THE SEARCH FOR THE UNIQUE ACTOR: A CRITICAL CONSTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS

OF THE RETAIL CLERK

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Robert A. Hernandez

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     We do not reach or accomplish achievements without help from others. This study was only possible with the help from those who allowed me to interview them. (I know you guys could have been busy doing other tasks or offering customer service.) To all the retail clerks who helped me, I thank you.

     Accordingly, I would like to thank Dr. Alessandro Bonanno, Dr. Jeffrey Gardner and Mary Scherer for having patience with me during my thesis journey. You guys stuck with me, and for this I am forever grateful.

     I thank my family and loved ones for supporting and believing in me and my love of Sociology and. As some may know, this is often times not easy task!

     And thank you Dr. Agger… I treasure that you were not a "traditional" professor. Going against the grain, your message, at least to me, was unique—WE needed to be critical thinkers! WE needed to understand that the social reality that is presented to us, is not a concrete objectivity, but rather subjective and relative. WE needed to critically examine and interpret with our own unique sense of self how to view of the world.

     We always talk about independent studies as a curriculum. Ben, on the other hand, saw independent study as the only way that we could learn. Thank you for the guidance and support that you gave me Ben. You were the first "academic" to lend me a hand… A hand that has guided me towards a critical understanding of my own unique academic experience.

     Rob

ABSTRACT

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This study probes the contradictory position of the retail clerk (RC), which is socially constructed and legitimized through: (1) Retail settings where the actor carries dichotic roles—what Erving Goffman would call *actual* and *virtual roles*—and (2) in general society, where a contrast in social significance of the RC role arises based upon functional necessity within the U.S. economic structure. These socially constructed contradictions of the RC role result in role conflict, a "role ambiguity", which veils the "unique" actor behind the RC role and which consequently skews epistemological understanding of what we understand the RC role to be. Utilizing Joe Kincheloe's critical constructivist approach, the researcher presents a *critical analysis* of the RC role as viewed through traditional functional and symbolic interactive frameworks, which reveals major limitations regarding the RC—role ambiguity and lack of *unique actor*. In order address and untangle these limitations related to the RC, a phenomenological approach is used to *construct* a platform through the use of researcher observation and semi-structured interviews. Through data collection and analysis— reduction and bracketing—of these semi-structured interviews and observation, this study exposes the *unique actor* behind the RC through personal narrative. This personal narrative reveals a humanistic, social interaction element between RCs, which is constructed in order to combat the definition through which others interact with them. This humanization of the RC allows for the emergence of a new *lived experience* perspective, which provides us new narrative towards the epistemological understanding of the RC.

KEY WORDS: Retail, Lived experience, Qualitative, Unique actors, Dramaturgy

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Contradictory Retail Clerk Role

The RC plays an important role in our daily lives. According to 2017 data from

the U.S. Department of Labor, the retail clerk —comprised of cashiers and

salespersons—was the largest occupations overall, at 4.4 million and 3.6 million,

respectively (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018). Acting as a functional necessity within

economic institutions such as grocery stores, malls, and convenience stores, the RC aids

us in our daily shopping experience through "frontline" social interactions such as

monetary transactions, product knowledge and stock replenishment. While this

"functional" version of the RC plays an important role to us, it is difficult to know this at

wide glance. Accordingly, data from the U.S. Department of Labor revealed that the

retail clerk was one of the occupations that had "below average wages" in comparison to

the national occupational average (Bureau of Labor Statistics). Additionally, the RC role

is also labeled as a "bad job" (Vicki Smith 2013)—an occupational role with little to no

benefits, variation in work schedule, limited job security and little to no opportunity for

career development (Smith 2013).

The E-Commerce Fallacy

Looking at this data reveals a contradiction— the RC is both an important and an

inessential part of our daily economy. Playing to the latter, with the continual rise of e-

commerce retail, a trend that has increased since it began in the 90's (Emim M. Dinlersoz

and Pedro Pereira 2005), this idea of the retail clerk as the "face" of retail may seem

somewhat of a relic. This is especially true when Amazon—the quintessential e-

commerce retailer—online sales have increased 14.8% between 2018 and 2019 (James Risley and Jessica Young 2020). As we move further into a fast economy this efficiency of e-commerce allows consumers to shop at their convenience. Accordingly, you see glimpses of this e-commerce efficiency at physical retailers with self-checkouts and self-help kiosks which slowly increase automation in favor of human interaction.

While our move into faster capitalism does bring forth more automation, and decreases the necessity for human elements in favor of technology, the RC remains important. If there are no retail clerks to act as the "face" of retail, than there is no retail which leads to a high number of jobs lost, a huge loss to the U.S. GDP, and an overall decrease in U.S. economic activity. And quite possibly, and honestly, less efficient for the consumer who still relies on the RC to punch override buttons when the self- checkouts require approval or malfunction. While this may seem minor, what this illustrates is a present necessity and awareness of the RC role.

Unearthing the Ambiguous RC

Role conflict often results within actors who occupy contradictory roles. Expected to adhere to incompatible behavior expectations while occupying a specific role, role conflict occurs when these expectations cannot be met by the actor (Laulicht 1955). This role conflict often leads to actor difficulties in how they operate or perceive their role, such as family childcare (FCC) providers who express "confusion" and "bitterness" over their role definition when parents expect them to be both "educators" and "babysitters" (Fernandez 2018). Accordingly, in order to keep up with economic activity, a requirement of the RC actor is to portray the RC role while on the sales floor. In dramaturgical fashion, these *virtual role* differentiates from the *actual role* that the actors

realistically possess. In lieu of the dynamic status of the actor, the RC role is an artificial

performance created and dictated through corporate imperatives. Objectively dichotic,

these roles are dialectical for the RC actor and give way to another contradiction. This

role conflict not only affects the actor and their role, but also often leads to the creation of

an ambiguous perception of the RC—a lack of understanding and decreased satisfaction

with one's job role (Manas, Dias-Funez, Pecino, Lopez-Liria, Padilla, Aguilar-Pirra

2017). If looked at as a process, role conflict leads to role ambiguity.

This role ambiguity results in another contradiction—between structural

importance and dialectical role performance by the actor. Thus, how do we deal with this

ambiguity? More importantly, how do the actors behind the RC role deal with this

ambiguity? While certain sociological frameworks offer answers to this question related

to RC role ambiguity—such as functionalism and symbolic interaction theory—these

models operate through objective interpretations and examinations which lack the "lived

experience" from those who occupy the RC role, or what this study refers to as *unique

actors.*

Study Overview

This study addresses the limitation of the *unique actor* perspective within the

ambiguous RC role through the multi-dynamic analytical lens of Joe Kincheloe's critical

constructivism. This critical constructive perspective provides this study a framework

which allows for the criticism of multiple perspectives, which fail to address the *unique

actor* behind the RC role. Additionally, the use of this perspective also gives this study a

pedagogical dimension. Although the objective of this study is to unveil new ideas and

perspective from the *unique actor* behind the RC role, this can only be in conjunction with our ability to learn.

Chapter 1 introduces the idea of contradiction and ambiguity in relation to the RC. In chapter 2, a literature review is provided which illustrates how the RC is viewed through functional and symbolic interactive frameworks. Chapter 3 provides the conceptual framework for the study. This chapter provides explanation and validation for the use of Joe Kincheloe's critical-constructivism in this study. Chapter 4 provides the methodology used for this study. The use of phenomenology, sampling and data information is provided in this chapter. Accordingly, interview and observation methods are introduced. Chapter 5 highlights the findings and results of the interviews and observations that I conducted. The observations revealed functional and symbolic interactive elements including "tasking" and "facework", while my interviews revealed more of a focus on being "functional" to others while in the RC role. Chapter 6 provides a critical look at the results of the study. While "functionality" was a major duty of the interviewees, there arose a need for a social connection between RCs. Chapter 7 offers a conclusion to this study, elaborating on the availability of new narrative from this study which can aid on the epistemological understanding of the RC.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Frontline Functionality

While a major contention in this study is that there is unique actor behind the RC role, it is also important to address the vital role that the RC plays in the functional operation of U.S. society. Functionalism has been suggested as the "single most important attempt [at constructing] a scientific system of explanation" towards society and social settings (Isajiw 2013: 8). Following early positivists such as Comte and Spencer, the goal of functional apparatuses is to unite functional parts in order to establish "stability and equilibrium within institutions" (Kalu 2011: 121). Moving beyond the consuming of necessary products the towards manufacturing of consumer wants—a major component of what Ben Agger (2016) suggests is the "fast-capitalist" economic reality that exists—the functional operation and operating parts of the U.S. economic institution are vital for overall survival.

Acting as one of these major parts in the U.S. economic system, it is essential that the RC role operate as a function in order to create and maintain economic-structural stability and equilibrium. In accordance with other essential roles such as the consumer, the functional RC role allows for the presence, maintenance and continuation of social stability, or "a normal state of affairs", within the U.S. economic setting (Kalu: 122). This normalcy which is essential for the survival of the U.S. economy is best achieved through functional frameworks which possess the formula for RC functionality through a correlative relationship that transforms awareness and understanding of uniform objectives into structural stability and equilibrium.

Following scientific tradition, these functional frameworks find origin in behaviorists models—such as social learning theory (Ismail et. al. 2017)—which focus on the manner in which structure impinge upon the behavior of the individual (Austin 2015). In these models the behavior of the RC is not unique, but rather in accordance with the ideals set forth by the structural organization. Accordingly, attempts to measure the success of these functional roles exist (i.e. Olexova 2018) in the form of multi-level evaluation training programs. Ensuring that the functional parts are operating at maximum structural success and profitability, these types of "evaluation training allows for [the improvement of] training in companies, its quality and financial efficiency" (Olexova: 28).

The "Bad" RC

The importance and value of the RC role is evident within our economic society through the amount of resources given to the implementation, training and evaluative techniques of its functionality. Interestingly, while the RC role serves as an essential function within the success and operation of the business structure, it is within this same structure that appropriation of little value of the RC is constructed. With the rise of the general service sector within our modern economy, the RC role is also considered one of the more popular "bad job" occupations (Smith 2013). The precariousness which highlights these "bad jobs" results in appropriation of low wages, unpredictable work schedules and few opportunities for success and growth to the people who occupy them (Amico 2017).

These precarious attributes are the main drivers which construct these jobs, including the RC, as non-essential and of little value. These "bad" occupations are often

perceived by others as occupied by individuals who are "inferior, lacking in requisite skills and intelligence" (Besen-Cassino 2013: 47). Accordingly, popular articles which address these bad jobs (while noted as some of the cornerstones of our society) often suggest the RC occupation as one of the "worst jobs in America", which people "may not want to consider if… exploring career options (Doyle 2018; CareerCast 2017). While this lack of value and importance from popular belief upon the RC and the "bad job" discussion may look biased, the literature tends to support this skewed viewpoint. While the discussion surrounding "bad jobs" focuses on specific job traits—such as "job insecurity"—in relation to gender in the workplace (such as women in Rigotti, Mohr and Isaksson 2015), data suggests that the consequences of these non-standard job occupations—including performance issues and impact on health and well-being and — tend to affect all unique actors who occupy these jobs (Rigotti et. al. 2015: 539; Luckhaupt, Alterman, Li and Calvert 2017).

Dysfunctional Functionalism

Despite these affects upon the RC actor, these non-standard "bad jobs" provide a positive service to the functional operation of the U.S. economic structure. With the rise of innovative practices and specialized labor in the U.S. post-Fordist society, there is "a structural demand for low-autonomy workers" (Vidal 2013: 588). In order to be competitive in a "fast-capitalist" consumption market, the business organization must make profits (good for the business structure), while still offering competitive prices and deals (good for the consumer) within razor-thin budget margins (Amico 2017). Knowing that the current U.S. consumer has moved beyond needs to wants when acquiring products, it is essential for the functional RC to assume "front-line" employee roles and

to "sell" and enhance service during social interaction with consumers, becomes important (Engen and Magnusson 256).

Accordingly, the importance of the functional RC exists not in the unique actor but in the ability for the role to successfully interact with consumers. This interaction between the RC and the consumer has been noted as a means for "a store to differentiate itself from others and to increase their sales, to raise customer loyalty and to create a positive word of mouth for their store" (Jacob, Gue´guen, Martin and Boulbry 2011). These company objective achieved through the use of these structural roles are vital in order to maintain the "desired organizational façade" (Rafaeli 1989). It is this façade which veils the unique RC actor from exposure. Demonstrated by RCs who offer product knowledge and "connect" to customers, in essence, creating a good experience in order to create sales, this productivity for the RC is neither inherent nor personally valuable. While sales goals are achieved by the RC, which frames them as "productive", this is simply an exterior motive for the true ulterior motive which allows the company to profit and continue production.

Representing the organizational socialization of the business structure, the success of the functional RC only adds value to the objective success of the business structure. The achievements and goals that the RC meet and accomplish are not recognized as unique, but rather viewed as organizational achievements of functional roles reached through the business's ability to train and develop "effective members of an organization" with the right "attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge" (Tang, Liu, Oh and Weitz 2014 :62). Despite the importance of the functional RC role that is constructed

through organizational and social learning systems, what remains is a lack of attributes,

the "lived" experiences", that are related to the unique actor within the RC actor.

Dramaturgy and the Interactive Retail Clerk Actor

This functional view of the RC role do not offer primary perceptions of the unique

actor, but rather operationalizes the RC as a means to an end, as a cog in a machine. This

lack of human agency leads to isolationist and depressed states where the unique

experience of the actor is deflected in lieu of the exhibition of necessary RC role "skills"

created, implemented and maintained in order to help customers and to sell products

necessary for economic and company growth (MINT 2010). Accordingly, the

examination through these functional frameworks often come at the expense of not just

the RC actor, but often times the RC role itself. The RC role is not directly addressed, but

rather indirectly represented through analytical measures such as the RC as a component

to combatting loneliness of customers (Rippe, Smith and Dubinsky 2018).

The symbolic interactive framework, popularized by Erving Goffman, attempts to

address this unique actor limitation set forth by functionalism. Unlike the functional lens,

this interactive model allots a path towards unique actor exposure through the

"understanding of interactional and organizational phenomena" from the actor

perspective (Kotarba 2014). While the RC is viewed as either a functional or a "bad"

component within functional frameworks, in gaining this interactive independence, the

lens upon the RC moves from macro to micro. Accordingly, the interactive role of the RC

and the interaction that we have with RCs on a daily basis—that which too often falls into

this category of everyday normative aspects (Ghisleni (2017)— is able to be exposed

through the creation of a dynamic element of the RC actor.

This new dynamic dimension allows for the "viewing [of] people as actors" which makes it "[possible] to regard [unique] behaviors as part of a context that is thrust [upon actors]" (Cherry and Calvert 2012: 202). Moving away from simple functionality, the RC actor gains the ability to exhibit and perform not just as themselves, but also as situational actors—through *front* and *back stage* roles and behaviors. Based upon Goffman's dramaturgical model, the ability for the actor to possess both *virtual* and *actual* social identities allows necessary elements needed in order to "build upon existing knowledge" towards the "discovery of aspects of everyday life" (Kotarba: 418).

While the dramaturgical lens allows for the exposure of the unique actors behind the RC role through the ability to highlight "the ways humans and societies have been represented" and "what these people, their knowledge, values, and relations to the society have been like" (Vosu 2010), this perspective continues to encase and limit the unique actor. While a new dimension is given to the RC through Goffman's performance metaphors, the "actual" role which is considered the "lived experience" of the unique RC actor continues to be hidden behind a role configuration based upon functionality and necessity—the virtual role. This virtual configuration of the "front-line" employee role— an employee who interacts directly with, and is often the only contact between the organization and the customers— is important within customer service occupations (Engen and Magnusson 2018). Accordingly, ensuring that the business structure is represented accurately and that there is maximum "front-line" RC functionality, the RC must understand and meet the "shared awareness and understanding" of company goals and objectives (Kalu: 122). In order to meet these uniform objectives, the functional RC is appropriated direction through role skills and knowledge necessary for proper role

behavior through organizational learning techniques adopted by the structure (Austin 2015; Ismail, Abdul-Majid and Musibau 2017). Within the context of this organizational learning, individuals are seen as major key players, given that they act either to produce results or to learn relevant skills set (Austin 2015).

Using training as a modeling technique, the organization ensures that the RC fulfills a specific roles with specific behaviors. Through the use of *impression management,* the *virtual role* "ensures that one presents a coherent public image, where appearance and behavior are predictable and intelligible over time and across various contexts" (Dolezal 2017: 238). Thus, "when individual see someone else's behaviors, such as fellow manager or seasoned employee, the[y] embrace and implement them as [theirs which] support the learning process of the ideal role" (Ismail 2017: 97). Ultimately, within this performance model, the *virtual role of the* RC role is as that of a "front-line" employee. Following the theatrical metaphor outline, the unique actor (the actor) assumes the "front-line" employee persona (the acting role) in front of customers (audience) on sales floors (settings) through "training" created and maintained by organizational goals and ideals (scripts).

In following with Goffman, in addition to this *virtual role* is the actor's *actual role.* While the researcher attempts at clearly defining the *actual role* of a unique actor, it is to be mentioned that this is not an easy task. Rather, this is difficult, as the idea of the actor's *actual role* in this study is conceptualized as the "lived experience" of the actor. Thus, to be as efficient as possible, the *actual role* is best viewed as behavior expressed by the actor's "back-stage" behavior. In reference to Goffman, Jakovina and Jakovina

(2017) note that it is in this "back-stage" area where the performer is able to reflect without an audience. It is within this area where:

> "there is a chance for the performer to decide what kind of a role s/he wants to play, which roles are developed and underdeveloped, and which role is congruent with the performer, the one he / she sees as more authentic" (Jakovina and Jakovina 155).

Essentially, it is within this "back stage" that the actor is able to be and express the actual role from which other roles may exist or be created. Accordingly, in regard to the RC role, this view of the "lived" experience is what the researcher hopes to help expose within this study.

Forging for Humanity Through a Critical Constructivist Worldview

In order to get to this "lived experience" of the RC actor, the attempt to deconstruct the ambiguity surrounding the RC created by role contradictions must be made. While this study suggests specific contradictions related to the RC that can be reconstructed, this is not an easy task. Accordingly, these contradictions are not just subjective, but also objective as evident through the implementation and operation of the RC role through functionalized and interactive models. To suffice the needs of the ever-growing capitalistic economy, functional and symbolic interactive neglect the unique actor behind the RC in favor of appropriated roles. As suggested by Ben Agger (2016), the U.S. economy is a consumption society dictated by fast-capitalist tendencies which achieve social order and social control through compression of time and the erosion of boundaries (3-4). While the study of this focus is not on "fast-capitalist" ideology, the "acceleration" that exists in our early-twenty-first-century capitalistic model provides a

contemporary frame of reference for the contradictions which constrain the unique experience of the RC actor. This blurring of boundaries, between the personal and the private life, allows for the efficient completion and success of economic imperatives without actor hindsight or reflection.

Breaking away from these structuralist and interactive perspective of retail which suggests the RC role as that which is subordinate to management, regulations and consumers, I will examine the retail employee, not as part of a "cog" in a system, but rather as a unique actor within a system. In doing this, it is the researcher's objective to reveal the humanity, the lived experience, the human agency that is overshadowed in lieu of structural adherence and necessity.

CHAPTER III

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to reveal this RC humanity, the researcher utilizes Kincheloe's critical constructivist perspective in this study, which allows for an "intimate connection" between the "research act" and the "learning and teaching process" through the use of critical theory and constructivism (Kincheloe 3a). Kincheloe's critical constructive approach allows the researcher to address and legitimize two major objective and the relative assumptions which are present within this study:

1) The ability to expose the *unique actor* behind the RC role, which the researcher assumes is veiled by multiple frameworks—functionalism, symbolic interactionism—in lieu of structural accordance.

2) The ability to offer the exposed, *unique actor* a voice towards an enhanced epistemology of how we view the RC role, through a "lived experience" perspective. The researcher assumes this unique perspective of *what the retail clerk is* overshadowed by dominant ideology which suggests *what the retail clerk should be.*

Critical theory: Moving from that of a component—functionalism— towards a more systematic ability through role creation—symbolic interaction— it remains that the RC actor is still entrapped within social role structures. Accordingly, this allows us an opportunity at addressing the issue at hand—the limitation of exclusion surrounding the RC "lived experience." In order to reveal this *unique actor* , the necessary theoretical tools must be utilized to create a path for exposure. Following Kincheloe's framework, initial use of a critical perspective becomes necessary in untangling the RC actor from the ambiguity created by contradiction. Generally speaking, "in their search for ways to

produce democratic and evocative knowledges, critical constructivists become detectives of new ways of seeing and constructing the world" which are "traditionally dismissed by dominant culture" (Kincheloe 4).

Reflective of that of the "starting point" of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, this critical approach develops within the "real contradictions in [the] conception of society" (Jan Volker 2018: 675). Because of this, the researcher finds critical theory an adequate lens for adequate critical analysis in untangling the *unique actor* from their contradictory RC role (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2016). These requirements which are "explanatory, practical, and normative" elements of critical theory (Federico Sollazo 2016: 6) allow for the emergence of "clear norms" and avenues necessary for the "social transformation" (Sollazo 2016) of the RC. Moving away from an actor immersed in ambiguity of dialectical roles and labels within functional and symbolic interactive frameworks to that of independent, *unique actor*, this use of critical theory will allow for:

1) Examination of the micro and macro functional interpretations the RC role in U.S. society.

2) Presentation of an answer to the limitations of the functional interpretation of the RC through assessment of symbolic interaction-—specifically through *actual* and *virtual role concepts* from Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model.

3) Critical examination of functional and SI models as deficient to the use of critical theoretical tools in examining contradictions experienced by the RC. These examinations reveal major limitations—contradictions of RC role constructed by U.S. society and lack of actor presence.

Constructivism: After critically unearthing this *unique actor* from the ambiguous RC role, the researcher is then able to take a constructivist position. Through the use of constructivism, "different individuals coming from diverse backgrounds will see the world in different ways" (Kincheloe 2005a: 9). Accordingly, constructivism allows the researcher to move away from dominant RC interpretations and instead allow participants to "make sense of (or interpret) the meanings individuals have about the world" and to provide them the ability to "develop subjective meanings of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell 2014: 8). Through analysis, assessment and discussion of these "real" experiences of the *unique actor* behind the retail clerk, the researcher attempts to deconstruct the ambiguity of the RC role and allow the construction of a foundation necessary for the emergence of the *unique actor* behind the RC role resulting in:

1) The emergence of a *unique actor* voice beyond the retail clerk role, and

2) Addition to the epistemology of what we understand the RC role to be.

Accordingly, the addition of the understanding to the epistemology of the RC through personal experience and reflection will allow us to add strokes to our portrait of understanding regarding the actors behind roles that we interact with on a daily basis.

Framework Validation

While the role of the RC is often viewed through singular frameworks such as functional and interactive ones, these frameworks limit the interpretation of the RC. Following the ideas of researchers (i.e. Malott 2010; Kenneth Tobin 2010) that a "bricolage" of theories are necessary for a better understand of social roles, the researcher views Kincheloe's critical constructivism as adequate for exposing the RC actor. Formed as a critical pedagogy/constructivism effort, Kincheloe's framework is described as

"challenging the false hierarchy of intelligence dominant within mainstream schooling in favor of a contextualized approach to learning that celebrates epistemological diversity as counterhegemonic and transformative" (Malott 386).

While the use of Kincheloe's framework is fairly new and initially adopted towards a critical perspective upon traditional modes of education (Curry Stephenson Malott 2010), the use of critical constructivism by the researcher allows for the proper tools—allowing the meshing between critical theory and constructivism—necessary for the "democratic" emergence of primary understanding generated through the unique actors behind the RC role (Malott: 386). Through this critical constructive meshing researchers have been able to address new epistemologies in regards to adult education (IIhan Kucukaydin 2010), the relationship between race and education (Horace R. Hall 2015) and teaching, in general (Patrick M. Jenlink 2015). Accordingly, while the RC role is framed specifically through functional and interactive perspectives in order to maintain structural equilibrium and normal role expectations, Kincheloe's critical constructivism allots a pathway for the unique, lived experience of the RC actor can move away from this subordination towards neutrality (Malott 386). Within the critical constructivist literature, removal of dominant connotation—that of being compliant with "the best theoretical framework"— of ideas towards neutrality is an important common theme (386). Accordingly, with this theme of neutrality, it becomes possible for the RC actor to provide personal reflection upon their experience which results in a representation of the unique actor—the true, "lived experience" of the RC.

CHAPTER IV

Methodology

Phenomenological Design

In following Kincheloe, it is important to expose the *unique actor* behind the RC role. In order to do this this, a qualitative methodology is used in this study in order to interpret and develop subjective meaning of the RC perspectives. While guidelines to qualitative study exist within disciplines, "flexibility" remains for the qualitative researcher as to what methods should be used as the project proceeds (Creswell 2014; Kevin R. Clark and Beth L. Veale 2018). Accordingly, the researcher uses a phenomenological design in this study. Phenomenology is an adequate research design for this study because it is a type of research that Edmund Husserl suggests "focus[es]… on meanings and identifying the essence or central theme of an experience as a way of furthering knowledge" (Lois Phillips-Pula, Julie Strunk and Rita H. Pickler 2011). Similar to the major goal of this study—exposure of the *unique actor* from within the ambiguity of the RC role—the use of phenomenology within this study allows for knowledge production of the contradictory RC through the illustration of ideas and experiences from the actors who occupy these contradictory RC roles.

Study Setting and Population

The research for my study took place within DFW area malls. Semi-structured interviews were completed at two malls in Fort Worth and one mall in Grapevine—Northeast Mall, Ridgmar Mall and Grapevine Mills Mall. The settings were chosen based on proximity of the researchers home location. The population of focus in my study are retail clerks. The unit of analysis for my study is the "small-box" retail clerk. "Small

box" retail outlets are retail stores that exist in within bigger settings such as boutique shops and mall outlets. Accordingly, in this study, the participants chosen for this study are considered "small-box" retail clerks if they are retail associates or retail managers who work as "front-line" employees within mall settings. "Front-line" employees are defined as individuals who work on sales floors and who interact with customers The narratives revealed in the data sets reflect ideas related to the individual retail clerk and not the general population of retail clerks. This is important to state so that there is no confusion between the unit of analysis and the unit of observation.

Data Collection, Sampling Method and Procedure

The researcher collected 22 data sets—20 interviews and engage in 2 participant observations for analysis in this study. In order to gather participants for interviews, I utilized non-probability, convenience sampling in order to acquire retail clerks from "small-box" retail outlets. While non-probability sampling strategies are less reliable than probability sampling, due to researcher limitations the use of convenience sampling was chosen as it remains a sampling method that is an "excellent means of obtaining… information" about research questions (Howard Lune and Bruce L. Berg 2017: 28-29).

Participants: The participants in my study all held retail clerk positions in "small-box" retail outlets at the time of the study—either as sales associates (8) or as retail managers (6 store manager and 6 assistant managers).

Interviews: With participant approval (through use of informed consent forms), the researcher conducted face to face, semi-structured interviews with 20 participants. Questions related to job requirements, RC role experience and affects that may arise due

to the contrast in these roles will be asked related to *structured roles*, actor *agency*, and *role contradiction.* Examples of these questions include:

"*As a retail clerk, what does your company require you to do?*"

"*In what ways do you define yourself as an individual?*"

"*Do you believe that there is a difference between your/ others importance of role?*"

The 20 interview participants will remain anonymous and were given pseudonyms within the study. The interviews were recorded using an audio recorder and lasted approximately 25 minutes to 45 minutes. To adhere to a more "natural" setting and feel, the researcher's primary goal was to conduct interviews with the participants while in their retail setting. Knowing that there is the possibility that issues will arise with participants being unable to interview within their retails setting, participants were offered to complete interviews away from their retail settings. All recorded audio of the participant interviews will be kept for 3 years and then discarded by the researcher.

Observation: Two participant observations were conducted at pre-determined "small-box" retail outlets at two of the mall locations stated above—Ridgmar Mall and Grapevine Mills Mall. The selection of these "small-box" retail stores will be used based upon 1) the researcher's locale and 2) the permission from the store managers of the retail locations. The primary goal of these observations was to get a better glimpse of what it is like to be on the sales floor with the retail clerk. The researcher conducted field notes within these observations. After each observation, the researcher took an hour to make comments, examine, and note important moments that are experienced in the

observations. The field notes were written, transferred to digital text, and will remain confidential with the researcher until they are discarded and destroyed after 3 years.

Data Retrieval and Analysis

The audio from the interviews was transcribed and then, along with the field notes from the observations, analyzed for more "clear and definitive" verification and conclusions (Lune and Berg 2017: 31). While there are multiple ideologies regarding how to analyze data to get verifiable conclusions within phenomenology, this study utilized data analysis methods suggested by Amadeo Giorgi. Similar to Giorgi's perspective, the participants in this study were viewed as "co-researchers" because of the cooperative relationship established with the researcher—ultimately resulting in the creation of unique perspectives and conclusions. In order to ensure that both the researcher and the co-researchers descriptions are "as precise and comprehensive as possible", the researcher utilized bracketing and reduction as appropriate data analysis tools necessary to "set aside a priori biases, theories, beliefs, thoughts, or judgments" of the data sets (Pula et. al.: 70). As suggested by Giorgi, the use the validity measures (as listed below) of bracketing and reduction by the researcher "culminates in a [cooperative] description of the common experience that becomes the essence of the phenomenon" (Pula et. al.: 70):

1. Read and reread descriptions of experience to get a sense of the whole

2. Divide descriptions into meaning units by identifying significant terms

3. Describe the meaning of each unit and relate each to the topic of study

4. Synthesize units into a consistent description of the phenomenon

5. Analyze the transformed units focusing on intentionality of co-researchers

6. Develop a description of the common experience

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS/RESULTS

*Observations***:** Prior to interviews, I participated in two observational sessions within two mall retail outlets in the DFW area. These observations took place in May 2019. Access to these stores were gained by my request towards each retailer representative. Informed consent was given for me to observe the retail clerk participants while they operated within their respective workplaces. Accordingly, in order to protect these retail clerks and to maintain their confidentiality, any mention of their names within my observational narrative have been altered into pseudonyms.

I took a two-step process with my observations. I first observed the employee and the environment which allowed for me to obtain a general, initial idea of what I viewed. Secondly, after this initial observation, I noted, what I believed to be, a few major behaviors and occurrences which I later briefly questioned about with the retail employee. The first observation took place at a retail outlet in Grapevine Mills Mall—within a popular hat store—and the second observation took place at Ridgmar Mall—within a popular novelty shop. By participating in these observations, it was my goal to gain a better understanding of what the retail clerk does. While only momentary in time—these observations were limited to 30 minutes—due to retailer recommendation—these observations and brief follow-up with the retail employee revealed themes which helped create the interviews that I would eventually conduct.

Observation I: Grapevine Mills -May 6th 2019

It is a slow Monday and the popular novelty store seemed to highlight this. The retail employee, the store manager, who is working is busy folding tee shirts that lay upon a work-station like mobile desk. The store is filled with merchandise, with what seems to be everywhere—on racks, on chains, on the register area, in an overhead area. While there are areas that seem to need replenishment of stock, I find it interesting that this retail store has so much product yet there are so few people on this day. I later ask the store manager if this is normal—having lots of product and few people around to buy it. Jessie states that this is. She informs me that at this mall, the customer traffic hits on the weekends—primarily Friday and Saturday—which is when the stuff will sell. "Don't worry, not every day is like this." Jessie states as she continues to fold shirts. The stack of shirts that Jessie is folding stacks about two feet on top of the workstation that she is near. Based in this, I believe that the weekends within this store are completely different from what I see on this day.

For the majority of the hour, Jessie continues to fold shirts, while occasionally running to the register to look at the register screen and around the store, in which it looks like she is making minor fixes to product that is out of place. I later learned that the register screen also acts as a computer, which allows employees access to reports, e-mail and other programs—such as scheduling applications—which allow for the timely function of the store and it's productivity. Accordingly, while at first I thought that one of Jessie's innate traits was that of "organizes", which would have explained her occasional fixing and maneuvering of products, I was completely off. Mentioning later to Jessie that she seemed to be very organized with her products, she informed me that, while that was

somewhat true, what was even more true was the anger that would arise from her DSM or corporate bosses were they to come in and see that everything was not in tip-top shape. "They would be [very upset]." Jessie states with an awkward smile on her face.

During my 30 minutes within the store, I observed 7 people who came into the store, with 3 eventually buying items. These individuals ranged from a young teen couple, to an elderly man, yet all seemed to initially engage in the same behavior when first entering the store—looking left and right, seeing Jessie folding tee shirts or running around, and then making their way straight to her. "Excuse me." Most of the people stated as they walked up to Jessie. Attentive and friendly with all of the shoppers, Jessie answered questions and assisted guests find the products that they were trying to find in the store.

Two of the people who bought items were an elderly couple. Seeking out greeting cards for a friend's 70th birthday, the couple asked if there were any "good" cards. Jessie suggested that the cards in here store were more "humorous" than traditional ones. The elderly couple suggested that this was "great" and asked where the cards were. Jessie escorted the couple to the greeting card area and let them know that there was a special on tee-shirts and to let her know if they needed any more help. The couple smiled and Jessie walked back up to where I and the stack of shirts were. "I love old people with a sense of humor." Jessie stated as she grabbed another tee shirt and begin to fold.

About five minutes later, a young woman walked into the store, rather quickly and went up to a wall which contained a plethora of images of tee shirts that the store had for sale. Jessie walked up to the young woman and greeted her. The young woman did not reply. Jessie again greeted her. Again, the young woman did not reply. I noticed a

look of frustration overcome Jessie's face. It seemed as though the young woman did not even recognize that Jessie was around. Jessie walked back up to me and expressed her frustration with this customer. "But you just watch this." She said as she walked back towards the young woman. As I watched Jessie walk over to the young woman, I heard a loud crash. Gaining my attention, I noticed that young man with a baby stroller had hit the metal sign (which holds numerous sale signs) that Jessies store puts out near the store entrance. The young man smiled at me and continue on into the mall.

Turning my attention back to Jessie and the young woman, I noticed that Jessie was at the register with the girl. Walking over to the register I noticed the two having a friendly conversation about the band of the shirt that she was buying. "And if you buy 3 more tee shirts, you get one free". Jessie stated as she handed the young woman a card. The young woman smiled, thanked Jessie and walked out of the store. "Thank you. Come back and see us!" Jessie yelled at her. After the young woman exited the store, I asked Jessie what was "up" with that young woman and here not responding back to her. Jessie smiled and informed me that the young woman had earbuds in, something she only noticed when re-approaching the young woman. "I see." I stated, the situation now making more sense. Jessie stated that she thought the young woman was just being rude, like so many people are to her normally. "But no, It was just technology."

Balancing Symbolic and Lived Emotion

One of the major and more interesting observations I noted as the smile that seemed to magically appear upon Jessie's face each time a guest approached her. I viewed this magic act as a play on the human emotion of happiness and friendliness. When meeting Jessie initially and even after my observation, rarely did I notice Jessie

smile. While I do not believe that she hated what she was doing or attained any information from her regarding her personal situation, it did seem that a major behavior change took place when dealing with those who were coming into the store as potential customers. I perceive that this may be a good example of "facework" and "impression management" which Goffman suggested as pivotal for what could be called the normalization of social interaction between two people. Questioning Jessie later about this, she states that while she does not really like her smile, she does smile when dealing with people at work because it makes them feel like they are coming into a "warm environment." "They are more likely to buy stuff." Jessie states when asked as to why a warm environment in her workplace is important. "If people don't buy stuff, then I don't have a job."

In contrast to the magic acts that Jessie, I can only assume, performs on a daily basis, what also became apparent to me was the non-whimsical acts which I saw Jessie also illustrate—what we could call real human emotion. We can also see this through the impression management and face-work that Jessie outs on when. That is, Jessie is more laid back and less "smiley", as she called it, when there are not customers around. Jessie's natural emotional state, whatever that may be at the moment has to be "turned off", in order for her to be able to "turn on" for the people, the "guests" in her store. In dealing with the young woman, these contrasting emotional states became fully displayed as Jessie, albeit filled with real emotion, was expected to be "friendly" and "helpful" with even those who are not to her, or in this case to those who do not even acknowledge her. Initially believing, as did I, that the young woman was simply being rude or dismissive, really affected the balance of emotional states that Jessie is expected to be able to

manage. Becoming a challenge at times, I note after my observation that the balance of emotional states may be a major expectation of the retail employee role.

Observation II: Ridgmar Mall- May 8th, 2019

It is a Wednesday morning and Tyra, an assistant manager at a video-game related retail store, is putting up shipment from the day prior. The store follows a clear pattern where everything is green, black, white and grey. The store is filled with product, not in an abundant manner which I have seen at many other retail stores. There are a few boxes stacked in different locations, not in an obtrusive, but an organized manner. I joke with Tyra that this must be the "fun part" of what you do. She laughs and suggests that it is actually not too bad. "It makes the time go by." She informs as she rips open a box with a yellow box-cutter.

From the moment I arrive in the store, I notice that there is a consistent flow of people in the store. This is different from my first retail store observation, I think, which was much more slow with sporadic traffic in comparison. There are at least 4 people in the store at all times during my observation. These people seem to primarily be young teens to middle aged young men. I wonder why these kids are not in school on a Wednesday. Another research question for another day, I think to myself. Accordingly, the people that are in store are either browsing video game titles and related product or at video games console, playing the popular "new" video games that are on sale.

While there are people on the store, it seems that not much communication between Tyra and the people in the store, besides what I would consider to be "functional" language—or that which seems to reflect the requirements of her company, or the person above her. "Hey guys, we have [insert item] on sale today." I repeatedly

here Tyra inform every person that comes in to the store. Most of the guests say "thanks" or some don't, as they and I notice that Tyra quickly continues to work after each greeting. From what I see, it looks as though Tyra represents the functionality of the retail clerk. She works on tasks, she dictates the proper verbal script to the people that come into her store and she takes people's money that want to buy product in her store.

I am more independent in this observation. Tyra informs me from the start that she is busy working on yesterday's truck (shipment) and that I can observe however long I want. "If you have any questions, just ask me." She states as she smile and walks back behind the register to an open box of product.

I walk around and notice lots of popular culture products for sale—which I overhear the majority of guests talking about. This is weird I note, because at first observation I believed there were only video games for sale here. However, looking at the store more closely, I notice that there are action figures, home-related items and apparel for consumer consumption. As one of the people on the store states, "Man this place has a lot of stuff." I agree in my head and smile.

Realistically, many of the interactions between Tyra and the people in her store are initial greetings and then dialogue between "cashier" and "customer" at the register. Very functional approach that Tyra takes in her role as retail employee. It seems that everyone who enters the store understands this approach. Only once did I notice one of the people in the store speak to Tyra for more than a brief amount of time. It was another young woman wearing a blue polo with a logo. Asking Tyra later about this conversation, she stated that that was an employee in the mall that had once worked in the store. "She was cool, she just left because the other place offered her more money." I ask her if the

pay is "okay here." She emits the most emotion in the form of a laugh and states, "No it's not!" I snicker, surprised at her response. "But they do give a good discount on stuff I like." Interesting, I think to myself. I wonder if retail employees work retail just to get discounts at places they like.

About 20 minutes into my observation, I notice that a young man wearing a bright yellow shirt comes into the store, approaches the register area and asks Tyra if they have a specific video game in stock. She briefly states that they did but now they don't. The customer looks disappointed. She functionally apologizes, but then asks, " Why don't you just buy it online? You can do that here." The young man, looks confused and asks, "I can?" Tyra nods and walks towards the right end of the register area, where I thought a sample gaming-console was. Interestingly, I am wrong and this area is a touch-screen computer station. Tyra waves at the young man to come over with her and then begins to explain to him how he can order the items that he wanted to purchase. After a few minutes, the guest approaches the register area, is handed a piece of paper and then leaves. I ask Tyra about the machine and she informs me that it is new, that it makes it easier for people to buy items in the store that they are out of. I ask her if this worries her or affects the store in any way. Tyra states that, she does not think it does. "I mean, it makes people happy." "Cool." I state as I think in my head, whether this is the right ideology to carry within the functionality of the retail sector.

Functionality at Its Finest

Unlike my observational experience with Jessie, I did not get the feel that an "emotional balance" was as important as ensuring that the functionality of the employee was important—as a necessity for the store to be productive and to make profits. Similar

to literature which suggests that retail is necessary for economic sustainability and growth, I believe that I witnessed first-hand how this looks at the "ground-level"—within the "front-line" employee. Throwing "impression management" and "face-work" out of the window, Tyra illustrated that utilitarianism can also get you a long way int the retail "game". Again, I am surprised at how little interaction Tyra had with the people that entered her store. There seemed to be no connect, but rather an established dissonance between the people in the store and Tyra—save for the process of transaction interaction.

While this dissonance may have been just a culturally created aspect—the store is following the team at the store level has created—or perhaps was something created by myself, possibly observer bias, I do find the "new technology" aspect that I saw in my observation as an interesting addition. I asked the question to myself in my notes if there a correlation between the use of technology and what seems to be the dissonance I see in the store between employee and customer may have a correlation. If technology in the form of a customer service aid—similar to kiosk in Tyra's store which allowed for the purchase of anything the store had to offer—does that allow a "slack" for any customer service that is not issued by the employee? If so, does this affect the way in which the employee views this technological help? Thinking back to my first observation with Jessie, I see that she exhibited much more customer service in a store that did not offer people the opportunity to order products in-store. While I understand my intent is not to examine the effect of technology on retail employees, I found this emergent, possible correlation an interesting phenomena.

Reflection of Observations

After my two observations, I gained a better, albeit not experienced, understanding of the retail employee role. While my reflection is secondary, not that of a lived experience, the description that I created allowed for the progression of study— primarily the interviews that would follow.

In both observations, the RC behaved primarily as a function. Both Jessie and Tyra, worked on functional daily store behaviors—shipment and store "pick-up" (re-organizing and stocking the store)—which allowed the store to be functional for the people who may which to shop it. When approached by people, Jessie and Tyra catered to their needs whether that was answering a question, getting product from for the customer from hard-to-reach areas, or "ringing" them up when they were ready to purchase items. Accordingly, in line with a symbolic interactive interpretation, Jessie and Tyra both verbalized script which suggested sales and mottos which represented the company—what we could call following a "script." Additionally, Jessie even went as far as to exhibit the "face-work" and "impression management" aspects of Goffman's dramaturgical framework, which allowed for compete creation of the image that she wished to portray to the people on her store.

While my observation revealed these functional and interactive behavior patterns within Jessie and Tyra, to suggest that this is all that I observed in the two would be erroneous on my part. In respect to Jessie and Tyra, and in accordance with study's aim, through my observation I saw that the retail employee is more than a functional or interactive role. This peak of the unique actor was reflected in the reasoning given to questions I presented to both after observation. I learned that Tyra enjoys the discounts

that they get with their job (Tyra) and Jessie informed me that she acts in accordance with corporate guidelines because if she didn't their DSM would get angry.

From an observant perspective, more importantly, may have been the perceived disposition of the two when idle from guests within their stores. With both Jessie and Tyra, there seemed to be a difference in behavior when dealing with shoppers and when not. While this "facework" many have been more prevalent when observing Jessie, this change in behavior also occurred with Tyra. Accordingly, it is this level of "facework" that illustrates the uniqueness within each actor. While the ideal act of these two within their social settings would be uniform were there a true following of functional or interactive frameworks or scripts, what realistically occurs is a contrast in acting between the two RCs. Jessie seemed to be much more engaging with the shoppers in here store, while Tyra was much more reserved and seemed to engage only when it was necessary—when someone found her and asked if "she worked here."

While there could be many reasons as to why there was a difference between the two RCs, what does become apparent is the "quality" of the performance that the two are giving to their customers—essentially their audience. Noting that the two "know" how to turn on "facework", the level at which they put on their performance could then suggest that their awareness of their role and how much that they really want to put into it. More efficiently, the performance of the two shows the result of the contradictory role position that they are in. In their RC roles, Jessie and Tyra are expected to be both actors with an identity that is expected to "connect" with customers, and as a functional role, catering to whatever the customers around them want.

Ultimately, equating to their roles as RCs employed by corporate institutions, this dissonance between the behavior between Jessie and Tyra suggests that there is a difference in how the two view and interpret their role in regards to the ideal, the preferred, behavior and scripts which are expected by their corporations. Noting that RCs are "frontline" employees who represent their companies, this dissonance between RCs becomes important when speaking of economic productivity. The success of retail economy do not occur in vacuums, but rather through daily routines, behaviors of RC's— which affects the allotment of monetary resources given out from the general customer. *Interviews***:** This difference in role interpretation illuminated in my observations suggests that there is a uniqueness within each RC experience. Accordingly, to dig deeper into this uniqueness, I conducted semi-structured interviews with retail clerks. 20 interviews were conducted with RCs from across three DFW malls. Emergent themes and narrative support from these interviews regarding unique RC experience are provided below. While these interviews did reveal unique experiences, the initial themes listed are more in line with functional and interactive themes that emerged. These themes, which reflect limited definitions of the RC appear from participant experience.

Functional Tasking

As with any occupation, the RCs in this study stated that there was a functional aspect to their role in their stores. This role consisted of what would be considered daily goals and activities which would be considered common for the retail clerk. Dalia, a key holder who has been in retail for 8 years, gives a good example of these daily tasks:

"I am expected to open and close, which consists of making deposits, taking them to the bank. Also, doing paperwork and sending that in at the end of the night.

Umm, we are also required to buy merchandise. So, if we are low on product certain days of the week, I have to go through this and order more. I also am in charge of shipment,, checking it in, making sure that we get in the right amounts. Merchandising the store, making it look pretty."

Accordingly, Brad, a store manager who has been in retail for 20 years, provided me with what seemed a checklist of the tasks that he states that he is expected to do every day:

"Markdowns, schedule issues, have to go to the bank, we have a lot of paperwork to fill out, umm, we have to assign tasks, we have to do tasks, we have to put up shipment on shipment days. We have to coach our employees, we have to evaluate our employees…We have to interpret a lot of reports…"

In an itself, the RCs in this study stated that these tasks were tedious and what Brad called "dumb." However, it is the expectations by the companies towards these daily tasks which make these daily routines functional and therefore necessary. When asked if these tasks were mandated by their company, each RC interviewed stated that they were. In line with this functional necessity, Mark, a store manager who has been in retail for 25 years, suggests that the tasks that he does on a daily basis is centered around "selling". While Mark notes the daily tasks that the other participants in this study have suggested—selling items, making sure that policy and procedure are followed—he is more straightforward about his role as a developmental recruiter for what he views as a "selling job".

"This is, first and foremost, a selling job. So, I need salespeople, I need sales personnel. I need someone who is not just going to ring up, that is [the big

retailer]. We need people that come in and offer sales and push product onto

people. And, I have to make sure that they are doing that on a daily basis."

Suggesting a bigger picture, Mark notes that his primary task of ensuring that 'extra

selling' is occurring on the sales floor is important because of company expectations."

"I want that extra on everybody, because they do judge us based on units per

transaction and average dollar per transaction. if anybody ever wants a promotion

of some sort, or even a raise, they look at those numbers and if your numbers are

mediocre, you are not going to get anything. They want people to excel. And I tell

[my employees] that."

Formal and Informal Functional Learning

In order to achieve this functionality, as set forth by the company's represented by

RCs in this study, the RCs in this study suggested that there were formal patterns of

training and evaluation in each store which guided the development of associates within

the store. As noted by Jackson, a key holder, and Heather, a store manager, at popular

mall retail outlets there are manuals and packets which allow them to see how associates

are doing and to punish if necessary.

"As managers, we are really adamant about showing them the manuals. Like the

right and wrong ways to do things. So like if they do mess up, we really don't

chastise them that much, we just show them the manual, and what and how they

are supposed to be doing it… If it becomes consistent, as far as mistakes, then

there might be some type of like punishment. As far as like a write-up, a one-on-

one or something like that." (Jackson)

"There are packets that we go through called [company name] university, and

anytime that a new employee is hired we go through that process one on one with

the steps daily." (Heather)

Understanding that we are on the digital age, much of the training that associates

receive, as highlighted by the RCs in this study does come from computerized programs

and training. Reflective of the RCs in this study, Ryan states that many of these computer

training programs train the basics of what one must do as an associate. "[The] programs

train them how to do register, POS stuff. Those are pretty simple and easy for them to

use."

However, despite this use of technology in training associates, what prevailed

from the RCs in this study was the idea that while the use of formal training materials,

such as manuals and computer programs is vital for basic learning, the use of more

informal learning tactics, such as "hands-on learning" held more value as far as one really

understanding the role that they are expected to function within. Accordingly, while there

are training programs that Janice speaks of which aid in the understanding of what is

expected of her and her co-workers, the use of "roleplays" are also what helps her and

those around her learn. When asked if these two training helps her, Janice said they do,

albeit "hands-on" training was preferred.

"I think so, yeah. But, for the most part, hands-on with someone supervising is the

best way for everybody, I think to learn."

Similarly, Brandon, a part time associate at a retail shoe outlet, is exposed to both

computer training programs and "hands-on" training. However, he feels that the training

that he receives from "higher ups" is better in order for him and others to better understand their role, and to forego any technical errors.

"… it's a better experience, a hands-on experience. I don't have to worry about a computer making mistakes when you have an error. It is easier to fix a human error. So if someone needs, say, you don't know how to put on a SKU on something, it is easier for somebody to show you how to do that, rather than just reading it off of a computer. It's more of a mental thing, it is a mental process that is built up."

Aside from computer training, store manager Brad also uses coaching and hands-on training methods with his co-workers.

"While there is some computer training, it's more hands-on training with people. Most of the time, you know, it is more like coaching or counseling. Yeah, there is some hands-on training, like face to face that I like to do rather than rely on paper or electronic training."

Similar to sales associate Brandon, Brad replicates this favor of informal training over computer training, when he speaks of "hands-on" training as a better form of learning for associates.

"I think [associates] learn more through hands on. You know, because sometimes it is a lot to read and comprehend. You might forget a lot of stuff. I would prefer hands-on training myself."

Approachability Through Appearance

While the RC is expected to function within a specific, specialized role, which is instilled though social training methods, the manner in which the RC is expected to

behave is also dictated. This dictation, by way of corporate expectations is expressed by all the RCs in this study. This is best expressed by Brenda, an assistant retail manager who says that she is expected to "be positive and upbeat, polite, have good customer service, always with a smile." These behaviors are expected from Brenda by her company in order to promote an "approachability" which allows for those shopping with her to feel comfortable. This is important for Brenda to do because she states that if she does not do this, then she is "not going to make any sales." As she puts it, "People don't want to have anything to do with you if you are not approachable."

Accordingly, when asked if sales are important, Brenda replies, "Absolutely." This follows the other RCs in this study which equate dictated behaviors to sales productivity. Helping this sales productivity is the ability for the RC to appear in a professional manner. As noted by Jackson and Amy, a sales associate who has been in retail for three months, being professional allows the store to be productive through being viewed as a "respectful" company, in general. Or, as Amy puts it: "It is how the customers perceive us as a company. If we are professional, they will respect us and respect our store and then shop with us."

Accordingly, because it is important that the RC "look" the part while on the sales floor in order for sales productivity and profit building, what results is a lack of what can be described as the true emotional state of the RC. This emotional state reveals a conscious role interpretation of the contradictory performance that the RC is exhibiting. Thus when Mark states that at work he must be welcoming and friendly, what he understands is that there must be an absence of the personal while he is in his RC role. "So, if you are in a bad mood or whatever, you have to check that at a door" (Mark). This

delineation in role conscious role interpretation is further elaborated upon by Johnny who states that he must be able to put on a "happy face" at work no matter what.

> "Just no matter if I am having a bad day, I have to put on a happy face you know and just suck it up. Make the customer happy. Because we are in the business of making money by selling stuff. And, you know if we [expletive] people off, we are not going to sell stuff."

Conscious Emergence of Role Importance

In the interviews, the majority of the RCs revealed that they saw that their role was important. Only one participant, Janice, stated that she did not view her role as important. Accordingly, the majority of the participants who did view their roles as important, only did so because they felt as though they were pivotal to the store and "helping" or offering aid to managers or co-workers around them. For a couple of participants, such as Ryan, this limited the perceived importance, who saw their roles as "somewhat" important and a bit more "functional".

> "I feel like it is important, but that it's also… maybe not that important. What I mean by that is, that, really I am just here to assist the manager so that they don't have such a large workload." (Ryan)

However, many more participants in this same perspective, who believed that their role was important because they are able to help co-workers, saw this importance as "more" important. This conscious ability for the RCs to see the centrality of their roles allowed for the emergence of role importance. Brenda, for example, sees importance in her role, knowing that she is able to assist her store manager and take some weight of their shoulders: "It is relatively important to have that assistant to help alleviate some of

the job stress." Dalia mirrors this perceived importance when she reveals that her job is important because of the lack of employees that her store has, which she attributes to the "dying" mall that she works in.

"Yeah, actually right now I am very important. We are in a very much dying mall. Umm, so and then on top of that, this particular location is very short-staffed. So, if I actually wasn't here, my manager would be here and by herself. So, right now it is just me and my manager. Right now, I am very important. If I get sick, umm, we are very much screwed."

Additionally, sales associate Brandon sees his role as important because of how long he has been at the store. The longest tenured associate at his store, Brandon views his self as an initial trainer to those associates who are new to his store, as well as succession aid and the store's overall performance.

"I am one of the longest people who have worked in this location, so when we do get somebody new, I am usually the one that comes and helps them know how we run things around here. So, I feel as though if I don't know my part, than nobody else knows their part and then it is a whole failed system in the store. So, I just make sure that I am up to date so that I can keep everyone else up to date."

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

The major goal of this study has been to expose the unique character of the RC. Attempting to remove definitions from what should be the RC role, through interviews and observation I hope to further advance the understanding of what a RC is to us within our society. Accordingly, just like anyone in society, the RC is an individual and therefore a social being. While this may seem a basic statement, in the retail arena, the definition of who is allowed to be social and who is not is dictated.

While not my intent, the revelation of experiences where defined roles are placed upon the RC—where participant narrative reflects functional and interactive roles rather than unique ones— in my results section illustrate a connection between theory and what is considered lived experiences. Accordingly, these results act as a precursor to my discussion, which highlights the major themes which emerged in my interviews. These themes offer a reflection of the "uniqueness" which surrounds the lived experience of the modern RC and offers new knowledge, in critical constructivist fashion, which allows for deconstruction and an alternative understanding and reconstruction of how we view the RC role.

The Unique RC as Social

"Teamwork" was listed as a resulting theme which emerged from the RCs in this study. This suggestion that one is not simply a unique identity within their stores, but rather a collection of individuals working together alludes to the social identity which is lost when traditionally examining RC roles. While this theme of "teams" and "teamwork" could be considered social, this collective effort operates as an asset in achieving

functional, corporate goals through interactive behaviors. However, this theme does open

up a new avenue which allows us to look further into what I label as a "non-functional

social RC". Accordingly, as I moved along with my study, this new path expanded as the

mention of social relationships in my interviews continually occurred. While I initially

understood that there was a hidden social element to the RC role, veiled by traditional

and corporate frameworks, the extent of this social element was an interesting find.

Creation of Social Bonds

Initially exposed in my results section, the RCs were expected to understand their

roles at work though training programs. While the RCs in this study noted that the

training programs did help, what also came to fruition was the ability to train people

"hands-on." This sort of "partnership" training was suggested as better than what would

be perceived as traditional, "formal" training—where booklets, checklists, computer

programs determine how much someone has learned or is doing in their role. What this

may suggest in my study is a move from traditional forms of training to more

personalized forms. While this may seem minor, this move, this favorable move from

non-human to human interaction during RC training sets a seed for what some of the

participants stated as important to them on a daily basis—the people they work with. This

is the case with Johnny, who sees his role as important not based on the day to day

operations that he is in charge of, but rather because of the people that he has worked

with.

> "Yeah, I feel, I know that I have had former employees come back and tell me
>
> years later that I've had an impact on their lives. They learned a lot working for
>
> me, you know. I was one of their first, or first, employer. You know, they learned

work ethic working at my store and stuff. And, it kinda' makes me feel good you

know, that I helped teach somebody."

This ability to create social bonds, to continue to be close to people beyond the

retail store, is mirrored by Ryan and Jackson who suggest that the importance of their job

lies in the people that they work with. This importance is based upon innate social

connection and longevity of relationships.

"The people for sure, it's what retail is more about for me personally. The duties

are very monotonous, so it's just like second nature. Whereas, like the people that

you meet, those are what's really going to stick with me." (Ryan)

"The people I work with. Because, when you're here with the people you work

with, you develop relationships with some people. And, I feel like that's a little bit

more important than making daily goals. Just because I mean, it is more of a

longevity thing than it is a daily thing." (Jackson)

Accordingly, as expressed by the RC, this social interaction element was

something that was seen as also being available to the customers. This was revealed

during my interviews, through dialogue such as Brenda's who believes that one of the

most interesting things about retail is the people that you encounter :

"It has to be the people. Like on all ends, the people you work with, the

customers, learning different personalities and getting to know them. It's the

people, I think is the most interesting part of retail."

Similarly, Jack believes that interacting with "guests" is important when working

as a RC within the retail industry. Actually, Jack even states from his experience that

retail even enhances one's ability at social interaction.

"Based off my experience, if you have never worked retail and you plan on trying

it out, get ready to work! Be ready to deal with a lot of guests. If you are not a

people person, this is probably not the field. If you are looking to be a people-

person, this may be the field to get into to help break into that. That was me with

my first retail job. It took me a minute to get into walking up and actually talking

to somebody I had never met before. But, honestly I believe it was a very good

social-building experience."

Power Structures… With "Others"

Interestingly, in sharing these experiences, Brenda and Jack reveal a more

personal, social RC interaction with the customer—one which is left out of functional and

interactive frameworks. This personal type of interaction with customers is frowned upon

by functional frameworks which suggest utilitarianism and interactive frameworks which

use "personal connection" in order to create an image to sell product. Because there is no

outlet for the RC with this type of personal connection with those within their stores

beyond co-workers this affects the way that the RCs view others who are not in their

position.

While not highly contentious, this personal connection is strained and does affect

the way that the RC views the customer. When asked about how they thought others

(what Mead would call a generalized "other") would view their roles, their role

importance, the majority of the RCs defaulted to the other as their customers. This was

the case with Brenda, Janice and Ryan, who relegated their dialogue not to a general

public but towards that of the customers who shop in their stores. Accordingly, as stated

prior, all of the RCs in this study stated the idea that one of the main jobs of the RC is to

offer customer service, to aid, to help, customers that are in their stores. Jack states this goal in base terms. "Obviously, you want to give an overall pleasant experience to the guest coming into shop… you want to try and put on a good face to try to help them." While this pleasant customer experience tended to be the ultimate goal for the RCs in this study, the expectation that complete customer satisfaction be attained by the customer caused issues. This inability to sometimes not completely satisfy the customer hit close to home to many of the RCs in this study who hear one motto on a daily basis: "The customer is always right."

As noted by key holder Dalia, sometimes there are just situations where "nothing can be done in order to satisfy the guest.

"There are things, even if it was right, there still is nothing I can do about it. Even if you are right, I understand and the best that I can do is say 'I'm sorry, but there is just nothing that I can do about it." You know, like I can't do that. I did have an instance with a customer, where we do manager specials at different locations. So, different locations have different sales. We had an instance where we had a bunch of a certain shirt, we put it on sale and a customer took off to another location to find the same sale. And so, I got the complaint because I was so fortunate to be working that night! And, it's like she was right, the special was going on. Everything she did was correct. The only thing is, I cannot make the other location honor that price. It is up to that manager and she didn't want to do it."

This difficulty that Dalia has, at times, with trying to ensure that the guest is satisfied, that they are "right" was expressed by other RCs in this study, such as Johnny who has sometimes just "roll" with the experience he is expected to give to the customer.

"Because it is about sales, sales, sales. The suits, corporate, they don't want to [expletive] anybody off. They want everybody to leave happy, perfect, no matter what!... And I have had circumstances like that pop up, where they clearly were not and I still got yelled at. And, the guy was clearly a maniac! But, it happened and it is what is so. So, you just kinda' roll with it."

In these situations, the RC's often do have to "roll with it" as the expectations placed upon them by their corporations enforce them to satisfy the customer. While none of the RCs in this study personally believe that the "customer is always right", they do have to follow what their companies expect. When asked if the "customer was always right"? Amy gave a neutral, realistic response. "Yes. I mean, it may not always seem right, but in the rules of the handbook, the customers are always right." Similarly while Brad does not believe "the customer is always right", he knows that the company fully believes this idea.

"For the most part, yeah they do. And I know a lot of people hide behind that to get what they want because they say, "Well the customer is always right. You have to give me what I want!" And, that is not necessarily true. And, I know that we bend the rules to satisfy them, but a lot of times they are not always right. They think they are but they aren't."

This default definition of "others" by the RCs in this study suggests a social relationship between two types of people. However, this did not seem to be an reciprocal relationship due to the loss of the human element of interaction—due to perceived, concrete type of interactions with retail clerks as was evident in many other participants views within the discussion of whether or not "the customer is always right." Because of

the loss of the human element of interaction with the "other", the customer, what seems to emerge is a power structure, in which the RC has little power.

Searching for a Voice Through Empathy and Sympathy

While we may overlook those who work in those arenas as we hustle and bustle along in our daily lives, it remains that the RC owns a voice—one which offers insight into what their daily experience is really like. As mentioned earlier, retail is something that we all deal with in our daily lives. Yet, as his study suggests, there is a lack of understanding regarding the actual role of the RC. This lack of understanding, is established by a power structure that is created based on a conflict between the RC wanting to socially connect and the presence of established interaction norms. Resulting from these two factors—the RC social dynamic and the creation of a power structure— we see the major issue in easily identifying the unique character that exists beyond the RC role. While the RC is expected to be a functional role through interactive behaviors dictated by corporations, there is a hidden social dynamic which is offered light through co-worker and "team" based interaction.

So then, how do we help to cease, or attempt to cease, this conflict in order to reveal a better understanding of the RC? In order to understand, or to care to understand another's role, there must be an outlet for communication. The participants in this study suggested that one of the answers that can fill this outlet is addition of empathy and sympathy—two traits missing from the RC-"other" relationship equation. Often times these missing traits result in one-sided RC-"other" social interactions as noted by Heather, who highlights a common daily experience, where there is a lacking of reciprocal patience within the RC-customer relationship.

"Just, you have to have patience with people. That is my biggest tickling. Umm, like when someone is spending two hours shopping, but when they need a room, they are ready to check out, they are ready! You know, this is what we are here for, it is for them."

Brad shares his frustrations in dealing with these missing traits this when he speaks of how they affect how others view him.

"I would just say for people to be more sympathetic to retail people. I mean, we work hard. You know, we are not the low-lifes that they think we are. And in general, not just to retail people, be more sympathetic. Talk to people, communicate, have dialogue, have some type of understanding of what other people do."

Ryan elaborates upon this lack of empathy and sympathy when he shares his experience in how social beliefs affect him, the "other" and society in general.

"There is the human interaction element of it. As a society, we have pushed for the idea that the 'customer is always right' and because of that we have a lot of people who lack empathy. It's not common, but you know there is always the person who wants to "speak with the manager." I feel like you've met that person halfway on the interaction. We see each other as cogs as well, we see them as a consumer and they see you as the customer who sells them a product. We have lost what it means to be a person there and like actually empathy and how to treat people."

The Business of Voice Cancelling

While the implementation of empathy by the public provides a resource to establishing an outlet for the missing RC voice, more complication arise due to the business side of things. The retail industry competes for resources in an ever-heavy capitalistic market, which allows for little to no error in productivity and profit loss. Accordingly, the companies that the participants worked for in my study were reported as caring little about the amount of, or implementation, of empathy or sympathy to the role, the job, the person that are their RCs. Notably, it was revealed that corporate expectations and direction regarding the strict functionality of the RC provide the biggest obstacle in the emergence of true RC social interaction. Ryan elaborates on how his corporation plays into the loss of this human interaction, between RC and customer, which is understood as irrelevant in lieu of customer satisfaction.

"On the business side, a lot of it just comes to being understanding. A lot of the time, they teach you to just "smile and nod", the customer is always right… You know, if someone comes in the store, they see you as servicing them and that it should be your pleasure to help them, that that is what you are getting paid for. They want you to go out of your way to make their shopping experience whatever it may be, good or for ill."

While this loss may seem costly to the RC's, this is not of importance to the corporation whose goal is to acquire resources in order to survive and create profit within the economy. As noted by Dalia, this loss of agency is necessary to accept when an RC:

"…Because no matter what company the most important thing they want to make sure you understand is that the customer is very important. Because initially,

without the customer buying, it would be nothing, we would have nothing. It

takes the customer buying in order to make the whole company work."

As elaborated further on by Heather and much more despairingly, this loss of unique

identity is necessary in order for "you [to] keep that machine going. You are the one that

keeps it going. You keep all the cogs going."

CONCLUSION

While the retail clerk role is regarded as a functional occupation which helps us in our daily lives, it remains one which we often times overlook. Hidden by dominant definitions of what their role should be, the agency behind the RC role, the unique, lived experience is rarely thought of, or imagined. This study has attempted to reveal the consequences—loss of agency and social connection— of these popular narrative frames that define what we know the RC role to be, yet which does not accurately represent the unique actor behind the RC role. These humanistic losses, veiled by functional and symbolic interactive frameworks, limits the ideas, stories, opinions expressed in this study by those who occupy RC roles on a daily basis. Critically examining these dominant definitions in order to introduce lived experiences of the RC—necessary for the construction an alternative, more engaged interpretation—I allowed those in my study to be co-researchers—a co-operative immersion Giorgi found necessary for addressing and revealing of, rarely seen, unique human experiences.

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