April 2022

The Formation of Protective Relationships between Service Workers and Customers

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SOC 102 Qualitative Research Methods

December 15, 2021

Abstract:

This study explores the understudied experiences of service workers in elite settings, in this case, at a private elite college in the United States. I analyzed data collected from participant observations and from nine in-depth interviews with dining hall staff and housekeepers. I focus on the formation of what I call *protective relationships* among workers and students & faculty to shed light on how this dynamic is unique to elite private colleges. *Protective relationships* refer to the "social shields" that students and faculty bring to workers against injustices in the workplace. The analysis shows that while such relationships are beneficial to workers, they conceal the socio-economic inequalities that exist between workers and the students and faculty they serve. These findings help us expand our understanding of universal concerns, such as class and inequality.

Key Words: worker-customer relations**,** interactive service work, personalistic relations, inequality

Acknowledgments:

I would like to express my gratitude towards Professor Thai for allowing me to take this class and introducing me to the fascinating field of qualitative research. I am grateful for all the time and help he provided to me throughout the research and writing process of this article. Thank you so much for supporting and believing in me. I would also like to thank all of my respondents who took time out of their busy schedules to meet with me. I appreciate their time and honesty during the interview process. Lastly, I would like to thank my classmates and the Writing Center at Pomona College for their feedback on the production of this article.

Introduction

The American economy is dominated by services (FocusEconomics 2022). Almost all Americans spend time paying for services, such as buying a cup of coffee or eating at a restaurant. Since our economy is particularly service oriented, it is difficult for people to get through a day without engaging in a service transaction. This article discusses the experiences of service workers, including housekeepers and dining hall workers, at an elite private liberal arts college on the West Coast that I called Havana College. To put into context the elite character of this school and show the disparities between workers and their customers, Havana College has been ranked as one of the best liberal arts colleges in the United States and it is one of the richest schools in the country with an endowment of more than two billion dollars. The median income of a full-time faculty professor and of a student's family is more than $160,000 while the average income of my respondents is less than $34,000. Citations of these numbers have been omitted to prevent recognition of the school and to protect the confidentiality of respondents.

I explore the process through which service workers and their customers (students and professors) form what I call *protective relationships*, which refers to the protection that students and faculty provide for workers against injustices in the workplace. Additionally, I explain how these relationships protect workers through *formal* and *informal* mechanisms. The central argument that I make in this article is that the relationships both parties develop with each other conceal the inequalities that exist between them. This research is important because while there is an abundance of research on the experiences of service workers, only a few studies have examined the experiences of service workers in elite settings (Hanser 2012). Moreover, my findings shed light on a new type of relationship between customers and workers, which in addition to enriching the literature on this topic, paves the way for other scholars to examine

different dimensions of these relationships. Lastly, I bridge the literatures on interactive service work and the personalization of relationships in paid domestic work. Although these two literatures are inextricably intertwined, scholars of both literatures do not generally engage with each other's work.

This article is divided into three parts. The first examines the literature on interactive service work (between workers and customers) and personalistic relationships (between employers and employees). The second provides a description of the site, the methodology I implemented to conduct my research, and characteristics of the sample of participants. And the third explains the processes through which workers form protective relationships with their customers. This last section is divided in three subfields in which I explore the different types of interactions that workers and customers have with each other; the personal relationships that both parties develop; and how the two previous subfields contribute to the formation of protective relationships.

Literature Review

We interact with service workers daily, so much that people often take their presence for granted or simply ignore it while others appreciate their work and often develop personal relationships with them. Regardless of whether or not we choose to build a relationship, when we engage in a service transaction, we affect the workers' day to day experience on the job as well as they affect ours. It is crucial to know how the way we interact with workers affects their lives. This literature review synthesizes two bodies of literature that can advance new ways of thinking about the topic of worker-customer relations and inequality. In the following pages, I begin by analyzing the literature on interactive service work—when customers and service workers engage in direct interactions—to explain the different dynamics between workers and customers.

Second, I examine the scholarship on personalistic relationships between employers and employees and describe the benefits and disadvantages of these relationships for both parties. The third and final goal of this literature review is to highlight the importance of bridging the gap between the two bodies of literature as scholars of both schools do not generally cite each other in their works even though their subjects are interrelated.

The main arguments I make in this literature review are that the scarce literature on service work in elite settings undermines the complexity of human interactions. Second, the narrow scope that the literature on personalistic relations has taken by focusing primarily on the relationships between domestic-workers and employers restricts our understanding of how these relationships affect service workers in different sectors of the economy. Moreover, the disconnect between the two bodies of literature limits our overall knowledge about these two areas of research. The importance of these three arguments becomes clear when thinking about various macro issues. For instance, understanding the interactions and relationships formed between customers and workers can expand our understanding of universal concerns, such as dynamics of class inequality.

Barbara Gutek identifies two main types of customer and worker interactions: "relationships" and "encounters" (Gutek, 1995, p. 7). *Relationships* occur "when a customer has repeated contact with a particular [worker]...[and when both parties] expect and anticipate future interaction." These relationships create a history of interactions that both parties can draw upon each time they interact to complete a transaction. This history of transactions also contributes to the development of bonds of trust, making transactions more efficient and rewarding for both customers and workers. It is also important to note that these relationships are not friendships but based on "role expectations" (Gutek, 1995, p. 7). In contrast, *encounters* consist of a "single

interaction between a customer and a [worker], and they are typically fleeting rather than lengthy." In these types of interactions, the customer usually has contact with different workers rather than a particular one, making both parties strangers to one another. Another important characteristic of encounters is that workers are "interchangeable" and trained to deliver quick and efficient service (Gutek, 1995, p. 8). Although Gutek's typification of service interactions serves as a basis for analyzing and understanding worker and customer relations, clustering human interactions into these two terms tends to obscure their complexity. I shed light on the complexities present in the relationships that form between workers and customers.

More recently, the study of service interactions has brought new insight to our understanding of class inequality (Williams 2004, 2006, Hanser 2007, 2008). Amy Hanser (2012) suggests that "the study of service work has increasingly taken up the question of class in the context of service interactions, taking class inequalities as more central to their analysis," and trying to understand service settings as places in which "class entitlements and class boundaries are enacted" (p. 299). My research also forms part of this new approach to the study of service work and sheds light on how power and inequality is expressed through social interactions. A prominent scholar in this regard is Rachel Sherman, known for her ethnography of American luxury hotels (Sherman 2005, 2007). Surrounded by the wealth and elitism of hotel guests, Sherman describes the processes through which luxury hotel workers use a set of comparisons to situate themselves as superior to other coworkers and notably to hotel guests. One of the main arguments that she makes is that this phenomenon contributes to the reproduction of inequality given that workers criticize guests' wealth as an individual characteristic, as opposed to criticizing the system that allocates wealth unequally. Sherman's research highlights some of the complexities of service interaction that Gutek's work lacked. At the same time, she also

highlights a new type of dynamic between workers and customers in elite settings that researchers can consider when studying these populations in similar spaces. My research was motivated by Sherman's findings as I also looked for these kinds of dynamics but found different results. Another contribution of Sherman's work is the new questions that arise from her study, such as: what other kinds of relationships can form between workers and customers if they interact over longer periods of time and with more frequency? How does the culture of the institution in which these workers find themselves affect how the relationships between workers and customers are formed? My research provides answers to these questions. Lastly, similar to Sherman, I argue that the relationships I found between workers and customers conceal the inequalities that exist between them.

The second body of literature that informs my research is that of "personalistic relations," since it provides insight into another set of dynamics of service work that goes beyond those covered by encounters and relationships (Rollins 1985; Romero 1992; Moras, 2013). Service interactions and personalistic relations are two main factors embedded in the experiences of the service workers I studied. Personalistic relations refer to the process through which the boundaries between employer and employee relationship, specifically those between domestic workers and employers, are blurred by the employer's appeal to family ideologies to make the worker feel like a family member (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). An example of this kind of relationship is when employers of domestic workers think of their employees as part of their family due to the years they have been working for them and how embedded these workers are in their lives (Young 1987, Moras 2013). One of the first contributions that I make to this body of work is that personalistic relationships are not only a characteristic of employer and employee

relations, but they can also be found in other realms of service work, such as the relations between customers and workers.

Scholars who study personalistic relations have documented the benefits and disadvantages that this sense of closeness brings to employers and employees. The scholarship of the late 20th century describes these relationships as exploitative. The employer gets more out of the personalization than the workers; and the personalization often obliges the workers to do unpaid work (Katzman 1981, Rollins 1985, Glenn 1986, Romero 1992). In contrast, some scholars have argued that closer relationships between these two parties can actually empower workers. The personalization of relationships can give workers leverage to negotiate better job terms (Dill 1988, Mendez 1998). More recently, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) builds on this work and describes a new social pattern between domestic workers and their employers. She explains how domestic workers not only want their employer to recognize them in terms of their role as workers, but also as people who have a life and needs outside of work. Besides a professional relationship, these workers wanted a closer relationship with their employers, in which their personhood was central to their relationship. When employers choose to distance themselves from their employees, Hondagneu-Sotelo argues that this "exacerbates inequality by denying domestic workers even modest forms of social recognition, dignity, and emotional sustenance" (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007, p. 29). The process of personalization that I found between workers and students does not follow any of the patterns mentioned above. The central difference between personalistic and protective relationships is the protective quality of the latter. Through these relationships, students and faculty protect workers from injustices in the workplace through various formal and informal mechanisms. This new kind of relationship demands sociological explanation as it contradicts the findings of previous scholars on this literature.

The last contribution of this article is connecting the literatures of interactive service work and personalization of relationships. These two literatures are very much interconnected; however, to the best of my knowledge, scholars of both literatures do not engage with each other's works. This lack of engagement restricts scholars' understanding of the phenomenon on which they want to shine light. My formulation of protective relationships is the clearest example of how combining these two literatures and thinking of them together can lead researchers to illuminate new experiences of service workers. The understanding of both literatures will help scholars shed light into universal issues of social life, such as the reproduction of inequality.

Overall, previous research highlights the different types of interactions and relationships between two different realms of service work: customers and workers and employer and employee. However, there is a disconnection between scholars of both bodies of literature as well as limited research on the experiences of service workers in elite settings and on personalistic relationships between customers and workers. The history of relationships between the two realms of service work has always been one of unfair power dynamics, with whomever represents the "boss" exerting power over workers. Engaging with the two bodies of literature laid out in this section and analyzing the experiences of service workers in elite settings is crucial to imagining and working towards a world that begins to fizzle out those oppressive dynamics.

Methodology

I began my research with the intent of studying the experiences of service workers at an elite educational institution. To gain entry to my research site and population sample, I talked to the general manager of the two operating dining halls at Havana College and the Assistant Vice President of Facilities. I also engaged in small talk with some dining hall workers to build rapport and gain access to these workers' lives and experiences. In order to communicate with the

housekeepers on campus, a professor connected me with one housekeeper who then put me in contact with two other housekeepers.

My research methodology consists of participant observations over three months, informal interviews, and nine in-depth recorded interviews with service workers. I took field notes on a regular basis by visiting the College's North and South Campus dining halls, on Mondays, Thursdays, and Sundays for either lunch or dinner. I also visited two different academic buildings on Fridays to shadow housekeepers. I spent an average of an hour and a half during each stint of fieldwork. I took jottings while I was in the field and then expanded on said notes when I returned from the field. Informal interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes while formal interviews lasted an average of one hour and 45 minutes. Formal interviews were recorded with respondents' permission. Informal interviews were unrecorded, and I relied on note taking. When interviewing housekeepers, I had to divide the interview into two sections of approximately 50 minutes each because it was difficult for my respondents to do almost two-hour interviews due to conflicting schedules. Most interviews were conducted in a private conference room with only the interviewee to ensure confidentiality. There was only one interview which took place during the closing hours of the South dining hall. Out of the nine interviews conducted, four were in done Spanish, a language in which I am fluent.

Regarding my research site, the total direct cost of attending Havana college is approximately more than \$75,000 and more than 60 percent of the students' families come from the top 20 percent of the American income structure, while less than five percent comes from the bottom 20 percent. Other important characteristics of the school are that its relatively small size (7:1 faculty ratio and an average of 1600 undergraduate students), which facilitates bonds among workers, faculty, and students since they are constantly interacting with each other within a

confined space, in a day-to-day interactive nature. These interactions create a culture of community in the school, which produces an illusion of equality where everyone pretends like everybody is equal, yet there are vivid and glaringly contrasting differences between workers, students, and faculty. Furthermore, it is a place where students are educated about the inequalities characteristic of the service sector, and where students are interested in fighting against these inequalities. For instance, the organization, Student Worker Alliance, is formed by students and faculty to fight for labor justice within the College. Lastly, students' agency matters, meaning that their demands and their voices are usually considered by the school administration. Students also participate regularly in the governance of the school, such as sitting on faculty hiring committees, serving as members of important committees at the College, and serve in advisory roles in many aspects of the school daily operations.

Regarding the layout of both dining halls, each of them have an expo station, where at each given meal one to two cooks prepare food to order, meaning that they take food orders directly from students, cook the food within minutes, and serve it to students. Additionally, each dining hall has a mainline section, where the students can partake in the main course of typically hot food. Unlike the expo station, students serve themselves in all the remaining food stations. There is also the salad bar where students can find fresh vegetables and fruits as well as a pizza bar for quick, easy to eat, and easily accessible items like pizza and rice. Lastly, there is the grill station, in which students can pick up similar food available at the mainline as well as sandwiches already prepared by the cooks.

The structural organization is composed by a single general manager for both dining halls, who is responsible for planning and managing food service across the entire campus. Then, each dining hall has two managers, one that works in the morning shift and one at night. They

are responsible for overseeing the work of all the dining hall staff and making sure that the staff have the resources necessary to do their job efficiently. Similarly, each dining hall has its own chef manager, who always wears a white uniform and is in charge of developing recipes for the cooks as well as special orders for students with dietary restrictions. Below the chefs, there are the cooks, who wear black and are divided into three different categories. Cook 3 is the cook lead, who besides cooking, communicates the orders of the chef to the other cooks. Additionally, another one of Cook 3's responsibilities is to serve as a point of contact for Cook 1 and 2. Cook 2 is the second in charge; if Cook 3 is not available, Cook 2 will become the lead cook. Cook 1 can be placed to work at any food station like the Pizza Bar while Cook 2 and 3 work most of the time in the mainline station. The cooks are responsible for cooking all the foods for their assigned food station as well as preparing and cleaning their stations after the dining halls close. Besides the cooks, there is a person in charge of the salad bar, who disinfects and peels all the vegetables and fruits. Next, there is a baker, who is in charge of making bread and all the desserts. The last position is utilities, whose uniforms are blue, and there are usually an average of four workers. Each of them has a specific role such as being at the register welcoming students and making sure that they tap their ID before entering the dining hall, cleaning the floor, the tables, and the counters of the entire dining hall, filling up the water fountains, and putting food utensils and water cups outside for students to take.

There are three departments under the Facilities and Campus Service School Department: housekeeping, maintenance, and grounds. All three are managed by the assistant vice president of facilities along with the director of facilities. Reporting to these two, the assistant director of housekeeping and facilities oversees the Housekeeping Department. Under this person, there are the supervisors in charge of checking the work of the housekeepers and providing them with the

cleaning utensils they need. Housekeepers are in charge of cleaning the bathrooms, the classrooms, the professors' offices, and the hallways of the building they are assigned. One of my respondents was in charge of an entire building, which was common among the housekeepers.

My sample of respondents consisted of one cashier, three cooks 1, two utilities, and three housekeepers. The ages of my respondents ranged from 29-65 and they have been working at the college from 5 to 23 years. Three of them only spoke Spanish, one was bilingual, while the remaining five only spoke English. Regarding the racial makeup of my respondents, eight were White and one was African American. Four of them were Hispanic immigrants while the rest had always lived in the United States. The wages of my respondents ranged from $16-$20 per hour while working 40 hours a week. All housekeepers and utilities workers found positions at the college through a hiring agency and lasted an average of two years until they were hired permanently by the College to work for either a nine- or twelve-month period.

Data Analysis

Encounters and relationships

I found that the types of interaction between dining hall workers and students were the same as Gutek (1995, 2000) had previously documented and can be divided into encounters and relationships. Due to the nature of their job, dining hall staff predominantly interact with students instead of faculty since the latter are infrequent dining hall goers. Unlike dining hall workers, housekeepers do not interact frequently with students because there are no transactions between the two and they usually do not share the same workplace. Instead, they interact more regularly with faculty since they share the same workplace. Additionally, as two of the housekeepers I

interviewed only spoke Spanish, their interactions with both faculty and students were limited, making their interactions fall under encounters.

Some characteristics of encounter interactions are brought to light by Teresa, a housekeeper. When talking about her interactions with professors, she said, "all the professors are very nice with me… They always say hi to me. They always tell me 'good job!' because their offices are very clean." Teresa's example shows the fleeting nature of these kinds of encounters since she only exchanges quick greetings with faculty throughout the day. Similarly, Carlos, a utilities worker at South dining hall said, "I don't really interact with students too much…a quick, 'Oh, hi, how are you?' sort of thing, you know? I guess I'm not a big interactor with customers or strangers." Carlos's example also shows the prevalence of quick interactions in encounters. Moreover, Carlos refers to students as "customers or strangers," which are terms that workers experiencing relationship interactions do not use to refer to students. His statement shows that his relationship with students is more professional. At the same time, it demonstrates that when workers distance themselves from students, they are estranged from each other in encounter interactions.

Just as encounters are present in the dining hall, relationships are also an important feature of interactions. For instance, Marco, a Cook 1 at North dining hall, said the following when asked about his interactions with students:

> For four to five minutes a day, you know, you're in front of me, I'm in front of you. So, I just try my best to maybe strike up a conversation… we get to laugh, we get to know each other… help you out if you need it, you know… [my coworker and I], we're not therapists or anything like that. But you know, we're someone that you guys can talk to.

Unlike the quick standard greetings that other workers experience at their position, Marco has repeated contact with students for longer periods of time since he works at the Expo Station, which requires students to wait in front of him until he is done cooking their meal. Moreover, since Marco only works at this food station, students interact with him in particular, creating a history of transactions. In contrast to encounters, Marco and the students are not strangers to each other; in fact, Marco says that during his interactions he gets to know students personally.

Another example of interactions that I witnessed was when I went to South dining hall on one busy day. In this instance, I witnessed the interactions between Steven— a short, talkative, and well-known Cook 1 who works at the Expo station—and two different students. As Steven was serving food to a student, he asked him, "How are things going bro?" After the student replied, Steven started asking him about other students that he knew because he wanted to know if the student had seen them, how they were doing, and what they had been up to. Similarly, another student came to Steven's station and told him in Spanish, "What do we have for today, Steven?" And Steven responded, "Ah! I knew you would come today!" These two conversations are clear examples of relationship interactions at play. The first conversation serves to show that greetings like "how are thing going bro?" are used to start longer conversations whereas in encounters, interactions do not go beyond these greetings. The second conversation demonstrates how customers and workers drew on previous interactions to complete a transaction as the student and Steven knew each other previously. Lastly, the fact that Steven was expecting the student to come highlights another feature of relationships, which is the anticipation of future interactions (Gutek, 1995, p.7)

Furthermore, through Steven's interaction with the first student, we can begin to see how the relationships between students and workers are less professional and more informal. For

instance, Steven uses the word "bro" to refer to the student and he starts asking him questions about other students' well-being, their whereabouts, and past plans, which shows a greater level of interest about students' life than the previous respondents. These kinds of behaviors form part of what different scholars have named, personalistic relationships (Rollins 1985; Romero 1992; Thorton-Dill, 1998).

Personalization of relationships

Workers who experience relationship interactions usually develop bonds with students that go beyond typical customer service relationships and mirror maternal and friendly relationships, which are traits of personalistic relationships (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). A clear example of these relationships becoming more personalized appears in the case of Aliza, a utilities worker at South dining hall. During our interview, she mentioned how students present her to their parents in the graduation ceremony like "the woman who took care of them while they were in school." She also said, "When I see the students graduating, it is like I am seeing one of my children graduates." After graduation, she keeps contact with students through Facebook and WhatsApp. A factor contributing to the formation of these maternal relationships is that students usually come to her when they are stressed about a test, and she hugs them and cheers them up. Even though Aliza's position as a utility worker does not facilitate interactions with students as much as a cook would have, she has developed strong bonds with them. The fact that students present her as "the woman who took care of them" and that she refers to the students as her "children" signals that the relationship between students and Aliza is more intimate and personal, to the extent that Aliza thinks of students as family. By supporting the students emotionally, she also assumes the role of a caregiver for them. This is an extra role that comes with extra labor since the kind of emotional care that she provides to students is not paid.

Besides manual labor, she has to do "emotional labor" as Hochschild would say (2015, p. 9). Moreover, having students in her Facebook network shows that they are part of her personal circle of acquaintances.

Although Aliza's relationship with students is sincere, the personalization of these relationships obscures the inequalities that exist between the two. For instance, while interviewing Aliza, she shared how supervisors constantly check on her work by "being next to [her] while [she is] working or checking the cleaning room to make sure that everything is in order." The careful control and surveillance of workers by supervisors is vividly and glaringly contrasting to the people they serve (students and faculty), who generally are cultivated to be "free" and curious and have full control of their time. Even though my respondents were aware of the social and economic differences between them and the students, they tended to value more the personalism of their relationships with students, ignoring the inequalities between them.

Another example of personalistic relationships is the case of Steven, who said the following when talking about his relationships with students:

> Some students from San Francisco called me and came to see me at my house after I got out of the hospital from my brain surgery. They came with breakfast and said, "we are here to have breakfast with you." And I said, "ok." So we went to the patio of my house and we sat down to have breakfast…I would also go to the school gym with them to lift weight, run, or play soccer before the pandemic happened too.

Steven's relationship with students is similar to a friendship, which extends outside of work. The fact that students had Steven's phone number and visited his house shows the personal ties of their relationships. Students' gestures of care for Steven are also evidence of a closer relationships between both parties.

During the interview Steven also shared another example that has personalistic characteristics. He said, "Other students have told me, 'Hey, can you come and make omelets for us?' And I go [inside] their dorms to make omelets for them." This is a clear example of Romero and Rollins' argument that personalistic relationships lead workers to do unpaid labor (Rollins 1985, Romero 1992). The students' request and Steven's willingness to accept it shows the kind of casual relationships that both of them have with each other. Additionally, it is clear that in this scenario the students gain more from this relationship than Steven, making the relationships exploitive.

Protective Relationships

The interactions and the relationships described in the sections above often evolve into circumstances where workers and students assume a role of protectors towards workers. It is important to highlight that interactions and personalistic relations play a pivotal role in the formation of protective relationships as they represent the foundation through which these protective relationships emerge. Simply put, protective relationships cannot occur if faculty, students, and workers do not interact or develop personalized relationships. There are two main mechanisms through which students and faculty protect workers, which I have categorized as formal and informal mechanisms.

One of the formal mechanisms through which faculty and students protect workers is the Havana Student Worker Alliance. The actions that the participants of this organization have taken to protect workers came up several times during the interviews. Catherine, a cook at one of the dining halls said the following:

I know that there's some students that have connections with a coworker, just to make sure everything's all right... The students have our back, like, if we're out there picketing,

the students will come picket with us. We've had the students march into our General

Manager's office. I don't remember what it was for, but they came in chanting...because

we were having problems…. Then, soon after that, they got rid of [the manager].

The Alliance is a formal mechanism through which workers can directly reach faculty

and students whenever they face problems at work. By formally advocating for workers, the

students and faculty's relationship with workers goes beyond typical customer service relations.

They become formal advocates for the workers, which contributes to the formation of protective

relationships. Catherine acknowledges the protective role of students by saying that they have

their back and giving an example of how students have advocated for workers. Students'

advocacy also proves efficient as the manager was fired after the students' march. Catherine's

case is worth highlighting because her interactions with students fall under Gutek's category of

encounters, which shows that even though she does not have strong ties with students, she still

recognizes support from them. Besides Catherine, another respondent also had encounter

interactions and felt protected by students in the face of challenges. These two examples

demonstrate the extent to which these protective relationships can give workers a sense of safety

regardless of whether they have encounters or relationships with their customers.

Besides this formal mechanism of protection, students and faculty can also offer

protection through informal ones. Workers who fall under Gutek's category of relationships as

part of the interactions in their work also develop protective relationships through informal

mechanisms such as regularly talking with students while they are waiting in line to get food. For

instance, Steven said the following after asking him how supervisors treat workers:

STEVEN: Sometimes they are a bit rude with us, but I have the luck that I talk a lot with

students, so I get along with all of them very well… We are nothing without you [the

students]. We have to treat you well, so you are with us, the workers… So a lot of my

supervisors have something towards me because they know that the connection that I

have with the students is very good...This is why I tell my coworkers that it is important

to treat the students well...We are here because of all of you…[so would you say that

having relationships with students gives protection?]...Oh yeah! Of course, it gives

protection!

Steven shows that students are a point of contact for workers to reach out in case they

face problems at work. Besides the pleasure and satisfaction that workers gain from having

relationships with their customers as documented by Ellingson Jill (2016), I find that these

relationships act as a deterrence mechanism against supervisors' surveillance and mistreatment

in the workplace. Steven's relationships with students keeps him safe from supervisors because

the students may expose the College's mistreatment of workers. These relationships give him a

sense of relief and security in the workplace since students can act as advocates for him.

Steven's statement is also worth highlighting because he mentions how workers should

treat students "well" because of the protection that they offer. This optic hides the inequalities

between workers and students and faculty. Since workers picture students and faculty as

protectors, it is difficult for workers to think about these people as the representation of the

unequal system of wealth distribution in the United States. Many students come from extremely

wealthy families while faculty earns nearly five times more than the service workers at the

college. However, it is hard to criticize the people they think of as protectors.

Unlike dining hall workers, housekeepers do not form these protective relationships with

students since their interactions with them are limited as they tend to cross paths with the

housekeeping staff less than the more visible dining staff. Instead, they interact more regularly

with faculty, leading to the formation of protective bonds with them. In the case of housekeepers, the protective relationships that they form with faculty is the only protective mechanism that they have against the regular surveillance and mistreatment that they face at work. Unlike dining hall workers, housekeepers are not unionized and human services, in their own words "do not care about [them]" Kate, a housekeeper at one of the school buildings, touches on this point:

> I have been having problems with the first-floor coordinator of this building because she acts like she is my supervisor. She checks that the floors, the libraries, and the offices are clean, and she exaggerates if something is not clean. Like if there is a piece of paper that I forgot to pick up or that I didn't see, she would email the supervisors saying that I didn't vacuum...But professors have never complained… In fact, when the supervisors send emails saying that the offices are dirty, professors respond by saying 'No! Everything is clean. This building doesn't have any problems.' They have always come out in defense of us…. They help us and protect us.

In the absence of a safety net, Kate has to rely on the protective relationships that she has established with faculty. These relationships are the only protective mechanism that these workers have against the constant surveillance and micro-management that they experience at work. These relationships are a double edge sword. Besides the protection they offer, they prevent workers from being critical of the socio-economic inequalities between them and the faculty. Unlike Sherman's (2005) findings, my respondents do not criticize neither the individuals nor the structural system that allocates wealth unequally, highlighting the extent to which protective relationships can contribute to the reproduction of inequality (p. 155).

Conclusion

The main findings of this article are that both the different interactions and relationships that customers and workers develop with each other contribute to the formation of protective relationships. Although these relationships protect workers indeed, they also hide the inequalities that exist between workers and customers. Given that service workers are part of our everyday lives, it is crucial that we know how our interactions and relationships with them affect their lives and contribute to the reproduction of an unequal system of wealth. This research has contributed to the scholarship on interactive service work and personalistic relationships by shedding light into the complexities of human relationships and interactions through the revelation of a new kind of relationship between workers and customers: protective relationships. Additionally, the study has paved the way for researchers to explore the dynamics of protective relationships in different settings and with a different sample of respondents. It also serves as a guide for researchers to know how they can shed light into these particular relationships in an elite setting. While much of the literature on personalistic relations has focused on the realm of domestic-workers and employer, my research shows that this process is also present in the relationships between customers and workers outside of private settings, like homes where domestics work, and thus can have implications for other sectors of the economy. Lastly, my study has bridged the literatures of personalistic relationships and interactive service work together, and it has demonstrated the kind of process scholars can illuminate when we think of these two literatures together.

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