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# "WHAT ARE YOU CRYING ABOUT? IT'S NOT YOUR REAL JOB!" EMOTIONAL LABOR AND COMMUNICATIVE SENSEMAKING IN RETAIL CUSTOMER SERVICE POSITIONS

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“WHAT ARE YOU CRYING ABOUT? IT’S NOT YOUR REAL JOB!”  
EMOTIONAL LABOR AND COMMUNICATIVE SENSEMAKING  
IN RETAIL CUSTOMER SERVICE POSITIONS

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty

of

DePaul University

by

Danielle M. Harkins

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of

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## ABSTRACT

Using Tracy and Trethewey's (2005) crystallized self metaphor as a framework through which to view organizational identity, the researcher bridges connections between emotional labor, job performance, meaning of work and communicative sensemaking within the organizational context of a grocery store. The purpose of this study is to seek the potential strategies that employees of this specific grocery store chain use to make communicative sense of their everyday realities in order to "get through" the day, especially with the great deal of emotional labor that takes place on the job. The researcher utilizes a combination of face-to-face interviews and participant observation to collect data for this study. Findings indicate that employees utilized multiple strategies to manage their emotionally laborious positions including venting, forming social relationships and pursuing interests outside of work, as well as resistance. Limitations of this project and directions for future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* emotional labor, job performance, meaning of work, burnout, crystallized self, grocery store, service-based occupation.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Picture this: You have been working as an engineer at a major American auto-manufacturer for over 20 years. Your job seem secure until the price of oil rises, and continues to do so, thereby substantially reducing the amount of income your company is bringing in because nobody wants to buy an SUV when the price of gas is over three dollars per gallon. In the midst of rumors and speculation regarding the financial situation of the company, your organization publicly declares its plan to eliminate over 10,000 jobs in the next year in order to avoid bankruptcy. Within six months, you are unemployed from the job you thought you would be retiring from. You are married with three children who depend on you for monetary support, as well as employer sponsored health benefits. What do you do now?

The lives of many Americans have been affected by similar scenarios in the past five years. More and more people are being forced from long-term, professional careers into the realm of short-term, service-sector jobs, which are defined as any job where the employee must make repeated contact with customers (Leidner, 1999; MacDonald & Sirianni, 1996 ). These service-sector jobs make up over "...80 percent of non-farm U.S. employment, whether in health care, retail, financial services or shipping..." (Arbel, 2010). Thus, people who may have never worked in an occupation in which they have to directly interact with customers are being forced to do so simply because there are no other jobs available elsewhere. In the current economic climate, people are desperate for any type of job, especially one that offers comprehensive benefits packages. Service sector jobs can be especially challenging to people who have never worked in customer facing occupations. Leidner (1999) observes, "Interactive service workers daily



encounter behavior that angers, insults or exasperates them” (p. 88) and applying for service-sector jobs may be under-prepared to meet the demands of companies in terms the quality and quantity of interactions that are expected in face-to-face service positions on-the-job performance. When working in customer service related jobs, it is assumed that the customer will not be satisfied with their shopping experience every time and could potentially personally attack the integrity of an organizational employee in place of being able to physically threaten the actual, inanimate organization when dissatisfied with a particular policy, product or employee.

On what level does such an insult affect the personality of the employee? How can employees, especially those who do not have a background in service work, learn to remain neutral to such behavior? A solution to such a question runs much deeper than developing “thicker” skin. Being treated in a demeaning way for an issue that is not her or his responsibility can have a negative effect on the identity of an employee over time, depending on the extent to which an individual's identity is tied to a job, occupation or organization. If insults persist, it could lead to burnout, or more specifically, depersonalization, which is defined as numbness to life on the job that can bleed into other parts of an individual's life (see Hochschild, 1983; Miller, 2006). Burnout occurs when there is a disconnect between the public self (the image or personality an individual projects to others) and the private self (the emotions that an individual actually feels) (Hochschild, 1983). For example, when a friendly, smiling cashier is accosted by a customer for a particular item not being in stock (the fault of the organization, not the employee), the employee is expected to respond pleasantly, apologize to the customer (as if it *were* the employee's fault, thus assuming blame for the organization) and offer an

explanation as for why the product is unavailable. Despite all of this, the employee continues to smile and tells the customer to have a nice day, no matter what the cashier may be feeling internally.

Though the physical qualifications to work in service sector jobs may be few, the ingenuity it takes to perform the tasks required of these jobs is great and can take time to develop. Many factors are at work and intersect within the abilities of individual employees in order to perform these tasks. This study focused on several of these factors including the effects of the performance of emotional labor on the personal identity construction process, as well as how individuals find meaning in the work that they do. This study also sought to unveil ways in which individuals cope with on-the-job stressors, such as rude customers and inefficient management communication practices. In the section to follow, scholarship pertaining to emotional labor, work as performance, meaning of work and identity construction processes will be discussed. Further, Tracy and Trethewey's (2005) metaphor of the crystallized self will be introduced as a tool to elucidate how these areas of scholarship intersect and overlap in the field of communication studies.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Working in the service-sector is a way to refine individuals' skills of public interaction, due to the amount of contact that employees have with customers. There are many benefits of learning to help and work with others in a public setting, including how to maintain an individuals' composure in unpleasant or negative situations. For example, a negative interaction between an employee and a customer in a retail customer service work setting is embedded with notions of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983; Miller, 2006; Miller, Considine, & Garner, 2007; Sass, 2000; Schuler & Sypher, 2000; Tracy, 2000), the performance and concealment of public and private emotions (Fleming, 2005; Hochschild, 1983; Miller, 2006; Miller et al., 2007; Sass, 2000; Tracy, 2000), as well as how seriously the employee regards the position that she or he occupies within an organization. Studying these concepts together and seeking a connection between them could help to uncover strategies for reducing burnout, inside and outside the workplace, which should be shared with employees to alleviate possible feelings of burnout or depersonalization. Also, by providing a closer look into the world of retail customer service positions where emotional labor is utilized as a marketing strategy by an organization, a new environment in which to study this behavior is showcased. This new environment, for the purpose of this study, is a specific grocery store. In the following study, I review extant literature pertaining to the concepts of emotional labor, work as performance, and meaning of work. Second, the metaphor of the crystallized self (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005) is introduced as a framework to view organizational identity. Finally, I propose to conduct a study of employees who work for a national chain of

grocery stores and explore the impact that emotional labor has on the performance of their job, their meaning making and construction of identity.

### Emotional Labor

In order to talk about emotional labor and how it affects employees, one must first consider a few definitions of the term. Miller, Considine and Gardner (2007) identify and define several categories of “emotion in the workplace” (p. 232) including “emotion labor,” “emotion work,” “emotion with work,” “emotion at work,” and “emotion towards work” (p. 232-233). Hochschild (1983) defines emotional labor as sacrificing one’s actual emotions for the benefit of an organization in return for a wage. Also, there are two types of emotional sacrifice that take place during service encounters: surface acting and deep acting (Hochschild, 1983). According to Hochschild (1983), surface acting is when employees amend their facial expressions to mirror the expectations of the organization and the customer, whereas deep acting is when employees amend their inner emotions to reflect the expectations of their audience. Similarly, Schuler and Sypher (2000) describe emotional labor as “...the management of emotion as a job requirement” (p. 51). To further extend on this definition, Tracy (2000) offers that, “...employee emotion is not just a response to work situations but actually is the work” (p. 91). Finally, Sass (2000) notes that “emotional labor is intended to promote an organizationally desired state of emotion within another person, usually a customer” (p. 331). In the following section, emotional labor will be explored in terms of what types of occupations can be emotionally laborious, as well as studies that have been done outside the discipline of communication.

Wharton (1996) states "...when the management of feeling shifts from being a strictly private act, performed almost unconsciously, to a public act, performed to others' guidelines, negative consequences follow" (p. 93). This public display of emotion can be found in grocery stores as well as numerous other organizations which employ people to engage and interact with customers and clients. Observations of emotional labor run the gamut of customer service positions, including fast-food workers (Leidner, 1999), flight attendants (Hochschild, 1983; Murphy, 1998; Murphy, 2001), police officers (Martin, 1999), 911 call-takers (Schuler & Sypher, 2000; Tracy & Tracy, 1998), firefighters and correctional officers (Tracy, Myers & Scott, 2006), grocery store cashiers (Rafaeli, 1989; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1990) and human service workers (Miller, Birkholt, Scott & Stage, 1995; Miller et al., 2007; Schuler & Sypher, 2000) to name a few.

Human service workers is a term referring to a broad category of work that encompasses relatively any job in which one human being is providing a service that helps another human being in some way (Miller et al., 1995). It is a phrase that incorporates a wide variety of professions including "Physicians, nurses, social workers, teachers, ministers, [and] day care providers..." (Miller et al., 1995, p. 124). Also included in this definition would be care-givers and 911 call-takers because they involve some people being physically and emotionally dependent on others for help. Human service workers are trained to handle a variety of difficult and ambiguous situations, as to not cause any more harm to those who need help.

In this fashion, human service positions differ from other types of customer service jobs because employees are expected to be high self-monitors of their public display of emotionality and be able to "...conceal adaptively an inappropriate emotional

state and appear to be experiencing an appropriate one” (Snyder, 1974, p. 527), managing their facial expressions in emotional encounters with others. Despite the situation, human service workers are expected to maintain their “cool” otherwise, the situations they come across may get even more emotionally charged. For example, I share here an experience I had in an intercultural communication class while teaching a group of undergraduate students. While discussing groups of displaced people, one student, without raising his hand blurted out “Homeless people are lazy and obviously do not want to work; therefore, I don’t give them any of my money.” Instead of making it apparent how I felt about the statement internally, I smiled kindly, and asked the other students what they had to say about the statement not only to hear their voices on the issue but also to give myself time to find the right words to respond. I wanted to avoid silencing the student or passing judgment on him immediately. Later on in the class period, I had the opportunity to discuss actual percentages of Americans who are displaced, or are only one or two paychecks away from being displaced. To act out in any other way than the mediator in the classroom would have been inappropriate for this setting because in this area of human service work, especially in American college classrooms, open discussions are encouraged, and the voices of all students are supposed to be welcomed. There are countless other experiences that people in human service work could share that also reflect stifling one’s own emotions and communicating more appropriately to the situation, thus playing an active role in the performance of emotional labor on-the-job.

Along the lines of suppressing true emotion in order to maintain an appropriate public identity within an organizational context, most of the literature that has been produced on the topic of emotional labor is either in connection with people who are

human service workers where intangible services are provided to recipients for payment or that of customer service related jobs in which employees are the mediators through which customers must pass in order to purchase the tangible goods, like food from restaurants, clothes from retail stores, or grocery items from supermarkets. For the purposes of this paper, retail customer service positions are those in which products (through human interaction) are exchanged for money. Others have used similar terms such as interactive service work (Leidner, 1999), people work (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002), and emotional proletariat (Macdonald & Sirianni, 1996) to describe the same type of work. Macdonald and Sirianni (1996) make a clear distinction between the emotional proletariat and human service workers because in human service work, how to behave on the job is loosely regulated, mostly by the person engaging in the emotional labor whereas “in front-line service jobs, workers are given very explicit instructions concerning what to say and how to act, and both consumers and managers watch to ensure that these instructions are carried out” (p. 13). Consequently, how strictly employees’ emotions are controlled designates the degree of autonomy they possess within their organizational position.

Miller et al. (2007) emphasize applying the definitions of “emotion in the workplace” (p. 232) to organizations studied in hypothetical situations mentioned by two books in the form of second-hand textual analyses. To extend this area of scholarship, it would be useful to conduct a first-hand study in order to gather primary data, as well as being more recently completed than a second-hand analysis. Another way to extend this literature would be to build upon the research by doing autoethnographic work to extend these definitions in the future. Lastly, the Schuler and Sypher (2000) study is limited in

its representation, yet the framework of positive and negative emotional work/labor could be applied to a job that is not a “real job,” (Clair, 1996) or would not be considered meaningful, based on the simplicity of the actual tasks being performed.

Moreover, the act of speaking itself serves as a way through which identities and realities are shaped, a process called retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1995) where “...communication is central to understanding how organizational realities are created” (Murphy, 1998, p. 502). Hence, it is important to study how employees in such positions speak to customers and more importantly, how they are instructed on what they are allowed to say versus what they should not say since these messages influence their workplace identities and realities. Communication is not the only scholarly lens through which the influences and effects of emotional labor have been studied. Emotional labor is also a popular topic of inquiry within the fields of psychology and management. In psychology for example, in addition to studies that investigate employees’ internal states-of-mind to predict burnout (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Martin, 1990) and findings that reveal facial expressions to be inconsistent with internal emotion (Ekman, 1993), there is much discussion of actual feelings that get suppressed.

This scholarship differs from communication scholarship because it does not focus on the ways through which these behaviors are physically enacted, either by faking a smile (nonverbal communication) or by biting one’s tongue, and saying something “company approved” (verbal communication), in order to suppress internal emotion. The emotions themselves get studied, and there is a heavy emphasis on burnout, a psychological state created through the communication of a false reality and identity to others for the benefit of the organization (Hochschild, 1984). In this regard, burnout is



studied as a negative state that is the end result of engaging in too much emotional labor. Emotional labor is seen as something that can be regulated (Grandey, 2000) as opposed to genuine, instinctive emotion, which can be masked but not eliminated. Thus, the communicative performance of nonverbal behaviors coupled with verbal speech serves as the vehicle through which emotional labor travels.

On the other hand, management scholars study emotional labor through a lens that is more focused on how tasks are executed (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987) rather than on how communication affects workplace interactions. These management studies seem bound by definitions and explanations for how-to perform specific behaviors on the job, rather than focusing on the effects that the performance of these behaviors have on the employee. Also, the literature does not account for how the utilization of these behaviors may stimulate feelings within the customers through the interactions they have with employees in the co-construction of their social realities. For example, one study that takes place at an Israeli supermarket focuses on the operations in the supermarket and makes note of emotional labor that occurs (Rafaeli, 1989) but the study does not address how communication shapes the performance and realities of the organizational actors employed at the store. In another study of the same Israeli grocery store chain, Rafaeli and Sutton (1990) look at how the busyness of the store affects employee-customer interactions, stating that "...service employees are less likely to display good cheer during busy times than during slow times" (p. 634).

In addition, Rafaeli and Sutton (1990) believe that employees feel stressed due to the demands of customers in a busy work environment, whereas if this same study were conducted from a communication perspective, with an emphasis on performance, while

the busyness of the store would still matter, it would be the degree to which the employees embody and identify with their roles as organizational actors that would make a significant contribution to the study's findings. When discussing roles of actors, either those that appear on an actual stage or that use organizational spaces as stages, it is important to note that, according to Goffman (1959) a good actor can perform in any type of climate for anyone, and be regarded as genuine by the audience. Therefore, looking at emotional labor as an organizational performance that is embodied and projected through the use of communication is an important place to continue this discussion.

### Work as Performance

Emotional labor is an example of an organizational performance because by offering a public self versus a private self, a person embodies a possible disconnect between emotion experienced and emotion displayed. A public self is a general personality that a person displays when interacting with many people in group settings (Hochschild, 1983), such as at work, at school, or at parties. A private self is a more guarded personality that a person is likely to use less frequently (Hochschild, 1983), and would not reveal to large groups of people. A private self would be used with just an intimate few, like close friends and family. These two personalities are not likely to be opposite of each other but there will most likely be significant differences between the two. Enactment of the public self begins even before one gets hired. How one performs during the pre-interview will ultimately determine if she or he gets a call about setting up a formal interview. This suggests that going to work, or even applying for work, entails some degree of acting (Fleming, 2005; Hochschild, 1983; Miller et al., 2007; Murphy, 2001; Sass, 2000; Tracy, 2000)

Being an actor at jobs outside the realm of theater is explicitly stated in the title of Tracy's (2000) article *Becoming a Character for Commerce* (emphasis added). Also, the term "organizational actors" (Murphy, 2001, p. 23) implies the performative nature of some jobs and lines of work. Sass (2000) emphasizes the jobs that we do and the tasks completed within them as being "cultural performance" (p. 333). Depending on what type of organization a person works for, and what their job requirements entail, one might have to act in a more "professional" way (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007) than they would at home, especially if contact with clients or customers is required, as in retail customer service positions. This contact with customers usually has to do with matching one's displayed facial expression with their verbal communication (Ekman, 1993) and performing convincingly (Goffman, 1959) as if genuinely interested in each customer.

Another reason the act of performing at work is directly tied to emotional labor is due to the fact that organizational members are paid to embody and put forth an attitude that is incongruous with how one may actually be feeling, which affects the construction of their workplace reality (Murphy, 2001). The performance of a happy emotion when feeling sad, for example, is a way in which the employee may experience a disconnection. This disconnect is a negative aspect of performing emotionally laborious work in which the employee runs the risk of burnout (Hochschild, 1983; Miller, 2006; Tracy, 2000; Wharton, 1996), or to be so emotionally exhausted from one's job that it has a negative effect on how the employee treats others, as well as her personal view of herself (Tracy, 2000). Likewise, the more disconnected performances that an employee engages in over time, the less likely the performer is able to acknowledge "true" emotion, which can lead to burnout (Wharton, 1996).

Though Miller (2006) provides extensive definitions and causes of burnout, from a variety of scholars, she acknowledges that most of the research contained within the chapter in her book are based on feminist, gendered (p. 259) views of emotional labor. Studying both men and women, and their experiences with emotional labor and burnout, would be a way in which to see what effects gender has on work performance. On the other hand, Sass (2000) and Fleming (2005) studied mixed gender groups of people working together under the premise of emotional labor but neither of the studies addressed the possibility of burnout, which is an almost inevitable part of most jobs that require people to mask their “true” emotions in the presence of others (Tracy, 2000).

Another area that the Fleming (2005) study is limited is with regard to location. The participants were living in Australia, working at a call-center, and the cynicism that was observed was mainly constructed by four people who worked at the call-center and lived together, an incredibly small sample of the population to base a generalized use of cynicism as a tool of resistance, which was the goal of the study. As for the Tracy (2000) article, along similar lines, the effects of “emotion labor” and burnout were studied in the environment of a total institution (cruise ship), whereas most positions in organizations are not as physically confined. Related to confinement, despite Hochschild (1983) providing a solid foundation for definitions of emotional labor and burnout, the studies she conducted represent limited groups of people, such as flight attendants and bill collectors, the first of which who were also confined to a total institution while in flight. Another study that focuses on human service work jobs is Shuler and Sypher’s (2000), where they focus on a professional job, a 911 call center, where meaning is inherent through helping people and assisting in saving lives, whereas this researcher makes her

primary focus on jobs that would be considered the opposite of “professional”; front-line service sector jobs (Macdonald & Sirianni, 1996), or “interactive service work” (Leidner, 1999, p. 83) where a person comes to work, does the same task over and over again for the financial benefit of an employer in return for a wage and benefits, then goes home. Arguably, unless an individual finds meaning in those tasks that they repeat, like stocking shelves at a grocery store, there is no obvious meaning in these jobs themselves in the tasks completed. Following this discussion of performance at work and what type of work is deemed real, professional or neither, the next section will include an overview of scholarship pertaining to what type of work is deemed meaningful or not

### Meaning Construction

Meaningful jobs are not necessarily the jobs that people are paid to do; they could be any activity that makes an individual feel like she is fulfilling some greater need for another or for herself (Cheney, Zorn, Planalp, & Lair, 2008). Cheney et al. (2008) also offer several other ways in which people can find meaning outside of their paid work, such as volunteering or being involved in spiritual organizations. Though Cheney et al. (2008) mention physical and mental labor, there is no mention of emotional labor. However, they do acknowledge that most of their work focuses on past sociological studies, but there is a need to study alternate meaning construction in the field of communication because of the number of people working in service related jobs where emotional labor is so prevalent. Studying people that do work service sector jobs can give insight into the lives of the working-class because, according to Blustein (2006), there is a lack of written accounts of workers in non-career positions, non-professional.

Related to the language people used to make sense of the type of work that is deemed meaningful or not, Clair (1996) examined what the effect of the use of the term “a real job” has on employees, and also what it means to imply that there are “real” jobs and “not real” jobs, such as a “real job” being one that an individual is paid to perform, and a “not real” job could be something like running a household or volunteering. Clair’s (1996) work argues that some types of work are more privileged than others, due to the emphasis placed on money in discourses of communication about work. The study was conducted by collecting data from college students about their jobs, by constructing various definitions of what a real job is or is not as well as what non-dominant meanings could entail (Clair, 1996). However, the sample was regionalized and limited to a group of students at one university, in the United States, in one department of one college. Outside of these areas, perhaps people would have broader or narrower definitions of the concept “real” jobs. Therefore, by studying a variety of organizations in multiple locations would be a way to propel future scholarship regarding the discussion of the language people use to discuss work forward.

Additionally, one cannot discuss types of labor and what it means to have real jobs without considering what it means to work. Broadfoot et al. (2008) also put emphasis on what work can be defined as, as well as what the communication of these definitions implies for the social construction of the meaning of work. Much of how we view social construction of meaning is biased, in terms of defining it through the lens of the dominant group (Broadfoot et al., 2008). Blustein (2006) adds that people have a psychological need to work as a means of survival as well as for social networking and support, among other things.

How we make sense of work and what is “real” or not cannot be navigated without noting the power that hierarchies embedded within organizations (e.g. race, class, gender) operate through, and how those hierarchies affect the perceptions of organizational members, especially if they are not members of the dominant group. Also to be explored is who belongs to the dominant group, as well as which members of the group get to ascribe meaning, and why they get to do so.

Further extending upon the notion of dominant versus non-dominant group membership, Lair, Shenoy, McClellan, and McGuire (2008) highlight the importance of intersectionality in meaning making. They argue that personal lives cannot be completely detached from work lives. For example, in regards to people who identify as spiritual, they do not leave God at home (Lair et al., 2008). Rather, He’s with them at all times, even at work. Stemming from this argument is the idea of boundaries, imposed on oneself and others, and how fluid or static these boundaries may be, in terms of personal-private self, what is meaningful, or what is work (Lair et al., 2008); even extending to how one views her/his own personal-public identity

The previous section has provided many of the ways in which existing research has used and defined emotional labor, work as performance, and social construction of meaning within the organizational context. In the next section, the discussions of emotional labor, work as performance and meaning construction will be tied together through the weaving of a complex, multilayered organizational identity.

### Identity

One of the core tenets of emotional labor suggests that there is an element of detachment from one’s inner self that must be executed in order to successfully perform

the outer self for an organization, in turn for a wage (Hochschild, 1983). Also, the way in which employees talk about what they do at work is part of how they construct their private and public identities. According to Murphy (1998), “We make sense of and create reality through the language we use,” (p. 502). How people think about and articulate the work they do by the words they choose (i.e., job versus career) shapes the reality that they see themselves as participating in. This crafting of reality and identity through the process of communication interaction can be referred to as the process of sensemaking (Murphy, 2001; Weick, 1995). Throughout this paper, participant’s sensemaking processes will be referred to as communicative sensemaking in order to refer to how their realities are crafted both for themselves by themselves, as well as how others may ascribe them, which also affects the identity construction process.

Further extending Hochschild’s (1983) work, Murphy (2001) studied the identity and reality sensemaking processes of flight attendants, while highlighting how resistance is employed by these employees. Murphy (2001) states that “Organizational actors do not recite lines in tandem with another; together, they create a reality within which they are interlocked as each communicative act enables and constrains the next” (p. 32). Though employees might be immersed within the organizational context of a particular job performance, there are still subtle ways in which employees can rebel in order to feel like their true, uninhibited selves, as opposed to a cog within the machine of a formal organization, while simultaneously embodying the role of organizational worker. To further support this work, seeking strategies of resistance of other organizational sites, such as a grocery store, where face-to-face customer service is utilized would be beneficial. Also, to study the ways people in such positions describe their work and work



place situations, like handling problem customers, would also serve as an interesting extension of scholarship.

Another way in which communicative sensemaking has been found to be used by organizational members is through the use of humor (Schuler & Sypher, 2000; Tracy, Myers & Scott, 2006) to transform intense realities into lighter ones, as to not internalize feelings of despair and remorse, among others. Schuler and Sypher (2000) insist that emotional labor can serve as a positive function in organizations, such as being a vehicle for humor to emerge. Other ways in which scholars have observed humor as a positive function of emotional labor is in the study of 911 call-takers (Tracy & Tracy, 1998), as well as the study of firefighters and correctional officers (Tracy, Myers & Scott, 2006). Nine-one-one call-takers make light of the intense emergency situations that they encounter by making faces or joking about amusing callers in order to balance feelings of anger, disgust, guilt or empathy that they may feel towards particular calls throughout their day. By using humor as a tool of deflection, employees are able to quickly move on to the next task rather than to dwell on the previous one.

For instance, Tracy, Myers and Scott (2006) emphasize that the use of humor can influence how workers personally identify with the work that they do, especially with the levels of emotionality they encounter on a daily basis. Also, by answering calls on the telephone (Tracy & Tracy, 1998), the 911 operators are able to make certain facial expressions that may be incongruous to what emotions their voices may be expressing (Ekman, 1993). Yet, they have the ability to do so because they are not required to have face-to-face contact with the callers, which supports Goffman's (1959) notion that "When there is little chance of being seen, opportunities for relaxation can be taken" (p. 218).

Thus, humor in this regard can be a way to take a break from emotional labor and its constraining and draining effects on employees that interact with customers in this regard. Not mentioned in these studies is how humor can be used as a method of coping in other emotionally laborious jobs outside of human service work in order to deflect negative feelings imposed by retail customer service workers.

Other studies that include communicative sensemaking, in regards to the actual language and words we use to craft our workplace identities include use of the term “the professional” (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007), embodiment of incongruous identities in police work (Martin, 1999), and what is considered a “real job” or not (Clair, 1996). In a discussion of what counts as “professional,” in terms of work that is done for pay, Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) note that one can act professionally in all types of work, yet there is a certain aesthetic image attached to the type of work that one must do in order to be considered as possessing a “professional” job as opposed to a non-professional one. Martin (1999) observes a similar notion of acting professionally in a non-professionally classified field, where police officers are expected to portray nondescript emotionality despite the intense feelings that interactions with civilians may invoke.

Studying how people construct their workplace realities and identities is completely dependent upon the terms and labels they have available to them for telling others about the work they do, like working in a professional field, for example, since defining oneself in regards to which occupation one holds is common practice in modern American society. When meeting new people, one of the first ice-breaker questions that can be asked (if not already with a colleague of that person) is “What do you do?” or “Where do you work?” Not only does one’s occupation communicate to another person

how income is earned, but could also indicate where a person lives and which socioeconomic class he or she may belong to, which reflects more about a person than the question that was originally asked.

For the purposes of this study, retail customer service jobs will be considered non-professional, not in the way that employees behave on the job, but in the way that they make sense of the work they do and their identities there. Also, the physical environment can have an effect on non-professional identity, such as working non-traditional hours, up until midnight, as many others who work second shift (Cheney, Lair, Ritz & Kendall, 2010), can affect how identity is shaped. The hours of the job also make it hard to maintain relationships with people outside of the workplace, because many people work their 40 hour work week between the hours of nine to five, Monday through Friday, whereas a “typical” work week at Merchant’s Bounty could be working from four in the afternoon until midnight, from Wednesday to Monday. There are also very early shifts at Merchant’s Bounty, which start at four am and end at noon, which could be another scheduling conflict with people who work more “professional” hours.

Therefore, how a person tells others about her or his job and explains the duties performed there, reveals to the other person how one chooses to identify, or de-identify with the work she or he does. In the following section, the metaphor of a crystallized self is introduced as a way to think of identity in a more multi-faceted way beyond the binary of real versus fake (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), or professional versus non-professional, as a crystal has many facets which shift and change. Hence, embodying crystallization can integrate identity in a way that incorporates where work is performed, how it is performed and what benefit can be found through the performance of that work.

## The Crystallized Self

The crystallized self as a metaphor to use in the construction of identity is presented by Tracy and Trethewey (2005) in the form of a “linguistic alternative” (p. 186) to combat individuals’ seemingly inherent need to construct their identities in fixed, oppositional ways. According to Tracy and Trethewey (2005), identity construction is a “multilayered” (p. 185) process in which an ever-shifting sense of self is present. The crystallized self is to be utilized as a tool to emphasize the need to break down binaries that constrain organizational members, in favor of a less-static, more fluid way of thinking about the multiple identities that constitute an individual. Thinking about the self as part of a fixed binary (real/fake, public/private) can lead to attempts to compartmentalize the self, which “...can also reinforce passivity, subordination and objectification” (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 183). Compartmentalization of the self can lead to feelings of internal alienation between the public and private self (Hochschild, 1983).

As organizational members, individuals need to change the language they use to describe themselves and all of their identities (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005) in order to avoid feelings of alienation and emotive dissonance, which is the clash between what one expresses versus how one really feels (Hochschild, 1983). The use of the crystallized self metaphor as a lens through which to view emotional labor as an organizational performance (Sass, 2000) is useful because it emphasizes that there does not have to be a fixed real-self/fake-self binary. Rather, the crystallized self allows the embodiment of both, simultaneously, as well as multiple other selves as part of the identity construction process (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005).

Experiencing emotional labor is one way that an organizational identity is constructed through performance (Goffman, 1959). The concept of emotional labor (Fleming, 2005; Hochschild, 1983; Sass, 2000; Schuler & Sypher, 2000; Tracy, 2000) implies that there is an element of performance (Fleming, 2005; Miller et al., 2007; Sass, 2000; Tracy, 2000) that takes place in the workplace that is an interrelated part of individuals' identity that cannot be separated. Emotional labor is experienced by individuals, both as a reflection of how they are currently feeling and how their organization expects them to act (Tracy, 2000). Also, acknowledging the different types of emotional labor and that "...an individual could easily experience multiple types of workplace emotions at the same job" (Miller et al., 2007, p. 239), further supports that one person, with one body, is capable of performing multiple facets of their identity, as well as containing those same facets of identity, at any given time.

To relate organizational performance of self to meaning, Cheney et al. (2008) state that, "for many people, largely invisible activities may be more meaningful than paid employment" (p. 142). There are multiple meanings to be found in a variety of contexts in the life of one, whole person. For example, taking care of a garden may enrich someone's life more than working in a factory, yet a person may identify as a "factory worker" rather than a gardener. Also, building relationships with friends and family may be the most satisfying part of person's life, although it may be hard to find paid employment doing so. However, by engaging with customers and coworkers in a positive way, a person could use their relationship building skills at work and find meaning in those relationships.

The crystallized self metaphor can also be used to deconstruct the binary between real/not-real job (Clair, 1996) in order to pave the way for finding meaning in other realms of one's life (Cheney et al., 2008; Lair et al., 2008; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). For example, belonging to a church, or any type of social network, may be a more meaningful part of an individual's life than working for an organization. The overlapping groups that encompass an individual's social network and the time spent there may be more important than the time spent at work and can affect one's commitment to her/his job (Weick, 1969). The notion of being spiritual is a facet that cannot be completely removed from an individual's workplace identity (Lair et al., 2008), thus reinforcing the metaphor of the self as a crystal (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). As Broadfoot et al. (2008) point out "reconsidering how individuals communicatively constitute what work is and what kinds of work are meaningful forces scholars to also consider diverse sites of emotion labor work such as the home, house of worship, backyard studio and playground" (p. 154). Figuring out different ways to define meaning and what it means for work to be meaningful is part of the way that individuals and scholars alike can push language further, outside the dichotomized categories of real/fake, meaningful/meaningless.

To make language more productive as previously mentioned, more scholars need to incorporate the concept of the crystallized self into future studies. Current research does not utilize the term, although several scholars have studied the concept of the dichotomized "work" self versus "real" self (Hochschild, 1983; Miller et al., 2007). Other studies have even alluded to the self as having more fluid boundaries (Cheney et al., 2008; Lair et al., 2008; Sass, 2000; Tracy, 2000) outside of the strict binaries that

place limits upon an individual's self identification. Further, recognizing the intersectionality of identities (e.g., race, class, gender, etc.) and the embedded power within those positions as part of an *entire* identity (Cheney et al., 2008; Lair et al., 2008) is a way in which the crystallized self has implicitly been used because these are dimensions of selves that are inseparable from one another (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005).

As a crystal is multifaceted and ever changing in size and shape, so are people and their identities (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). These identities are shaped by where meaning is found, the work that one does, how one performs at work, and the consequences of doing so. Tracy and Trethewey (2005) argue that these concepts all inform and intersect with one another and cannot be extracted from one another, much like how a crystal cannot be unassembled. By utilizing the crystallized self metaphor as a way to make the connection between emotional labor, work as performance and meaning construction this study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ 1: How do retail customer service personnel make communicative sense of emotionally laborious positions?

RQ 2: How do retail customer service personnel construct meaning while working in emotionally laborious positions?

RQ 3: What strategies do retail customer service personnel utilize to manage their emotionally laborious positions?

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS & PROCEDURES

### The Organization

With the purpose of answering these questions, a study was conducted at a grocery store that claims to be a “national chain of neighborhood grocery stores,” Merchant’s Bounty (MB). MB has 335 locations in the United States, three of which are located within four miles of each other in a large, Midwestern metropolitan city. Though emotional labor has been studied in a variety of other occupations (i.e. teaching, 911 operators, cruise ship employees) there have been no published studies done in this retail customer service location in which the employees have a wide variety of physical and emotional tasks for which they are responsible. This organization is unique because it has yet to be formally studied in the field of communication, and the internal structure is different from other grocery store chains. In traditional grocery stores, there is a clear hierarchy of organization, as well as very rigid boundaries for what types of tasks an employee is able to do if hired for a particular position. For example, if someone is hired to work in the bakery, she or he will work solely in the bakery. At Merchant's Bounty, it is advertised on the walls of the break room and throughout company literature that there is "no bureaucracy" which means that all employees share all responsibilities throughout the store, at all times. In actuality, this principle of "no bureaucracy" plays out daily at Merchant's Bounty, with even the store manager stocking shelves and greeting customers. The researcher has worked at this organization for over two years and has a thorough understanding of the functioning of the workplace on a day to day basis.



## Methods of Data Collection

The researcher applied several of data collection techniques, which included face-to-face interviews, participant observation and personal experience. Using more than one data collection technique is beneficial in order to obtain richer data and enables the researcher multiple sites from which to develop grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) and to ensure a "...better understanding of the subject matter at hand" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1996, p. 4). The procedures by which data was collected by the researcher are detailed below.

### Interviews

In order to collect data about this particular workplace a face-to-face interviews were conducted and participant observation was employed. The interviews were conducted with 20 current members of the organization and from one of the three Merchant's Bounty locations in the region. Twenty is a sufficient number for conducting face-to-face interviews because they will be used along with other qualitative data collected, to be mentioned in the following section. The interview questions will be loosely structured in order to receive genuine, unique feedback from each participant. Corbin and Strauss (2008) use grounded theory as a platform to discuss the benefits of loosely structured interviews. Loosely structured interviews are more beneficial than more structured interviews because they allow ideas and theory to emerge from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) rather than leading the participants into answering questions in a certain way, in order to fit a specific research objective, for example. Subjects will be selected based on willingness to participate in talking about the organization while off-

the-clock, as employees have voiced at times that they do not wish to talk about work while not getting paid to be at work.

Also, there was an element of secrecy involved in the recruitment process, as the internal workings of this organization are kept very guarded. The researcher did not request permission from management to interview employees as she anticipated she would not be given permission, and did not want to endanger the jobs of any of the participants or herself. Therefore, she had to contact potential participants while in the break room when no other employees were around or on the sales floor, out of proximity of management and other part-time team members alike.

#### Participant Observation

The second way in which the researcher observed the employees' feelings and opinions of their positions within Merchant's Bounty was by taking field notes. As a participant observer, the researcher took notes after each shift at Merchant's Bounty, documenting the behaviors (i.e., griping behind closed-doors and "on the floor") and interactions of her coworkers. As someone having first-hand, insider knowledge of incidents where employees are participating in the performance of emotional labor and engaging in the construction of meaning with one another, this process will enable the researcher to offer deeper insights.. By participating as a fellow employee, the researcher was able to better understand what the other organizational members describe as well as bear witness to employee behaviors on and off "stage" (Hochschild, 1983; Tracy, 2000).

#### Personal Experience

Also, as a current employee of MB for over two years, the researcher has worked a variety of shifts and has noticed the low turnover rate. Also, she is well connected with

all 80 of her co-workers and possesses a general knowledge of who works what shifts (i.e., only mornings, only evenings, mid-shifts, or "open availability" which means that employees work anytime that they are needed). This information will aid in being able to recruit five people from each type of shift, which will ensure a representative sample to receive the perspective of people who spend the most time in the store while the doors are open to the public, as well as people who spend more time in the store while the doors are closed (from 4 a.m.-8 a.m., and also from 10 p.m.-1 a.m.). However, people change their "availability" every six months, so it is likely that there have been times when each participant has worked shifts where they have had a lot of face-to-face interactions with customers.

The body of participants were composed of 10 men and 10 women, ranging in age from 20 to 55, and tenure with the company ranged from three months to eight years (See Appendix A). . Twenty people was an adequate sample size for this study, since it was used in conjunction with participant observation and personal experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 1996), which enabled the researcher to also recognize any discrepancies between what an employee said versus what was actually performed on the job.

The researcher used the above mentioned research strategies in order to seek answers to the following questions: 1.) how do retail customer service personnel make communicative sense of emotionally laborious positions?; 2.) how do retail customer service personnel construct meaning while working in emotionally laborious positions?; and 3.) What strategies do retail customer service personnel utilize to manage their emotionally laborious positions?. The following example will outline the three research questions to be answered further on in the study.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Working at Merchant's Bounty is like working at Disney World or Chuck E Cheese or something, you always have to be happy, because that's the impression that our company wants to leave on people. They want customers to think that we have the most friendly employees, and you know we're nice and all that kind of stuff, but it's hard when you're having a bad day, or when somebody's being a total jerk; it's hard to just smile and pretend like you know everything's okay and you love your job [Laura]

This particular employee likens her paid position at Merchant's Bounty with working at Disney World, the partner theme park to Disneyland, which totes itself as being "the happiest place on earth!" (Disneyland.com). Consequently, working at Merchant's Bounty appears to be a place where employees are held to high standards of interactions, appearance, and friendliness by management. Embedded within this employee's statement are references to emotional labor, identity and performance. Emotional labor can be realized in the phrase "it's hard to just smile and pretend everything's okay and you love your job." By stating that on a particularly bad day due to an individual's mind being weighed down either by work or external distractions outside of the work environment, Laura admits that smiling can be difficult.

By putting on a smile when not in a mood to be smiling, this employee not only engages in emotional labor, she is also performing the role of both a happy person and happy employee for the benefit of the customer, and in turn, the company. A major part of employees' salaries is based upon "performance reviews" in which the ways they have interacted with customers and employees are recounted and evaluated for a six month period (Merchant's Bounty employee handbook). Thus, depending on how well one performs and how managers deem these performances as not meeting, meeting, or exceeding the company's expectations, employees are given a higher or lower raise, no

raise, or subsequently fired. Not being in the mood to smile one day could affect employees' income for the next six months.

A combination of suppressing how an employee actually feels at times, in favor of a sunny, organizationally encouraged disposition, as well as knowing that this performance can make or break what payment she or he receives can have an impact on employees' personal identity. To continually suppress how one actually feels in favor of a customer's experience at a grocery store can lead to burnout at one's workplace, in addition to an overall desensitizing of interactions with friends, family and acquaintances outside of the workplace as well (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989). How the employee performs at work is also dependent upon the degree of importance that the employee places on his or her job, the pay they receive, and how he or she identifies with the job. The intended meaning of "identify" in this context refers to any employee's degree of attachment or detachment to the role of Merchant's Bounty Team Player. Thus, if they embody it while on the clock, then leave that identity at the door when leaving, or if the workplace identity is embodied so deeply that an individual employee is unable to completely leave that identity behind; therefore, taking work home with them.

The preceding example serves as an outline of the topics to be delved into further detail in the next sections of this study. First, how participants make communicative sense of their realities despite the emotional labor they experience will be covered as well as how the engagement of emotional labor through performance affects employees' identities. Following communicative sensemaking, but not completely separated by it, will be a discussion about how customer service personnel construct meaning while

working in emotionally laborious positions. Finally, strategies utilized by customer service personnel to manage their emotionally laborious positions will be shared.

### RQ 1: How Do Retail Customer Service Personnel Make Communicative Sense of Emotionally Laborious Positions?

In order to answer this question, participants were asked a host of questions including: what do you think about when you hear the term “real job”?; do you consider your position at Merchant’s Bounty to be a “real job”? why or why not?; what kind of jobs do you associate with the term “real job”?; what are some positive and negative aspects of working at this job, if any?; what sorts of behaviors do you engage in at work that improve the quality of your experience on any given day?; and what types of activities do you engage in (if any) outside of work to combat negativity experienced on the job?. The themes that were derived from these questions included definitions of the term “real job”, labor (emotional and physical), ineffective communication practices, and performance as organizational actors.

#### *Definitions of “Real Job”*

To begin the discussion of the sources of emotional labor at Merchant’s Bounty, employee attitudes to the work that they do and how they identify with it will be examined. Depending on how long one is employed at Merchant’s Bounty, most employees were likely to have their job be a secondary way in which they choose to define themselves, rather than a primary way. In this way, employees partitioned their lives, and themselves, between at work and not at work. The primary way in which they define themselves was likely to be in regards to something that they do outside of work, such as student, musician or interior designer, as opposed to Merchant’s Bounty team

member, because of the lack of long-term future that they do not see at the company, but somewhere else.

When participants were asked if they considered their current position at Merchant's Bounty to be a real job, more than half admitted that it was not. The term "real job" is related to communicative sensemaking because how people talk about the work that they do reflects how they see themselves constructing reality, based on the vocabulary available to them (Murphy, 1998). Consequently, how people identify and define the term real job affects the way that they makes sense of their realities through communication.

The definitions offered by participants about what a real job is included feeling a passion or love for what one is doing, a longer-term career position, and getting paid. Some of those definitions matched the work they were currently doing at Merchant's Bounty, but most definitions did not. Interestingly, many participants offered their own definitions of what a real job is, and how it differed from what they believe the societal definition is. Several participants also commented on the ambiguity of the term "real job" itself in terms of wondering how one might participate in real world work activities if they do not hold one of these societally defined real jobs.

BD mentioned "...it would be nice if everyone could have a job they love, and that they have a passion for...I think that's what a real job [is], where you have a passion for what you do and you're able to use that passion in your position." In this sense, a real job could be using one's talents of being able to interact positively with others in a multitude of positions and that real job could be working at Merchant's Bounty, if one was passionate about it. Thus, when asked about what a real job is and if their current

line of work matched the description they gave, many employees gave several definitions. Yet, most participants offered answers that resonate with what Chaz stated, “[A real job] to me, what it means to me is a job that you are happy to be at...it’s something that you really want to be doing, which I’d say for most people isn’t working at a grocery store.” Therefore, being skilled in creating positive customer interactions does not necessarily denote that an employee will consider his or her job to be a real job, even if he or she has some degree of passion for parts of the job itself.

Further extending this explanation as to what real jobs are or are not, many participants concluded that a real job connects with, or even is synonymous, with a long-term future, and participants stated that Merchant’s Bounty does not seem to be the type of place those employees would see themselves working at for the next 30 years. Mayor related:

I think a real job is part of a profession, which could often lead into a career, something you aspire to do, move up within the hierarchy of that job...you wanna wear that suit, you wanna make that salary. Oftentimes an office or a cubicle are parts of those real job symbols: basically anything besides the service industry.

Numerous definitions offered by other employees mirrored the terms that Mayor used here, such as “profession,” “career,” “hierarchy” as well as noting that service jobs are not to be defined or looked at as real jobs. Similarly, Eliot said “It’s not a career, it’s a job,” in regards to the work she performed at Merchant’s Bounty.

Most mentioned the reason they work, whether it be a real job or not, is to get paid. People need to work out of necessity; they need places to live and they need to eat; thus, they need money. Within this metropolis, as in many large cities in the US, there are so many well-educated people living in one place that there is a great deal of competition for jobs. In order to maintain a minimum standard of living, it is unlikely



that every person residing in the city can have the real job of which they have always dreamed. Cornelius, defined his position at Merchant's Bounty a real job because "...it is concrete and has concrete benefits, I mean I don't have the stress of money, I don't have the stress of wanting insurance, because I have it." Others who defined a real job as getting paid offered a similar definition, in a "beggars can't be choosers" mentality of being thankful for having a job at all, even if it is not what they have always wanted to be doing. Yet, to Spring, "Making \$14,000 a year to me, in the United States, is not a real job." Thus, the impetus to working at Merchant's Bounty is money, regardless of whether the employee perceives the job as real or not, which can affect an employee emotionally.

*Labor (Physical and Emotional)*

Aside from emotional labor, employees at Merchant's Bounty are expected to do a lot of manual labor; job applicants are forewarned that they must be able to lift at least 50 pounds in order to be eligible to work for the company. Almost every employee interviewed made some comment about the physical nature of the job, and also commented on the degree to which the physical element of the job affected her or his overall job performance. Osage lamented that:

When I'm so physically fatigued and still having to go so much further throughout the day and becoming uncomfortable and you know having, turning it all off unconsciously just to get through the day... 'cause it's very hard to not feel physical pain when it's there and you have to keep going, it's very hard to move your head beyond that and still stay positive and you wanna interact with every single person in a positive way...that's probably one of the hardest things about the job.

This employee may share one of the most extreme examples of the combination of physical and emotional labor, but he paints an accurate picture of what it is like to be exhausted by mentally and physically challenging tasks at work. Other employees

mentioned that the physical labor they felt on the job varied. Bibi shared, “I like to feel like I’m working hard, some days it’s more tiring than others, but sometimes it feels good to work hard and use your body, it’s physical labor, sometimes it’s rewarding,” while Frank declared, “There are things that have happened to me that...I’ll never recover from; physically, [and] emotionally I’m kind of a different person than I was three and a half years ago.” Consequently, though there may be a variety of ways in which the physical toils of this job affect individual employees’ bodies, it is apparent that physical and emotional labor are directly affected by one another at Merchant’s Bounty, as well as how the employees identify with the job or not. These were just a few ways individuals engaged in emotional labor at Merchant’s Bounty. Employees also reported being emotionally affected by ineffective communication practices from management.

#### *Ineffective Communication Practices*

The following ineffective communication practices were brought up by participants and seemed to cause a disconnect between management and their expectations of team players’ on-the-job performance. The communication practices that were most ineffective were the use of contradictory communication, a general lack of communication, and unidirectional communication.

#### Contradictory Communication

At the store level, management can communicate contradictory statements to employees, aiding in an individual’s participation in emotional labor. BD shared:

For two weeks prior to Valentine’s Day, the store manager kept saying “I’m not concerned about spoils, I wanna make sure we have a great display, I want to make sure we have plenty and makes it look like we really mean Valentine’s Day, I don’t want to worry too much about spoils’ then all a sudden, the day after Valentine’s Day, ‘Well, there’s all these fucking spoils!’ So who’s being passive aggressive?”

Consequently, though this employee was explicitly told that leftover product was not an issue, this was clearly not the case, according to BD. This employee was once in charge of doing the ordering for the flower section (his official title was “section leaders”). Section leaders take on responsibility beyond that of regular team member because they are in charge of ordering the product from the warehouse that will go onto the shelves of the store daily, and are typically given a certain degree of autonomy as far as their section is concerned. Here, the employee felt conflicted about being told to do something by his boss, and then being punished at a later date for doing exactly what he was told to do at the time. This direct contradiction of communication led to BD’s ultimate demise as the section leader for the flowers section, of which he is no longer in charge.

Another employee, Mayor, made a comment on a similar form of contradictory communication: “Ironically, now that they’re using the term ‘section leader’ [instead of ‘order writer’] is when they have less control over their section than ever before!” Those part-time employees who are responsible for being section leaders are also faced with the task of recording the amount of product being purchased and ordering the appropriate amount of product to keep the shelf full, while simultaneously being responsible for making sure there is not too much extra product in the back room, refrigerator, or freezer, depending on the climate requirements of the product for a particular section. Yet, what Mayor referred to is that if a section leader is not ordering enough product, or orders too little, management will go into the computer and alter the numbers to be more in line with what they perceive to be accurate.

The overriding of the autonomy of the section leaders is an example of how management’s inconsistent enforcement of the values, particularly “no bureaucracy” does

not meet the expectations set for part-time employees. Section leaders are told that they are given a certain amount of autonomy, but then managers still have the ultimate authority to change the amount of product ordered, which undermines the ability of the section leader and serves as an example of bureaucracy. Contradictory communication is a point of frustration for employees and serves as a stressor from management that can affect team member interactions with both management and customers. Being entrusted with a certain amount of power and autonomy then having it taken away, can be stressful and disempowering for the employee and to the degree to which they trust the company in the future.

An additional way that communication is used in contradictory ways at Merchant's Bounty is stated in the employee handbook. The handbook states that an employee will never be "pigeonholed;" that each and every "team player" will have the same opportunities to work at each of the stations (i.e., produce, dairy, register, back room, flowers) in the store. Yet, in recent history, there have been people hired to work solely in the food demonstration area, (referred to as "demo" within the organization) with no training in any of the other positions in the store (Field Notes, 5/5/2010). Selma shared:

[Working in demo] seems very in contrast to what the store promotes otherwise, [laughter], because it's like for everything else, it is very much like okay, you'll do this an hour then switch...I basically learned demo, and then no one wants me to learn anything else, which is really weird, it's a really strange thing, like I literally have learned nothing else about the store."

This excerpt verifies that this employee has indeed been pigeonholed or "to assign to an often restrictive category in an orderly system; having only one skill" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2010). In this case, that orderly system is Merchant's Bounty, and the

restrictive category Selma occupies in the system is the food demonstration counter. However, being put in a single position at any of the stations in the store can lead to either physical or emotional burnout due to bodily harm (i.e., heavy lifting, repetitive movement injuries) or emotional harm (i.e., prolonged customer interactions). The food demonstration area is situated in the far back secluded corner of the store, with a counter of food that a wall of customers scurry around for samples, asking the demonstration person questions about the food.

Therefore, the demo person's contact is rather limited to being with mostly customers, in a very limited location, as opposed to the rest of the team players who are permitted to be in just about any other location in the store, at any given time, even the "backstage areas" (Hocshchild, 1983), like the back room or the break room; places where customers are not permitted. Selma is working in the most emotionally laborious position in the store, due to the constant contact with customers, and this position has the highest turnover rate, and is not given the same amount of time away from the customers as the other employees are allotted. Having spoken to employees that have worked at other stores, it seems that a certain degree of pigeonholing takes place at other stores, to varying degrees (Field Notes 4/25/10) which reaffirms that the company is not only contradictory in its communication to its employees, it is also inconsistent.

Another way in which inconsistent and contradictory communication practices take place at Merchant's Bounty is when comparing how the managers enforce the importance of accuracy and efficiency while on the job. Several employees noted this inconsistency in their interviews, as accuracy and efficiency on the job are almost opposed to one another, because to work as quickly as possible, sometimes the integrity

of employees' degree of accuracy with which they work can be compromised, and vice versa. Frank stated "...when I'm stressed and when I feel pressured to get my job done faster, not necessarily more efficiently or actual productivity being of higher quality, just faster." In this example, Frank admitted that he not only felt conflicted about which is more important, but due to stress, actively compromised the quality of the work performed for the sake of efficiency. Such conflicting ways of being told to work, either more quickly or more accurately is an additional communication practice that can cause employees to be engaging in emotional labor on the job because it can be frustrating to not know which is actually the more important function, especially since the quickness or "timeliness" with which an employee completes tasks is another area in which employees are evaluated on their performance reviews. Though employees are routinely encouraged to "work with a sense of urgency," they are also encouraged to not "sacrifice the integrity of the product" (Field Notes, 2/21/10). Thus, it is difficult for an employee to know which is more important, since the raise they receive may be affected by choosing one option over the other: it is a gamble the employee unwillingly takes.

#### Lack of Communication

Lack of communication is also a type of inefficient communication practice that can add to an individual employee's engagement in emotional labor. Something quite a few participants made note of was a complete lack of communication from management, especially in regards to changes taking place. This was not only a lack of communication, but a lack of proficient answers for why particular changes were taking place, much like a child asking a parent "Why?" and the parent replying "...because I said so!" Eliot noted "...their communication sucks because they don't let us know

what's going to happen before it happens, I mean not that they need our permission or anything, but it would be nice to know what to expect and what's going on." As previously mentioned, the store at which the researcher conducted her research underwent an unanticipated transition with the replacement of the store management in the middle of the study, which affected the overall culture, environment, and morale of the employees. The transition also marked many smaller changes that took place at the individual store level, such as the removal of the checkout area game, to larger changes that took place at the national level, such as the discontinuation of the distribution of free balloons to children.

Prior to each of these transitional, cost-cutting strategies of elimination, employees were given little to no information as to why these measures were being taken, as well as no informational scripts as to what to tell customers when they were to ask what happened to the game or the balloons (which were actually one of the store's signature distinguishing characteristics for over 40 years). Not having an answer for a frustrated customer can be equally as frustrating for the employee, as well as emotionally draining, all the while trying to maintain one's composure in the face of the frustrated customer. Celia, who was seemingly frustrated and fed up with the ambiguity of the balloon situation, went online to do personal research as to why Merchant's Bounty did away with balloons: "I researched it online, because I wanted to know, and...[I'd] been getting a lot of different answers from management. They don't tend to communicate very well." Though there are only two incidents mentioned here specifically, the examples used above are intended to elucidate how a lack of communication, especially

from the top of the company at the corporate level to the bottom of the hierarchy can cause stress and frustration for those who are left out of the loop of communication.

### Unidirectional Communication

Not only is there a lack of communication, but there also seems to be a unidirectional flow of communication from top to bottom, meaning part-time team players are not fully heard by management, yet they are expected to follow the direction of management higher up the hierarchy without question. While mentioning a discussion she tried to have with the store manager about scheduling, Bibi stated frustration with the following:

...just not being listened to, like I'm talking to a wall, like they would keep saying the same thing over and over, instead of absorbing what I had to say and having a conversation, it was like talking to a wall...and then the next day, you know, that same person, who was screaming at me and throwing a finger in my face, was trying to tell us in a group meeting, how much he wanted feedback.

This employee was clearly affected by the way she was treated, and how what she wanted to communicate to the manager was not processed in a manner that matched her expectations.

This problem of unidirectional communication is another contradiction to Merchant's Bounty corporate literature, which states there is an "open door policy" (Handbook, p. 3) in which "You are encouraged to discuss with your immediate supervisor any suggestions, questions or problems relating to your jobs...you should feel free to raise issues of concern" (p. 3). From these statements in the employee handbook, the company shows its initiative to hear the voices of its employees, while from this participant's remark, there is a clear opposition between stated values and actual actions.



Additionally, outside of scheduling a meeting to potentially speak one-on-one with the store manager or assistant manager, an open forum for which to share feedback with the higher management does not exist, aside from being able to place an anonymous letter in a box with questions or concerns, which may or may not ever be taken seriously or addressed in the future. Neptali shared a time when he attempted to use this letter-writing forum:

I wrote a letter and he [store manager] proceeded to read it aloud to the full-timers...at this point he brought up the letters, and was like he was saying 'who wrote these letters, who wrote these letters' and he was looking for someone to speak up and he was saying 'this is not what we need, this is not what we need at this store' and all this stuff, and I'm thinking in my head like 'man, those are supposed to be confidential! You're not supposed to...if someone wrote that letter they're not, they don't have to come out and say that they wrote it!

Instead of valuing "open, honest communication" (Employee Handbook, p. 3), the store manager, in this case, takes an attempt at honesty and shuts it down, thus, giving the message to the rest of the employees that if they want to address an issue via the letter writing forum, they may or may not remain anonymous and that an employee could potentially be punished for raising a problematic issue and not keeping a positive attitude. Neptali was clearly emotionally affected by this incident, as well as some of the other topics raised during the course of the interview. He was upset with his current work environment, which only aggravated the emotional labor he felt at work because of the fact that he remembered these incidents and brought them home with him, thereby affecting his personal life as well.

However, these ineffective communication practices point to something deeper than a communication breakdown. Employees want to seek ways in which to communicate better and to do their jobs better, based on the previous, but lack an

effective forum for doing so, which can result in uncertainty. Hochschild (1983) discusses emotion management, which accounts for how employees not only engage in emotional labor, but must also keep their emotions appropriate even in the face of uncertainty. Uncertainty reduction theorists Baxter and Montgomery (1996) state that uncertainty exists in interactions where there is not a complete understanding or an answer for a specific question. Accordingly, employees want to experience as little uncertainty as possible in interactions with others within their work day, depending on their tolerance for uncertainty (Kramer, 1999).

Further, Leidner (1999) elucidates that “A distinctive feature of the jobs of nonprofessional frontline service workers, then, is that they often must cope with their own emotions' being managed while they try to manage the emotional responses of others” (p. 82-83). In this way, employees must perform for the benefit of management, co-workers and customers, as they simultaneously seek to express or suppress inner emotions and reduce uncertainty.

#### *Performance as Organizational Actors*

Another emotionally laborious activity that employees engaged in was the performance of a workplace identity. Inadvertently while commenting on emotional labor endured in the workplace, almost every participant noted the degree of performance that they actively engaged in while on the job. Employees admitted to not necessarily acting like themselves; rather, they inhabit an organizational character outside of their private identity for the benefit of not only the organization but for themselves. Cornelius remarked that, “...Even with the customer I try and banter, I try and feel like I'm onstage, I'm performing, I'm fine with that, because it does help me get through the day, because

if I do want to strangle someone, it's coming out in a productive way, 'Die, or I could make you laugh!'" In the previous example, Cornelius noted that being a character at Merchant's Bounty can be a way to protect his personal identity, especially from rude customers. Thus, performing, at least while at work, can enhance the experience of the customers and the employees.

Why are these employees so concerned with not acting like themselves or not reacting to customers the way they naturally would to anyone else exuding rude, selfish behavior? As representatives of this company, they must first consider their positions within the organization before they consider their personal interests if they want to be assured of keeping their jobs at Merchant's Bounty. Corporate literature and management constantly reinforce that the customer is the primary focus, no matter what. Employees are paid to put on the performance of happy outgoing people because Merchant's Bounty has a reputation for having the nicest, friendliest employees. This reputation is something that employees are hyper-aware of, as Eliot noted:

I mean we're definitely known for our customer service. Out on the streets....Oh my God, every time I mention that I work there people are like 'Ohh, people are so nice there, you guys really are having a good time, everyone really likes working there'.

It is commonly known that customers frequently ask employees "Is there something in the water here that makes you guys so happy/friendly/nice/etc?" Thus, within the role of the corporate employee, one would likely respond with anything besides "I'm being paid to be nice to you; I don't necessarily feel like it today." Upon reflecting on what it was like to be a Merchant's Bounty customer, prior to employment, an employee mentioned that he would sometimes get up early in the morning and go shopping there, just knowing

that there would be people there that would be friendly and nice to him to lift up his spirits (Field Notes, 9/21/2010).

Overall, communication practices employed at Merchant's Bounty did not operate singularly; they were inter-related and directly linked to emotional labor. However, these communication practices, such as lack of communication, unidirectional communication, and contradictory communication, did not solely contribute to the degree to which employees felt affected by emotional labor. Factors that aid in any particular employee's degree of bodily exhaustion on the job can be attributed to a combination of emotional labor endured from engaging in communication break-downs with management, such as when words contradict actions and being physically worn out from lifting boxes and bags of groceries for eight hours at a time. Also, performing these physically and emotionally taxing tasks for the purpose of an organization that employees do not see themselves working for long-term is a source of personal conflict, but they do it anyway, to get paid.

Thus, performing at a job that one does not identify with for the sole benefit of payment can lead an individual to participate in fracturing the self into the spheres of work self and home self. Communication is used in this way for the individuals to claim their experience and describe their selves in these fractured ways, and how they talk about their selves ultimately reflects how they make sense of their realities. In this way, not only are the selves fractured but the realities that individuals participate in are fractured, based on the words and phrases that they use to describe their experiences at work. In the following section, the ways in which employees make communicative sense of their workplace realities will be extended into how the performance of emotional labor

affects their workplace identities, as well as how they find and construct meaning in their workplace realities.

## RQ 2: How Do Retail Customer Service Personnel Construct Meaning While Working in Emotionally Laborious Positions?

In order to answer this question, the following questions were asked of participants: could you share a story or two based on memorable customer interactions, and why those interactions were memorable?; what are your aspirations for this job?; how would you define meaningful work and does your current job meet that definition?; and finally, if your current job is not a place where you find meaning, what types of things do you find meaningful?.

### *Emotional Labor in Customer Interactions*

Almost all questions asked about customer interactions resulted in answers pertaining to emotional labor. From these answers, it was deduced that emotional labor at Merchant's Bounty was affected by the image it projects via employee personalities, which affected customer interactions, which affected employee responses to customers, which affected the engagement of the performance of emotional labor itself.

### Image and Emotional Labor

Since Merchant's Bounty does hire people based on personality, an integral part of being a "unique" individual is having different facets of one's identity despite what is seen by the upper management during the interview process. In the context of the interview, interviewees are on their best behavior and know from previous shopping experience, what personality characteristics they will have to display to get a job at Merchant's Bounty. Further, current employees are well aware of the fact that they have

been hired, at least partly due to their extroverted personality. Sven stated "...we tend to hire people that may not be so capable of the job, but are more of a personality. And as far as [Merchant's Bounty] is concerned, I think they view hiring unique people as a way to represent their company." Thus, Merchant's Bounty has an image they want to project to their customers; they want a way to differentiate their brand from other grocery stores. They want customers to remember the Merchant's Bounty brand image because of the friendly environment it provides. This environment has been purposely constructed by the organization in its hiring policies.

When faced with a less-than-pleasant customer that may be less than satisfied, employees are encouraged to keep smiling and do what it takes for the customer to have a WOW experience, even if it takes holding back what one feels as part of his or her genuine emotional experience. Cornelius shared:

I think the frustration of not being able to say what I want to say because quote unquote 'the customer is always right' and we're here for the customer...when there is a complaint from the customer, the customer is always favored over some hack slinging potato salad.

Here, since there is so much weight placed upon the customer's value versus that of the employee, employees need to monitor their words and actions so as to avoid conflict with management by displeasing the customer. Similarly, Eliot shared "The nice thing about being out in public with people is you can tell them they're rude and [to] just stop but at the grocery store you got your name-tag on and you gotta smile and you can't tell them how you really feel." In this fashion, much of the emotional labor employees engage in is based on pleasing the customers.

### Guilty By Association and Emotional Labor

Another way in which customer interaction can heighten employees' engagement in emotionally laborious work is blaming a particular employee for an item being out of stock or discontinued. At this particular chain of grocery stores, new products are coming in constantly and old ones are being continually discontinued to make room for new ones, since the grocery stores are rather small and carries limited lines of products. As a result, Merchant's Bounty discontinues products much more frequently than other grocery stores, based on lack of shelf space. Since the preceding phenomenon was mentioned by almost half of the participants and is unique in occurrence to this grocery store, a term should be used to talk describe the phenomenon. Within this study, this phenomenon will be called "guilty by association", or GBA.

The following is a description of the steps preceding a GBA occurrence. When a customer asks an employee about a product that she or he does not see on the shelf, the employee goes in the back room to see if there is either more of the product or to check the computer to see what the status of the product is, such as temporarily out of stock, reformulating package, or discontinued. Regardless of the actual product status, but especially if the product has been discontinued, GBA is likely to occur when the employee returns to the sales-floor empty handed, where the customer will react with some degree of disappointment, from a frown and a "Thank you" to "How come you always discontinue my favorite products?" This disappointment is something that the employees notice too. Chaz stated, "I guess another negative experience can be when the customer considers it they almost make it seem like your fault if something is out of stock." Merchant's Bounty employees, like Chaz, use words such as "hurt," "angry," and

“furious” to describe the range of emotions they directly encounter from the customer after a GBA outburst. Kim described:

...there is just like that general feeling of like when we don't have a product, it's amazing how hurt people seem and it's like we-- it's just this one day! We'll have it next week, like why is this hurting you so bad, like how you're not going to be able to get through this next week? I don't know, I'm just always amazed.

Since products at a grocery store are material goods, it may seem absurd or silly to this employee why the customer gets so “hurt” over not being able to buy pine nuts at that moment. Laura captured the raw emotionality of how she feels about being GBA and assuming a misplaced assignment of responsibility:

The customers get so frustrated if we discontinue things or if we move things; it's like it's the end of their world that they can't find the vitamin section anymore, and then they yell at me, not yell at me, but have an attitude towards me or get angry at me because we discontinue things, and it's just hard you know being, I don't really have a position of power so it's hard to you know, I'm taking the blame for something that somebody I don't even know is doing, and making the decision on, and it just gets frustrating because these customers will come in, and will continue to come in, even though they seem like you know they get so mad at us and hate the way we run things.. I guess I get frustrated because I don't understand why they continue to shop at [Merchant's Bounty!]

Despite being the target for customer anger and frustration over something as trivial as a product not being on the sales floor for one day, employees are still expected to maintain their composure, wear a “genuine” smile and work hard to find the words to soothe the customer, in order to keep from having a complaint issued to management from the customer, which is the ultimate way to sabotage one's personal performance review. The more customer complaints someone has, the less likely they are to receive a substantial raise or favorable review for that matter. Thus, an additional source of emotional labor that employees are subject to is from customer interactions, which can implicitly affect any employee's salary and relationship with management.



### Performance and Emotional Labor

At Merchant's Bounty, the primary focus is on the customer and putting their needs first. Indeed, the number one core value at Merchant's Bounty is "We create a WOW! Customer experience everyday" (Employee Handbook, p. 5). Thus, it is up to the products that the store carries as well as its employees to make the customer exclaim "Wow!" or at least think it on the inside. In order for employees to WOW the customer, they are expected to be fun, polite, and friendly regardless of whether every customer they help has the same style of public interaction or not. But do these employees always feel like being happy/friendly/nice/etc. and capable of having genuine interactions with customers? Chaz shared:

I don't genuinely care about helping them too much, I don't know, I do like helping customers, I like talking to people, but at the same time, I think it's just window dressing...fakeness on my part when dealing with customers, which I still do because...another thing I like about this job is that you're kind of like an actor on a stage there...my personality changes when I'm dealing with customers.

This employee, like many others, knows he is being paid to put on a performance for the benefit of making the company look good. Similarly, Blanche reported "I'm constantly making up crap-ass excuses to make the company look good, because in essence, if the company looks bad, then I look bad, and I don't like to look bad in public because I take too much pride in my ethics."

For some people, this performance and embodiment of the Merchant's Bounty part-time team player is necessary to get through a job where so much of job performance such as the quality of the work one does is intrinsically linked to an actual performance, in the sense of being on a stage and putting on a show. For example, Seth mentioned "I'm getting paid decently well for a part-time job and get great benefits and I'll deal with

the bullshit and some people do very well. Other people I think like their job, there's some people that like doing it and being fake with people. Maybe that just how they are...when I go into work, I have to put on an act." These three accounts of employees acting, being fake with customers, or a combination of both, are just a few of many who shared knowledge of engaging in a performance-based type of emotional labor.

In order to keep receiving health benefits--a large reason why many people stay at Merchant's Bounty--and to keep getting paid, employees need to put on the performance so that the organization can continue to project the façade of being the friendliest place to shop for its customers. Yet, employees are not merely just acting like actors do on a stage where the context of the interaction between the audience and the actor is with the audience being well aware that the person on the stage at the end of the day, is not the character that he plays. Whereas, at Merchant's Bounty, the employees are such good actors that customers think they are as nice and as friendly as they are paid to be; that it is their job to convince the customers that they are having a great day, every day.

The degree to which one needs to engage in performance, though, depends on the individual personality of each employee. As previously mentioned, many people are hired at Merchant's Bounty for their outgoing personalities, though not all are really extroverts. This job is likely more frustrating, difficult and emotionally taxing on people who are not "naturally" outgoing. For example, Neptali stated "When I first started working there, it was a challenge, and I remember the guy telling me one day, 'You know, sometimes you just gotta fake it' and I caught on." Therefore, for the acting to not come "naturally," at least at first, employees have to work even harder on the emotional level, as well as on a physical level, as previously mentioned.

As employees grow into their roles at Merchant's Bounty, they settle into a role that is comfortable for them, or as comfortable as they are going to be while performing the double capacity of physical and emotional labor. Yet, if they do not, they risk burnout and ultimately leaving the job. Bibi, who was interviewed on her last day of employment, expressed "...you spend so much time there hiding under the mask, trying to be everything they want you to be, whether you want to or not, whether it is real or not, and ...it's hard to just take it off and put it away when you leave, you know?" This employee expresses how deeply this job has affected her, over the course of a single year, to the point that she quit because she did not feel emotionally equipped to perform any longer at the capacity with which she once had.

Thus, employees feel that their performance, though seemingly genuine from the customers' points of view, drips with fakeness, for the most part. "Fakeness" here is the portrayal of a false persona or identity which may be in direct opposition to how a person may actually see oneself or personally identify. Repeatedly engaging in deep acting (Hochschild, 1983) at work can affect an employee outside the workplace as well. Though some employees feel that they have grown in some ways through the obligation to project an additional "fake" personality, others feel constrained and resentful of such a performance as it bleeds into their lives outside of the workplace. Fifi offered:

I recognize my work self when I'm out and I mean I'm there 40 hours a week, it's my job and like 90 percent of our job is fake talking and fake smiling. It kind of like becomes second nature in some sense so then when you remove yourself from the situation, it's kind of hard to like completely remove yourself from [work].

This employee does not view her practice of a workplace persona as a tool that enhances her interactions with others outside of Merchant's Bounty. The workplace persona she

inhabits is actually a hindrance that may force her to spend more time talking to strangers she might not have wanted to talk to for very long, had she not ever worked in this particular grocery store. Another employee, Osage, made a similar observation about the blurred line between public and private identities: "...there isn't really an on and off switch 'this is me at work, this is me here,' it's just kind of like getting ready to go for a job." As per this employee's description, getting ready to put on the work performance for the benefit of the customer is something that takes thought and preparation outside of the workplace.

Since employees talked about public and private identity in both static and dynamic ways, it was not surprising that they took customer insults and rude behavior personally. Some employees really seemed to be personally offended by insults, while others noted trying to brush off rude people and not internalize the negativity, neither of which depends on if the insult is targeted at the individual employee or the company as a whole. Also, what some people see as rude, insulting behavior, others find funny, as to be expected with the breadth of different types of personalities that Merchant's Bounty hires. Blanche stated that when she is at work, her identity is consistent with her private identity, which makes her even more susceptible to being affected by rude customers, because she is so genuine in her interactions with them, she is bearing her true identity to them, instead of hiding her private identity behind that of a public one (Hochschild, 1983).

It's my biggest pet peeve! You can say 'excuse me'...that 'excuse me' will make me aware you are talking to me. I hate when people approach me and go 'eggs!'...They just bark at you like you don't exist on their level, they don't see you, I think a lot of folks don't see you as an equal human being.

Not being treated as a human being worthy of respect is likely a pet peeve that not only is insulting as an employee, but also over time eats away at each employee's notion of self-worth, depending on the degree to which an employee internalizes it. Despite employees being aware of the fake role they may be performing while at work, they receive insults that are very real, that can affect their true identities.

However, not all employees reported being so emotionally affected by customer behaviors. One technique mentioned to deflect negativity was to turn a negative remark or situation into a positive one for personal well-being (which will also be covered in more detail in the Strategies section). For example, Eliot mentioned, "What I'm trying to do more and more lately is to try not to let the a\*\*\*\*\*s ruin my day and start thinking about the people who are always nice to me." These people who are always nice could be customers, co-workers, or both; thus, by focusing on the positive people who are mostly surrounding an employee, then she can put her energy into concentrating on happier things, rather than negative ones, which may very well enhance any particular employees' quality of life on any given work day. Also in this fashion, an employee is able to somewhat remove their internal state of self from negative events, which are less frequent than the positive interactions, and focus on investing in the latter.

Further, not all employees engage in performing fakeness the entire time they are at work. Though many employees mentioned partaking in performance at least for some time at work, quite a few also made note that they had opportunities with customers to be themselves. Chaz shared that despite acting while on the job, at times "...I love when I get into a real conversation, and you know when you're in a real conversation, it just snaps and you become yourself, you don't become a [team player], you become

yourself.” Though employees are afforded many opportunities in backstage areas with co-workers to express their “real” or true identities and have “real” conversations, interactions with customers are usually more scripted and focused on groceries or the weather. Subsequently, it is a welcomed relief from the performance of being a Merchant’s Bounty team player to engage with a customer on a deeper level.

Additionally, moving from the individual to the corporate level, most employees do not completely define themselves in terms of the work they do or with the company itself. Yet, being a Merchant’s Bounty team player has some sort of effect on their overall identities. For example, Mayor stated:

I think that as an individual, the company is good, beside from friends; it’s changed me, its part of who I am right now. I wouldn’t be in the position that I am today, and it’s awesome in general. Overall, a fun place, it really has helped me become a happy, healthy, confident, capable individual that I am right now.

Hence, while an employee might try to not let her or his workplace self or workplace identity affect her or his “real” self, working at Merchant’s Bounty can be a beneficial learning experience that may inspire positive personal growth, as in the case of Mayor. This personal emotional balancing act that employees do, between real and fake roles/identities, among others, serves as a place to acknowledge the crystallized self (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), which also is a tool to look at identity that acknowledges the human propensity to compartmentalize identity into real versus fake spheres.

### *Identity Construction*

Crystallized self as a tool was a major inspiration to this research and provided a helpful lens to view what employees were struggling with constantly. Here, the compartmentalization of self, rather than acknowledging that identity is something that is more malleable and ever-changing, rather than merely this or that. An example of this is

when talking to employees, they described themselves and their workplace selves/identities/emotions in static ways, rather than acknowledge the dynamic way in which these overlapping parts of their identities were working together. Though employees may have been compartmentalizing their workplace identities at times, being able to have a genuine interaction with a customer or laugh with a coworker proves that individuals' personalities are fluid and dynamic in the workplace. Overall, one must be able to rifle through these identities quickly and believably to continue their employment at Merchant's Bounty, in order for the company to maintain its' facade.

Some people really enjoy the escape that wearing an alternate personality at work can afford them. One such person, Randy, identified that his position at Merchant's Bounty was his real job, which put him in the minority in terms of the sample, since many other employees did not define themselves with their jobs, yet several explicitly mentioned being active members of society and participants in the shaping of this "real world." Randy also shared, "You're always told throughout your life, like, when you get into the real world, you have to be ready...this is what you need to know to succeed in the real world. When, it is like [Merchant's Bounty] is your real world, this is, it's real!"

While at work, employees are either embodying the identity of Merchant's Bounty team member as their real job, or performing their workplace identity because this is not their real job. Despite not viewing their positions at Merchant's Bounty "real jobs," some participants made sure to note that they live in the real world even if they did not consider their jobs to be real and are actively constructing their own realities, even if these realities may be beyond the boundaries of what the dominant American society (i.e. white, middle-class, "professional") may consider as "real." Spring captured this when

she stated, “I know that I have a real job, and I know I live in the real world, and I know that I’m a real person, and I know that actually I have a real job, I know a lot of people would be happy to have my job, but I don’t actually consider it a “real job”...’cause I didn’t have to do anything special [like go to school] to get it.” Here, this employee’s definition of real job is complicated by the way in which she feels she should be moving forward in her life, per society’s influence via the emphasis on education. Also, Nina added that “...in my mind, it’s a real job to me, it’s something I have to make a part of my life all the time, so it’s a real job to me, so I guess there’s two types of real jobs: there’s a personal job that’s like real for somebody, but then there’s [also] what outside people think would be considered a real job.” Therefore, many factors play into the degree to which people define themselves in regards to their job, or not at all, as well as the importance of having a job that fits an outside definition of what it means to have a real job, or what type of work is considered real, and ultimately, if that is even important to someone or not.

### *Meaning Construction*

What things in life are important to people, at least the employees at Merchant’s Bounty? Is it necessary to find meaning in the work one performs, and if so, why? Further, if meaning is not found in the work that one is involved in, where would she/he find meaning outside of the work one is paid to do? Is finding meaning outside of the workplace a value that you seek? Various combinations of the preceding questions were asked to participants in order to answer the second research question: How do retail customer service employees find meaning in emotionally laborious positions? To answer



this question, participants were also asked if their current job is meaningful, as well as what kind of work did they find meaningful or define as meaningful.

### Meaningful Jobs

Employees mentioned the types of work or concrete professions that they would associate with being meaningful, which included being teachers, doctors, lawyers, scientists, horticulturalists, social workers, and full-time volunteers. All of these professions have one general theme: helping others and doing tangible good acts that genuinely help the lives of other people, rather than merely helping to find products on peoples' shopping lists. Neptali mentioned, "It's a shame that you can't just get paid for helping other people." The ability to be able to help others is the most common route of finding meaning that was identified by participants, and helping customers on the job was not the type of help employees defined as meaningful. Like Neptali, Blanche stated that "Meaningful work, for me, tends to be work that I don't get paid for," as she describes a situation in which she moved across the country to help a friend for a year.

Besides helping others, employees also mentioned that meaningful work was something that had to be fulfilling, something one needs to be passionate about, and at the end of the day, makes the employee feel happy with how she or he is investing her or his time. Frank stated, "[If] you walk away feeling like you've done something that makes you happy, then I believe that's meaningful work." Employees' definitions of meaningful work made it clear that they do not find meaning in the work that they do at Merchant's Bounty, outside of the interactions that they have with co-workers.

Interactions with co-workers were places in which relationships were built and sustained,

and serve a social function and means of coping for the employees, which was defined as meaningful by employees.

### Meaningful Interactions

Almost all employees made it clear that the only redeeming aspect of the job, in terms of finding meaning, is the fact that they have meaningful interactions with co-workers and meaningful friendships that they had formed with one another. These relationships have had time to develop through the repeated social interactions employees have had with each other over time, both inside and outside of the workplace, as well as the occasional meaningful interaction with customers. When asked if her current job met the definition of meaningful work she performed, Kim replied, “Uh, not really, I mean I find meaning in it by developing relationships with people I work with or some customers that come in.” Thus, social relationships were the sole meaningful way in which Merchant’s Bounty employees reported identifying with their job positions. Social relationships in this context are friendships that form within the organization and usually extend beyond the walls of Merchant’s Bounty.

Social relationships proved to be integral in the communicative sensemaking of the meaning construction process because employees understood their environment by engaging in the co-creation of reality with their peers in the organization. Although the participation in a variety of situations in which emotional labor occurred, employees were aware that they were not experiencing its occurrence alone. Employee relationships and interactions served as the medium through which meaning was found and constructed, as they also served as a way in which employees were able to cope with on-the-job stressors by having peers to support and comfort them.

### RQ 3: What Strategies Do Retail Customer Service Personnel Utilize to Manage Their Emotionally Laborious Positions?

Only one question was asked of participants to answer this question: what sorts of behaviors do you engage in at work that improve the quality of your experience on any given day? The responses yielded that the formation of social relationships was an integral way in which to do so, as well as having external motivators outside the workplace, having a forum in which to vent, and letting negativity literally “bounce off” individual employees, rather than internalizing it. Also, though not explicitly stated by employees, resistance was identified as a means of coping through miscellaneous stories told about what it was like to work at Merchant’s Bounty.

#### *Social Relationships*

Having social relationships with coworkers was not only the exclusive way in which employees found meaning at work, it was also the number one way in which employees reported coping with on-the-job stressors, such as rude customers, management, and the emotional labor they endured on the job, something every employee mentioned. Other ways in which employees reported coping strategies were through joking with others, having external motivators (i.e. school, family, hobbies), a means through which to vent, and by letting what customers say to them “bounce-off” rather than by taking it personally.

In order to cope with stressful days and to make even the most mundane days a little more fun, employees utilized each other in a multitude of ways. Randy shared, “I would love to be able to hang out with everybody I work with, it would just be amazing, but the only time I get to see a lot of these people is when I’m at work and that’s what

makes the day worth it.” Joking and social relationships are intrinsically linked because it usually takes having someone else to laugh with in order to make a joke work. Eliot mentioned that one of the redeeming things about this job is that “I like to goof around; the nice thing about having this type of job is that you don’t take it seriously...I mean I work hard when I’m doing it, but I’m going to at least make it fun!” To further make a connection between joking around and social relationships, in the words of an employee, Chaz stated, “I think everyone is on the same level there...we’re all like ‘Hey, we’re here, we’re not doing what we love, we all know that, but let’s try and have a good time anyway.” Therefore, the employees are highly aware of the lack of meaning that their peers ascribe to the job as well as the fact that their well-being is contingent upon one another for survival. Ojha (2005) stated “If used carefully, humor is a communication strategy that can help members assimilate into an organization with less difficulty” (p. 131). Through the assimilation process at Merchant’s Bounty, employees get to know each other and learn what types of behavior, in this case the use of humor and joking around, are appropriate for the organizational context.

#### *External Motivators*

Another way in which employees coped with emotional labor endured on the job was to have things to do outside of the workplace that interested them, which for many included going to school or working at another job. Further, many employees are artists of some sort (e.g., actors, musicians) and rely on Merchant’s Bounty to provide a flexible schedule in order to pursue their personal interests and passions. These other activities might serve more of a way for employees to find meaning in the work they do, especially if the work that they do at Merchant’s Bounty is not where they find meaning. In

addition, Fifi noted that it is important to mention to those outside of Merchant's Bounty, either friends, family or customers that "...I study interior architecture, I like let it be known that I do something else, and I notice other people do that, they just start talking about themselves essentially to let them know this isn't all that they're doing, this isn't the only thing they do."

Thus, some employees feel it is necessary to tell people about the other activities in which they participate with the aim of not being labeled solely as a grocery store worker, in order to assert their identities as unique, passionate individuals. There are certain stigmas associated with working in retail customer service positions, such as a lack of education and a lower social status, especially as opposed to the majority of the clientele that shops at Merchant's Bounty. The clientele at Merchant's Bounty, based on observation, are mostly affluent, "working professionals"; people that can afford to drive nice cars, hire nannies, and to survive on the income of one person. Therefore, it becomes important for certain employees to make it known that working at Merchant's Bounty is not all that they do with their lives, as highlighted in the previous example.

On a related idea to bridge elements of social relationships and external motivators, Bibi said:

It seems like there's a lot of people [at Merchant's Bounty] on their way to somewhere else, you know, there's some people there that are lifers, or have a family, but I think in general there are a lot of people at [Merchant's Bounty] that are on their way somewhere, so it's fun to be in that boat with people and enjoy each other.

Here, Bibi qualified that certain people have to be at Merchant's Bounty because they are making it their career and/or have families. For these people, working at Merchant's

Bounty *is* their real job. Most employees, however, are in transitional places in their lives, with activities going on outside of the workplace to keep them motivated.

### *Venting*

Besides the pursuit of other interests, another way to cope with the work environment at Merchant's Bounty was to have a forum or support group to vent about it. Being able to verbally voice negativity incurred on the job, rather than holding it in, is a key way in which people voiced improving their work lives. The people that mentioned it were not venting to seek answers but simply needing to communicate their frustration, either with co-workers, management, or, most often, customers. Seth shared an emotionally charged example of venting about customers in general when he stated:

I'll freak out, I'll go in the back room or the break room and sit on the couch for a second, and if someone else is back there I'll say 'What's going on?' I'll say 'Doesn't it piss you off when...' and try to make it, try to bring them down on my level, because I know it's probably happened to them because a lot of the same stuff happens, over and over again.

Several employees that reported venting also noted that it took place in backstage areas (Goffman, 1959) as opposed to front stage areas (e.g., the sales floor, the cash register), due to the monitoring of employees' positive display of emotion on the sales floor by management. To react as Seth did would be deemed as "unacceptable" if performed on the sales floor, especially if an outburst as such was to be witnessed by a manager. Similarly, Laura observed that "...you can usually find someone that feels the same way that you do, so it's good to be able to share your experiences, just even if you're just venting, you know, it feels good to have somebody there with you." Thus, having community and social relationships within that community proved to be essential in the

construction of workplace realities and identities and helped to provide a way to cope on the individual level.

### *The “Bounce-Off”*

One final technique that employees utilized to cope with their emotionally laborious retail customer service positions was that of the “bounce-off.” The bounce-off is a deflection of what a customer says to an individual employee, by the employee not taking a particularly rude remark seriously or letting their “real” identity be affected by it. Sven mentioned, “Ultimately when you look back on it...if you let it wash over you and not let it affect you so deeply, which means taking people not as serious sometimes, or taking work not as serious sometimes, but you might have more stamina for working there.”

Therefore, results indicate that employees know what they need to do in order to cope with stressors on the job, but sometimes putting it into action can be the hardest part. Blanche mentioned, “I’d be a liar if I said I’ll never let what a customer said bother me, but I’m getting a lot better, in the back of my head I’m going ‘They’re stupid, they’re ignorant, they don’t know any better,’ and if they do, oh well.” In this fashion, by attributing the negative personality aspects to the customer and not herself, the participant is able to deflect the customer rudeness, when she remembers to do so. One last tip for engaging the brush-off, offered by Celia, is: “I really don’t let it get to me anymore, I’ve worked in customer service for so long that, somebody years back said something like, ‘You know, they throw it at you, take it and throw it in the garbage behind you’.” This quote and such other memorable messages (Stohl, 1986) are productive bits of advice to remember when interacting with customers in any location and really embodies what

would be described as having a brush-off mentality on-the-job in order to get through the work day.

### *Resistance*

Therefore, as a method of coping, many employees expressed using the brush-off as a way in which to cope with negative emotionality encountered at Merchant's Bounty from both co-workers and customers. Yet, many also shared that in order to assert themselves as humans and unique individuals beyond the grasp of the organization that some degree of resistance was also necessary. Within an organization resistance is where differing degrees of power between subordinates and superiors meet, overlap and intersect (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). Mumby (2001) defines power as "The production and reproduction of, resistance to, or transformation of relatively fixed structures of communication and meaning that support the interest of some organization members or groups over others" (p.587). According to this definition, employees enact the limited power they have as subordinates in order to implicitly oppose their superiors and the company itself. These resistance acts are offered not merely as a way of coping, but also as a way for employees to project their own, non-corporate identities, whether it is explicit or implicit and to maintain self-respect (Deetz & Mumby, 1990).

Though over half of the employees implicitly admitted to engaging in some form of resistance, there was not a single method found to be universal. None of the employees actually used the term "resistance" to explicitly describe these behaviors that clearly were acts of resistance. In this way, resistance takes many forms, both obvious and subtle. However, resistance took a subtle form most often, taking place beyond the eyes and ears of management, where employees embody a lack of power and a sense of



power all at once. People with less access to power are the ones who resist by asserting themselves in creative ways that go against the grain of corporate expectations (Deetz & Mumby, 2005).

An example of this was when Celia admitted, when a customer complained about a particular issue, “I agree with them (laughs) that it’s wrong. And that they’re right. I just let them know that they’re right to feel that way.” Here, it is apparent that agreeing with the customer for an issue that the company is at fault is a form of resistance because although Merchant’s Bounty’s primary focus is on the customer and their experience, portraying the company in a negative light would be frowned upon if management were to overhear that an employee were not simply apologizing for the store being out of stock on a particular product, for example, but were to explicitly state that the organization is wrong would come-up in a review, and perhaps restrict the amount of money a person is given for their semi-annual raise.

Another way in which employees participated in resistance was through the use of sarcasm. Employees frequently utilized a form of sarcasm that mocked corporate language and themselves through its application. For example, Laura shared, “We’re told to WOW the customer, and we always use that in such a mocking way like ‘I really WOWed that customer’ you know (laughs) “WOWing customers left and right, you gotta get out there and WOW some customers’.” In this way, the employee metacommunicated about how she frequently mocked the corporate lingo, along side of her co-workers. In this fashion, by talking about the talk that they engage in at work, employees are using communication to make sense of their environment. In this case, the employment of mocking signifies that although employees may be using corporate

language, they are sarcastic about its application and are therefore asserting themselves as people who think that the corporate language is ridiculous. Mocking the organization is a behavior of resistance because ideal, model employees follow company standards and do everything by the book, and thus would not be encouraged to make a spectacle of those standards through their engagement.

A way in which sarcasm is utilized between employees and customers as a form of resistance is when employees use their words to play by the corporate rules, but their tone may denote a lack of sincerity. Mayor stated, "...to be over-the-top-nice, you know, kill 'em with kindness, and I think that's still a method, that's a way, you know, there's no possible way, you're completely distancing yourself from any risk because there's nothing in your words that could get you in trouble, you know, but it's making it clear that you're not genuine." By simultaneously doing what he is told while retaining a piece of his personal identity in the face of his corporate identity, he embodied a self that is crystallized and exists in more ways than one in a single instant. This type of sarcasm is another form of resistance employees employed at Merchant's Bounty in order to assert themselves as individuals.

A final form of resistance observed, although not explicitly stated by research participants, was a type of act that several employees made explicit note of was that of what happens in the backroom or when the doors are closed to the public. For example, when a product is broken or damaged on the sales floor, it is to be brought to the backroom to be written off on the computer and then thrown away. However, many products may encounter a detour before they reach the trash can, if ever. Sven mentioned "...taking spoiled" eggs and throwing them off the second story...at an empty lot or

whatever out of frustration and fun or bowling with turkeys.” Besides using the products to wreak havoc, products that have been written off have been known to disappear home with employees as well. When employees notice that instead of being donated that a particular perishable item is going to be tossed in the trash, they will sneak it home and eat it themselves. It is specifically stated in the corporate literature, communicated in training standards and routinely reinforced on the job that no employee is supposed to take or eat any item that has been brought to the back room to be “spoiled”, even if there is nothing wrong with the actual product.

To maintain some form of personal identity and integrity, Merchant’s Bounty employees utilize multiple forms of resistance including agreeing with customers, using sarcasm in interactions with coworkers and customers alike, as well as being disobedient behind closed door and outside the watch of management. Resistance is a way that employees can exercise their ability to not remain in their situation at work, but to maintain individuality in the face of the organization. Tracy and Trethewey (2005) argue that employing and embodying alternative vocabularies and metaphors can be another form of resistance employees can use to empower themselves in the workplace. The metaphor of the crystallized self is introduced as a tool that can be used as a point of resistance, in order for organizational members, including those in retail customer service, to use to avoid the doom of representing these organizationally constructed selves and feeling forever conflicted by them (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Therefore, by goofing around with others and making it known to an individual and to others that a performance is taking place is just one way an employee can get through the day a little easier.

## The Crystallized Self: An Application

This study intended to explore not only ways in which employees cope with their workplace realities, but also how identity is constructed and where meaning is found in retail customer service environments where the performance of emotional labor is required. In the following pages I plan to discuss the crystallized self as a tool to view identity in a way that bridges together each of the areas of scholarship addressed in this paper within academia and within individuals. The crystallized self will be discussed as an identity construction process and a coping mechanism.

### *The Crystallized Self as an Identity Construction Process*

The crystallized self metaphor was realized as another way for organizational employees to identify or de-identify with a job based on how they talk about identity (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). This metaphor is offered as an additional model of the identity construction. The four strategies offered that their work seeks to extend is Deetz's (1998) discussion of self-subordination, Hochschild's (1997) discussion of perpetually deferred identities, their own discussion of "auto-dressage," and Newton's (1995) discussion of good little copers. Tracy and Trethewey (2005) state that these four processes function as separate entities at different jobs of varying status, with some processes being reserved for "low-status, service oriented positions" (p. 6). At Merchant's Bounty, however, employees engaged in all four of these processes, with some employees actually engaging in multiple identity construction processes. Descriptions of these four processes will be detailed in the following section along with examples of how employees implicitly embodied them while they communicated about identity.

Self subordination is the act of a person's most preferred self being saved for her or his work performance (Deetz, 1998). This could be observed at Merchant's Bounty, from the very beginning of an employee's point of contact with the organization. When a potential employee turns in a job application, they are given a "pre-interview" (Field Notes, 4/15/2010) on the spot by a full-time team member, which serves as a personality screening. If the full-time team member does not think the job candidate has a personality that "fits" with the company, then that person will not get hired. To get hired, potential job candidates need to display their best, most friendly self, as they see employees who already work there do, in order to be considered for a position. As previously mentioned by Eliot, Merchant's Bounty employees have a reputation for being friendly and seeming like they are always having a good time. This image is created through the self-subordination of an employee's own personality for the organization's benefit. By repressing any negative emotions and holding them until the workday has ended, the employee is able to bring forward his or her most pleasing personality traits while on the job.

Related to exploiting the "best" parts of one's personality or identity for profit is the creation of a future identity that is never fully embodied or a perpetually deferred identity (Hochschild, 1997). An example of this from the data is when Chaz stated "...we're not doing what we love, we all know that, but let's try and have a good time anyway." There is a sense of futurity implied by Chaz to make this statement, there is the hope embedded within it, the opposite of "not doing what we love," which would be doing what we love at some point in the future. However, getting a job that one loves is likely not a possibility for every person employed at Merchant's Bounty, due to the

degree to which some employees get stuck working there. Thus, this future self that works at a job that she or he loves is created in speech, yet is not fully realized in action.

The third identity construction process mentioned is that of “auto-dressage,” which is a term they coin within the text to denote the act of performing the preferred workplace personality outside of the workplace. Auto-dressage can be observed in the data when Fifi shared, “I recognize my work self when I’m out...it’s kind of hard to like completely remove yourself from [work].” She explicitly stated that a work self exists, which implies that a performance of a preferred self takes place as well as that she takes that performance with her outside the context of the grocery store and “out” into her “real” life. Auto-dressage is exemplified by a default self that she reacts to others as, which is no longer her own “self” but the organizationally created self which she usually is paid to perform.

Some employees engage in a completely fake performance while at work, which is a way of faking a preferred self as a “good little copier” (Newton, 1995). Newton (1995) describes the best copiers as “those who see the job as all about acting; they treat the emotional performance as a game into which they switch in and out” (p. 130). There were several examples to be found in the data which highlight the degree of acting as an entirely fake persona. Cornelius shared, “I try and feel like I’m onstage, I’m performing, I’m fine with that because it does help me get through the day.” In this instance, Cornelius is a “good little copier” because he uses the performance and role-embodiment in his interactions with customers in order to make the best of the work day. However, Tracy and Trethewey (2005) warn that the “good little copiers” need to beware of compartmentalizing work selves versus real selves because it could “...reinforce

passivity, subordination and objectification” (p. 17). When coupled with auto-dressage, not only can an employees workplace identity be taken outside Merchant’s Bounty, but employees could be less apt to be forward, aggressive and direct in encounters with people in the outside world in environments where their actions and reactions are not being constantly monitored by management.

Newton’s (1995) “good little copers” is a slightly different identity construction process because it is a device used by employees for “non-privileged” (low-level, service sector workers), whereas the first three processes mentioned are devices utilized by employees of “privileged” (non-retail, “professional”) occupations. Yet, employees at this low-level, service sector job utilized each of these identity construction processes in order to talk about their workplace selves. Thus, the lines between professional, privileged jobs and non-professional, service sector jobs are blurred, as well as the types of identity construction behavior that superiors and subordinates engage in at these jobs. Further, the first three identity construction processes utilized by these part-time employees are usually strategies that would be enacted by management, or the dominant group.

#### *The Crystallized Self as a Coping Mechanism*

In this way, crystallization is not merely a coping mechanism to be used by people to talk about identity in less static ways; it is also a tool to be used to explain how traditional identity construction processes can intersect and work together to add depth and explanation to how a particular employee inter/acts on the job. It makes sense that a tool that emerged as an alternative, counter identity construction process could also serve

as a way to bridge the functions of these processes together, making each of them more complex.

Another way that the intersection of these identity construction processes taking place by way of crystallization is through the acknowledgment of a past self, or someone a person used to be; a fractured self that functions as split between not just “real” and “fake,” but also “past” and “present.” In an aforementioned example, Frank stated that due to the toils he had endured on the job that “...physically and emotionally I’m kind of a different person than I was three and a half years ago.” Frank openly acknowledged that this job has changed his overall sense of self, beyond the changes that occur as people grow older. These changes can be attributed to demands placed on this worker by himself by engaging in self-subordination in order to find favor in the eyes of the organization via management, which he feels changed his overall identity outside the confines of Merchant’s Bounty. Evaluating himself when not at work also serves how auto-dressage is at play because Frank has monitored his own performance of emotional labor for management and customers, and was well aware of how it had affected him over time.

The engagement of emotional labor as an organizational performance can have quite the effect on the identity construction process of individual employees as demonstrated by Frank. Yet, if this job is so taxing on organizational members, why do they stay? I argue that these employees are literally trapped, or stuck at their jobs. Employees feel that this is not a job that can be left in favor of another job that requires no college degree, such as an entry level position or other retail job, because of the quality of the benefits that are offered. As Spring stated, “But like anybody could do



this, like any entry level job, I didn't go to school you know, I didn't really, I didn't need experience." Along with consistent biyearly raises with a cap-out of around \$17 per hour, employees are also given excellent health benefits for working a minimum of 20 hours per week, including vision and dental, for less than \$60 per month. Nina noted, "I am comfortable with what I am earning...I've been there three years and I've gotten raises and I feel like I'm at a point where if I, I couldn't like quit and find another job with the same pay." Nina was not the only employees that felt she or he would not be able to find a better paying job with better benefits, with such a flexible schedule in this city, if she or he were to quit this job, especially in the retail sector, regardless of education level. Several employees working at Merchant's Bounty, like Fifi, Nina, Eliot, Laura, Seth and Neptali are students or have some type of formal degree from a college or university, but for whatever reason cannot find a better job in the city at this point in time.

If not a student, however, it is important for employees to have something else outside of Merchant's Bounty to look forward to, put focus into, or identify with. Despite the fact that 75 percent of the research sample were under the age of 30, only 40 percent of those under the age of 30 were enrolled in college or had completed a degree. Those people not enrolled in school spent more time at work and had to engage in the performance of being a Merchant's Bounty employee more time each week than their student co-workers, thus being more susceptible to having a self that is dichotomized and fractured, a self that is split between fake reality inside the workplace and real reality outside the workplace.

Though this metaphor was not directly shared with participants it was clear at times that employees were apt to talk about their identities in less static, non-polarizing

ways. By not having a word to lay claim to the complex web of identities that one embodies, it then becomes difficult to talk about the identity construction process in any other way than besides with the language currently available to a person. It is plausible that most employees have only had dichotomist language available to them by which to talk about the work that they do, as exemplified by the examples in the previous section.

In the discourses surrounding “real job”, it is assumed that one day a person will have a “real job” or sometimes parents will ask their children “When are you going to find a real job?” as a way to communicate that the current position one holds is not as valued as one where more money could be made, more status is associated with it, or that requires a more complex skill set apt to grow. The idea of real versus not real job is a binary, which makes it easy to see that those working in jobs that fall in one category tend to identify with one or the other, not completely or partially with both. Thus, the language used to discuss a job forces someone to pick a concrete title for that job, which the employee seemingly identifies with in a singular way.

Despite assumed pressure from others to pigeonhole an employee into a particular title or identity, employees did not seem to self-identity in such static ways. When interacting with others, some employees make it a point to share information about themselves with co-workers and customers alike, in order to assert themselves as not just a grocer, but predominantly as an artist, for example. Fifi shared:

When customers start like ‘Oh well, it’s gotta be nice...working at a grocery store’ and I’m like well, no, I also study interior architecture, I like let it be known that I do something else, and I notice that other [employees] do that, they just start talking about themselves essentially to like let them know that this isn’t all that they’re doing.

In this example, Fifi implicitly engages in crystallization, despite not being completely aware of the actual metaphor of the crystallized self (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). As she mentioned, she is not the only one who participates in this type of defending the self through conversation with others. Overall, studying, identifying, acknowledging and embodying the crystallized self metaphor can move employees away from identifying through binary dichotomies, such as those offered by Deetz (1998), Hochschild (1997) and Newton (1995) in order to move towards a whole, complete discussion of self. The crystallized self metaphor is the key that binds each of the following topics together: emotional labor, performance, identity, real job and meaning of work. Acknowledgment of an entire self requires the performance of emotional labor at times as part of an identity with which employees choose to define as real or not and find meaning in, or not. Each of these functions together, intersects with or conflicts with one another within the experience of each participant and needs to be recognized in order to realize an entire, whole self.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Through all of these intersections of identity, this study uncovered how participants defined the work they do, what it meant to them, how they found meaning, as well as what strategies they used to persevere through the work day. While some employees have been able to maintain a cohesive and balanced identity between work inside and outside of Merchant's Bounty, many have not been able to cope with the identity-shifting that must take place in order for them to be a successful person at work and at home. Much like how it is hard to break or crack a crystal, it is hard to break apart facets of identity that make up an entire, crystallized self. Employees need to be made aware of alternate identity building vocabularies in order for them to be useful methods for coping. Tracy and Trethewey (2005) state, "People understand their lives through the language available to them" (p. 20). Accordingly, if these employees are going to make the best of the positions they are "stuck" in, they need to utilize an extended vocabulary in order to add more depth to the construction of their workplace realities and identities, if deemed as a matter of importance. Communication scholars are urged to "play with language" (Tracy & Trethewey, p. 21, 2005) and occupy unfamiliar spaces, in order to shift how people think about the work they do and their attachment to that work.

### Practical Implications

In order for this research to help employees engage in crystallization in their identity construction processes, the following steps need to be taken:

- Management needs to be provided with information regarding not only how to make employees look happy, but how to actually keep them happy, via encouraging crystallization strategies.

- Employees need to be encouraged to use the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
- Employees need to be encouraged to construct identity through avenues outside of work, as well as be empowered and encouraged to do their paid work well.

A practical way to put Tracy and Trethewey's (2005) discussion in the hands of employees is to share the findings with management at Merchant's Bounty. By making management privy to this study, they would be aware of how subordinates view the company and the actual work performed there. Also, management could use the study to restructure training to include creative ways to cope with on-the-job stressors other than substance abuse, such as forming close relationships with co-workers or seeking venues outside of work that inspire passion within the individual, for example. In this way, management could engage in improving the work lives of others at their place of employment as well as their own lives inside and outside of the workplace.

Providing management with the vocabulary to discuss the self in multifarious ways is the most wide spread way to access those it seeks to help at Merchant's Bounty. An awareness of such language may result in all team members at each store being able to partake in coping through different use. Since the use of language shapes our realities and identities via communicative sensemaking (Murphy, 2001; Weick, 1995), it is necessary to make a wide array of terms and concepts available to employees to encourage them to construct their own alternative realities, both at work and at home.

Employees need to realize that they should not fracture their selves, but rather embrace their selves as being very complex and whole. Employees need to feel that they

are not merely cogs in the machine of a business but are unique individuals that are very talented and skilled at the hobbies and activities they participate in outside the workplace. Depending on how long one is employed at Merchant's Bounty, employees are likely to have their job be a primary or secondary way in which they choose to identify themselves. Choosing to define and identify with their jobs is just one example of how employees can use crystallization as a tool of resistance for personal maintenance of identity. In addition to arming people with the vocabulary to talk about identity in more fluid ways, people also need to change the way in which they ask about the work people do and interests that they have (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). By encouraging employees to think of themselves in more dynamic way in response to the question "What do you do?" (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), they are being empowered to remain whole in their identity and talk about what they are actually interested in, rather than talk about work.

Crystallized self and other coping mechanisms can be taken from research, studies and scholarship in this way and placed in the hands of the people that can directly benefit from their application. Further, though there is an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) at Merchant's Bounty, not a single employee reported using it. Making management aware of phenomena such as emotional labor could also encourage the company to brainstorm other constructive ways to combat burnout or encourage employees to really utilize the EAP in order to reduce turnover and increase content longevity with the company. Thus, by giving management these tools, this study serves a practical, hands-on purpose for the people involved.

### Theoretical Implications

Another way this study functions is to extend current theoretical research. I propose that the phenomenon of GBA is an extension of Hochschild's (1984) emotional labor. Future studies seeking GBA could be initiated in order to further study the effects it has on employees, as well as other workplaces that it might also occur. By doing so, ways in which to deflect the phenomena could be found and shared with others to limit its affect on employees in the future, as well as lending language to define it, making GBA a tangible occurrence that employees can name and discuss in explicit ways. Therefore, employees can acknowledge that though the customer addresses the employee as you the customer is actually addressing the company, not the individual. In GBA, the person is literally guilty of discontinuing a particular product, for example, by association with Merchant's Bounty, as an employee and public face of the organization with which customers may interact, both positively and negatively.

Aside from extending emotional labor in this way, this study also served as way to extend the work of other scholarship in several different areas of communication. Aside from emotional labor and the crystallized self metaphor, this study also extended what other scholars ask for in their limitations and areas of future: additional studies to be conducted in a variety of other organizations. As far as the researcher can comprehend, not a single other study has been conducted at any Merchant's Bounty locations, especially not related to communicative sensemaking and emotional labor. Since Merchant's Bounty itself is unique in a sense that it has an entirely different business philosophy and organizational structure than other grocery stores, it serves as a new place in which to study these phenomena in accordance with one another. Further, much like

how triangulation of research methods can make the data produced more rich (Denzin & Lincoln, 1996), using a blended approach to studying emotional labor, performance, real job, and meaning of work can lend a richer way to observe the complexities of the organizational identity construction process via communicative sensemaking.

Another phenomenon that existed, but not completely unique to this particular workplace, is that of being stuck. Employees voice that of all the things that keep them working at this job, albeit miserable at times, were the health benefits, consistent pay, and social relationships formed. As noted by Blustein (2006), humans need to work in order to survive and that "...for most adults around the world, working represents a necessary means to an end" (p.77). As this holds to be true in this study, at least workers at Merchant's Bounty have decent health benefits in non-professional jobs, as benefits are usually associated with professional jobs. Blustein also adds that it is important to collect the narratives of those working in non-career positions because there are plenty of narratives that reflect those working in professional jobs, but not as many for those who work non-professional jobs.



## CHAPTER SIX: LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Though this study does several things in terms of pushing research forward for several areas of organizational communication studies, it is also limited in its scope in several ways. First of all, there was only one location of one chain of grocery stores studied. Future studies should focus on other grocery stores, both chains and those that are independently owned to see if the effects of emotional labor are universal or exclusive to this store or particular chain.

Also, in terms of social relationships, making close friends with employees, though it may be a method of coping, could also be a way to remain stuck at the job. Randy stated, "I've built some of the most strong and lasting friendships that I could possible think of at this position." This workplace serves as a social outlet for many and once removed from this workplace and put into another one, likely one with different hours; it would be much harder to maintain social relationships with people that continue to work in this particular space, due to the previously mentioned obstacles. Consequently, employees remain stuck performing the same persona everyday in order to keep their social life as it is.

Social relationships form strongly for many reasons including working with many like minded people in close proximity for an extended period of time, while working hours that are different from those that are considered to be "the norm". On the weekends and during the evening, when 9-to-5ers are enjoying some downtime from the work week, Merchant's Bounty employees are still at work, or already asleep, to prepare for the next day. When employees get off work at noon, or midnight, it is likely that people that they know from outside of Merchant's Bounty are at work or asleep. Therefore, this

job can be a strain on not only the identity construction process, but also on personal relationships with non-employees, including friends, partner/spouses, and even children.

This alienation felt by working odd hours is yet another reason why employees form such strong bonds and personal relationships with their co-workers at Merchant's Bounty. Working similar hours can make it convenient to spend time together at work, as well as outside of work. To their credit, Merchant's Bounty creates a culture where employees get along not merely as co-workers, but also as friends, roommates, and sometimes lovers, which creates a culture beyond the workplace. Participation in this Merchant's Bounty culture can be a way in which employees find meaning outside the workplace, while still in the company of co-workers. Therefore, between money and social relationships, it becomes hard for employees to leave this particular workplace, which is another avenue that would be beneficial to study at other retail customer service workplaces in the future.

Also, through the exploration of non-professional jobs at Merchant's Bounty a few categories arose with interview participants that could affect an employee's workplace identity construction process include racism, sexism and ageism. Though several participants touched on these subjects, not enough made mention of these themes to include them in the research findings. Future studies at this workplace in particular could take a critical lens to explore how each or all of these types of discrimination factor into the degree to emotional labor or emotional management that employees endure, as well as how promote equality at Merchant's Bounty among all employees.

In addition, only part-time team members were interviewed, in order to maintain the anonymity for the participants and to protect the jobs of those in management positions, as there are many less of them, it is not in their best interest to speak in any way other than positively of the organization and their participation in such a project would easily be detected by other participants who read the study. This participation would be even more detectable if gender were revealed, as there are very few women in management positions at this particular Merchant's Bounty location. Multiple full-time team members at a variety of locations would be yet another way to gather another perspective of employees regarding research topics of emotional labor, identity, performance, meaning of work and real job from the perspective of a superior, as opposed to that of a subordinate, as an entirely different array of answers and coping mechanisms would be likely.

Future studies should also observe the specific strategies for coping used by the participants in this study to see if they are universal across other grocery stores or other retail stores. By examining these coping strategies at work in other retail customer service environments, more strategies could be uncovered as well as discovering which of the strategies found in this study are most common or most effective. By doing so, retail customer service personnel could be provided with ways to improve the quality of life, both on and off the clock.

## Appendix A: Participants

<i>Name-Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Tenure</i>
Neptali Aztlan, M.	27 years old.	8 Years
Bibi Beet, F.	25 years old.	1 Year
Osage Buffalo, M.	24 years old.	2.5 Years
Seth Clinton, M.	21 years old.	2.5 Years
Kim Curry, F.	26 years old.	3.5 Years
Nina Diego, F.	22 years old.	3 Years
B. D., M.	55 years old.	2 Years
Laura Huron, F.	24 years old.	6 Years
Frank Jager, M.	27 years old.	3.5 Years
Sven Lightning, M.	26 years old.	6 Years
Mayor McCheese, M.	26 years old.	5 Years
Chaz McFly, M.	20 years old.	3 Years
Blanche Obermeyer, F.	45 years old.	1 Year
Selma Stonewall, F.	24 years old.	3 Months
Fifi Rodriguez, F.	25 years old.	5 Years
Celia Thornquist, F.	34 years old.	4 Years
Cornelius Wangstein, M.	42 years old.	3 Years
Spring Water, F.	28 years old.	2.5 Years
Eliot Why, F.	45 years old.	1 Year
Randy Zimmerman, M.	23 years old.	5 Years

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