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Waging a Living in Casual Dining Restaurant Chains

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Sociology

by

Hannah Blythe Bower

December 2012

Dr. Martha Copp, Chair

Dr. Lindsey King

Dr. Theresa Lloyd

Keywords: restaurant chains, casual dining, servers, customers, sexual harassment, games

ABSTRACT

Waging a Living in Casual Dining Restaurant Chains

by

Hannah Bower

Through in-depth interviews with 14 restaurant servers who worked in “casual dining” restaurant chains, this study explores service work and servers’ perceptions of restaurant culture.

Interactions between servers and customers are examined through the lens of servers’ personal experiences. The analysis of interview data focus on how servers understand their role, how “casual dining” restaurant chains try to avoid the appearance of fast food outlets, and how “the customer is always right” slogan affects servers and customers. As a response to difficult and inflexible structural conditions present in restaurant work, servers establish short-lived camaraderie with each other through games, harassment, and deriding low-status customers to get through their shifts. The thesis closes by examining possible ways to combat the effects of this exploitative industry on servers.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to
the memory of
my Mimi and Grandpa.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, thesis committee, Dr. Lloyd and Dr. King, for taking the time to read and comment on my thesis. Your time and efforts are invaluable to me. Thank you, Dr. Martha Copp, for pushing me through as my thesis advisor even during the times I dragged my feet. Without your patience, encouragement, and diligence, I would not have been able to do this.

Thank you, Christine, my mother, for being my voice of reason. Thank you for listening to me cry when I did not think I had it in me to finish. Thank you, Caleb for working extra hours, so I did not have to work. Thank you Natalie and Kristen for the hours of listening. Your friendship is so important to me. I love each and every one of you.

Lastly, thank you, respondents for participating in this study and enduring the interview process. Without all of you, there would be no thesis!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Americans center their social interactions around food, but not necessarily around its preparation, as is the practice in other cultures. According to the National Restaurant Association (NRA), many Americans now treat restaurant dining as an everyday experience rather than a luxury. Americans eat in restaurants about four times per week (NRA 2000). People spent an average of \$2505 per household on restaurant food in 2010 (NRA 2012). However, even for people who eat at home, eating prepared food outweighs cooking from scratch. Because Americans now think of themselves as living busier lives, restaurants are a growing service industry providing not just places to eat, but also many more jobs for workers (NRA 2012). It is projected that there are now about 1 million restaurant locations in the United States (NRA 2012). The restaurant industry is projected to make \$632 billion this year (NRA 2012). Servers alone held about 2.3 million jobs in 2010 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012).

Researchers have done studies on servers in restaurants as early as 1907 (Tanner). Tanner, doing participant observation, found that “waitresses” worked long, strenuous hours. She argued, like Jane Addams, that the workday should be eight hours in length, especially for waitresses (1907:55). William H. Whyte (1946) published a study using research assistants working as waitresses. In an industry where human relations stand out, Whyte found that waitresses work under many pressures that can affect their relationships with coworkers and customers and create problems (1946). Today, the industry consists of three main types of establishments: low-end, middle-range, and high-end restaurants (Hall 1993; Hallett 2003; Lerum 2004). Low-end fast food restaurants like Wendy’s or McDonald’s consist of ordering from a window or counter and quickly receiving the relatively inexpensive food, mostly fried,

with impersonal albeit "friendly" service. Customers have limited contact with workers who stand behind a counter or at a drive through window. Workers typically make minimum wage (\$7.25/hr.) and do not work for tips. This job sector is occupied by mostly young Americans and is typically a temporary work solution (Leidner 1991). Working in low-end and middle-range restaurants requires less than a high school degree and no prior on the job experience. Middle-range and high-end restaurants differ from the low-end by offering full service to customers. Workers interact more with customers and wait on them as they dine. The type of food at both middle-range and high-end restaurants is expected to be a better quality than that in a low-end restaurant. Middle-range restaurants cater to a more middle class clientele. These restaurants attempt to make a dining experience personal for the customer, yet with standardized operations that customers can count on. Middle-range restaurants do not take reservations (except for large parties); instead, people can walk into middle-range establishments and be seated by a host right away or wait in line with a pager. High-end restaurants offer a more exclusive dining experience for their customers, who must make reservations hours, days, or even weeks in advance. These businesses may have fewer options on their menu and the food is usually prepared and directed by a trained chef, whereas food is prepared by cooks in the other types of restaurants.

The majority of corporate low-end and middle-range restaurants have become standardized using Ray Kroc's model that George Ritzer (2010) refers to as "McDonaldization." McDonaldization is "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world" (Ritzer 2010:4). The key points about McDonald's success are "efficiency, calculability, predictability and control" (Ritzer 2010:16-18). This sort of business model encourages people to rely on fast food as a way to get their food and meals. Customers are guaranteed the same service and

product every time they visit, so they can get in and out quickly (Ritzer 2010). All of this is done to maximize profits. What started as a model for McDonald's to organize their business has become so attractive and profitable that many low-end and middle-range restaurants (fast food and casual dining) now embrace this model as well. Successful adopters are low-end chains like Taco Bell and Pizza Hut and middle-range chains like Chili's and Olive Garden (Ritzer 2010).

Low-end and middle-range chains are paying close attention to McDonaldization principles. Workers are a replaceable commodity whose hours, behavior, and appearance are closely governed. Managers schedule workers to come in according to the volume of customers throughout the day. Workers may only come in for a few hours to work a lunch/dinner rush and then be sent home. Workers cannot always count on a set number of hours from week to week. Workers wear uniforms and are instructed to be personable with the customers but still share their own personalities (Leidner 1991). They are required to maintain the routinized nature of the restaurant and embody its "brand." If they fail to follow the standards set before them, then there are more people waiting at the door for a job. It is nothing for restaurants to have numerous employees cycling in and out. The restaurant industry refers to this as turnover, which according to the National Restaurant Association (2011) declined from 2008-2010. This decline coincided with the economic turndown.

McDonaldization has become the norm in managing and structuring restaurants. Yet the middle-range "casual dining" restaurant tries to create an atmosphere that does not feel like the service from a low-end or fast food chain restaurant because of the cultural stigma they carry. Fast food is generally perceived as unhealthy, greasy, and delivered quickly. Middle-range restaurants want customers to think they are eating better food but still receive consistent food with efficient delivery of service. They target middle-class Americans and they want customers

to feel special without paying the price of visiting a high-end restaurant where service might be stuffy. They want to be known as reputable dining establishments making customers feel comfortable, as if they were dining in their own home. Darden, the corporation that owns restaurants like Olive Garden, Red Lobster, and Longhorn Steakhouse, claims they have “grown to become the world’s largest full-service restaurant company.” They state they are “committed to delivering genuine service to others.” These chain restaurants provide servers to wait on customers throughout their meals rather than merely carry food to tables and consider the service completed. Middle-range restaurants thus promote full service, attention to detail, and personable interactions similar to a high-end restaurant. But rather than offer a high-end customer experience, middle-range restaurants require scripted greetings, irregular hours for workers, and low pay like low-end restaurants.

Even though these restaurants target middle-class Americans, the workers are considered to be members of a low-status job sector. Researchers have found that workers in low status work are more likely to experience alienation from their jobs. In their summary of the concept of alienation, building on the ideas of Karl Marx, Hodson and Sullivan (2012) write, “alienation occurs when work provides inadequately for human needs for identity and meaning. Work is alienating to the extent that one does it only from economic necessity, not for its intrinsic pleasures” (2012:58). Because wages for many lower and middle-income Americans have stagnated, work is an “economic necessity” rather than a pleasurable or stimulating activity that offers meaningful ties to their work (Economic Policy Institute 2012). Workers can also become separated from their jobs because “someone else controls the pacing, patterns, timing, tools, and techniques of their work” (Hodson and Sullivan 2012:58).

Restaurant workers experience much of this strain. They are unable to make their work their own because it is controlled by others, rewards are unpredictable, and they begin to feel alienated as a result. As other researchers have found, when workers feel alienated, they invent a variety of ways to cope (Ehrenreich 2001; Guiffre and Williams 1994; Heinsler, Kleinman, and Stenross 1990; Lerum 2004; Tucker 1993; Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 1999). I am particularly interested in how the business structure of middle-range restaurants adds to servers' alienating work conditions. I am also interested in how middle-range, "casual dining" restaurants shape customers' expectations during their visits.

My thesis examines the perspectives of restaurant servers working at middle-range restaurants and how the aforementioned tensions affect them. I conducted in-depth interviews with 14 restaurant servers in four "casual dining" restaurant chains. Servers described the nature of service work in these restaurants and shared their perceptions of restaurant culture. Following this chapter, I will discuss the methods I used for my research and describe the participants. The data focus on how servers understand their role, how "casual dining" restaurant chains try to avoid the appearance of fast food outlets, and how "the customer is always right" slogan affects servers and customers. In response to their work conditions, servers establish short-lived camaraderie with each other through games, harassment, and deriding low-status customers to get through their shifts. I close by examining possible ways to combat the effects of this exploitative industry on servers.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

I conducted 14 interviews with male and female servers in restaurants in Johnson City, Tennessee. I interviewed 2 males and 12 females. Respondents were selected with a “snowball” sample. I contacted a couple of servers I knew from when I worked in the restaurant industry. These servers recommended others who might be interested in participating in the study. After respondents consented to the interview, I asked them to fill out a “face sheet” that gathered basic background information (e.g., birth year, relationship status, years in the restaurant industry). I then asked respondents a series of 29 questions regarding their jobs as servers. Some of the interview questions covered servers’ specific duties, problems encountered, and their perceptions of these problems. I chose to conduct in-depth interviews rather than administer a survey or questionnaire because open-ended questions allowed the respondents to speak candidly about their jobs. Please see Appendix A for a copy of the face sheet and B for all interview questions.

I conducted the interviews in private settings such as my own home and servers’ homes, which helped respondents speak freely about their workplace and themselves. Because I was a server for some time, the respondents and I quickly developed rapport; shedding light on the culture in which servers work was important to them and me. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. I audio recorded the interviews with the permission of the respondents and then transcribed them in full. I assigned a pseudonym to each respondent in order to preserve anonymity.

The 14 participants worked at four different local restaurants (all pseudonyms): American Bar and Grille, Casual Café, Seafood Heaven, and Asian Café. Nine servers were employed at American Bar and Grille, one server was from Asian Café, one was from Casual Café, and three

were from Seafood Heaven. Table 1 describes some of the respondents' social characteristics. The respondents' ages ranged from 21 to 48 years old and their work experience in the restaurant industry varied from 3 to 30 years. The majority of respondents had worked in other restaurants before their current one. It was common for servers to move to another restaurant if they were making poor money; if another, presumably more profitable restaurant opened in the area; if their restaurant closed; and if they were fired. For their educational backgrounds, 12 respondents had some college, were currently attending college, or had earned advanced degrees. Only one respondent with a high school diploma planned on attending college in the future; the other respondent, 48 years old with a high school diploma, did not plan on leaving the restaurant industry for school or otherwise. GEDs, high school diplomas, and college degrees are not required to work in the restaurant industry.

Table 1. Description of Respondents

Pseudonym	Age	Race ^a	Marital Status ^b	Sexual Orientation ^c	Education ^d	Restaurant ^e	Years in Restaurants ^f
Alice	23	W	R	H	SC	ABG	4
Allison	35	W	M	H	SC	ABG	12
Emily	29	W	S	L	M	SH	6
Erika	20	W	R	H	HS	ABG	3
Helen	21	W	S	L	C	ABG	4
Jacob	31	W	M	H	SC	CC	8
Jennifer	48	W	M	H	HS	ABG	30
Kate	26	K	R	H	B	ABG	10
Kristi	23	W	S	H	C	ABG	7
Lance	27	W	R	H	B	AC	6
Samantha	32	W	D	H	M,C	SH	3
Sandy	26	W	M	H	SC	ABG	7
Sophia	23	W	S	H	C	ABG	6
Tiffany	28	W	S	H	B	SH	7

^aRace: W=White, K=Korean

^bMarital Status: R=Relationship, M=Married, S=Single, D=Divorced

^cSexual Orientation: H=Heterosexual L=Lesbian

^dEducation: HS=High School, SC=Some College, B=Bachelor's degree, C=Currently attending college, M= Master's degree

^eRestaurant: The restaurant the respondent works in currently. AC=Asian Café, ABG=American Bar and Grille, SH=Seafood Heaven, CC=Casual Café

^f‘Years in restaurants’ refers to number of years respondent has worked in the restaurant industry.

CHAPTER 3

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Server Role

Restaurant servers, like many other service workers, must come to work dressed for their shift and ready to perform their duties. They are required to have a clean, pressed uniform, and management requires servers to be well groomed with neatly styled hair. A smile is considered part of their readiness as well. Beyond grooming and appearance, some servers discussed the mental preparation they do in order ready themselves for work. Lance said,

You have to know what managers are on and how the shift is going to run. The biggest thing you have to do is get yourself ready to be detached, because people are going to treat you like crap. Other people will make your day. I'm not doing anything with my life; I'm feeding people's bellies and probably giving them heart disease. If I can make their day a little bit better and fatten their bellies maybe they'll be nice the rest of the day.

That's the mindset that I have going in.

As they prepared to start a shift, some servers suggested that they consciously steeled themselves emotionally for whatever ups and downs might come throughout their shift. As Lance said above, he had to ready himself to be detached because he claimed that people are going to treat him "like crap" (he did not specify whether he meant customers, coworkers, or managers). Kate explained that before she came in for a shift, she prepared herself to not receive any breaks throughout the night, even though breaks are a legal requirement. In other jobs, workers in Tennessee can count on a mandatory 30-60 minute break after working six hours. Servers usually do not receive this luxury and must prepare themselves to stand for an unknown amount of time until their shift is over.

Once servers have arrived at work, they commence a cycle of duties that stops only when they clock out from their shift. Every job entails cyclical and repetitive tasks, but servers' duties are contingent on their ability to multitask many chores throughout their shift. Multitasking is key because not only must servers keep the restaurant's public spaces clean (and especially their set of tables), but they must also remain aware of customers' needs, a message that their employers impress upon them.

Each of the restaurants where my participants worked followed the business model of "McDonaldization." While the model certainly influenced all business operations, the principles Ritzer identified--efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (Ritzer 2010)--directly affected servers' roles. The following list of tasks from American Bar and Grille reveals management's attempt to keep servers' minds trained simultaneously on personal service, generating profits, and efficiency. Workers had to memorize these "Ten Steps to Great Hospitality":

1. Make a great first impression: Greet guest and take beverage order--one minute
 - Smile and introduce yourself, unscripted and genuine.
 - Put beverage napkin down, logo facing the guest.
 - Suggest two specific beverages and two specific appetizers.
2. Show you know/Show you care: Deliver beverages and take appetizer order--three minutes
 - Run beverages to the table within thirty seconds of completed order, using Teamwork.
 - Take appetizer order and entrée order if guest is ready.
 - Offer soup or salad to go with their order.

3. Show you care: Deliver appetizer--seven minutes
 - Bring appetizer plates.
 - Ask guest if they [sic] need anything (Bring A1, 57, mustard, etc.)
 - Take entrée order if they have not already ordered.
4. Show you care: Take second beverage order, provide refills
 - Suggest a second specific drink.
 - Bring a fresh beverage napkin with new beverage.
 - Always hold glass under the logo [Coke or Pepsi].
5. Show you know/Show you care: Deliver entrée--14 minutes
 - Identify item you give the guest and warn of hot skillets or plates.
 - PRE-BUS all appetizer plates.
 - Invite guest to enjoy their [sic] meal and get whatever they need.
6. Show you care: Check back--two bites.
 - Check is down at lunch [at lunch, deliver the check after two bites].
 - Ask specific questions about food.
 - Using a dessert menu, suggest your favorite dessert and describe the ingredients with enthusiasm!
7. Show you know: Take dessert/dessert beverage order
 - Suggest specific desserts using sizzle words.
 - Suggest specific dessert drinks.
 - PRE-BUS Entrée plates.
8. Make the guest feel valued: Deliver dessert/dessert beverage--five minutes
 - Present personalized check face up [write a personalized thank you].

- Walk two tables away turn around to see if payment is on table.
 - Process payment within two minutes.
 - PRE-BUS everything but dessert plates and glasses.
9. Make a great last impression: Thank guest, invite to return.
- Use guest name if they [sic] used a credit card.
 - Thank them and ask them to return to see you!
10. Show you care: Prep for next guest--two minute table turn
- Wipe table and seats.
 - Reset tabletop and sweep floors.
 - Ready to go for next guest in two minutes.

The restaurant chain's list of steps end with a reminder to "know your guest and adjust service steps to their [sic] needs." What the list of steps omits, however, is that servers must engage in this process every time customers arrive and juggle their needs and the timing of tasks for each table throughout their shift, repeating this cycle each time new customers arrive.

When I asked workers to describe a typical shift, I learned that seasoned workers prepared their workspace in order to make sure they have everything they need for a shift. As Kate explained,

You have to make sure where your tables are that you're working in. See what kind of state your section is. If it's clean, if there are people who are transferring people [customers] to you. Greet them if there are people there, don't ignore them. Pick up, clean up, make sure you have all the supplies you need. Silverware, salt and pepper, sugars. The first part of the shift is spent making sure you have everything you need to work it.

Kate's description of her routine at the start of a shift signals her identity as a seasoned worker. Servers who had not worked long in the restaurant industry did not report any careful preparation. Instead they described arriving and waiting on tables right away.

Servers at each restaurant discussed how a typical shift involves balancing basic service duties with extra cleaning chores while attempting to manage each table differently (a topic I return to later). They were expected to maintain a specific section (an area with a given amount of tables) throughout their shift. Some restaurants restrict the number of tables a server can wait on. The servers must maintain this space while they are working and avoid letting their work spill over to other workers.

Each set of customers represents potentially different demands, and servers must alter their presentation of self to fit the customers' expectations; some customers need more attention than others. While these social interactions take place, the server is multitasking other duties that customers do not generally see. Servers tend to their extra assignments such as "running" food (taking food for customers to their own and other servers' tables), keeping drinks filled, and maintaining relationships with coworkers—cooks, bussers, hosts, servers, bartenders, and managers. Maintaining these relationships plays an important part in servers' shifts. While all of these positions are considered low-status work, with the exception of managers, workers in other positions can exert some power over servers. Hosts, even though they are required to go in a rotation, can ultimately choose where to seat customers as they arrive. Bussers can choose to avoid bussing servers' tables and cooks can choose to send food out incorrectly or be generally difficult. If servers upset a coworker or superior, they put themselves at risk for any of these punitive actions if their coworkers choose. Ultimately, these relationships affect servers' income, which I will discuss in the next section.

Each of the servers interviewed also maintained a “bank” to settle customers’ tabs. They served as a human cash register to their customers and were responsible for keeping track of this money. The computers they used to ring in orders had a credit card reader for non-cash tables. At the end of their shift, they were required to clean their section and workstation.

Once they were done, the servers assigned to close the shift (day or night) made sure the other servers cleaned what they were responsible for and then they could give their “cash out” (the money they were responsible for throughout the shift) to the manager. Credit card tips were subtracted from the cash owed and the server left with all of their tips.

In upscale restaurants, a more particular division of labor is common where other people perform extra duties. One person may refill water and non-alcoholic beverages, another person may roll silverware, and someone else washes dishes, sweeps, and busses tables. At a middle-range restaurant, like the four my respondents represent, servers ultimately function as quasi-independent contractors (see Bodvarsson and Gibson 1997; Paules 1991). They “rent” space (their station) for the shift and are expected to maintain it and follow corporate rules for how they dress and behave. They are expected to meet all needs (except cooking and dish-washing) at little to no cost, as the following section explains.

Money

Restaurant servers are excluded from national minimum wage law protections that cover most other workers. In 1996, the server minimum wage was raised to \$2.13 an hour (from \$2.03) and has stayed at this rate for the past 16 years. Minimum wage for all other non-farm workers is set at a higher level; although past legislative battles made national minimum wage increases difficult, the minimum wage has been increasing in a stepwise fashion since 2007.

Unfortunately, even though the “regular” minimum wage has increased, its rate of increase still falls below annual inflation levels. To an even greater degree, then, restaurant servers’ minimum wage is stagnant and lacks even the pretense of a connection to the cost of living. This structural condition forces servers to depend on tips more than ever.

Bodvarsson and Gibson argue that tipping is “both a social norm and a means of rewarding *good* service” (1997:187). Servers’ tips are thus dependent on customers’ satisfaction with the service they received. Unfortunately from the servers’ perspective, even if they consistently aim to provide good (or better than good) service, “Gratuities are voluntary payments for services received, made after-the-fact” (1997:187). Consequently, servers face routine uncertainty because they learn what their tip will be only after the customer’s meal has ended, often after the customer leaves.

Once the servers collect all of their payments and tips from a shift, servers in all but one restaurant in my study had to tip a percentage of their sales to the bartenders, host, and/or bus personnel. For American Bar and Grille, servers tipped 3 percent of their sales up to a maximum of \$20. The others, except for Asian Café, tipped 3 percent, but did not stop at \$20. This money came out of their tips regardless of the actual amount of tips they earned at the end of the shift. Because these servers must tip out their coworkers, their relationships with them must be carefully maintained. As I mentioned before, if servers upset their coworkers, coworkers may retaliate against servers. The relationship between servers and cooks is delicate as well. Cooks earn an hourly wage with reliable hours, which servers seemed to resent; however, cooks may resent servers who sometimes make more in tips per hour than their hourly wage.

As one can see, tips are structurally and economically central to servers’ jobs and are a source of both pleasure and uncertainty. When asked what they liked best about the job, some

servers said money was the best part. Emily said, “I can go in and work four hours and make \$100 [in tips]. The worst part is sometimes I can walk out with \$30. It’s a crapshoot. We’re all to some level, all servers have a gambling addiction.” Because tips were so critical to their livelihood, many servers mentioned anticipating how they were going to handle their tables before they greeted their customers. They mentioned sizing up the customers and estimating how much of a tip they might receive from a particular table. Many servers claimed that they could predict a tip by looking at a table just as poker players think they can guess an opponent’s hand. Tiffany said, “Being a server, you tend to judge people, and you shouldn’t...The ones that sometimes tend to surprise you, ...you can be like oh, that’s a three dollar table or that’s a \$10 table.” Servers also reported looking at the total of the bill, factoring how much they should receive as a tip, but not knowing what the actual tip would be.

Because they depended on tips just to “break even,” many servers devised strategies to make good tips or increase them. Some women believed unbuttoning their shirt improved their chances of receiving a better tip from a table of men. Many servers said flirting and chatting up their customers was a way they increased their tips. All servers commented that making mistakes was a way to decrease tips. Inadvertently, servers spent much of their shifts attempting to avoid mistakes (making sure every dish/beverage had the correct garnish, keeping glasses full, not forgetting to bring a table all the extras they need, such as napkins, dressings, bread etc.). Servers formed their impressions and developed their “theories,” but none reported systematically tracking what might produce the best tip from their customers. There would have to be a larger study to compare tipping across race, class, and gender categories, but workers forged ahead as if the research results had already been tallied. Not surprisingly, each server’s “findings” contradicted the others’.

Embodying the Casual Dining Experience

Servers work under two different, sometimes competing conditions. First, they must follow company guidelines by making an experience enjoyable for a customer, which takes time, and second, they must earn as much money for the restaurant as possible and receive as much tip as they can possibly get, which means working efficiently and quickly. Each of the four restaurants where interviewees worked try to cultivate an atmosphere of comfort and care for the customer. “Turning tables” (a phrase used to describe getting customers in and out in a timely fashion) is a way restaurants make a profit; however, restaurants do not want to seem like they are in the business of getting people in and out.

To establish an atmosphere that masks the emphasis on making profits, corporate figures shape the environment by using specific language to describe the dining experience. They call customers “guests” to make the experience more personable and status-conferring. Servers discussed having to treat customers as if they were a guest in their own home. One server said he did this by treating customers as if they were his grandmothers. I will discuss this further in the following section. Many middle-range corporate restaurants gentrify their service by trying to derive a higher-class experience out of a middle-class establishment. Scene setting hides the fact that the food at these middle-range restaurants is not particularly healthy; in fact, they are fast food in disguise. Kate said, “The workers joke that [American Bar and Grille is] a step above McDonalds.” While many restaurants have started campaigns that advertise menus with lower calories, many menu items are still over 1000 calories. If customers combine an appetizer, rolls, side salads, entrees with multiple sides, and dessert, they could potentially be consuming well over the 2000-calorie-per-day marker in one meal, yet the food is presented and described as fresh and healthy. They want to elevate the customer’s status behind their veil of fast food,

because eating healthily is associated with high class and eating junk food is associated with being low class.

Elevating a customer's status can create problems--not just problems for individuals eating particularly unhealthy meals, but problems for servers. Elevating the status of the customer encouraged some customers to be pretentious and hold sometimes-unattainable expectations of service. Servers reported customers dining with the expectation of a five-star dining experience. Servers also complained about customers not realizing that they had other tables to wait on, so they would be needy and pull them aside frequently asking for more rolls, dressing, chips, attention, etc. Encountering this problem on each shift could make servers feel used and exploited. They grew to distrust their customers for fear of maltreatment and ultimately feared losing their job if they did not make the customers happy. It is one thing for a manager to find out about a bad interaction between customers and servers, but if "corporate" finds out (if the customer calls the corporate headquarters, which often happens) it is entirely possible the server could lose his/her job because corporate managers had the final say and servers are generally not given the benefit of the doubt.

Based on my own work experience, I asked respondents if they had a specific script that they were supposed to follow. The servers reported that every restaurant had specific points that they were supposed to highlight in their initial greeting to the table, yet they were also, somewhat contradictorily, supposed to make the experience unique for each customer. For example, one restaurant instructed the servers to inquire why the customer was dining in their restaurant and if there was a special occasion. Another restaurant had to ask the same, but they had to work into the conversation something more personal than just asking about the weather. One server said she complimented customers' shoes, clothing, jewelry, and handbags in order to make a

connection with her customers even though she does not care about those things. Instructing servers to appear to take a personal interest in their customers helps the restaurant mute the impression that coming to the restaurant is a routine business transaction. Friendly interest in customers also serves to elevate the customers' status—to communicate that they are special people who deserve a one-of-a-kind experience at the restaurant.

Making an experience special and continuously exerting oneself to repeat the “special” treatment for each table can become laborious. With numerous customers per shift, there are only so many ways to make an experience seem special, especially if the restaurant is busy. Servers tried to be personal and spend quality time “buttering up” their tables (Hallet 2003). Servers had to make their tables believe they were genuinely interested in them; however, they also had to complete tasks efficiently (ringing in orders, refilling drinks, running food, resolving problems, and various cleaning tasks). For many servers, all it took is for something to go wrong (food taking too long, something wrong with the food, failing to refill a drink, or unintentionally offending a customer) and their fast-paced routine was messed up. When one thing went wrong to upset this balance, servers tended to have a hard time recovering and their other tables suffered (Whyte 1946). This balancing act, if not done well, can make the difference between a good, bad, or nonexistent tip.

Even though servers were expected to follow a script as a way to shape and control the customer's dining experience, customers could be hard to read. From my own experience, some customers like servers to get their food and drinks quickly and leave them alone. Other customers want their servers to schmooze with them, working hard for the money they are about to leave. In the restaurant business there did not seem to be a boundary line for how customers could treat servers. Servers, however, had to hold their tongue and smile through their teeth, no

matter their personal opinions, in order to keep their job and pay their bills. In the restaurant business, there are not hard line rules like this for customers. Servers reported customers grabbing their arms or tugging on them to get their attention. Servers struggled to create an atmosphere in which they could balance professionalism with camaraderie (an effort that Kari Lerum [2001] also found among exotic dancers); this balance was part of the job and “necessary to maintain control” (Lerum 2001:222). However, the “customer is always right” mantra makes maintaining this balance difficult most times.

The Customer is Always Right

Each restaurant associated with my study had its own take on the phrase “the customer is always right,” but the bottom line is that customers should always receive what, how, and when they want the service/food/drink they are purchasing. Ideally, this is how restaurants should operate; however, it can create problems along the way for customers, servers, and managers. In some cases, customers take advantage of this philosophy to the fullest extent. If their food is not what they expected, it is acceptable to send it back to the kitchen. If their service is not exactly what they wanted, they could complain to a manager or they could treat their server poorly—all of this is acceptable because the customer is the authority. They dictate what happens during their time in these restaurants. When customers had an “issue” during their visit, two restaurants had acronyms to help their servers deal with these problems on their own. American Bar and Grille used L.A.S.T. (Listen, Apologize, Solve, and Thank) and Seafood Heaven used L.E.A.P. (Listen, Empathize, Apologize, Promise). As Tiffany, from Seafood Heaven, explained, “You always want to listen to them, empathize, if I was in the situation, apologize, and promise that it’ll never happen again. I always try the best I can in my own hands.”

At some point, however, servers may be unable to fix a problem on their own and need managerial help. Emily explained what managers at Seafood Heaven did to accommodate customers, “Typically they’ll talk to them and try to schmooze them over and make them happy. They’ll fix as much as they possibly can. The last resort is to comp the meal [take the item they are unhappy with off their check] or give them a gift card.” Each restaurant would comp items off of customers’ checks to make them happy and hopefully have them return. However, based on the respondents’ and my experience, it seemed that particular customers returned and complained about the same things on a regular basis. Rather than treat this as a pattern to be stopped, servers felt that managers ultimately rewarded those customers for their complaints. Emily said, “They won’t do anything for the people [customers] who say how great everything was. Those people [customers] don’t get rewarded. We reward the negative.” Servers feared the way managers treated customers created “coupon customers” and “scammers.” Coupon customers rarely buy things full price. Customers like these are thought of as actively trying to find something wrong with their meal or dining experience every time they dine to avoid paying the full price. Sometimes customers would criticize the server’s service in order to receive discounts. Servers believe that these types of customers learn how to abuse the system, leaving servers feeling powerless to stop them. Dealing with this type of customer can create animosity in the server; as a consequence, the presence of the customer looms over the server who tries to guess what the customer wants.

Because servers were on the alert for customers who do this, they adapt by trying to avoid upsetting the customer. Servers reported lying to the customers about what happened to the customer’s food in order to save face and ultimately their tip. Perception is reality, so servers attempted to look busy making the customer think they were working hard. To preserve their

dignity and livelihood, servers blamed problems on the kitchen to alleviate themselves of responsibility. Because the server was the only face the customer saw, s/he alone bore the blame when it came to problems during the customer's dining experience. According to their problem solving mottos, servers must be the first to resolve the problem. Ideally, a server would get a manager involved to alleviate pressure from the customer. Using "LAST" and "LEAP," however, servers are encouraged to be the heroes. Servers can save the day if they resolve the issue, but problems can also quickly backfire on the server. These mottos and "The Customer is Always Right" philosophy have been created and enforced at the expense of the server's dignity. Servers believe most customers are aware of their role in this exchange, which gives customers power over servers. This can make servers' work unrewarding and difficult. Servers become cautious as they wait on their tables, especially if their customers have problems. With a sour taste in their mouths, servers may be reluctant to help customers to their fullest extent, causing more problems in the long run.

Workers strive for control but are still relatively powerless, similar to workers in other low-end restaurants (Hallet 2003). Yet middle-range restaurant servers differ from those employed in low-end and high-end restaurants because of the amount of emotional management workers must perform (Hallet 2003). Middle-range servers spend much more time interacting with customers than low-end restaurant workers do. Servers working in high-end restaurants focus on "dramatic showmanship" requiring "little emotional management" (Hallet 2003:711). These servers are recognized for their quasi-professional detachment and lack of emotional investment (Hallet 2003). Even though middle-range restaurant servers must appear to be personally engaged with customers as a requirement of their job, this requirement signals one of the ways they can be alienated from their work and customers. Consequently, workers' feelings

about their work and their jobs are affected. They may exhibit dissatisfaction, withdrawal, absenteeism, quitting, and passive resistance and engage in sabotage and theft (Hodson and Sullivan 2012).

Getting Through the Shift

Because shifts can be both repetitive and filled with uncertainty, the servers I interviewed admitted to playing games with each other in order to “get through the shift.” Servers discussed a game where they would look at a table and wager how much they thought they would receive as a tip at the end of the meal. Each server would venture to guess about the tip from 0 percent of the check to 20 percent. This is a game that was played repeatedly during a shift. Then servers played a game at the end of the shift where they guessed how much they each made total. In classical research on the sociology of work, workers revealed the importance of playing games as a way to get through their shifts and experience some small degree of autonomy. Donald Roy, in “Banana Time” (1959) was one of the first sociologists to find that games provide workers an incentive to keep working in the face of uninspiring tasks. In “Banana Time,” he describes his own experiences as a production worker who made a game out of setting simple goals; when he reached the first goal, he “rewarded” himself by setting a new goal (1959). Roy discusses how this is the only “substantial reward” for the repetitive work production linemen were doing (1959:161). In jobs free from the uncertainty of tips or piecework, workers have less need to play these games because they know what their paycheck will be every two weeks. For the servers I interviewed, the tip-guessing game may alleviate the stress of potentially being let down by a “poor” tip. If servers low-ball their tip, when they do

receive a low one, they might not be as disappointed as they would have been if they had guessed too high, especially since they have no control over how much a customer tips them.

Servers played other physical games with each other at each other's expense. The games varied from hugging, kissing, and groping each other (one server referred to this as "loving on each other") to making up names for coworkers and customers. They did not admit that this sort of behavior harmed anyone. Some servers explained that their restaurant had a "family" atmosphere. They claimed everyone hugged and "loved" on each other because they claimed they cared about one another and that these things brought them closer as friends. Servers saw their behavior and games as a normal way to bond and get through their shifts, even though some of their games could be classified as sexual harassment. The thought that they were becoming closer as friends and coworkers masked understanding sexualized physical contact as harassment. Patti Giuffre and Christine Williams (1994) found that restaurant servers frequently sexually objectify each other and customers at the expense of those who are not in privileged racial, sexual, and gender categories. Giuffre and Williams also found that restaurant servers see sexual harassment as normal (1994).

In my discussions with participants about physical contact (whether or not they recognized it as sexual harassment), servers portrayed it as an entertaining part of their everyday work. As Emily explained,

Hugging, kissing on the cheek, humping each other's legs. It all happens. There's nothing sacred in the restaurant. The guys play this game where they tap each other on the testicles. I wanted to play my own game, but none of the girls were for it!

To non-restaurant industry workers, this may seem like an offensive game played by some male coworkers. Another server, Helen, also characterized physical contact among co-workers as normal and affectionate:

The majority of people love on each other...It's a pretty open atmosphere. Everyone loves on each other and I get my butt slapped all the time, but it's just entertainment to keep the day going.

Even though the servers I interviewed all seemed to see physical contact as normal, not all claimed to participate in it. Alice, one of the older servers says,

I think it's just the nature of the beast. I think it's how people are. They are young and they're at the age where they're partying a lot more. They're just going to flirt a lot more. They're going to hang out a lot more and go out after work...It's just that sexual tension that makes a lot more money. I feel like it's kind of wrong for me to flirt cause I'm older, but I do it like not in your face flirty, but more joking. Cause I have a husband and three kids at home thank you very much!

Alice explained that she thought the sexual harassment happened amongst the younger staff members. She wrote off the behavior saying it was because they were young. Even to Alice, sexual harassment was normal. She did not feel right participating, however, because she was a little older. Lance explained why he played games and why he enjoyed working in restaurants,

The thing I love about working in restaurants is that sexual harassment does not exist.

There is a line, but for the most part, people who work in restaurants are easy going, fun, and realize that it's a shitty job. Little things like that help make the day go by. After I left Seafood Heaven, I found out there was a game that the male servers started playing

that involved reaching from behind and touching other male servers' testicles. I would have been really good at that! I've got long arms and I'm sneaky.

Servers did not go into detail about just what constituted sexual harassment in their workplace, but they frequently talked about "lines being crossed." The only way they explained what this line meant was to say that if someone did not like the behavior, it was his/her responsibility to notify the person that the line was crossed. This makes for a dangerous territory as a worker. How do you know what is sexual harassment, then? Until comparisons are made about what servers think is sexual harassment, contradictions become more apparent. When asked what the restaurant's policy was, Lance explained,

Does it matter? You're not supposed to make any lewd gestures, comments or anything like that. That's standard corporate bullshit. But we're in an industry where they treat us like shit. They treat us like objects every day and you have to have a vent for that. And if that's joking about other people being objects then you have to do what gets you through it. Time heals all wounds, but laughter does it quicker. And I mean that's my thoughts about it.

As Lance suggests, it seems likely that sexual harassment is prevalent in restaurant work because workers do not feel valued. Restaurant work is low-status. Workers complete repetitive tasks with uncertain earnings. Because of this nature of their work, workers treat harassment as a means to deal with their alienation. Alienation occurs when low-status work, seen as an economic necessity, is not fulfilling to the worker. However, sexual harassment they participate in to cope with this alienation does not change the structural problems of the job. Sexual harassment just preoccupies the servers and presents a short-term distraction.

Just as with the servers Guiffre and Williams studied, most sexual harassment was not taken seriously by the servers I interviewed, nor did I hear of restaurant management acting to stop it, except in one case. Ignoring their games and physical contact allows for these actions to continue. It also allowed for the maltreatment of women customers and opened the door for doing the same to women workers. Lance shared a story of a game he enjoyed playing with customers with or without their knowledge. He described an interaction with a table that involved making sexual advances towards a female customer.

One of my favorite games is to proposition older women without them knowing. Gesture at a glass and say “Ma’am can I fill that up for you?” Just little things that get me through my day. Only rarely do I get caught. I asked a lady if I could top off her wine glass, and she said “You might have trouble making it fit” and I just looked at her and said “Ma’am I never have problems making it fit.” She looked at her friend and said, “Did he just say that,” as I walked away. It makes you more money.

Lance, the server who was so forthcoming in discussing workers’ games, related another game that he and his coworkers played: spotting customers in the dining room and giving them crude nicknames in the form of acronyms. The goal of the game was to figure out what the acronym meant by looking at the customer in question. Lance described the game in detail, “At [Seafood Heaven] we used to play a fun game where we came up with acronyms and we’d say things like we’ve got a BFB at table 32. We’d go out there and look and this lady has a big scowl on her face and a broomstick up her ass, we’d be like oh, we’ve got a Big Fuckin’ Bitch.” This thrill of this “game” was that it invited servers to make disrespectful remarks about customers in the dining room without the customers’ or management’s knowledge. Servers also reported using the kitchen as a refuge to talk about their customers without making an effort to be polite. In

another type of play, some white servers chose to refer to black customers as “Canadians.”

Many white servers believed—on a purely anecdotal basis—that black customers did not tip as well as white customers.

Servers invented nicknames and code words that could be used in the dining room because it offered a way to retaliate against the customer without openly upsetting the customer and risking losing money. While mocking customers behind their backs can relieve the mundane nature of serving, these examples suggest how some games that supposedly build camaraderie between workers may come at the expense of women and minorities—as customers and as co-workers. When people use the term “bitch” they are trying to assert themselves over whomever they are referring to. Calling women “bitches” infers that women are “something (meant to be) dominated, conquered, and vanquished” (Kleinman, Frost, and Ezzell 2009:51). Because servers did not feel that they had power over their customers, they gain “false power” by referring to their female customers as bitches. Talking about black customers in code allowed some white servers to engage in race talk—and feel superior—without sounding overtly racist to other servers.

Servers know they are supposed to be subservient when it comes to their customers, however they often felt customers abused this relationship. Servers chose to participate in games that made them feel better in the short term. Even if only for a short while, servers could call customers names without their knowledge and feel like they had exerted some power over them, especially if they treated servers poorly or tipped them badly.

In addition to the games servers played in order to get them through their shifts, servers also discussed other ways that they dealt with the stress of their job. Many servers talked about drinking and doing drugs to take the edge off after a shift. Allison said, “Fridays are usually the

worst nights and if I go and have some fun with friends [afterward] I feel a lot better.” They reported rehashing the shift with their coworkers over drinks. Emily said, “I used to drink heavily. Now I just go home and leave it at work. I’ve realized I was more stressed out when I went and had beers with my coworkers and all we did was bitch and complain.” It seemed the servers who had been in the business longer did not go out as often. A few servers speculated that servers in general have drinking problems. Allison speculated, “Most people in the restaurant business have a drinking problem or drink [heavily] at least a couple times a week.” Some of the servers had multiple friends with DUI offenses. Only one server I interviewed actually had a DUI offense.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Because Americans center their social interactions on food, restaurants will be a cultural and economic staple for a long time. The restaurant industry is ever growing and is always in need of workers, especially because of its high turnover rates. High turnover could potentially be blamed on the average age and education of the workers; however, the job itself, inconsistent wages, lack of fringe benefits, and the conditions of the work should mostly be to blame for the turnover. Working in restaurants is demanding temporally, physically, and mentally. Restaurant workers do not just answer to management's demands, as I have discussed. Because the minimum wage is so low, workers depend on customers to subsidize their ability to earn a living. Yet, customers have a great deal of power over servers and managers. Because servers engage in a power struggle with customers, they find it difficult to earn steady tips, let alone make a living wage. Many servers discussed their tips being the redeeming factor of their job; however, tips end up giving servers a false sense of earnings satisfaction. The irregularity of this payment system causes problems for servers and hampers their ability to care for themselves.

This is not to say that all servers are poor and living on government assistance programs. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012) reported that median pay for servers in 2010 was \$18,330 a year (\$8.81 an hour if the server worked 40 hours a week for 52 weeks). The poverty level in 2010 for a household of two was \$14,570 a year. Although servers' median pay seems to be above the poverty line, it still means that well over half of all full-time restaurant servers are likely to fall below the poverty threshold or fit the federal government's "near poor" classification (approximately 150% of the poverty threshold; see DeParle, Gebeloff, and

Tavernise 2011; Short and Smeeding 2012). Although no one reported to me exactly how much he/she made, servers reported that their income was inconsistent.

When workers were faced with inconsistent wages, unpredictable customers, and feelings of alienation from their jobs, they engaged in what they perceived to be harmless games to pass the time. But even though the games were efforts to ease the feelings of alienation, servers harmed themselves, coworkers, and customers in the long run. These things might give them a sexual thrill, short-term superiority, and a sense of power, but their playful behavior could not change the structure of the system they work in.

Lacking the glamour of more prestigious jobs, restaurant work, not having changed substantially in 100 years, is sometimes viewed as dirty work. Workers in this industry are necessary, however. Sometimes customers say, “You are a better person than I. I could never do what you do.” What they mean to say is that restaurant work is a less than desirable job, or a bad job. According to Kalleberg, a bad job consists of low wages, no fringe benefits, no control over activities, no flexibility to deal with non-work activities, and no control over termination (2011:10). During a conversation with an older white man, he asked if I was in school. After telling him I graduated with a bachelor’s degree he said, “And that qualifies you to work here?” I felt the need to defend myself to this customer. To this man, serving was not considered an appropriate job for a college graduate. Without servers, however, no matter their education, he would not have been able to eat there. Even servers talked about their job as if they were bad jobs. Some would discuss finding a “real” job after they graduated from college.

Service work is set aside as if it is different from other work. Tanner, writing over 100 years ago, discussed what her manager would have said about her work, “Yes, the hours are long, but the work is easy” (1907:53). Tanner went on to say,

I grant that it is unskilled, that it requires comparatively little mental ability...the occupation is about paralleled by light gymnastics with half-pound dumb bells, with occasional walking. How would a person feel after eight hours of such gymnastics with five of heavier work coming at intervals? (1907:54).

Although serving was and may still be seen as “easy” work, it is not revered like other jobs. Servers perform a balancing act of tasks throughout their shift, like the “Ten Steps of Great Hospitality” I discussed earlier. As I personally experienced, sometimes this balancing act can be thrown off by a seemingly insignificant interaction with a table that quickly snowballs to affect other tables. Writing in 1946, Whyte explains that “whenever a difficult incident arises to upset this relationship [with the customer], the waitress is thrown off balance and is more likely to get into difficulties with her next customers, so that social equilibrium may readily be destroyed for the whole working period” (1946: 130-131).

Ultimately, servers are caught between the kitchen, customers, and management. They face many structural problems and social processes that disempower them: First, they make a tipped wage that in many ways awards great power to customers because they control the bulk of servers’ earnings. Second, servers spend long hours on their feet without breaks, lifting up to 40 pounds throughout their shift. Third, servers’ tasks are highly repetitive—and thus not intellectually stimulating—yet they must pay close attention to their performance and give customers the illusion of personal, rather than routinized or institutionalized, service (Schwalbe et al. 2000). This conditioning of their emotional subjectivity (Schwalbe et al. 2000) is an under-compensated job requirement. Fourth, their language at work is scripted by managers and corporate representatives. Words like “guest” encourage servers to treat customers as if they were guests in their own homes; however, customers’ rude behavior would never be tolerated in

someone's actual home. Through such regulated speech and artificial conditioning of their emotions, servers participate in a social process that reinforces inequality at their expense (see Schwalbe et al. 2000). Taken altogether, servers relinquish the power they wish for in order to make a living wage from customers (Paules 1991).

Currently, it is important to research restaurant work because it is a sector that has greater job growth but lower compensation than "good jobs" (Kalleberg 2011). The majority of new jobs are low paying jobs such as those in the service industry (Rampell 2012). The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) also reports that low-wage and mid-wage jobs have a great potential for economic growth, however the "fruits of economic growth" are going to those in high-wage jobs (EPI 2012). The low-wage sector has the biggest opportunity for growth because some other sectors, such as blue-collar work, are declining. Entrenched problems with wages and the other problems I have discussed have opened an opportunity for unionization among dissatisfied restaurant workers. Union membership in the service industry is low, but growing, according to Hodson and Sullivan (2012). Some unions have organized the food industry (for example, UNITE HERE! promotes the needs of cafeteria workers and institutional dining services). Union membership could enable servers to push for breaks, benefits, and mandatory increased wages. There has recently been public protest on Change.org for Darden to initiate a living wage for their workers. Because restaurant work is a type of service work that cannot be outsourced overseas, public pressure may grow for highly profitable restaurant chains to increase the hourly wage for workers. Otherwise, servers will exercise their most reliable, yet least effective option: quitting.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Face Sheet

What year were you born?

How long have you worked here?

What is your relationship status?

Do you have children? How many?

How long have you been working in restaurants?

Have you had other jobs as a server? Where?

What is the highest level of education you have attained?

Do you plan on continuing your education?

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about a typical day of work. What is a typical shift like for you?
2. Tell me about the hours you keep. When you do work, sleep etc.?
3. What were your first expectations/impressions of your workplace?
4. Based on your experience in the restaurant business, what is it like to be a “newbie”?
5. How do you treat new staff members?
6. How are you supposed to act here? Are you expected to act in any way that reflects this establishment?
7. How does management expect you to act towards customers? Co-workers?
8. How would you describe the atmosphere of the restaurant where you work? How did you adapt to that?
9. What kind of clientele come to this restaurant? Can you describe them? Have you ever dealt with customers who don’t fit the image? Please give me some examples.
10. What kind of servers want to work here? Please describe. Have you had to work servers who don’t fit the image of the restaurant? Please give me some examples.
11. What are some official and unofficial sayings you hear or use around your workplace?
12. How are you instructed to approach a table? Is there a script you’re supposed to follow? What do you think about that?
13. What are you expected to wear to work? What do you think about that?
14. In other jobs, workers are interested in possible promotions or pay increases. What are workers’ chances for that here? Do you ever discuss this with your coworkers?
15. Were there any surprises after you started working here?
16. What are the “behind the scenes” jobs you have to do?
17. What kind of problems do you encounter at work? How often?
18. How do you handle customer complaints?
19. How do managers handle customer complaints?
20. Do people make assumptions about your sexual orientation as a server? Who? How?
21. What are the advantages to being a male server at this restaurant? What are the *disadvantages* to being a male server at this restaurant? What are the advantages of being a female server at this restaurant? What are the *disadvantages* to being a female server at this restaurant?
22. Do any workers flirt on the job? Tell about some of the things your coworkers do. Do any of your customers expect this of you? What would happen if any staff were to touch, hug, etc.? What is the restaurant’s policy on this?
23. What stresses you the most/least about your job?
24. What are some ways you deal with this inside/outside work?
25. What do you think about the kitchen staff?
26. How do your coworkers interact outside of work?
27. Do you ever go out with your coworkers?
28. What do you think about your coworkers?
29. What do you see yourself doing on down the road?

VITA

HANNAH B. BOWER

Personal Data:	Date of Birth: June 16, 1986 Place of Birth: Roanoke, VA
Education:	Public Schools, Knoxville, Tennessee B.A. Sociology, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee 2009 M.A. Sociology, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee 2012
Professional Experience:	Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University, Department of Sociology, 2010-2011