Who of us would wear an expensive suit as an exotic, global food trader? So with the exception of a logoed shirt workers are more or

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40 Here, *logoed* is broadly defined for brevity, but clarified later on.
less free to cast their own image, with acceptance, encouragement and plenty of space for personal style. From this, a second item to address is whether workers can present themselves anyway they want? If they are given an inch of agency over the processes of aesthetic labor, do they take a mile? Here I show that management does not relinquish all control. There are negative sanctions for deviance from formal policies and informal practices. In short, employees can do what they want, within reason.

Given that aesthetic labor is not exactly tedious, and every day is something of a “casual Friday”, a final inquiry emerges. What does this tell us about aesthetics in service work and aesthetic labor more generally? The current understanding of aesthetic labor walks the line of co-optation. That employers staff their organizations with workers who “look right” and use the aesthetic and embodied capacities of those they hire to sell the product. I argue this ignores significant variation in terms of what “looks right” and who in effect owns “the look”, the employee or the organization. Drawing on Lopez’s (2006) work that makes a strong case for a bifurcated approach to feelings at work, I suggest that aesthetic labor is better conceptualized along a spectrum too. On one end of the aesthetic spectrum are appearance rules and on the other end, the rules have yet to be made up.

**Aesthetic Labor**

Anyone walking through a modern shopping mall can easily recognize who is working and who is not, simply by looking. While perhaps obvious, this is reflective of a growing trend in retail (or other) service organizations. Increasingly so, service organizations are designated, and differentiated by appearances and themes. Suffice to say, service work is not only an emotionally charged landscape, but an aesthetically charged one too. Organizations convey a particular image

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41 I use the term “appearance rules” analogous to Hochschild’s (1983) “feeling rules” whereby the organization commands that employees feel certain emotions on the job and suppress others. Here, appearance rules would be meticulous organizational standards that tell employees what images they can and cannot convey.
to potential clients and customers through color schemes, signage or other equivalent physical displays. More important, organizations are charging workers with the task of, in colloquial terms, “looking the part.” As Goffman (1959) suggested, individuals are actors on the social stage. Within the context of service work, employees adorn the costumes appropriate to the enacted scenes.

In its basic form, aesthetic labor is the mobilization, development (and ultimately commodification) of the embodied capacities and attributes of employees (Nickson et al., 2001). These embodiments and attributes then serve to produce the appropriate service interaction with customers (Nickson et al., 2001). Much like displaying the “proper” emotions within service interactions, workers must also display the “proper” image. They need to “look right” and/or “sound right” (Nickson et al., 2001). Employers want workers that carry these faculties so as to best align with organizational interests; for example, portraying the organization’s image or selling their commodities. Originating in smaller boutique hotels and high-end designer retailers, aesthetic labor served as a way to differentiate these service organizations in relatively homogenous markets (Nickson et al., 2001). But with an expanding customer servicescape\(^{42}\), aesthetic labor is more widely used. Forms indeed vary; some more visual with others more aural.\(^{43}\) Here I focus largely on the visual aspects; things like dress and appearance. While the processes remain consistent across organizations, the different end forms signal a considerable degree of variation under the larger aesthetic umbrella.

Given this variation, aesthetic labor is not as exacting as perhaps originally thought. As noted, Nickson et al. (2001) suggest the embodied capacities and attributes of workers are

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\(^{42}\) The term “servicescape” emerged from Sherman’s (2007) work on luxury hotels whereby she insightfully denotes several important aspects to a changing economy. Importantly, the economy is strongly service in orientation. But more than this, service is often understood as unlimited access to workers’ time and efforts (7-8).

\(^{43}\) One example of an aural form is call center work where service interactions are essentially blinded, but workers are charged with the task of sounding a certain way (Nickson et al., 2001).
commodified. That is to say appearances (and even physical bodies) are bought and sold within the service labor process so the organization turns a profit. This implies a level of co-optation whereby service organizations usurp the very identities of employees, take ownership and fashion them in a way to do more business. While this may be the case in a high-end designer retail store, it is certainly not the case at Grocery Adventures. In terms of the former, it makes intuitive sense that a clean-cut image or fashionable style is much more central to the service experience. One would not take fashion advice and overhaul their wardrobe based on the recommendations of a service provider (i.e., worker) who is unkempt. The potential disconnect would surely work against the organization’s retail goals. However, at Grocery Adventures, the aesthetic match between employee and organization is much less important. Unlike high-end designer fashion, “looking right” is not necessarily a perquisite for grocery retail.

From this perspective, I suggest that aesthetic labor is best conceptualized along a spectrum, drawing a parallel from Lopez’s (2006) work on emotional labor. Lopez (2006) proposes that the emotive underpinnings of care work (of which emotional labor is part and parcel) exist along a continuum, with the more coercive emotional labor on one end and “organized emotional care” on the other (133). Emotional labor is consistent with Hochschild’s (1983) initial notion, that certain emotional displays are appropriate, others are not, and workers actively endeavor to convey the former. Alternatively, “organized emotional care” (Lopez, 2006) is attempts by organizations to create space to enable the formation of caring relationships (137). Each is distinguished by the organizational framework and demands placed on workers. The former approach to managing emotions on the job is prescribed by the organization, highly restrictive and controlling. The latter approach is devoid of prescriptions (137), and does not require (only) certain feelings or emotional displays from workers.
Aesthetic labor can be understood much the same. At one end of the spectrum are coercive organizations that place exacting standards on employees, requiring appearances fall within a prescribed set of “appearance rules.” At the other end of the aesthetic spectrum are organizations that leave considerable space for individual style with few (if any) predefined notions of how employee should look. In addition, like Lopez (2006) suggests “organized emotional care” is not an extension of worker autonomy (137), freedom in aesthetic presentations is not either. Rather, it is a product of the organizational context that allows for (and even calls for) individuation. Where do the employees at Grocery Adventure fall? The answer is the latter, conditioned by organizational policy, aesthetics and the service labor process.

**Aesthetic Labor at Grocery Adventures**

It is wrong to assume that aesthetic labor is simply “dressing up” for work. Rather, aesthetic labor is grounded in the organizational frame, negotiated by agentic actors, sanctioned (positively and negatively) by management and conjures varying degrees of acceptance and resistance. Items such as these signal a much more complex picture of working on (one’s) appearance and implicitly suggests a multitude of potential end forms. In addition, it is not necessarily top down, coercive or co-opting like emotional labor and as others have suggested (for example, Nickson et al., 2001). The organizational context matters and at Grocery Adventures, there is much space for employees to bring and express personal style. In fact, this is part of what makes the store, for lack of a better term, adventurous. Here I address the roles of theming, uniforms, theme days and the complexities that frame the processes of aesthetic labor.

**Theming**

Bryman (2001) suggests a process analogous to McDonaldization is reshaping the socio-economic landscape. What he refers to as Disneyization (Bryman, 2001). Much like Ritzer’s
(1993) McDonaldization spreads the tenets of the McDonald’s corporation\(^{44}\), Disneyization spreads the tenets of the Walt Disney Corporation. As such, the principle of Disney, best exemplified by its theme parks, is infiltrating modern society and the world. Most important is the central notion of *theming*. For Bryman (2001), more and more economic arenas are becoming themed: restaurants, hotels, shopping malls, amusement parks (outside of those Disney) and certainly many others. In essence, the process entails creating an organizational aesthetic to promote a particular image. For one specific example, the popular chain of Hard Rock Café restaurants use a dark décor, loud music, musical instruments and other memorabilia to provide customers a “rock and roll” experience.

Grocery Adventures does much the same. Each store is made up in one of three particular themes: a Polynesian theme, a Beachside theme or a Maritime theme. Upon entrance to any store, one of the three is clear; my particular store maintained a Maritime theme. In addition, there might be local adaptation of these themes that work to draw in aspects of the surrounding community\(^{45}\). But these overarching themes (and their adaptations) only scratch the aesthetic surface. So what does this themed field actually look like? Answering will best illustrate the organizational framework that conditions aesthetic labor in its end form.

Upon entry into the front vestibule, a large mural painted above the cart corral and featuring the Skipper and the Navigator greets both customers and workers. The saluting Skipper dons a captain’s hat with a Hawaiian style shirt underneath a sailor’s jacket. The Navigator strums a ukulele, dressed in a shipman’s outfit with white pants, jacket and cap, and a navy and white striped shirt. A message above reads: “Your shopping adventure awaits!” On the left side of this vestibule would sit numerous displays that indicate new products or product demonstrations for the day. One in particular found rave reviews from customers: a fresh-faced full time

\(^{44}\) These tenets include efficiency, calculability, predictability and control (Ritzer, 1993).
\(^{45}\) For example, store signage that references the local football and soccer teams.
employee lounging in a hammock. All such items were hand painted by in-house artists employed by the store for that very purpose.

On the floor of the store, registers are set off to the left. Each register is assigned a country; England, Germany, Australia, India, China among others. These are designated by signage hanging just above the heads of customers as they filter into one of the lines. The fronts read in American English; the backs read in the foreign languages, saying “goodbye.” The register counters themselves are wood-paned, concealing all of the computer equipment and are quite small, leaving just enough space for groceries to pile on top of each other during checkouts. On some of the fronts of register counters one can regularly find picture collages of employees dressed up during theme days (addressed below). Also, balloons would be tied down and/or flowers displayed, put there by management, the employee in charge of ordering flowers or anyone in general.

Glancing around the rest of the store, the same wood-paned décor hugs the walls. On these walls hang a considerable amount of signage and artwork, displayed around the perimeter, and consistent with the Maritime (or other) general theme. For example, above the fresh produce area of the store hangs a large sign with a surfer “hanging ten” on a crashing wave. For another example, an array of different decorations hang down the center aisle of the store (the open freezers), and range from small tiki-persons to snowflakes (during the winter holiday season). As noted, stores will draw in elements of the local community; part of the general thrust is that of a “neighborhood grocer.” At this location, there were two prominent examples. First, a painting of the stadium paid homage to a local university football team. Second, a painting of the team logo paid homage to the local professional soccer team. The logo includes three men inside the teams crest; here, each is dressed in a navy and white striped sailing shirt.
A final item to note are the interlocking, diamond-shaped panel boards that hang on the front, left wall of the store. Customers cannot help but notice them as they check out given (1) the close proximity to the registers and (2) their size. Painted in vibrant, floral colors, each panel board displays one of the company’s philosophies. For examples, not raking customers through the coals to return items, not sacrificing quality for price, working to make the customer experience the best it can be, and importantly (for purposes here), being adventurous and trying new products (food).

The significance of this theming and the aesthetic representations is takes accomplishes (at least) two things for Grocery Adventures. First, and most obviously, it illustrates the context in which shopping, but also work takes place. What is that organizational context? Broadly defined, Grocery Adventures is an exotic journey to explore the high seas of culinary adventure. This is made clear to both customers and workers by the ways in which the workplace is decorated. Second, and more importantly, it conditions the end form(s) of aesthetic labor. Given that aesthetic labor entails “looking right” to convey the organization’s image, it follows that the “right look” is necessarily conditioned by that image. For example, the high seas of culinary adventure do not call for suits, ties or equivalent. In addition, adventure does not call for uniformity. The organizational themes of Grocery Adventures are inherently less demanding on worker appearances, and allow for (and encourage) personal style, rather than rigid adherence to a set of appearance rules.

Uniforms

While the theme(s) enable personal style, there is still organizational policy to contend with. These formal requirements of aesthetic labor are (1) a uniform (loosely defined) and (2)
close-toed shoes. All employees are required to wear a company shirt consistent with the three aesthetic themes around which stores are designed. These also designate their employment status with one of two, options. Full time employees adorn Hawaiian-style shirts with a variety of patterns that mirror the décor. Tropical islands, surfers, ocean scenes and floral patterns, among others, can all be seen. Embedded within these patterns might be the Grocery Adventures’ logo or name, but are small and only visible up close. Part time employees are required to wear a t-shirt. A set of shirts is given to each worker upon hiring, and also when designs change. When I started, the print was a tribal band that wrapped around the shirt at chest level, with the company’s name embedded within it over the left breast. Towards the end of my tenure, a new print arrived consisting of a large tropical flower on the back with Grocery Adventures written across the center with a same smaller version over the left breast. So end the formal requirements of a uniform.

However, employees are far from uniform. As my tenure grew, I was continually reminded of school uniforms, particularly among teenagers. While students are all required to wear them, a cursory look at this demographic group reveals a multitude of ways in which personal styles come through. At Grocery Adventures, employees also personalize their minimally uniformed selves. They wear the shirt, but it far from stifles their individuality. Consider the following example:

I am working on register #2 and facing the rest of the crew who are also checking out customers. I am in full view of Danny, a full timer, who is bending down to fix an untied lace on his shoe.

46 The policy for close-toed shoes is grounded in safety and health. The labor process requires heavy lifting in tight spaces, so a stable base is needed. Also, health codes require certain parts of the body be covered when working with food and/or food products.
47 This can vary across different seasons. For example, long sleeve shirts, sweatshirts and hooded sweatshirts are worn in colder months, and when employees are working in the refrigerated sections of the store or the freezer. Quite simply this is done for functionality (so much as presentation).
48 The only other managerial policy in terms of dress is that employees need to wear closed-toed shoes. However, this is done for safety, and not conceptualized along the lines of dress or appearance. Given the physical nature of the work, the heavy lifting involved, the potential for accidents, spills, broken glass and falling stacks of product, no one had any reason to, or did, take issue.
Rocky is next to him and jibes to Danny, “Nice shoe’s you got there. Pretty spiffy…” I can see the shoes myself, and they are quite decorative. A brand new pair of Nike’s with a quite colorful pattern.

Danny: Yeah, man. I just got them.
Rocky: You are just “blinging” all over the place, aren’t you? Both the shirt and the shoes…
Danny: Hey, what can I say? You know me; I like to do it up sometimes (throwing his hands up as if to say, “It’s just my style”).
Me: You better turn it down or Rocky won’t be able to hear you!

We all laugh and I tell him I was just joking, and that the shoes look nice.

This instance is revealing in two significant ways. On one hand, Danny adheres to the uniform requirements and the organizational aesthetic. He has the full time shirt on with a decorative print, and adds to this a new pair of shoes that really do stick out. This seems consistent with aesthetic labor in the sense that, (1) he meets the requirements and (2) he is the embodied vehicle to convey the organization’s image. However, it is revealing of the space allotted for personal style. He individualizes the aesthetic requirements by accessorizing. Danny adorns a new pair of shoes that reflect his personal style and that he would wear anywhere. Does Danny feel fenced in by the requirement to wear a uniform shirt? No. Is Danny actually working on his appearance for purposes of the work role? Perhaps.

Another example helps clarify the picture of aesthetic labor at Grocery Adventures:

Che and I are working on back to back register and I can hear him very clearly speaking with a customer who is more or less gushing about how “fun the atmosphere” is at the store and that “it must be nice to be able to dress up for work.” Che seems puzzled as I glance over my shoulder and offers up a simple “Yeah” (with a nervous laugh) that seems to suffice. The woman then suggests she wishes she could be “more creative” with her appearance at work (motioning down her body). From this I gather her outfit is pretty standard: black slacks, black top and similarly colored overcoat. As she leaves, Che turns to me:

Che: Did you hear that woman? What was she talking about?
Me: I heard her. So we dress up? (referencing what the woman suggested)
Che: That was so weird! I mean, I would hate to wear that sort of thing to work (referencing pretty typically “business attire”). Here, I mean, this is just what I would wear.
Me: And that’s appealing?
Che: I don’t really think about it…but I sure don’t mind it.
Again it seems that the aesthetic requirements (i.e., appearance rules) are not exactly requirements (i.e., labor). Che is very clear in that he does not feel he is dressing up for purposes of the work role. Further, given the fact he barely considers his appearance in general, strongly suggests that Grocery Adventures, while aesthetic, does not make demands on workers’ images. The two above items clearly show that appearance rules are up for interpretation. The following discussion more widely illustrates the degree of personal style that permeates aesthetic labor at Grocery Adventures.

Ava is often seen in floral printed shorts in an array of colors, a visible nose ring and tribal-like jewelry made up of various turquoise gems and stones. A self-touted “flower child” she would regularly tuck flowers behind her ears, pushing back waifish hair. During each game of the hockey season, Stuart wears his favorite team’s jersey underneath his shirt; visible to workers and customers. Bruce, a self-proclaimed “fashionista” dresses up with button-down shirts and different pairs of matching, often colorful pants to create what might be called a “prep-look.” Jerry, the Navigator, noted from the beginning, “c’mon, you get to wear shorts to work if you want!” Indeed he does regularly; in addition, often accessorizing with a pair of shades perched atop his head. Karen adorns black-rimmed, Harry-Potter-like glasses, tussled hair, a small bud-like nose ring and a visible tattoo, slightly below her right ear. Wearing shorts, rolled-up overall and/or three-quarter length pants, she reveals, in her words, “funky socks” in different patterns. Joy looks somewhat similar. With hair cropped around her head, she also has visible piercings in her nose and ears, visible tattoos below her left ear and on the front of her right leg, below the knee. Shorts, jeans and overalls (her reported favorite) accompany the Grocery Adventures tees and sweatshirts. Che switches between different styles, ranging from punk to preppy. Thom once reported he was going through a “murdered out” phase, urban slang for dressing in all black, while also changing his prominent facial hair from full beards to muttonchops to mustaches.
Lastly, and quite illustrative, is Jewel who is nicknamed after the considerable amount of jewelry worn daily. Around both her neck and wrists were an abundance of necklaces and bracelets that she herself made.

It is clear that employees take on the aesthetic requirements of the work role, but at the same time they “customize” their (partially) uniformed selves. On any given day, employees bring their own styles and preferences to the “appearance rules” outlined by aesthetic labor. Personal wardrobes pervade the workplace, and importantly, casual wear is the order of the workday. In short, there is no “right look” as suggested previously (Nickson et al., 2001). From this perspective, the degree to which this is laborious is quite questionable.

**Theme Days**

Wow! We have had some great dress-ups and response is improving, but let me explain a little bit why we do this: I like to dress up. No, seriously, there is no “I” in team…and that is what it really is about – having fun as a TEAM. Dressing up allows us to show our silly, creative, FUN side to the customers. It says we enjoy what we do and value each other enough to have fun while we are here…I have heard time and again that people love our people! Our Grocery Adventures characters. Have you noticed customers, adults and children alike checking out our photos from dress-up days? They spot their crew “friends” and have a giggle. That smile is on us and you are welcome! So come on Crew, join in! Smile with our customers, you might just like it.

The above anecdote is taken from flyers that accompany paychecks, distributed to both full and part time staff and written by a Jewel, a part time employee of Grocery Adventures. Referenced in this passage are so-called theme days whereby a particular theme is chosen for a day and employees are encouraged to costume themselves accordingly. Halloween is an obvious example, as are other recognized holidays. But others were done in the spirit of, as Jewel notes above, “dressing up”, and showing “our silly, creative, FUN side.”

Theme days are a tradition at Grocery Adventures, as stores dedicate one or two Friday’s per month as days to dress up in costumes. Both management and regular staff are free to offer up
ideas for particular themes. During my tenure, the following themes were designated\textsuperscript{49}: Hippie Day, Patriot Day (around July 4\textsuperscript{th}), Country Bumpkin Day (during the change to fall) and 80’s Day. The vigor surrounding the tradition waxes and wanes, but with changes in staff often come a renewed energy. During one post-work huddle\textsuperscript{50} the staff was told of a push to revamp the tradition of theme days, to get us “together, as a team” and as a way to engender “fun.” Crystal was leading the charge, noting how these days were “really fun” and “good times” at other stores she had worked at. The Skipper was sold, and the first of her brainchildren were born: 80’s Day.

The following Friday, employees dressed up like one would have done so in the 1980s\textsuperscript{51}. The following are some examples of costumes seen. Crystal, Karen, Joy and Jody looked like early-career Madonna, an iconic, pop-culture figure among women during the decade. Hair was big and curly with loads of hairspray and colorful ribbon-like strips tied in throughout. They wore black leggings underneath ruffled skirts and different matching tops that would hang off one shoulder. Some had matching ruffled gloves while others had a number of bracelets bunched around each wrist. The Skipper and several other female employees had something of a similar look, though a bit more limited in scope. Martina, in high school during the 1980s, adorned an old letterman’s jacket, cuffed jeans with her hair in a large ponytail hanging to the left side. Bruce reportedly “went all out” with a strong, punk rock look including plaid pants, a mohawk hairstyle, numerous piercings\textsuperscript{52}, tattered shirt, chains and combat-style boots. Che was much the same, but will more black than color, a skateboard-style hat crooked sideways and a vintage denim jacket.

\textsuperscript{49} These day in addition to the more generally recognized holidays of Valentine’s Day, St. Patrick’s Day, Cinco de Mayo, Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas.

\textsuperscript{50} “Huddles” is the term that refers to a brief meeting of all working staff, before the beginning of business hours, and at the end of business hours, prior to finishing closing duties. These are held daily and various issues are discussed.

\textsuperscript{51} One aside to note here is that the store played music from the decade all day long. This is consistent with the aural component that is often part of aesthetic labor processes. Nickson et al., (2001) suggest that aesthetic labor might entail “sounding right.” Here it is the organization that takes up this aesthetic challenge.

\textsuperscript{52} To be clear, Bruce purchased magnetic piercings for easy removal and did not actually get pierced for the costume.
Interestingly, Che is quite a fan of punk rock itself. I comment that this was not much of a stretch, but more of a regular look for him. Agreeing wholeheartedly, he reported looking forward to this day so, “I could basically wear my own clothes to work.” Two final cases are revealing. Bob, a full time employee in his early forties, donned something of a “greaser” look with an old, black leather jacket and hair slicked back. Catching some flak for not being as consistent with the fashion trends of the decade, he offered, “It’s the best I could do.” I did not dress up at all and immediately received a good amount of ribbing by other workers. Floundering around excuses as to why I did not put something together, the critiques were clear and I felt the need to defend my position.

Four additional theme days provide further illustration. First, the Holiday season which is a number of days following Thanksgiving and preceding the New Year.

Once the Thanksgiving weekend is over, the store changes to a “holiday” décor. This is not to say the larger Maritime theme is replaced, rather that holiday flowers are brought in for display, readily changeable signage takes on a holiday flair and ornament-like decorations hang from the certain places on the ceiling. In addition, there is a very noticeable change in the appearance of employees, encouraged to wear what one might call holiday gear. Interestingly, the standard uniform is often forgone in favor of such items. The Skipper regularly adorns a red holiday sweater with a snowflaked pattern across the chest and wrapping around to the back. Stocking hats are common as are scarves with festive color patterns: reds, greens, whites, golds and/or silvers. While the store does get cold during these days, these items are not simply functional. In addition, there are a number of costume items, for example, reindeer horns and Santa Claus hats that are free for the using.

Some go the costume route; more consistent with the above. Some maintain personal style throughout. For example, Joy is regularly seen in a grey stocking hat with matching scarf and fingerless glove set. In her words, “a great thrift store buy.” Karen is much the same, but with a “vintage” (but festive) long-sleeved undershirt she picked up at one of her favorite local second-hand stores.

Second, there is Valentine’s Day:

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53 All four subsections here are adapted (slightly) from fieldnotes.
54 This encouragement came from the newsletters that accompany paycheck. This particular flyer indicated employees should feel free to wear items that represent the holiday season. In short, to “be festive” and mentioned items such as scarves, hats, sweaters and the like.
55 I use the term “holiday gear” in reference to festive, winter items that generally lean towards the aesthetics of Christmas.
The store is decorated in as much pink and red as possible. Flowers have been moved up front and around the end caps of the aisles (as part of a push-buy, but certainly adds to the décor). Normally, register tops will have balloons tied up in all colors, but only pink and red today. Foil, heart-shaped balloons hang from the ceiling and two large balloon displays arch across the center aisle of the store. Much like the Holiday season, employees are encouraged to dress much the same. Jewel who has a penchant for “dressing up” is covered in all pink from head to toe, including shoes and jewelry. Those employees (typically women) who have a pink colored work shirt wear them. Those employees (typically men) who have a red colored work shirt wear them. Carol accessorizes with a set of red, heart-shaped earrings that light up and flash. Several others have added additional “flair” to their ensembles with makeshift corsages and/or in-store holiday stickers placed at random on their clothing. Wearing only a red shirt myself, when called to attention, I respond with “this is the best I can offer.”

Thirdly, there is St. Patrick’s Day.

As for the store, signage and other décor are as green and white as possible. Grocery Adventures carries some authentic Irish products, and some are prominently featured. Potatoes and Irish cheddars are being tasted, along with an Irish Pale Ale, available to customers for a small fee. Balloons are green and white, and like Valentine’s Day, two larger displays are strung over the center aisle of the store. Employees with green (albeit a pine or forest green) are wearing them, along with a good bit of costuming. Donna borrows a gigantic, green, Mad Hatter-style hat with several strands of green beads around her neck. Rocky looks similar, with beads and hat, though his hat is green and white striped. Stuart has a green hooded sweatshirt on that reads “Irish” down one sleeve, and also sports a Mad-Hatter-style hat while working the beer and cheese tasting upon entrance to the store. Numerous employees comment that with his short stature, he could be a leprechaun. Jeana has a green, almost fluorescent wig on with a green t-shirt emblazoned with a four-leaf clover. Also similar to Valentine’s Day, many others have “flaired” themselves with the in-store, holiday-themed stickers. Interesting to note, a local Irish ensemble was brought in to play authentic folk music for two hours in the evening.

Finally, there is Halloween56.

Most noticeable among employees are Bob, Al and Jerry. Bob is costumed as the father character from the Disney film The Incredibles. He has the entire suit on; one shaped like a strongman. In addition, he has a photo of his own family, dressed as the character family as they did for the holiday, often showing it to customers. Al represents a mental patient, with a t-shirt reading “Psych Ward” with a number on the back. On top of this, he shaved half of his head and face; the implication is that he is “out of his mind.” Jerry costumes as a lesser-known comic character, requiring a hard hat, work vest, goggles, accompanied by a shovel for digging that he lugs around a good bit of the time. Several guys wear football jerseys as an easier way to dress up like athletes. Among the women, there are numerous “cowgirls,” cheerleaders, and Madonna-like characters to name a few. Even Che (who is often reluctant) paints a zombie-like face.

Given the above evidence, I find theme days lie at the intersection of theming and aesthetic labor.

They are structurally grounded; perhaps designated by the organization but also suggested and/or

56 Among the theme days noted here, Halloween by far saw the most engagement across employees.
encouraged by employees themselves. While these days outline a particular appearance theme, they do not align with the organizational theme(s) as outlined\textsuperscript{57}. They typically draw from cultural trends or holidays, and importantly, appearance rules are much more informal. Participation is not mandatory and it is clear the degree of engagement varies across staff.

Theme days are thus conditioned under the lens of aesthetic labor, but a labor with a considerable degree of complexity. First, themes require the embodied capacities of workers (i.e., they “dress up” in costumes), to convey the “right look.” To these ends, theme days put the onus on workers to actively work on their appearances for purposes of the work role, consistent with previous understanding of aesthetic labor. They charge workers with the task of constructing and maintaining two prescribed images. On the meso level, it is the theme of the day. On the macro level, it is the fun that is Grocery Adventures. Second, these data also show how processes of aesthetic labor are complicated by personal style and agency. In each instance, workers remain active agents, deciding whether to participate, the degree of participation or to disengage altogether. Much like the discussion of uniforms, theme days also suggest aesthetic labor is best conceptualized dichotomously. Rigid appearances rules on one side, personal style on the other and different balances in between.

**Aesthetic Labor Reified**

Unlike the suggestion that aesthetic labor forces employees into a certain image or required look by placing exacting standards on their appearances (see for example Nickson et al., 2001), I show that Grocery Adventures tends in the opposite direction. The organization leaves a considerable degree of choice in the hands of employees. It follows to ask a few final items. While there are very few formal requirements for dress and/or appearance, can employees do what they want? Given there are no exacting standards and few formal policies, what is

\textsuperscript{57} This is to say they are above and beyond the overarching organization-based (themed) aesthetics of Grocery Adventures.
acceptable? The formalities and informalities create a push and pull between what employees want and what the organization needs. This final section shows that aesthetic labor is also conditioned by an informal understanding of what should or should not be done. From this, sanctions emerge to reify aesthetic labor, stifling deviance and promoting conformity to more normative patterns. Several examples demonstrate the ways these sanctions augment aesthetic labor at Grocery Adventures.

Arriving at work to start my shift, I pass Michelle in the snack aisle. She is wearing shorts, but I find myself noticing their length; they are quite short. On one hand, it is the summertime and the store can get hot. On another hand, shorts of this length have become increasingly popular and more widely seen. In passing, I say hello and she responds much less cheerful as normal. After taking up my post on a register, I ask Jamie (a closer friend of Michelle) if she is feeling okay because she seemed a little down. Jamie informs me that she “got into trouble” with the Skipper for wearing her shorts. The Skipper apparently pulled her aside to say the length was inappropriate for work. I ask if she was told to change them, and wonder if that would even be possible. While Jamie was unclear on all the specifics, she knows that Michelle was permitted to finish her shift as is, but could not wear them again.

Clear from this instance is the push and pull between organizational demands and employee preferences that creates a gray area in terms of what is appropriate or not. Shorts are permitted (as Jerry noted prior), but they need to meet the (unspoken) standard for work attire. A formal sanction was brought on Michelle by management for violation of this “policy.” Here, the Skipper stepped in to realign employee understanding of the aesthetic requirements of the job. Yes there is a degree of freedom, but one cannot come to work with too exposed. “Sexy” is not an image the organization wants to put out to customers and clients. As shown here, aesthetic labor is reified, by cutting off choices to employees and enforcing the rules (albeit informal) for appearance.

Another instance with Che provides even starker illustration of the negative sanctions that surround deviance from the aesthetic requirements of these service workers:

Che is at the very front of the store, working a product demonstration role referred to as “Schooner.” The individual charged with this duty is placed about ten feet from the front doors, in full view of all entering customers, and is designated to welcome and offer them a taste of the
product being sampled. I am on register within earshot and in full view of his station. Murmurs surround his assignment, finding this strange as it is not typical at all. Some suggest this might be his first time ever. Nearing the end of Che’s hour up front, Bob comes up to buy a bottle of water.

Bob: I can’t believe they have him doing that. (Italics added to indicate intonation).
Me: Why is that? Because he’s never done it before?
Bob: No, not that. He looks like a homeless person!

I find this funny, especially as expressed by Bob, who has this comical tone to a lot of what he says; I burst into laughter.

Bob: I’m serious. Look at what he is wearing...especially with that earring thing in. Look at him (motioning over in Che’s direction with his hand)! We don’t want people seeing that when they come in.

The earring is a bit different than normal. Che normally has a small, studded one, the one in question is tribal-like, and dangles well below the earlobe. I also take note of his clothing. All dark-colored, combat-style boots on, with pants rolled slightly above them and a bandana wrapped around his right ankle. He also has a black Grocery Adventures stocking hat on. I just reply with a shrug, and a rhetorical “I don’t know.”

Bob leaves with a clear sense of frustration and heads over to the office the daily log. While he does not take Che off the post immediately, I can overhear his relief that Stuart is coming back from his break to take over for Che.

Much like Michelle above, personal style is trumped by appearance rules. Bob is a full timer and responsible for the store closing this evening. In the immediate sense then, he is top management. Further, he shows a particular understanding of what one should look like at Grocery Adventures. Che is outside that box. From his perspective, one cannot embody the kind of place Grocery Adventures is when “looking like a homeless person.” This implicitly clarifies what constitutes an acceptable look. Again, this reifies the aesthetic labor (albeit informal) required of these service workers. Che is removed from this position, better hidden in other areas of the store. While this instance was a simple shift change, over the course of my tenure, Che is never put back up front.

Three final examples demonstrate how deviance from appearance rules (formal or informal) at Grocery Adventures draw the attention of, and signals the need for, management and to realign personal style with appearance rules. During one shift in the summer months, Jamie wears a new pair of shoes that expose a good portion of the top of her foot. She was reportedly,
“talked to” by management that they were not to be worn. Part of this was grounded in terms of safety; they lack support and she could injure herself. Part of this was grounded in terms of health; health codes require certain body parts to be unexposed to food products. But a final part of this was grounded in appearance. They are “a little too casual”; Grocery Adventures is not a place of leisure for employees.

Over time, Che seemed to push aesthetic boundaries the most. One winter evening, he was frustrated with having to remove his stocking hat. During this time, employees were encouraged to be “festive” as noted above, and he felt well within the bounds of the appearance rules. Management had a different opinion, and said he could wear Santa Claus replica hat if he wanted, but could not wear his own, which was black and navy striped. Interestingly, Che worked himself up to saying something to Jerry, the Navigator, suggesting he was not stepping out of bounds, and that others had similar hats on. A compromise was reached, and Jerry gave Che a black stocking hat with the store’s logo embroidered on the front. Instances such as these (and that above) apparently piled up over time, culminating in the issue being raised during a formal review. Confiding in me after this round of reviews, his choice of attire left something to be desired; reportedly, “sloppy” and “unkempt.” Che found this ironic coming from the Navigator, Jerry (his mentor at the time) who would not necessarily be described as “clean cut.” When I asked what he thought of this? “I just think they don’t like my style.” When I asked what he was going to do? “Maybe I should rent a tuxedo to wear!”

Returning to the questions outlined above, the evidence presented here helps to clarify answers. First, given that few formal policies that exist, can employees do/wear anything they want? In short, no. While there is considerable freedom to exercise one’s personal style with the set of appearance rules that underlie aesthetic labor, it is not a free-for-all. Michelle and Che were

58 This was not an aberration of Che’s imagination. Indeed others had similar styles of hats and/or scarf sets. The major difference appeared to be the color. The others were much more obviously “festive.”
both formally sanctioned by management for deviating from the requirements of aesthetic labor. Shorts cannot be too short, and there is a definitive line between “dressing down” and “looking sloppy.” Second, given there are few formal standards to speak of, and standards are often informal, what is acceptable? Here, an answer is much less clear. Some of it is grounded in general understandings of public dress, and some of it is enforced by managerial sanctions. Implicitly or explicitly, there are times when aesthetic labor is reified from the top down. Evidence that aesthetic labor absolutely conditions the service labor process at Grocery Adventures.

Discussion

This analysis is inspired by the work of Wharhurst and Nickson (2007) who suggest that a preoccupation with emotional labor in interactive service work has produced a lag in attention to other sensory experiences embedded in the service experience. As such, further attention needs paid to appearances and images of service employees, a so-termed aesthetic labor (Nickson et al., 2001). As a starting point, aesthetic labor is the mobilization, development (and ultimately commodification) of the embodied capacities and attributes of employees (Nickson et al., 2001). These embodiments and attributes then serve to produce the appropriate service interaction with customers (Nickson et al., 2001). Much like displaying the “proper” emotions within service interactions, workers must also display the “proper” image. They need to “look right” and/or “sound right” (Nickson et al., 2001). While this is a useful starting point, I find this to be the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

It makes intuitive sense that a so-termed “right look” varies across service organizations. Service organizations do not retail the same products or services; accordingly what is asked of employees in terms of self-presentations will do the same. While perhaps obvious, this variation is much less addressed, and raises several important questions. To begin with, I ask to what
degree is aesthetic labor a laborious process? There are certainly significant differences between holding employees to exacting standards and allowing them the freedom to fashion their own look. Moreover, neither approach is necessarily inconsistent with organizational goals. In other words, both approaches can be (and I argue are) used to match employee appearance with the organizational aesthetic. This creates a symbiosis of image, matching employee to organization.

Returning to the question above, I show that Grocery Adventures reconfigures our understanding of aesthetic labor in that it is by and large not demanding of employees. Also, it provides a space whereby personal styles are acceptable and even encouraged.

The data here clearly show that demands are not placed on workers that would force them into a particular image. The only two formal requirements employees must adhere to are (1) wearing a uniformed shirt provided by the organization and (2) a close-toed shoe. From this, employees are more or less free to adorn themselves with a multitude of clothing and shoe options, accessories or equivalent, and indeed they do. Personal wardrobes are regularly seen as employees bring their individual styles to the workplace. Over the course of my tenure at Grocery Adventures, less than a handful of issues with employee appearance surfaced.

Equally important is the organizational frame under which this movement away from appearance rules is possible. Two items are notable. First, the nature of this particular form of service work can be very physically demanding. Working in extreme temperatures and small space, and on dusty floors with regular product spills makes a “clean cut” image nearly impossible. But more than this, the very socio-cultural premise of Grocery Adventures is just that: adventurous. Stores embody exotic themes, and employees are free to do the same. From the perspective of the organization, it does not make sense to enforce rigid uniformity to a set of appearance rules. Imagine suits and ties or high-end fashion on the high seas of culinary
adventure? These would absolutely work against the larger aesthetic and circumvent organizational goals.

Because space is provided for, and employees permitted to bring personal style to the workplace, a second question emerged. Are workers free to do anything they want? The data are clear, the answer is no, and a degree of aesthetic labor (as originally defined) is indeed present. In other words, while aesthetic labor is not laborious per se, employees do actively work to convey the “right look” at times. One very clear example is the practice of theme days. Once a theme is decided on, the onus is put on workers to embody the correct, representative images. Participation is not required, but workers might be in for some ribbing by other employees. Though jovial, it does signal workers are aware of (in this instance, informal) appearance rules. Further evidence of aesthetic labor at Grocery Adventures is the managerial sanctions brought on employees for deviance to appearance rules. As there are but two formal policies codified, this is a gray area, but I show that management does step in at times to realign personal styles with an appropriate image. When this does happen, it reifies the appearance rules and makes aesthetic labor significant.

Despite these items, and the fact that Grocery Adventures draws on the embodied capacities of workers to convey at least a look, one cannot deny the agency given employees. There are very few appearance rules (formal or informal) and plenty of space for workers to fashion themselves as they choose. In the end, I suggest a reconfiguration of aesthetic labor as Lopez (2006) does with emotional labor. For him, emotional labor is best considered along a continuum. At one end exists a coercive organization, bearing down on employees and telling them exactly how, and what emotions to feel (Lopez, 2006). This end is consistent with Hochchild’s (1983) analysis of emotional labor, emotion management and feeling rules within service work. At the other end exists conscious, organizational spaces whereby employees are not
fenced in to preconceptions about what emotions or displays are appropriate (Lopez, 2006). Alternatively, these spaces provide the room for workers to explore and establish *any* emotional connections in service interactions (Lopez, 2006). Applied to aesthetic labor, Grocery Adventures reveals a similar spectrum. On one end there exists and organization that places exacting standards on employees, forcing them to adhere to a rigid set of appearance rules (see for example, Wharhurst and Nickson, 2007). At the other end of the spectrum sits a place like Grocery Adventures. Workers are not held to an unyielding, inflexible dress code or uniform style. Nor is having the “right look” clearly defined. Rather, there is a shift away from appearance rules towards personal style, whereby employees have considerable license over their image in the context of the work role.
“Hey, I’m just doing my ‘thang’.” (Bruce, part time employee)

Many of the service workers at Grocery Adventures have considerable educational attainment. The store does not hire anyone without a high school diploma and many have college experience; some graduating with good marks. This raises an interesting question: with the potential for occupational success in a more conventional “white collar” path, why choose service work? To get even more specific, why choose Grocery Adventures? In this chapter I argue that cultural preferences are central to service work and help to explain the potential disconnect between the socio-demographic makeup of employees and their occupational choices. What I find is that the service workers at Grocery Adventures choose the occupation because it aligns with their lifestyle. Conditioned by their cultural preferences both in and outside of the workplace, these workers select into these jobs because the jobs offer what they find important and meaningful. Rather than material rewards (e.g., wages) or hard power at work (i.e., access to decision making), workers seek out a workplace where they can embrace things they find meaningful. Namely, food, fun and non-convention. Further, this reifies itself over time given the nature of the service process. Workers lack economic and political power (to varying degrees) and thus status and culture emerge as central. I draw on Milner’s (2004) “theory of status relations” as a guiding framework to best understand these processes.

The conceptual backdrop is born out of Milner’s (2004) investigation of high school social groups, but nicely applies to the occupation choices made by service workers at Grocery Adventures. He asks and answers three driving questions that set up his so-termed
“theory of status relations” (29) as the lens for understanding. First, he asks what exactly status is? Second, he asks how it is related to power? And third, he asks when does status take on increased importance (29-30)? Working through each of these clarifies this theoretical perspective:

For Milner (2004), status is:

The accumulated approval and disapproval that people express toward an actor or object…it is more or less synonymous with notions of prestige and honor-dishonour…Status is the sum of the evaluations that are ‘located’ in the minds of other people with whom one interacts. Status is inherently linked to the process of social construction of social meaning and evaluations (29).

Milner (2004) follows this by asking how status is related to power, and suggests three forms of sanctions influence individuals: force, goods and services, and expressions of approval/disapproval (29). Each form is representative of a particular type of power. The first is political power, the second is economic power and the third status power. The degree to which any individual has these powers will vary; in addition, the importance of each varies across societies (Milner 2004). Further, individuals will usually exact which power is most readily available to them. The implication is that context matters and for Milner’s (2004) teenagers, the context emphasizes power in status. Applied here, employees at Grocery Adventures draw on a certain cultural framework to actively construct a social status that is meaningful to them and importantly, made know to customers. In colloquial terms, one might call them “foodies.”

From this it is important to understand when status takes on increased significance. A particularly salient time is when individuals lack economic or political power (30). As they are marginalized from the former items, groups may work to build a new identity (Milner 2004) and arguably a new understanding of their relative social positions. This makes intuitive sense from a cultural standpoint. Those who hold dominant positions will largely embrace dominant normative

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59 At the most basic level, the term “foodie” is conventionally defined as a person who takes a particular interest in food. This is part of the cultural status among workers at Grocery Adventures, but additional items are clarified later in the analysis.
behaviors and value orientations, in effect, maintaining the dominant cultural framework. An obvious example would be white, male corporate executives that embrace (and purport) “hard work”, “individualism” and “materialism” as the means and markers of their success, conditioned by their social locations. In contrast, there are obvious examples of those who that reject these dominant patterns in response to their marginalization. I argue we can see service workers\textsuperscript{60} from this perspective. They appear to reject the macro-order (societal) and work to reconfigure the meso-order (organizational) to highlight values, orientations and attributes that are most central to their personal identities: “organic\textsuperscript{61}” food is better, music is cool and so-termed “day jobs” are intolerable.

But service workers at Grocery Adventures are not teenagers. While obvious, this significantly conditions the degree to which economic, political and cultural power configure into this analysis. Many workers, especially the full time staff, can and do make a good amount of money. This provides workers with a reasonable, often quite comfortable, standard of living. This is quite different from parental dependence among teenage students. Here, workers cover all their own expenses and are in sole charge of discretionary income. In addition, benefits are offered to all employees, another significant material resource. Thus economic power is not limited per se. Wages and benefits are clearly important to employees at Grocery Adventures, but they cannot fully explain their occupational choices. If they were, all employees would work to climb the income ladder.

Political power is also reconfigured in this analysis, operationalized along two fronts: autonomy and access to decision making. This power is significant on two levels. First, unlike students who are told what to do on a daily basis, the work is relatively self-determined. This is

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\textsuperscript{60} “Service workers” refers to the retail workers at Grocery Adventures.

\textsuperscript{61} I use the term “organic” loosely but do elaborate this distinction later on. Suffice to say here, the focus is more that food preferences are central so much as the food choices themselves. Whether or not it is “organic” is of less consequence than actually maintaining a preference for, and status around food.
not to say there is no direction from management. There is a time-clock, there is a weekly schedule, there is a daily log that assigns specific tasks and activities to each worker and certainly there are policies that are followed. But outside these constraints, workers are free to do things in the way that works best for them. Suffice to say, there is a considerable degree of autonomy in the sense of how things actually get done. Second, workers share a degree of influence in the larger organizational structures. A prime example is the “In-Store Meeting” whereby all employees come together to discuss the how the store is and/or should be run. Suffice to say here, workers are given something of a voice. The degree to which said voice is heard is explored later. But what is clear; input is elicited.

Lastly, cultural power is also modified. I argue that culture is central, and considerably more important than economic or political power. But given there are increased levels of economic and political power, cultural power is also not exactly like Milner (2004) demonstrates among teens. First, culture and status in schools is not guided by one structural framework (i.e., the school itself). However, at Grocery Adventures, there is an overarching framework put forth by the principles set out by the organization. Further, planned events and organized work activities reify this culture over time, drawing in new employees and refreshing it for the tenured veterans. Second, there is a symbiosis between the organizational framework and employees themselves. Workers take on the culture as much as they also make it up. They bring their own cultural preferences to the workplace, and are invited to exercise them. Third, and similar to Milner’s argument, workers actively construct a status-hierarchy; importantly between themselves and customers. Drawing on their own cultural preferences, workers separate out from non-employees and maintain a unique status. For example, using food preferences and knowledge (often about Grocery Adventures products), workers not only construct boundaries, but also a significant amount of authority as so-termed experts. This authority extends not only over
customers, but also outside the workplace, projecting an image of Grocery Adventures as a place where people have fun and know food.

In the end, the triangulation of economic, political and cultural power is applied a bit differently. Each commands attention much like Milner (2004) suggests. However, the degree of influence and/or importance is conditioned by the socio-demographic makeup of the service workers under investigation. Economic power is important. It is also valued. I show that workers repeatedly find (better) wages and benefits important elements of their job choices. Political power is less important, but it is also seems valued. On one hand, I show that workers are critical of the idea that management (or the company) really wants to hear what they have to say, moreover, whether things are actually going to be different. On the other hand, I show that workers value the micro-level decision making power they have; allowing them to do the job as they see fit, exercising autonomy over work tasks. Finally, I argue cultural power is most important. While workers condition their understanding of this with statements along the lines of “the pay is good too,” there is very clear indication that they have selected into Grocery Adventures because of the cultural resources it offers. In short, it allows employees to “be themselves” so much as constructing a work role, making for meaningful work experiences.

**Wages and Benefits – The Importance of Economic Power**

Grocery Adventures employees starting wages are higher than other, similar retail organizations. Beginning my fieldwork, I started out at $10 per hour. This is/was reportedly similar for all employees, and indeed higher than minimum wage. In addition, all employees are eligible for benefits. These effectively increase workers’ economic power to some extent, highlighting the importance of better pay. While they may not make as much as a salaried employee, this increased economic power is certainly appealing. Immediately, the centrality of wages emerges as a potentially significant factor for employment.
Consider Bruce, an established part time employee who made the transition to Grocery Adventures from Starbucks, an organization that is known for paying workers better wages and offering benefits too. Among the reasons Bruce came to Grocery Adventures are (1) better pay and (2) more, and consistent hours. He tells me he began to get frustrated with Starbucks’ apparent lack of concern for his own well being; cutting hours but also not offering the wage increases like that of Grocery Adventures. It is clear that making a decent wage (i.e., more economic power) is a significant draw of the organization. But at the same time, he notes “I can still do my ‘thang’ with customers.” This latter item is addressed in further detail with respect to the culture of the workplace below.

Stories such as these are not uncommon and signal the need to consider economic power as a driving force for employment at Grocery Adventures in order to separate out the more significant theme of culture. Of all the employees, full and part time, that I surveyed\textsuperscript{62}, increased economic power was key to their interest in the organization. While this is generally reported by employees, the importance of wages is much more complex. In particular, a distinction between full and part time employees needs made.

**Full time Economic Power**

Full time employees start out at around forty-five thousand dollars per year. In return, they are required to put in fifty hours a week\textsuperscript{63}. Over time, this starting figure can increase as full time employees move up the managerial hierarchy, potentially reaching the rank of Skipper. What is more, while I could not get an exact figure on the Skipper at this particular store, all indications suggested she (and others in the same position elsewhere) can pull in two hundred thousand dollars per year.

\textsuperscript{62} Grocery Adventures employed 44 total employees at last count and I was able to speak directly with nearly two-thirds.

\textsuperscript{63} While I say “required” above, the rhetoric is couched in terms of “guaranteed fifty hours” from both management and employees. And it is clear from full time employees is that this is a welcomed consistency so much as an organizational mandate.
thousand dollars a year. And this is salary alone. There are additional options for bonuses should
the store “make good numbers.” Benefits packages are also extended including health insurance
coverage, retirement plans and the like. For full time employees, as the Skipper noted, this is
“good money.”

The allure of increased economic power through higher wages is a draw for part time
employees to ultimately go full time. This can be a lengthy process, having to maintain part time
status for several years, but reportedly well worth it in the end. During the course of my
fieldwork, three part time employees were promoted to full time, and two others were promoted
within the full time hierarchy. Brady made the part-to-full-time transition within my first few
months working, but he remained attached to the store, often returning to visit giving me a chance
to find out how he liked the transition:

Brady: Things are good; a lot of work and a lot to learn. But they pay me a lot better, and I will
take it!
Me: How do you like things relative to here?
Brady: I like this store (the one he used to be at) better. There’s too much of a “business” (using
air quotes) orientation over there. I think we should be doing more of this (motioning around the
store with his hands)…
Me: This?
Brady: More customer service stuff…
Me: Gotcha.
Brady: I really want to focus on customer experience and Hoto but they just focus on numbers.
But whatever, I’m new, so hopefully a matter of time.

It is evident from this passage that better pay is central to the full time transition. In fact, as we
continued to chat he alluded to feeling relieved as he and his roommates (who share a house)
were in a much better financial position to get it paid off. The better pay was a source of
excitement despite some initial adjustments to the new store, and also a relieving effect for his
larger economic concerns. But it is revealing in another sense too; that better pay may not be the

64 Hoto is a Japanese reference adopted by Grocery Adventures as one of their core values, indicated doing
one small thing every day to build something great in the end. Hoto is a fictitious term used to protect
confidentiality.
end-all-be-all of full time employment. As noted, stores get bonuses when their numbers are up, leading to pay raises for full time employees. However, that mentality (that could ultimately raise his pay) is rejected in favor of a customer experience (service) and cultural (Hoto) focus. I cannot speak for Brady and suggest that these foci would ultimately lead to “good numbers” (and thus more pay), but each remained distinctly separate in his discussion.

In the springtime of my investigation, two other part time employees were promoted to full time. Much like JD, this required moving to a different store. Brady moved to another location in the same city; Karen and Joy moved out of town altogether. Their experiences are equally revealing of the importance of economic power and higher wages at Grocery Adventures. The announcement was made at an “all-store meeting” where all employees gather to discuss current, relevant issues in the workplace including changes being implemented or the like. A small party followed whereby food was served and workers were able to socialize. After congratulating Karen on her promotion, we spoke about the upcoming move:

Me: So, full time, eh? Bet that’s exciting?
Karen: More like nerve-wracking. I have to move to Indy! I’m still looking for a place and time is running out.
Me: Well, I’m sure you’ll find something. But, you’ve been to the store, no?

Her response is less descript as we are interrupted, but she had been there a few days to get acquainted with things.

Me: Anyway, going to miss the old crew?
Adrienne: Of course. Gonna miss my girls of course. And you too (in a mock-gushy tone)…
Me: (laughing)…but it’s a good move?
Adrienne: (laughing)…I mean, I love working here (the store). I love the people here. Grocery Adventures has been awesome. Now they’re just being more awesome (laughing)…I’m certainly not going to turn down the extra cash! It’ll be nice to have the consistent hours and the consistent pay.

Joy’s story echoes Karen’s:

Me: How is the move going?
Joy: It’s good. I like the store and the people are nice.
Me: I hear you have quite the house now?
Joy: (laughing) Yeah, I lucked out to find a really nice neighborhood. I figured it’s time to move up now that I am making the big bucks…(rubbing fingers together as the signal to indicate cash).
I nod in affirmation.

Leigh: …I mean, the money is good. I definitely don’t mind the pay (laughing). (Italics added for emphasis).

Each of these stories are revealing of the way increased economic power is central to the full time experience at Grocery Adventures. Both women clearly indicate that better pay is a critical factor to their occupational choices. Joy is very straightforward, unequivocally stating that the “money is good.” While Karen shares much the same sentiment, she is less direct. Pay is indeed important, but at the same time she indicates that her experience is first conditioned by the people and the culture, and second that pay just makes those things even better.

One final example to consider is Quinn. She began her career at Grocery Adventures while attending the nearby university as a political science major. Working through school, Grocery Adventures was a “good fit” in that it offered a non-standard work schedule which freed her up to attend classes, but the store also offered less late nights than other service jobs (for example, waiting tables) she had held. Her experience raises one very interesting question that lies at the heart of this investigation. Quinn graduated with a degree in political science with honors. She considered law school, or working with politically affiliated groups in government. Certainly, she could have done so, but opted to continue at Grocery Adventures with an offer for full time promotion.

Upon graduating, she was able to move into the full time position and this seemed like the best move to make at the time. She enjoyed the store, and found it very appealing that she would be earning what she considered a very good salary immediately after graduation. She prides herself on being financially independent, so the choice for her was relatively easy to make given some uncertainty surrounding a potentially costly move to Washington, D.C. or law school.
loans. Over time, the money enabled her to do the things she wanted; take trips, buy a nicer car, upgrade her living conditions and the like. So, in her words, “I just stuck with it.”

Over the course of my time at Grocery Adventures, the economic power from full time wages remained salient and Quinn would always indicate that “good money” and additionally, the benefits, were highly appealing aspects to the job. But I did find that while, in her words, “I love my job”, this was conditioned by some other important factors besides wages. First, it is fun. One day during a product tasting, she explicitly stated, “Where else can you come to work and have this much fun all day long?” This but one example of a theme reiterated over the course of my time in the field. Quinn made it overwhelmingly clear that she values being able to have fun at work and this is a place where she can do so. One could hear her infectious laugh boom throughout the store on a daily basis.

Second, in her words, “it makes sense that I would work here.” On one hand, her employment history is concentrated in service work. On another hand, she tells me that as a child, while other kids would play sports or games, she would play grocery store, setting up a storefront in her parent’s home using foodstuffs from the pantry. She would also occasionally play “restaurant.” So, from her perspective, even though “I make good money”, it is quite fitting to work in a grocery store. Lastly, work is kept separate. We would often speak of her going back to school (given her political science background and interest in law school), and while she still considers the option, she has reservations about the work schedule. As it stands, she appreciates leaving work at work. While feeling accomplished at the end of the day, she genuinely enjoys being able to find a welcomed respite at home, away from the job.

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65 The comment here is in specific reference to a slew of product tastings shared by all employees during the course of the work shift. At one point, someone shouted out jokingly, “As if we haven’t eaten enough today!”
This data illustrates the variable importance of wages for full time employees. Particularly among full time employees, pay is central to their work experience. It is indeed “good money” as shown, raising the standard of living for employees. Asking the question of “why work at Grocery Adventures?” Part of the answer is the increased economic power via promotion. But given the complexities reported by employees themselves, part of that answer is not.

**Part time Economic Power**

As noted prior, part time starting wages are generally higher than other retail service organizations, typically ten dollars per hour. This is considerably higher than a minimum wage. In addition, employees can get up to a dollar per hour raise every six months. What is more, benefits are offered to part time employees too. Taken together, there is a significant degree of economic power garnered by part time employees. Ava’s story well illustrates the importance of these economic benefits:

I have the chance to speak with Ava while giving her a ride home from work one night. She gives me a brief history of her previously working at Donato’s Pizza but ultimately switching to Grocery Adventures as soon as something opened up. I probe as to why:

Ava: …I needed something close to walk to. Plus the money was a lot better and they (Grocery Adventures)…you could get health insurance.
Me: So, it was the money?
Ava: And the health insurance too (suggesting she needed it at the time).
Me: But you could get those other places too, no?
Ava: Yeah, but it was better here (Grocery Adventures). Plus the people are cool too. It fits my personality. I get to talk with people and make good connections.
Me: So, rank-order them for me. Is it the pay, the benefits or the people?
Ava: I would say the people first, with the pay and the insurance second.

This story is much like Bruce’s presented above, whereby she (and he) offer up the notion that the pay was a decisive factor in their choice of Grocery Adventures. Each also made unequivocally clear that the “very affordable” benefits package was also significant. But at the same time, each alludes to the fact that there is something less tangible about Grocery Adventures that is/was
appealing. For Bruce, it was being able to “do his ‘thang’”, i.e., work with people (customer service) and for Ava, the people (and place) are “cool.”

Stuart’s sentiments are similar to those conveyed above. A part time employee who has worked at this store since it opened, has gotten several raises over the course of his five-year-plus tenure, and reports the pay and benefits as a nice supplement to student loans in that he can use them as something of a safety net while finishing his master’s in education. Many others were/are also able to maintain their desired standard of living quite comfortably on this singular source of income. David was able to save up and put down money for a condo. Jody was able to save up enough to go back and work on a degree in social work. Drexel was/is able to support a new addition to his family. The significance of increased economic power (e.g., better wages) is clear.

Other part timers work at Grocery Adventures as a second job, but their motivations are much the same. Nelson works full time as a human resources associate for a number of hospice centers in the area, but works about 20 hours a week at Grocery Adventures for the “good benefits” and because, in his words, “the discount is nice too.” Carol is much the same, working nearly full time as an insurance agent and part time at Grocery Adventures. Though not necessarily in need of the added income, she likes Grocery Adventures for several reasons, consistent with the argument made here. On one hand, she enjoys having more discretionary income and on another hand, the benefits are solid but more importantly, very affordable. Over the course of my time in the field, it was made very clear that wages and the benefits package were incentives to work at Grocery Adventures.

But the question remains: how significant is this supposed economic power? Can it fully explain why workers choose to work at Grocery Adventures? From the perspective of full time employees, economic power considerable in the context of the figures presented. But at the same

66 Regarding the employee discount, all staff gets ten percent off of their grocery orders, with the exception of alcohol purchases.
time, the evidence suggests they cannot fully explain why workers choose Grocery Adventures. In all cases presented, there is obvious reference to non-economic factors suggesting pay is only part of the story. From the perspective of part time employees, the explanatory power of better wages is arguably less strong. Theoretically, if it were all about money, employees would relish the opportunity to stay with the job and move into full time status. However, this is certainly not the case. Drexel is an interesting case in this regard. He was full time, but went back to part time status as it offered a less demanding schedule. Che is another interesting case. Having worked at the store for several years, he has the experience to (at least) attempt a move to full time. However, he remains reluctant indicating he is financially fine. Suffice to say, time is not money.

**Autonomy and Access to Decision Making – The Importance of Political Power**

Perhaps obvious from the part time and full time designations at Grocery Adventures, it follows there is a managerial hierarchy. At the same time, it is much less pronounced and often unknown to those who are not full time staff. There is no real direct supervision over employees once they are trained how to do particular tasks. Further, such training comes from more experienced part timers and not supervisors per se, leading to a widely-felt consensus that, in the words of Jerry, “we are not here to babysit anyone.” Management at Grocery Adventures is not there to micromanage the labor process. So regardless of distinction (full or part time) employees are given considerable autonomy and some access to decision making, insofar as the work gets done. Like wages and benefits, these items are also important to employees. They decide how to best accomplish work tasks. My own experience provides a clear example of how employees (even new ones) take ownership in the labor process:

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67 The major designation is that between full and part time employees. This everyone knows and is obvious in some ways; for example, visible through uniforms. However, there is a more elaborate managerial hierarchy that exists and is often hidden to some degree. For example, every employee knows the full time staff, in addition to the Skipper (the store’s top position) and the Navigator (the second top position). But there are numerous distinctions among full timers that are not as obvious. For example, one can be a Tallyman or a Shipsman. However, from the part time perspective, these are more or less meaningless; the general notion of full time is sufficient enough.
It is my first day on register. No new hires will be stationed here for the first two weeks in order to get familiarized with the store, the layout, products and generally how things are done. Danny, a full timer, “trains” me. I say trains, but it is more like a trial by fire. I shadow him for one customer. He points out some of the more important buttons on the register that I will need to be really familiar with as he rings them out. Then he hands things over to me, staying with me for my first one. I immediately struggle. I am increasingly nervous, trying to ring the items up and talk with the customer as suggested, and not doing to well at all.

After the customer leaves, we chat for a bit about what to do. Danny gives me some suggestions in terms of customer service; giving balloons to children, offering free flowers to women for celebratory reasons (e.g., birthdays), and importantly, “just be yourself.” This is the most important part. This will create that service experience Grocery Adventures wants to project. I am the last person they will see before they leave the store...and to give them an experience they can take away, which will ultimately bring them back. He goes on to say that register interactions are often quite lengthy. They will want to know about you (me) and I will come to establish relationships with them. We will talk about all sorts of things: my life, their life, “they will tell you when they are having a bad day”.

In the end, he says I did a fine job, and that everyone struggles at first, but eventually pick it up. After these genuinely encouraging words, he leaves, saying “it’s all yours,” “you got this,” to “just be yourself” and if I needed anything to call someone over. With that, I am in charge of this register.

This “trial by fire” approach is widely applied across the board at Grocery Adventures. New hires will be given more direction initially, but much like shown above, such direction is a cursory introduction to the work process. Further, like Danny does, workers are “given the reigns” and left alone to get the job done. From this perspective, workers work quite autonomously, and effectively decide how to do the job as best they see fit.

But the autonomy (and associated increased responsibility for decision making) given to employees can be a double-edged sword in a service organization that is fraught with unpredictability. Several items reveal the extent to which this lack of political power can lead to frustrations with the work process and among employees themselves.

One such instance lies at the intersection of policy and customer service. All employee staff registers; this is organizational policy. For full time employees, the process is simplified. For part time employees, the process can be complicated as they lack certain authorities: to make returns, give discounts (for examples, to customers buying a case of wine or the percent employee
discount), void unwanted items or perform other override functions on the registers themselves without the help of management. In order to do these things, a full time employee needs to be called over and use their key to change the register settings. At times, registers are left on these settings thus enabling anyone to manipulate the order total. When service is at a premium (i.e., lots of customers waiting to checkout) this can be a significant source of frustration. Consider the following:

Jack and I are staffing two busy registers during a very busy period. Each of us needs a full timer to come and discount cases of wine several times. This requires ringing our bells three times to signal we need assistance, then waiting for a full time staff member to help us out. Facing each other, I can see his frustration mount when this is taking longer than he (and I’m sure the customer) would hope. I know from experience this can be a tense customer interaction as the transaction can come to a screeching halt while waiting around. While I (and others) try to maintain the Ahoy! customer experience, it is clear that there is a snag.

Ultimately, this bells are answered and the discount given. Once things calm down a bit, I ask him what he makes of this. He tells me that it is frustrating waiting for someone to come over and do things he “knows how to do” and “has done before.” He adds it is particularly frustrating when “people (motioning towards the boss) are talking on the phone in the pit” and not answering (his bell calls).

Me: Do you feel distrusted?

Jack responds unequivocally “no” and adds it is more the fact that it is busy (with lots of customers) and it makes the process longer. He doesn’t think the function needs to be on at all times, but we could benefit from it when things are “really busy” to “speed things up” suggesting he could have easily discounted the previous customer and that “voiding items would be nice too.”

Stories such as these are very common to hear among employees, and all the more common during the busier times. Here is a clear example of the rub of autonomy. At times, employees are free to do the work as they see fit. They decide when to write orders so long as they get written, build displays so long as they get built, face the store so long as all the products are brought to the front of the shelves, and even provide the “Ahoy! customer experience” so long as the customer

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68 Often referred to as “having the power” (i.e., additional command over the register), part time employees will readily give discounts when appropriate, void unwanted items in the course of ringing up an order, but never offer refunds for returned items or overcharges.
is pleased. But, the ambiguities surrounding autonomy and limiting the decision making power of part time staff is a barrier to employees, serving as one source of frustration.

Autonomy is challenging in other ways that reveal the limitations of political power among employees. Workers are bound to the schedule that is made on a weekly basis and provided (hopefully) a week in advance.\textsuperscript{69} This practice is not uncommon across organizations like Grocery Adventures, and certainly other employees can attest. Nor is this all that different from a so-termed “9-5” whereby employees are required to be in the office at a certain time, have an hour for lunch, then leave at a certain time. So regardless of work form, service or otherwise, suffice to say the schedule organizes the time spent at work and often limits the decision power granted to employees (in that they cannot simply show up whenever).

However, the schedule and surrounding processes further illuminate the fickle nature of autonomy at Grocery Adventures. To begin with, Grocery Adventures enables employees to request days off using a central book to submit requests. Such requests are granted to the extent that there is a sufficient number to staff each shift. Further, workers are able to pick and choose which times are best for them. Some work mornings, others opt for nights, and workers prefer this\textsuperscript{70}. To these ends, employees have a considerable degree of power in deciding what times they like to be on the clock. But this micro-empowerment is conditioned by increased responsibility when all preferences cannot be accommodated. In effect, the burden of scheduling can fall on the

\textsuperscript{69} Over the course of my tenure at Grocery Adventures, the schedule came out early in the week, usually a Monday or Tuesday. But there were numerous instances when scheduling was put off in favor of other work taking precedence. From this perspective, there was a degree of inconsistency in terms of when workers would know what hours they would have for the next week. Not only did part time employees expect this uncertainty, during my time at Grocery Adventures it was reportedly much better than before when another full time employee had the chore. Also, it is worthy to note this is concentrated among part time employees, as full time schedules are set every three months when days off are decided in so-termed “full time meetings.”

\textsuperscript{70} For example, some workers supplement their overall income by working part time at the store, so opt for nights and weekends. For another example, a number of workers prefer the non-standard work schedules (i.e., not “9-5”) and opt for a myriad of alternative times. In both such instances, worker preferences are matched (rather than dictated).
worker as they renegotiate their terms of service. Calling off is certainly an option, but much like any job, this can culminate in termination if abuses are made. Several examples demonstrate the downside to autonomy along these lines:

Carol calls me late one evening asking me to switch shifts. She needs her regular Friday off for a work party at another job. This request could not be accommodated as the party was put together at the last minute; she was thus double-booked. At the time I was not working Fridays so was a potential candidate for a switch. I could not accommodate her. She says that it was not a problem, and apologizes for calling me last minute, but she was in the store earlier talking with others and could work things out. Apparently, I was the last resort.

Nelson is looking for a switch today and is frantically moving about the store with the schedule book in his hands to check in with those employees not scheduled the day he needs off. I find out he wants to switch a Saturday for a Sunday and no one seems to be biting. I am Pilot, which enables me to see this going on for some time as I am floating about the store. Negotiations take place for a solid half hour, perhaps more, with no resolution in the end.

These are revealing in at least two respects. First, it clearly shows the constraints put on workers by the schedule, but more so, it places the responsibility to negotiate the terms of work squarely on their shoulders (rather than the schedule writer). Autonomy can be empowering by giving employees choice, but with this decision power comes added responsibility, and this time, control seems to trump autonomy in the end.

The “perils of the clock” extend beyond the need for employees to renegotiate their work arrangements should they need it. Arriving for my shift one day I happen upon several employees discussing the ebb and flow between micro-level autonomy (within the work process and across job tasks) and macro-limitation (i.e., control) of decision making power. Congregating around the time clock ready to punch in, others are milling about; some waiting to begin, others waiting to leave or working in “the pit”\textsuperscript{71} using the computer. One employee shouts out “Damnit!” to which we all inquire what had happened. Forgetting to clock out for lunch, he is concerned that this will reflect poorly on his work performance; it can, with too many “missed punches.” Two other

\textsuperscript{71} The Pit is the store’s designation for an office-like area set near the registers at the front of the store, containing computers, the phones, filing cabinets, a safe and other administrative needs.
employees raise similar concerns and one indicates she was disqualified for a raise the last review period for having too many.

Agreeing this can be problematic, Jared pushes the idea, grounding the problem in the larger work process. He suggests, (and the others agree) that the store, and certain job assignments in particular\(^{72}\) create instances whereby the clock is all but forgotten and these are not cases where they (employees) are looking to get one over on management. They argue work is “so busy at times” that is becomes really easy to miss a punch:

Michelle: …I know! Especially on a weekend. Or better, how about when a customer stops you coming up to punch in and you help them out… Jared: …Or on Pilot (pointing and nodding at Michelle in hopes of affirmation)… Michelle: “Yeah! You got it! (High-fiving).

From this perspective, employees are simply doing what they are supposed to be doing: here helping customers or completing their “pilot” duties. The limitation of autonomy emerges as problematic when it buttresses the need for managerial control. Obviously, management does not (and hasn’t wanted) employees to be paid for work not done. And one cannot readily hide away for an extended lunch break without going unnoticed. But the need to exact control formally emerges in the form of disqualifying workers from possible raises. This very idea is counterintuitive to employees. As shown above, workers do not see management as distrustful per se; in fact the opposite seems to be the case. They enjoy considerable autonomy during most of the course of the labor process, and it is these limitations to their agency that are the sources of frustration. As Carol indicates once the group had broken, “I think it’s silly.”

Increased autonomy challenges employee agency even when they are off the clock, or not scheduled altogether. Consider the following:

\(^{72}\) The shift referred to here is that which is called “the Pilot” or “piloting.” One or two individuals are assigned this shift daily and in essence roam the perimeter of the store, attending to four larger sections that need near-constant attention: refrigerated dairy, cheese, meat/deli and produce.
Working the floor, cereal area, I see Anne come by in street clothes with a clipboard. I ask her what she is doing here today, knowing she is not on the schedule. She tells me that with inventory coming up she has to come in on her day off to write the final order before it happens. I ask her what she thinks about this.

Anne: I’d prefer NOT to be here, but I have to write my order. It sucks though. I don’t want to be here on my day off. It feels like I am always here.
Me: Could someone else write it for you?
Anne: Technically, if you are off, you could ask. But they might screw it up, and then it comes back on me.

Tara’s story mirrors that of Anne:

Me: So you’re off today right? What brings you in?
Tara: Have to punch my order for the next couple days.
Me: Yeah, Anne was in earlier doing the same thing.
Tara: Oh, she was?
Me: Yeah. She had the day off too.
Tara: Yeah, kind of sucks that I am here, but I had some errands to run, so I was out and not far away.
Me: Well, that makes it somewhat better, no?
Tara: (laughing to herself)…Yeah, somewhat.
Me: So, Anne was saying someone else can punch them for you guys (referring to all the order writers)?
Tara: They can if you ask, but I like to do my own.
Me: Why’s that?
Tara: Well…it is my job…I am responsible for it…I guess I would have Joseph do it, but…
Me: But…
Tara: He is the only person I would trust with it.

For these order writers, increased political power surfaces in yet another precarious way. Each employee feels compelled to come in the store on days off and complete this job task. Normally, this would take place during the course of a scheduled shift; whenever they have time to do so, so long as it gets done. Here, autonomy and decision making seem to give way to control. Each could have another person fill it out, but any repercussions would fall on them. It seems that in order to keep this increased political power, they consent to organizational demands.

One final consideration is the degree to which this decision making power extends beyond the micro level. Grocery Adventures holds semi-annual in-store meetings; attendance is
mandatory. At these meetings, various issues are addressed. Typical examples include: new products that are coming out, what items will be “pushed” in the upcoming weeks (or months), how the store is faring overall, announcing upcoming promotions and if there are any managerial concerns that have emerged over time, such as policies that have relaxed and need reinforced.

One takes place in the spring to ready everyone for the impending summer; the other takes place in the fall to recap the year to date and prepare for the impending holiday season. Each provides a forum for all employees to voice concerns they might have. The spring meeting was less formal in this regard. But consistent with the increased significance of the fall meeting, something of a quality circle activity was engaged.

Two specific items reveal the degree to which employees find these meetings, in more colloquial terms, all talk and no action:

In the middle of the spring, employees fill out a store review. This consists of a set of about 10 standardized questions that have employee rate different items on set scale, and 10 or so open-ended items. These are kept anonymous and employees take them to a nearby mailbox upon completion to mail directly back to the company headquarters. I am given a longer break to fill it out, and heading out back of the store to do so I pass Ava who sees me with the envelope. She engages me referencing the survey and noting that it is my first one. I ask her what they (the store) are looking for on these; that is, what do they want to hear from employees? She responds with, “Tell them it sucks.” I ask her what she means:

Ava: You were at the meeting in the fall, right?
Me: Yeah. It was interesting.
Ava: So you know. They don’t really listen to us.

Ultimately, Ava clarifies her position, suggesting it does not “suck” per se. Rather, her frustration stems from the fact that, as she noted, the store does not listen to employees. In other words, employee input is not taken seriously by management, and workers lack significant decision

73 It is noteworthy, that employees are paid for attendance (i.e., they “clock in”), but at the same time this requires some to show up for about 2 hours even if they are not scheduled for the day.
74 The activity referenced here involved splitting the staff up into groups of about 5 individuals, including both full time and part time employees. While in groups, employees discussed items that they would like to see improved, things they felt the store as a whole could work on, things that were going well and the like. In addition, the groups brainstormed possible solutions to perceived problems. Groups recorded these items on a large sheet of paper, and one representative from each group presented these items to the staff once reconvened.
making power at the macro level. Che and Stuart, two of the more tenured part time employees reiterate this position. Having participated in numerous in-store meetings, in addition to witnessing numerous changes to managerial personnel, they corroborate Ava’s position that management does not really take this feedback into consideration. But at the same time, each maintains a lackadaisical attitude about the whole process suggesting they have no reservations then “doing what they want” or not giving it there all.

Oppositely, there are employees who relish the in-store meeting process and take the forum as the vehicle whereby their voice can be heard. One such example is Al, a part time employee with a considerable tenure with Grocery Adventures. Outspoken on a lot of fronts, Al makes certain he is at least heard during these meetings to the point where others later revealed to me it is something of a running joke surrounding his contributions. For examples: wagering as to what time of the meeting he is going to speak up, when he is going to say something awkward and how long he can go on speaking. During the course of this meeting, there was a clear sense of “eye-rolling” among the group that Al is a bit out of touch with things. This is reflective of the fact that most employees are accepting of their position within the organization, and assume the take-it-or-leave-it approach noted above. That is, a nonchalant attitude, and degree of apathy, towards active participation in the macro level decision-making processes.

From this perspective, access to decision making (i.e., political power) for employees at Grocery Adventures is arguably limited at the macro level. At the micro level, employees find significant autonomy over their daily work lives. They are relatively free to approach work tasks as they best see fit, they can provide customer service in their own image and they can decide the extent to which they do or do not engage the service labor process. At the same time, autonomy and decision making power can be a double-edged sword when increased autonomy becomes increased responsibility.
Culture and Status – The Importance of Cultural Power

Clear thus far is that wages and benefits (i.e., economic power) are important to workers at Grocery Adventures. However, these resources have significant drawbacks that are equally meaningful to these service employees. While wages are reportedly “good”, several items are clear. First, not everyone elects to improve on these by going full time. Second, they are contingent to the degree to which hours are consistent from week to week and workers do not take time off. Thirdly, self-reports indicate they are not the reason for working at Grocery Adventures. There is a difference between full and part time wages, and thus more economic power among full time staff. From this perspective, one cannot dismiss entirely the importance of pay for these employees. At the same time, and noted above, other job facets rival increased economic power. So while better wages are indeed part of the picture, they cannot fully explain the motivation among workers at Grocery Adventures.

In similar fashion, autonomy and decision-making (i.e., political power) is important to workers at Grocery Adventures. On the micro level, employees are by and large, permitted to do what they want. In the words of Jerry (the Navigator), “…we won’t babysit you.” On the meso-level, all workers are given a voice, for example at the all-store meetings that actively ask for and engage employee input. However, and much like economic power, these resources have significant drawbacks that are relevant to workers. First, political power is largely limited to the micro level; that is, doing one’s job how they best see fit. The degree to which employee input shapes storewide decisions is highly questionable. In the words of Stuart, “I’ve been here since the beginning. They ask. But they don’t really listen. It’s more what she (the Skipper) thinks is best from what I hear.” Second, at the macro level, employees (especially part time ones) are left outside the organizational fray. Skippers and Navigators (from all stores) meet for an annual meeting, but decisions are from the top. Thirdly, extending increased autonomy and decision-
making power to employees comes with added responsibility that can frustrate employees as it can challenge their agency, or when they realize their actual influence is limited.

From this perspective, a gap in understanding persists. If not wages and benefits, or autonomy and decision making power, why work at Grocery Adventures? More importantly, why are workers so content with these jobs? A final item to address is the culture of the organization and the workplace. It is here that we can adequately answer these inquiries. I argue that employment at Grocery Adventures is something of a lifestyle choice. That is, workers find the organization and labor process consistent with what they want out of work and out of life. The store provides an occupational framework that aligns with what they find important in a job, a place where they can, in Bruce’s words, “do their ‘thang’,” and also space to reify their personal preferences whereby individual identity and occupational identity are more or less one in the same. In short, the culture at Grocery Adventures is most meaningful. It enables workers to see themselves as themselves.

**Culture at Grocery Adventures**

A salient question to ask is what exactly does the cultural makeup of Grocery Adventures look like? Answering will help illustrate why it is so important to employees. A colloquial description of Grocery Adventures is that of “crunchy granola” or “neo-hippie.” These are individuals who forego mainstream culture in favor of alternative preferences and styles. If the participants of mainstream culture are “keeping up with the Jones’”, individuals here are looking for new neighbors. They do not see themselves as a person in a suit, behind a desk, eight hours out of the day. They do not see themselves as a proverbial cog in the wheel. The abovementioned terms describe a subcultural group that is looking for something else. To these workers, Grocery Adventures is full of energy, non-convention and food and fun. Jerry, the Navigator, offers a clear depiction that can be widely applied:
As I am stacking wine and Jared is fronting “the box,” he engages me in a debate over whether or not there are hippies anymore. Going back and forth, we seem to decide that there are not. Jerry, headed from the backroom to the front of the store passes us, overhearing out conversation and sparking his interest. He turns and asks:

Jerry: Paul, have you ever spent time out in Colorado?
Me: No.
Jerry: Plenty of hippies out there. They just look anachronistic and stupid.
Me: So, what are neo-hippies?
Jerry: Oh, you mean “kids?” That’s us (motioning around the store and in Matt and my direction). Yeah, you can just call us “kids.”

So what does this mean? What is a “kid” as Jerry refers to here? And what does this tell us about the culture at Grocery Adventures?

As a 28 year old fan of jam bands who disfavors the grind of a “regular job” but embraces many of the hallmarks of modern society and technology Jerry is a self-proclaimed one. This is not an age-based term. Kids (to Jerry) are a culturally distinct group who approach social and work life from a perspective that rejects an older, and for them, oppressive form. Kids want to, and feel they have done things differently and for them, Grocery Adventures a place where work aligns with their self-identity. Embedded in this very depiction is a distinct set of material and non-material cultural elements. For Jerry, one important element is music. For others, it is food. And for yet others, it is artistic expression. Each individual arguably weighs certain items more heavily than others, but in the end, they make up and are reified by the cultural configuration of Grocery Adventures. This culture (and by extension, cultural power) makes work meaningful for employees, above and beyond what economic or political powers provide. Retuning to the question of what exactly does the cultural configuration look like? It is a complex combination of food, fun and self-expression.

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75 For examples, hip-hop music as a new and significant musical form, computer technologies like the iPhone and other mobile devices, social networking sites and even modern capitalism.
From the very beginning, this culture is brought to the forefront. Interestingly enough, Jerry emerges as quite the cheerleader. Starting in the middle of the summer season, my socialization begins with a chat over grilling steaks. Back for my second interview, things are much less formal than one might imagine. However, the informal nature surrounding interviews of prospective job candidates will soon become par for the course across the work process. After meeting him in the “office” we head out back of the store through the large industrial door whereby deliveries are accepted and literally “fire up the grill.” An increasingly common practice for service organizations like this is to offer food samples to customers. As we are in summer, today’s is a sampling of ready-marinated steaks. He throws them on with my help and we begin talking (interviewing):

After getting through a myriad of questions asked in the first interview by the head of the store we have sufficiently, as Jerry says, “gotten that out of the way.” As the steaks emanate the aroma of summer grilling, we resign ourselves to the picnic table nearby, let them cook and he asks:

Jerry: So, if the boss was coming over for dinner, what are you going to make?
Me: (fumbling somewhat to answer)…Well, I would likely pick something like a grilled salmon. I’ve done this in the past and people have enjoyed it. Plus it is sort of unique and most people I know who enjoy meat would like the meatiness of the fish.
Jerry: (nodding in agreement to my previous statement)…So, what do you like about your job and what don’t you like about your job?
Me: I like the creativity but also the non-regular schedule. In terms of dislikes, I would say politicking within the workplace is what I like the least.

I tell him a story of my current neighbor who does not clean up after her dog to well in the backyard area we share at the house. My complaint is that it is not my space, or hers, but ours, and that we all need to be responsible for it. Then we could all best enjoy it. At this point I feel like I have lost my point altogether, so suggest I may not have answered the question.

Jerry: That is actually a really good story. Makes total sense. You just want her to be “cool about it.”

After these central questions, he tells me that I am an “A+ candidate” and he will speak with the top boss and get back with me. He asks if I am in a hurry, and we chat a bit more about our cell phones (which we have the same) and tastes in music and food. The conversation is just that; a

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76 Interestingly enough, Jerry explicitly stated to Bob (a full time staff member) and myself that he is, in many ways, a “glorified cheerleader” and is quite enthused by the role as he sees it.
77 The office is commonly referred to as the “pit.” It is a small, roughly ten by eight foot area where (usually) full time employees oversee the front end of the store where the registers are located. It is demarcated by a set of swinging doors (saloon-style) and is in full view of all employees and customers.
conversing and continues until the steaks are done. I help him take them inside and he sends me off with a “Peace, bro. I will be sure to get back with you.”

The interview process is revealing in that it is not conventional and very informal. This in contrast to what a typical interview is often like with formal attire, an office whereby the candidate sits across from the superior, and questions certainly do not center on cultural items like food and cooking. While perhaps obvious, or even expected for a place like Grocery Adventures, it is significantly revealing of the culture that permeates the organization. Fun, food and non-convention are indeed present. Jerry emphasizes the importance of food when he suggests the dinner question is something he asks of all prospective employees. He is also suggestive of a non-conventional approach in his choice of words (e.g., “cool about it” and signing off with a “Peace, bro.”) There is an undeniable sense of fun and food that is necessary, but also important at Grocery Adventures.

But equally important is why (this) culture is so important to employees at Grocery Adventures. Ava’s story offers good insight. After giving a brief history of her previous employment at a pizza chain, she offers the following:

Ava: I mean, it’s like, a pizza joint; it was just a job.
Me: And this is not a job?
Ava: Well yeah, but, it’s different.
Me: How so?
Ava: Its something that I want to do, I mean, I’m a foodie. We’re foodies. I mean, that is why I’m here. Well not the whole reason, but definitely, yeah, that’s part of it.
Me: Part of what?
Ava: Why I’m here. I mean, come on, everyone here likes to eat good stuff. If you’re not into it, you wouldn’t come here…
Me: To work?
Ava: Yeah…I mean, all of us are into the idea. Joy, Karen, Quinn…we all like it. We eat all the time. And, you know, the customers like it too.
Me: How so? Can you give me an example?
Ava: Ok, so, theirs this one lady the other day, and I’m just doing my thing…checking her out and we’re talking, and she’s a regular shopper, so I know she’s into the food. I always talk to them about the food. She tells me that she just loves the things we offer that she can’t find at other places, etc., that things are so good…and she likes how we are, and…
Me: How we are?
Ava: (air quoting) Grocery Adventurers (laughs). That we’re into food and stuff. How we do the tastings and are not afraid to try the new stuff that comes in. And how we are always eating and then we…that we deal in food. It’s fun. It’s cool. It’s fun to talk about.

This passage is crucial to understanding the importance of culture as explanation for why workers like Grocery Adventures. Central here is the food. But as revealed, it is not just the foods themselves that are appealing. According to Ava (and applied the others she mentions), she is a “foodie.” That is, someone with a strong interest in food, cooking and presumably eating. Importantly, these same items are offered by the organization. The salience of culture becomes clearer. In effect, it (the culture) allows Ava to be the person (i.e., foodie) she is. To paraphrase her, this is not just a job. Rather, we see alignment of self and occupational identity, made possible by the medium of culture.

Kimo is another excellent example. A transplant from Hawaii, he seeks to maintain the culture of islands that is close to his heart. Asking him what that culture exactly is, he offers the following:

Kimo: I just try to stay happy at all times, no matter what the situation is. It is a good way to live. That’s how we do it on the Island.

In addition, he tries to bring a sense of this wherever he goes.

Me: Can you do that here?
Kimo: Oh sure. I mean, look at this. We are outside. Look at that sky! Full of stars. It’s nice. We are having fun man!
Me: So what do you like about the job here? You haven’t been here that long…
Kimo: I like this (motioning around to indicate being outside). Customers are pretty nice too…I like moving around. Keeps that energy level up.

This is not merely a product of the labor process, or structural arrangements at Grocery Adventures. It speaks to a larger issue within the organization (and others like it). One might argue that ideas like “moving around” or varieties in job tasks are simply extensions of autonomy or occupational complexity that have long been seen as valued job attributes. Here I suggest an alternative explanation. Things like working outside to inventory the newly arrived truckload of
products, facing the store, and checking out customers while staffing a register among others are as much social times as they are job tasks. And during these times, workers actively draw on their cultural preferences; free to be themselves. Employees often reiterate to each other, they (employees) work hard, play hard and have fun doing it. Moreover, bringing cultural styles to the workplace are items that workers at Grocery Adventures are actively seeking out. For someone like Kimo, this entails maintaining a Hawaiian life perspective.

Consider the following discussion in relation to the point above. That workers are free (and arguably encouraged) to bring and use their own cultural preferences to the workplace and this is central to explaining why workers choose Grocery Adventures.

After ending my own employment, I followed up with several workers who I had befriended over the course of my tenure. I met them at a local restaurant where they began to share a few recent stories about customers, indicating some of the same frustrations I remember when I was working. There is considerable laughter at the, according to Thom “dumb” things they say and do. But as the stories run out, Quinn offers up the general consensus that “you gotta love ‘em” and they agree that the job wouldn’t be the same without odd customers.

I ask Thom to give me more. Some particular instance as of late whereby he was able to reconcile this apparent discrepancy between frustration with customers and the fact that he overwhelming “loves his job.”

He recalls an instance whereby a woman was frustrated over the fact that she was not able to find everything she needed. After sending another coworker back to find it in the back stock, there was still none to be found.

Thom: She had her daughter with her who was a little rambunctious so that was getting to her too.
Me: So what did you do?
Thom: I just did what I do.
Me: What do you mean?
Thom: Well, this is why I like the job so much. I can just do what I do. I can go in there and be Thom. What you see is what you get. She was a little upset, but I just started talking about whatever – something else altogether – and joking with the girl…
Me: Do you remember what you said?
Thom: Oh, I don’t know. Just talking my shit. Come on Paul, it hasn’t that long, you know what I do
Me: (Nodding in agreement)
Thom: So yeah, she gets mad, there is nothing I can do, so I just do what I do. Joke around, tell stories, whatever really…
Me: So that is what you like about the job?
Thom: You got it buddy. I can just be me. Whenever I am there, I can be the same person I always am… (Trails off a bit and the conversation shifts, but I notice the others have been listening to us and do not disagree).
This best illustrates the degree to which cultural power is present and recognized at Grocery Adventures. The central reason offered by Thom is that the organization allows him to be who he is. This challenges the roles of economic and political power among employees, and in effect trumps those benefits. While wages are higher, and workers enjoy autonomy and some degree of decision-making, these items are of less consequence. Most important is that Grocery Adventures aligns with what employees are really looking for in their occupational choices. Spaces where they can be themselves, rather than regularly constructing a separate work identity.

Part of this identity is food related as discussed previously. Emergent from the above remarks, part of this identity also centers on being oneself. A third element, is that employees want to, and have fun. Simply put, part of the cultural framework at Grocery Adventures is having fun. While some might argue this is but a ruse put forth by the organization to exact additional effort out of employees for purposes of organizational gain, workers tell a different story. Stuart opens this discussion:

Stuart: I’ve been here since the beginning. It was kind of iffy for a while.
Me: Iffy?
Stuart: The old management ran it like a frat house…which is probably why they all got fired (laughing).

Probing for a story, Michael tells me of one incident where one of two managers were setting up another part time employee to walk in on one of them exposing his backside to the employee. The plan ultimately backfired as a customer nearly fell into the prank. The degree to which the customer actually saw the staff fooling around in this manner is unclear, but there was apparently the need to make some changes in management.

Stuart: …but now its great. They can work you to death, but it is still one of the best jobs I’ve had. Jerry is really cool, as I’m sure you now know. And most everyone is having a blast most of the time.

Changes to the structural arrangements of an organization are just the places to see the emergent role of culture (Volti, 2008). Having witnessed the change in management to current arrangements, his comments effectively bring workplace culture to the forefront. There are two items to note here. Stuart’s job satisfaction is indeed a product of culture. Grocery Adventures is a
genuinely fun place to work. Previously, things were like a so-called “frat house.” But now, the workplace increases job satisfaction, allowing workers to have fun nearly all of the time, despite the fact that the actual work itself can be quite demanding. Others find similar results:

Michelle: Grocery Adventures is awesome. If you want to try something you just have to ask. I mean, they’re letting me work part time on the artwork. It’s cool that I get to do something I would want to do anyway.

Quinn: I love my crew. I’ve felt the same about all the crews I worked with. Me: But that’s only two (jokingly). Quinn: (laughing) True, but both places, people are just cool. But that makes sense cause we only hire cool people. You can’t not want to have fun and try to work here.

Jody: I love the crew! Both here and at my last store. It is such a fun place to work! We always have so much fun working.

Liz: We used to shop here all the time. We just live right there (pointing to the southwest corner of the store signaling the neighborhoods just beyond the shopping plaza). So we’d come in here…I mean, the stuff is great…and everyone was so nice, I thought it would be a fun job to have. So I decided to come and try to make some extra money for us (her family) and it was just like I thought it would be. People are so fun. Work is so fun.

I began this section by suggesting that three key components underlie the culture at Grocery Adventures, food, fun and a non-conventional approach to work and life. Food and fun are well demonstrated. One final element of culture to address is non-convention. Asking Joy what she likes most about Grocery Adventures:

Joy: You won’t find any normal people here. Well, I guess some, but most of us are into different things.
Me: Different things?
Joy: Yeah, you know. Alternative lifestyle things (using air quotes). Just look around. These people (motioning to a group of part time employees congregating outside by the days delivery of products) are not nine-to-five-ers.

For Joy, part of the appeal of Grocery Adventures is the ways in which it does not align with convention. This for both the work itself and the lifestyles choices employees make. Per the example (and consistent with many service organizations at large), the labor process is non-standard. It is not the proverbial “daily grind” of a typical office job, e.g., the so-termed nine-to-five. Also (and perhaps expected), workers are non-conventional in their individual approaches
too. The remarks here corroborate my own experience with coworkers. They are a distinct group of individuals designated by (often obvious) status markers: tattoos, musical tastes, food preferences, styles of dress and life philosophies among others.

Further, it is often the case that work histories are concentrated in occupations that had (1) an interesting cultural makeup, or (2) better emphasize workplace culture over economic power (wages and benefits) and/or political power (autonomy and access to decision making). One example is Bruce (noted above). A performance art major in college, his is occupational history is littered with service jobs, most recently at Starbucks. When asked why (and why now here at Grocery Adventures), he indicates it is “what he does” (quotes added). That he genuinely enjoys working with people and these jobs provide the vehicle for this. Crystal, a full time employee, shares a similar past. Previous to Grocery Adventures, she waited tables, and interestingly was a can-can dancer. Reportedly one of the most fun things she has ever done, and been paid to do. Karen provides further illustration:

As we chat during a break in customers, she tells me of a personality test she had taken online that supposedly matches one with jobs they are best suited for. Asking about her work history, she says that she has mainly held service jobs since graduating from college. Initially, she started bartending while living out of state. Why? She answers because she was “good at it” and “had fun.” Interestingly enough, the test indicated bartending as one of her top jobs. She had also waited tables, worked in other (non-specific) retail sectors and “those types of jobs.”

Me: You mean service jobs?
Karen: Oh, like customer service stuff?

I nod in affirmation.

Me: So why here (specifically)?
Karen: I guess it fits my personality (laughing robustly).

She then comments that she really liked bartending, and particularly the interactions with customers. It brings, in her words, an “interesting crowd.” As for Grocery Adventures, she finds many of the same elements, again, a great deal of interactions with customers and being able to work with people.

From this perspective, Grocery Adventures is not just about wages, autonomy or even the nature of the labor process, i.e., working with customers, itself. As I show, these stories strongly
emphasize the degree to which workers seek out (and have sought out) occupational choices that best align with a particular lifestyle they want; that of food, fun and a lack of convention.

**Pushing the Bounds of Cultural Power**

Given the nature of the work – that it is service and thus involves other human actors – it is important to consider the customer in relation to organizational culture. Service work researchers, and the larger analysis here, argue that customers are crucial for understanding the service labor process. Moreover, as active participants in the work process at Grocery Adventures, customers shape the importance of culture in several ways. Returning to Milner’s (2004) theory of status relations, two additional items need consideration.

First, status emergent from cultural power is inalienable (Milner, 2004). This is to say it is primarily located in the minds of others. Here, to some degree, these locations are the minds of customers. They perceive the culture as meaningful too, making their awareness clear. Second, status emergent from cultural power is inexpansible; it is a relative distinction (Milner, 2004). Consider the example of membership to a country club. If anyone were allowed access, the cultural power conferred by membership would certainly not mean as much. From this, the implication is that when the cultural power of one group increases, it falls for another. The following items demonstrate these notions:

Working Mother’s Day, I check out a woman customer who is dressed quite nicely, prompting me to ask if she is on an outing for the holiday. She is not, but rather working herself. I empathize briefly and she comments:

Customer: I can tell you this, I would rather be working here…you guys have all the fun.

I ask why she would say this.

Customer: Every time I am in here it is like a party. There is food, good music and you guys are laughing and having a good time. I am in the wrong business.

I ask her what she does. Insurance sales. So I lightheartedly suggest we are both in retail.
Customer: I guess you’re right, but we don’t get to have this much fun. Or eat this much (motioning to the numerous different samples on the register counters for customers to try)...ooh, these are good!

While the above is one of my own experiences, by no means is it an isolated incident. It is very common to see and overhear these kinds of customer interactions during the course of a shift.

Consider two additional items:

Customer: (initiating the conversation) So, how is your weekend going?
Thom: Good so far.
Customer: Working all weekend?
Thom: Yeah, they got me working all weekend, but its good…I’m on lock down...(laughing)
Customer: (laughing)
Thom: ...but I’m used to it and I like working here.
Customer: Well, that makes it better.
Thom: Oh, no doubt.
Customer: You guys do seem to like what you are doing…
Thom: …Right, right.
Customer: That’s good.
Thom: It is. How can you go wrong? Good customers, good food, good fun and of course, good people to work with. Isn’t that right Paul?

Being cordial, I nod in affirmation. The customer smiles at me looking over and Josh turns back around to finish the transaction.

I also observed David having a similar experience as I bagged for him one particular transaction:

Customer: Speaking of green, I have some bags, but you can't judge me. They’re from that other place…(motioning over her shoulder to the competitor’s Plaza outside the front of the store). David: Oh, not a problem, we don’t speak ill of the competition.
Customer: (Laughing)…well, it is either here or there, and I prefer here, but… never those other places (waving her hand around in the air to presumably signal other grocery stores).
Customer: Do you guys ever go there?
David: I do most of my shopping here.
Customer: I can’t stand those other places. They don’t know where anything is, and (with much exuberance) they’re certainly not foodies!

At this point I chime in with a story a friend recently told me about not being able to find pesto at the very stores the woman had frowned on. Not only that, they were unsure what pesto was.

Customer: See, so you know. You guys know your stuff.
David: One of the benefits for sure.

The transaction finishes and we wish her on her way.
In each of these instances, the degree to which cultural power is inalienable (Milner, 2004) is clear. The cultural underpinnings that make Grocery Adventures appealing to workers make it “cool” to customers. To them, employees are much more than simple retail service workers. What is much more important is their perception of fun (and food) understood via their experiences with the store (and ourselves). The extent to which cultural power is inexpansible (Milner, 2004) is also evident. Here, the cultural power that makes work meaningful for employees also serves to rebalance the customer-worker equation in favor of the former. As workers close the cultural ranks, they maintain power given the distinction their employment confers.

**Discussion**

At the heart of it, this analysis addresses one central question: why do workers at Grocery Adventures choose a life of service work? Given that many of the core staff have a considerable degree of educational attainment, it stands to reason they would pursue careers that are more consistent with a so-termed “white collar” occupation. However, this was not the case, even for those who performed quite well in school. A corollary of the above inquiry is why this place in particular? Over the course of my fieldwork a genuine liking for Grocery Adventures emerged from the voices of my coworkers. At the same time, these jobs fall under the retail service umbrella. Employees could find this type of work in a multitude of places. The application of a “theory of status relations” (Milner, 2004) best reveals the answers to these two items. What I find is that this is largely about culture and status.

Briefly, the theoretical lens posits status is emergent from socially constructive processes of meaning, evaluation and interacting participants (Milner, 2004). The summation of these processes engenders a particular social distinction that is made obvious to both the observer and the individuals. In essence, it is a socially meaningful identity. Additionally, status is related to power. Milner (2004) argues three forms of sanctions influence social actors: goods and services,
force and expressions of approval and disapproval (29). Each is representative of a particular power that individuals can exercise: economic power, political power and status power.

Economic power is those material resources at one’s disposal. Things like income and wealth or the like. The more one has, the more economic power they wield. Political power is the ability to exercise one’s will (broadly defined). The more one has, the more political power they wield. Status power is the degree to which one’s social identity is accepted or not. Like economic and political power, the more one has, the more status power they wield.

I argue this final form, status power, is culturally grounded. While the other forms are manifested in concrete ways (take for example income), status is necessarily contextualized in a cultural framework. That is, it is understood by those social cues that are interpreted by individuals as the important markers drawn on to navigate the social world. From this perspective, status power is seen as cultural power. Insofar as individuals lack economic or political power, cultural power is increasingly important78. As applied here, employees at Grocery Adventures largely draw on cultural power. They exact power by drawing on a particular cultural status that is individually meaningful, made known to service recipients (i.e., customers) and fits well within the context of the organization. But the significance of cultural power needs juxtaposed against the two other forms.

First, consider economic power. At Grocery Adventures, such power is grounded in wages and benefits. Both full and part time employees are paid what they themselves refer to as “good wages.” As noted, part time staff starts out at ten dollars per hour; considerably higher than minimum wage. Full time staff starts out at around forty-five thousand dollars per year. Like wages, both full and part time employees are offered benefits; health care and retirement

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78 The more general proposition is that the degree of each varies across groups and individuals and that they will employ which power is most available to them (Milner, 2004). As it stands for this analysis, I show cultural power is most prominent.
packages for those who are full time. Further, these are reportedly “very affordable” and explicitly appreciated. These figures are nothing to scoff at for this type of work, and suggest they offer employees significant economic power. From this, one might argue that increase economic power through wages and benefits explain why workers choose Grocery Adventures.

Second, consider political power. At Grocery Adventures, such power is grounded in autonomy and decision-making. From the most tenured veteran to the newest hire, employees are given relative autonomy over their jobs. As management told me, they are “not here to babysit you.” And it is clear that workers actively decide how to best accomplish their work tasks, so long as they get done. In other words, micro level decision making. In terms of autonomy, the preeminent example is providing customer service. It is central to the labor process at Grocery Adventures and employees are encouraged to take ownership of this critical – arguably the most critical – job task. Here workers have nearly full autonomy over the service process; moreover, they are encouraged to “be themselves.” Also, the organization actively seeks out employee input on work related issues. Through store meetings, quality circles and surveys, Grocery Adventures gives employees a voice. In other words, access to macro level decision making.

The theory of status relations suggests that individuals (here, workers) will draw on those forms of power that are most available to them. Are those forms economic and political? I argue they are not. Returning to economic power, wages and benefits are better at Grocery Adventures, but they do not fully explain why employees select into these jobs. Wages and benefits provide some motivation to employees; to increase standard of living, alleviate financial concerns or provide things like health care if/when needed. But reports indicate they are rivaled by other, less tangible elements of the labor process. For examples, working with people, finding connections with coworkers (and customers), and generally enjoying what they are doing. Returning to political power, autonomy and decision-making also do not fully explain why employees select
into these jobs. At the micro level, workers operate autonomously and have good access to
decision making. They take ownership of the customer service process and accomplish work
tasks as they best see fit. However, they are still bound to the clock, bound to the schedule and
confined within larger work structures. In addition, this micro-empowerment can (and does) lead
to increased responsibilities that are sources of frustration. For examples: renegotiating a fluid
schedule or working on a supposed day off. At the macro level, Grocery Adventures elicits input,
but reports clearly indicate these are not taken seriously, if considered at all. To these ends,
economic power and political power are highly variable forms.

It is here that cultural power can fill the gap in understanding. To begin with, the culture
at Grocery Adventures centers on food, fun and non-convention. The triangulation of these items
produces a framework that best aligns with the occupational preferences and lifestyle choices
employees’ want. Workers are free to bring their tastes for food, their desires to enjoy work and
life and their distinct identities to work. As self-proclaimed “foodies”, Grocery Adventures is a
place to express (and develop) culinary expertise. The relaxed atmosphere and unique coworkers
(and customers) allow, and perhaps even command, workers to genuinely have fun at work and
with each other. And given their unorthodox approaches to work, life and identity, there is
considerable appreciation of the non-conventional. In short, cultural power is what makes work
life most meaningful. Further, the social status emergent from this cultural power is made
obvious to service recipients. As such, it rebalances the dynamic between workers and customers,
tilting the balance towards the former. Grocery Adventures’ employees are experts who “know
their stuff” and the jobs themselves are seen as downright “cool.”
Chapter 5: Conclusion

“Land ho!” (A joke among employees signaling the end of business for the day).

Come to Grocery Adventures, and you will find a flurry of activity drowning in a din of chatter, beeping registers and ringing bells. Customers are likely backed up in a series of meandering lines with craned necks and twittered eyes looking for the quickest moving checkout. Others realize the inevitable surges of business activity that accompanies grocery shopping and wait patiently. All seem to get the same treatment. Find everything you needed today? How is your day going so far? Did you get a chance to try these yet? Oh, don’t worry about that, we can take of it for you. Indeed they do. While the cashiers stand fast to their posts, a steady stream of coworkers emerges from all directions to answer their calls for help. Can you grab me another one of these? Sure thing. Can you help bag for a while? Not a problem. Looking across the store you will see aisles cluttered with shopping carts, stacks of new products waiting to be put onto shelves, a team of employees moving between sections to make things look nice, and amid all of this activity sit several employees talking with customers as if there is nothing better to do. Workers pay the chaos little mind, and move seamlessly from one thing to the next; their performances appearing effortless.

Using ethnographic techniques, I conducted an in-depth investigation of Grocery Adventures, a store located in a sizeable metropolitan area in the Midwest. By doing so, I can speak directly to three under-addressed themes in service work analyses: the role of coworkers, the role of aesthetics and the role of culture. Elaborating on these three fills significant gaps in our understandings of the dynamics surrounding the service labor process and the ways service
workers situate themselves with their work roles. If you follow any particular worker around Grocery Adventures, you can begin to see the degree to which this is a collective endeavor. It is a veritable symphony of customer service. If you get a chance to step back and take in the store as a whole, you can begin to see how your experience is colorful and illustrated. There is a vivid landscape of sights and characters. If you get a chance to talk with the employees, you can begin to see the degree to which they actually like what they are doing too. They find it meaningful, customers like it, and dare I say they even have fun.

I chose Grocery Adventures given three factors, each pertinent to the aims of this analysis. First, it is a place that eulogizes service. While I assumed it would be integral to the store’s approach (it is service retail after all), I certainly did not anticipate how central the emphasis is. But this good fortune turned highly informative for understanding the workings of the service labor process, both within and beyond the store. Second, as the pseudonym suggests, Grocery Adventures intends to be just that – adventurous. Towards this effort, it is as much aesthetic as it is physical, emotional and interactional. The combined efforts from the organization, and employees themselves, make it an ideal setting to explore the increasing prominence of aesthetics in service work. Lastly, as it turns out, Grocery Adventures is something of a cultural hub whereby jobs align with what workers find meaningful. In short, there is a remarkable degree to which food and fun take precedence over money and power.

From the beginning, my personal experience with, and scientific understanding of service work, suggested that there is something that separates it out as a unique occupational form. Thinking through the different strategies for a project of this caliber, one question chomped at my curious bit: why service work? What is it about working with people (so much as things) that is so appealing to a growing sub-segment of the workforce? Stereotypical images abound. Workers toiling endlessly under the iron fist of organizational policy for little, or insecure pay. Exhausting
jobs that tax the bodies’ physical, mental and emotional capacities. A rotating cast of characters, alienated from one another by high turnover. And on top of this all sits a never-ending line up of selfish customers with far-to-unreasonable demands. Now I do not know if I found the answer to the proverbial why, but what I did find adds a depth and richness to our understanding of service work. To these findings I now turn.

Coworkers in Service Work

The first substantive chapter reveals the importance of coworkers within the service labor process. From the perspective that there exists a “sociable means” (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003) that enables service workers to prop up the appropriate emotive states over the course of an arduous shift, I extend the concept of horizontal relations. These are the relations that exist between coworkers in similar positions dealing with similar work challenges. I show they serve essential functions that enable work processes to unfold as they do. The corollary is that service work is better understood as a collective endeavor; the end form conditioned by the shared understandings in and among service workers. At the same time the horizontal relations help, they can also harm. This is made evident when any individual is not pulling their weight and coworkers (not management!) step in and sanction one another. In either case, helpful or harmful, the horizontal relations unmask the complexities of face-to-face service work.

Regarding a collective endeavor, the horizontal relations condition the end form of service at Grocery Adventures in several ways. First, service at Grocery Adventures is captured under the umbrella of a so-termed “Ahoy! customer experience.” This is a highly ambiguous concept with no codified rules or procedures that specifically outline exactly how to dazzle the customer. From this ambiguity, it follows that there is no routine to speak of. Each service interaction is (ideally) unique to the service recipient. After all, in the parlance of the values guide, it is their store, and they likely have particular tastes and preferences. In lieu of a
procedural overlay, workers turn to each other, making the ambiguous concrete, while adding a degree of routine to the non-routine. I show how workers clarify a widespread (mis)understanding of “talking with people” and use formal group settings, informal grapevines of communication and interpersonal, collaborative efforts to give service an appropriate end form, and one that is considerably entertaining.

I also show how coworkers use the horizontal relations to manifest the service experience. That is, they labor together, both physically and emotionally. The labor process at Grocery Adventures is organized so that coworkers are needed in important and immediate ways. One prominent example is the bell system that calls other employees to the point of service. They bring needed items, exchange for different ones, check for items in the back stock and even help bag groceries, to name a few. This might be mistaken as workers simply helping each other out and/or taking a break from what they were doing. But that it happens at the point of service suggests something different. It is often the case that coworkers become part of the service interaction itself, engaging the customer and constructing the service experience. In doing so, the interaction and concomitant processes of emotional labor emerge dyadic rather than the burden of a lone individual. Not only does this work to make for service as conventionally expected (usually “pleasant”), but coworkers can also buffer each other from mounting tensions should things go haywire.

A third item specific to the horizontal relations speaks to the so-termed triangulation of interests (Leidner, 1993) present in service work. The relationships between management, workers and customers provide a framework whereby each is vying for control (and power), with alliances that shift between the three parties. Sometimes two (or even three) sets of interests align; sometimes they do not. I do not dismiss this schema; each party is unequivocally present at Grocery Adventures. Rather, I add coworkers to the mix; a fourth set of interests that reconfigure
the battle for control. They are a mainstay of the service labor process; very specific ways are noted above. But more than those, they decide the terms of service, what they will or will not do in the name of customer service and rearticulate the terms of a potentially subservient status. Is the customer always right? Not if you ask coworkers. Moreover, at the same time coworkers’ work with each other, I show they also work on each other. Negative sanctions emerge from individual workers and through structural mechanisms to set the collective record straight.

**Aesthetics in Service Work**

The second substantive chapter calls attention to an ever-more-present element of the service experience, aesthetics. Here I refer to those visual elements that condition our sensate capacities, signaling to the customer or client how the experience ought to be. For one example, the dimmed lighting and clean-cut, black-uniformed workers at a high-end dining establishment might convey a sense of the finer things in life. For another example, the Hawaiian-shirted full time employees at Grocery Adventures primes for the exotic. Heeding the call by Wharhurst and Nickson (2007) I disentangle some of the aesthetic components that configure into service experiences.

The starting point is *aesthetic labor* (Nickson et al., 2001), defined as the mobilization, development (and ultimately commodification) of the embodied capacities and attributes of employees (Nickson, et al., 2001). Much like Hochschild (1983) showed service employees must convey the correct emotions, Nickson et al., (2001) suggest service employees must also convey the correct images. They need to look the part so to speak, arousing the appropriate service interactions with customers (Nickson et al., 2001). This at least makes intuitive sense. Who of us would take fashion advice from the unkempt? At the same time, to borrow a colloquialism, who of us trusts a skinny chef? My point is that with a multitude of service organizations to patron,

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79 Aesthetic elements might also be aural, but the focus at Grocery Adventures is visual.
and countless customer preferences, there is certainly going to be variation. Service organizations
certainly do not fill the same niche, retail the same products or provide the same services. It
follows that the aesthetic demands placed on service workers will consequently vary too.

The data are quite clear in this regard. Grocery Adventures places but two formal
demands (requirements) on workers. First, they must adorn a uniformed shirt \(^{80}\) given to them by
the organization. Second, they must wear a closed-toed shoe. Outside these constraints (and I am
reluctant to call them that), workers are free, and often encouraged to dress and accessorize in
ways that they feel comfortable. Individual styles are regularly the order of the workday. This lax
approach is not inconsistent with the aesthetic aims of the organization however. It actually works
with it. Grocery Adventures is suggestive of the exotic as noted. The corollary is that one also has
a good time on their culinary trips, meeting animated characters along the way. It makes little
sense to enforce a comprehensive set of what I call appearance rules \(^{81}\) to follow. Thus exists a
symbiosis. Employees match the organizational aesthetic, and also work to make it up. One can
almost hear the exchange: “Here’s a colorful, floral-print shirt. There are some extras in the back
if you need. Oh, the visible neck tattoo? No problem. I have one myself!”

Given this organizational space for style, I ask (and answer) a related inquiry: can
employees do anything they want? In short, no. A degree of aesthetic labor (as originally
conceived) is present. While there is not a set of appearance rules to follow, the embodied
capacities and attributes of employees are mobilized and developed (see Nickson et al., 2001).
One widespread practice is the theme days that call on employees to costume themselves with
specific, and sometimes elaborate attire. Some themes are widely recognized holidays, but more
interesting is the days thought up by employees themselves. Here, workers decide to increase

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\(^{80}\) Full time employees wear a Hawaiian-style shirt. Part time employees have short or long sleeved t-shirts
in different colors and designs that bear the company’s logo.

\(^{81}\) I chose appearance rules to mirror Hochschild’s (1983) use of feeling rules.
their own aesthetic labor! Participation is not mandatory per se, but workers can (and sometimes do) heckle the non-participants. Another instance that evinces aesthetic labor is the times when management intervenes to realign employees. Though few and far between, they reify the reality of aesthetic labor within the service labor process at Grocery Adventures.

From this perspective, I challenge the degree to which aesthetic labor is in fact a laborious, coercive process. This parallels Lopez’s (2006) approach to emotional labor whereby he rightfully suggests that organizations need not be coercive, and can leave space for employees to make meaningful emotive connections with service recipients, rather than feeling hounded by an uncompromising set of “feeling rules” (Hochschild, 1983). Applied here, I show that Grocery Adventures rearticulates the concept of aesthetic labor in the very same way. A spectrum for understanding emerges. On one end, there is a rigid set of appearance rules as Wharhurst and Nickson, (2007) might suggest. On the other end are places like Grocery Adventures, where considerable space is made for employees to fashion their own images and express their own personal styles. Seemingly paradoxical, but serving the individual and the organizational ends nonetheless.

**Culture in Service Work**

The third and final substantive chapter, among other things, most specifically addresses the question of “why” as suggested above. In some ways that question lies at core of what is presented. Upon getting a sense of the socio-demographic makeup of the staff at Grocery Adventures, I found that many have, suffice to say, other options. This is especially poignant when considering there is a degree of educational attainment that is not often associated with service workers like these. At the very least, this indicates they have access to other occupations. In addition, over time, a conceptual disconnect emerged. Workers expressed a genuine liking of

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82 Over the course of my tenure, there were only two such instances.
the work, the store and the organization, but there is no mistaking it as anything but grocery service retail. However, I argue we can disentangle these incongruities by using a conceptual lens that goes all to unrecognized in studies of service work: culture.

I specifically apply a *theory of status relations* (Milner, 2004) to show that working at Grocery Adventures (but also service work more generally) is driven by cultural power that comes to the forefront when economic and/or political resources are blocked, limited or less desired. To reiterate briefly here, the theoretical application suggests that individuals can exercise three particular forms of power, economic power, political power and cultural power (Milner, 2004). Economically, there is income, wealth and the like. Politically, there is the ability to impart one’s will (generally speaking). Culturally, there is status, or the social acceptance of one’s identity. The more of these anyone has, the more power they exercise respectively. Alternatively, when anyone of these is reduced, individuals or groups will seek out another (Milner, 2004). The practical application to Grocery Adventures is threefold. Economically, there are wages, salaries and benefits, extended to both part and full time workers. Politically, there is autonomy (more micro) and access to decision making processes (more macro). Culturally, there are the preferences that employees bring to, and also the statuses substantiated within, the organizational framework. As it stands, the latter are markedly important.

Recall that Milner’s (2004) theoretical orientation emerges from his analysis of high school teenagers. Given my focus on service workers, qualifications are made. First, economically speaking, workers find financial independence, and full time staff can make a considerable amount of money. Neither I, nor they, discount this higher degree of economic power. But at the same time, wages, salaries and benefits do not make wealthy individuals per se. As the data indicate, more economic power is but part of the story. Second, politically speaking,

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83 I add this latter item to the discussion of Milner’s (2004) “theory of status relations” given the different populations under investigation for his analysis and mine.
all workers have substantial autonomy at the micro level, as they are essentially free to get the job done as they see fit. But workers, and especially those who are part time, lack access to decision making at the macro level. While their input is solicited by the store, by no means do they set organizational policy or restructure the service labor process at Grocery Adventures. So like economic power, the political front is also but part of the story.

The theory of status relations (Milner, 2004) suggests that individuals draw on those sources of power that are most available to them. From the above, there is a distinct sense that workers are limited along the economic and political fronts. Wages and benefits provide some motivation and a generally acceptable standard of living. Autonomy over work tasks is quite valued, but voice is rather drowned out at the organizational level. What are they left with? A situation where culture emerges as an increasingly significant source of power and meaning, offering intangible rewards that reportedly supersede others. The data are clear, and reveal several important items. Employees value working with people, not as service providers, but as an extension of their cultural preferences. Bruce is a good example. As a drama/theater major in college, the job aligns with what he likes to do: entertain people. In his words, “do my ‘thang’.” More revealing is this has not been the case across his service experience. Other places have not given him space to “do my ‘thang’”, instead, fencing him in the structural and organizational frameworks.

Broadly characterized, the cultural framework at Grocery Adventures centers on food, fun and the unconventional. These are the things workers are looking for, and Grocery Adventures is an excellent match. Workers are free to bring and exercise their identities at work. I use the descriptive “foodies.” Grocery Adventures is a place to express and develop culinary
expertise. It is also a place where employees genuinely have fun. With a relaxed attitude, the personalities of workers come through, and at times demanding that workers enjoy themselves. As Crystal once noted, “you can’t not have fun here.” Lastly, employees (and Grocery Adventures) appreciate a maverick approach to work, life and identity. The organization values the unique and quirky, so there is no fear of reprisal from that end. The customers know them as food experts, capsizing the longstanding, presumed inferiority of service workers. This leaves just the workers themselves. In short, they need not pull punches, and can be their very own bona fide selves. In the end, power in culture engenders a status that makes these workers, and their jobs, “cool.”

The Adventures and Beyond

Given the qualitative approach to this study, my findings address important micro-level phenomenon that regularly occur within the service labor process. Researching service work inevitably begins with the premise that working with (and on) people is unique, and that fact separates out service work from other occupational forms. Only by exploring these interactive frameworks from the level of workers and organizations can we better understand the nature of this type of work. In addition, service jobs vary, with some at the higher ends and some at the lower ends of the occupational spectrum. It follows that the dynamics presented here fluctuate across the hierarchy. But regardless the micro-focus on service work and this particular worksite (and perhaps because of), I make several key contributions.

First and foremost is an elaboration of interactive service work as collective so much as individual. Up to this point, I find this has been largely glossed over with the implication that service is between a worker and a customer or client. Some have harkened the collective notion.

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84 One revealing aside, two individuals working through culinary school helped fund their education by working at Grocery Adventures. At one point, each had run the “tasting program” that prepared and created new recipes using store products for customers to sample.
For one example, Hochschild (1983) alluded to a shared sense among coworkers in similar positions or work arrangements. For another example, Korczynski (2000) explicitly shows the relevancy of coworkers, but “off the clock” so to speak. Pushing coworkers center stage draws out their importance in ways that have heretofore been underdeveloped. Their role within the act of work itself adds another dimension. It is one thing to find someone to talk to during breaks and down times, but it is quite another to have active support during critical junctures (i.e., at the point of service). Moreover, this further shows how workers (and coworkers) are agentic; actively shaping the course of their daily work lives. Drawing on each other, they battle back against the organization but also the demands of customers.

However there is still work to be done. As Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) suggested, a “sociable means” exists among workers who labor together. While inspiring to my approach, I cannot say I have elaborated exactly what those sociable means are. Coworkers are a good starting point, but a better answer would come from exploring the interpersonal. What are the strategies used to boost each other up? What are the frames workers use to understand their shared circumstances? Addressing items like these would clarify those means. What scholars of service work can take away is a conceptual frame to apply: a trapezoid of competing interests. A multitude of questions can be asked and explored. What types of service work better draw on the horizontal relations? Is there something unique about organizations that allow them to flourish (or not)? How is the service labor process different when there are fewer coworkers or unsupportive relations between them? Looking at different types of jobs and organization through this lens will undoubtedly help move things forward, and triangulate data from highly valuable resource: coworkers.

Our understanding of service work also benefits from the attention paid to aesthetic labor (Nickson et al., 2001) in this analysis. The contours of modern society are increasingly visual.
Popular advertisements in the 1980s featuring Andre Agassi (the top tennis player in the world at the time) told us “Image is everything.” When Sprite reinvented their brand in the early 2000s, their marketing strategists told us “Image is nothing.” But even that nothing is something, and aesthetics continue to proliferate the social and cultural zeitgeist. As a means of differentiation in a progressively complex society, it stands to reason (and I show) they follow us into the workplace. Organizations use visual cues and décor to distinguish themselves from competitors. Underneath those umbrellas, service staff is necessarily involved.

Previous studies that examine the role of aesthetics in service work are right to suggest it is part and parcel of the service experience. While the landscape was/is colored with emotive aspects that are well established, aesthetics (and investigation thereof) add further illustration. With aesthetic labor as a good starting point, workers are the vehicles through which service is provided. The inescapable fact is that they will be seen; images are conveyed. This is problematic when they are used for the sole purposes of the organization and blocks employment opportunities for those without them. But there is clear variation in the approaches taken by organizations and workers too. Like the case of Grocery Adventures, there are certainly others (perhaps competitors) that maintain aesthetic themes that are equally unrestrictive.

As it currently stands, there is still much to disentangle. But I clearly show the perspective that aesthetic labor need be coercive is limiting. It narrows the conceptual frame to only particular images and aesthetic forms. As organizations vary, so to do their aesthetic terms. At the same time, the body at work is not necessarily the same as “mobilizing the embodied capacities of workers” (Nickson, et al., 2001). Moreover, those organizations that do maintain a strict set of appearance rules to follow may not confine employees so much as fit their preferences. Lastly, the suggestion that aesthetic labor is ultimately commodified needs further investigation.

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85 By “body at work” I mean that physical bodies and a code of dress are inevitable given (1) people staff service jobs (not machines) and (2) social taboos call for bodies to be clothed.
investigation. Neither previous studies, nor this one, effectively show that this is the case. These suggestions for future research command our attention to fully gauge the form and function of aesthetic labor in service work.

Perhaps most germane to moving our understanding of service work forward is a keen awareness of the culture that buttresses the structures that organize work forms. If one accepts that culture is “ways of doing” (a general definition), then a growing service sector will likely give rise to many interesting ways. While I address but one facet of culture as it pertains to service work, it is still a step in the right direction. The central takeaway is that culture is meaningful to workers. It allows them to make sense of what it is they are doing there in the first place. It also reifies their identities by giving space and place for self-expression. Thinking more broadly, culture could very well be the defining feature of work life for an entire cohort of workers, many similar to those investigated here. Why? These findings indicate it can compensate when other work rewards are blocked, seem inaccessible or unappealing.

Service work scholars can further benefit from cultural approaches as the work form brings status to the front lines. Not only are emotions and images given and received in service interactions, statuses are constructed. I show that these statuses can emerge from (sub)cultural frameworks within groups (of individuals) and organizations. From this, the service labor process plays out in a multi-layered field of cultural cues that organize and coordinate activity as much as structural elements do. Culture gives us important referent points that help workers navigate the conditions of their employment. To borrow from Swidler (1986), it readies our “toolkit” for the service labor process. At Grocery Adventures, it is filled with things like the emphasis on food, the “Ahoy! customer experience”, styles of dress, language used, employee preferences but also their interpretations. Not only do these condition the work process, it also conditions the
consumption process. Customers, the cultural outsiders, receive those cultural cues, acclimating them in terms of what to expect.

It stands to reason that other stores and organizations will have different cultural frameworks that can serve as a jumping off point for investigation. For example, one respondent of mine referred to his time working for a competitor, suggesting that “You can hide at (the competitor), but you can’t hide at Grocery Adventures.” In relation to the above, the indication is that culture figures more prominently into Grocery Adventures than elsewhere. Perhaps given remuneration, perhaps given autonomy (or equivalent) I cannot say for certain. But this does suggest differences do exist. Furthermore, not all cultural frameworks are likely to be as supporting as Grocery Adventures. Examining what makes for support and what makes for deviance, resistance and workplace countercultures can only add to our understandings of culture within service work.

A final item to consider it that this analysis convincingly shows why culture matters. That is, how it is triangulated with an economic and political realm that overlay the service labor process. But it does not exactly tell us how culture matters. That is, the data tell us little about the process whereby culture becomes significant and how it is put to use. By no means am I dismissing the importance of why culture matters as addressed here. But asking and answering questions about how culture matters, how it is formed, and what specific strategies groups use to make it their own can only add to this discussion (and others). One perspective suggests that a group style might emerge that conditions the patterns for interaction using (group-based) boundaries, bonds and speech norms (Eliasoph and Licherman, 2003). This group style might then serve the purpose of designating what is appropriate, inappropriate, good, bad, acceptable or
unacceptable for group members (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003). From this perspective, we will get a better sense of how service jobs use culture within the service labor process.

This analysis challenges some of the longstanding assumptions implicit in our conceptualizations of service workers and the dynamics surrounding the labor process. It undermines several perceptions of service work. First, that service jobs like these are a repository for the less qualified, unambitious nomads of the occupational landscape. Second, that workers are there not because they want to, but because they have to. Wandering aimlessly from one menial arrangement to the next, with service jobs the turn-styles through which they move. Third, that service organizations do not trust employees to do, well…anything. Nor do they extend any accoutrements to better their working lives. Looking ahead, we must consider that alternatives indeed exist. There are spaces within the service lexicon (and the occupational hierarchy) where workers can seek out jobs they want and create and find meaningful experiences. And with an ever-growing service sector, in many ways we have to.

86 I say “might” in that I cannot speak definitively to these processes given the data presented here.
References


