

RETAIL WORKERS' JOB EXPERIENCES: AN ANALYSIS OF EMOTIONAL  
LABOR, COMMISSION PAY, AND STRESS

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with nineteen commission paid retail workers from three levels of department stores as well as small business, non-department stores. Data from these interviews were used to examine emotional labor and stress in commission paid retail workers' interactions with customers and co-workers. Participants were found to engage in emotional labor not only to benefit the store they

were employed by, but to benefit themselves financially as their behavior in front of customers influenced the sales they made. Commission pay gave employees control over the emotional labor they chose to engage in, which led to a sense of job autonomy. While all participants employed emotional labor in their interactions with customers, only eight did so with co-workers. Participants experienced various forms of stress, the most common being lack of customers in the store and the competition between co-workers for customers. Employees from one level of store did not differ from employees in other levels of stores in their feelings about particular issues. This study contributes to existing literature on emotional labor and stress, while incorporating the influence of commission pay.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“You’re selling yourself. You’re not only selling the product, but yourself” (male retail worker interviewed for this study).*

Service workers are in a distinct position of being the frontline of contact with customers (Leidner 1999). Retail workers, in particular, are not only required to sell a product, but to reflect the attitudes of their company because they are viewed as representatives of those companies (Sutton and Rafaeli 1988). Consequently, the focus on emotions displayed by retail workers has become a major priority for retail companies. Companies expect employees to display a positive demeanor to help sell more products (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987; Rafaeli 1989). The behavior portrayed by an employee can help a company sell their product, or prevent them from selling the product (Rafaeli and Worline 2001).

Companies use various methods to ensure retail workers are expressing the appropriate emotions while on the job. Retail workers learn the appropriate emotions to display on the job from their employers. The workers are then monitored by supervisors through various techniques of rewards and punishment to make sure employees are complying with the required emotions and that these emotions are continuously being expressed (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987; 1989). Hochschild’s (1983) emotional labor

describes the phenomenon of covering true emotions to express the emotions required by a person's work organization.

Many retail workers, however, do not always feel the emotions required of them by their work organizations. Retail workers must handle issues with their private lives and hide them at work so they can interact with customers and co-workers with minimal conflict. Hiding true emotions at work further becomes complicated when workers have to deal with issues of stress from both customers and co-workers. Retail workers learn to deal with stress in various ways to be able to maintain the emotions required of them by their store. However, stress can at times become so difficult to overcome, such as being confronted by a verbally abusive customer, that employees are no longer able to hide their true emotions.

Retail workers employ emotional labor for different reasons. A main factor for retail workers to engage in emotional labor is for the benefit of the company by which they are employed. Another factor is commission pay and its effects on the stress retail workers encounter with customers and co-workers.

This study examines how retail workers engage in emotional labor, whether they experience stress, and the effect commission pay has on their feelings toward their jobs. Previous literature has examined the emotions service workers express and experience on the job (Hochschild 1983; Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Martin, Knopoff, and Beckman 1998; Erickson and Ritter 2001; Brotheridge and Grandey 2002). Previous studies have also connected stress experienced by service workers to emotional labor (Erickson and Ritter 2001; Brotheridge and Grandey 2002). No studies, to my knowledge, have assessed commission pay and its effects on emotional labor.

The purpose of this study is to explore a particular sector of retail workers, those who are commission paid, and to study their experiences on the job. In examining work experiences, issues of using emotional labor, coping with job stress/burnout, verbal abuse from customers and co-workers, and commission pay will be the focus and will give a better understanding of social interactions with customers and co-workers. Further, connection of these issues will give an understanding of the positive and negative consequences on retail workers' overall well being. The importance of understanding various aspects of a job can help to promote a better work environment for employees. This study will further sociological literature on emotional labor as well as connect it to job stress and commission pay.

I analyze the following research questions: What causes retail workers job stress and burnout while on the job? How do retail workers cope with verbal abuse from customers? In what ways do retail workers use emotional labor? How does emotional labor affect retail workers' well being? How does commission pay affect retail workers' feelings toward their job, co-workers, and customers? In order to examine these questions, I interviewed nineteen commission paid retail workers across different levels of stores to gain insight on their experiences on the job.

Theoretically, I employ Arlie Hochschild's concept of emotional labor, and subsequent literature on emotional labor to interpret data on commission paid retail workers' experiences on the job. I rely on literature about burnout, organizational behavior, and social control theory to examine various aspects of job stress.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Most literature regarding emotional labor begins with Arlie Hochschild's definition: "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (1983:7). Prior to establishing the concept emotional labor, Hochschild (1979) discussed the idea of emotion work in which one tries to change the level of emotion or feeling (p. 561). Emotion work was the foundation for the concept emotional labor and was based on Goffman's dramaturgy; using ideas such as feeling rules, surface acting, and deep acting (Hochschild 1979: 558). Hochschild distinguishes between emotion work and emotional labor in that emotion work is conducted in a private context, while emotional labor is conducted publicly and is sold for pay (1983:7). The private and public spheres are linked in what Hochschild calls "transmutation of an emotional system" (1983:19). Transmutation is the process of utilizing privately felt emotions for publicly expressed emotions for the profit of an organization. These private emotions become public emotions. Emotional labor occurs during the shift from the private to public sphere in which emotions become commercialized and standardized (Hochschild 1983:156).

Standardization and routinization of emotions is a recent trend for work organizations. Leidner (1993) says that routinization had been used in the past by work organizations to create a uniform product as well as keep labor costs cheap. Routinization also prevented skilled workers from having any major influence on the organization and

from moving to higher positions within the organization (Leidner 1993:24). Thus, routinization acted as job security for workers and professionals with positions at higher levels than skilled workers in the organization. Work organizations presently have emphasized the importance of interactions to business and have applied routinization of emotions to interactive service workers with the goal of having uniform behavior by employees. Enforcing uniform behavior, however, is more complicated than producing a uniform product. Emotional labor, thus, has become a mechanism currently used by work organizations to enforce the routinization of employee behavior.

According to Hochschild, emotional labor occurs in jobs that contain three characteristics: face or voice contact with the public, production of an emotional state in other people, and the presence of supervisors who monitor emotional labor through tactics such as training and supervision. Since the inception of the term in sociological literature, many researchers have examined the concept of emotional labor, its components, and its consequences for workers.

One particular component of emotional labor is feeling rules. Feeling rules define emotion work by providing guidelines as to which emotions should be displayed depending on the particular situation (Hochschild 1979:566). These feeling rules act as precursors to action, or as scripts for how we should conduct our emotions during interactions. Feeling rules can emerge by way of assessing the reactions we receive from others. The reactions from others are what they perceive we are feeling during the interaction (Hochschild 1983:58). Feeling rules, however, can differ from true emotions actually felt.

Three schemes can be used to examine the connection between feeling rules and true emotions during interactions: emotional harmony, emotional dissonance, and emotional deviance (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987). Emotional harmony occurs when expressed feelings match both experienced emotions and feeling rules. Emotional dissonance occurs when expressed emotions match the feeling rules, but do not match the true inner feelings of the person. Emotional deviance involves the cases where inner feelings are expressed and feeling rules are ignored (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987:33).

Expressing feeling rules is performed through the use of surface acting and deep acting, dramaturgical techniques developed by Goffman (Hochschild 1979:558). Hochschild (1983) differentiates between surface acting such as expressing emotions not actually felt through the use of nonverbal and verbal cues, and deep acting in which the person uses private experiences of an emotion to express the necessary emotion required for the situation (p. 35). Surface acting can involve gestures or facial expressions, whereas deep acting requires more effort to refer back to memories of experiences where the required emotion needed was previously felt. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) use the term display rules to refer to emotions required of workers for a particular situation as opposed to feeling rules. They argue that display rules are related to publicly expressed emotions rather than feeling rules which relate to privately felt emotions (p. 89). Thus, feeling rules would more appropriately describe emotion work and display rules would describe emotional labor.

Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) further argue that use of emotional labor can be affected by one's identity. Identity includes both personal identity, such as traits, and one's social identity, which includes feeling as though he/she belongs to a group

classification (p. 98). People who perceive their roles to be a valuable component of their personal identity will conform to role expectations and display rules, and thus will feel authentic. Even if one's social identity with the organization may be weak, they will still feel authentic as long as the display rules are in agreement with their personal identity (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993:98).

There are many approaches to studying emotional labor. Brotheridge and Grandey (2002) suggest an approach that divides emotional labor into two sections: job-focused emotional labor and employee-focused emotional labor. Job-focused emotional labor is defined as "the level of emotional demands in an occupation" (2002: 18). Companies and managers for stores encourage people to express a specific type of emotion (Brotheridge and Grandey 2002). Rafaeli and Sutton (1987) discuss an example of supermarket check-out clerks who received a handbook from their store explaining the importance of a smile and that smiling is a part of the work role as opposed to indicating one's well-being (p. 23).

Job-expressed emotional labor can be seen in length and frequency of interactions with customers. Emotional displays that last longer with a customer or client force the worker to use more emotional labor (Morris and Feldman 1996: 990). Further, Morris and Feldman (1996) suggest that as a work role requires socially appropriate emotional displays, the organization will increase its demands for specific types of emotional display (p. 989).

Employee-focused emotional labor is the "employee process of managing emotions and expressions to meet work demands" (Brotheridge and Grandey 2002:18). This type of emotional labor encompasses the attempt to modify one's expressions based

on the demands of work as well as the concept of emotional dissonance (Brotheridge and Grandey 2002:18). Rafaeli and Sutton (1987) discuss the occurrence of emotional dissonance as a case of person-role conflict in which personal values and role requirements disagree (p. 32). Morris and Feldman (1996) state that there is a greater chance for emotional dissonance to occur as face-to-face interactions increase, and that as job autonomy increases emotional dissonance will decrease (p. 1000). Employee-focused emotional labor also includes use of surface and deep acting (Brotheridge and Grandey 2002).

Emotions have recently become important in organizations. Rafaeli and Worline (2001) found that organizations have moved away from preventing emotion from having any influence in the organization, to organizations embracing emotion. Managers have noticed the impact of emotion on organizations and have increasingly used emotion management to obtain the expected, consistent emotions from all employees when interacting with customers. Rafaeli and Worline (2001) point out that current work organizations rely heavily on individual emotions. Emotions expressed by employees are viewed as so important that they could make an organization thrive or fail.

In many cases, customers encounter one or two employees during their time in a store. Not only do they see the emotions of each individual employee, but the emotions expressed by employees give customers an impression of the organization as a whole. Each time customers shop at the same store, no matter the employee working, the expectation is for each employee to act the same: as a representative for the organization (Sutton and Rafaeli 1988:463). Thus, time and effort is spent by the organization to manage emotions expressed by employees.

To manage the emotion displayed by employees, management uses three techniques: recruitment and selection, the search for people who can fulfill the specified role expectations; socialization, the process of teaching which emotions should be displayed; and rewards and punishment, the maintenance of required emotions for the job (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987; 1989). Maanen and Kunda (1989) found that supervisors at Disneyland spent time in the stores to help employees, but also acted to monitor employees who violated rules (p. 65). Disneyland supervisors are prime examples of Rafaeli and Sutton's (1987; 1989) descriptions of managing emotions. Employers at Disneyland recruited and selected employees by focusing on people's appearances such as height, weight, and color of teeth (Maanen and Kunda 1989:58). Disneyland supervisors also used socialization. Employees began their employment at Disneyland by attending the University of Disneyland in which they became acquainted with particular language to use on the job such as referring to customers as guests, as well as how to answer questions from guests (Maanen and Kunda 1989:63-64).

Rewards and punishment can be a particularly effective way of enforcing specific emotions. An example of reinforcing particular emotion displayed by employees was a grocery store chain that used mystery shoppers, people hired to act as customers, to monitor the displayed emotions of employees. These mystery shoppers were used by management to reward employees who consistently expressed the desired emotional display without the employees knowing they were being monitored (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987:28). Employers occasionally use real customers to reinforce the specified display rules. One particular store offers customers a specific amount of money if they do not receive a smile from the retail worker during their transaction (Sutton and Rafaeli 1988).

Many stores make use of feedback forms for customers to fill out feedback forms to rate the service they received from employees (Morris and Feldman 1996).

The role occupant, the employee, is able to assess the situation before the interaction occurs by receiving cues from the target person, the customer (Rafaeli and Sutton 1989; 1990). These cues include traits such as sex, age, dress, and mannerisms of the target person. Depending on the feedback that has been received from the target person, the role occupant can maintain his or her displayed emotions, alter the intensity of displayed emotions, or shift emotional behavior. If the target person interacts with a role occupant displaying negative emotions, he or she is less likely to want to conduct business with the organization. If the target person experiences an interaction with a role occupant displaying positive emotions, the role occupant is likely to continue to conduct business with the organization (Rafaeli and Sutton 1989).

Leidner (1993, 1999) also focuses on the management of emotions by organizations. Leidner (1999) points out that employees using emotional labor control the responses of the customer, while the employer controls the emotions displayed by the employee. Leidner refers to the frontline service workers as the “emotional proletariat” who must manage customers’ emotions while their own emotions are being managed (1999:82). Frontline low and middle level service workers are more susceptible to being monitored by employers than those with professional classification. Frontline, or interactive service workers, act as mediators between the organization and those not involved with the organization (Leidner 1993:7).

### *Consequences of Emotional Labor*

Many researchers have examined the consequences of emotional labor on a person's well-being (Hochschild 1979 and 1983; Rafaeli and Sutton 1987; Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Morris and Feldman 1996; Martin, Knopoff, and Beckman 1998). Emotional labor can have positive effects. Martin et al. (1998) examined emotional labor at The Body Shop and found employees had some autonomy in that they used emotional labor when they wanted, without the pressure from managers to constantly use it. Similarly, Wharton (1993) says that those who have high autonomy regarding emotional labor are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs. Martin et al. concluded that workers in the company who used emotional labor felt authenticity, which meant they could be themselves, as they were able to conduct emotional labor when they wanted to. Feeling authentic also helped to benefit the company by increasing productivity (1998:461).

Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) discuss emotional labor as having positive functions first by having task effectiveness in which display rules help to accomplish a task, and second by allowing self-expression in which a worker is able to utilize some of his or her authentic self in the interaction (p. 95). Rules that define the interaction between the employee and customer can be positive. They allow the employee to deflect potential personal attacks from customers by deferring to particular practices of the company such as informing an irate customer that rules must be followed (Maslach 1978).

Similarly, Leidner (1993) points out that routinization of particular interactive service jobs can benefit the workers by giving them a sense of control over customers and protection from using too much emotional energy, thus making the job easier.

Routinization not only reinforces employee behavior, but customers' behavior as well. Emotional labor also aids in making interactions predictable and allows the worker to separate themselves psychologically from embarrassing interactions that may arise (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993: 94). Further, using emotional labor can encourage repeat encounters with customers as well as increase financial well-being when workers rely on tips from customers (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987: 30). Rafaeli and Sutton (1987) state that psychologically, emotional labor can increase feelings of satisfaction for the service worker (p. 31).

Emotional labor can have negative consequences as well. Morris and Feldman (1996) note the majority of previous literature on consequences of emotional labor has focused on the negative aspects. The literature on negative consequences of emotional labor denotes two major themes: inauthenticity and burnout.

Hochschild (1983) calls inauthenticity "emotive dissonance", which describes the estrangement of the self and the work role at the expense of the self (p. 90). Employees suffered negative consequences of emotional labor due to the alienation from the feelings they were actually experiencing as a result of emotional labor. Alienation occurs as a result of employers enforcing the management of emotion. Undergoing such alienation could potentially lead to problems of drug and alcohol abuse, absenteeism, and headaches among other problems (Hochschild 1983).

Employees who experience negative emotions at work such as anger and agitation are more likely to experience feelings of inauthenticity than those who experience positive feelings at work (Erickson and Ritter 2001). Further, people with positions in interactive service jobs are more likely to experience feelings of inauthenticity due to the

nature of service work which requires self-management of emotions (Erickson and Wharton 1997). Emotional dissonance, which involves displaying fake emotions on the job, can potentially harm the well being of the employee as displayed feelings potentially can become internalized, clashing with his or her true feelings (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987).

In terms of identity, Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) suggest potential risks to doing emotional labor. Risks include: the potential for an individual to experience a decrease in self-esteem if he or she becomes estranged from a group, as an individual identifies with a group to increase his or her self-esteem; and psychological risks of not being able to fulfill role obligations (p. 106).

Another negative consequence of emotional labor is burnout. Maslach and Jackson (1981) define burnout as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do ‘people-work’ of some kind” (p. 99). This definition was later modified to add three states of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment/performance (Maslach 1982). Conservation of resources model of stress (COR) is a theory often used to examine burnout. According to COR, burnout results when resources are lost, resource may potentially be lost, or resources fail to meet expectations (Lee and Ashforth 1996). These resources include the ability to make decisions at work, to be promoted, and job autonomy (Wright and Cropanzano 1998).

Emotional exhaustion explains the feeling of “being emotionally overextended” as a result of a person’s job (Wright and Cropanzano 1998: 486). Employees suffering from emotional exhaustion are likely to decrease their job performance and in some cases quit their jobs (Wright and Cropanzano 1998). Depersonalization involves viewing

customers as objects (Jackson, Schwab, and Schuler 1986) and is a coping mechanism for handling emotional stress on the job. To handle emotional stress from the job, Wright and Bonett (1997) suggest employees should conserve their valued resources when conducting transactions with customers to prevent problems from arising (p. 493).

Diminished personal accomplishment involves negative feelings toward one's self in terms of job performance and achievement (Wright and Bonett 1997). Diminished personal accomplishment, often a result of low self-esteem, can lead to a decline in work performance. To handle emotional stress from the job, Wright and Bonett (1997) suggest employees should conserve their valued resources in their interactions with customers so they are able to conduct their transactions with customers without problem (p.493).

Erickson and Ritter (2001) state that burnout is an effect of stressful work demands such as number of hours worked and an increase in time spent with customers (p. 160). When they experience agitation, workers also have increased feelings of burnout; experiencing positive emotions decreases burnout (Erickson and Ritter 2001:159). Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) discuss how people with high job involvement are more likely to suffer burnout as they devote more time to their roles and are more likely to identify with their roles (p. 106). Wharton (1997) also found that people who use emotional labor and have high job involvement are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion than those who do not perform emotional labor. The amount of emotional display, attention to display rules, and variety of expressed emotions are positively associated with emotional exhaustion (Morris and Feldman 1996:1002). Experiencing emotional dissonance is also positively associated with emotional exhaustion (Morris and Feldman 1996:1003).

Overall, emotional labor can have both positive and negative consequences. The use of surface acting to fake emotions while on the job can increase feelings of exhaustion and alienation thus leading to burnout, while use of deep acting can increase one's feeling of personal accomplishment (Brotheridge and Grandey 2002:34).

While emotional labor can have positive and negative consequences for service workers, the consequences felt by workers are largely due to differences in the individual worker and his or her experiences at work (Morris and Feldman 1996; Wharton 1993; Leidner 1993). An encounter that may yield a positive result for one employee may have negative consequences for another employee. Other parts of the job, such as the nature of the encounter with customers or co-workers and type of wages received, may have some influence on the service worker's overall feelings towards his or her job.

### *Stress and Abuse*

Other issues such as coping with stress and abuse at work are relevant to examining the service workers' experiences on the job. Employees may act out their frustration with their jobs in order to cope with stress in various ways. Tucker (1993) applies social control theory to the range of ways workers cope with their personal dissatisfactions with their workplaces. Tucker found that the majority of employees responded in non-aggressive ways with most resorting to gossip to determine fault and gain feedback before taking action (p. 31). Others used confrontation with their supervisors, resigned immediately, or tolerated the offensive behavior. Aggressive techniques such as theft, sabotage, collective action, formal complaints, and violence rarely occurred to handle stressful situations (Tucker 1993).

Employees can be on the receiving end of abuse from customers in the workplace. Boyd (2002) conducted a study of airline and railroad crew members and found that employees generally felt that dealing with verbal abuse was part of the job and that pursuing the problem was difficult due to little support from managers and complex reporting procedures (p. 160). Verbal abuse was not the only problem. Physical abuse also occurred with sixty percent of the respondents (Boyd 2002:160). As a result of verbal abuse, many felt intimidated, angry, and had a decrease in job satisfaction (p. 161). Using emotional labor to deal with issues such as verbal and physical abuse can negatively affect the well-being of workers (p. 162).

Some service workplaces have developed informal communities of coping with stress. Korczynski (2003), studied service workers employed at call centers for three financial institutions and one telecommunications company in which employees answered questions from customers. These employees often handled abusive and irate customers, which many times caused employees emotional pain (p. 63). Employees sought help from their managers to cope with such customers. Managers promoted 'cognitive restructuring', which recommended that employees remove themselves from the situation mentally by keeping emotional distance from the situation, and by not taking the complaints personally (p. 65). Managers also emphasized teamwork to create bonds among co-workers. Employees found they could share their experiences with their co-workers to gain support.

### *Commission Pay*

An area lacking attention in service workers' experience concerns the issue of pay. There is little previous research regarding form of pay and its relationship to job

burnout and emotional labor. In particular, receiving pay by way of commission, a form of pay based on number of items sold to a customer, is a topic that has received little sociological attention. Shirom, Westman, and Melamed (1999) found that pay systems, such as those based on performance, had negative consequences on blue-collar workers' well being such as causing depression.

However, commission pay can lessen the effect of conducting emotional labor solely for the organization. Commission pay acts as an incentive for each individual employee to monitor his or her behavior around customers, because they want to rather than because they are told to do so by managers, in order to earn their wages (Leidner 1999). Examining the effects of pay on employees may further help to understand the issues of emotional labor and job burnout.

Emotional labor and burnout are fairly new areas of study for sociology and management. Emotional labor and burnout started as concepts in the 1970s and early 1980s, and have received a copious amount of attention by researchers in the 1980s and 1990s. Currently many researchers are trying to determine how to conceptualize and operationalize emotional labor and burnout so empirical studies can be conducted to further understand the concepts and their impact on service workers. There are several debates in the literature about how emotional labor and burnout ultimately affect service workers on the job. These debates stem from the differences in how to measure and define the concepts, which leads to conflicting results.

Emotional labor can be enacted by service workers in a number of ways such as deep and surface acting (Hochschild 1983). Emotional labor can also produce positive and negative results for the service workers. Burnout is another issue experienced on the

job that can affect service workers' well being. Other factors such as stress and abuse can further add to the consequences of using emotional labor and affect the overall feelings one has towards his or her job.

Most of the literature on emotional labor uses qualitative methodology to examine service workers' experiences on the job. The current study will do the same, as much of the literature has indicated that it is difficult to generalize the effects of emotional labor and burnout to service workers as a whole. Further, most of the literature focuses on one concept such as emotional labor or burnout. This study examines the job experiences of retail workers with regard to emotional labor, stress/burnout, verbal abuse, and commission pay. I explore the following questions: What causes retail workers' job stress and burnout while on the job? How do retail workers cope with verbal abuse from customers? In what ways do retail workers use emotional labor? How does emotional labor affect retail workers' well being? How does commission pay affect retail workers' feelings toward their job, co-workers, and customers?

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

To examine retail workers' job experiences, I use qualitative methods. Qualitative methods are particularly useful as they allow close examination of the experiences of people, and can reveal various aspects of a social phenomenon that might be otherwise missed if using quantitative methods, in which data from a sample is generalized to a population (Esterberg 2002). This type of method enables researchers to examine people in their natural settings; whereas quantitative methods, such as surveys, study a large group of people disconnected from their natural setting (Orum, Feagin, and Sjoberg 1991:7).

Qualitative methods allow intricate details of a social phenomenon to emerge. Because qualitative methods scrutinize a phenomenon in such detail, they are generally associated with validity, in a broad sense this means the methods used accurately describe the social phenomena being investigated. Since qualitative methods used to examine social phenomena may vary, qualitative research is often criticized for lacking reliability - the ability to achieve the same results from one study to another due to the use of the same research instrument (Orum et al. 1991). Researchers, however, have argued that obtaining consistent results every time a study is conducted is not a necessity when closely examining social phenomena. Marshall and Rossman (1999) point out that qualitative methods examine a particular social phenomenon in its natural setting, rather

than focusing on replicating a study because “the real world changes” (p. 195). Sjoberg, Williams, Vaughan, and Sjoberg (1991) further note that we are part of a complex social order, which makes it difficult for those under study to respond consistently. They pose the question: “How can people respond consistently in a complex social order that is itself rent by contradictory expectations?” (p. 53).

This study employs in-depth interviewing, which allow for obtaining detailed data on job experiences. In-depth interviewing, also known as semi-structured interviewing, involves asking open-ended questions so that interviewees can discuss their experiences and feelings in as much detail as they care to disclose (Esterberg 2002:87). In-depth interviews allow the researcher to ask many questions regarding the topic under study, and the ability to obtain responses that could not otherwise be received through quantitative surveys. Quantitative surveys are limited in the detail they can gather from respondents because they rely on close-ended questions to obtain data. In some cases, the respondent may not be able to answer a question as none of the answers directly applies to them. Further, quantitative surveys are limited as they are unable to ask follow up questions or obtain answers from respondents in their own words. By participating in in-depth interviews, participants are able to discuss experiences that they may have not ever previously discussed. This not only aids in the research on the topic, but can also potentially be beneficial to the participants personally (Esterberg 2002).

This study examines commission paid retail workers who are in positions such as cashiers or sales assistants that require daily contact with customers.<sup>1</sup> Most of the participants in the study work in various department stores in Central and South Central Texas; however several participants work in non-department, small retail shops that similar to a department, specialize in one product. Department stores in this study are located as anchor stores within malls that range from designer/bridge to popular/moderate. According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), there are four different types of department stores which range from most exclusive to least exclusive in terms of products sold based by monetary value: designer/bridge, designer products; better/moderate, higher priced brand name products; moderate/popular, lower priced brand name products; and off-price/discount (Equal Employment Occupational Commission 2004:2-3). I excluded off-price/discount stores from this study because I did not encounter any department stores in this level that offered commission pay to retail workers.

I wanted to interview employees from the three different types of department stores, as well as employees from small business, non-department stores that offered commission pay. This would give me a good understanding of how commission pay

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<sup>1</sup> My interest in commission paid retail workers stems from a previous class study I conducted on retail workers and emotional labor. In that study, several of the participants received commission pay and I discovered their feelings towards their jobs differed from those of participants earning hourly wages. I found commission pay was a particular area of stress for participants. The difference in responses from retail workers earning different forms of pay brought my attention to the effect wages has on retail workers' feelings towards their jobs. For the purposes of this study, I focus solely on retail workers earning commission pay.

affects retail workers. Including different types of stores in this study allows me to obtain various perspectives from commission paid retail workers. Interviewing employees in different levels of stores is a purposive strategy in which participants are deliberately sampled because they may have particular insights that add to the study (Esterberg 2002:93). Small business, non-department stores are similar to a single department in a department store in that the focus is on selling one particular product such as shoes or cosmetics. The difference is that small business, non-department stores are smaller than department stores and typically have fewer employees working at one time. Small businesses are less likely to be part of a state or national chain, compared to most department stores, which are part of a chain. While both types of stores have some similarities and some differences, because I was planning to incorporate the different levels of department stores in this study, I decided to include small businesses that specialize in one particular product.

All of the stores in this study have varying forms of pay within them. Some small stores and departments pay employees commission only, hourly wages only, or pay commission as well as an hourly or salary wage. Only people who work in department stores and small business, non-department stores that paid commission to employees were interviewed for this study. Retail workers sought for this study are in positions that require daily contact with customers. Every participant is a sales assistant and handles payment for products sold.

### *Sample*

I initially had problems recruiting participants (SEE APPENDIX C-METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES). This study has a total of 19 participants (SEE TABLES

1 AND 2).<sup>2</sup> All participants earn a commission either as all or part of their pay. Fifteen participants are department store employees. I interviewed four employees from a designer/bridge store, nine from better/moderate stores, and two employees from a moderate/popular store. Four participants interviewed are from non-department stores. (TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE) More employees were interviewed from better/moderate stores due to these stores being more prevalent in the Central/South Central Texas area than designer/bridge. Better/moderate stores were also more likely to have commission paid positions than moderate/popular stores.

All participants are over age 18. All but two employees have worked in their respective departments for over a year.<sup>3</sup> Other employees' time of employment in their department or stores ranged from a year to 20 years. Ten of the participants are female and nine are male. Eleven participants are Latino/Latina and eight are white. Participants' ages ranged from 22 years to 59. Five participants are in their 20s, six in their 30s, three in their 40s, and five in their 50s. (TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE) All employees interviewed are employed full-time. Participants come from a variety of departments: men's shoes, men's suits, men's fragrances, women's clothes, women's shoes, cosmetics, jewelry, furniture, and appliances. Non-department store participants come from stores selling cell phones and beauty supplies.

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<sup>2</sup> I originally planned to interview 20 retail workers. The twentieth interviewee did not feel comfortable signing the consent form and decided not to participate in the interview.

<sup>3</sup> One employee had been in her department for 11 months. Another employee had been in his department for four months, which I was unaware of until after I started the interview. His manager, who set up the interview, had been informed that participants needed to have worked in their department at least one year several weeks before this interview took place.

Twelve participants were interviewed at their place of work, in a private room, while they were working. Eleven of the twelve participants were contacted through their managers. The managers set interview times, provided private offices, and contacted employees to ask if they would participate in the study. The twelfth participant owned her own business, thus scheduled the interview on her break in a private room.

Four participants were interviewed away from their place of work, off the clock, in a public location such as a restaurant or coffee shop. One of the participants was contacted through an acquaintance. This participant gave me the names and numbers of two co-workers, both of whom were interviewed for this study. This technique, in which participants recommend others to be interviewed, is referred to as snowball sampling (Esterberg 2002). The fourth participant was contacted through a manager who gave me permission to interview the employee off the clock and away from the store.

### *The Interviews*

Three participants, who were contacted through an acquaintance and were interviewed off the clock, were interviewed at their place of employment or at home. Two employees chose to be interviewed in their store, as it was the most convenient location for them. One employee opened the store in the morning and chose to be interviewed prior to opening time, when she was the only employee in the store. Another chose to be interviewed after the store had closed, when she was the only employee in the store. The third employee chose to be interviewed in her home, as this was the most convenient location for her.

Prior to each interview, consent forms were given to the participants that briefly described the study and interview, as well as discussed the confidentiality of the study

(SEE APPENDIX A-2). Both participant and I kept a copy of the signed consent form. Interviews were audio tape-recorded and lasted from 30 minutes to 90 minutes. I explained to the participants that the interview was divided into different sections and I would let them know when I changed sections.

I asked interviewees a series of questions grouped thematically to address my research questions (SEE APPENDIX B). I began with background questions such as age, length of employment, number of co-workers, number of customers they had contact with on a daily basis, and amount of responsibility held within the job. The second section addressed feelings about working in the store. Participants were asked how they felt about their job and if they ever felt stress or burnout as a result of their job. The third section dealt with verbal abuse from either customers or co-workers. Section four examined emotional labor and section five addressed commission pay. The last section concluded the interview.

### *Data Analysis*

I transcribed the tapes for this analysis. Each tape is assigned a code number, which identifies each transcript. After tapes were transcribed, data within each transcript was coded. Coding involves developing categories from the data. Open coding is used to find any themes in the data (Esterberg 2002). To begin the process of open coding, each transcript was read numerous times. After reading, each transcript was marked for themes. Once all the transcripts were coded, I moved on to the process of focused coding. Focused coding is used to thoroughly examine the themes that emerged from open coding (Esterberg 2002). I began to group themes from open coding together into one document for closer examination. For example, during open coding a theme that emerged in many

interviews was the idea of separating personal life from work life. I compiled all relevant quotes from the transcripts into a document titled “Separate Personal Life from Work Life.” I was then able to reread the document more thoroughly and began to analyze and interpret the data. I use inductive analysis to collect and analyze data in an effort to contribute to existing literature on a social phenomenon, emotional labor.

I do not attempt to generalize the findings to the experiences of all service workers. Instead, my goal in this qualitative study is to investigate the work experiences of a particular group of commission paid retail workers. By studying the experiences of a unique social group, I am able to closely study the group in an effort to understand the interactions that occur between employee and customer or employee and co-worker.

TABLES

Table 1. Interviews Dispersed by Store Level

Store Level	Number of Stores	Number of Participants
Designer/bridge	1	4
Better/moderate	5	9
Moderate/popular	1	2
Non-department store	2	4

Table 2. Descriptive Data about Participants

Sex	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Years in Current Position	Store Level
Female	Latina	31	1 year 2 months	Non-department store
Female	Latina	54	4	Better/moderate
Male	Latino	27	1	Better/moderate
Female	Latina	53	9 years 3 months	Better/moderate
Male	Latino	39	5	Better/moderate
Male	White	36	5	Better/moderate
Male	White	53	4	Better/moderate
Female	White	39	11 months	Better/moderate
Male	Latino	25	4 months	Better/moderate
Female	Latina	22	1 year 6 months	Better/moderate
Female	White	48	1	Non-department store
Female	White	44	2	Non-department store
Female	White	31	1 year 6 months	Designer/bridge
Female	White	24	2	Designer/bridge
Male	Latino	38	1	Designer/bridge
Male	Latino	45	5	Designer/bridge
Female	White	51	20	Non-department store
Male	Latino	25	2	Moderate/popular
Male	Latino	59	8	Moderate/popular

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Three major themes developed from the collected data on retail workers. The first deals with emotional labor. Several sub-themes under this topic emerged: covering true emotions, necessity to cover true emotions, showing true emotions, and separating work life from personal life. The second theme is commission pay. The sub-themes are: negative aspects, positive aspects, and customer service. The final theme, stress, is sources of stress, coping mechanism, burnout, and verbal abuse. Quotes from participants are identified by the following abbreviations: M for male, F for female, d for designer/bridge, b for better/moderate, p for moderate/popular, and n for non-department store.

All of the participants engage in emotional labor with customers; however, half of the sample does not feel the need to use emotional labor with co-workers. Commission pay seems to affect the stress felt by the retail workers as well as the amount of emotional labor they engage in with customers. Employees seem to have a sense of control over their jobs not only concerning the number of sales they choose to make, but concerning how much emotional labor they decide to engage in while on commission pay.

#### *Emotional Labor*

*Hiding True Emotions.* The retail workers in this study stated that it is necessary to cover their true feelings while at work. All participants said they covered their true

feelings in front of customers. Participants had various ways of covering their true feelings. Many found smiling to be useful. One interviewee said:

**Mb:** Just smile. Just smile. No matter what's going on inside, it's outside that matters. That's all that matters. If you're upset because a customer insulted you, put you down, just keep smiling. That's the only thing you can do. Work it out, because the worst thing you do... is get angry at a customer. And there's been situations where I've heard other associates say they snapped at a customer. That's losing control. You know, customer's only there for a few minutes, bite your lip, smile.

A male employee from a designer/bridge store added "Just keep myself busy and try to smile, and smile, and smile, and smile. It's hard." These employees emphasize the use of smiling to cover their true feelings, while simultaneously expressing the emotions their employers require that they express. Other retail workers report that the use of body language helps to hide their true feelings and make them more approachable to customers.

**Mb:** You go out there with your head down and poor posture, that customer is not going to want you to help them. You go up there smiling, "Hey, how you doing, how's the weather outside? We have that shoe in your size." You'll find that customers will talk to you and want you to help them. I go out there with a frown on the face and poor posture, and just an ugly face and they're going to go "I don't want somebody like that to help me!"

Smiling and body language are forms of surface acting. The nature of surface acting is such that employees cover their true emotions to make the customer believe they are genuinely happy. However, the employee knows his or her true emotions do not reflect emotions being presented. As Hochschild states, "we deceive others about what we really feel, but we do not deceive ourselves" (1983:33). The display of positive emotions is beneficial to the retail worker as customers are more likely to revisit the store after experiencing a positive interaction and transaction (Rafaeli and Sutton 1989; 1990).

All participants discussed some form of surface acting to conduct emotional labor. Deep acting, on the other hand, is more difficult to assess from participant data. Hochschild (1983) says that in deep acting, not only does the person deceive others with his or her displayed emotions, but also deceives him or herself (p. 33). The person using emotional labor becomes so engrossed in portraying the required display emotions, that he or she eventually believes the expressed emotion is the way he or she genuinely feels. Thus, participants may have adjusted their true inner emotions to comply with display rules required by their workplace, even though their true emotions they initially did not match the display rules.

*Necessary to Use Emotional Labor.* Since all of the participants state that they cover their true feelings in front of customers, many further explained why they thought covering their true feelings was a necessity in their job.

Fn: I tend to do it just because it makes the situation easier for everybody. Because otherwise then you get into that "I can't believe you just said that" and what should have taken 30 seconds now takes 30 minutes.

Emotional labor helps to make interactions between customer and employee easier. The use of emotional labor makes the interaction with the customer predictable, thus making the transaction more efficient (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993).

Mb: It's a necessary evil. I have to do that. There's a moment that I lose control, let my emotions out, I'll lose that customer. The worst thing you can tell a customer is that he is wrong. That's the worst thing you could, "No sir, you're wrong". You could say it in another way. Well, you know, you just say "Well, maybe, but this is..." so that's what works. Don't lose control because you'll lose a customer.

This employee used emotional labor to prevent losing a customer. A positive aspect of using emotional labor is to gain clients that can benefit an employee financially (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987). In this case, the employee benefits from making commission on a sale.

If the employee loses clients, he/she suffers in pay.

Four interviewees said they cover their true feelings because management used techniques to verify they are expressing the required display rules. A participant from a better/moderate store discussed one particular method her managers used to verify she and her co-workers are acting appropriately: “We do have what they called a ‘spy’ that comes as a customer to irritate us.” The employee was required to cover her true emotions because her employer monitored her behavior with customers. Brotheridge and Grandey (2002) describe this monitoring as job-focused emotional labor in which the place of employment requires particular emotions be expressed. Rafaeli and Sutton (1987) discuss a similar situation in which supervisors managed employee behavior by utilizing mystery shoppers who monitored employees’ behavior.

Eight employees said that it is necessary to cover their true feelings in front of customers, co-workers, and managers. One participant mentioned in regard to co-workers and managers that:

Fn: I’ve had to cover and to not show certain things. I just had to bury myself in work and keep away from them. That’s all I could do. If they stay in their place, I’ll do my job and get everything that I need to get done.

By immersing herself in work, she consciously prevents the occasion of showing her true feelings from arising.

Another woman pointed out:

Fd: I would just put on my work face and come to work, and if they say “what’s wrong, something bothering you?” and I say “No, I’m fine, just tired.” I’d just move on, I don’t feel comfortable divulging.

This interviewee does not want to share what is occurring in her life outside of work. This was a common feeling among the eight participants; they felt their private lives should not be discussed with co-workers.

Eleven employees said that while they hide their true feelings in front of customers, they are not as likely to do so in front of co-workers or managers. Most of these participants felt more open with their co-workers than their managers.

**Mb:** I definitely have friends here so I can confide in them or talk to them and explain what's going on and they can either listen or talk back.

A female participant from a better/moderate store said "No, with them, they know me (laughs), they know me." These interviewees said their co-workers are so familiar with them, that was not necessary to cover their true feelings. Another described being open with co-workers to facilitate open communication.

**Mb:** We're very open...especially in our area. Where again the livelihood, you know, if we don't sell, we don't get paid. Certain...there's a lot of ethics involved in selling. And we have these rules posted: Don't take another person's customer. You know, if that's your customer and somebody else is helping them, just tell them, "Hey! That's my customer." You have to be open about that.

The workers point out the importance of communication between co-workers to prevent the possibility of conflict primarily over who completes a transaction with a customer. Further, communicating with co-workers gave employees the opportunity to vent about customers. Co-workers communicating with one another provides a community in which they can share their negative experiences with customers (Korczynski 2003).

One woman interviewed mentioned hiding her true feelings in front of her co-workers, but showing her true feelings in front of her manager. Her reasoning was that she felt particularly close to her manager, whereas some of her co-workers had different

ethics from her, which she found to be frustrating. Thus, she did not feel the need to be open with co-workers.

*Showing True Emotions.* The majority of the men and women interviewed said there is a point where they draw the line in terms of hiding their true feelings. Some said that once customers started personally attacking them, their true feelings emerged.

Fn: I do that motto “Customer’s always right to a point” and I will try and try and try to work with them. But when they become abusive, I will stand up and tell them “Am I talking to you like that? What gives you the right to talk to me like that? Nothing. Not a damn thing. You may leave and you may find somebody else to help your account and service your needs. Get out.”

Others described how their true feelings emerged when customers accused them of doing something they did not do.

Mb: I think that lady, who I mentioned, I think I lost it that time. And she basically called me a liar to my face. And I told her “Ma’am you don’t know me. You’ve...I’ve never seen you before, you’ve probably never have seen me before. You don’t know who I am. So please don’t call me a liar.” I’ve never had anybody call me a liar like that, in front of...but my co-workers were... other customers. And when she did that, because I knew what I did was right. And she accused me of something or somebody who I wasn’t and that just blew me off.

Another male agreed:

Mp: I think the worst thing in the world is to be accused of something that you have not done. Because you really know you didn’t do it, and they insisted you did, then your true feelings do come out.

Employees realized that they could only cover their true feelings for so long. Rather than continuing job-focused emotional labor, employees cease expressing emotions required of them by their workplace. Emotional deviance, where personal values and role requirements conflict and feeling rules are ignored, occurs as employees break from role requirements to defend themselves (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987).

*Separating Work from Personal Life* . Eleven retail workers discussed the need to separate their work lives from their private lives.

Mb: Everybody's got personal things going on and it's natural for them to come into your job, your relationship whatever with friends, but to be professional in anything, you've got to separate the two. Because you're there for the customer, you're there to sell.

Other retail workers also emphasized keeping their personal lives away from the customer:

Mb: I'm here to work. I got to work, so it's time to go regardless of what's going on. Because that person doesn't care. The customer doesn't care what my problem is.

A female from a designer/bridge store said that there is no reason for her to share her personal emotions with customers at work because it is unprofessional to do so.

Employees separate work from their personal lives in an effort to keep the job professional and to be effective in selling. Other retail workers suggest the idea of leaving personal emotions "at the door" when entering the workplace.

Mp: The moment you walk in the door, you have to forget about those things and you have to re-concentrate on what you doing here. Because if you can't, you might as well go home. Because you're not going to be effective on the floor. You're going to get more and more frustrated, so the best thing you can do is go home if you can't cut off that valve. You have to cut off...put on a different hat, walk in like nothing has happen. Once you step out that door, then you can pick up what you left outside the store.

Another retail worker reiterates this point:

Mp: There's times when you come in and you don't really want to be here and you have problems smiling and like if you want to sell something, then you have to leave whatever's going on at home, leave it at the door.

Retail workers realize that their emotions vary from their private lives to their work lives. Separating emotions is explained by Hochschild's (1979) feeling rules in which particular emotions are invoked for the appropriate situation. Personal issues brought into work by employees can conflict with the feeling rules guidelines for the employees' jobs. In the cases of the retail workers, while the feeling rules might not match their experienced

emotions, they devise a way to prevent their personal lives from interfering with their work lives and vice versa.

Several retail workers, making note of these separate spheres, mentioned that if they are unable to separate the two spheres, then they must leave their place of work so they can handle the problem. One male employee from a better/moderate store said “Don’t mix them up. Or at least, if you need some time off, take some time off to deal with your problems.” Retail workers may not always be able to separate their personal lives from their work lives. They may be unable to overcome the disagreement between feeling rules and their expressed emotions, which is known as emotional dissonance (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987). This experience may be so strong that it prevents employees from focusing at work, and thus they feel it is necessary to take time off from work.

#### *Commission Pay*

Seventeen retail workers earned a base salary or hourly wage plus commission. The form of pay varied not by level of store, but by individual company. Thus, each company had its own range of pay. Commission pay is unique in that retail workers’ paychecks vary from pay period to pay period. Fourteen of the nineteen men and women interviewed emphasized that the time of year had an impact on how much they earned. One retail worker said “And I think in some ways it can be frustrating because you feel like you are at the whim of the seasons, like when it’s busy you have money and when it’s not...you can work really hard, and it doesn’t matter.” Because the amount received can be hard to predict, retail workers were able to detect some negative as well as positive aspects of this form of pay.

*Negative Consequences of Commission Pay.* The variance by months as to traffic of customers was the largest complaint regarding commission pay. Many interviewees expressed trepidation with this form of pay. A female employee from a designer bridge store said “You really have to be a go-getter or you’re not going to make it. In that sense. But it’s scary.” Another retail worker discussed the feelings of retail workers when his store decided to change their form of pay from hourly to commission:

Md: Well, my first year when I started here, we were regular. Like hourly pay. So it was nice. When they told us we were going to convert to commission, I was starting to leave. Actually, I left for a month...almost two months, but I came back. A lot of people left because of that.

These retail workers’ fears lie with the unknown in terms of how much they are going to earn. Retail workers can control how much they make to a certain extent. The majority, however, are unable to control how many customers they have the opportunity to make contact with. As one participant stated, “What you can’t control is how many people walk through the door.”

The majority of the men and women in this study mentioned feeling stress from not having a stable paycheck, which they needed in order to support themselves or others. Participants who reported that they did not feel stress from commission pay felt this way because they were not working to support themselves or others.

Mp: I’ve never been stressed. But for some people it can be... you have people upstairs who have just bought a brand new house, bought a brand new truck, they have three kids that are children, small children. They have a wife at home that probably doesn’t work and takes care of them. They are the only breadwinners. So I would imagine for them it’s pretty stressful, commission work. Yeah, for me, that’s not.

Another source of stress for the employees as a result of commission pay was the competitiveness between co-workers. Ten of the participants mentioned problems with co-workers vying for customers as a result of being on commission.

Fb: We have between 20 to 25 people and most of those people are on the floor all the time. So it's very competitive. The department is very competitive. You've really got to be hustling to make money, or else you won't make money.

Another participant described a situation with a co-worker which lead to stress:

Fb: Sometimes it is a little stressful because we do work on commission. It's...it...that's our most stress there. Because a lot of people are more stressed than I am because if...for instance if a customer comes in and you and I are working and I talk to the customer first and help them. And then I...there's another customer coming and they're still looking around and I get another customer, then the first customer that I talked to already decided what they wanted after I showed them 7,000 fragrances then they...because they're in a hurry they ask you to ring for them. So the stress is...is a lot.

Interviewees also reported co-workers who would try to make as many sales as possible rather than allowing others to make sales.

Mb: It's because he would nail every single customer that comes in. That makes it really...you can't trust anyone. There's some stuff that goes on. You do have to watch your back in a commissioned department.

One woman discussed the co-worker who gets a lot of customers:

Fb: But if you have someone that, what we call skating the floor, or are really pushing or monopolizing the floor, it doesn't honor your colleagues and other people start suffering. It sucks to have them around and people are having trouble making a living.

Commission pay seems to have the potential for creating an environment of hostility between co-workers. If employees are unable to make sales due to co-workers dominating the sales floor, the employees could potentially get a sense of diminished personal accomplishment, which can lead to a decline in overall work performance (Wright and Bonett 1997).

*Positive Consequences of Commission Pay.* While many participants viewed the uncertainty of knowing how much they would get each pay period, many viewed a positive outcome as being able to plan ahead. As one participant mentioned: “The good thing, also, is that you learn how to plan your life.” Eight participants mentioned the importance of planning in advance when earning a paycheck that was either wholly or partially commission based. Each suggested setting personal goals to aid in the planning process.

Mb: You gotta set your personal goal, whatever that might be. And that’s what I do, set a personal goal. But your main goal is to get there. You gotta get there first before you can get anywhere else.

Other participants discussed how often they set their goals:

Mp: I set a goal and I try to exceed that goal everyday. But I have a minimum goal that I have to get everyday. And I work towards that goal everyday. So every contact becomes very important to get to that goal. Once I reach that goal, I know that everything else that I do is gravy and it’s a great feeling when you do reach the goal so it makes you a little more aggressive, a little more attuned, you read the signs a little bit better and you close more customers because you’re very reachable. So that’s done. Now’s the fun part, now you start having fun.

Several employees say they set their personal goal for each month. Another participant detailed her method of planning ahead:

Fd: Because here you’re graded on your sales per hour. You’re constantly thinking of this. And I have my book [shows me book], where everyday I write down this is what sold, this day I sold nothing, this day I sold this. And a cumulative running tally of what I have been for this month, and also month to date, for the year. I have a personal goal.

The ability to plan ahead helps reduce some of the ambiguity of commission wages and allows participants to be able to predict what they may make in a particular month or give them the ability to save money from the busy months to assist them during slow months.

The action of planning ahead seems to be a way to cope with the stress that commission pay can present.

On the other hand, several interviewees view the uncertainty of commission pay as exciting.

Fb: You need to be a risk taker. You kinda live like on the edge so to speak [laugh], you enjoy an edginess to your lifestyle and can adapt easily because it's definitely going to require responsibility. The main thing I think...that being able to maintain on commission, you have to realize there's going to be up times, there's going to be low times.

A female, designer/bridge employee reiterated this point "You really have to be a go-getter or you're not going to make it." These employees emphasize the type of personality it takes to do commission paid retail work. Those who are risk takers or go-getters bring this aspect of their personality to the job, which can be beneficial as the employee can utilize their authentic self in the interaction (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993).

Many of the interviewees viewed commission pay as fulfilling because they were in control of what they made.

Mb: Like I said, you make your own paycheck. If I don't want to sell anything today, then I'm not going to get any commission. If I want to sell a lot, then I'll see a good commission check at the end of the month.

Another employee agreed:

Mb: It's great and it's also very difficult. It's great in the sense that you can control what you make. The harder you work, the more you make. You don't work so hard, you don't get so good a check. There's so much more in control I have as opposed to out of control.

One participant described commission pay as "governing" the retail worker. She felt this form of pay awarded the individual who worked hard, and hurt the employee who did not want to work. Another employee described commission pay as an incentive to make a person work harder. In many work settings, management makes use of various techniques to reinforce employee behavior on the job. Those earning commission, however, monitor

their behavior not only for the organization, but for their own personal benefit given that how they treat customers directly influences their personal income. Therefore, earning commission is an incentive for retail workers to monitor their behavior when interacting with customers (Leidner 1999). While many retail workers might not have a lot of autonomy within their jobs, commission pay offers the potential for workers to have some control in their jobs with regard to how much they earn.

Finally, thirteen of the men and women interviewed said commission pay was a way of rewarding themselves for the work they had done.

Mb: And it's...you know, that's quite a nice little pat on the back that management doesn't always give you. [laughs] Because they're not getting a pat on the back and they've got 400 other people they are trying to give pats on the back to. Sometimes they don't always make it around to you. So it's...that's really nice. You can kind of gauge yourself "Hey, I'm doing alright."

Another participant agreed:

Md: I like the fact that, to me it's like a challenge and I feel that the more money that I'm making on commission, is the more people I'm reaching out to. I feel like it's my own reward to myself as being a good salesperson, or a good person to people.

A participant who earns salary plus commission viewed the commission portion of her check as a bonus:

Fn: Well, I think when you do it, like I try to, that it's a bonus in my situation, I think it's a good thing. It's kinda like a nice surprise once a month. There again, if I had to depend on that alone, then I would probably be a little more stressful, but as it being a bonus, I really don't look at it as being a problem.

These participants discuss the personal satisfaction of being rewarded for the work done when receiving their wages. As the first participant mentioned, management does not always have time to monitor the employees to be able to reward a person for the work they have done. When employees have many sales in a pay period, they think that they

have been rewarded when they receive a large commission check. Commission pay further enables employees to monitor their success in sales.

*Commission and Customer Service.* Twelve of the interviewees discussed the importance of customer service in their jobs. As a female participant from a better/moderate store emphasized “Customer service is very important to me. So I strive to give good customer service and try to make the customers happy.” Most of the 12 employees felt that earning commission pay influenced the service they provided to their customers.

Mb: Being in a commissioned zone, we are... I feel that we're separate, a separate entity from other departments because we don't sell, we don't get paid as much, but what we have the same responsibilities as other workers such as the stock work, maintaining, you know, the floor, signing, having correct sign and correct prices. So I think we have a little more responsibility because we have to provide even better customer service than most co-workers. Cause that's our livelihood.

Another stated:

Md: It motivates me more to be friendlier to people because I know that's going to affect me the way that I treat someone. I mean, even though if I didn't work on commission, I would still treat them the same, but the commission is more like an added plus to...to your actions towards people. That's the way I see it. The overall thing that I think here, is the fact that it's a good thing to be friendly. To be a friendly person to have commission. If you're a jerk or if you're someone who's not a people person, then commission is not good for you. [laughs] Because it's the way you treat people. You're selling yourself, you're not only selling the product, but yourself.

Participants have various reasons for focusing on customer service. One reason for focusing on customer service could potentially affect the amount of money an employee earns. Another reason to focus on customer service is for the personal improvement of the employee who can use his/her experience for future interactions.

A problem that several employees mentioned with commission pay is the tendency to see people as objects. One interviewee stated “You see somebody walking, you see a money signal.” Another described particular co-workers who did not focus on individual customers:

Fb: The rule is you can't have more than two customers. If you have more than three, then you're not doing your job. All you're doing is, what my store manager says, clerking. You just want to ring up, you're not sitting with the customer. You're not supposed to be grabbing people left and right. It doesn't look right, and it's not fair for the others. But there's people that do it. This job, nobody's your friend. Everybody wants to make money, everybody wants to make that extra dollar. And they will do anything to make it.

Jackson et al. (1986) discuss the depersonalization of the customer. Employees detaching themselves from customers by not spending a lot of time working on the interaction is a form of being efficient on the job (p. 630). Thus, if a retail worker spends too much time working on an interaction with a customer, he or she may not be using his or her time efficiently to make as many sales as possible. Employees who spend more time with customers also use more emotional labor (Morris and Feldman 1996). This can have a negative effect on retail workers if they use too much emotional energy on a single customer; they can experience emotional exhaustion which can hurt overall job performance (Wright and Cropanzano 1998).

Participants also emphasized the use of customer service to prevent customers from returning merchandise. When customers return purchases to stores for a refund, the return goes against the retail worker who made the sale and they lose the commission they initially made.

Mp: You want them to leave here with a feeling that they have made the right decision, they've made the right purchase, and they don't have any remorse. So, about the experience, or about the product they are sold...or they have to return it.

This participant discussed how to prevent receiving returns:

Fb: You don't try to sell them a shoe they don't want just because the shoe was \$100 more. Because that's how returns come back. Because the lady was within budget, and you get her out of this budget. So once she goes home, she realizes she can't afford the shoe and the shoe comes back. The shoe comes back because it wasn't sold right. The theory is, you sell to the lady what she wants to buy, and you don't look at the shoe in the hand.

Returns negatively impact a commission check. Employees, therefore, emphasize the importance of customer service to help customers make the right selection in order to minimize the chance of returned merchandise.

Further, participants mentioned providing customer service to obtain repeat business from customers.

Fn: "And that's why I have so many repeat customers, is that I do service them, I take care of their accounts.

Another interviewee said:

Mb: I have some real loyal customers. They don't want to talk to anybody else. Because you interact with your customer and like I said you can build a client list and you have the confidence of these people.

These participants discuss providing customer service for the purpose of bringing customers back. This seems to suggest participants encouraging the idea of repeat customers to enhance their potential for making sales, thus earning commission.

Not all of the men and women interviewed felt that the customer service provided was influenced by commission pay. Three of the twelve reported that commission pay had no influence on the way they interacted with customers.

Fn: With customers, I really don't think of it. I try to not say "this is commission", I don't do that. A customer, I want him to be happy when he walks out the door with what purchase he made. I don't worry about the commission. If I get it, great, hey that's like a bonus, but I'm not going to say "I have to get this commission, I have to!" no I'm not that way. I want to make the customer happy.

A female, better/moderate employee reiterated this point: “My job is customer service, my main thing is selling, giving good customer service.” Customer service seems to be a way of preventing a stressful workplace environment from occurring by building relationships with customers to increase the potential for customers to repeat business, thus becoming clients (Maslach 1978). Because all participants in this study suggest using emotional labor in their interactions with customers, those who focus on providing quality customer service may have the opportunity to use emotional labor to aid in giving customer service. The use of emotional labor helps to draw in clients, which can give service workers a sense of satisfaction with their jobs (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987).

### *Stress*

Sixteen participants described experiencing some degree of stress in their workplace. As mentioned previously, a major source of stress for the interviewees is the competition between co-workers for sales as a result of earning commission pay. Employees felt stress from other factors as well. One particular cause for stress for participants was having too many customers at one time.

Fn: When I have ten customers all at once that they all need their phones and they all need me to come out and sit down and meet with them and I only have one hour.

Having too many customers at once creates stress for the employees in deciding who to help next as customers become impatient. Increasing job involvement to help many customers at once can lead to burnout (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993).

On the other hand, participants discussed feeling stress due to a lack of customers and too many co-workers on the clock at the same time. A male, better/moderate

interviewee said he becomes stressed when waiting for customers rather than becoming stressed when he has too many customers in his department. Another participant said:

Fb: During seasonal hire-ons, they may hire more people. And really, especially around Christmas, they'll hire more people. So they may go up to ten people on the floor, and that really gets too busy. And it's harder to make a living.

An employee discussed the competition between co-workers:

Fd: Well I mean I think one of the reasons is stressful...particularly in my department, there's too many people. So the more people you have, there's not enough business to go around. People can't meet their goals and I think that makes the environment more cutthroat. People are fighting over customers and have gotten more competitive which is hurtful in a place where they are friends.

The demands of work, such as worrying about pay and increase or decrease in customers, can amplify the stress felt in a work environment, which can potentially lead to emotional burnout (Erickson and Ritter 2001). Once employees experience emotional burnout, they are likely to decrease their job performance (Wright and Cropanzano 1998).

*Lack of Product.* Another source of stress for participants was their departments' lack of product. This type of stress, however, was only discussed by participants working in better/moderate department stores.

Fb: Sometimes, when actually you have a customer that comes two or three times to buy a product that you don't have and you know, I say, that's a sale I lose, how they expect me to make sales if they don't send me the merchandise.

This interviewee concurred:

Mb: Not having the shoe that someone wants or the size or...that can be stressful because that's a lost opportunity, even though it's not your fault. It's like why me?

These employees describe feeling frustration with the fact that once they make contact with a customer, they are unable to complete the transaction due to a problem that is not in their power to control.

Other interviewees suggested that their departments should carry higher end products to meet the needs of customers who come into the store wanting to spend money on more exclusive items.

Mb: By changing the product, obviously meet the needs of more people, sell a lot more. We don't carry any of the better brands in suits. Simply because they don't think they'll sell here. Shoes, we don't carry the better brands. But yet we have customers coming in here specifically asking for those better brands and we have to send them over to our...one of our other locations. That's money that's being lost.

Another employee stated:

Mb: Well probably in the product, I'd like to see higher price points. I'd like to see more [names brands] and more top end.

Employees suggested their departments could make more money by offering higher end products, however, articulated that they have no say in what their department sells.

Several employees said management also has the inability to give input on what they sell in their stores because corporate offices controlled what each store sold.

*Coping Mechanisms.* Participants dealt with their stress in various ways. The most common coping mechanism was taking a break from the situation causing stress.

Fb: There's a lot of times during the day that I just have to. I'm just ready to hit somebody's head, I need to go back and just chill and relax.

Another participant used of meditation:

Fn: I either go outside or I go in my office and try to meditate even if it's for a few seconds.

These employees leave their work area to a place out of view from customers to calm down. When participants could not deal with stress at work, taking a short break seemed to be the most effective way for them to recuperate within a short time span so they could finish the rest of their shift with minimal problems.

Interviewees also found ways to cope with stress they continued to feel after they left their workplace.

Fn: I love TV, so I watch mystery movies and that calms me down. Because I'm not into alcohol, I don't drink, I don't smoke so I don't have that, but I like to watch mystery movies. So there's certain shows I have to watch and it calms me down.

Another employee responds:

Md: But for me to relieve my stress, I exercise. That's what I do. That's what I do. At the end of the day I say, "You know what? I'm too stressed. I need to run, I need to exercise for a while. Go running and do something outside and come back the next day with a fresh mind."

To cope with stress away from work, participants emphasized the importance of partaking in some type of activity to get their minds off of stress. The idea of starting over again for the next shift was a common response. By coping with stress from a shift, participants are able to return to work with a positive attitude and a willingness to comply with required display rules.

*Burnout.* The majority of participants said they occasionally felt physical burnout as a result of their jobs, rather than experiencing emotional burnout. Participants discussed feeling burned out with their jobs as a result of working too many hours, or too many days without a break.

Fb: Yes cause instead of working just 40 hours a week, I work anywhere from 50 to 60. And we work on Saturdays and I am supposed to get a half-day off during the week, that doesn't ever happen.

Exhaustion from the physical demands of work was another cause of burnout. An employee described the layout of her workplace as a contributing factor to the physical exhaustion she experiences.

Fb: It is...we have a two story stock room, it's a very big stockroom. It's stairs. Four stairs, two on each side. Going up, going up and down. Lady trying on the

shoe saying her size is a six and by the time you're done with her, you realize that she's a size nine.

Another interviewee stated:

Fd: I think it's very physical, I mean you're literally on your feet all the time, especially in Christmas, like you're running all the time, you're climbing up and down ladders to get all this stuff. Often in high heels. A lot of the girls have gotten hurt.

The layout of the stores, requirement of standing, and required dress further influence the likelihood of physical exhaustion. Burnout discussed by these employees is consistent with Erickson and Ritter's (2001) description of burnout, which is an effect of stressful work demands as opposed to experiencing emotional burnout from interactions with customers.

*Verbal Abuse.* The majority of participants described encounters of receiving verbal abuse from customers. Whether or not they previously encountered verbal abuse from customers, all interviewees discussed seeking the help of a manager to prevent the escalation of a verbally abusive situation. One female, better/moderate employee said "I have called the manager, and my response is, 'Would you like to talk to a manager? If you're not happy with, whatever, you know.'"

Another employee agreed:

Mb: "You know, sir, or ma'am, obviously I cannot meet your needs, or obviously I'm not getting...I don't understanding what I...I have to do to you or for you. Let me get somebody else to help you", and just walk away. Diffuse the situation before it escalates.

These employees divert the attention of an irate customer away from themselves and to a manager to prevent the situation from becoming worse. Employees felt managers were responsive when situations arose with customers.

Participants felt that part of their managers' jobs was to handle irate and abusive customers.

Mb: If they want to verbally abuse you, "I'm sorry you feel that way, let me get a manager for you." They get paid for that, I don't. Always get a manager involved.

A female, better/moderate employee said "Turn it over to a manager, that's not my area of expertise." Others described having no tolerance for those who verbally abuse them.

Fb: I am a decent working person here giving the great service and then they come and they want to call me something ugly, I'm going to go, I'm going to face them and if the manager come and call me to the office, I'm just going to tell them. And I don't care that's one thing. I don't let anybody abuse me verbally or physically.

Another employee responded similarly:

Fn: No, they'd just need to leave, because I'm not going to their place of business and act like that, so just because I am sitting behind a desk doesn't mean that they can come in there and do that to me.

Verbal abuse has the potential for causing employees emotional pain and can lead to a decrease in overall job satisfaction (Boyd 2002). Boyd's (2002) study of airline and railroad crew members found that employees felt that dealing with verbal abuse was part of the job. Most of the participants in this study, while acknowledging customers have the tendency to be rude, believed that verbal abuse was not part of their job and they did not have to tolerate abusive customers while they were on the job.

Employees are able to cope with a verbally abusive customer by getting a manager involved. This method of handling abuse is a non-aggressive technique to cope with offensive behavior while on the job (Tucker 1993). Since verbally abusive customers can be stressful and upsetting for employees, involving a manager can give employees support and the understanding that they should not take the abuse personally (Korczynski 2003).

Employees, on the other hand, did not feel obtaining the help of a manager was necessary when they encountered verbal abuse with co-workers. The majority of the participants felt they could handle and resolve the issue with their co-worker without having a third party involved. A participant said “Personally I think it’s better if you have a problem with someone, to discuss it with them.” Participants did say that if the conflict was not resolved, they would eventually require the assistance of a manager.

While there is not as much information in previous research on interactions between co-workers as there is on interactions between employee and customer, keeping a manager out of personal conflict seems to be a result of having repeat interactions with co-workers. With customers, unless they are clients, the chance of the employee encountering the customer again is small. Further, interactions with customers are important in that employees act as representatives of their stores (Sutton and Rafaeli 1988). Obtaining the help of a manager helps ease a difficult situation by reinforcing company rules and policies (Maslach 1978). Co-workers, however, encounter each other usually on a daily basis. Employees are less likely to maintain a positive demeanor when experiencing conflict with a co-worker, as behind the scenes employees are no longer acting as representatives of the company. Employees felt that by involving a manager in a conflict that they believed could be resolved between the conflicting parties was making the issue a bigger deal than it needed to be.

### *Discussion*

Although the 19 participants in this study come from different levels of stores, employees from one level of store did not differ from employees in other levels of stores in their feelings about particular issues. For example, an employee in designer/bridge said

he did not feel stress and was very satisfied with his job. An employee in moderate/popular had the same opinion. While each level can differ significantly in terms of items sold, feelings about the job, emotional labor, and commission pay did not seem to differ by store level. Across levels, there were employees who were very satisfied with their work situations and others who emphasized feeling high levels of stress from their jobs, which influenced their overall job satisfaction.

The only finding in which participants from a particular store level gave a specific response was the source of stress for participants in better/moderate stores. These participants wanted their stores to carry more products to meet the demand of customers. The participants also wanted to see their stores carry higher-end brands to supply the customers who actively come into their stores to find a particular brand, and then leave when they find out the store does not carry it. The theme expressed here was a sense of lost opportunity that the participants from the other level of stores did not mention.

This study suggests that commission paid retail workers cover their true feelings primarily through the use of surface acting to make interactions with customers easier, and to encourage customers to come back, thus becoming clients. Participants were split as to whether or not they covered their true feelings in front of co-workers and managers. While some participants said that they could be open with their co-worker and managers, others felt sharing their personal life with co-workers was unprofessional. Participants allowed their true feelings to show, however, when customers or co-workers became verbally abusive or accused them of doing something they did not do. Further, most participants emphasized the importance of separating their personal lives from their work

lives as feeling rules in an employee's personal life can differ from display rules required of the employee while on the job.

Commission pay was viewed by participants as having negative and positive consequences. The men and women interviewed stated that this form of pay did not provide stability as patterns of customer traffic vary by time of the year. The advantage to this, however, was that many participants felt commission pay taught them to plan ahead and set personal goals to help them compensate for months when sales are down. Interviewees said that commission pay has the potential for creating negative interactions between co-workers in terms of competing for customers, particularly when there are too many workers on the floor and not many customers in the store. Many of the participants felt this negative environment could be overcome by communicating with co-workers.

The data demonstrate that commission pay seems to be connected to emotional labor. The majority of the men and women interviewed felt that commission pay had some effect on their interactions with customers. Employees learn to monitor their own behavior and cover their true feelings for their personal benefit of making commission and acquiring clients. This was not true of all participants, though. Others felt that commission had no effect on the customer service they provided, as their concern was with the customer rather than how much they would earn from a transaction.

Most of the men and women in this study felt some type of stress while at work. Participants felt stress from competition with other co-workers, from too many customers at once, and from lack of customers. Most employees experienced feeling burnout as a result of their jobs. This type of burnout, however, seemed to result from being physically tired from the job as well as working too many hours. Verbal abuse was another source of

stress. Interviewees discussed involving a manager when the abuse was coming from a customer, as they felt managers could better handle the situation. Most participants did not feel it was necessary to get a manager involved if verbal abuse came from a co-worker as they said it was better to talk directly to the person there is conflict with. Only when the conflict could not be settled, employees felt managers should be involved.

Overall, while most participants reported various forms of stress from their jobs, almost all mentioned at some point that they were grateful to have their jobs. Interviewees mentioned the economy as a reason to be happy they have a job; however, 17 of the men and women in this study said they were happy with their particular department or store. Many of these participants stated that they took their position because they had a high interest in the product they were selling. Further, a benefit of the job discussed by many of the interviewees was being able to work with customers. A participant emphasized this idea when he stated, "I'm excited. I mean I love coming into work and just interacting with people."

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Commission is a form of pay that can incite negative as well as positive reactions from retail workers. While employees cannot always control the amount of money they earn because of variation in customer traffic, the participants in this study demonstrate that they learn to overcome the challenges and turn them into positive aspects of the job that increases their overall well-being. The majority of the men and women interviewed were in their particular department or store as a career choice rather than for a temporary job. These participants overwhelmingly were satisfied with their jobs even though commission pay and various other issues with the job were stressful. Overall, the positive consequences of commission pay seemed to outweigh the negative consequences for the majority of the retail workers in this study.

This study suggests that retail workers on commission pay will engage in emotional labor in their interactions with customers. In particular, participants seemed to use surface acting to hide their true emotions from customers. This study shows that commission pay had some effect on the behavior displayed by the majority of the interviewees in their interactions with customers. While retail workers are required by their employers to portray a particular type of demeanor, most of the participants felt that requiring themselves to use emotional labor in their interactions financially benefited them personally. While display rules are important for service workers to follow to

benefit the organization they are working for (Martin et al. 1998; Rafaeli and Sutton 1989; Leidner 1999), commission pay seems to motivate the employees to portray those display rules to a greater extent so they are able to reach the financial goal they have set for themselves.

Further, while display rules are enforced by employers in various service organizations by methods of rewards and punishment (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987; 1989), commission pay seems to act as a self-disciplining method for controlling behavior. Employees monitor their own behavior to benefit financially, and also are able to track their success rate of selling. Interviewees earning commission pay, overall, seem to perceive more control over the amount of emotional labor they choose to engage in with customers than other service workers not earning commission.

The ability for workers to benefit directly from their actions demonstrates the importance of having some type of control over their jobs. For many frontline workers, being at the lower end of the organizational hierarchy reduces the potential for job autonomy. When asked how much authority they had in their jobs, most participants responded “not much.” However, when asked about commission pay and its influence on their interactions with customers, most interviewees said commission pay was their opportunity to control, to an extent, the amount of money they earned. This feeling of control seemed to affect their feelings toward the job in a positive manner.

All interviewees who discussed being able to have some control over their pay saw this as a positive aspect of their job. Again, emotional labor seems to help employees in their interactions with customers to earn as commission. Not only do the men and women in this study have some control over their pay, but also seem to have some

control over the emotional labor they engage in. Research has shown that employees feel more authentic when they are able to control their own emotional labor (Martin et al. 1998) and are more satisfied with their jobs (Wharton 1993).

While the majority of employees described commission pay influencing their interactions with customers, the rest of the participants who did not feel this way discussed the importance of customer service and focusing on the customers' interests rather than feeling concern about how the interaction would affect their pay. These employees wanted the customer to be happy with the purchase made. However, while participants describe the importance of customer service, they are still engaging in emotional labor during in the interaction to prevent the likelihood of the customer wanting to return merchandise and to increase the likelihood of making a customer a client.

All men and women interviewed discussed hiding their true feelings in front of customers; however, the majority did not feel they needed to hide true feelings from of co-workers or supervisors. While most interviewees said they were not as likely to hide their true feelings in front of co-workers, they did suggest it was necessary to do so when out on the floor in front of customers. Those who hid their true feelings did so to preserve the professional environment of the workplace.

Commission pay also has connections to the stress participants experience on a daily basis while working. Competition between co-workers seems to be one area in which stress and commission pay are connected. Commission pay leads to a potentially competitive environment, particularly when few customers are coming into the store or

department. Interviewees described conflict that occurred as a result of this competition. Thus, commission pay seems to have an influence on stress with co-workers.

Another area of stress with commission pay was the inability of employees to be able to predict how much they would make for each pay period. While the interviewees discussed planning ahead, they pointed out that it was difficult to correctly guess in advance the amount they would receive. Most of the men and women interviewed had some form of base wage to rely on if their commission was not as high as they expected it to be for a pay period. However, this base wage in many cases was not enough for participants to cover the living expenses for themselves and their families. Those with families emphasized the anxiety of not knowing what they would earn for each pay period. In some cases, participants said they would rather rely strictly on hourly or salary pay as these were considered to be more stable forms of pay. Others seemed to embrace the challenge of earning commission pay.

Verbal abuse, particularly from customers, was another source of stress for employees. The men and women in this study discussed being able to hide their emotions except under certain conditions. When customers verbally attack them or accuse them of doing something they did not do, the majority of the employees said they no longer were required to cover their true emotions. All employees agreed that obtaining the help of a manager was necessary to quell the situation, however many described situations of showing the customer their true feelings before a manager was involved in the conflict. Those who had not experienced verbal abuse or simply refused to show their true emotions in front of irate customers suggested refraining from showing true emotions to prevent the situation from escalating and to get a manager as quickly as possible.

Finally, a source of stress for employees was burnout from the job. Participants described feeling physically tired from the job rather than emotionally burned out. Physical exhaustion was a result of factors such as working too many hours, the required dress, and standing for the entire shift.

This study makes use of in-depth interviews to obtain the experiences of retail workers. The benefit of using this type of interview is the opportunity to ask probing questions to address issues that might not have otherwise been brought up. In-depth interviewing allowed me to ask follow-up questions when a statement needed to be clarified or when discussing a topic that deviated from my interview guide. This study contributes to previous literature on emotional labor with the addition of commission pay and stress on the job. I have also given attention to employees' feelings of control within their jobs due to commission pay, which can further help in understanding how and why retail workers use emotional labor.

Commission wages appear to contribute to employees' feelings toward their jobs. While this study focuses on commission pay, future studies should examine the effects of other forms of pay on retail workers' feelings towards their jobs. In addition, researchers should explore differences between experiences of workers in jobs that are based solely on commission pay and those who work in jobs where commission pay is supplemented with a base wage. This study looks at any form of commission pay earned, but the majority of the participants earned commission pay with a base wage as opposed to straight commission. Two employees said they earned straight commission. While their experiences did not seem to vary much from the responses of those with partial

commission pay, this may be a result of the two employees not heavily relying on their pay to help them earn an adequate income.

One particular weakness in this study was with participant selection. For the 12 interviewees who were contacted through managers, the only control I had in terms of selecting participants was informing the managers that participants needed to be over the age 18, have worked in their department for over a year, and earn some form of commission pay. The other aspect I had control over was how many interviewees came from each level of store. Some of the managers seemed to select employees they deemed to be good representatives of their company. One manager in particular did not want me to interview commission paid employees who did not make a significant portion of the sales in the department. He stated numerous times “I’m going to get you the sharks!” The ability of the managers to make the selection as to whom I interviewed may have had some effect on the data in this study. There was a high number of interviewees who thought highly of their jobs and described being in the top levels of total sales in their department. Had more participants disenchanted with their jobs been included, the overall findings may have been different.

Part of my original intent with this study was to examine the types of burnout employees experience, with particular emphasis on emotional burnout. The fact that I found that participants experienced physical burnout rather than emotional burnout may have been due to a lack of questions regarding the phenomenon of burnout. I was not able to obtain enough data on emotional burnout to be able to investigate this phenomenon.

This study is broad in scope as I drew my sample from various levels of department stores. Future studies could be designed on a more micro level by examining

retail workers in one particular level of store, such as designer/bridge. While I found one difference in experiences of those from one level of stores on a particular issue, responses seemed to be similar across the different levels of stores. Collecting data from one particular level of store or one particular store could allow the researcher to focus on the details of that level or store, thus potentially uncovering a pattern that was not considered when focusing on participants from different levels of stores.

For this study, I was interested in examining how commission pay potentially varies from one store level to another. Thus, I wanted to obtain a sample that drew from a variety of level of stores. Future research could also look at the differences in responses between men and women or the differences between racial and ethnic groups in terms of overall feelings regarding commission pay and its tie to stress and emotional labor.

This study has implications for the literature on emotional labor. Stress has been connected to emotional labor in previous literature, but literature on the combined issues of effect of commission pay, emotional labor, and stress for retail workers has not to my knowledge been established. This study shows that the three areas are related and can affect each other. Examining issues of stress and form of pay can aid in furthering our understanding of when employees engage in emotional labor and when they allow their true feelings to show.

Further, this study has implications for the well-being of employees. One area in particular is studying those who deal with verbal abuse at work. Understanding abuse and how to handle situations involving it can prevent negative consequences affecting employees' psychological well-being as well as increase their job satisfaction. The amount of control employees feel they have in their jobs can also increase or decrease the

amount of satisfaction they feel. Examining the emotional labor of employees and the amount of control they have over their emotional labor, can further increase or decrease job satisfaction.

## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix A-1

Manager Consent Form  
Retail Workers' Job Experiences

My name is Alissa Denman and I am conducting a study of retail workers and their experiences on the job. I am a graduate student at Texas State University in the Department of Sociology working on a master's thesis. My study will examine workers in commission paid retail positions that require contact with customers. I will interview 20 people for this study. Participants will be asked about their experiences with customers and co-workers.

I might be asking workers at this store to meet with me for interviews about their work experiences. If a worker agrees to do the interview, it will be conducted on his or her personal time. Interviews will be conducted on a one-on-one basis and will be conducted away from work in a public place that we choose and will be tape-recorded.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with participants remains strictly confidential. Tapes will be assigned a code number so participants' names will never be attached to tapes. Tapes will be heard only by me, the interviewer and supervising professor, Dr. Patti Giuffre. When I describe the information obtained, an alias or false name will be used in place of their true name or identity.

If you have questions, feel free to contact me at (xxx) xxx-xxxx. You may also contact Dr. Patti Giuffre in the sociology department at Texas State University (xxx-xxx-xxxx). You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

Your signature gives me permission to approach employees working in this store about a possible interview.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Store Manager

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Store Name and Phone Number

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix A-2

## Consent Form

## Retail Workers' Job Experiences: An Analysis of Emotional Labor, Job Burnout, Verbal Abuse and Commission Pay

You are invited to participate in a study of retail workers and their experiences on the job. My name is Alissa Denman and I am a student at Texas State University in the Department of Sociology working on a master's thesis. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because I encountered you working in a retail position that requires contact with customers. You will be one of 20 people chosen to participate in this study. I will ask you questions about your experiences, for example, do you feel stressed because of your job, and what are the reasons that make you feel this way.

If you decide to participate, you will take part in a one-on-one in-depth interview with me. The interview will be conducted in a nearby restaurant, or another place that we choose and will be tape-recorded. The interview should take no more than one hour of your time. The possible risk to your participation is psychological harm from describing/re-living past events and interactions that may have been negative or damaging. At the end of the interview, I can give you a list of agencies providing services you may need. The possible benefit is being able to discuss events in your life that you haven't prior to the interview.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain strictly confidential. Tapes will be assigned a code number so your name will never be attached to the tape. Tapes will be heard only by me, the interviewer and supervising professor, Dr. Patti Giuffre. When I describe the information obtained an alias or false name will be used in place of your true name or identity.

If you decide to take part in the interview, you are free to stop the interview at any time. You don't have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. If you have any questions, please ask me. If you have any additional questions later, feel free to contact me at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or Dr. Patti Giuffre in the sociology department at Texas State University (xxx-xxx-xxxx). You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate in this study. Your signature means that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time after signing this form should you choose to do so.

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 Signature of Participant

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 Date

---

 Signature of Investigator

---

 Date

## Appendix B

## Interview Guide

- I. Background information
  - What is your age?
  - How long have you been working here?
  - Why did you take this job?
  - Describe your workplace. How many co-workers are there? How many customers would you say you have contact with on a daily basis? How much responsibility do you have?
- II. Coping Strategies/Conflict Management
  - How do you feel about working in your store?
  - Do you ever feel stress as a result of your job?
  - What makes you feel stress? What do you do to deal with your stress while at work?
  - Do you ever feel burned out or tired of your job? If yes, what makes you feel that way?
- III. Verbal Abuse
  - Have you ever had a customer be verbally abusive to you? A co-worker? If yes, how did you react and what did you do about it?
- IV. Emotional Labor
  - Do you ever cover your true feelings in front of a customer? If yes, what do you do to make yourself seem happy or helpful when you are feeling otherwise?
  - Do you ever cover your true feelings in front of your boss or co-workers?
  - Would you show your true feelings if a customer accused you of doing something you did not do or took out their anger on you? What about a co-worker?
  - What other situations might you show your true feelings in front of a customer or co-worker?
- V. Commission pay
  - How do you feel about commission pay?
  - Is commission pay stressful to you? If so, why?
  - How does commission pay affect your interactions with other co-workers? With customers?
  - How does commission pay affect your feelings toward your job?
  - Have you had another form of payment in a previous job? If yes, what was it and how does it compare or differ from commission pay?
- VI. Conclusion
  - How would you change your work situation to make the job less stressful and more rewarding for yourself?
  - What advice would you have for other retail workers in order to handle verbal abuse by either customers or co-workers?
  - How do you feel about hiding your true emotions at work?
  - What are your overall feelings on commission pay?

## Appendix C: Methodological Issues

Contacting participants was more difficult than I had anticipated. I initially set out to find commission paid retail workers for this study with the idea that I would make contact with participants by asking department store managers for permission to approach their employees while working on the job. My plan was to randomly approach employees while they were working and to ask them if they would be interested in being interviewed for my study at a future date and time. I visited a total of 15 department stores. Managers at eleven stores either told me I could not conduct my study with their employees or failed to contact me after saying they would. Four managers allowed me to interview in their stores. The Institutional Review Board required me to provide a signed consent form from managers who agreed to let me contact employees at their prospective stores (SEE APPENDIX A-1). A signature indicated permission to let me interview employees.

My first attempts at talking to different managers did not yield the results I had expected. I anticipated talking to managers about my project and getting their permission to let me approach employees for interviews off the job. I was surprised when every manager I spoke with told me I could not interview employees outside of the store. The reasoning was that, if managers gave me permission to approach employees while they were working, interviews would have to be done on the clock because employees were acting as representatives of the company. Several managers said that the liability of the company was too high to allow me to approach employees for interviews off the clock and away from work when the subject dealt with employees' work experiences. One

assistant manager stated that I would not have luck talking to the store manager as approaching employees on the job to ask for interviews was a form of solicitation and that particular company did not allow soliciting employees. Another manager said interviewing employees off the clock and away from the store would be illegal.

Eventually, two managers gave me permission to interview employees in their store while employees were working there. I decided to do these interviews with the stipulation that I could conduct the interviews in a private office. I had concerns about how open the participants would be about discussing work experiences since their managers set up the interviews and they were on the clock. After several interviews, however, I discovered that the participants seemed as open about discussing their experiences with co-workers, supervisors, and customers as the participants that I had interviewed off the clock and away from their work location were.

I suspected that managers were hesitant about allowing me to interview employees because they thought I might expose company business not meant for public consumption. After receiving so much rejection from managers and being told I could not approach employees on my own, I wanted to change the study or withdraw from it altogether. Corsino (1987) explains that experiencing feelings of rejection and awkwardness are common in the interaction between the fieldworker and participant. I, however, experienced feelings of awkwardness and rejection from gatekeepers, not participants. Handling rejection became easier after I experienced it several times. The desire to change the study or withdraw from the study diminished after I finally received permission from two managers to interview employees.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Esterberg (2002) notes that qualitative researchers should pay attention to their emotional responses to all parts of their studies. She refers to this attention to emotions in the research process as “reflexivity”.

In short, attempting to find study participants by contacting store managers was a difficult feat. However, while store managers were the gatekeepers to the employees, they were not the only people to serve as gatekeepers. Gatekeepers can also be those who allow the researcher to contact the person who gives permission to access potential participants (Esterberg 2002). I made contact with at least one store employee in each store I visited before I had contact with store managers. In most cases the employee was working in customer service. In other cases, such as when customer service was not easily located, I spoke with retail workers on the floor to find out where the store manager was located. After speaking with various people, I was directed to talk to the manager, told the manager would call me back, or else told to call or come back at another time. In total, I encountered 32 gatekeepers, who were at different levels of employees of the store. I spoke with a total of eight managers. I also spoke with various people within two different corporate offices. Of the eight managers I spoke with, four said they were able to make an immediate decision, without consulting other people. Two of these managers gave me permission to interview employees, and two declined my request. One manager cited issues with employee benefits, and the other manager said it was a very busy time of year for the store, thus employees would not be available for interviews. Two managers felt they had to consult with others before they could give me an answer. Two of the eight managers were contacted through their stores' corporate offices. I was never allowed to speak with the people who had the power to give me permission to interview employees. Instead, I corresponded with secretaries who passed messages back and forth between me and the people I needed to speak with.

Out of the four managers that allowed me to conduct interviews, only one mentioned concerns about allowing interviews to be conducted while employees were working. This manager was concerned that, not only would employees be losing potential sales, which would affect their personal income, but the store itself could possibly lose money. This manager allowed me to proceed with my study only after letting me know the possible consequences to the store and employees.

Since managers requested that I conduct interviews during store hours, I always asked participants if they were comfortable doing the interview knowing that they may be losing potential sales. Out of the 12 participants accessed through managers, only one expressed discomfort with doing the interview during his shift. He suggested we do the interview prior to his next shift and we obtained permission from the store manager to do the interview away from work, off the clock. The other 11 employees let me know that they were willing to do the interview as they all mentioned that it was an opportunity to have a break from being on the sales floor. They mentioned that this break allowed them to sit down whereas their jobs require that they stand during their shifts.

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## VITA

Alissa Leigh Denman was born in Corpus Christi, Texas, on January 30, 1980, the daughter of Paul and Wanda Denman. After completing her work at New Braunfels High School, in 1998, she entered the University of Texas at Austin. During the summer of 1999, she attended Texas State University-San Marcos. She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in sociology and government from the University of Texas at Austin in August 2002. The same month, she entered the Graduate College of Texas State University-San Marcos. She has worked at various jobs in the service industry including the retail sector.

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