

A “PROFESSIONAL BACK PLACE”: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF RESTAURANT WORKERS

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is both a study of restaurants and of how the restaurant setting influences the identities and behavioral processes of the employees. I draw on five years of participant observation in restaurants, fieldnotes, informal interactions and conversations, and 52 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with restaurant workers. In general, I investigate the reasons people enter restaurant work for the first time, why they remain, and the relationships between the employment and the workers’ statuses, feelings, decisions, goals, and conventional as well as unconventional behaviors. I address how and why the organizational, structural, and interpersonal features of restaurant work shape the lives of the employees. I discuss which identities and behaviors the workers consider appropriate to maintain positive self-concepts and the self-reported ramifications of those deemed inappropriate. My research reveals that restaurants complicate traditional constructions and chronology of work and occupations, the life course, onsets and persistence of deviance and crime, and meaningfulness. Despite the predominantly pejorative depictions of restaurant employment in media, popular opinion, news outlets, and scholarly literature, the data show the “good,” the “meaningful,” and the extrinsic benefits from restaurant work. This research contributes to the understanding of “nonstandard work” in the life course and to how contradictory cultural messages relate to identity work, stigma management, views on aging, techniques of neutralization, and meaningful lives. Overall, this study elucidates how the restaurant constitutes a *professional back place*.

To Leslie, Ladybird, and Soya

For standing by me every step (and paw) of the way

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

[T]he most interesting aspects of social and cultural life in our contemporary world are featured in restaurants. (Beriss and Sutton 2007:1)

This dissertation is both an ethnography of restaurants in general and of how the restaurant setting influences the identities and behavioral processes of the employees. The purpose of this research is to advance the understanding, view, and conceptualization of restaurant work and workers across the life course. The analysis draws on over four years of participant observation in restaurants, fieldnotes, informal interactions and conversations, and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with restaurant workers. In addition, I consider these various sources of qualitative data through the lens of my 13 years of experience as an employee in the restaurant industry.

This project started with the deceptively simple task of investigating the culture of restaurants. This objective proved quite complex. I could not merely ask the participants “what is the culture of restaurants” and expect to receive a comprehensive response. Instead, I formulated several themed questions to address this issue. Over time, the study developed into an examination of the relationships among jobs, identities, and behaviors that reflect and reproduce restaurant culture. In an analysis framed by theories of social psychology, the life course, and crime and deviance, I explore the reasons people enter restaurant work for the first time, why they remain, and how the experience of the employment influences their identities, life choices, goals, feelings, decisions, and conventional as well as unconventional behaviors. I examine how and why the organizational, structural, and interpersonal features of restaurant work shape the lives of the employees. I also address which identities and behaviors the workers

consider appropriate to maintain positive self-concepts and the self-reported ramifications of those they designate inappropriate. In sum, this is a study of identities, work and occupations, the life course, crime and deviance, and “meaningful” lives.

A PROFESSIONAL BACK PLACE

The title of this dissertation, “A Professional Back Place,” was inspired by Erving Goffman’s (1963) concept “back place” in *Stigma*. Although many contemporary scholars refer to Goffman’s term as a “backspace” (e.g., Redmon 2003), he originally used the term *back place* and defined it as a place

where persons of the individual’s kind stand exposed and find they need not try to conceal their stigma, nor be overly concerned with cooperatively trying to disattend it...It might be added that whether the individual enters a back place voluntarily or involuntarily, the place is likely to provide an atmosphere of special piquancy. Here the individual will be able to be at ease among his fellows and also discover that acquaintances he thought were not of his own kind really are. However...he will also run the risk of being easily discredited should a normal person known from elsewhere enter the place. (1963:81-2)

Goffman’s examples of back places include carnivals, mental hospitals, and the beats of prostitutes. More recently, Redmon (2003) analyzed Mardi Gras as an ephemeral “backspace” that allows for playful deviance (e.g., exhibition or public sexual encounters) as a leisure activity. He argued that Mardi Gras grants a license for temporary norm transgressions without a permanent associated stigma.

Scholars have traditionally conceptualized back places as either temporary spaces entered voluntarily or longer-lasting spaces relating to involuntary commitment. I contribute to Goffman’s term with what I call “professional back places,” which are both temporary and long-term workplaces and occupations. Moreover, restaurants constitute professional back places because they represent areas where the workers can stand exposed, do not have to conceal their stigma, and for the most part feel at ease among their fellow co-workers. Conversely, they still

run the risk of being discredited due to their occupational identities, statuses, roles, or behaviors if a “normal person” from elsewhere were to enter. Furthermore, restaurants allow for temporary and long-term transgressions and unconventional conduct. Throughout this dissertation, I clarify how restaurants in general are *professional back places*. In the following sections, I provide historical background information about the restaurant, current statistics about the restaurant industry, how the restaurant plays an important role in the United States, and reasons for the present research.

HISTORY OF THE RESTAURANT

Although this dissertation does not offer a historical analysis of the restaurant, the restaurant has an extensive backstory and is anything but ahistorical. The restaurant of today—a place to eat and drink—did not appear until well into the mid-nineteenth century. Originally used by the French, the word *restaurant* was a noun *and* an adjective. Beginning in the fifteenth century, a restaurant was a consommé, bouillon, or broth that people drank; doctors described a restaurant in medical terms as that which restores, repairs, and refreshes an invalid’s health, strength, and body (Spang 2000). At the time, consommés were restorative soups made from boiled capons (castrated roosters prior to sexual maturity, which were purported to produce high quality meat), gold, diamonds, and other precious stones in an alchemist’s glass kettle. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, doctors incorporated other ingredients, such as chocolate, chickpeas, and brandy. Today, chefs create bouillons from any number of different meats, spices, and other ingredients for a sense of taste rather than restoration per se.

When a restaurant eventually became a place (still not as a place to eat), it was known as a restaurateur’s room, or a place to serve consommé remedies to sip and drink (Spang 2000). Restaurateurs had the skills to create restorative consommés. Eventually the restaurateurs’

rooms began to serve small plates of food, and by the mid-1800s, France had restaurants similar to current-day ones. Restaurants continued to evolve and expand geographically within taverns, inns, and hotels. Their meaning and purposes have indeed changed over the centuries. They transitioned from drinkable remedies to medicinal sites of refuge to sophisticated private, urban spaces to eat and take leisure, to political “public” forums, and then to depoliticized eating and drinking places. Today, restaurants and restaurant employees are the integral part of a massive culinary economy.

Of course, there is further history to the restaurant in terms of, for example, class, gender, hours of operation, cuisines, and political purposes, but a historic analysis is not the central focus of this dissertation. I merely give a summary to frame the role of restaurants. Another comment I will mention is that the restaurant evolved from an exclusionary “bourgeois public sphere” (Spang 2000) to the present-day eateries that are accessible to people of almost any socioeconomic background. Even in difficult economic times, the service sector, and in particular the restaurant industry, plays a huge role in the growth of the U.S. economy (more on this below).

ETHNOGRAPHIES ON RESTAURANT WORKERS

The early twentieth-century saw few writings on restaurant workers followed by a complete lull of such research in the 1950s and 1960s. Even beyond the year 2000, there exist only “a mere handful of studies of restaurants based on primary fieldwork, most of them out of print” (Sutton, Helstosky, and Cwiertka 2004). Although research on restaurants has spiked in the last 30 years, most do not place attention on the employees. In other words, they spotlight the customers, the organizational space, the types of foods and cuisines, management practices and policy changes, globalization, or commodification. Among restaurant studies that have focused on the workers

in particular, the concentration is on waitresses, waiters, *or* chefs. I review ethnographies on restaurant workers to highlight extant scholarship and foreshadow the research chasm that this dissertation fills.

Often overlooked, Francis Donovan (1920) was one of the first people to document the intimate details of waitresses' lives. She spent nine months as a waitress and used her experiences and observations in restaurants in Chicago to write *The Woman Who Waits*.

Although Donovan wrote this book in a very personal, autobiographical, journalistic, and in an atheoretical manner, and not without value judgments, she brought to light a number of social issues within restaurants. Moreover, her book reflected many factors relevant for today's restaurant industry. For instance, Donovan addressed the shame she and other waitresses felt while working in restaurants, the irregular hours, minimal training, low wages, status, stability, security, and permanence, issues pertaining to sex and gender, and other inequalities. Despite these disparities, Donovan indicated that the waitresses could acquire an income comparable to teachers, "office girls," typists, stenographers, "shop girls," or "well-paid salesmen," but had "more freedom" and could "meet more interesting people" (p. 131). Donovan noted that married, unmarried, and divorced women were able to supplement their income as waitresses and that such "girls" have "but a few callings" and "choose" to waitress because it is "greater remuneration" and "greater freedom" than other job positions (p. 135).

Donovan also discussed circumstances that she believed persuaded women to waitress. "In most parts of the United States a woman cannot obtain a teaching position if she is married," she wrote. "In many business offices employees who are married remove their wedding rings and retain the title of 'Miss' so that they may keep their positions. If they do not, they may be asked to work for a lower salary" (p. 221). She additionally argued that "No such sacrifice is

demanding of the waitress; married and unmarried, divorced or merely expectant, all come in on the same basis, for the waitress has gained economic independence” (p. 221). Throughout her book, Donovan underlined the early social and economic conditions that waitresses faced in restaurants.

Funded by the National Restaurant Association in 1943, Whyte’s (1948) book, *Human Relations in the Restaurant Industry*, constitutes the first thorough ethnography of restaurants. Whyte conducted his study in Chicago restaurants during World War II. He focused on policy recommendations for management. Whyte’s main goal was to improve human relations among staff in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, cooperation, loyalty, teamwork building, and participation by developing training meetings, supervising strategies, and problem solving.

Whyte additionally showed an auspicious side of restaurants when describing how “the girls” preferred restaurant work to office work. He quoted one waitress as saying,

I can’t sit in the same place and do the same thing all day long. I need to move around and talk with people. I enjoy meeting people. I’m not happy at a job where I don’t have a lot of people around me. Once I tried an office job, but I just couldn’t stand it. (pp. 12-13)

Whyte then asserted, “Apparently there are many people who require a high rate of social activity and changes in physical activity in order to be happy in their work. The restaurant fills this for them” (p. 13). Furthermore, Whyte revealed the role of choice when he wrote, “These girls were well aware that office work at the present time has higher prestige in our society, and yet they were waitresses by choice because they enjoyed the social activity and the variety of experiences that go with the job” (pp. 13-14). He also weaved accounts from various waitresses, managers, dishwashers, and cooks throughout the ethnography. Although status, race, class, and gender were not the focus of his book, Whyte made significant contributions to the study of social conditions in restaurants by exposing these issues.

Decades later, Spradley and Mann (1975) examined gender constructions and status hierarchies in one Midwestern bar in *The Cocktail Waitress: Woman's Work in a Man's World*. Through the personal employment accounts of seven waitresses, Spradley and Mann discussed bar culture, structure, and social networks, the waitress-customer relationships, sexual objectification, division of labor, and gender roles at work. Moreover, they argued that the cultural meanings of “manhood,” “womanhood,” and “sexual identities” are defined in the process of social interactions in the bar.

Thereafter, Mars and Nicod (1984) wrote the *World of Waiters* based on an ethnography of all-male British hotel waiters. Their study explored several restaurant features from tipping, employee relationships, and customer complaints, to learning the career. Moreover, they discussed the power dynamics in restaurants and the “informal code” and “collective responsibility” among co-workers that allowed for the acceptance of fiddles (or theft) to pad the workers' incomes. What Mars and Nicod called “the fiddler's culture” was a means to obtain informal rewards and was what workers considered “part of a waiter's basic training and as compensation for low basic pay” (p. 121). They also portrayed hotels as arenas where “certain individuals will be excluded from full participation because they are discriminated against in some way” (p. 122). A large portion of their ethnography was spent on fiddles; however, Mars and Nicod's central intention was to elucidate how strong group culture is capable of guiding and shaping behavior.

In another study of waitresses, Paules (1991) investigated women's experiences in a family-style, New Jersey restaurant. She addressed how waitresses can and do control their tip income, both in number and in size. Paules concluded that waitresses participate in resistance strategies to avoid the exploitation in the restaurant and improve their economic situations. She

argued that waitresses have autonomy in how they operate the restaurant and earn tips, despite the predominate portrayal of waitresses as servants and under constant subjugation. Although Paules presented various levels of emotional labor and management in which the waitresses participated, she posited that these constitute tools of control and resistance rather than “evils” that leave the waitresses helpless.

While rare, ethnographies have also focused on kitchen staff. Most notably, Fine’s (1996) seminal research in *Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Work* is a study of the back-of-the-house. Fine documented organizational culture in kitchens alongside the lived experiences of kitchen laborers in four restaurants in the Twin Cities. He examined the restaurant industry as a “surrogate for a wide variety of economic spheres” and defended that “restaurants and their kitchens provide a setting in which the demands of the external environment affect the interactional order: where microsociology meets structural analysis” (p. 16).

Beyond the twentieth century, but a few primary restaurant fieldwork ethnographies have emerged. In *Juggling Food and Feelings: Emotional Balance in the Workplace*, Gatta (2002) explored how restaurant workers maintain and manage their emotions to rebalance them in interactions at work. Through interviews with servers and managers, seven months of participant observation, and “official emotion scripts” (the restaurant training manuals), Gatta focused on the “active emotional balancing practices” of the workers. She examined verbal and expressive practices of the workers while they were waiting tables. Gatta found that when the workers became emotionally unbalanced at work, they used emotional scripts as framework to act in socially acceptable ways to rebalance. For example, if a customer criticized the servers, they could go to the back of the restaurant to relieve anger. This method, Gatta claimed, is a normative learned emotional script.

In a final ethnography entitled, *The Hungry Cowboy: Service and Community in a Neighborhood Restaurant*, Erickson (2009) discussed the interactions between servers, managers, and customers in one restaurant that she called “The Hungry Cowboy.” She addressed how the restaurant is a commodified space that creates feelings of community and sociability. She found that the servers invest emotionally in their work, maintain freedom and autonomy at the restaurant, but face challenges of power dynamics in relation to race, class, and gender.

All these ethnographies on restaurant workers depict an enduring stigma associated with restaurant employment. While scholarship is beginning to note the favorable qualities of restaurant work—employee autonomy, resistance, and agency—it continues to hold a pejorative connotation. Furthermore, the restaurant industry and employees remain an understudied and under-acknowledged topic of sociological inquiry. The dearth of primary fieldwork on restaurants and restaurant employees exposes the requirement for more research, which I attend to in this dissertation.

THE CURRENT U.S. RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

Since 1970, the U.S. restaurant industry’s annual sales have grown from \$42.8 billion to \$659 billion in 2013 (NRA 2014). Full-service establishments, the largest sector in the restaurant industry, accrued \$208 billion in 2013 alone. Despite economic hardships in the United States, the restaurant industry experienced its fifth consecutive year of sales growth in 2014. In addition, 2014 marks the fifteenth consecutive year that the restaurant industry will outpace the job growth in the overall economy. Today, approximately 13.5 million people work in the restaurant industry, with an expected increase of 1.3 million by 2024. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013a), full-service restaurants employ roughly five million workers.

In sum, current restaurant employment makes up 10 percent of the U.S. workforce and over four percent of the U.S. population. Although these statistics do not include under-the-table, undocumented, or former employees, the restaurant industry is the nation's second largest employer, second only to government. Furthermore, 50 percent of all adults in the United States have worked in the restaurant industry at some point during their lives, and over 33 percent garnered their first job experience in a restaurant (NRA 2014). These figures make the far-reaching economic influence of restaurant work apparent. However, limited research, especially qualitative research, examines these workers, focusing instead on one particular group of employees (i.e., servers or chefs).

Regardless of the beneficial role the restaurant industry plays in the U.S. economy, the low wages, minimal benefits, and limited stability of restaurant jobs typically earn them the designation of "bad jobs." In addition, restaurant positions are overwhelmingly part-time; statistics indicate that part-time employment is more common among restaurant workers than workers in any other occupation (BLS 2010). Working part-time is defined as laboring one to 35 hours per week (Kalleberg 2000). About 50 percent of all waiters, waitresses and bartenders, 75 percent of hosts and hostesses, 31 percent of cooks, and 50 percent of food preparation workers hold part-time schedules, as compared to 16 percent of workers throughout the rest of the U.S. workforce (BLS 2010; 2014). Moreover, most part-time restaurant employees earn a *tipped minimum wage*. While the federal minimum wage is \$7.25, tipped employees are required to earn only the federal tipped minimum wage of \$2.13; each state (and city) has discretion over its tipped minimum wage, which ranges from \$2.13 to more than \$10.00 an hour (DOL 2014). Nineteen states (e.g., Utah, Texas, and New Jersey), Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands pay workers as low as \$2.13. Whereas, Colorado pays \$4.98 an hour, California pays \$8.00 an hour,

and Oregon (\$9.10/hour) and Washington (\$9.32/hour) pay the highest. As of January 2014, San Jose, San Francisco, Jackson Rancheria, and Santa Fe are the only locations paying over \$10.00 an hour. The vast majority of restaurant workers earn between \$16,310 and \$30,360 annually, with a mean of \$21,380 (BLS 2013b). Even when restaurant positions are full-time, fire-at-will policies make both full-time and part-time employment positions precarious.

In addition to economic instability, research presents other hardships that restaurant workers face. Studies suggest that they encounter sexual harassment (Giuffre and Williams 1994), health risks (Dimich-Ward et al. 1988; Karasek and Theorell 1990; Leigh 1991; Leigh and Jiang 1993), and high second-hand smoke exposure (Siegel 1993; Jenkins and Counts 1999; Licht et al. 2012; Liu et al. 2013). Research also indicates that the structure of restaurant jobs encourages emotion management (Paules 1991; Gatta 2002), the “doing” of gender (Hall 1993; Tibbals 2007), and the use of strategies to increase tips (Lynn and Mynier 1993; Lynn 1996; Rind and Bordia 2006). Some popular cultural autobiographies and journalistic books even point out that many people do not consider restaurant work “real” (Ginsberg 2001; Owings 2002).

Restaurant studies and reports often criticize the high risks and low benefits associated with restaurant work. Research portrays restaurant workers as unskilled, uneducated, low-wage, and highly marginalized. In other words, this view assumes that restaurant workers come from the “working poor.” For instance, Hearn and Stoll’s (1975) study on cocktail waitresses posited that women remain working because of the perceived losses they may incur if they leave (e.g., ability to feed their children). Ehrenreich’s (2001) cornerstone book, *Nickel and Dimed*, exemplifies the difficulty low-wage, unskilled, uneducated workers (waitresses, maids, and retail employees) have in surviving on a daily basis. Likewise, research reports, such as the Restaurant Opportunities Center’s (ROC) *Behind the Kitchen Door* (2010a), *Serving While Sick* (2010b),

and *A Consumer Guide on the Working Conditions of American Restaurants* (2012), hone in on the deplorable working conditions that confront low-wage workers in the restaurant industry.

At face value, then restaurant employees appear extremely marginalized economically, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Although I recognize that numerous cases of marginalization exist, there are many restaurant workers, and many aspects of the work, missing from the current conversation. Furthermore, in spite of the drawbacks documented in extant studies, restaurant employment remains stable and continues to grow over time. Such conditions beg the questions of why and how restaurant employees enter, remain working, and justify staying despite the marginal qualities, stigma, and unsavory beliefs associated with the work. The restaurant industry constitutes a valuable site for research not only because it affects millions of lives, but also because it allows for investigation into why some people stay for long periods and how this shapes their identities and behaviors over the life course. Although a significant body of social scientific literature has documented how work shapes the life course and identities, the paucity of research on restaurant workers means that restaurants—the single most commonly held job in the United States—represent a minimally understood aspect of the workforce and thus, of many people’s lives. Additionally, scholars have devoted little effort to distinguishing between career and non-career restaurant workers, or among all the workers in between. This distinction will help account for the varying mindsets, identities, life course decisions, durations of employment, and workplace deviant behavior among restaurant employees.

In this dissertation, I contribute to the research literature by exploring a recurring but not yet examined phenomenon. Specifically, this phenomenon involves workers who take jobs in the restaurant industry without the intention of long-term employment. However, they remain

employed in restaurant work, sometimes leaving for short stints of time, then returning and staying for a longer time. Frequently, these individuals come from middle-class backgrounds. They often begin working in restaurants as early as 15 or 16 years old, and along the way, take college classes, finish different levels of higher education, receive Bachelor's and even Master's degrees. Yet, they remain in the restaurant into their 30s and even into their 40s. Additionally, some indicate that they intend to pursue further education, and some explain that they are pursuing other occupations in the meantime. In short, although a group of educated 20-something to 40-something year-olds remain employed for long periods in work portrayed as a "dead end," scholars do not yet know why. Understanding this pattern of employment can reveal the factors that may keep workers in the restaurant industry, and in other sectors of the workforce. Even though *nickel and dimed* workers may lack other career opportunities and stay because they must, and others may simply seek temporary employment and financial gain, it is worth exploring the additional conditions that influence workers to remain. This study plays a pivotal role in critiquing, challenging, and debunking some of the dominantly held beliefs about restaurants and restaurant employees.

A COMMENT ON RESTAURANT ETHNOGRAPHY AND THEORY

When I began this research, and even during occasional moments throughout the study, I felt as though I had *nothing* to contribute. Beyond the usual graduate student insecurities, it seemed to me that everyone already knew (or thought they knew) what there was to know about restaurants and restaurant workers. Even when these thoughts faded, I periodically heard traces of skepticism from others, as I told them I was researching restaurant workers. When people asked me why I was studying restaurants, I immediately wanted to turn the question back around on them by exclaiming, "Why *not* study restaurants?" But, I typically responded with something

like, “Oh, because there are so many different people and behaviors in restaurants.” If I had taken the chance to put my true thoughts into words, I would have said something like this: Restaurants have a profound, far-reaching history, about which most people are unaware. In addition, restaurants are influential on numerous levels. Their impact extends to the economy, jobs and occupations, food and consumption, popular culture, and the media. In many capacities, restaurants affect the lives of a large majority of people in the United States. The influence of restaurants occurs in relation to wage wars, livelihood, socialization, friendships, social networks, identities, interactions, unconventional, deviant and criminal behaviors, life course paths, television shows, movies, and entertainment. Of course, not all these factors dawned on me prior to this study or in my many years employed in restaurants.

I remained enthusiastic about the prospect of studying a topic many consider banal. Encouragement came most often during the interviews; the participants told me that they were excited to participate in a study that gave them a voice. Many of them actually thanked me for conducting a study on people who so often feel slighted and depicted as “less than.” Moreover, I cannot express the number of times that they told me about the social and cultural complexities in restaurants, loving their work, and the importance of the restaurant in their lives. In addition, because of the numerous negative stereotypes about restaurant work and workers, they were delighted that I approached restaurant culture neutrally. Furthermore, they detested the idea that people consider restaurant work simply boring, uninspiring, and meaningless. I hope this research will illuminate how restaurants go unnoticed, in spite of the fact that millions of people labor in them and millions more reap the benefits of their labor. This research exemplifies how restaurants constitute a microcosm of U.S. society and its economic, institutional, social, cultural, and symbolic processes. Of course, I know that not all restaurants are the same, but the data

reveal more similarities than differences. I wholeheartedly believe in Beriss and Sutton's (2007) quote at the start of this chapter—*the most interesting aspects of social and cultural life in our contemporary world are featured in restaurants*.

Theoretically, this restaurant ethnography has much to contribute to social scientific and sociological literature. Scholars have argued that, “What makes ethnographic work special is that its authors are able to generate new theoretical concepts, identify the steps in a particular social process, reveal the organizational principles of social groupings, identify explanatory mechanisms in social dynamics, and link these issues to broader theoretical frames of understanding” (Puddephatt, Shaffir, and Kleinknecht 2009:1-2). I have pursued—and I hope, attained—these goals in this dissertation. In particular, this study does not simply extend the research that presents negative portrayals of restaurant workers. Rather, it departs from classifying them as “down and out,” “nickel and dimed,” impoverished, uneducated, unskilled, low-income employees. While some restaurant employees do reflect these demographics, many others do not. Among several characteristics, they fall along a continuum of class, age, and experience. This research aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of restaurant workers and underscore explanations for the similarities and differences among restaurant workers' experiences, despite varying demographics and restaurant conditions.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In Chapter 2, I present my research methods and describe the participants in this study. Chapter 3 examines entry into restaurant work. I analyze the relationships among the age at which the participants entered the industry, how they entered, and the reasons they gave for entering. I discuss the workers' initially perceived and current employment durations and whether they

intended for a job or a career. Finally, I examine how the workers make sense of their stigmatized occupational identities and negotiate “legitimate” occupational identities.

Next, in Chapter 4, I address the developmental stages portrayed in existing life course research and show how restaurant workers complicate these stages. I then use participants’ accounts of their employment and their lives to both challenge and complement the characteristics of several developmental stages. I show how the restaurant workers strategically negotiate the stigmatization of their nonlinear life course paths by “doing” what I call *strategic adulthood*.

In Chapter 5, I explore how the features of restaurant work contribute to crime and deviance in the life course. In particular, I examine how the structure of restaurants, as workplaces, allows for, normalizes, and even encourages certain types of deviance, such as theft. This chapter has a twofold aim. First, it introduces two new techniques of neutralization that the participants used to mitigate the shame of stealing: Denial of Excess and No One Cares. Second, it joins the areas of deviance and the life course by analyzing instances in which crime and deviance have late life and adulthood onset and persistence.

I attend to the complex subject of what makes for “meaningful” lives in Chapter 6. This chapter addresses how the restaurant employees describe meaningfulness in and around their workplaces. Among their accounts, I distinguish five categories of meaningfulness: *helping*, *mentoring*, *expanding*, *belonging*, and *supplementation*. Regardless of popular opinions about restaurant work, I show how the employees designated their lives as meaningful while working in restaurants.

Finally, I provide concluding remarks in Chapter 7. I summarize this study’s contributions to the research on identities, work and occupations, the life course, crime and

deviance, and meaningfulness, broadly speaking. I make relevant connections among the literature, theory, and practice in each area, and I show how this research advances the field of sociology as well as scholarship in the social sciences, more generally. I finish the chapter with suggestions for future research pertaining to the restaurant industry.

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODS

Over 12 years ago, I started working as a server in a corporate, nationwide chain restaurant. A friend from my high school mentioned that if I wanted to apply for a position at the restaurant where she worked, she would recommend me to the manager so that I could get an interview. On the same day that I filled out an application, I was interviewed and then hired to begin training that very week. As an 18-year-old at the end of my high school career with barely any savings from odd jobs over the years, I looked forward to finally earning some income. Having done only part-time work in child care and as a clerical employee, I knew little of what to expect from restaurant employment. Soon thereafter, restaurant work exposed me to large amounts of cash, introduced me to a new group of friends, and brought me into contact with coworkers and customers from myriad walks of life. Although I did not anticipate working in the restaurant industry for such a long time, I have worked in various restaurants as a server and bartender for 10-plus years throughout college and graduate school. It was only when I began my Ph.D. program that I stopped working in the restaurant industry on a consistent basis, but I did continue to work during summers and holidays, initially for income and then for research purposes.

At the beginning of my Ph.D. program, I had no intention to study restaurants or restaurant workers. In fact, when I looked back at my graduate school application, the statement of purpose describes my aim to study marginalized groups of people but does not mention restaurants as a research area. Nevertheless, in the second semester of the graduate program, happenstance brought me to use data on “food preparation and serving related occupations” from the third wave of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). This

ongoing study follows a cohort of people in the United States from seventh grade into adulthood and asks demographic questions on social, economic, psychological, physical health, and achievement outcomes.

I used the Add Health data set for statistical analysis assignments in two required courses. Doing so initiated my curiosity about restaurant employees because the Add Health data did not enable me to answer the questions of how and why restaurant work influenced employees' choices and behaviors. I found that some quantitative researchers document certain types of behaviors among restaurant workers, such as high alcohol consumption (e.g., Mandell et al. 1992; Larsen 1994; DHHS 1996; 1997). I also found that qualitative researchers address various social processes among restaurant workers (e.g., Whyte 1948; Mars and Nicod 1984; Paules 1991; Fine 1996; Gatta 2002; and Erickson 2009). However, both quantitative and qualitative researchers neglect to systematically examine the reasons people enter restaurant work for the first time, why they remain, and how the experience of restaurant work influences their feelings, behaviors, identities, goals, and life course development. These unaddressed topics encouraged me to investigate the culture of restaurants from the point of view of restaurant workers. I wanted to explore the workers' experiences and identities as well as how they made sense of restaurant work in their lives. In the spring of 2009, I submitted an Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposal entitled, "The Culture and Identities of Restaurant Workers" at the University of Colorado at Boulder. My proposal was accepted approximately a month later.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection took place between 2009 and 2014. I used multiple qualitative research methods, which include participant observation, fieldnotes, hundreds (if not thousands) of informal interactions and conversations, and 52 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Adopting a variety

of methods allowed me to gain access to a diversity of rich information. Employing several methods also enabled me to compare and contrast personal accounts with observable behaviors, and according to Warren and Karner (2010), helps provide broader understandings and thicker descriptions than one method would offer. My participation and observation took place when I served or bartended, spent time with restaurant workers in and outside of work, and went to restaurant-sponsored events. In each of these circumstances, I interacted and conversed with restaurant employees and jotted down fieldnotes when I had free moments away from gazing eyes.

Although I used multiple methods, the interviews constitute the main source of data for this dissertation. In-depth interviewing allows researchers to explore people's detailed experiences, behaviors, accounts, motives, and opinions from their perspectives (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Such a level of depth was important for the types of questions that I wanted to address. At the beginning of the interviews, the participants agreed to be digitally voice recorded and signed consent forms. The digital files were password protected and stored on my personal home computer to secure the privacy of the participants. Recordings allow the interviewer to concentrate on the topics, the dynamics of the interview, and the participant's words, tone, and pauses, all of which can be returned to for accuracy (Kvale 1996). The participants chose pseudonyms and I changed all the names of places mentioned (locations and workplaces) for confidentiality and anonymity. The duration of each interview typically ranged between 90 minutes and four hours in length. Participants chose the interview locations; examples include private residences, coffee houses, and bookstores. For ethical reasons, and to enhance the ease of conversation, I excluded places of employment as interview sites.

The interview guide (see Appendix A) included several loosely themed topics and questions, formed and developed from my many years of experience in the restaurant industry and adapted in the field. The themes and questions evolved as I spent more time participating, observing, and interviewing. Each interview began with a discussion of the participants' demographic characteristics and family backgrounds. Although I did not anticipate the first section of the interview to result in much data, most participants divulged elaborate narratives and stories that presented important features of their life histories. Such features included detailed descriptions of their upbringing (both economically and emotionally), closeness to family members, parents, divorces, siblings, children, pets, religious or spiritual values, past and present living situations, current and ended relationships/marriages, sexual orientations, incomes, and disposable incomes.

The next several parts of the interview focused on education and occupations. In these sections, we discussed reasons for entering school and work, work structure and procedures, occupational vulnerability, wages, benefits, stress and adaptability, daily activities, health, social networks, group membership, relationships, sociability, gender, race, socioeconomic status, values, beliefs, aspirations, and goals. While we did not go through the themes and questions in exactly the same order in each interview, they were all addressed. This inductive approach allowed for emergent follow-up questions, participants' elaboration of responses and ideas, openness to changes in question sequence and order, and provided a way for me to continue to test concepts, categories, themes, and ideas in the field (Strauss 1987; Charmaz 2008).

Some unanticipated recurrent themes included health risks and deviant behaviors. Although I did not recruit participants based on health risks or deviant behaviors, stories on substance use, underage and of-age drinking, theft, sexual activity, sexism, racism, and classism

were divulged quite frequently by the participants regardless of employment position, income, or rank. These topics developed inductively when we spoke about, for example, work procedures, socialization, social networks, stress, friendships, romantic relationships, and tips.

Sampling

To broaden past research, I purposely sampled a wide gamut of restaurant workers; I sampled restaurant *workers* rather than particular *restaurants* to gain access to different restaurant environments. Likewise, I moved from a sole focus on waiters to include a variety of workers employed in different positions. After receiving IRB approval, I began to sample close contacts. Afterwards, I used snowball sampling techniques (Sudman and Kalton 1986; Lofland and Lofland 1995) to interview referrals (Berg 2004) with whom I had no connection. Snowball sampling can be especially useful for interviews that may lead to conversations about the unconventional (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). I employed theoretical sampling in the later stages of my research to help develop my conceptual categories and themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Corbin and Strauss 2008). Specifically, I paid particular attention to *age* and *employment position* to examine whether experiences among workers with different identities and statuses varied.

Participants

The sample includes 24 male and 28 female bussers, hosts, food runners/expeditors, servers, bartenders, cooks/chefs, and managers between the ages of 18 and 48 from metropolitan cities in California and Colorado. California and Colorado were current residences; however, some participants have also worked in other states. I mention metropolitan cities to indicate that the informants represent a heterogeneous mix of individuals, not just college students sampled from college towns. Among the 52 participants, I had multiple interactions and follow-up

conversations with about half of them. The majority of the participants have worked at two or more different restaurants, so they provided me with experiences from well over 70 full-service establishments.

Typically, the employees in this study have worked many years (mean = 9 years), in different positions (often concurrently), in several restaurants, and in U.S.-owned, full-service restaurants (independent, chain/corporate, casual, and fine dining). To clarify, full-service constitutes table service and a full bar. Through this distinction, I excluded interviewees who have worked only in diners, fast-food establishments, or mom-and-pop type of eateries. These types of restaurants also generally maintain a chain of command: owners, general managers (sometimes regional managers), managers, and then hourly employees (i.e., bussers, hosts, expeditors or food runners, servers, bartenders, and hourly managers, shift managers, or supervisors). In addition, they have a tipping system that is predominantly individualized rather than pooled. All but three participants have worked in multiple employment positions, and many of them have held more than one position at a time; for example, some managers also hold server positions or servers also hold bartender positions. For the most part, the employees have had similar occupational experiences regardless of the position in which they currently work. Of the participants, 86.5 percent reported holding part-time positions.

Half the sample claimed white as their race/ethnicity, and the other half claimed black/African American, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, European, and bi- or multi- racial/ethnic backgrounds. Half the sample indicated having a middle-class upbringing, and the other half varied between lower-working-class, lower-working-middle-class, upper-middle-class, and upper-class upbringings. In our discussion about socioeconomic status, the participants self-determined their class upbringing, based largely on estimates of their parents' employment,

income, and assets. The participants reported incomes ranging between \$2,400 and \$53,000 annually, with a mean of \$26,457.69, as shown in Table 1 below. For non-salaried workers, their incomes included their disclosed wages and tips. These incomes are consistent with national income statistics for full-service restaurant employees (BLS 2013b). The four participants who reported making under \$10,000 annually spent most of their time working as hosts.

	N	%
< \$10,000	4	7.7
\$10,000-\$20,999	18	34.6
\$21,000-\$30,999	11	21.2
\$31,000-\$40,999	14	26.9
\$41,000-\$50,000	2	3.8
>\$50,000	3	5.8
Total	52	100.0

Most of the participants disclosed having high levels of education (see Table 2). Although one participant had only a high school diploma, the other 51 participants varied in highest level of educational attainment from some college to a master's degree.

	N	%
High school diploma	1	1.9
Some 2-year college	10	19.2
Associate's degree	3	5.8
Culinary arts degree	4	7.7
Some 4-year college	20	38.5
Bachelor's degree	12	23.1
Master's degree	2	3.8
Total	52	100.0

For further details on descriptive data, see Table 4 in Appendix B.

Transcribing, Coding, and Analysis

This study draws on over 1100 single-spaced pages of interview transcriptions. I transcribed each digitally recorded interview myself, and I listened to each interview several times. To

capture the informants' voices in as pure a form as possible, I stopped and rewound numerous times to transcribe the interviews verbatim. By and large, I included all the participants' "like's," "um's," laughter, sighs, pauses, and emotional intonation shifts (e.g., frustration, anger, sadness, etc.). I listened to the interviews so many times that, even today, the participants' voices echo in my head when I read the transcriptions. Even though this process was taxing, it was also advantageous for the coding phase because I became rather familiar with the data early on.

To analyze the data, I went through several cycles of coding. I entered the participants' demographic characteristics and personal background information into SPSS to create tables and have access to the descriptive data in one place. I then read through each interview and holistically coded for broad topic areas by highlighting large block passages, which prepared me for more detailed coding. Some holistic codes include passages on educational and occupational history, restaurant employment entrance, workplace procedures, tipping practices, friendships, health, unconventional behaviors, goals, and demographic characteristics (e.g., race, class, and gender). I often used memo writing to help make sense of the broad topics as they were identified (Charmaz and Belgrave 2012). Most of my memos were freewrites framed around key passages and words from the interviews. For instance, I wrote about the relationship between workplace procedures and unconventional behaviors.

In another round of coding, I themed the highlighted passages with relevant concepts, phrases, and sentences. Some examples include "getting in," "fun," "good money," "friendships," "the give and take of the restaurant," "many chances," "managerial practices," "substance or alcohol use," "unauthorized comping," "justifications," "hard worker," "until I get a real job," "aspired careers," "feeling of being stuck," "multiple identities," and "accelerated

maturity.” Additional memo writing, at this point, helped guide my thought processes and assisted in advancing what seemed like disparate pieces of information into coherent patterns and categories. To show an example, I spent time memoing about the idea of “fun” and its role in aging and occupations. These memos facilitated a bridge between the data and analyses.

Before feeling comfortable with the themes, I went back into the field on several occasions to discuss my conclusions with key informants. Not only did I crosscheck and confirm conclusions in the field, I drew on my intimate knowledge of restaurants (with restraint) to feel confident in the data (Charmaz 2008). After feeling reassured about my coding methods, I spent time theoretically coding the themes to flesh out a primary overarching theme of the research. Throughout this course of coding, I continued to write memos, review my fieldnotes, and speak with key informants. This type of inductive research allowed for preliminary categories and patterns to lead into theory-building (Becker and Geer 1960; Goetz and LeCompte 1981).

In addition to the interview transcripts, I had many pages of typed notes. On my computer, I set up folders entitled “fieldnotes,” “analytical notes,” “methodological notes,” and “free writing.” In these folders, I have files of fieldnotes, memos, and free writes. Although the notes were not the primary source of data for this dissertation, they helped me compare and contrast personal accounts and behaviors, think through conversations, interactions, and ideas, and process methodological issues and emerging theories.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

How objective does the researcher need to be to do good research? A bias against the group or person being interviewed may block access or distort the results, but too much sympathy can also be blinding. On the other hand, neutrality is probably not a legitimate goal in qualitative research. For one thing, it is impossible to attain. Even if a neutral role were possible, it is not desirable, because it does not equip the researcher with enough empathy to elicit personal stories or in-depth description. (Rubin and Rubin 1995:13)

Having worked in the restaurant industry for such a long time, I gained entrée without difficulty. Making close contacts and remaining friends with several current restaurant employees helped me enter the field with ease. My complete membership role (Adler and Adler 1987) as a restaurant worker not only gave me access to a wide range of possible interviewees but also created empathy with the participants. On the one hand, this role allowed me to elicit in-depth personal stories. On the other hand, it raised concerns about my role as a researcher employed in the restaurant industry and a friend to many restaurant employees. These concerns included issues with personal bias, misrepresentation, and sampling.

Qualitative researchers can often go through periods when they are “not neutral, distant, or emotionally uninvolved” (Rubin and Rubin 1995:12), and I knew that my complete membership and personal involvement could potentially bias my observations and conclusions. To achieve in-depth thick description without distorting the results, I aimed to maintain a balance between empathy and neutrality. Furthermore, I limited my existing assumptions to avoid personal bias (Lofland and Lofland 1995). In other words, I tried to restrict the assumptions I had formed about the restaurant industry prior to this study. When particular themes that I expected in the beginning did not arise inductively, I did not solicit such responses. For instance, I initially assumed that the participants would resent the restaurants they worked in because of the low wages. On the contrary, all the participants described feeling warmheartedly about their workplaces and many even stated that they loved their restaurants. In addition, I crosschecked opposing assumptions in the field by observing, interviewing, and talking to key informants and referrals rather than simply using my knowledge of the restaurant to deny or confirm the claims.

The other methodological concerns I had related to misrepresentation of the participants and diversity of the sample. Of course, qualitative researchers do not want to misrepresent their

informants. But I had personal concerns in addition to the methodological need for accuracy. Because of the close connection I have with many of the participants and the research setting, I wanted to portray both accurately. To do so, I discussed emergent themes with the participants throughout the research process, and I had some of them read my work. Lastly, my complete membership role alerted me to the pitfall of sampling participants too similar to myself. To resolve this, I intentionally avoided over-sampling close contacts and aimed for diversity as much as possible.

Questions of Validity and Reliability

I do not claim that my sample is representative of the entire restaurant industry. However, I argue that “sociological miniaturism” allows researchers to examine large-scale social phenomena by investigating small-scale social situations (see also Stolte, Fine, and Cook 2001). In other words, the restaurant setting and the case of restaurant workers in this study shed light on larger social circumstances within the restaurant industry. Moreover, my research contributes to the study of identities, work and occupations, the life course, crime and deviance, and “meaningful” lives. The validity of the conclusions came from continuous comparative analysis, data verification, and theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Warren and Karner 2010). I took several measures to enhance the reliability of my analyses. In particular, I used multiple qualitative methods, and I systematically repeated these methods over a long span of time. Additionally, I interviewed restaurant workers who worked in different restaurants and had varying demographic backgrounds. Again, because most of the 52 participants worked in two or more different restaurants, they contributed experiences from well over 70 full-service establishments. I did not replicate this study for observational compatibility or to use statistical

analysis to cast doubt on “by chance” occurrences, but as Adler and Adler (1994) would argue, the qualitative methods that I used yield accurate insights about social groups under inquiry.

CHAPTER 3

BECOMING A RESTAURANT WORKER

I've been in the restaurant industry for years and years, almost ten years now. I have worked in six restaurants. I started working when I was 14. I got a work permit because I crashed my mom's car, and she made me get a job so I could pay off the car...Most of the restaurant jobs I have gotten have been through friends. Yeah, a friend of mine was always working at my first job bussing, and she was like, "yeah, they're looking for bussers, come in and apply," so I did, and I got the job...With the fine dining Mexican place, I think I found it in the paper, and I went in and applied...I think just the more restaurant experience I had the better...The main motivation for working in the restaurant industry was, well, quick, fast money, definitely to help pay for school...it's just one of those jobs that it's easy to keep, it's flexible hours, it's convenient, and you know, all you really have to do is be a loyal employee, you know. You don't really need, necessarily, like a certain amount of education to be like in it. (Lucie, 23)

In the extant research on restaurants, there is little systematic effort to examine or analyze when, how, and why people enter restaurant employment and how long they remain employed there.

Other ethnographies on restaurants do not make the age upon workplace entrance, the means of entrance, the reasons for entrance, or the duration of employment a central focus (e.g., Whyte 1948; Spradley and Mann 1975; Mars and Nicod 1984; Paules 1991; Fine 1996; Gatta 2002; and Erickson 2009). Some of those studies briefly mention the topic of restaurant entrée, but the treatment seldom goes beyond anecdotes, predominantly from women working as waitresses.

The literature depicts restaurant employees as, on one hand, older permanent workers (Ehrenreich 2001; Taylor 2009), or, on the other hand, as adolescents engaged in temporary employment (Arnett 2004). In general, however, most of the work and occupations literature suggests that lower-level service sector jobs (e.g., food and beverage services) constitute the majority of what "young workers" between the ages of 15 and 24 occupy (Loughlin and Barling 1999). This category includes a "diverse" group of people such as high school dropouts and

part-time student workers. More recently, studies show that the average age of restaurant workers is rising, and many adult restaurant workers enter the trade for the first time in their late twenties or early thirties (Coomes 2011).

As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, research indicates that restaurant employees encounter low wages, minimal benefits, and issues pertaining to race, class, gender, and health risks. In this chapter, I additionally illustrate how social media, news outlets, and even scholars commonly regard restaurant work in a derogatory manner. I argue that a thorough investigation of restaurant entrance can provide an informed understanding of when, how, and why people come into restaurant work and for how long. This exploration, in turn, will shed light on why people enter the restaurant industry despite its stigmatized status and the considerable criticism it receives. Furthermore, examining the discursive strategies that the participants used to talk about restaurant work reveals the cultural paradoxes they faced and the identity work they did.

In this chapter, I first present the pejorative depictions of restaurant work in social media, news outlets, and scholarly literature. Second, I describe when, how, and why employees enter restaurant work. I proceed with a discussion of the meanings they assign to their employment, both retrospectively and in the present, considering whether they see themselves as holding a job or a career. Next, I examine how the workers make sense of their stigmatized occupational identities and negotiate “legitimate” occupational identities. Finally, I discuss the implications of my conclusions for the study of identities and occupations more broadly.

“GOOD JOBS” VERSUS “BAD JOBS”

Although my intention in this research is not to conflate “restaurant worker” with “waitress” or “waiter,” media commonly associate restaurant workers in this manner, which I argue constitutes the predominant societal view of restaurant workers as well. More importantly, media frequently

characterizes restaurant work unfavorably. Exploring the topic of restaurant work on the Google search engine reveals that restaurant positions, in particular, waitresses, waiters, and dishwashers, rank among the top 10 worst jobs in the United States based on the criteria of physical labor, job opportunities, poor work environment, and high stress (Brienza 2012). Oddly, these restaurant positions did not make the top 10 list in 2013 even though the characteristics of restaurant work and the “worst job” criteria remained the same; however, “head cook” was added to the 2014 list as number six (Kensing 2013; 2014). Other media suggest that restaurant work is for the uneducated. For example, an Education Connection (2012) commercial features a dancing, diner waitress in a pink dress and white apron, singing the catchy, rhyming lines about a projected higher salary in a job requiring more education:

I'm working for an hourly wage
 I went to high school
 Didn't do great
 Still I gotta make more cash
 More education is what I'm looking at
 When I get a degree
 I will make a bigger salary (on the screen of the commercial it reads, “Make \$25,000 More Each Year”)
 So now I've got to see which college is right for me
 I went on the internet and found education connection
 I took some pretest to find out my direction
 I'm taking my classes online
 Getting my degree on my own time
 Education connection matched me with the right college for free.

In addition to websites and television commercials, television shows and movies exemplify how people perceive restaurant workers as something less than, especially when the workers are purported to have skills beyond what the restaurant requires. For instance, in the episode entitled “You Must Remember This,” from the television show *House* (2011), a patient who works as a waitress and has a literal perfect memory, has the following conversation with her doctor after she asks her to recall her alcohol consumption:

Waitress: Two light beers November sixteenth, one really bad glass of pinot on the seventeenth, nothing from the eighteenth.

Doctor: Shouldn't you be working for NASA or something?

Waitress: You mean, why am I *just a waitress*?

Doctor: [stammers] No, I didn't mean, I'm sorry, I, I, I...

Waitress: It's ok. Remembering something, it's not the same as understanding it. I'm not a genius, I love my job, I'm great at it, keeps my mind busy.

Another example of media underscoring the perceived negative value of restaurant workers is in the apocalyptic supernatural film *Legion* (Steward 2010). When pregnant waitress, Charlie, learns that she is carrying the child savior of mankind, she questions her great import by exclaiming, "I'm nobody, I'm just a waitress!" Numerous other examples like these appear throughout popular culture and continue to reproduce inequality by marginalizing restaurant workers.

Even in more esteemed media, contemporary news outlets debut recent reports on the problematic state of the "good job deficit" and the disappearance of "good jobs" indicating a "bad job" growth in manual labor and service sector (e.g., food, retail) positions (e.g., Rampell 2012). These news stories contend that recent high school and college graduates face a crisis when having to take "temporary jobs" or so-called bad jobs, such as in food service, because of the disappearance of good jobs. With pictures of waitresses on the front covers of these news stories, media are not subtle about depicting restaurant work as "bad work." Even more, an article in the *New York Times* reads, "Clearly, positions in retail and food services are not the best use of the hard-earned skills of college-educated workers, who have gone to great expense to obtain their sheepskins" (Rampell 2013). This statement embodies the following assumptions. First, service work is bad work meant only for the low skilled and low educated. Second, college graduates are "hard working" and thus "clearly" deserve "good jobs." Finally, one's salary should be commensurate with the amount of money one spends on a degree.

By neglecting to critique these adopted assumptions, news writers disregard the extent to which people have agency. Such an oversight leads one to the supposition that if a person had a choice and chose to work in a restaurant, this probably indicates a flaw in that person's character. Additionally, what about the underprivileged? Should only the reputed hard working with the resources to go to college possess good jobs? Indirectly conflating "bad jobs" with "low-skilled people who do not work hard" creates a pervasive stereotype about restaurant workers. At the same time, there is a suggestion that certain people deserve to work in "bad jobs" while others do not. Simply because one goes to college does not mean that one is prepared for all types of "good jobs." Incidentally, spending money on college or taking out student loans does not guarantee an equal return.

Following the theme found in the media, many scholars have expounded on the topic of "good jobs" versus "bad jobs" in the United States. Some book titles include *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs* (Kalleberg 2011), *Where are all the Good Jobs Going?* (Holzer et al. 2011), and *Good Jobs America* (Osterman and Shulman 2011). Not only do news articles about bad jobs feature pictures of waitresses, so do academic books about bad jobs. Kalleberg's (2011) book cover features a striking dichotomy between a picture of a bright and cheery young woman working in an office next to the words "Good Jobs" and a picture of a bleak and wrinkled older woman in a waitress uniform next to the words "Bad Jobs." A search on Google Scholar since 2009 alone reveals over 1,000 scholarly articles on the same topic. Prior to 2009, some article titles consist of "Bad Jobs in America" (Kalleberg et al. 2000), "Good Jobs versus Bad Jobs" (Acemoglu 2001), and "The Decline of Good Jobs" (Schmitt 2008). The general definition of a "bad job" is one with low pay and without health insurance and pension benefits. In addition, bad jobs are those that typically fail to provide paid vacation and sick leave, job security, and family-centric

policies. Although there is value in understanding the characteristics of different types of jobs to create awareness and possible social change, most of the good job, bad job literature pigeonholes and reifies restaurant work as “bad” and “poor-quality” without considering the reasons why the employees would regard restaurant work as “good.” I consider these reasons in this chapter and more comprehensively in Chapter 4.

Comparable to news media, scholarly literature brushes off the advantages of restaurant employment. Furthermore, perhaps unintentionally, much of the academic literature on restaurants overlooks the degree to which employees have agency. On another note, work and occupations scholars often do not acknowledge that restaurant workers may choose to forgo college or begin college but do not finish. Consequently, these lines of thought stigmatize those who work in the restaurant industry and further stigmatize restaurant workers who have college degrees and choose to work in restaurants. Although structural or economic forces beyond one’s control may limit one’s agency to some extent, the data I collected from interviews with restaurant workers suggests the need for a more nuanced perspective. To begin to build this perspective, I turn first to accounts of when, how, and why people enter into the restaurant industry, despite the general pessimistic view of the work.

ENTERING THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

Rather surprisingly, the predominant negative societal view of restaurant work did not pervade the participants’ minds when seeking employment. By and large, they had no gloomy conceptual or structural understanding of the restaurant. For instance, after describing his restaurant entrance as a busser at age 16, Caleb, now a head server, said, “I didn’t know what I was walking in to [laughs]...The first time I worked in the restaurant, it was entirely new to me when I got there. I mean the servers raised me since I was 16-years-old on, more than my dad

did, I was easily corrupted [laughs].” What some of the participants did describe hearing about restaurant employment prior to applying generally reflected the auspicious side of working in a restaurant. For example, Brian, a 34-year-old bartender and shift manager, explained, “I started dating a girl who was a bartender at a chain steakhouse and like just hanging out with her and all of her friends and like all the money they made in tips. I remember how she always had pockets full of cash when we went out, and she kind of egged me on like, ‘you need to get into a tipped profession, like you make more money there.’” Here, Brian described the pecuniary benefits from restaurant employment.

Age upon Entrance

Among the 52 participants, 43 entered in their teens, 8 entered in their twenties, and one entered at age 33. Although current statistics show that restaurant employees are increasingly entering the work for the first time in their late twenties and early thirties, the vast majority of the participants in this study represent “young worker” entrance (between the ages 15 and 24). For many of those who entered in their teens, the restaurant was their first job. However, some held other jobs prior to the restaurant positions, such as the food runner and server, Bianca, who entered when she was 16 years old:

Before working in my current restaurant, I babysat a lot. And then I worked at a BBQ chain restaurant in Texas. And then I worked at a fast food burger place. And then I worked at a women’s lingerie store for like a week, and I was like, “I can’t fold panties every single day and watch people just mess them up and have to refold them again! I can’t do it!” So I quit that. And then I started working at my current nationwide sports bar, chain restaurant.

Before entering restaurant work, when entrée occurred later, some participants were serving in the military, others were pursuing different occupational paths, some were in college and working at various service sector jobs, and a few were getting their culinary or cosmetology

degrees. Storie, a sous chef who entered the restaurant when she was 20 years old, was in a different profession entirely:

I used to work as a teacher's aid in a daycare, and I did that in high school, and then as I graduated I took a year off, was a teacher's assistant for a year in a regular classroom, but I primarily worked with children with difficulties, like Asperger's syndrome, or difficult times reading.

The eldest (George, 48) in the study was a self-proclaimed "professional student" who traveled, entered a marriage, and then began working in restaurants, during which time he had a child, completed his master's degree, went through a divorce, and is currently pursuing a career in holistic healing while working in restaurants.

Means of Entrance

Regardless of the age upon entrance, the participants initially entered restaurant employment in one of two ways. Some gained access to restaurant work through a social network. Specifically, they entered restaurant positions with the help of a referral from a friend, family member, girlfriend/boyfriend, or an acquaintance. After clerical work, temping, a position in a legal firm, and losing that post of employment, Maria (35 years old), now a general manager, explained that a friend helped her enter the restaurant industry, "my friend was managing at this restaurant, and I asked her to help me get a job there, so she got me a job there serving. I was a server for several years, and then I started managing just a little bit and serving at the same time, and now I am a full-time manager." For Wayne (19 years old), restaurant work is common among his family members:

So the first fine dining restaurant, both my brothers and my dad worked there at the time, and my dad had established a relationship with the manager, and I went to school with the owner's children, so I kind of had an in there, never really went through an interview or an application process. They just knew me based on my family's merits, and I just kind of got a job like that.

Alternatively, Becky (29 years old) had an acquaintance at school:

In a class I had at my university, I knew somebody who had been at my community college as well and he was working at my first restaurant job. And he told his manager I was looking for a job, and then he introduced me to his manager at a bar, actually over shots of tequila [laughs]. And um, she gave me a 30 second interview and then said, “come in tomorrow and we’ll do a real interview.” And so I interviewed, and I got the job. So I guess I was referred.

Other participants initially engaged in restaurant work by happenstance. They often claimed that they “just fell into it” whether by accident, by fate, or by luck. As Tobias (32 years old) said, “It was sorta just by like luck. I walked into the restaurant and asked if they were hiring. And they were like, ‘yeah, actually we just lost a hostess.’ So I filled out an application, they did a short interview, and I started the next day training.” These by-chance restaurant enrollments occurred in several ways. First, some participants explained wanting or needing a job and simply walking into as many different workplaces as possible, filling out applications, interviewing, and getting the restaurant position relatively on the spot:

Um, the first job at the restaurant, it was my first job, and my parents wouldn’t let me get a driver’s license until I got a job. Um, so I applied everywhere, literally 36 different places I applied, and I only had two interviews. The first one was at a shoe store at the mall and the second one was at the restaurant...I just walked in, and asked for an application...I didn’t know anyone that worked there, I had never eaten there before. It was actually the first time I had been in there. It was just chance I guess that I ended up working there. (Nadia, 20)

Second, many of them frequented their places of employment prior to working there and management asked them to apply, or they applied because they enjoyed the food. For example, Daisy (19 years old) disclosed, “at the restaurant, that job just sort of fell into my lap actually, ‘cause the manager at the time asked me if I wanted a job while I was eating there with my family.”

The ways in which the participants gained access to restaurant employment reflect both “strong ties” and “weak ties” (Granovetter 1973). Granovetter measured *strength* by the time,

emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal services of each tie. His research highlighted the importance of the strength of weak ties. For restaurant workers, I would add that there is strength in strong ties, weak ties, and no ties. In other words, participants entered with a strong tie (e.g., friend), a weak tie (e.g., acquaintance), and by also serendipitously walking into a restaurant, filling out an application, and landing a position without a tie. The no tie phenomenon likely reflects the varying employee turnover rate specific to each restaurant location and the minimal skills or education required for the job. As a final note on entrance, I want to bring attention to how various participants loosely use the term “friend” to in fact describe a weak tie. This misnomer is present in Spock’s (22 years old) account of his restaurant entrance:

Ok, well, I was looking for a job, and I had met my friend through a class, and I saw him there when I went to the restaurant. And I had remembered that he worked there and we were friends *kind of* on Facebook, and so I messaged him and asked him if there are any openings at his restaurant. And he said, “Yeah” and he told me to apply because there they had an opening because one of their hosts was leaving, so I applied as quickly as I could. And he’s like, “Turn it in today, and I’ll tell them that one of my friends is trying to apply.” And he’s actually got really good standing with the managers because he’s worked there so long. I think he’s going on 3 or 4 years having worked at that restaurant, so they trust his opinion. So I went in and turned in the application. I had to do like 4 interviews to go through each of the 4 managers. You have to interview with each one and then you kind of move on, but I think he definitely played a part in getting me the job just because I wouldn’t have known about it, and probably if he hadn’t said, “oh this is ‘my friend,’ and I trust him,” they might not have looked at me as closely or considered me.

Reasons for Entrance

Notwithstanding participants’ age, I heard two consistently prevailing reasons for originally entering restaurant employment. The first obvious reason was to have an income. With one exception, all the participants described income as the number one reason for getting in the restaurant industry. The sous chef, Storie, is the one and only participant who said she entered for a reason other than for an income, which was to cook. I most commonly heard the

participants say what Jesse (45 years old) succinctly disclosed, “I got into the restaurant for the money.” I should clarify that the term “money” means a paycheck, paper cash, or both. This distinction is important because not all the participants were aware of the amount of cash they could earn, and some entered the restaurant in non-tipped positions. Moreover, some needed money to survive or make a living while others did not. The participants also revealed wanting money or that their parents encouraged or required them to get a job to earn money.

Describing financial need, Naomi (25 years old) stated, “when I applied for the restaurant, I kind of needed the money to survive because I had no financial from my parents, so basically I just needed a job, and just to go to school, so you know, and just to pay my way through school.” Conversely, Orchid (19 years old) explained, “it was my choice” to begin working in a restaurant because she resided at home with her parents, both of whom are restaurant employees, and they paid for bills and rent. However, she still had a number of reasons for beginning to work. Orchid mentioned that all her friends were working, she wanted to “get more independent” by “doing things” on her own, she desired to buy her own food as the only vegetarian in the household, and she wanted to help her parents with bills when necessary. Finally, Icarus (22 years old) exemplified parental encouragement when he said, “I was just at home doing school stuff, and my parents were like, ‘you should probably get a job.’”

Although several participants neither realized the amount of cash they could earn prior to entering the restaurant nor initially entered tipped positions, in many cases, the participants heard tales from a friend, sibling, or an acquaintance about the potential cash flow:

I had friends who worked at the restaurants, and they said they were making like at least 50 bucks a night and I was like, “oh my god, that’s so much money for a sixteen-year-old!” So I was like, ok, I’ll do this and see if I like it...and then I picked my current restaurant job off of Craigslist, and I got hired, so I was desperate, but same thing, I knew I’d make money, and it’s a sports bar, so I knew I was going to make more money, at

least I thought I was gonna make more money, so it's all about money [laughs] apparently. (Edna, 22)

Well, my sister worked at this restaurant waiting tables and that was how I got in there really. And she made good money, and she had a good time. And she got me my job bussing tables, so I think that's why I got that job, and it was money, 'cause I was young, like 14 or 15, and it was money. I wanted my own money, and, you know, bussing tables when you're 14, I mean I made good money, like 60 dollars a day. That's a shit load of money for a fourteen-year-old in like 1986 or whatever, you know, that's good money. (Molly, 36)

The second reason offered for entering the restaurant industry was that the workers found restaurant jobs convenient in several ways. Many participants emphasized the ease with which they could attain restaurant jobs. Moreover, the flexible schedules often allowed them to attend school or pursue other goals. When I talked with Tia (24 years old) about her reasons for working in a restaurant, she first said, "Money! [laughs] It's good money for the amount of work you do for a part-time job. Working in a restaurant is a good amount of money to pay for school. It's the best part-time job that you can have for going to school and the amount of money you make." She then added, "When I first started working in the food service industry, I was going to school during the day, so then I would work at night."

After completing his service in the U.S. Air Force, Pedro (28 years old) entered his first restaurant job while in a two-year program for his first of two Associates of Arts degrees. Describing this restaurant job, he explained, "that's basically my first waiting job I've ever had and it worked, you know, conveniently with school and stuff like that and all that, like I'd work a double every Friday and then two doubles in a row every other week, Fridays and Saturdays, so it was just kind of convenient, and the money was good, and it was always busy." Similarly, Portia (37 years old) also combined money, school, and goals in her explanation:

Money. [pause] Well, money and friends and it's fun. I didn't really expect anything when I first became a host, well like I don't really know what I was thinking. I mean I was like 16 and wanted a job and didn't want to live at home forever. I needed to pay for

my bills and other stuff. And it's really just like a good job to have for flexible hours to go to school and to pursue a career.

Furthermore, Hal (35 years old) discussed easy access, money, and flexible hours,

I chose to work in a restaurant because that was where you could get jobs real easily. You could walk into a lot of restaurants, they were always hiring. It might be a little bit harder now because of the economy, or the whole recession, but back then, you could just walk in; all the restaurants were always hiring 'cause people were in and out constantly. And it's good money, it's like, you work, and you're done, and you don't have to wait for a paycheck to have money, you have money that night to play with, so, yeah...pros, quick money, money that day, really cool people to work with, flexible hours, and you learn a lot about people skills, and communication skills, it is good for any job you might have.

In contrast to news reports that stress a “good job deficit,” I want to note that all the participants entered the restaurant by *choice*. Choice is an important discursive tool that they used to negotiate incongruent occupation identities, which I discuss later in this chapter. In any case, the participants did not take on restaurant employment as a last resort only after they had exhausted all possible options for “good jobs.” Likewise, even though the majority of them had some higher education, they did not indicate taking restaurant employment because of the disappearance of good jobs. Of course, some participants had more of a need for income because they were supporting themselves; however, the prevalent “forced into restaurant” sentiment does not resonate with this research. Rather, their accounts indicated agency, and it was through choice that they entered the restaurant industry. Additionally, they saw several positive qualities of their employment.

PERCEPTIONS OF INITIAL EMPLOYMENT DURATION

In spite of the ability to choose restaurant employment and the benefits of the work, the participants' initial perceptions of their employment duration begin to highlight the ambivalence they had with their work—an often recurring theme in this dissertation. As I began this project, I anticipated a somewhat balanced divide between those who entered as perceived short-term

employees and those who entered as perceived long-term employees. This was not the case. All but one (Storie) of the participants indicated that they entered expecting short-term employment in the restaurant industry. At the same time, I expected to find a rather even split between those who saw themselves as holding “jobs” in restaurants and those who understood their work in terms of a “career.” This assumption was also inaccurate. For all but Storie, whom I will discuss below, the entrance story detailed a sojourn in a job rather than a lasting career. Likewise, not one said they had grown up thinking they would have a career in the restaurant industry.

In dictionaries, the distinction between “job” and “career” is rather subjective and difficult to discern. For instance, a “job” is “a post of employment” and a “career” is “an occupation or profession, especially one requiring special training, followed as one’s lifework” (Dictionary.com 2013). To the participants, the key difference is a temporal one; by and large, they considered a “job” temporary, whereas “career” referred to the long-term, and the general entrance story came with the caveat of an ephemeral stay. They also provided other characteristics of a career, which included much of what the literature defines as “standard work,” or work that is full-time, benefited, and salaried (Kalleberg et al. 2000).

Among the 51 perceived short-term workers, whom I call *perceived sojourners*, their self-reported expected employment durations are very much alike. The duration account mirrors, often word-for-word, what Seymour (25 years old), already 10 years working in restaurants, stated, “I don’t plan to work in the restaurant for the rest of my life.” Another part of the perceived sojourners’ stories included the expectation to leave the restaurant in approximately one or two years, but only after they found a “better” job or entered a “career,” and/or when they finished various levels of education. Tobias anticipated only a summer or a year of employment:

Um, well, I was getting out of high school, and I wasn't planning on going to college, but like I did think about community college, but I just needed a job. And I was like only planning on working in that restaurant for like a summer or like maybe even a year, but then, things happened, community college didn't really happen, but I'm working on what I want to do next, like I'm not going to work in the restaurant for the rest of my life, but I'm just not really sure what I wanna do yet for like my career, for the rest of my life.

Whereas Orchid projected staying until she is done with her education:

I don't want to work in a restaurant forever [laughs]. I have different ideas of what I want to do, and since I am studying, I am grateful for that, that hopefully I can do something different, you know. But I do like restaurant work, 'cause you probably do make more money as a waitress than starting off in some office jobs you know, I've heard that before, so I plan to stay with it as long as I'm studying, and save up until I eventually find something that I like better.

The 51 perceived sojourners anticipated short-term stays. However, the lengths of their employment ranged between two and 25 years, and the majority of their employment durations, thus far, ranged between six and 25 years. I will discuss this shift to long-term employment momentarily, and I will more explicitly attend to the question of why they stay for extended periods of time in Chapter 4, reflecting directly on life course literature.

The perception of employment duration is different for one participant. Storie, a 23-year-old sous chef, is the only participant who entered with the intention of long-term employment and a potential career. In the beginning of this chapter, I introduced Storie as having had a disparate occupation before entertaining the idea of restaurant work. She worked in a daycare as a teachers aid, finished high school, continued on to work in a school as a teacher's assistant for children with disabilities, and then she went to culinary school without having worked in a restaurant before. After finishing culinary school in an accelerated one-year program and applying for kitchen positions, it took her about four months to get a job. Storie described starting in a low-level kitchen position and advancing through the ranks:

I started out in the pantry, and I worked my way up, I started out at the bottom. The pantry is the cold salad station, and our restaurant has four stations. So it goes salads, and

then it goes the oven, and then the grill, and then the sauté. So I worked each station, and I worked my way up until they finally offered me the sous chef position.

Storie's account is different from the perceived short-term workers because she entered the trade for which her education was intended, and she entered with the hope for long-term employment and a career. Throughout her interview, Storie said, "my career is extremely important to me, and I'm going to go far" as well as, "I just think I love it, it's my life, and I would never want to do anything else." Although Storie may have a different occupational mindset because she considered kitchen employment her "permanent job," I will show in subsequent sections and chapters how she, like the others, found a need to justify a "legitimate" occupational identity. In addition, Storie remained working for many of the same reasons as the perceived sojourners, and she had very similar experiences as they did.

TRANSITIONERS AND SETTLERS

Despite the participants' initial perceptions of employment duration, they explained much longer stays. The perceived sojourners unintentionally evolved into long-term employees, whom I call *transitioners*. Of those participants whose jobs turned long-term, some in fact also found themselves in careers. I call these participants *settlers*. Exactly when short-term turns into long-term depends on the particular individual. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, I will use contemporary definitions of "short-term" and "temporary employment"—12 months or less (Dictionary.com 2013; DOL 2013). Thus, the transitioners are those who have worked in the restaurant industry for over a year, but did not self-report as career restaurant employees, and the settlers are long-term employees who self-reported as career restaurant employees.

Transitioners

I know that I will stay as long as I have to, until I get something that pays more, but something that I'll like more...I didn't really think long-term when I started working at the restaurant...I guess I kind of thought in the back of my mind I'd have the job for a

while, but I didn't think I'd be there for three and a half years going on four, but it's kind of cool to know that I can hold a job for that long and not like lose it, yeah, but [laughs]. (Icarus, 22)

Transitioners are those who entered with perceptions of short-term employment durations, but have remained for two to 25 years. I do not call this category of employees transitioners only because they transitioned from short-term to long-term employees, I also call them transitioners because they all disclosed that they are as Molly put it, "in some sort of transition" to something else (e.g., intended career). Despite their lengths of employment, however, they continued to disavow that they are in careers. Even after some facetiously commented on the idea of how "fun" it would be to own a restaurant or bar, they made clear that restaurant work is not their "preferred" career or even a "realistic" career.

My inquiry about whether the transitioners could see themselves in a career in the restaurant industry elicited adamant contrary responses. For example, George said, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no. I never did. I think that would be the ultimate act of masochism, or to own a restaurant." Similarly, Chloe (24 years old) stated, "No, definitely not a career, I mean it could be for somebody if they're in the right position, and in the right kind of restaurant, or whatnot, but for me, personally, I don't see it as a career." Other transitioners also differentiated and distanced themselves from career restaurant workers by describing their projected careers. Aster (30 years old) does this when she said,

Well, I don't want to talk bad of restaurants, especially 'cause I like work in a restaurant, and I enjoy it, and I've been doing it for like, ugh, [pause] wow, over 10 years now [laughs], wow, maybe 11 now, but it's not like I said, "I want to work in a restaurant when I grow up," it's not like when people say like, "I wanna be a doctor when I grow up," or like, "I want to be a lawyer when I grow up," or like the president [laughs]. But yeah, so like right now, my career goal right now is to open up a hair salon, that's what I went to cosmetology school for, so no, restaurants, not a career for me, but like maybe for others it is.

What the transitioners unintentionally partake in is “defensive othering” or “identity work done by those seeking membership in a dominant group, or by those seeking to deflect the stigma they experience as members of a subordinate group” (Schwalbe et al. 2000:425). Doing so inadvertently aids the reproduction of inequality because the participants are reinforcing the dominant group’s (non-restaurant workers) claimed superiority and the stigma associated with restaurant work. Defensive othering is a “reaction to an oppressive identity” that commonly follows the frame: “There are indeed Others to whom this applies, but it does not apply to me” (p. 425). This process of identity work arises frequently, and I will discuss it further below.

In addition to the temporal aspect, which the transitioners felt distinguishes a job from a career, they also inferred that a career connotes prestige, specialized training, investment, and to some degree, ownership. Going into his sixth year in the restaurant industry, Caleb, like most participants who denied career-boundedness and permanence, articulated,

It’s not gonna be my career, for sure not. I don’t want to stay in the restaurant industry for the rest of my life. Um, but for now, it’s what I have to do to make a living, to pay my rent, to pay my phone bill, to put gas in my car. It’s work, um, not permanent, but it’s definitely work.

Even for workers in seemingly more permanent, benefited, higher paying positions, they have noncommittal undertones when I asked them about future employment plans:

Right now, I would say the good outweighs the bad. I mean there’s only a couple days that I have bad days, like where, oh my gosh, I don’t want to do this, but I mean I do enjoy my job...but I just don’t know if I could do it [manage] forever. (Abigail, 27)

I don’t know. I feel like that with my job now, I’ve been there for a long time, and that I should move on to like [pause]. Well, first of all, I don’t think I can make much more money there, so I don’t like think I can advance any higher than I am. And then, also, I just feel like it would be good for me to work somewhere else. But, at the same time, I don’t think I would want to manage a restaurant anywhere else. (Maria, 35)

Despite either the lack of interest in making restaurant work a career or the fickle attitude toward the permanence of the work, a considerable number of perceived short-term workers have

evolved into long-term restaurant employees. At the same time, there is an indefinite timeframe as to when they will exist or complete the transition to their projected aspirations and “actual” career goals.

Settlers

Settlers are a second category of employees that emerged from the data. This category of workers is much smaller and consists of long-term employees who self-reported as career folks. The size of this category likely relates to the length of and sampling in this study. It is possible that some transitioners have not shifted into settlers as of yet. In addition, I did not purposefully recruit participants who self-reported as holding restaurant careers. The employees in this category have worked in various positions for several years and—aside from Storie—slowly advanced into careers, which predominantly included managerial and culinary posts.

This was the case for Lilu, a 27-year-old manager. After explaining her job entrance through a friend in high school, Lilu stated, “Ever since then, I just really liked the restaurant business, the atmosphere, the kinda family-oriented way, uh, about restaurants. Uh, the food industry, and hospitality industry, really appealed to me since then.” Lilu continued to work in restaurants all through college because of the convenient schedule and large income. Having worked in several types of restaurants and in many different positions, Lilu indicated, “I ended up liking it a lot, and that’s why I continued on to manage in restaurants today. And, yeah, I plan on staying in the restaurant business; hopefully, I can work my way up to general manager someday, maybe not at my current job, but somewhere else, possibly, hopefully owning my own restaurant, you know, depending on how much money I save and how much experience I gain.” In follow-up conversations with Lilu in the last four years, she often said working in the restaurant industry is her career.

Other than settlers in managerial positions, the three participants who attained culinary degrees after entering the restaurant industry also became long-term career employees along the way. Acquiring a restaurant job through “one of his best friends,” Oliver (24 years old) began as a food runner, did a short stint as a server, busser, and bar back, went to culinary school three years after he entered the restaurant industry, and was an expeditor at the time of the interview. Although he did not initially expect a long-term career in the restaurant industry, Oliver anticipated entering the kitchen as a part-time chef within a few months while continuing to expedite. He moved on and said, “I am very loyal to this restaurant, my co-workers, and the owner. I respect this restaurant and I am very proud to work there. I hope this will be the last restaurant I work at, unless I find another place.” Despite Oliver’s loyalty, one hears a hint of tentativeness amidst his restaurant employment.

Perhaps several transitioners may eventually evolve into settlers, however, they did not self-report as career restaurant workers during this study. I proffer that the lack of commitment to a settler identity relates in part to the mainstream constructions of “legitimate” occupational identities, and the overall popular, public, and scholarly repugnance of restaurant work. In Pedro’s words, “Society doesn’t accept restaurant jobs as real careers, or at least that is in my opinion, people think that it is a job you do before you get a career, even though there isn’t a specific age to start and end working in restaurants.”

NEGOTIATING A “LEGITIMATE” OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY

An occupational identity tends to specify the kinds of organizations, and positions within them, in which one’s future lies, the places in which it is appropriate, desirable, or likely that one will work. (Becker 1970:183)

Both transitioners and settlers wanted and presented “legitimate” occupational identities.

Regardless of whether the participants perceived their employment as short-term or long-term

upon entrance or whether they appraised their employment as a job or a career, all of them indicated battling the predominantly unsavory perspective of restaurant work. They were keenly aware of the societally created division between short-term jobs and long-term careers (often referred to colloquially as “not real work” and “real work”) and when one or the other was more situationally appropriate and culturally normative. In turn, the participants perpetually justified their employment, hesitated to commit completely to the restaurant worker identity, and negotiated “legitimate” (or standardly established) occupational identities with “identity talk” also known as the active production of identity through talk (Howard 2000).

In general, an identity refers to “who or what one is, to the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others” (Gecas and Burke 1995:42). In addition, “Identities are the sets of meaning people hold for themselves that define ‘what it means’ to be who they are as persons, as role occupants, and as group members” (Burke 2004:5). An identity locates individuals in social groups, networks, roles, and settings. A person has ascribed identities such as an age, a racial, a class, or a gender identity. People can also hold achieved identities such as a student, a parent, or an occupational identity. Early social psychological literature indicated that occupational identity is important in the identity formation process (Erikson 1950). According to Fine,

Workers depend on images of their work and its characteristics to create occupational identity. These images are simultaneously public, subcultural, and personal. These images are not eternal, however, nor are they fully defined. In practice, workers use images and typifications when and if they seem appropriate: the bricolage of identity work. (1996:111-2)

The focus of this section is on what the participants constituted credible occupational identities, why they made the legitimate, illegitimate distinction, and how they negotiated their identities.

Reflecting on Stokes and Hewitt’s (1976) “Aligning Actions,” I argue that the participants in this study created and sustained “legitimate” occupational identities to reconcile

the misalignment between their current employment and culturally established understanding of normative careers to which people purportedly should aspire. Of course, legitimate occupational identities are subjective, but they nonetheless created a dilemma that the participants felt the need to discursively and rhetorically solve. To rectify this dilemma, the participants “did” what Snow and Anderson (1987) coined “identity work” or “anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996:115). Because popular press, public opinion, and scholarly literature often typify restaurant jobs as illegitimate long-term occupations, the participants were motivated to present their future, most often alternative, aspirations and career goals. By doing occupational identity work, the participants unintentionally reproduced inequality, stigmatized restaurant employment, and provided contradictory evaluations of it.

Future Aspirations and Career Goals

When the participants discussed their future aspirations and career goals, their accounts followed a general theme. They described an aspired occupation and explained why their current employment was not the end-of-the-line. The transitioners projected a diverse array of “legitimate” occupations including but not limited to nonprofit, government, criminal justice, psychiatry, banking, real estate, teaching in primary, secondary, or higher education, business, marketing, professional golfing, music, and cosmetology. Many envisioned entering these lines of employment after they finished higher education and/or went to graduate school.

When speaking about her career goals, Edna (22 years old) did occupational identity work through identity talk. First Edna explained, “I definitely want to do something with kids. I always kind of thought of juveniles more than homeless kids, but I don’t know, we’ll see where it takes me when I actually start working with the kids.” Even if that does not work out, Edna

said, “My fallback is to go get my teaching certificate and teach, but it doesn’t make crap for money apparently [laughs].” Later, Edna made an occupational “realness” distinction when saying, “I will somehow help people in a way. But *not* serving them ‘cause I’m just sick of dealing with people’s shit [laughs] ‘cause it’s not even like *real*.” She further explained realness when asserting,

I’m not helping people when I’m serving them. I’m just serving them, like, I’m not dealing with any of their *real issues*. I mean I do get to talk to them, which is why I still like doing it, and I do get to meet some crazy people, and I have fun with it, but it’s not like, I don’t know how to describe it, it’s not like *real problems*. It’s not like kids that are being abused, which is one of my main concerns, which is why I want to help people, or like families who are in trouble and need help, or need assistance for stuff. No, it’s just people who want to get drunk, that’s why I do it ‘cause I can handle that for now, but I don’t want to stick to it, it’s not a career, I don’t want to do that forever.

As Edna described her aspirations, she provided contradictory evaluations of restaurant work. She told me she both dislikes and likes the work. At the same time, she criticized restaurant work by dismissing its “realness.” The idea of realness in Edna’s identity talk relates to a “commitment to basic moral precepts” (Howard 2000) revolving around the norms of credible occupational identities. I will speak more on this in a moment as it is a common depiction that points to cultural embeddedness.

For settlers, “legitimate” occupational identities involved the mobility to advanced positions in the industry. These positions included sous chef, executive chef, general manager, regional manager, and restaurant owner. Explaining his entrance story and how he was in the process of making restaurant employment his career, Guy (35 years old) did occupational identity work by aspiring to a “real chef” career or becoming a restaurant owner:

I began as a server. I did that for like a few years. Was trying to figure out what I wanted to do. Made a lot of money and then I went to culinary school. That was a six-month program. Did some prep cook type stuff in a small restaurant, but that did not lead to a real chef position, so I quit. I got a job in a few other restaurants serving. Then at my next restaurant I went from serving to bartending, did that for like five years, but

that's not fulfilling. And then at my current restaurant, I saw a Craigslist ad that they were hiring for a prep cook, so I took that. I still pick up serving and bartending shifts at the other restaurant, but hopefully I'll move up to sous chef soon so I don't have to. That's what I want to end up doing now. I really do love food, and cooking, and maybe after all this, I can like open up a small place of my own.

In addition to advanced position mobility, settlers had ambitions for new experiences and expanded knowledge in the restaurant industry. For instance, Storie said,

I think like after a year of being a sous chef I think I'll probably think about leaving. I mean I could become the executive chef, but I don't think I'd wanna stay there. I want more experiences. There's only so much you can learn. I want to cook different foods than our restaurant cooks.

Despite long stretches in restaurant work, the participants were not despondent about their future aspirations and career goals. However, they paradoxically evinced both confidence and uncertainty when discussing them. Both transitioners and settlers negotiated an occupational identity that they deemed legitimate or "real."

The conception of "realness" appeared frequently in the participants' lexicon. It speaks to their cultural embeddedness and the norms about work and occupations. The idea that certain jobs have more realness than other jobs commonly pervades popular culture, especially in relation to restaurant employment. *Real* is defined as "true; existing as fact; being an actual thing; genuine; not counterfeit" (Dictionary.com 2013). Although restaurant work is by definition real, the participants explained that most people, especially outsiders, do not designate restaurant work as such. They additionally conveyed that "realness" of work includes things like prestige, permanence, and ownership. Also telling me that they aspired for careers that reflect these characteristics and that require some degree of specialized knowledge, the participants, perhaps unconsciously, protected normative measures of "realness" and "standard work." Despite wanting to defy conventional portrayals and evaluations of restaurant work as unreal,

their participation in “real job” identity work both defied and reified standard measures that segregate jobs from careers.

“Real Job” Identity Work

At the tables, when we spend time talking to our customers, a lot of times they ask, “So, what are you doing? Going to school?” And I say, “Yeah, blah, blah, blah.” Then they say, “What do you want to do for a real job?” And yeah, most people ask you know. And then when someone is leaving, we say, “Oh, yeah, he got a real job, she got a real job.” So that’s pretty common rhetoric, I guess you could say... And when I think about it, it just doesn’t seem like a welcoming environment for like a continuing job. It’s just a means to an ends until you find something permanent. (Icarus, 22)

The participants “did” identity work in the face of the pervasive “real job” rhetoric. The term “real job” is prevalent in the language and the lives of the participants and those whom I observed. The participants also told me that their customers and parents commonly adopted the “not a real job” rhetoric when referring to restaurant work. This language even appears in autobiographies about restaurants (e.g., Ginsberg 2001). The participants made the “real job” (legitimate occupation), “not a real job” (illegitimate occupation) distinction as a form of “occupational identity work.” Throughout the literature and this research, it is unclear how the “real job” rhetoric originated or why it is so widely disseminated, but this line of thought has a stigmatizing effect and regularly promotes the idea that restaurant work is an illegitimate occupation. Even if the flippant distinction between a “real job” and “not a real job” is unintentional, it devalues the jobs and those who work in them.

In conversations about occupational history and future goals, participants nonchalantly mentioned the term “real job.” For instance, Oliver (24 years old) began describing all the different restaurant positions in which he has worked and ended up talking about his friend and his now *real job*, “One of my best friends who doesn’t work at the restaurant anymore because he works at his real job now [pause], or his job of choice, he was a seasonal runner.” After

saying, “real job,” Oliver appeared to catch himself by pausing and then saying “or his job of choice.” This is interesting for a few reasons. First, Oliver suggested that restaurant work is not real work but probably recognized the irony in what he just said because he was making a career for himself in the restaurant industry. Second, he implied that people would not work in restaurants if they had a choice. Similarly, Naomi (25 years old) talked of choice as if she had none,

Um, nope I never thought that the restaurant would actually be my career of choice. If I had a choice, I'd be a schoolteacher, teaching little kids, but since I never finished school that never really played out the way I wanted it to. So um, yeah, no I never really thought the restaurant would be my career, but now that I look back, I'm kind of glad that I stayed with the restaurant because it's actually a good career. Now, as soon as I get my financial situation together [laughs], then I can probably start saving and then, you know, doing what I really want to do, but you know, but probably I'd go back to school and get my degree and probably open a small business up for daycare or something for little kids. So yeah, that's what I really want to do, that's what I always wanted to do.

Throughout Naomi's interview, she struggled back and forth with the idea of restaurant work as her career. She explained the enjoyment of restaurant work and the “love” of the people (employees and customers) “that make [her] want to stay in that kind of environment,” but also spoke of having no choice in the matter and the alternative career path that she has “always wanted to do.”

I highlight the importance of contradictions and specifically the term “choice” here because I argue that they are powerful discursive tools for negotiating incongruent occupational identities. In other words, the participants are resolving the discrepancy between their current employment identity and a normative long-term career identity. Comparable to when participants told me they both like/love and dislike/hate restaurant work, when participants first said they entered the restaurant industry by choice but then said they would work elsewhere if they had a choice, the participants are posing contradictory statements. Although some might

suggest disregarding contradictory data, scholars state that we should expect to see incoherence by virtue of the paradoxes of cultural life; and because people face cultural problems, they must reach for contradictory explanations (Pugh 2013).

I contend that the participants' contradictions help them justify why they are in stigmatized jobs and not in so-called "real jobs." Thus, the choice/no choice, like/dislike, love/hate, real job/not a real job, job/career, prep cook/real chef dichotomies are a type of identity work to negotiate incongruent occupational identities to self and others. The participants' discursive choices reflect cultural resources and are indicative of how restaurant workers embody the desire to enter careers deemed suitable or legitimate. I argue that this negotiation tool invokes a sense of power, self-directedness, agency, and control over one's life and future and speaks to the highly culturally embedded nature of the participants. As Fine wrote, "Work may be justified by workers, but this justification depends mightily on choices made by others" (1996:113). In this situation, the choices made by others are the ubiquitously held basic moral precepts about "real jobs."

So what is a real job? One scholar has defined "the first real job" as holding a position for at least six months (Borman 1991). In Rogers's (2000:114) study, temporary clerical workers and temporary attorneys believed that "real jobs" are "stable," "full-time," "male-dominated" employment, which is a definition that further marginalized temporary workers. In a follow-up question, when I directly asked the participants what a real job is, their conceptualization fit their definition of a "career" as well as the scholarly definition of "standard work." At the same time, they paradoxically considered their work as real regardless of the nonstandard characteristics. This occupational identity work came to light when Oliver said,

I would consider my job a real job, you know, but for most, like 95% of people would agree that jobs are real jobs that consist of an 8 to 5 schedule, and that would require a

college degree...you know what I mean? It's not considered a profession, at least not in the United States. Um, for the most part, the customers do not see it as a real job. But I wear a chef uniform to work, so the customers ask me plenty of questions about my life, like what I plan to do. Um, will I be working in the back, in the kitchen soon? Or what am I going to do in 2 years? And I always feel like I have to come up with some creative answer. But so far, my answer has been, I'm planning to travel to Spain in a month, just to learn more about food and culture 'cause that's what we are more focused on at that restaurant. And they always ask me if I'm gonna be on Top Chef. Stuff like that, and I always laugh, and I say, "Maybe." And I always end up saying I love cooking, but I know that's not all I am, or that doesn't define me as a person, and I don't think any profession should define anybody as a person.

When I asked him why he felt like he has to come up with some creative answer, he asserted, "Just because that is what people expect."

Even when the workers believed their jobs were "real," their discursive choices mirrored prevailing norms about occupations. This narrative was not unique to Oliver; numerous restaurant employees unconsciously characterized restaurant work as "unreal," but when directly asked what jobs are real, they told me that restaurants jobs are indeed real:

Well I hear this all the time that, "I'm just working here until I get a real job," and for some, it is their real job, they haven't seen it yet, but it's their calling. Like some people are just really good cooks and they'll be making a living out of it. It won't be like they're gonna be owning a house in two states, but you'll make a living. I mean I guess that's what I'm saying, I'm working here until I get a real job, or I'm working here until I have to go back to school, but uh, it's not to say that it's not a real job, it's just not the real job I want (Wayne, 19).

With the restaurant industry, I think it's just kinda one of those things where you're allowed to hate it because it's not really considered a real job [pause] it is one of those transitional jobs. It is where you can be like, "well I'm just workin' it until I find something else." It's kinda one of those things where it's not considered a real job, but I mean, it is, it is. (Lucie, 23)

Like Oliver, Wayne and Lucie were aware of the normative societal images associated with restaurant work. Namely, although they said restaurant work is real, they explained it is also unreal because of its predominantly nonstandard characteristics. They used contradictory explanations about restaurant work to negotiate the cultural problems with working in

stigmatized jobs. At the same time, the participants did identity work by way of “defensive othering,” such as when Wayne noted stigmatized work could be a real job for some, but it is not a real job that he wants or could reverse. Statements like these inadvertently reify the stigma of restaurant work and reproduce inequality.

Likewise, the following fieldnote is representative of how the employees internalized the ubiquitous belittling of restaurant work. When I was working a night serving shift over the summer, a woman walked in and was seated in Susan’s (a fellow server) section. Susan pleaded with me to take the table, and so I did. Curious to know why Susan did not want to serve the woman, I inquired what the problem was. Susan explained that the woman was her former high school English teacher, and she did not want to get into a conversation about her life goals. Susan then divulged, “I mean, I just really didn’t like want to get into why I am doing absolutely nothing with my life, I mean like I didn’t want to say, I am working here, that is what I do, [pause] absolutely nothing.” Giggling after venting to me, Susan was in part joking; however, Susan nonetheless appeared influenced by the stigma attached to restaurant work. To Susan, not only is restaurant work considered “unreal,” it is also associated with “doing nothing.” These notions develop from actors’ perceived judgments of others and scholars have found that audiences’ perceptions influence occupational identity (Becker 1970).

Incidentally, the participants considered certain restaurant positions more real than others:

The only time I would consider the restaurant a real job is when it’s like you know like [pause] I mean I obviously consider the managers who work in a restaurant, I feel like managing a restaurant is a real job [pause]. I feel like ‘cause we don’t really get a salary, like one thing about a real job is a salary. And I feel like also like kinda regular hours, even though the managers have like weird hours ‘cause they’re working in a restaurant, they still have like set hours like you know they work this time, and this day, and I think that also kinda constitutes a real job. I just never know when I work, maybe I’ll know when I work by Thursday, or sometimes Friday morning, for that following Monday, and

like I can barely tell you what my income is because I don't even really know what I make, 'cause it is so just like daily [pause], also having benefits. (Rose, 22)

Although many regarded management positions “realer” than other positions, even restaurant managers struggled with the legitimacy of their positions. Discussing this struggle, Maria noted, “It is easier for managers to say they are doing something, because at least they are managers,” but went on to explain she feels conflicted about managing because restaurant work, in general, is stereotyped as employment for the low skilled and low educated. Goffman even said some jobs “can lead the few of their holders who have a higher education to keep this a secret, lest they be marked as failures and outsiders” (1963:3). The participants were not hiding their employment per se, but I contend that the participants negotiated legitimate occupational identities partially because the majority of them had at least some higher skills and education.

Embarrassment and Enjoyment

Another contradictory element to the story of restaurant work is the fact that the participants were embarrassed about their work *and* enjoyed their work. According to Goffman, embarrassment is “a regrettable deviation from the normal state” and if frequent enough, one may suffer “from a foolish unjustified sense of inferiority” (1956:264). Goffman further explained that the given society provides the standards by which people should live. Moreover, “A complication must be added. Often important everyday occasions of embarrassment arise when the self projected is somehow confronted with another self which, though valid in other contexts, cannot be here sustained in harmony with the first” (p. 269). Goffman contended that people can save themselves embarrassment by segregating audiences and only performing appropriate selves and roles in front of the proper audiences.

For the most part, the participants explained enjoying working in restaurants and some even said they loved it. However, restaurant workers faced embarrassment when an audience

looked poorly upon them. This usually happened when the audience felt the worker had “potential” to do something else, regardless of whether this was true or not. After Cliff (23 years old) stated, “I think most people look down on the industry,” he described that customers “were so jazzed” to find out he was in college. However, when he stopped going to college without completion, and he told customers about this educational status, Cliff said, “you could tell they were a little bit like, ‘Oooh [pause] so this is what you do? You just wait tables and like party all day long?’ So that’s a little embarrassing.” Cliff continued to say that he now takes part in “an experiment”:

I’ve actually lied to people and been like “Oh yeah, I’m in school and I’m in chemistry.” And this and that, and they’re like, “Oooh wow, that’s insane, you know, that’s great!” And they’d leave me a really nice tip. And I think that’s kind of messed up, ‘cause they just really only want to support me if they approve of what I’m doing, which I mean why would you want to support someone who you don’t approve of what they’re doing? I can’t blame them for that, but it’s kind of funny how that does kind of make a big difference on how they view you.

As Cliff felt more secure in his identity as a server when he was in school, Becky felt more secure in her restaurant employment because she had a “day job” as an administrative assistant in finance. Becky also had her Bachelor’s degree and had intentions to go back to school for a Master’s degree. In a follow-up question asking her whether money is the main motivation for working in restaurants, Becky revealed her enjoyment of the restaurant industry but how she has too much pride to make it her full-time career,

Yes and no, I like it too, I enjoy doing it, like *I really enjoy* the work, I’ve said lots of times that if the work were considered more prestigious, I would really like working in restaurants anyway. But, no, I don’t ever want to manage a restaurant. I just don’t have any desire to, I don’t know, like I could never have it as a career. I would feel like, like I am too prideful. I would feel like I wasn’t doing myself justice or something. It’s looked down upon, um, I think that a lot of people have the misconception that, and I mean for some people it’s true, that they work at restaurant because they can’t do anything else, or they’re uneducated, or you know, like any idiot could do it, which isn’t true, um, but I mean there are a lot of people who are just plain slackers who work in restaurants, and I guess they give everybody a bad wrap. Um, I think if working in a restaurant was my

only full-time job, I would dislike working there more, but there was always a comfort for me in having my full-time job in the day and knowing that if I ever wanted to quit, there was always something I could say, kinda like, well yeah, I work here, but, you know, in the day, I have this other job that's professional. Plus you get better tips if you mention that kind of stuff, like "Ooh, you're work through school" or "Ooh you just do this for extra money?" "Here's a better tip." Yesss!

Becky made a salient point, which I heard from many participants. Feeling pride and enjoyment while working in a restaurant is somewhat related to how the participants also emulated societal standards outside the restaurant industry. In addition, contradictory feelings (i.e., enjoyment and shame) about the restaurant industry indicate the identity work done to reconcile cultural problems with occupational identities. Becky also verbally distinguished herself from the alleged "slacker" restaurant workers to portray a positive self-image.

In the following account, although Brian (35 years old) was aware of how subjective pride is in relation to a job, he acknowledged that it is difficult to maintain pride while working in a restaurant. Brian thus described the reasons restaurant work can create shame and some ways in which workers attempt to circumvent embarrassment:

Well, it's all semantics, it's all a matter of like are you proud of your job? Are you ashamed to have it? Some people definitely think like it fits under unskilled labor. It's not glamorous work, but a lot of people feel like if they tell someone like, "well I'm getting a degree in business, and I'll have a career later," then it's not as shameful to work in this industry... So I think a lot of times people are ashamed to admit it; it's like being a low-class person... like, "oh what does your husband do?" "Oh, he's a bartender." It's not impressive to people, "Oh he waits tables?" Like that's a job like that society thinks any monkey can do, you do that 'cause you can't do anything else. It's ok if you're doing it on your way through school because you're not gonna be waiting tables 10 years from now. You'll be, you know, contributing to your 401K, and working as a whatever instead.

According to Fine, "Through occupational rhetoric, workers justify their work and explain to themselves and their public why what they do is admirable and/or necessary, a form of impression management" (1996:90). As Brian indicated, the participants often avoided shame by justifying why they were working. When describing restaurant work as a means to something

else, workers accepted their circumstances as enjoyable and more real. Doing so, typically with contradictory explanations, the participants negotiated “legitimate” occupational identities.

* * *

In this chapter, I examined the relationships between employment entrances, durations (whether perceived or actual), stigma management, and identity work among restaurant workers. I found that the scholarly literature, popular press, and public opinion tend to represent restaurant work in pejorative terms and as “bad work.” Restaurant employment is often portrayed as work one would accept only as a last resort, and then only as a temporary solution. Moreover, it is often considered unskilled labor, unsuitable for college-educated workers, especially in the long term. However, I presented a more nuanced perspective of restaurant employment entrances and durations, beyond the structural and economic forces that may influence occupational shifts. The data suggested that the workers entered restaurant employment by choice. Many had college educations or took on restaurant work while in school. They claimed to enjoy several aspects of the work, and they all appreciated the money it brings.

After a thorough investigation of when, how, and why people entered restaurant work and for how long, however, it is clear that the participants faced some fundamental tensions. Despite the advantages and enjoyment that restaurant employment provides, the workers knew of the restaurant industry’s stigma and the great deal of criticism it receives from various social outlets. Consequently, they engaged in identity work to resolve incongruent presentations of self that result from holding a job that others consider lowly. In particular, the participants assigned instrumental, functional and practical value to their marginalized employment and negotiated “legitimate” occupational identities to thwart the shame and embarrassment of the work.

My research contributes to what we know about work and occupations, stigma management, and identity work. The data highlight elements of the concepts “dirty work” and “dirty workers,” which organizational scholars often disregard (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). More than 50 years ago, Hughes (1951; 1958) formally gave meaning to “dirty work” by defining it as physically, socially, or morally tainted. Although he did not elaborate on these three categories, later scholars developed the dimensions of physical, social, and moral taint. In a review of the “dirty work” literature, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) derived criteria for each category. They explained that,

Physical taint occurs where an occupation is either directly associated with garbage, death, effluent, and so on...or is thought to be performed under particular noxious or dangerous conditions...Social taint occurs where an occupation involves regular contact with people or groups that are themselves regarded as stigmatized...or where the worker appears to have servile relationships to others...Moral taint occurs where an occupation is generally regarded as somewhat sinful or of dubious virtue...or where the worker is thought to employ methods that are deceptive, intrusive, confrontational, or that otherwise defy norms of civility. (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999:415)

I do not intend to reify restaurant work as *dirty* or *bad*, but considering restaurant work relative to the formal definition of dirty work provides a larger theoretical understanding for why workers have a proclivity to negotiate legitimate occupational identities. Restaurant work has physical, social, and moral taint, to which the participants confront on a daily basis. Specifically, they deal with filth, they engage in servile relationships with others, and they often defy norms of civility, which is more apparent in the following chapters. Furthermore, my research indicated that restaurant employees are in a pursuit to build positive identities and hope to secure social affirmations from a society that typically fails to recognize their work as honorable. They do so by justifying their work and aligning their future aspiration and career goals with dominantly held beliefs and values about workplaces.

Consequently, the discursive choices that the participants used to discuss restaurant work reveal their ambivalence toward their employment. They simultaneously like and dislike their work, consider their work real and unreal, and say they have a choice and do not have a choice in where they work. The participants have equivocations about their work in part because of their socialization in the larger culture and their continued association with people outside the restaurant industry. They latch on to contradictory descriptions of restaurant work to reconcile incongruent occupational identities. Namely, they try to resolve the discrepancy between their current employment identity and a normative employment identity. However, when reconciling cultural contradictions about work, the employees are participating in “defensive othering” whereby they are unintentionally reproducing inequality and reifying the stigma that restaurant work holds. In other words, they reinforce the dominant group’s claimed superiority and the stigma associated with restaurant work. The contradictory statements in this chapter foreshadow the theme of ambivalence throughout the rest of this dissertation and are indicative of how restaurant workers legitimate working in stigmatized occupations.

In Chapter 4, I address why restaurant workers remain employed for such long periods of time. This exploration points to the self-reported positive side of restaurant employment. Additionally, I examine how restaurant employment is situated in the life course and critique and complicate the developmental stages.

CHAPTER 4

RESTAURANT WORKERS AND THE LIFE COURSE

From the review of literature in past chapters, it is clear that media, news outlets, the public, and scholars commonly regard restaurant work as bad, nonstandard, temporary, part-time, unskilled, poor quality, contingent, and precarious labor. In addition, restaurant employees confront issues relating to low wages, minimal benefits, race, class, gender, and health risks. Furthermore, the extent to which people do not treat restaurant work as “real” work further stigmatizes restaurant jobs and those who hold them. The trend to describe restaurant work as fit only for adolescents compounds the negative image. This, in turn, intensifies the unfavorable self-perceptions of adult restaurant employees.

According to Arnett (2004), job positions held primarily by adolescents include restaurant server, cook, retail sales clerk, and other low-wage service sector positions. Arnett insisted that these jobs have little to do with future occupational preparation “for the great majority of adolescents.” He specifically stated,

They take these jobs not with the intention of gaining important skills that will form the basis for the work they will do as adults, but mainly for the purpose of bringing in an income that will finance their current consumption and leisure—clothes, CDs, movie and concert tickets, fast food, travel, car expenses. They work to provide for the pleasure of the moment, not to lay a foundation for the future. (2004:144)

Arnett holds a few unwarranted assumptions. First, he assumed that restaurant jobs are not adulthood occupations or long-term. However, research shows that the average age of restaurant workers is rising, and many of the adult restaurant workers are in their late twenties or early thirties. Moreover, many stay in the job into their forties and beyond (Coomes 2011). By characterizing restaurant work as having little to do with future adulthood occupations, Arnett

reified restaurant work as “unreal,” nonstandard, and unprofessional. Second, Arnett based his assumption about the adolescent status of restaurant work on another assumption: people have the opportunities, means, and motivations to leave restaurant work once they “complete” the transition to adulthood.

Portrayals of restaurant work as temporary young adult work also exacerbate the disparaging view of long-term adult restaurant workers. Contemporary media represent restaurant workers as young college students who hold temporary restaurant positions. For instance, Dictionary.com (2013) defines “waitress” as “a woman who waits on tables,” and then illustrates this definition with the example, “She waitressed in a restaurant to help pay her way through college.” The first line of Taylor Swift’s (2010) song, “Mine” is, “you were in college, working part-time, waiting tables.” In the movie *Going the Distance* (Burstein 2010), Drew Barrymore plays a journalism student at Stanford University who is waitressing while going to school and aspires to have a career writing for a newspaper. These depictions hint at the idea that restaurant work is merely temporary work for young college students to earn money until they finish their education and subsequently move into careers for which their degrees were originally intended. Furthermore, media conflate restaurant worker with waitress and waiter.

Despite the marginal qualities, stigma, and beliefs regarding appropriate ages of employees associated with restaurant work, restaurant industry employment remains steady, continues to grow, and attracts a group of somewhat educated 20-something to 40-something year-olds who stay for extended amounts of time. So this begs the question: why stay? Analyzing this pattern of employment can reveal the factors that may keep workers in the restaurant industry and how the long-term employment durations shape their feelings, choices, and behaviors. Consequently, these retention-related issues can contribute to the study of work

and the life course. According to George, “occupations are a strategic context for studying life transitions” because job shifts and durations are highly connected to life course transitions (1993:367). Even though *nickel and dimed* workers (Ehrenreich 2001) may not have other career opportunities and stay because they must, and some simply seek temporary financial gain, it is worth exploring the additional conditions that influence other restaurant workers to remain employed. Although much is known about experiences of work and how they shape the life course, little is known about the single most commonly held job during the life course: restaurant work. To date, there is no qualitative study on restaurant workers that critiques and complicates life course transitions and the related developmental stages.

In this chapter, I examine how the experience of restaurant work complicates the assumptions of the life course perspective. I analyze how the restaurant workers’ accounts of aging both challenge and complement the characteristics of several developmental stages. I also show that the restaurant workers “do” what I call *strategic adulthood*, whereby they sustain standard or legitimate presentations of adulthood by claiming adulthood benchmarks, values, and goals but continue to participate in “youthful” behaviors. In the following sections, I review the relevant literature, present how the workers do not belong to one particular developmental stage and “do” *strategic adulthood* to explain their non-normative life course trajectories, and finally, I highlight the implications of this research more generally.

SECURING WORK IN THE LIFE COURSE

By and large, there is a bifurcated story about entering work in the life course literature. On the one hand, life course scholars study school-to-work transitions in which people go to college and then enter work; on the other hand, researchers examine noncollege pathways to economic independence through which people enter work after high school (e.g., Benson 2014). However,

very few investigate people who are in between these two categories. In other words, there are people who finish school while working, who go to school while working, who transition in and out of school while working, and who aspire for various career goals while working. These transitions are much more complicated because of factors such as the economy and their socioeconomic status. Normative transitions and trajectories to adulthood are no longer available to everyone. Moreover, when accounting for agency, some people do not *want* normative trajectories.

The life course literature also predominantly reifies the developmental stages. Although scholars have begun to theorize about the socially constructed nature and subjectivity of developmental stages because of the prolonged time it takes people to transition, their agency, and the changing markers of adulthood (e.g., Macmillan 2007), there is still a prevailing belief that people will eventually transition into normative adulthood and settle into traditional adult life (Settersten 2007; 2012). Even when circumstances prolong the transition to adulthood, the literature encourages and presents ways that will help youth transition to adulthood because of the negative health and socioeconomic consequences for stymied transitions highlighted in past research (Wright et al. 2010; Burd-Sharps and Lewis 2012; Mortimer 2012).

Although scholars have begun to acknowledge varying pathways to adulthood, most continue to conceptualize adulthood through a highly exclusionary middle-class framework. If transitioning to adulthood means that people have pursued and completed higher education, left home and lived independently before marriage, obtained full-time work, entered marriage, and had children (e.g., Arnett 2004; Settersten 2012), this prohibits many people from ever being recognized as adults. For example, most homosexuals in the United States still cannot marry, many people cannot bear or adopt children, many do not have the means to attain higher

education or full-time work, and some are not able-bodied enough or in a legal documented status position to attain adulthood benchmarks. Furthermore, standard markers of adulthood prevent people who *choose* not to complete them from ever becoming adults. In sum, the current conceptualization of the transition to adulthood belies many people's actual experiences, choices, and aspirations.

Features of the Transition to Adulthood

Traditionally, scholars measured the transition to adulthood by the “Big-5” benchmarks: leaving home, finishing school, finding work, marriage, and bearing children (Settersten 2012). Today, scholars argue that it takes longer for the transition to adulthood to occur and the characteristics of adulthood have changed (Furstenberg et al. 2004). Research attributes prolonged early adulthood partly to the increased time it now takes to finish college, procure a full-time job, leave home, cut off support from families, marry, and have children (Fussell and Furstenberg 2005). However, this elongated transition is commonly a racial and classed phenomenon. Privileged groups, who are predominantly white and Asian American, have opportunities to prolong the transition to adulthood; in contrast, racial minorities and those in lower socioeconomic levels tend to transition to adulthood earlier than their counterparts do because they typically take on adult social roles and responsibilities sooner and face more challenges in the life course (e.g., Johnson, Berg, and Sirotzki 2007). Likewise, research shows that people who experience hardships (e.g., poverty or violence) feel relatively adult-like and older than their age peers (Johnson and Mollborn 2009).

More recently, statistics spotlight three salient milestones for reaching adulthood: completing school, living independently, and obtaining full-time employment (Furstenberg et al. 2004). Other research suggests that people consistently feel that accepting responsibility for

oneself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent are the most significant criteria for reaching adulthood (Arnett 2004). Complicating the transition to adulthood further, scholars have highlighted the individual's subjective feelings of being an adult as another measure (Settersten 2012).

Other research explores the active process by which individuals choose institutional, organizational, and interpersonal involvement (Shanahan 2000). This active process is what Clausen called "planful competence," which occurs when people can "assess their options and have thought seriously about what possibilities exist" (1991:8). In other words, planful competence is the ability to make thoughtful choices about future goals. Even though many young people use planful competence and have clear goals and plans, Shanahan contended that "The inability to carry through with these plans in everyday settings may seriously detract from one's agency in the life course" (2000:677).

Features of Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood constitutes a developmental stage between the late teens and late twenties (Arnett 2000; 2004). According to Arnett, the majority of individuals in their late teens through the twenties say they both feel and do not feel that they have reached adulthood. This contradiction reflects the ambiguous and subjective definition of adulthood. So while there are traditional benchmarks of adulthood, the shifts in the "appropriate" timing of these benchmarks place many individuals in a state of liminality. They are neither adolescents nor adults, but they do fit somewhere in between. Arnett constructed the "emerging adulthood" stage (ages 18 to 25) as a new phase in the life course to capture the prolonged period in people's lives when they do not see themselves as entirely adolescents or adults. Some scholars have extended the age range of emerging adulthood to 29 or 30 years old (Arnett et al. 2011). As with the elongated

transition to adulthood (Johnson, Berg, and Sirotzki 2007; Johnson and Mollborn 2009), emerging adulthood may also be a racial and classed phenomenon. That is, people who have more opportunities and resources do not feel as pressured or rushed into adulthood roles and responsibilities as are those without.

The portrayal of emerging adulthood as a developmental stage of *identity exploration* in love, education, work, values, and beliefs is the central component of Arnett's argument (2000; 2004). As in many of these areas of identity exploration, Arnett claimed that work is more tentative during adolescence and more serious during emerging adulthood, with adolescent work being mostly part-time, having little to do with occupational skill preparation for adulthood, and being unrelated to work expected in adulthood. Arnett also argued that emerging adults gradually become more focused and serious about work, and much of "the emerging adulthood years are simply about fun, a kind of play, part of gaining a broad range of life experiences before 'settling down' and taking on the responsibilities of adult life. Emerging adults realize they are free in ways they will not be during their thirties and beyond" (2004:10).

Some critics, such as Hendry and Kloep (2007; 2010), disagree with Arnett's model of emerging adulthood as a new stage in the developmental process. Although Hendry and Kloep concurred that the transition to adulthood is increasingly prolonged, they opposed Arnett's model for two reasons. First, they argued that people do not attain full adulthood at a specific age. Second, they contended that people exist within a state of dynamic fluctuation, or a state of being in-between or emerging, throughout the entire lifespan. That is, people weave in and out of transitions and their development is nonlinear; some having claimed they reached adulthood may regress out of adulthood, and then transition back in. For example, some adults behave like young people; they go back to college, begin different careers, and fall in love with new partners.

Hendry and Kloep went as far as to assert that Arnett's concept of emerging adulthood "does not add to our understanding of human development" (2007:78). Rather, they insisted that scientists should focus on human interactions within specific cultural contexts to understand adolescent-adult transitions across the whole lifespan.

Other scholars have explored a "new adulthood" where "people in their late twenties experience the transition to adulthood as a dynamic, multidimensional package of new social roles and personal attributes" (Hartmann and Swartz 2007:278). In addition, young adults "not only accept the open-ended, diverse, and uneven nature of this transition, they embrace it as a condition to be celebrated, valued, and perpetuated" (p. 279). Hartmann and Swartz continued by stating,

There is some reason to believe that these two characteristics, taken together, constitute the subjective or experiential dimensions of a distinct new phase in the life course—what scholars looking at objective markers have most commonly referred to as young or early adulthood. However, a good deal of evidence also suggests that it could be that these attitudes and understandings signal a broader and deeper re-conceptualization of adulthood itself. In this view, adulthood is coming to be understood less of a static state or a permanent status...and more of an ongoing process of continued personal growth, career mobility, and the deepening and expanding of relationships with others—an ongoing process of development, achievement and discovery that extends across the life course, occurs in all domains of life, and varies from individual to individual. (p. 279)

I focus on restaurants as a specific cultural context where development is non-linear, dynamic, and multidimensional. Rather than reconceptualizing adulthood, however, I make claim for a reconceptualization of the life course perspective. I critique the realness of the essentialized characteristics of developmental stages. My research provides empirical evidence for how the life course is much more complicated and needs reframing. For example, much of what people consider "youthful" seeps into adulthood and vice versa. The participants, like many, wrestled back and forth between meanings of youth and adulthood because they grappled with popular beliefs and outside social worldviews, which were in conflict with what they valued

and were actually experiencing. In what follows, I present how the workers navigated the broader societal framework; the restaurant workers “do” *strategic adulthood* as a response to dominant cultural values and paradoxically as a protective practice for standard ways of living in U.S. society.

RESTAURANT WORKERS AND “ADULTHOOD”

I feel like we need a new word for that, for adulthood [pause], for maturity, for responsibility. But that middle ground between adolescence or childhood and adulthood I think seems to thrive in the restaurant industry. (Icarus, 22)

By U.S. standards, all 52 participants are adults, chronologically and legally. The participants ranged between 18 and 48 years old, with a mean age of 26.6, as seen in Table 3 below.

	N	%
18 - 20	14	26.9
21 - 25	17	32.7
26 - 30	8	15.4
31 - 35	6	11.5
36 - 40	3	5.8
41 - 48	4	7.7
Total	52	100.0

If given the task to categorize the participants by the life course developmental stages as traditionally constructed, however, I could not confidently place them in one or another category (i.e., young adult, emerging adult, or adult). In fact, they each partially belonged to more than one category, but not fully to any. Many lived independently, finished their higher education or some levels of higher education, and the majority earned between \$20,000 and \$53,000 a year. A few were married, were divorced, had children, and/or owned a home. At the same time, participants who had some of the adulthood benchmarks lived with their parents, did not finish higher education, or were in and out of school, and 86.5 percent of the participants were part-

time employees. Furthermore, those who did not finish their higher education yet were attending school beyond the normative college-age years (i.e., 18 to 22 years old).

The data additionally elucidated how the participants were in the process of taking nontraditional life course paths. Although many possessed some of the constructed benchmarks of adulthood, they did not reach them through normative trajectories. Most entered work early, finished school while working, were going to school while working, transitioned in and out of school while working, and aspired to various career goals while working (see also Chapter 3). Further, some lived independently, had children (often prior to marriage), and married before finishing school or securing permanent work. Overall, I found little evidence of a linear life course transition from school to permanent work/independent living, to marriage, and to child bearing for the participants. The restaurant workers in this study thus constitute a case that underscores the pitfalls in the life course perspective and illustrates the problem with attempts to fit people into developmental categories.

The participants' descriptions of themselves confound this situation further. The workers' accounts about adulthood status highlighted the running theme of ambivalence. The majority hesitated to say they were completely adults and felt both adult and not adult. Additionally, some said they did not feel like adults, others said they felt somewhat adult, and some said they did feel like adults.

After I asked 28-year-old, married Pedro whether he considered himself an adult, he said, slowly, with apprehension in his voice, "I don't feel like I'm an adult," and then elaborated,

I think the reason being is that I don't have a "real job." You know, like, I don't see it as like adult [versus] child, you know, like oh, you are still pissin' the bed or something like that. I just think of it as almost like a status, um, like, I'm definitely more mature than other people, you know, I think of myself more as a grown man instead of an adult. Uh, I don't know if I'll ever see myself as an adult, maybe when I have a kid, who knows? But, I just kind of see myself as a grown man, just working at a restaurant, trying to better

himself for him and his family, so, the adult [versus] child mentality, I think I stopped being a child when I was 18, but definitely not an adult. I don't know what an adult would be, especially with today's society of, you know, with your Charlie Sheens and, you know, Ethan Hawkes [sic]. You know, like those are extremes, but it's very less cut and dry as it was 20, 30 years ago.

Here, Pedro explained how complicated the idea of adulthood is, and it is not as simple as no longer being a child or an adolescent. For Pedro, "growing up" is a gradual process, which is more nuanced than the disparate developmental constructed stages. One hears Pedro's ambivalence because, although he remained attached to attaining certain things (i.e., a real job or having a child) before he will feel like an adult, he also did not know if he would ever feel like an adult. Adding to the semantic confusion, his self-perception was that of a "grown man."

Even George, the eldest participant at age 48, did not claim an adult status even though he had a son of his own. He explained, "I'm very childlike, and I see it in my son, well he is a child, but I see that just wonder, enjoyment of things and ideas, and there's always gonna be that child in me." He then clarified, "With respect to the restaurant industry, I take very good care of my guests, and I feel that where I work, I'm usually a comedian, like I'm always witty, and I'm always having fun, and I feel that that's ok because my job is to make money for my restaurant and I do that by taking very good care of my guests." George made sure to demonstrate his professionalism and respect at work even though he preserves childlike characteristics.

Bianca—although only 19 years old—also did not consider herself an adult, but she did feel responsible and mature. In her words, "Right now, definitely not [laughs]. I mean I understand responsibilities, I'm a lot more mature than all my other friends, like that go out and party and drink *all* the time." Then she asserted, "I did that last year, but I mean, I don't know, I just feel like there's better things that I could be doing with my time, like, I like to work, I like to go hang out with my friends and catch up with people that I haven't seen in forever, and like

build relationships.” She added, “I think I’m more mature, I don’t think I’m an adult though, so still a kid, just trying to have fun.” Interestingly, among the participants, a prominent theme existed where having fun is for the young and banality is for the adults.

Many affirmed to have adultlike qualities, but did not claim to have attained adulthood yet. After answering “no” to my question about feeling like an adult, Zoe (19 years old) said, “I think I’ll really feel like an adult when I’m financially independent, but I don’t quite feel like an adult yet, but with the apartment and the work and stuff, I am definitely getting there.”

Similarly, Spock (22 years old), who worked two jobs, received financial help from his parents, was about to graduate college, was involved in numerous associations, and was applying for graduate school, told me,

I would say that I don’t feel necessarily like an adult just yet just because like I mean I do work, I know what it’s like to be working, I have experience working, and I know how businesses operate, and I know how to deal with customers, and that’s definitely something that will carry over to adulthood, but I think to be an adult would mean being financially independent because I’m not... I mean like money doesn’t necessarily mark adulthood, you know, financial independence isn’t the end all, be all, or like when adulthood really starts, but I definitely think it’s a huge part of it. But I do feel more mature in how I deal with people and with my experience in the workforce. Like a lot of people just go into the job market without ever having a job, and you know I feel a lot more experienced.

Others maintained a somewhat-adult status. Eliza (22 years old) resided at home with her parents, did not complete her higher education yet, and did not finalize a career path. Her response to my adulthood question was moderately ambiguous. She started by saying she is, “somewhat of an adult.” She then explained, “I think someone is an adult by the choices you make, whether they are good choices or bad choices, being responsible, for instance, with your cash, for your tables, making sure that they don’t walk out on you, being responsible in the restaurant to keep busy, I don’t know, not having your manager tell you what to do, ‘cause there are some people there that I feel like they’ll never grow up [laughs]. After talking through how

she felt, she ended with, “I feel like mainly an adult.” Answering in a similar manner, Portia (37 years old) laughed and then articulated,

Somewhat. Well, I like go back and forth on this. Like, I’m of adult age, I don’t rely on my parents, I work all the time, but then I don’t actually feel like an adult. I guess I have like an adult state of mind, and I do adult things, but I feel like a child [laughs], I guess you could put it that way. Maybe, it’s ‘cause I haven’t figured out what I want to do yet, permanently, for like a career, like something more meaningful.

Descriptions such as somewhat, mainly, not yet, and so on suggest ambivalence based on comparisons to normative understandings of adulthood.

Alternatively, some felt like adults even if they had not fully attained normative adulthood benchmarks. Chloe (24 years old) explained going through several life experiences, such as an alcoholic mother, challenging family issues, a “terrible” ex-boyfriend, going to college, working, volunteering, and now sharing the responsibility of a mortgage and a stepchild with her current boyfriend. Although she did not secure full-time work or marry yet, and she planned to go back to school for social work, Chloe considered herself an adult. She said, “it slowly like started to develop, and I do feel like an adult now. I very much feel like I know what I want, I know where I’m going, I know how to interact with different people in different situations.” She added, “I think there’s something about having a mortgage and having a kid, and all of these things make me feel like more of an adult too, it all just came together, but when I was 13, working, no...I feel a lot more mature all around.”

Storie (23 years old), who entered restaurant work with intentions of a career, finished school, had a salary, had a “complicated” relationships status, did not have children, and said she lived at home with her mom and stepfather “*by choice*. I want to make sure to put that in there. I love my parents! Not to save money, just because I love my parents.” She, like Chloe, explained having difficult life experiences. Her biological father had an alcohol dependency

issue. He suffered major brain damage in a motor vehicle accident when she was four. He spent the rest of his life in the hospital and passed away 19 years later. Along with many trying decisions she had to make, Storie went through an abortion. She also mentioned that, when growing up, she never had an “I don’t really know what to do period” and said “I graduated, didn’t go to college, I taught, and I went to culinary school, so there wasn’t really like a time to.” Although she felt like an adult, Storie later told me, “I feel like I have living and growing up to do.” Storie highlights a missing piece of the life course perspective. Scholars have been remiss not to incorporate the idea of “growth” (albeit subjective) and the notion that “personal growth” never ceases. I contend that this is one reason that many participants considered an adult status confusing and often dubious.

The participants whose development conflicted most with the life course perspective were those who held the fewest normative adulthood benchmarks, but claimed an adult status. That is, some participants who lived at home, were pursuing higher education, were unmarried, and/or were childless, felt like adults. After I asked if he felt like an adult, Benny (22 years old) said, “Yeah, definitely, um, I have all my own stuff, you know, right now, even at my parents’ house I pay rent, I pay off my car, and I’ve always worked since I was 15, I’ve never not had a job since I could get a job, so I feel like an adult.” I then inquired about what he thought qualifies a person as an adult, and he responded with, “Like just being able to be responsible for yourself, being able to take care of yourself, you know, being able to have priorities, and take care of what you need to do. It’s not all partying and going out every night, there’s stuff that needs to get done, you gotta worry about your responsibilities.” Still, Benny indicated not having any savings and relying heavily on financial help from his parents such as for health insurance coverage.

Similar to Benny, Wayne (19 years old) also answered the question with, “Yeah definitely” and then said,

A huge part of maturing was ‘cause I started working [in restaurants] when I was 14 or 15 years old. And uh, working with people really helped me become an adult because you learn how to work with people...that was like a huge part of growing up, and I think that accelerated, like I noticed even after a whole summer of working at the restaurant, I went back to high school, and like I just felt like I was a lot more mature than other kids, ‘cause they didn’t have to work with people...sometimes it felt like I matured faster...you’re exposed to drinking and drugs at a young age, that is a staple in the industry I think, it’s so terrible to say, but the amount of narcotics that are done after or before service is just mind boggling...there are people that I’d give rides home to, still do, like every night cause they’d just get so drunk after work...you’re definitely exposed to a lot more in the restaurant industry.

Wayne expanded the conceptualization of adulthood. He described maturing and learning to work with people as adult behaviors and characterized the exposure to drugs and alcohol as something that accelerates growing up and maturity. He later discussed the exposure to a great deal of sexual activity as well. Among the measures for the transition to adulthood, exposure to deviant behavior is not one of them.

Regardless of whether the participants claimed an adult status or were somewhere in-between, they consistently mentioned two major criteria for advancing in the life course: maturity and responsibilities. Of course, like other constructed benchmarks, these concepts are subjective, but to the participants, adulthood is less about the label and more about exposure to life experiences. More importantly, what they considered maturity and taking on responsibilities they gained largely from working in the restaurant industry. For instance, in a follow-up interview with Caleb, almost two years after his initial interview, he stated,

In the last year or so, I have grasped adulthood more. Before I was still in the dorms, I was still getting help from my mom. I have more responsibilities now; I pay for my rent, phone, bills, I hardly talk to my parents, I have to manage my time better. But like I said last time, the restaurant exposed me to mature things, adulthood was accelerated in a way. The first three years in the restaurant, I aged like five years. I was exposed to the

“adult world” from the lives my co-workers, the “real world,” not just the school world, then the college world, that’s not real, not the real world.

Caleb elaborated on adult or mature or “real” things as meeting new people, “hanging out” with older people, partying, dancing, and drinking “a little bit,” learning about food and wine, listening to “mature” music, talking about “a lot smarter stuff” rather than having “basement parties,” “playing beer pong,” “drinking bud light,” “going to Taco Bell [laughs], but we still go to Taco Bell plenty.” He also stated, “I think that actually really matured me a lot...so the maturity thing, that’s what I’ve learned from my restaurant friends, how to operate and socialize as an adult and not as a child.” Paradoxically, Caleb also said, “we’re all the same, you know, immaturity level” and “but really behind the scenes, we’re just a bunch of irresponsible kids that like to party [laughs].”

Commenting on a rather counterintuitive observation, Sarah (20 years old) said her restaurant experiences differ from those she has had in any other work environment. She explained:

the age range is so spread out, but yet everyone is still at a median age where they all kind of act the same. So all the old people are way more immature, and all of the young people are a little more mature, so I think that is kind of what it is. I think for the younger people, I feel like they gain maturity there, and I feel like the older people lose maturity, or they just never gain it ‘cause I know a lot of the older people there, there’s some of them that just act like they are 15 and stuff like that, where I just feel like since they haven’t really established a career for themselves, or like moved on to that whole adulthood yet, they’re not quite there, and they haven’t quite been there yet.

For Sarah, the restaurant presented a maturity leveling effect on the workers from different age groups. The young employees participated in more “mature” behaviors (e.g., alcohol, drugs, sex), and the older employees continued to participate in behaviors once considered mature, of which they purportedly should have grown out.

In Nadia's (20 years old) case, feeling like an adult related to associating with the older restaurant workers, being treated like an adult by the older workers, and taking on responsibilities as a restaurant employee:

I think those relationships with those older people is what made me feel like more of an adult because they trusted me more, they respected me more, you know. They always, at the end of the night, if someone else closed, they would be like, "Nadia make sure you check all their stuff, and make sure that they did it right," and um, so I think having that, and even though it's not a lot of responsibility, that little responsibility is what made me feel more of an adult I guess.

Likewise, Bianca said, "the restaurant makes me feel mature, yes, 'cause I have to deal with people, and I can't just say, like you're being ridiculous, you know, like you can't, you have to put on that professional face" and "when somebody's being rude to you, you just have to suck it up and grin and bear it, which I hate, nothing's worse than when somebody's being rude, and I just want to take my tray of food and slam it in their face." The requirement of professional behaviors at work appeared to trump immature thoughts and childish behaviors. To the participants, growing up has much to do with feeling respected, trusted, responsible, and having many experiences, "mature" or not.

Regardless of what developmental stage the participants claimed or how mature or responsible they felt, my point in this chapter is not to categorize them. If I used the developmental stage constructions from the life course perspective, I could not call one of the 52 participants an adult; all would still be in the transition to adulthood. Additionally, using standard measures of adulthood would mean that the participants could never "grow up" because they hold "adolescent," part-time, unstable employment. Such dominantly held constructions and beliefs constituting adulthood and adulthood occupations are what create a developmental predicament for the restaurant employees. In the rest of the chapter, I address why the participants stay if staying means hindered growth in the traditional sense, and I examine the

strategies that the participants used to justify remaining whereby attempting to solve conventional stage development dilemmas.

STRATEGIC ADULTHOOD

The participants' non-normative trajectories influenced how they spoke about their work and life course plans. Whether *transitioners* or *settlers*, they all engaged in explaining and justifying their nontraditional life course pathways. The restaurant workers “do” what I call *strategic adulthood*, which is a strategy for negotiating the stigmatization of nonlinear and/or nontraditional life courses. I define *strategic adulthood* as adults (18 years old or older) creatively maintaining various constructed features of several developmental stages while safeguarding normative presentations of adulthood or the transition to adulthood.

Strategic adulthood provides a resource for talking about the self for those whose trajectories are not designated normative or age-appropriate. Doing strategic adulthood allows the workers to sustain mainstream or legitimate presentations of adulthood by claiming adulthood benchmarks, values, and/or goals while continuing to participate in behaviors and jobs that many people, news outlets, and scholars consider youthful. The restaurant provides a pathway for adult workers to strategically hold on to the freedoms of young life *and* adult life. Consciously and unconsciously, the workers extend the ways in which they feel free; they act in manners that exclude the full responsibilities of an “adult” and a “standard” career.

DISCOURSES OF NEGOTIATION

All the participants engaged in strategic adulthood by using discourses of negotiation to defend their non-linear, dynamic, and multidimensional life course trajectories. I define *discourses of negotiation* as ways in which people reason through communication. Each discourse of negotiation reflects the theme of ambivalence and contradictory statements as related to

aspirations for youthfulness *and* maturity. On the one hand, the participants explained enjoying the youthful behaviors of their nontraditional life course paths. On the other hand, they rationalized these paths to cultivate appropriate presentations as adults. In this section, I discuss three major discourses of negotiation that the participants used: The Three F's; Work Hard, Play Hard; and Easy Come, Easy Go. Each participant employed one or more discourse of negotiation.

The Three F's

If you're not there having fun, then what's the point? What the hell are you working in it? That's why it's so addictive, you get paid to be social. (Guido, 28)

In all 52 interviews, the most common words I heard when the participants described restaurant work were “fun,” “friends,” and “freedom.” They discussed the fun, exciting, and social atmosphere of the restaurant, and they recounted freedoms in terms of money, flexible schedules, and educational, goal, and behavioral explorations. This research shows how the restaurant provides a space where employees can hold on to fun, friends, freedoms of youth, and exploration. Importantly, the participants concurrently safeguarded appropriate presentation of adulthood by caveating their statements about fun, friends, and freedoms. They used three types of caveats. First, they explained their present orientation toward the fun, friends, and freedoms that the restaurant provides but indicated their future orientation toward a “career” or “real job.” Second, they described a present orientation toward the fun, friends, and freedoms that the restaurant provides but cautioned to uphold professionalism, responsibilities, and maturity in and outside the restaurant. Third, they discussed a present orientation toward the fun, friends, and freedoms that the restaurant provides but qualified adultlike and occupational (current and future) benefits of the restaurant.

In chapter 3, I highlighted how the participants conceptualized “real jobs,” and Rose indicated that restaurant work is not a real job for her and explained that real jobs have a salary, benefits, a regular schedule, and may include restaurant managers. In this chapter, Rose’s following account reflects the first caveat. She explained her reasons for remaining in restaurants (or “unreal” work) for seven years and why she continues to do so instead of immediately applying for work that requires her Bachelor’s degree:

I just realized it is so much more fun working at a restaurant, and it’s like you’re going to work, but you’re working with your friends. You’re working, but you’re kinda just playing and joking around the whole time at work, it’s just kinda a joking and fun place. I mean you can just up and go on a trip, you know ‘cause it’s easy to get your shift covered. You don’t have to get up every morning and go to work because sometimes you only work at night, and you can just like make a bunch of money, and you have that money if you just want to go treat yourself to like four days of doing something because you can, versus a regular job, where you kinda have to be set in stone. I just don’t want to get stuck working in a restaurant. Like restaurants are really good money, and I like it, and it’s fun, but I don’t envision myself [pause], I guess my drive is that my vision of myself is not like [pause], like if you asked me in five years what my career is, I wouldn’t say server, or I would hope I wouldn’t still be.

Rose also explained that she is in a “pickle” and has not thus far figured out what she wants to do; she said, “I really don’t know,” but mentioned looking into sales, PR, social work, and grad school options, and then stated, “I first need to zero in on what exactly I want.” She further described the restaurant as fun, full of friends, a place of play and jokes, and mired in the freedoms of money, taking mini-holidays, and identity exploration. Rose’s ambivalent statements are indicative of internalized norms about the transition to adulthood; while the restaurant is this fun workplace, Rose said it is not a career for “five years” down the road. She did strategic adulthood by explaining her non-normative life course trajectory and negotiating a legitimate presentation of adulthood, whether or not this presentation is true, achievable, or certain.

Similarly, Eliza (22 years old) said the restaurant is “an atmosphere that is fun, and I have friends, and I can make money while I am working on my school and career goals.” Violet (21 years old) also explained the restaurant is “a fun atmosphere, and I think that’s why people want to work here, and the money” and then added, “The social atmosphere keeps you working there, it’s a fun place to work, it’s not too demanding, it’s like just the right amount of commitment for me right now at this point.” Also expressing the low-demand aspect as well as the youthfulness of restaurant life, Nadia mentioned, “Working in a restaurant is easy, easier compared to starting your own business, which is what I want to do.” Following up what she said, Nadia described the difference between a job and a career, “Careers are big people stuff, grown-up things, um [laughs], real life I guess, yeah. I guess I would say that I’m working in the restaurant until I get a real job.” A shared characteristic among the workers is that they believed “fun” and “adulthood” are mutually exclusive, an attitude that follows suit with traditional societal views of adulthood. In all these cases, the participants presented age-appropriate aspirations.

The second caveat was to limit the fun, friends, and freedoms that the restaurant allows by preserving professionalism, responsibilities, and maturity in and outside the restaurant. Although professionalism, responsibility, and maturity are not part of the “Big-5” benchmarks for the transition to adulthood, recent research staged these adult-ways of thinking by showing that people believe “accepting responsibility for yourself” is part of the transition (Arnett 2004). The participants discussed that there is a “time and place for everything.” In Naomi’s words, “My number one thing in a restaurant business is to have fun at work. If you’re not having fun at work, then there’s no point of being there, but there’s a time and a place where you have to be professional about everything, you know.”

Oliver, a now career restaurant employee, also highlighted the second caveat when describing a co-worker with “too much energy” who is “a little too loud,” wants to have “a little too much fun,” and “jokes around a little too much.” Educating his co-worker on appropriate restaurant behavior, Oliver asserted,

I looked at him, I said, “listen, I love joking around, that’s my personality too, but there’s definitely a thin line between being professional and not being professional, and you can joke around the entire night,” he calls it “funzies” that’s his term, he likes to do “funzies,” and he’s like a hilarious guy, and I tell him, “well you can do ‘funzies,’ it’s just when you’re working, ‘funzies’ is kinda like an ‘undercover funzies.’” You know, like there are certain ways you have fun, you know, you do that in the back, and you keep it a little bit quieter. I mean you can still have fun, just you gotta adjust, that’s all.

Likewise, Storie discussed that everyone needs to relax because the restaurant is “sooo high stress,” but relaxation techniques can exceed the point of responsibility. To relax, Storie explained that people drink, smoke (cigarettes and marijuana), go to the bars, and party, “and it continues and continues and continues. But you also have to be able to also catch yourself, and be responsible, and actually be like alright, it’s getting too much, I need to go, good-bye.” The participants also caveated fun by cautioning when and how much to drink. Lucie discussed the professional, responsible, and mature way of drinking on-the-job. Although the workers are allowed to drink on-the-job and have “staff drinks” or “staff shots” (free and discounted drinks), Lucie clarified, “the rule is after 7:30 PM so no one is getting wasted...I mean we are all kinda ‘professional drinkers,’ we all kinda know our limits, and we know when to stop, and we are allowed to get a little bit tipsy, and it is really a matter of being able to do your job, and knowing your limits.” Lucie proceeded to talk about how some workers keep bottles of liquor with them at the restaurant, “and have a shot every once in a while, but yeah, this restaurant is very encouraging of us having fun while we work, but being responsible and professional about it.” Earlier in the chapter, I stressed that whether or not the participants claimed an adulthood status,

the two major criteria they had for advancing in the life course were responsibility and maturity. These values consistently surfaced as they negotiated their present orientation toward “youthful” behaviors, which suggests a changing understanding of what it means to “grow up.”

The third caveat deals with qualifying the adultlike or professional opportunities that the restaurant made possible despite the fun, friends, and freedoms that it allows. In the life course literature, the transition to adulthood includes benchmarks such as living independently, financial independence, securing full-time work, and finishing school. Although the participants have not attained all these, they discussed how the restaurant could provide circumstances to gain them.

Tia (24 years old) framed the restaurant as a salient part of financial independence, independent living, and educational completion. While she considered her restaurant work temporary, and loosely used the term “real job” to describe a future career, she also said, “I work in this job because I don’t want to leave it without having another source of income and since I’m not completely sure as of what I want to do, um, it’s kinda convenient. But as soon as I figure out what I want to do, if I want to go back to school, or if I want to find another job, I mean a full-time position, something in nonprofit, or the government, then I wouldn’t say I would *completely* leave the food industry, but I would work less days, I would just have two jobs.” Later in the interview and in follow-up conversations, Tia told me she would miss the friends, fun, enjoyment of working, income, ability to vacation, and social networking that the restaurant permits if she left.

Apprehension and ambivalence about leaving the restaurant industry is telling of the nonlinear life course dilemmas that Tia and other participants encountered. First, Tia illustrated the necessity of the restaurant for economic independence in many areas in her life. However, she did not consider the restaurant a career or “real job” option. Second, she showed signs of

hesitancy to leave and actually admitted that she may not leave even when she enters a full-time job because she does not want to forego the “youthful” underpinnings of the restaurant.

Others spoke about the “good living” they could have in the restaurant even though they had other aspirations. For instance, Naomi said, “If you want to be in a fun atmosphere, upbeat place, go to a restaurant business because you can make quick cash there and make a good living out of being a server slash manager slash bartender slash whatever. It’s fun, it’s fun, very fun.” In addition, the participants detailed expansive economic and professional benefits embedded in the restaurant industry, which are important for the “world and culture as a whole.” Storie explained,

I think the restaurant industry is extremely fun and exciting, and I think it opens up *a lot* of doors ‘cause you’re dealing with different people and customers. And like people have business meetings in your restaurant, and *ooh* if they like you, they’re gonna help you find another job, you know. And I just think it is a great opportunity for a lot of people. And I think it provides a lot of jobs and money for more people than anybody would know because if we didn’t have the restaurant industry, it’s like not only the people that work immediately in the restaurant wouldn’t have a job, but all the people like your purveyors, and people who provide you with linens, and people who come in and clean your restaurant at night, like your electricians, the people who repair ovens, so I think it’s definitely an extremely important industry in our world and culture as a whole.

In sum, the participants described many positive and favorable qualities of restaurants. At the same time, the participants nevertheless expressed ambivalence about their work and discursively caveated their fun, friends, and freedoms because these run counter to mainstream or traditional understandings and social expectations about what it means to “grow up.” The participants’ claims in this section juxtapose the vastly negative popular, public, and scholarly opinions of restaurant work illustrated in Chapter 3.

Work Hard, Play Hard

“We work hard, we play hard.” (Storie, 23)

The second discourse of negotiation that the participants used to reason and thwart the disapproval of a nontraditional life course was recounting how “hard” or diligently they worked in the restaurant and firmly disclosing their aversion to what they called “boring” work. To the participants, boring work predominantly included “office” and “cubicle” jobs as well as a 9-to-5 workday. Paradoxically, an office or 9-to-5 job is what many participants classified as a career or “real job,” to which many also aspired. Although some office jobs are beyond the participants’ reach, I did not see evidence of them calling these jobs boring as a justification for remaining in restaurant work. In any case, the participants engaged in strategic adulthood by clarifying that although they were not working in a normative, traditional, or stereotypically “adult” boring job, they took their restaurant work seriously. In other words, they were committed to investing pride, time, feelings of ownership, and a stake-hold in the restaurant. They also maintained professionalism, responsibility, and maturity when working. Additionally, they depicted their hard work by mentioning the emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion of the work.

Abigail, the 27-year-old manager I introduced in Chapter 3 who did not know if she could work in restaurants “forever,” discussed working hard but not wanting to work in a boring job or be “sheltered as a human being in an office job.” She said, “I would have to say I take my job very personally ‘cause I work my ass off for it ‘cause it’s like I work so hard for them.” She then disclosed quitting a receptionist position in the past. She noted, “I don’t have the personality to sit there and just sit. I have to be going, like who wants to sit at a desk? I think that it’s so boring, and plus you gain a lot of weight.” She added, “there’s a whole bunch of

instances that happen in the restaurant industry, whereas in an office job it's very minimal of what can happen. In the restaurant industry, the sky's the limit. You could have people smoking weed in your parking lot, you know, you could have people stealing money 'cause they need to support their family, or you have people that are drinking 'cause they're addicted."

Benny, who holds very few traditional adulthood benchmarks, explained working "really hard" in the restaurant by making "sure that everybody's happy, and I try to do my job the right way, and I try to show up to all my shifts, and be on time, to me that's working hard because I'm working to make sure I can take care of all the responsibilities I have." At the same time, he did not consider his restaurant job a career or "regular job." He then said, "I wouldn't want a job where I had to sit in a cubicle all day though, when I get a career, I want it to be something that I just enjoy doing anyway. I hope to enjoy the people I work with, I wouldn't ever be able to stand myself if I was just in a workplace that I couldn't talk to people, couldn't joke with people." Benny then contrarily specified that if he had an office job,

I think I'd be a riot 'cause I could think of some great office pranks because of, you know, like the TV shows that are out there and stuff. Like I've always thought it would be super fun to have a cubical job and pull the ridiculous stuff on people that I could think of to do. Um, but I wouldn't be able to stay with a regular job like that, like an office job, or a cubicle job, or a boring and dry job. I wouldn't be able to do that anyways. I think it's just 'cause I'm a people person, so I would always want to have a job where I could do what I do now with other people, with good friends, fun, jokes, and stuff.

Similar to Benny, other participants disclosed that they would "hate" to work in an "office, cubicle atmosphere."

Violet (21 years old) discussed her frustration with employees who do not work hard and are "pretty slackerish" and how she herself puts in "a lot of hours," "a lot of days in a week," and a "high quality of work." She especially hated when, "three of you are working really hard and

essentially doing everything, and then two are just sort of doing nothing.” However, the fun and joking atmosphere of the restaurant is what Violet loved. She even said,

If I were to go into a more traditional job, I would miss the social aspect of it, just people, I do have a lot of freedom to joke around and have fun on my shifts. Like I think I would go crazy if I was just working at a desk, like super rigid, not being able to do what I wanted, but that’s sort of my personality anyway. I don’t think I’d be happy in that sort of a job, yeah. I think after working in a restaurant, you get spoiled on like being able to goof off and have fun.

The participants often equate boring work with traditional careers. For Violet and the other participants, they would rather responsibly “work hard” in “fun work” than in “boring work.” Strategically, they maintained appropriate presentations of maturity while sustaining “youthfulness.”

Another way the participants preserved maturity was detailing their commitment to and investment in the restaurants. Seymour, whom I introduced in Chapter 3 as having stated that he did not want to spend the rest of his life in the restaurant industry, discussed plans of owning some sort of a business one day and eventually going back to school to finish his “AA.” But for now, Seymour mentioned, “I like where I work, the people I work with, the job, it’s fun, I like the lifestyle, and the job permits my lifestyle, I’m not a 9-to-5er, no I’m not!” Yet, not being a 9-to-5er is not the same as being lazy. Seymour invested time and energy in the restaurant. For example, he talked about circumstances where he “worked 10 hours straight” without a break to help cover employees who were sick or hung over. He also highlighted how he cares about customers and the regulars who ask for him on a weekly basis. Seymour stated he “works hard and parties hard.”

Comparably, after explaining that he enjoys working in the restaurant because of the fun, friends, “good times,” “free alcohol,” and “every aspect of it,” Caleb also indicated that the restaurant creates “a strong feeling of commitment” and that “there’s this incredible

responsibility to do well and keep doing well, and learning wines, learning foods, and keep moving up.” He also added, “without a highly trained serving staff and a tightly knit family there, they couldn’t do anything, so we’re incredibly important to the restaurant as a whole.”

According to Icarus, “the restaurant kinda lets me keep my youth and it kind of robs me of my youth.” He explained, “I feel like a kid when I’m at the restaurant, I feel younger,” “we all just fuck around and like just be total weirdos together,” and “when we’re able to just be together in the restaurant community itself, I’d say that keeps it young.” Alternatively he said the restaurant “robs me of it [youth] with all the hard work and the shitty customers here and there.” Moreover, he described feeling like an adult in the restaurant because of the money he earns and the ability to pay his bills.

After I asked Jose (25 years old) about extended employment durations, he responded with,

I think often times people don’t want to be like their parents, like they see their parent’s lives, especially this young generation views their parent’s lives as boring. Like they do that same thing everyday, go to work, come back, and that’s portrayed in the movies as well. For instance, yesterday I saw *American Beauty*, and [laughs] that was portrayed in that, so I think yeah, that has a big influence on people. I mean you see a lot of people who are like, ‘I don’t want to sit in an office and work all day,’ or ‘I’m not the kind of a person who can do a 9-to-5 job,’ or whatnot. So I think that is influenced a little bit by the parents. Maybe they don’t see their parents happy, or they don’t see their parents in an exciting life that they want, or maybe they see themselves in the future and picture it a different way.

For Jose, it is not that he and restaurant workers are lazy and only want quick cash now; actually, they simply want to “work hard” in fun and exciting jobs that would make them happy.

As Jose’s and the other participants’ experiences show, the derogatory representation of younger generations in the growing body of popular cultural articles and scholarly research, for the most part, do not apply here. Specifically, news outlets argue that 20-something to 40-something-year-olds in Generations X, Y, and Z exhibit narcissism, entitlement, and laziness

(Rampell 2011; Sanburn 2013). In addition, scholarly work suggests that Generation X, Y, Z, and beyond will experience extended periods of exploration and instability in their late teens and twenties (Arnett 2004; Henig 2010; Parment 2012). Moreover, researchers contend that the Millennials born after 1980 seek immediate payoffs from their places of employment (Maccoby 1995; Jurkiewicz 2000; Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak 2000). Others argue that many young workers are less interested in making large sacrifices for work, which makes part-time work appear more favorable (Loughlin and Barling 2001; Moore 2010). The data show how restaurant workers were and considered themselves diligent workers rather than “bad capitalists” with non-sacrificial mindsets. The major employment mindset shift is that the participants aspired for work lives that could provide excitement and fun in addition to commitment, investment, responsibilities, maturity, *and* hard work.

Easy Come, Easy Go

“It’s kind of the running joke: you can’t quit, you *always* come back.” (Sarah, 20)

The last discourse of negotiation that the participants used to explain disruptions in a traditional and linear life course was describing reasons why the restaurant influences them to stay and come back after leaving. Some of the reasons appear contradictory. The explanations they gave included the burdensome demands of the restaurant, the advantageous perks of the restaurant, the disinterest in taking a pay cut in an entry level position, the ability for identity, occupational, and goal exploration, the restaurant as a fallback for indecision or the inability to attain aspired occupations, the dislike of entering alternative forms of work, and the love of restaurant culture.

Ted (25 years old) told me he started working in the restaurant industry because it suited his school schedule. Conversely, he described the restaurant as interfering with completing college sooner. Explaining why it took him six and a half years to finish his Bachelor’s degree,

Ted said, “I wanted to make more money. Like I guess it kinda has a way of drowning out school because the restaurant demands. Like they always want you to work more shifts, they always want more out of you. In a way, the restaurant pushed me from school because I wasn’t studying as much, and I was tired all the time.” He also said night shifts, “made me even more tired for school. Like say I had a 9 AM class and then two others after that, like go to school from 9 AM to 2 PM and then go to work from 5 PM to like 11 PM, so it was like waking up early, and going to bed late at night, I mean I could nap in between, but I was tired a lot.” He added, “working in a restaurant is strenuous on your body, I mean I get foot pains and back pains all the time, like my heel always hurts, it is hard to walk sometimes.” Although Ted has a BA, he indicated that the money is “probably why I stay in the restaurant, I mean even though I’m graduated.” Moreover, he reported,

It’s hard to find work now because of the economy, but now I make pretty good money, I bartend all the time. So while I can’t find a regular job, it’s still a good job that caters to my schedule. I can work nights and sleep in and still make good money. I think if I got a college educated job, like a job that I could use my degree, I think it’d initially be a pay cut from what I actually make now, so it’d be kind of hard to leave, but I would do it.

In the interview, Ted oscillated back and forth between staying and leaving for a “regular job,” “youthful” behaviors and “adultlike” behaviors, and claiming the restaurant hours are and are not flexible.

According to Rose, the tiring, late hours of restaurant work hamper “her motivation to apply for jobs” and prevent her from finding a “real job.” Specifically, she stated, “restaurant hours are long hours, and you get off and you’re tired because you’ve just been working so much.” Rose then asserted, “the last thing you wanna do is like write a cover letter when you get off work, you know? So I feel like it definitely gets in the way.” She later commented on how the erratic schedule inhibits her from interviewing for jobs: “I never know my schedule. I never

get my schedule until Thursday, Friday morning for Monday, so when I'm like interviewing for jobs, they'll be like, 'can you come in on Monday,' and it will be Friday, and I still don't know, and I have to cancel because I'll have to work Monday and we only know two days before so I don't have time to get my shift covered. So I feel like that gets in the way all the time 'cause it's such weird hours."

Rose's discourses of negotiation present conflicting representations of her restaurant employment. She first suggested that restaurant work is not conducive for finding other jobs because of the scheduling and the fatigue-producing manual labor. However, Rose also discussed the freedoms of working in the restaurant, one being the ease with which she was able to text message the entire staff and get her shifts covered—"it's just as easy as that." In addition, Rose stated that she and other workers stay because of the "really good money." Furthermore, she rhetorically asked, "where else can you make 25 dollars an hour" and then explained she wouldn't quit "just to start down at the bottom at like an 8 dollar an hour desk job."

The participants also discussed identity, occupational, and goal exploration as a reason to stay in and/or come back to restaurant employment. For instance, Storie described various types of "moonlighters" in the restaurant,

A lot of the workers go to school and some of them want to go and do a trade. Like there is a lot of massage therapy people. And a lot of them already do a trade and then moonlight as a server, just to make extra money. So like a lot of the bussers, I know one of them installs air conditioners, like in companies, like in big units, and bus at night. You know, everybody has other jobs, and everybody else goes to school, or they're trying to move, or like they're traveling, and they are just saving up money to travel. You know, there's a lot of musicians.

Another example of an explorer is Eliza. After leaving school for a while, Eliza left the restaurant and worked only in her receptionist position so that she could begin school again. Subsequently, she explained quickly returning to restaurant employment because she needed to

pay for school and other bills. In addition, she told me she, like many workers, stayed longer than planned because of goal changes while working in the restaurant. After a few years in the restaurant industry, Eliza decided to enroll in a criminal justice career college. She said she aspires for a probation officer position.

Lucie has always worked in restaurants while in school, which has allowed her to explore her goal options. She said, “I [laughs] have *a lot* of schooling [pause] and it hasn’t really amounted to much because I transferred from New York, and then when I came back, I started taking random classes, and then I decided I wanted to be an art major in communication design. And so now, I am kinda trying to pull all my classes together and all of my education together to create an individualized degree, which is all in the works right now.” Despite her efforts to finish college, Lucie remained ambivalent about a future occupation, stating she would rather go travel,

I was actually talking to my advisor this morning, and she was like, well what kind of job do you want? What career do you want? And I mean I don’t really know, I don’t know, like I kinda just wanna go travel. I just want to save all my money and go travel. And you know, I had a friend at another restaurant I worked at, he was an art major, and he was a server, and he would work for like a month, and save all his money, and leave for a month, come back and save for a month, and then go travel for a month, and I don’t know. And half of me just wants to be like screw this stuff, I don’t want to go to school anymore, save all my money and go travel [frustrated laugh].

Still, Lucie described aspiring to enter some kind of social or nonprofit work, but then said, “in terms of like a career, I don’t know” and “I don’t have a *specific* job that I am pursuing.”

Seemingly more directed participants still presented ambivalence and were happy to have the restaurant as a permanent “fallback.” For example, Elliot (18 years old) said, “right now, my dream is [pause], I love drawing, graphic design would be my ideal situation as a career, but um, but you know I’ll always have the restaurant to come back to, so I can go away from the restaurant, try something else, and if I don’t like that, I can always come back. Likewise, Penny

(20 years old) explained that restaurant work is “work you can fall back on as long as you leave on good terms, you can definitely fall back on it.” In addition, Daisy (19 years old) mentioned restaurant work is “easy, once you’ve learned how to do it, to come back to and do it again, it’s not one of those jobs where you’re not welcome back.”

Some participants left the restaurant for short periods to try other types of occupations. However, they returned to restaurant employment because they were dissatisfied with the other jobs. For instance, Aster (30 years old) explained:

At one of the restaurants I worked at, a doctor was eating there and offered me a 9-to-5 position like running the front office. It was a good network opportunity for me, so I took it and did it for like a year, year and a half, and hated it. I was making good money, but it just wasn’t like the restaurant, it just wasn’t for me, it was boring. I quit and got a job back in a restaurant. Now, if I’m gonna leave the restaurant again, it’s gotta be for like something I really wanna do, enjoy doing.

Other participants described co-workers who left for other work several times but returned to the restaurant several times. Sarah told me that “a lot of people leave and come back,” which created the running joke, “you can’t quit, you *always* come back,” among the employees. Sarah elaborated about one of her friends, “she’s quit and come back 6 or 7 times, like it’s once a year she’s quit and come back. Like she leaves and tries to go to another job, but she never can, so she always comes back.” She then added, “there’s a girl who just recently got hired again who quit like two years ago, and now she’s back.” Sarah discussed how many of her co-workers left and “tried to get jobs at big companies, and tried to like start their careers, but it never really works out.” She later speculated that she thinks this process continues to happen because people appreciate the “family environment” of the restaurant. Lucie also stated, “Yeah, definitely, a lot of people leave and come back.” She further described a close co-worker who “got a 9-to-5 job,” but “came back to the restaurant industry just because he made more money, it was more

flexible for him, and he was really good at selling things. He knew a lot about food and wine, and he prefers it.” She said he told her, “he hated his 9-to-5 job, he hated it!”

Along with alternative job dissatisfaction, some participants left and came back because they missed the restaurant culture. They longed for the friends, fun, family-orientation, and other freedoms. Molly (36 years old) discussed this culture and several ways that it was easy to remain working in a restaurant and easy to return after leaving:

I really like my co-workers. I have a lot of love for the people I’ve worked with. And like there is drama, there’s a lot of non-sense, and there’s probably a lot of people that I’ve met who aren’t good for me either, but I also have life-long friends, like more so than from high school, and I just have some pretty warm feelings from all my experiences in bars and restaurants. So I think overall, it’s been a good part of who I am, and a good part of my development. And that’s probably why even when I left a few times, I went back. I always loved all my jobs, even when I hated them.

Molly continued by explaining that restaurant work is always “something to fall back on, not only for money, but they were like family, and you could go back.” She added, “It’s definitely, definitely, definitely a family affair for sure. Lots of love, lots of hugs, lots of kisses. I mean really intimate closeness, like siblings, more so than like, I know my partner doesn’t hug and kiss all his employees when he leaves work [laughs].”

Those who invested in restaurant work did not claim that the restaurant would bring them adulthood status. However, they saw the extrinsic values of working in restaurants. That is, they felt a part of a larger culture of friends, family, fun, and various freedoms. Not only did restaurant culture provide belonging, it also granted feelings of leadership, responsibility, maturity, “hard work,” ownership, and importance. Through the three discourses of negotiation that I discussed in this chapter, the participants “did” *strategic adulthood* and were able to reason and thwart the stigmatization of their nonlinear and nontraditional life course development.

They were able to maintain features of various developmental stages and sustain appropriate presentations of adulthood or the transition to adulthood.

* * *

In this chapter, I presented a case for reconceptualizing the life course perspective. My research showed that the life course is much more complicated than the model of stage transitions suggest; many dimensions of what scholars consider youthful seep into adulthood and vice versa. I emphasized the importance of examining stories of “growing up” rather than developmental stages. I contended that “growing up” is no longer strictly about role transitions or benchmark acquisition; it encompasses the meanings and constructions that people impose on their behaviors, choices, identities, and workplaces. In addition, I argued that the workers are not being held back from the transition to adulthood, they are simply choosing a different life path. Moreover, people become adults when *they* decide to do so. I illustrated how adult workers take on roles that are both “adult” and in some ways make them less “adult.” The workers weaved in and out of adult roles especially when circumstances permitted. They also decided when they should act more adult and when not to. In fact, the restaurant at times calls for more immaturity and irresponsibility and at others more maturity and responsibility.

The participants navigated between feeling and not feeling like adults because they grappled with popular and social meanings and worldviews about adulthood. In response, they “did” *strategic adulthood* to help them explain their restaurant worker identities despite what mainstream society thinks. The specific discourses of negotiation that the workers employed helped them present appropriate presentations of adulthood *and* stave off adulthood, too. Strategic adulthood is a resource to explain un-adult identities, incongruent adult identities, and a so-called “failed” adult mobility. The workers were presented with contradictory cultural

messages or competing social expectations. They wanted to have a fun, a “youthful” life, and to sustain legitimate presentations of adulthood or the transition to adulthood. Strategic adulthood and the associated negotiation discourses attempted to solve the developmental dilemmas they faced in relation to cultural expectations.

I presented a new perspective on occupations and the life course. Doing so, I contribute to our knowledge of how “nonstandard jobs” and “bad jobs” fit into nonlinear development and the constructed meanings of the life course. As Hendry and Kloep (2007) contended, people are perpetually in a state of dynamic fluctuation or a state of being in between or emerging throughout the lifespan. Indeed, the participants in this study exist in such a state. By making this middle group visible, I challenge (possibly contentiously) the life course and the work and occupations literature. I problematize the life stages as mere constructions with no essential or universal realness to them. The data showed that people do not *want* a traditional, middle-class adulthood but, at the same time, feel the need to explain their choices because of normative expectations.

My research makes standard work and normative development vulnerable because it indicates alternative ways of making a living and developing. This is not unlike how same-sex marriage made heterosexuality as the standard vulnerable. However, instead of giving up on standard career/lifestyle aspirations entirely, the workers negotiated the tensions between their lives and normative occupational scripts by caveating fun, friends, and freedoms, doing fun hard work not boring work, and explaining why it is easy to stay and easy to come back. These discourses of negotiation are what I consider unconscious protective practices of internalized normative ways of living. My study also speaks to why people would choose to enter and remain in the restaurant industry despite the marginal or “bad” qualities of the work. This

research can extend to people in other nonstandard workplaces. Some examples may include theme park workers, resort workers, hotel workers, car wash workers, marijuana bakery and dispensary workers, strippers, or call girls.

In Chapter 5, I continue to investigate the ways in which restaurant workers are able to engage in unconventional behaviors. I specifically examine the theft practices of the employees and what this means for the study of deviance and crime in the life course.

CHAPTER 5¹

RESTAURANT WORKERS, CRIME, AND DEVIANCE IN THE LIFE COURSE

In Chapter 4, I discussed how scholars separate the life course into developmental stages and provide the normative chronological timing of these stages in terms of benchmark acquisition, roles, identities, and, especially, jobs and occupations. Rather than categorizing restaurant workers into stages and remissly designating them in a state of “failed-adult mobility,” I presented how they are a case for the reconceptualization of the life course perspective. That is, restaurant workers experience development in non-linear, multidimensional, dynamic, and fluctuating ways, and focusing on the meanings they impose on “growing up” is a more suitable framework for understanding processes within the life course.

In this chapter, I consider the body of literature that has situated crime and deviance in the life course, and I investigate how and why restaurant culture and restaurant workers disturb existing life course theorizing about crime and deviance. Specifically, I focus on the restaurant employees’ usage of techniques of neutralization to justify late life onsets and persistence of crime and deviance. Although crime and deviance typically desist over the life course, the data show that restaurant culture influences a person’s likelihood of participating in theft without much contrition. Furthermore, despite the workers’ general commitment to normative beliefs and values, the techniques of neutralization allow for and minimize the shame of stealing. This research indicates that restaurant workers are an empirical example of when the onset and persistence of crime and deviance can and do occur in later life and adulthood. The present

¹ Portions of this chapter are published in my 2013 article “It’s Only Stealing a little a Lot: Techniques of Neutralization for Theft Among Restaurant Workers.” *Deviant Behavior* 34(6):494-512.

study challenges researchers' prevailing assumptions about and explanations for deviance and crime in the life course.

DEVIANCE AND CRIME

Most people commit some form of deviance throughout the lifespan (Lemert 1975). In addition, people may drift in and out of participating in deviance (Matza 1964). Various definitions of deviance exist, and many people disagree about what behavior they consider deviant. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I use Becker's (1963) relativistic definition of deviance, which he described as the failure to obey group rules or norms. While developing this definition, however, Becker acknowledged the ambiguity that arises with such a definition; that rules in one group do not apply to all groups means a person might be considered deviant in some groups but not in others. This treatment is significant when I discuss the culture of restaurants. Another complication about the definition of deviance is its relationship to crime. The general definition of a crime is an act that violates criminal law (Walsh and Hemmens 2014). Although deviance is often also a crime, it is not always so. That is, not all types of deviant behavior violate criminal law or are illegal. In this chapter, I address a behavior in which restaurant workers participate that is both deviant and criminal: theft from the workplace.

THEORIES OF DEVIANCE AND CRIME

Numerous theories focus on explaining how deviance and crime occur and why people come to participate in such activities. Among the social structural theories of deviance and crime, which explain extenuating circumstances that increase the likelihood of crime and deviance, are zonal theory and social disorganization (Park and Burgess 1967; Shaw and McKay 1972); anomie theory (Durkheim 1893); strain theory (Merton 1938); general strain theory (Agnew 1985); short-run hedonism (Cohen 1955); and opportunity structure theory (Cloward and Ohlin 1960).

These macro-level theories are valuable to advance how social contexts influence crime and deviance. I broaden these theories by examining a microcosm that shapes unconventional behavior.

Some theories that have already explored micro-level circumstances are social process theories of deviance and crime, which include differential association theory (Sutherland and Cressey 1974), social learning theory and differential reinforcement theory (Burgess and Akers 1966), social bonding theory (Hirschi 1969), self-control theory (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), labeling theory (Tannenbaum 1938), neutralization theory (Sykes and Matza 1957), and rational choice theory (Clarke and Cornish 1985). I widen the explanations for deviance and crime by investigating restaurants as a specific social context under which micro-level processes transpire.

THEORIES OF DEVIANCE AND CRIME OVER THE LIFE COURSE

Most theories of deviance and crime do not account for changes in deviance or crime during the life course. Moreover, they do not explore how people themselves change throughout the lifespan. As a result, some scholars have established reasons for why people not only initially deviate or commit a crime, but also for how they persist or desist in these deviant or criminal behaviors over time (e.g., Sampson and Laub 1993). Such explanations predominantly fit under developmental theories about deviance and crime, specifically examining delinquency and its persistence or desistence. Most of these theories detail the individual, family, school, peer, and community risk factors for delinquency. Further, they address the frequency, duration, and seriousness of offenses from onset to detailing persistence and desistence (if there is desistence). Yet, these explanations largely focus on *normative* onsets, persistence, and desistence of crime and deviance. Conversely, I examine non-normative criminal and deviant careers in this study.

A deviant career is the development of a pattern of deviant behavior (Becker 1963). Likewise, a criminal career is the development of a pattern of criminal behavior. Although a deviant or criminal career may begin at any time in the life course, Elliot, Huizinga, and Menard (1989) notably indicated that it almost always begins in childhood or adolescence, and only four percent of criminal careers begin in adulthood. Despite the acknowledgement that deviant or criminal careers are the development of patterns of behavior, scholars mention that these careers do not have to last for the entire lifespan, and they may include only one offense (Elliot et al. 1989). This point is especially important for low-consensus crimes and deviance. For instance, simply because a person drinks on the job (low-consensus) does not mean he or she will murder people (high-consensus). Additionally, deviating or committing crime may occur in one context (e.g., in a restaurant) but not in another (e.g., in a law firm).

Many crime and deviance scholars use the life course perspective to explain patterns of crime and deviant behavior. Sampson and Laub (2003) even said that the life course approach is “the most promising approach for advancing the state of knowledge regarding continuity (persistence in) and change (desistance) in crime *and* other problem behaviors” (p. 300). In addition, they wrote, “a life course perspective offers the most compelling and unifying framework for understanding the processes underlying continuity (persistence) and change (desistance) in criminal behavior over the life span” (p. 305).

Various developmental theories of deviance and crime over the life course include explanations of desistance because of maturation and aging (Glueck and Glueck 1974), the propensity theory of crime (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), the general theory or super traits theory of crime (i.e., personality, family, school, peers, and work) (Agnew 2005), the dual pathway developmental theory of crime (i.e., adolescent-limited and life course persistent)

(Moffitt 1993), and the age-graded developmental theory of crime (Sampson and Laub 1993). Sampson and Laub specifically discussed how adult attachments, life events, informal social controls, and social capital lead to the desistance process. To demonstrate, they highlighted how marriage, full-time employment, and adult social bonds are salient turning points. However, Sampson and Laub emphasized the importance of “good” marriages and “stable” employment rather than the formation of marriage and full-time employment themselves as key to the desistance process.

People often take on deviant or criminal roles and identities through interactions, which change with age. Social psychological explanations for deviance and crime or symbolic interactionist theories undertake illustrating these processes and changes. Specifically, scholars have suggested that if people’s deviant roles and identities are salient, or if their role-commitments are deviant or criminal, these roles and identities are more likely to persist in the life course (Matsueda and Heimer 1997). Conversely, the opposite is true when people are committed to law-abiding identities.

Other scholars have explained delinquency through criminal embeddedness (Hagan 1991; 1993). That is, when people are embedded in delinquent subcultures early on and repeatedly engage in delinquent acts, this reduces the likelihood of later legitimate adulthood employment, educational success, and status attainment, each of which influences the desistance of criminal activities. Hagan also proposed that early delinquency has a lasting socioeconomic effect on the adult life course.

Developmental theories of deviance and crime generally indicate that people “cease or moderate their criminal and deviant behavior as they become more integrated or reintegrated into other domains of social life, suggesting that desistance is a consequence of becoming an adult.

In addition, desisting from adolescent deviant activities facilitates integration into work, family, and community life” (Uggen and Massoglia 2003:322). As such, Uggen and Massoglia argued that desistance is both a cause and consequence of transitioning into adulthood benchmarks. Furthermore, they maintained that educational and occupational attainment and stability (socioeconomics), stable families, and community and civic participation alter crime and deviance patterns.

The life course crime literature has predominantly focused on how adult roles affect desistance *or* how deviant/criminal behavior affects transitions to adult roles (Uggen and Massoglia 2003). Determining either one with certainty is and has been difficult. For example, those who were going to desist anyway may self-select into “high quality” jobs. Alternatively, role transitions may actually cause desistance from deviance and crime. In terms of stealing, some quantitative researchers have intimated that adulthood benchmark attainment decreases the likelihood of theft practices (Waite 1995; Warr 1998). However, this argument does not explain the high theft rates among adult restaurant workers. Based on the literature, theft should go down as people age and attain designated adulthood markers. On the whole, Uggen and Massoglia (2003) encourage a greater attention on onset and desistance patterns across space and time, which is one of the aims in this chapter.

Despite the relevant and important research life course criminologists and deviance scholars have conducted, most rarely examine the onset and persistence of deviance and crime in the late life course, and especially in adulthood (ages 18 years old and older). Moreover, few systematically address how and why specific late life social contexts influence the onset, persistence, and desistance of crime and deviance. Within this chapter, I examine a specific cultural context that impacts the likelihood of deviating and committing crime in later life and, in

particular, in adulthood. I address how restaurant culture allows for the acceptance of theft from restaurant establishments. I specifically integrate the deviance and crime literature with the life course literature by way of investigating the techniques of neutralization that restaurant workers employ to justify theft. The data show that techniques of neutralization are generally accepted in restaurant culture, which allow for the later life and adulthood deviance and crime onsets, persistence, and a commonplace lack of guilt.

TECHNIQUES OF NEUTRALIZATION

Techniques of neutralization are justifications of deviant behavior. Sykes and Matza (1957) identified five such techniques. These include denial of responsibility, when people deny culpability for deviant behavior due to forces beyond their control; denial of injury, when people view their behavior as not causing any great harm; denial of the victim, when people claim the victim deserves the punishment, or the victim is physically absent, unknown, or a vague abstraction; condemnation of condemners, when people shift the blame to those who disapprove of the deviant behavior; and, an appeal to higher loyalties, when people assert that they are deviating for the demands of smaller social groups to which they belong (e.g., friends).

Other scholars more recently identified seven additional techniques of neutralization: metaphor of the ledger is employed when those who deviate claim they have other positive qualities (Klockers 1974); defense of necessity is drawn on when people contend that they need to deviate for various reasons (Minor 1981); denial of necessity of the law is applied when the law is called unfair or unjust, claim of entitlement is used when people believe they deserve the gains of a crime, and everybody else is doing it is employed when people state that others also deviate (Coleman 1985); justification by comparison is drawn on when deviants explain that

they could be doing something worse, and when deviants suppress guilt by not thinking about the deviant acts committed, they are applying postponement (Cromwell and Thurman 2003).

Successful use of the techniques of neutralization comes from the ability to draw on dominant social values (Sykes and Matza 1957). Evidenced by the fact that delinquents do not completely oppose societal conventional norms, Sykes and Matza explained that many delinquents exhibit guilt or shame, respect law-abiding persons, feel certain people deserve victimization, while others do not, and, to a certain extent, conform to societal norms. As such, they contended that delinquents are embedded in the larger social world, and are partially committed to the dominant social order. Therefore, Sykes and Matza claimed that delinquents and non-delinquents use similar defenses for deviance. Conversely, some scholars disagree with their argument that delinquents and non-delinquents have similar value systems (Schwendiger and Schwendiger 1967; Hindelang 1970, 1974; Minor 1981).

Scott and Lyman (1968) added to the literature with the concept of accounts, or statements made by people to explain untoward behavior. Accounts include justifications, through which people accept responsibility for the act but deny its wrongfulness, and excuses, by which people admit the act was wrong but deny full responsibility. Scott and Lyman extended neutralization theory further by recognizing how accounts are honored; that is, cultures, subcultures, and groups govern whether an account is legitimate.

In this chapter, I consider how the participants' neutralizations emulate both the dominant cultural beliefs in the United States and the socially approved narratives in the restaurant. I acknowledge restaurant subculture in my analysis, where a subculture is a social subgroup within larger society that maintains specialized knowledge, values, and beliefs (Best and Luckenbill 1982; Haenfler 2010). In brief, I argue that late and adulthood onsets and persistence of theft

occur in restaurants—professional back places—because of the generally agreed upon codes of conduct and ways of talking about non-normative behaviors.

DEVIANCE AND CRIME IN OCCUPATIONS AND RESTAURANTS

One reason deviance and crime might decrease with age is *employment entrance* because “at the peak age of committing crime, young people begin to enter the labor force. The job, with its regular hours, its restrictions, and its compensation, settles the adolescent down and satisfies his previously unsatisfied wants” (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990:138). However, although some people with jobs are less likely to deviate than some people without jobs, this employment explanation does not address how different types of occupations or different personal characteristics may influence deviance. Furthermore, deviance “does not occur in a social vacuum; it takes place as part of the on-going processes attendant to our major social institutions and their behavioral configurations. Such a central institution is that of work. A very significant proportion of deviant behavior occurs within, concomitant to, or as a result of, work and occupational specialty” (Bryant 1974:4).

Paradoxically, employment may decrease *and* increase deviance and crime. Such a contradiction has incited much interest in occupational deviance and crime as a research topic among many sociologists. Although deviance and crime may decrease with age, with non-deviant social bonds, and with non-criminal role commitment, certain occupations may have work cultures and structures that are conducive to deviant and criminal behaviors. Of course, there are illegal occupations, such as illicit drug dealing or prostitution, that are illegal and deviant *sui generis*, but criminal and non-criminal deviance occurs in legal occupations as well.

Among research pertaining to deviance and crime within occupations, sociologists have examined white-collar crime (Sutherland 1940; 1949), blue-collar crime (Bensman and Gerver

1963; Horning 1970), deviance in illegal occupations (Adler 1993), and deviance in legal occupations (Reed, Burnette, and Troiden 1976). Some workplace deviance consists of “rate-busting, quota restrictions, the use of forbidden procedures, such as a shortcut technique or to cover up mistakes or shoddy workmanship, and unethical professional behavior” (Bryant 1974:4). Deviance in the form of occupational crime and abusive employee behavior is defined as “any illegal, unethical, or irresponsible act committed by an employee acting alone or in concert with a co-worker or nonemployee that results in a loss to an organization, co-worker, customer, or vendor” (Blount 2003:4). Deviant behavior in the workplace, in general, includes the breaking of organizational norms and comprises of workplace violence, theft, fraud, and substance use (Kidwell and Martin 2005). The restaurant industry is an important site of research because studies have indicated that deviant and criminal behaviors are occurring in restaurants. In particular, research on restaurants has shown a prevalence of employee theft (Mars and Nicod 1984; Hawkins 1984; Hollinger, Slora and Terris 1992; Grey and Anderson-Ryan 1994; Shapiro 1995; Miller and Gaines 1997; Thoms et al. 2001). What we know less about is how and why restaurant theft is occurring, especially self-reported reasons for such acts.

Although themes of illegal and illicit substance use, subsequent health risks, illegal workplace practices (e.g., from breaks and overtime procedures to citizenship statuses), and controversial (and illegal) sexual, racial, and classed behaviors have emerged inductively in this study, I focus on theft in this chapter. As a side note, I am not as interested in the actual theft committed as much as I am concerned about how and why it occurs. I improve our knowledge on how and why people participate in deviant and criminal behavior in adult life. Specifically, I highlight why restaurant culture allows for the acceptance of deviant and criminal behavior, and I investigate how the workers make sense of and assign meaning to deviant and criminal

behavior in the workplace. Rather than using the collected data to suggest that restaurant workers are deviants and/or criminals, I shed light on how the experience of restaurant work and the culture in restaurants influence deviance, crime, and justifications for each. In addition, this research indirectly offers policy options for any interested parties.

THEFT IN THE RESTAURANT

Employee theft is the unauthorized taking of workplace or customer possessions, which can include the pilfering of time, merchandise, or money (Gabor 1994). Such theft is a routine practice found within many U.S. businesses. Researchers estimate that over 50 percent of employees steal from their places of employment (Wimbush and Dalton 1997). It is likely, however, that as much as 75 percent of employee theft goes undetected (Applegate 1990; Green 1997). Employee theft occurs at such high rates that it is approximated to cause one-third of all business failures (Conway and Cox 1987; Lipman and McGraw 1988; Greenberg 1997). More specifically, research reports indicate that the restaurant industry loses \$15 to \$25 billion annually due to employee theft, and four cents out of every foodservice dollar goes to in-house theft (NRA 1996; Paul 2001). Furthermore, 35 percent of restaurants are estimated to fail because of employee theft (NRA 1996; Sheridan 1997).

Generally, empirical research on employee theft has been on retail (Ditton 1977; Kamp and Brooks 1991), medical (Hollinger and Clark 1983; Dabney 1995), and blue-collar (Horning 1970; Mars 1974) occupations. However, some studies show that employee theft is commonly occurring in restaurants. Mars's (1973) study of one hotel dining room in England was the first research to highlight "fiddles" or theft among restaurant workers. Expanding this work, Mars and Nicod (1984) examined the restaurant waitstaff's fiddles in five English hotels. Published articles on employee theft in U.S. restaurants include research on both fast-food establishments

(Hollinger et al. 1992; Shapiro 1995; Thoms et al. 2001) and full-service restaurants (Hawkins 1984; Grey and Anderson-Ryan 1994; Miller and Gaines 1997). But there are still only a minimal number of studies that investigate employee theft in restaurants, especially in full-service restaurants in the United States. In addition, there is limited qualitative research exploring restaurant worker theft. Although ethnographic research on this topic provides claims about why restaurant employees steal, these studies typically exclusively study waiters rather than any other restaurant positions.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, with 13.5 million people working in restaurants, the restaurant industry employs 10 percent of the U.S. workforce (NRA 2014). Moreover, half of all adults in the United States have worked in the restaurant industry at some point in their lives, and one out of three adults has had a restaurant position as his/her first job experience (NRA 2014). Because of the far-reaching nature of restaurants and the fairly normative inclination for restaurant workers to steal, the restaurant industry is a relevant site to examine theories that explain why some people steal and the late life onsets of deviance and crime. One important, rather unresolved issue is how the workers avoid the contrition that is typically associated with stealing, notwithstanding the large pecuniary costs of theft, especially as adults who purportedly *should know better*. The purpose of this chapter is to improve our knowledge on how and why restaurant workers can and do participate in theft and underscore how adult restaurant workers strategically navigate around the guilt and shame commonly accompanying theft behavior.

I examine the self-reports of time, merchandise, and money theft from restaurant workers. Although theft of time and merchandise occur on a regular basis, the focus of this chapter is on the techniques of neutralization for forms of theft that directly result in extra cash because this topic is largely unexplored. Moreover, theft that results in extra cash acquisition

tends to be the most pernicious form of theft for restaurants and yet is not treated as such by the majority of the employees. I contribute to the life course, deviance, and crime literature by discussing how the techniques of neutralization allow for onsets and persistence of theft in later life. I specifically address the formerly documented neutralization techniques that the restaurant workers employ and present two newly identified ones. My direction in this chapter, henceforth, is to analyze the participants' accounts of theft and neutralization techniques for theft in detail and emphasize the implications of this research more generally.

ACCOUNTS OF THEFT

The three types of theft that the participants reported include theft of time, merchandise, and cash. All 52 participants were aware of co-workers who used work time as personal time, took or received merchandise for personal use, and gave away merchandise to customers and co-workers without authorization. Giving away merchandise typically meant that the workers were not charging the patrons and either received a large tip or simply retained the cash the patrons paid for the company-owned products in addition to a tip. Forty-eight participants were aware of co-workers who illegitimately pocketed extra cash from customers. While the participants in this study did not admit to embezzling, 20 provided details on fellow employees who were caught and terminated for embezzlement. Of the participants, 51 used work time as personal time, 49 disclosed taking, receiving, and giving away merchandise without authorization, and 28 admitted illegitimately pocketing extra cash from customers. None of the participants indicated that they stole cash before entering the restaurant industry. Moreover, none of them told me that they stole cash in other types of jobs they held. In addition, all of them indicated that they would not steal cash in other forms of employment, especially in ones they considered professions, careers, or "real jobs."

Even though theft of time and merchandise occurred on a regular basis, the focus in this chapter is on the neutralizations for cash theft. Although the participants reported many ways in which money was stolen, a detailed discussion of them all is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, the most prominent way that they stole money was by illegitimately pocketing extra cash, which meant that the workers took cash paid by customers that was intended for the restaurant bill by compensating or removing items from the check after-the-fact. The informants compensated cash tickets by using managers' codes without their authorization to delete items, asking a trusting manager to void items, duplicating coupons or rewards cards for personal use, transferring items off bills, or using the employee discount on customers. Here, I make special note of how the participants verbalized stealing. When they discussed theft, they rarely, if ever, referred to theft as such; in almost every account, they called theft *it*. Other terms that the participants used to talk about stealing include, "this," "discounts," "discounting," "comped," "comping," "voids," "voiding," "tricks," and "hook up."

In the interviews, five central accounts of theft emerged: opportunistic-based, economic-based, merit-based, symbiotic-based, and minimizing. Among these accounts, the participants employed six of the 12 formerly documented techniques of neutralization. Additionally, they used two new techniques of neutralization that I call Denial of Excess and No One Cares.

Frequently, the participants employed a combination of these eight techniques.

Opportunistic-Based Accounts

Theft based on opportunity was a common account. However, opportunistic-based accounts were less readily neutralized than economic-based, merit-based, symbiotic-based, or minimizing ones. In other words, stealing that occurs because it is "easy" is less socially justifiable than, for example, stealing for the right to a living wage. As Scott and Lyman (1968) explained that for

an account to be honored it must be anchored in appropriate situational background expectations, I contend that the same must occur for honoring theft accounts. Likewise, Sykes and Matza (1957) asserted that neutralizations are grounded in the dominant social order. Consequently, neutralizations that are not “normalized” as reasonable in terms of background expectancies are less likely to be honored or legitimated. Nonetheless, consistent across self-reports, participants indicated that they in part “do it” (steal) because they “can get away with it.” Employees were generally able to steal from customers and the restaurant with little fear of sanctions.

The participants frequently explained how easy and convenient it was to steal because of opportunity. For example, Val, a 39-year-old server, bartender, and former manager, said, “it is a crime of opportunity.” Likewise, Molly, a 36-year-old former restaurant worker of 22 years, asserted that theft occurs “just ‘cause it’s a totally easy way to make money.” Comparatively, Cindy, a 33-year-old server and manager, explained that workers steal because of convenience and opportunity, both of which enabled future acts of theft,

I think it is convenience, but I think once it is done, and there is that room for opportunity, that is when it happens, so like say I go into work tonight and I have to make 60 dollars, and I am stressed, like I am not going to make it, so really fast, I do a 2-for-1, and then I’ll go in the next night and not need the money, but all of a sudden a cash payment comes along, and the manager’s keys are there, and it’s like oh yeah ok, I can do it, I’ve done it, and it’s a great opportunity to do it.

To clarify, a “2-for-1” stands for two meals for the price of one. Doing a “really fast” 2-for-1 is using a 2-for-1 coupon without managerial authorization on a cash table to pocket the extra cash.

Despite the account of convenience and opportunity for cash theft, the participants appeared rather cognizant of the social illegitimacy of this narrative. Perhaps because opportunism has minimal reasonable groundedness in the dominant social order in the United States, the participants provided four other accounts of theft along with several techniques of neutralization to better mitigate the disgrace of stealing.

Economic-Based Accounts

Paralleling the defense of necessity (Minor 1981), the participants disclosed economic-based accounts of theft. They claimed the need to void items for extra cash because of the precarious nature of restaurant work. In other words, they alleged to need money for various expenses.

Take for example, Nicole (29-year-old server and bartender), she revealed that while voiding items for cash is “really easy,” she did it because of work instability, which lessens her feelings of guilt,

You don't know how much you are going to make at the end of the night and you're kinda hoping, in your mind, you have the amount that you need to make in order to keep up with, you know, weekly, I said I made \$400, so if last time I worked I made \$30, and this time it looks like I'm gonna make \$30 again, like, oh my god, you know, it's unstable, and so if you find a way that you can adjust it, you know, then I guess you do it...I mean it's just really easy, and um, yeah, I don't know, I mean I don't feel that bad about it.

Here, Nicole unveiled how economic instability is easily compensated by opportunities to “adjust” her income. As a result, although opportunistic theft is doubtfully socially acceptable, it is not completely problematic either. The economic-based account of theft enabled Nicole to free herself from feeling “that bad.” Similarly, even though Cindy stated above that theft is about convenience and opportunity, she also disclosed that “sometimes it might even be desperation too, like if you have rent to pay, you aren't making money, and it isn't busy.”

Merit-Based Accounts

Akin to the claim of entitlement (Coleman 1985), the participants frequently expressed merit-based accounts of theft by describing a “hard-worker” identity. The participants described being entitled to, or deserving of, the gains of theft (see also Miller and Gaines 1997). Describing why voiding items for cash was just, Nadia, a 20-year-old host and server, said,

Working there, just, you didn't make that much in tips, just because of the kids eat free thing, and just people being just assholes [laughs], but you know if someone worked a

double, I remember one day, my friend worked a double, and he only made like \$60, and he was there for like 9 hours, and um, and that was when he first started working there and he didn't know about the discounts and stuff, and someone told him, they're like, "hey, like if you're having a bad day, like if you don't make that much money, you know, you can do this and get a little extra money," and so they kinda, I guess they figured that, and I would agree, the work that you put in to receive so little back, it's not equal at all, you know you don't get what you deserve.

In part, the merit-based account of theft resulted from the "hard work for not enough pay culture" in the restaurant industry. Employees emphasized how "hard work" deserves a "good tip." At the same time, workers and their employers socially constructed what hard work, as well as a good tip, is.

Generally, when participants said they have "worked hard," they indicated completing the following three main criteria. Fulfilling the sequence of service (e.g., timing sequence for drinks, appetizers, entrées, and desserts), not making any mistakes, and providing the proper emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), such as smiling, was assumed to guarantee a good tip. Typically, the participants understood a good tip as 15 to 20 percent of the total bill. It was easier for the participants to justify theft because they were making the tipped minimum wage and relied on tips as their main source of income. In fact, the tipped employee minimum wage is hardly a living wage (see also Chapter 1). Although the participants told me that the vast majority of patrons tipped them, there is no enforced tip law in the United States, whereby tipping is entirely within the patrons' discretion.

Surprisingly, however, the participants did not indicate feeling that the company was explicitly to blame (i.e., because of unfair labor practices). In fact, they expressed a general satisfaction with their places of employment. As such, the workers were not seeking revenge. Even when it came to gratuity, unfair tips were considered the fault of the customers. For

instance, Cindy described the restaurant as sitting in the crossfire between workers and customers,

I think people can justify it saying they got stiffed on a table, or they didn't make any money or any great tips, they can justify it that way. Like the company owes them because the customers aren't tipping what they are supposed to, I think people lose a sense of, I think a lot of money is flying in and out, you see people comping this or discounting that, I don't know, but even bartending, you see people not ringing in drinks and keeping the cash, I have never heard of anyone not doing it, which is sad.

The data showed that the participants were somewhat ambivalent about stealing and oscillated back and forth between claims of opportunity and claims of entitlement. Nonetheless, theft was justified through merit-based neutralizations despite the opportunity to steal.

Symbiotic-Based Accounts

Mirroring appeal to higher loyalties (Sykes and Matza 1957), the participants used symbiotic-based accounts of theft. They indicated that they stole because of the demands of the smaller social groups to which they belonged. Swapping uncharged restaurant items for large tips and/or social networks functioned as a symbiotic exchange. Implicit and explicit pressure from friends, family, and customers granted the employees justifications to steal.

Specifically, symbiotic-based accounts of theft burgeoned from the “hooking it up” narrative. Employees tended to have discretionary power over the people who they thought were deserving of a “hook up.” Hooking up people included giving uncharged items to friends, family, regulars, or acquaintances met while on the job. The control over “hook ups” also gave workers some satisfaction. This is evidenced when Cliff (23-year-old, server and shift manager) divulged, “I do enjoy personally being able to hook people up and give them nice treatment, like I do like the service industry in that way, it's kind of rewarding, kind of.” In addition, Eleanor (19-year-old, server) admitted preferring that her friends do not pay when she said, “I have seen some servers not charge for things, and then go ask the kitchen, to ask them to just give it to

them, like we'll do it if our friends come in and we don't want them to have to pay for it. Most of the time, it is a friendly thing to take care of your friends or customers." Cliff and Eleanor drew on social expectations to preserve both *weak* and *strong ties* (Granovetter 1973) with customers and friends. Incidentally, "hook ups" occurred when there were *no ties* as well (e.g., with customers they just met).

In a similar vein, the participants expected their fellow co-workers to also "hook them up." As Rose, a 22-year-old server, remarked,

It is kinda just like well you're my friend, come on hook me up! I wouldn't expect like a bartender that I didn't know to hook me up, you know, but it is more of a friendship, deserving, like due to friends, like dude, come on, give the drink to me...like if he worked at a different bar, I would hope he did the same there, like not because I work with him, but because we are friends.

Not only did participants "hook up" friends, they gave special treatment to patrons to "keep them happy" and customarily received a larger tip from the social exchange. Referring to himself and other bartenders, Hal (35-year-old server and bartender) conveyed this employee-customer relationship when stating,

Sometimes bartenders want more tips, so they will hook it up a little bit, or they will conveniently forget one thing, it's never usually anything too crazy, and the management is ok with it, 'cause it keeps the customers happy, and coming back, and management wants them to feel like regulars."

Here, Hal expressed how management allowed certain types of "hook ups," whereas in most businesses, any "hook up" would be nothing other than stealing.

Consequently, managers were in some ways complicit in theft behavior, and they explicitly and implicitly enabled employees to use techniques of neutralization to ward off the disgrace of stealing. Therefore, the workers were neutralizing theft behavior by way of the moral code within the restaurant. This subcultural moral code has been described as a "cognitive perspective" or values that designate what is desirable; "these values are translated into

behavioral expectations or norms” and are used to justify deviant behavior (Best and Luckenbill 1982:37).

Minimizing Accounts

Minimizing accounts of theft included three previously documented techniques of neutralization: denial of injury, denial of the victim (Sykes and Matza 1957), and everybody else is doing it (Coleman 1985) and two new ones: Denial of Excess and No One Cares. I call these accounts “minimizing” because when using them, the participants minimized or understated the problematic factors associated with theft behavior, thereby reducing the wrongfulness of theft. The workers used minimizing accounts especially when participating in opportunistic theft. These accounts mirrored values from the larger social world and were anchored in the situational context of the restaurant.

I consider both the denial of injury and the denial of the victim minimizing accounts. Denial of injury and the victim are closely associated; as a victim can be denied when he/she is physically absent, unknown, or a vague abstraction, I argue that injury can also be denied under the same circumstances. Even though the participants knew the company suffered pecuniary costs from theft, the latent nature of theft in the restaurant enabled them to neutralize it. When the participants nonchalantly described theft as *it* or an analogous term, they, in some ways, also removed the wrongfulness of stealing and avoided recognizing the social, economic, and legal issues that the theft act engendered. In this sense, the unauthorized acquiring of cash was a rather invisible form of theft. Although the cash was directly transferred from the customer to the worker, there was no clear victim or injury from the crime. For the restaurant workers, the victim and injury of theft were predominately absent. As an example, Benny, a 22-year-old server, divulged, “you get very caught up in how much tips you could make in one day, you stop

seeing it as like stealing from the company as much as just like making your tip bigger.”

Because the workers felt one step removed from stealing, and there was no explicit victim or physical cash removal through force, they had the ability to alleviate the guilt of theft.

Minimizing accounts also consisted of the neutralizing technique everybody else is doing it (Coleman 1985). By saying everyone steals, the participants attempted to trivialize the outrage generally associated with theft. This technique is evidenced by Nicole when she said, “I justified it because I knew other people that were doing it, so I wasn’t the only one.” The data suggested it was easier to justify theft when it was understood that other workers were also stealing. Statements such as “everyone does it” and “we all do it” reflected how participants bought into the cognitive perspective within the restaurant, which enabled theft neutralizations (see also Best and Luckenbill 1982).

In this section, I discussed the five central categories of theft accounts and the six formerly documented techniques of neutralization that the participants used to assuage the shame associated with stealing. I made evident how the participants justified stealing and actually used subcultural norms to frame and bolster their accounts of theft. I also showed how restaurant workers drew on larger social values and restaurant moral code for theft neutralizations that are deemed legitimate, acceptable, and thus normal. Finally, I illustrated ways in which late and adult onsets and persistence of deviance and crime can and do occur. In the sections that follow, I present the two newly identified techniques of neutralization.

DENIAL OF EXCESS

The restaurant workers used techniques of neutralization beyond the formerly documented ones to more readily justify opportunistic theft. Statements like “don’t be stupid,” “hook it up a little bit,” “never anything too crazy,” “I wouldn’t do it so much,” or “a little bit fudged,” give a

glimpse of how the participants conceptualized appropriate amounts of theft. When examining the participants' narratives further, what they meant by "little" was not the literal sense of the word; they simply meant limited and not excessive. That is, the "little bit" of theft occurred on a regular basis and consequently accumulated over time. As such, I identify this justification of deviance as the Denial of Excess technique of neutralization. I define "denial of excess" as the act of not exceeding beyond the bounds of custom. I argue that to remain in the bounds of custom, individuals look to the normative guidelines set for them in the situational contexts in which they live and work. To this end, the participants "take account" (see also Hewitt and Stokes 1975) of the dominant moral code and the restaurant subcultural beliefs.

I consider Denial of Excess a "minimizing account" because when the participants used this technique, they downplayed the wrongfulness of theft by *subjectively determining* normative bounded amounts of stealing despite the injury that theft may cause. The use of the Denial of Excess technique was, therefore, a way for them to justify stealing regardless of whether they could assert a positive economic, merit-based, or social value on the act itself. The data showed that restaurant workers were allowed to steal *a little a lot* without experiencing contrition. By doing so, they remained within the bounds of normative stealing and were able to maintain positive self-images.

A Little a Lot

The participants used the Denial of Excess technique to justify stealing *a little a lot*. When I say the workers stole *a little a lot*, I mean they stole in limited increments frequently. That is, they may have only stolen 30 dollars each night, but this would eventually add up to a large sum. For example, Chloe, a 24-year-old server and manager, admitted,

I have [laughs], when I worked at the corporate American restaurant, pulled some little tricks, but it didn't involve stealing the manager code, it would be more like transferring

drinks over, like a table orders four cokes, I would separate off the cokes, they paid cash, separate off the cokes, keep that extra cash, and then wait for other people to sit down, and order coke, and then I would transfer it onto their tab, and just keep doing that, and I mean you only make like 2 extra bucks per coke, but that adds up by the end of the day, so little tricks like that, that I think that we all do.

Here, Chloe not only neutralized the wrongfulness of theft by saying that all the employees participate in the “little tricks” (everybody else does it), she also employed the Denial of Excess technique when claiming that the “little tricks” only grant “2 extra bucks per coke.” At the same time, Chloe recognized the fact that a little adds up to a lot, whereby made theft in restrained increments normative and justifiable. Moreover, she did boundary work by *distancing* (Snow and Anderson 1987) herself from those who stole the manager codes, which she inferred as a larger injustice.

Similarly, Cliff revealed that employees can be “a little bit shady” and not get fired.

Highlighting the Denial of Excess and the everybody else is doing it techniques, Cliff said that “we” only use coupons without managerial approval “once in a while,”

We actually had coupons at this restaurant I used to work at that would print out in the local newspaper, and it was like a coupon for like a free entrée or something or half off your bill. And they were in the newspaper for like a few months, and almost no one [patrons] brought them in. I only had like maybe 3 coupons. And we used to get this newspaper delivered outside our door, and we would actually go and cut out the coupons, and then when people [patrons] wouldn't use them, once in a while, we'd throw them on a cash table, and get like an extra 10 bucks.

Stealing is legitimated in subjectively restricted amounts; those who stole tried not to cross customary boundaries. Discussing this boundary, Molly pointed out the social context in the restaurant that allowed for socially approved amounts of theft,

Like you could get away with so much shit and not get fired, and especially if you weren't just a complete negligent or a total asshole, it seems like in all the places that I worked, you had to just keep pushing your luck, and pushing your luck...you could get fired for stealing, um, but it would have to be big time stealing, like giving a beer away wouldn't get you fired, but like intentional legitimate stealing.

Molly indicated that “big time stealing” or “intentional legitimate stealing” may not be honored and can result in termination, whereas giving away a beer on a regular basis was controlled behavior and not a large enough offense. Implicit workplace policies such as this one provided the unspoken guidelines that the workers followed. Consequently, these policies were qualifying norms for deviant behavior.

The embezzlement cases and the resulting terminations that are specified by 20 participants emphasized the allowance of stealing *a little a lot*. Embezzlement constitutes exorbitant continuous stealing. After describing a case of embezzlement by a manager accruing in thousands of dollars, Maria, a 35-year-old server and manager, divulged, “it was different than, you know, taking a five and slipping it into your pocket, it was like very involved [laughs].” Alternatively, she went on to explain the difficulty in catching every incident of theft, whereas large sums of theft are visible and a cause for reprimand. Even though some theft is latent or ignored, unrestrained theft was typically unacceptable. When problematized for restaurants, workers tended to take chances because they were aware of the minimal regulations with regard to limited theft. As a result, normalized amounts of stealing allowed workers the Denial of Excess technique of neutralization.

Even when a theft case was not considered embezzlement, inordinate amounts of theft were difficult to justify or conceal. In addition, workers who stole beyond the bounds of custom were commonly terminated. As Abigail, a 27-year-old manager, exemplified, two of the workers she investigated and terminated “were caught because of the excessive voiding on their number [personal ID number], and they walked with \$1300 extra each month.” In another case of excessive voiding, Jesse, a 45-year-old manager, suggested that the development of “expensive tastes” leads to severe reprimands,

The woman that was fired, I think it might be because of her expensive taste. I mean, we were all making a lot of money about a year ago, but with the decline in the economy, she still had to make enough money to satisfy it. I mean she was also working another job in a salon, but salons are also slow, people aren't getting their hair done as much, so she lost her job, and she was working at the restaurant as much as humanly possible, she was just trying to meet her expensive goals, and once she was meeting those goals, she would then exceed those goals. And I think she just got a big expensive taste. And, you know, you'll do it 'til you get caught, you know, and she did get caught, period. And uh, she had the audacity to say, "hey is there any way I could work at any of the other locations?" And I rolled my eyes, and said, "Are you kidding?" And our general manager felt bad, I didn't feel bad, I mean the thing is how much she got.

Although the participants needed to pay bills, those who "exceeded" what was deemed an economic necessity, albeit subjectively, failed to have honorable economic theft accounts. For Jesse, the excessive amount of the offenses was particularly off-putting, and Karen (the fired woman) was far too brazen to deserve clemency. Similarly, Bianca, a 19-year-old host and server, mentioned the result of a former employee excessively writing in extra tips, "I remember there was one girl who like always added a dollar to every tip, and I'm like you're really stupid, so she got fired." These narratives make evident that the participants justified stealing *a little a lot* or in limited increments frequently but typically eschewed unrestrained theft behavior, which became the blight of many workers' employment.

Subjective Determination

As workers justified stealing in restrained increments, they also subjectively made the boundaries for reasonable types and amounts of theft. Doing so, they were able to justify theft even if it was merely opportunistic. For example, Caleb (19-year-old server) explained having his boss's computer authorization code and admitted that he abused the ability to compensate restaurant products to take the extra cash, but said he did so "within reason." Most notably, when Caleb stated, "I've definitely comped a few brunches...I can definitely just void a couple of those coffees or void the orange juice, and there's 8 more dollars in my hand, cash tips, but

it's really, I'm not gonna do that with a filet mignon, or like something expensive," he subjectively determined which items were and were not within the boundary of reason and custom. Both here, and later when he said "it's really not too bad," Caleb invoked the Denial of Excess technique. He dismissed the wrongfulness of theft by asserting that voiding brunch buffets, coffees, or orange juices are legitimate amounts of stealing. As such, reasonable theft was linked to restricted items and the intention to steal in moderate amounts. Simultaneously, Caleb denied excessive voiding practices because he claimed there were limited opportunities to steal: "but there will be nights where I don't get a single cash tip or cash ticket, so yeah, it's mostly credit cards, so it [voiding] doesn't play a big role."

Likewise, Hal subjectively determined appropriate theft when admitting, "I have had a void here and there, but never anything big, but I know of people who have done massive voids and shit, I've known people who have figured out managers' codes to do it just 'cause they want more money." By distancing himself from people who go beyond the bounds of custom into the territory of exorbitance, Hal maintained a positive self-image. Even though a void "here or there" accrues "more money" just as "massive voids" do, the subjective determination of restrained theft allowed for justifiable stealing.

Furthermore, restaurant workers in this study were not committed to theft outside the restaurant and even had a subjective moral code that drew a line between legitimate and illegitimate stealing. This way of thinking relates to the conceptualization of a subcultural cognitive perspective where deviators "distinguish appropriate from inappropriate behavior by whether an act supports or violates their norms" (Best and Luckenbill 1982:37). For example, Ted, a 25-year-old bartender and shift manager, drew the line between legitimate theft and what he called "greed" when revealing, "but I would just do it like three times a night, I would just

want to add like 30 extra bucks to the shift, I wouldn't want to get too greedy because I think that'd be stupid." Highlighted by the "don't be greedy," "don't be stupid" narratives, subjective self-monitoring based on appropriate versus inappropriate behavior in the restaurant was frequent among the participants and was a salient part of the Denial of Excess discussion. This behavior and reasoning enabled the workers to deviate without forfeiting the benefits of conventional behavior, such as the preservation of current employment, respect from management, or recommendations for future occupations.

In this section, I laid out how late onsets and persistence of crime and deviance occur and how the employees neutralized theft behavior. The participants claimed to only steal *a little a lot* by *subjectively determining* legitimate versus illegitimate theft. Doing so, the employees were able to deny excessive stealing, neutralize the shame associated with it, and maintain positive self-concepts. I also showed how we cannot simply conflate Denial of Excess with denial of injury or denial of the victim. When denying excess, the participants were not denying the consequences, harms, or injuries that restaurants may incur from theft. The few participants who mentioned product cost did not discuss cost in concern for the injury to the restaurant; rather, they discussed cost to make the distinction between normative and non-normative amounts of theft, which helped them self-moralize theft behavior. Nevertheless, both types of theft have large monetary harms, of which the participants were aware. Moreover, the participants did not say that the restaurants "deserved" the financial loss because they could afford it. What the participants did was explicitly discuss the customary *amount* and *frequency* of theft. Even for cases of embezzlement, the participants did not explain or conceptualize them as hurtful or consequential; instead, they spoke about them in terms of *intentional involvement* and *excessive quantity*.

NO ONE CARES

By claiming co-workers, supervisors, and managers did not care if they stole, the workers attempted to neutralize the shamefulness of theft, especially when participating in opportunistic theft. Exemplified through statements such as “nobody cares,” “no one cares,” or “they don’t care,” the participants claimed that there was an overall acceptance of, and apathy towards, stealing within the restaurant. As such, I establish precedence for the No One Cares technique of neutralization, which I define as the normalized lack of interest from others in whether the act in question occurs.

Similar to when participants claimed everybody else is doing it, when workers employed the No One Cares technique of neutralization, they accounted for “the generalized other” (Mead 1934). The belief that everybody else does it and no one cares that they do it diffused the guilt associated with theft and helped the participants allay the shame of the act. Like Denial of Excess, I consider No One Cares a minimizing account. The usage of No One Cares dismissed the generalized unrest others may have exhibited in relation to theft.

Exemplified below, the participants tended to draw on both the Denial of Excess and the No One Cares techniques when participating in opportunistic theft—a “when all else fails” type of dictum. In other words, when the participants could not justify the ease in which they could steal with sound social or economic reasoning, they aligned theft behavior with the acceptable social values in the restaurant. Chiefly, they claimed that no one cares if they stole only *a little a lot* regardless of whether theft could be justified by way of economic need, merit, or social exchange. Therefore, customary amounts of theft were believed to be overlooked. For the most part, the workers expressed this line of thought, which was evidenced by the fact that embezzlement cases were heavily reprimanded, while limited theft was generally disregarded.

No One Cares was frequently employed in combination with several neutralizations. For example, Portia, a 37-year-old server, bartender, and shift manager stated,

There have been times when like I just wasn't making enough money, and like I wanted to make sure to tip out the bussers, and the bartenders, and the hosts enough, and like have enough money for myself, so I've had to pull off some last minute tricks to get enough...but nothing too serious, I mean like no one really cares...everyone does it, and everyone knows its happening...and like I make sure to take care of the people that help me out most, especially I mean, the bussers, they have families, and like they work two jobs, and they work sooo hard.

Portia used six techniques of neutralization. She first employed the defense of necessity and then supplemented economic need with the Denial of Excess, No One Cares, everybody else is doing it, appeal to higher loyalties, and claim of entitlement. Portia aligned her actions by culturally framing her reasons for theft. Specifically, she expressed economic need by positioning that need in terms of the larger group. In particular, Portia indicated needing to “tip out” her co-workers and expressed how deserving they were for their “hard” work. A “tip-out” refers to the customary practice of hourly employees giving a percentage of their tips to other hourly employees who have helped them during the shift. Placing herself as a secondary benefactor of theft, Portia aligned her actions with the laudatory cultural sentiment associated with loyalty and helping others, regardless of the fact that she also stole because no one really cares and everybody does it.

As someone who was initially adamantly opposed to stealing, and tried to change the system, Brian, a 34-year-old, longstanding bartender and manager, altered his views of theft when he accepted the no one cares ideology. He described this perspective shift when asserting,

I'm a little frustrated now, but basically when I got told that nothing was gonna happen, I just figured like I need to quit stressing about it and be like it is what it is, and if I see a manager stealing, I'll just assume they're allowed to steal on their shift or something, or if I see workers talking with their boyfriends on the telephone for half-an-hour, it's allowed, and if no one else cares about it, why should I, and then like if I ever want to do something like that, I'll just do it, nothing happens, no one cares, no one sees.

Such a proclamation illustrates the moral code within the restaurant and exemplifies the opportunity for late life onsets of deviance and crime in adulthood. Furthermore, even when stealing was opportunistic or convenient, participants had the ability to use the No One Cares neutralization technique because the social values within the restaurant subculture allowed for certain degrees of theft behavior. Paradoxically, even though Brian said no one sees, the data illuminated that theft is clearly visible. Perhaps, the employees simply chose not to acknowledge or care about limited theft. Such a mentality, in turn, created, affirmed, reified, and reproduced the No One Cares technique of neutralization.

What the No One Cares technique of neutralization highlights is that the restaurant workers were keenly mindful of the discrepancy between larger social values and values within the restaurant. Although there is an overall mercurial contempt for theft in the larger social world, the restaurant is typically a space immune to the normative repercussions associated with stealing. Because of this disparity, the participants could and did justify theft by stating that restaurant employees tolerate and are apathetic toward limited amounts of theft. In sum, the overarching restaurant culture and the techniques of neutralization allowed for adulthood onsets and persistence of deviance and crime in the life course.

* * *

The participants' demographics and job experiences, detailed in Chapter 2, inform us that they disclosed theft accounts and neutralizations regardless of position, rank, type of full-service restaurant, income, or education. The restaurant workers' accounts revealed a widespread use of six existing and two new techniques of neutralization. They employed neutralization techniques in order to justify theft, prevent self-blame, and maintain positive self-images in the face of deviant behavior. Contrary to Hawkins's (1984) belief that neutralizations are rare or

unnecessary for restaurant workers, the participants in this study commonly justified theft behavior with economic-based, merit-based, symbiotic-based, and minimizing neutralizations, despite the abundant opportunities to steal and the forgiving subculture of the restaurant industry. Additionally, they used combinations of neutralization techniques to better ward off the wrongfulness of stealing, especially when participating in opportunistic theft.

In light of all eight techniques of neutralization that the restaurant workers employed, theft neutralization was less about a “strong sense of work group cohesion and loyalty” (Miller and Gaines 1997:15) or a “counterattack” on the workplace (Grey and Anderson-Ryan 1994:208) than it was about the normatively held values in and outside the restaurant. Mainly, the restaurant workers’ accounts of theft were generally culturally situated and made the honoring of opportunistic theft more plausible. As long as the participants could locate their conduct within the parameters of the prevailing norms, they had the ability to “align their actions” with “cultural constraints” (Stokes and Hewitt 1976:849). When doing so, they were granted the ability to justify behavior typically regarded as deviant, especially in later life and adulthood.

In this chapter, I addressed what the existing techniques of neutralization neglect to do. Specifically, the general failure of scholars to examine instances in which people adhere to the dominant value system but nevertheless engage in deviant and criminal acts has left an incomplete picture of how people justify such acts, whereas, I provided an empirical case where the deviators (restaurant workers) were at least partially committed to the dominant social order but still deviated and justified their crimes. In fact, the data showed that the workers who stole have a very similar value system as individuals who do not. That is, they drew on larger social values (e.g., merit) when neutralizing theft behavior *and* maintained the subcultural moral code (i.e., limited theft) within the restaurant. For this reason, to say that stealing is simply

opportunistic would belie the complex processes undergirding theft. The restaurant workers navigated around the problematic nature of stealing by positioning their theft accounts among socially acceptable justifications for deviance. As Cromwell and Thurman (2003) explained that shoplifters make adaptations to conventions that permit deviance under certain circumstances, theft is possible for restaurant workers because they modified conventional social and moral values that permitted stealing within the restaurant.

By establishing precedence for Denial of Excess and No One Cares, I contribute to “the study of what constitutes ‘acceptable utterances’ for untoward behavior” (Scott and Lyman 1968:61). In general, these two neutralizations demonstrate how deviant behavior is overlooked if individuals do not deviate beyond the bounds of custom. Within the restaurant, as long as the workers did not steal exorbitantly, theft was typically legitimated and disregarded. In other words, the employees were able to mollify the shame of stealing by claiming that their co-workers (even managers) did not have major qualms about limited theft. These techniques also made evident how restaurant workers were resourceful in their ability to preserve a positive self-image in spite of whether they could assert a positive value on the theft act itself. I suggest that the restaurant workers solved the dilemma between not necessarily needing to steal and opportunistic stealing with the Denial of Excess and the No One Cares neutralizations; provided that the workers *only stole a little a lot*, participants contended that *no one cares*. At the same time, the techniques of neutralization and the accepting and forgiving restaurant subculture allowed for late life and adulthood onsets and persistence of crime and deviance. This research comes at an especially appropriate time given that the average age of restaurant employees is rising, and more people are entering the restaurant industry in their late twenties and early thirties

(Coomes 2011). As the service economy continues to grow, we may witness increases of late life and adulthood onsets and persistence of employee theft.

The techniques of neutralization that the restaurant workers used speak to how U.S. values of self-denial have inculcated the restaurant subcultural beliefs about theft. This study provided evidence of a contradictory dual-value system of self-control and mass indulgence. It is this contradictory cultural model between mass indulgence and self-denial that I contend has, in part, led restaurant workers to resolve the ethical, social, and monetary issues with theft by way of *only stealing a little a lot*. That is, the participants indulged, but they did so in limited increments and without exceeding the bounds of custom. With that said, the very values the people lionize in U.S. society may influence theft behavior among restaurant workers and possibly among others who steal. These contradictory cultural messages are highlighted in Reinerman's research on drug scares; there is a paradoxical cultural message in U.S. history between "Temperance culture that insists on self-control and a mass consumption culture which renders self-control continuously problematic" (1994:163). Similarly, in Bordo's work on body image, she wrote, "Eating disorders are also linked to the contradictions of consumer culture, which is continually encouraging us to binge on our desires at the same time as it glamorizes self-discipline and scorns fat as a symbol of laziness and lack of willpower" (1997:111).

Extending further beyond the restaurant industry, with research estimating that 50 percent of employees steal (Wimbush and Dalton 1997), one-third of all businesses fail due to employee theft (Conway and Cox 1987; Lipman and McGraw 1988; Greenberg 1997), and 75 percent of employee theft is undetectable (Applegate 1990; Green 1997), the techniques of neutralization that the restaurant workers employed can and should be examined and tested for in other occupational industries. To pursue such a task, one might begin by asking whether employees

who steal in all types of occupations have late life deviance onsets and use neutralizations that mirror dominant moral code. Are theft accounts for blue-collar occupations similar to theft accounts for white-collar occupations? Or are similar techniques of neutralization employed in comparable service sector professions? Even though scholars such as Hollinger and Clark (1983) previously indicated that employee theft is occurring in retail, hospital, and manufacturing businesses, outlined the major variables that influence theft, and provided policy recommendations, they did not address late onsets of deviance and crime or dominant moral code.

I suggest that both newly identified techniques of neutralization can speak to phenomena outside the workplace as well as beyond the realm of deviant behavior. I propose that people have the potential to justify various everyday behaviors in late life and adulthood by claiming that *no one cares* when they participate in them only *a little a lot*. Future studies might investigate how and why people limit indulging in so-called “guilty pleasures” (e.g., food, alcohol, or even fun). I believe it will serve scholarly literature to broaden the current theorizing in other workplace studies, in settings outside the workplace, and among behaviors that are and are not considered deviant.

In Chapter 6, I address the concept of “meaningfulness” and how the construction of meaning has the potential to contribute to *and* diminish the restaurant workers’ positive self-concepts. This final empirical chapter provides insight into how the workers make meaningful lives while employed in work that many people commonly regard as meaningless.

CHAPTER 6

RESTAURANT WORKERS AND “MEANINGFULNESS”

When interviewing Tia, whom we first met in Chapter 3, she recounted an interaction she had at work one night. During casual conversation with some customers seated in her section, they presumptuously asked her whether she did “anything else” besides waiting tables. “I explained I had a master’s,” she said, “and I am looking for a government job. And then they exclaimed, ‘You should work for Google! Our daughter used to work for Google, and it’s so good,’ and they wouldn’t stop talking about it. Apparently, people want to give me advice to get out of the restaurant industry. But, who’s to say that working at Google would make my life any more meaningful? I mean, why is a guy in finance, or a banker, or a nurse more meaningful?” She paused and contemplated verbally, “Well, maybe a nurse is more meaningful,” but then vehemently asserted, “I mean, define meaningful!”

In the preceding chapters, I explained how the general perception of restaurant employment is that it constitutes a type of work that a person would take and stay in only if one had no other choice. In contrast to this image, this research showed that workers value extrinsic benefits of restaurant employment, particularly fun, friends, freedoms, and unconventional behavior, more than they value the benefits found in traditional workplaces (e.g., health care). Although this hints at the meaning the employees ascribe to their jobs, until now, however, I have not yet broached what the participants feel is “meaningful” and how they attain “meaningfulness” from work that many regard as meaningless. In this chapter, I examine what the restaurant workers deem as meaningful, in general, and what makes their lives meaningful in and outside their work.

Specifically, I investigate how restaurant employees assign meaning to and make meaning in their work and lives as they age and remain in restaurants. I focus on the 35 participants who have worked in restaurants between five and 25 years because these older and longer-working employees have had more time to experience and consider meaning in the restaurant industry. My intention is not to dismiss the younger, less experienced restaurant workers' beliefs about meaningfulness. In fact, they expressed similar constructions of meaning. However, I omitted them from this part of the analysis because their constructions may change if they stay in restaurant work longer than four years, or if they leave and return, or leave entirely. Moreover, they may not be as invested in finding meaning in their work because they maintain a greater certainty about eventually leaving the restaurant industry.

In what follows, I first review the literature that explores meaning and how people engage in meaning making. I then examine meaningfulness among the older and more seasoned employees, focusing particularly on how they pursue meaningfulness despite their longer-than-intended stays in work that most consider fit only for adolescents and the so-called destitute and downtrodden. In doing so, I shed light on the ambivalence and contradictory cultural messages that the workers face, which constitute recurring themes throughout this study. I also introduce a more nuanced, less exclusionary, and less reductive perspective on meaningfulness.

MEANING AND MEANING-MAKING

Meaning is a concept difficult to define, since any definition runs the risk of being circular. How do we talk about the meaning of meaning itself? (Csikszentmihalyi 1990:215)

As Tia stated at the start of this chapter, “I mean, define meaningful!” Meaning, as a concept, escapes precise definition. Without going back to the greatly influential philosophers such as Kant and Heidegger, not to mention Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, a task well beyond the scope

of this chapter, I will provide a general sense of how the participants used the term. Typically, scholars distinguish between the study of “meaning” in the branch of linguistics known as semantics, which examines how words come to indicate ideas, and its use in a moral or ethical context, in the sense of life’s significance or value. Although the two uses are related—a meaningful life is one connoted by the term “meaningful”—the participants referred mostly to the latter sense, or to what makes a life meaningful. Their loose definition involves conditions or qualities in which one takes pride or finds satisfaction. It does not necessarily have to do with happiness; what makes a life meaningful may not make one happy, and may involve sacrificing one’s self-interest. Nor does meaningfulness imply moral goodness. Importantly, in the context of this research, meaningfulness refers not to objective goodness, but to how people subjectively construct the value, worth, or purpose of their lives.

Psychologists have examined situations that influence people’s ability to have and make meaning. They predominantly study meaning in the hopes of helping people cope with trauma, loss, suffering, and misfortune, often through the branch of the field known as “positive psychology” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). One of the first to investigate meaning, Viktor Frankl (1959) explored his personal experiences surviving a concentration camp. His reflections led to his term “logotherapy” or healing through meaning. Another early work considered how the importance of “purpose” gives people meaning (Klinger 1977). Specifically, Klinger discussed meaning and purpose in terms of people’s “function,” “aim,” and what they were “created for.” Through student questionnaires, he found that contributors of meaning broadly include friends, parents, siblings, religion, education, romantic relationships, leisure-time activities, happiness and security, jobs with a sense of responsibility and success, helping others and sharing, feeling loved, wanted, and useful, and having goals and plans for the future.

More recently, Baumeister described meaning as “shared mental representations of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships. Thus, meaning *connects* things” (1991:15). In order to acquire meaning, he concluded that people must attain purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth. According to Baumeister, *purpose* relates to people anticipating future fulfillment; *value* helps people decide what is right or wrong; *efficacy* is when people feel they can make a difference and have control over their circumstances; and *self-worth* pertains to self-esteem based on feelings of belonging and worthiness. Consequently, Baumeister argued, “A person who has not satisfied them is likely to feel a lack of meaning” (p. 29).

Defined another way, Mezirow wrote, “Meaning is making sense of or giving coherence to our experiences” (1991:11). He explained that people learn to make sense of their experiences through formal and informal norms transmitted during socialization. “Sense making” refers to a

recurring cycle comprised of a sequence of events occurring over time. The cycle begins as individuals form unconscious and conscious anticipations and assumptions, which serve as predictions about future events. Subsequently, individuals experience events that may be discrepant from predictions. Discrepant events, or surprises, trigger a need for explanation, or post-diction, and, correspondingly, for a process through which interpretations of discrepancies are developed. Interpretation or meaning is attributed to surprises. (Weick 1995:4-5)

Scholars who study meaningfulness generally agree that meaning and sense making are interconnected. These two concepts transpire through a long process of learned assumptions about the societally appropriate, which make for the reference point for people’s perceived attained or unattained meaningfulness.

Despite the contributions of the meaningfulness scholars, they construct meaning under an exclusionary framework. Just because people have not attained purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth, does not mean that they will have meaningless lives. In my analysis, I consider whether people can feel meaningful once participating in social contexts that many treat as

having an absence of meaning. Moreover, the literature largely excludes people from having meaning in nontraditional pathways. If left to the psychologists, regardless of people's alternative "wants" and "needs," anything outside the conventionally constructed meaningful leaves people at risk for a "lack of meaning." Such a conclusion itself, I argue, is likely to result in a self-fulfilling prophesy of meaningless reflexivity.

Meaningfulness and Trauma

Sociology has produced limited research on meaningfulness; most of the literature comes from behavioral psychology, which predominantly focuses on trauma, loss, and suffering. These scholars have analyzed the "utility" of suffering and trauma relative to meaning. In particular, they argue that suffering and trauma constitute an integral part of meaning because "people are highly motivated to make sense of misfortune by imposing meaning on it" (Baumeister 1991:286; see also Marris 1974). Additionally, people can make sense of loss—for instance, death—when they can appoint a positive denotation to it, which "lends it to continuity in the context of the person's life" (p. 287). That is to say, when people suffer, they undertake a quest to find meaning in and around the loss to cope and become meaningful anew. Baumeister stated that "suffering and unhappiness tend to be characterized by a loss or lack of meaning. Responses to suffering, accordingly, are often designed to find meaning—to make sense of the misfortune itself and to restore a broad sense of meaningfulness that is sometimes threatened by personal suffering" (p. 232).

The process of acquiring meaning, or "meaning making," refers to "a search for meaning in the experience, an attempt to regain mastery over the event in particular and over one's life more generally, and an effort to restore self-esteem—to feel good about oneself again despite the personal setback" (Taylor 1983:1161). Succinctly, meaning making involves a reappraisal of

incoherent events to conceive them as coherent. Most commonly, scholars explore meaning making through trauma research. For example, Taylor (1983) investigated how breast cancer patients searched for meaning in their suffering. She found that the women went through the process of meaning making by revising their attitudes about cancer, reordering their priorities, regaining a sense of control over their bodies, “mastering” the cancer, and maintaining positive attitudes.

Other, more recent studies on trauma have noted similar meaning-making paths to meaningful lives. Some researchers describe meaning making after the loss of a loved one (Bower et al. 1998; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson 1998; Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema 2001; Currier, Holland, and Neimeyer 2006; Lichtenthal et al. 2013). Scholars also address meaning making from survivors of sexual abuse (Grossman, Sorsoli, and Kia-Keating 2006; Wright, Crawford, and Sebastian 2007), from survivors of the Holocaust (Armour 2010), and from people living with medical conditions, such as HIV (Henrickson et al. 2013). In each of these cases, meaning making entailed a reconceptualization of the life event, where the participants could “find meaning” in, “make sense” of, or “find benefit” out of the event or coping process, often portrayed in a positive, beneficial light. For example, some sexual abuse survivors used their experiences positively to help others, and they spent time making sense of their abuse by attempting to “understand” their perpetrators (Grossman et al. 2006).

The literature about meaning and suffering illuminates how people reconcile their traumatic experiences. However, these studies assume that meaning happens only after a traumatic experience or an extraordinary event. Moreover, they assume that people without normative meaningfulness will likely suffer and feel unhappy. For example, when a death in the family takes place or a person survives cancer, meaning is a product of those events after-the-

fact. In these situations, scholars suggest that the experience of suffering *gives* people meaning and thus happiness—a reset button, so to speak, that directs people into pursuing sense making and meaning making. These lines of thought, perhaps unintentionally, dismiss people’s agency. Despite the idea that people can attain meaning in their own terms, researchers largely discuss meaning as arising only after something happens *to* them.

The meaningfulness literature also rarely, if ever, looks at basic, everyday occurrences as meaningful. It hardly addresses meaning on a daily, mundane, quotidian level. Consequently, this framework views the traumatic and the extraordinary as bringing meaning rather than the “little things,” such as looking at the stars, going for a walk, talking on the phone, or the small tasks people perform in the workplace—saying thank you to a co-worker or having a conversation with a customer. Dismissing commonplace meaningfulness excludes the vast majority of workers who labor in manufacturing, construction, wholesale and retail trade, leisure and hospitality, and other service sector jobs from normatively appearing and feeling meaningful. In spite of this oversight, some scholars have made distinctions between types of jobs and their associated meaning.

MEANINGFULNESS AND WORK

Work holds a central place in modern life, and no account of life’s meaning would be complete without a careful consideration of the meaning of work. American adults probably spend more of their waking time working than doing anything else, especially if one counts the hours spent getting dressed for work, commuting, lying awake at night worrying about work, and so forth. (Baumeister 1991:116)

The literature portrays three major roles of work: as a *job*, as a *calling*, or as a *career*. A *job* is for the sake of a paycheck, a *calling* is done out of a sense of personal responsibility, obligation, greater good of society, duty, or destiny, and a *career* is motivated by the desire for success, achievement, and recognition (Baumeister 1991). These categories overlap and are not rigid but

are nonetheless designated as “important prototypes for very different ways of understanding work and its relation to the meaningful themes in a person’s life” (Baumeister 1991:119).

On account of minimal benefits and satisfaction, Baumeister claimed that “working-class jobs in particular may often fail to offer much efficacy to the worker, for even the alternative satisfactions and consolations of the other meanings of work are missing” (p. 121). Additionally, he argued that “work as a career can be a powerful source of meaning in life” and “self-worth is a central focus of the career” (p. 123). Because he believed that *a calling* can provide people with value and fulfillment, Baumeister reasoned that a combination of a career *and* a calling, “will inevitably be a major and thorough source of meaning” (p. 128).

In the twenty-first century, meaning in work and occupations is not understudied, but it is certainly not well understood. Nevertheless, Wrzesniewski (2003) indicated that many researchers have classified the constructs of meaning in work. These include work centrality, work commitment, job/work involvement, intrinsic/extrinsic work motivations, and work values. Similar to Baumeister (1991), Wrzesniewski suggested that people derive different meaning from different jobs and occupations, especially depending on whether they see their work as a job, calling, and/or a career. Other scholars suggest that a single source, such as work, is not enough to achieve a meaningful life. For instance, Emmons (1997) explained that people derive meaning from numerous sources, like jobs, travel, family, education, religion, love, and friends. More importantly, he argued that many sources of meaning serve as a buffer against the meaninglessness of any one source in a person’s life.

Despite the significance of Weber’s ([1958] 2003) study of the origins of the work ethic, limited extant sociological research specifically examines meaning in work and occupations. Relevant sociological studies include investigating the creation of meaning in the context of

manual labor, with particular focus on the question of why employees work as “hard” as they do. Roy’s (1959) highly cited study, “Banana Time,” revealed that Chicago factory workers created games to break up repetitive tasks and make work meaningful. Thirty years later, while studying the same shop, Burawoy (1979) also noted how the employees treated their work as “a game” with incentives to surpass its banality and ensure maximum productivity and earnings. Moreover, he found that when the workers participated in the shop-floor culture, which they called “making out,” they could attribute meaning to work absent of meaning in the traditional sense. In Willis’s (1977) ethnography of working-class “lads” heading for industrial jobs in a British town, he addressed how the positive meaning that the “lads” ascribed to manual labor—especially its association with masculinity and resistance to authority—led to the reproduction of class divisions.

In another study, Heinsler, Kleinman, and Stenross (1990) researched detectives and campus police. Heinsler et al. found that the detectives and campus police turned “a mundane job into significant work” by “transform[ing] the *core* of their work into something meaningful” (p. 236). Even though not every detective or campus police officer could do so, many “successfully” transformed their “dirty work” into valued, satisfying, prestige-giving roles and activities. When the workers could perceive their tasks in terms of important outcomes (i.e., collegiality, teamwork, learning the law, students of criminals instead of janitors of victims), they could say, “this is who I am” and constructed these tasks as their core identity, which granted them meaning. Furthermore, the participants wanted the community to appreciate them as “real police” and “crime fighters,” instead of workers who merely jump-start cars, fill out paperwork, or do “boring jobs,” “thankless work,” and “nothing.”

Additionally, Wharton's (1996) study examined women who work in residential real estate sales. Although most of the job proved disappointing to the women, the majority remained working and satisfied with their work because of a few particular characteristics. These consisted of education and skill level, limited work alternatives, and positive aspects of the work, such as personal autonomy. Rewards of the job included the lure of flexible hours, greater autonomy and control in the job without needing much education, high income, excitement and unpredictability, pride from overcoming job challenges, and enjoyment from showing houses and matching people to homes. In addition, the women appreciated making clients "feel good by selling them a house." The women also justified their positions as meaningful in real estate sales because of their "feminine attributes," and they made statements like, "women were well-suited to selling houses because they pay attention to the details involved in closing a sale better than do men, and handle stress better" (p. 226). In sum, Wharton found that the workers construct meaning in real estate sales by overlooking "the exploitative nature of contingent work—having to pay their own Social Security, having no medical or vacation benefits, no retirement plan" by focusing on the "autonomy and the feelings of doing good work" (p. 231).

Overall, psychological research predominates the scholarly literature on meaning and work. The sociological research that addresses meaning and work—albeit limited—typically concentrates on the employees' meaning constructions and the extrinsic benefits of the employment, despite the "disappointing" conditions of the labor itself. The assumption that employees construct meaning to compensate for unsatisfying jobs contrasts sharply with what I heard from the restaurant workers I interviewed.

MEANINGFULNESS TO RESTAURANT WORKERS

Despite the traditional importance of entering full-time employment—perhaps a full-time job at Google, as some of Tia’s customers intimated—for a “successful” transition to adulthood, restaurant workers tended not to base their “adulthood” or meaningfulness solely on where they worked. In addition, they did not construct meaning only after a great loss, trauma, tragedy, or an extraordinary occurrence; “meaning” more importantly existed in the quotidian, everyday, commonplace processes and activities. The data demonstrated how meaningfulness is not something that simply *happens to* restaurant workers, it is something that they actively took part in and pursued. Thus, I argue that restaurant workers are not without agency in their pursuit for “meaningful” lives.

Meaningfulness in General

When participants spoke about meaningfulness in general, four major themes emerged. First, they discussed the meaningfulness of family, friends, and social groups. Second, they highlighted how helping others is meaningful. Third, they emphasized the meaningfulness of enjoying life and happiness. Finally, they stated that succeeding at any endeavor they were attempting was meaningful. In most cases, the participants described a combination of these themes when defining meaningfulness. Additionally, they often used the words “meaningful,” “important,” “enjoyment,” and “happiness,” or some variation of these words, interchangeably. Before mentioning these themes, they typically prefaced their statements with broad, grand, idealistic, and/or altruistic terms that characterized meaningfulness to them. In other words, they emphasized humanitarian efforts, such as, “making an impact,” “making a difference,” “making a change,” “helping others,” “acts of kindness and respect,” and other benevolent deeds that

reflect prevailing normative definitions of meaning, notwithstanding their appreciation for the “little things.”

Tia, who has worked in the restaurant industry for almost ten years, first said, “Meaningfulness is making an impact, something that will change someone else’s life.” After she thought about the concept more, she explained, “To me, in terms of meaningfulness, my family is number one. They are the number one thing that is meaningful to me. And then, second, is friends. What’s the point of being successful if you have no one to share it with? And then if I’m happy, I want my family and friends to be happy, we should all be happy.” On the contrary, she stated, “I don’t necessarily feel like my life is meaningful now, but I do make an impact on my family, my niece and nephew especially. I don’t really have any hobbies that I do all the time. I did run a 5k once because it donated all the money to autism, and it was for a good cause, but no hobbies consistently.” She laughed and said, “I sit on the couch and watch TV, does shopping count?” She laughed again and added, “I like eating.” In spite of her current feelings of meaninglessness corresponding to her self-disclosed absence of widespread impact, Tia told me that she is content with the little everyday things, like watching television with her friends and family.

Along similar lines, a longstanding manager Maria, whom I introduced in Chapter 3, explained, “Meaningfulness is something that helps other people, like being a teacher and teaching, or being a social worker and helping with social services.” Describing what she does that is meaningful, Maria said, “Me, I volunteer weekly with refugees with English and job searches through a nonprofit. I have also thought about volunteering at this bike shop that fixes and gives bikes to the homeless. That stuff is meaningful because it is helping people.” Maria additionally indicated, “I also find meaning in going on vacations to other countries, hanging out

with friends, going out. I also want to go on one of those long vacations to another country to volunteer and help people or something like that.” More importantly, Maria stated, “Before I was volunteering, I felt like I wasn’t doing enough with my life in general. When I was younger [laughs], I envisioned my life having more meaning. And when you get older you get stuck in a cycle of paying bills. And then, when you have enough to pay your bills, what’s the point? And then you barely have enough to even pay for those things, from the restaurant, and have extra to do meaningful stuff.” At the end of our conversations, she said, “Honestly, I mean, I want to enjoy where I work, and I want to make more money.” Going back and forth between the extraordinary and the quotidian, Maria has gained meaning from something as “large” as helping refugees and from something as “little” as vacations and socializing with friends. However, she indicated not feeling like she was “doing enough” before engaging in “selfless” acts, like volunteering. Maria was self-reflexive about her aging; she presented how she is determined to secure more meaning but was aware that meaning acquisition often requires money as well as other resources to, for example, travel to volunteer around the world. Perhaps, this is a paradox of U.S. culture; one needs money to volunteer. In addition, volunteering is never *really* selfless; the exchange value may just appear in the form of meaning.

In the case of Jesse, an established worker of well over two decades, he described meaningfulness as respecting others, loyalty to others, and “the act of listening” to others. He also emphasized his family, friends, and that having fun, happiness, and enjoyment are all part of a meaningful life. Large parts of Jesse’s meaning also came from his motorcycle and music. He made mention of both when comparing his life to that of his brother:

My brother who earns three times as much as I do, but I mean he puts his ass to the grindstone, maybe just a bit too hard for my liking, and you know, he worries about me, but I mean he got married, has the job, had a kid, and those things are great, but the one thing that I have is motorcycles. And if you talk about getting my rocks off, going for a

ride really gets me happy, that makes me happy because you lose your thoughts in the wind. There's nothing like losing your thoughts in the wind. I get on my bike, and I forget about every little thing...and oh yeah, I'm such a musician. I still play music in a band. And that makes me happy, too.

Jesse found meaning in things as small as music, going for a bike ride, and acts of listening and loyalty that he said his parents taught him. He continued to juxtapose his situation by saying,

I think that people's values [pause], everyone is just so driven to live in the rich neighborhoods, all the customers, they're striving to have the two point five children, the dog, and the Volvo, and if that's their gig, god bless 'em, you know? I missed out on my opportunities to marry young. I probably missed out on my opportunities to have kids. But now I'm content, I just want to be content, and I'm happy with that role. It's tough coming across people that I see that are just putting their heads to the grindstone, I mean I admire those people, I mean you, you're getting your Ph.D., and you made *a lot* of sacrifices, and I admire that. And it just scares me, it scares me how hard people work, and I'm hoping that they're happy, because you know what, I haven't been happier.

If taken at face value, Jesse appeared as if he does not “work hard,” and he spoke as if working hard cannot bring happiness or meaning. However, throughout his interview, he revealed how “hard” he works in all of his endeavors and the associated happiness and meaning they provide. Other key elements to Jesse's story are his military background and overseas service during Desert Storm. He explained that after he came back from the Gulf War, all he needed was “to heal.” He said, “I didn't need to make my brain think twenty-four-seven and worry about everything, instead of concentrating on a career, I concentrated mostly on happiness...I missed out on the kids, I missed out on that career path, so yeah, I discovered restaurants, and that's where I was truly happy.” Later, he told me, “the most important thing is, I need to be happy at work, I do, if I'm not happy at work, I'm terrible, I'm not a good person, I'm just not fun to be around, you know what I mean, it's awful, and who wants to be that person, I don't. I want to be happy, I want to be nice, I don't want to be mediocre, I want to be happy and make your day.” Contrary to popular belief, Jesse exposed that laboring in restaurants does not make him mediocre, meaningless, *or* unhappy.

To Lilu, meaning and success go hand-in-hand. She stated, “Meaningfulness is when you gain success out of something, when you achieve something from an action and gain success.” Furthermore, she said, “Meaningfulness in my life is doing well at my job, having all the necessities for my family—food, water, soda, and booze [laughs]—and making sure I can pay the bills.” Analogous to this line of thought, Baumeister wrote, “success at work refers to completing the task and achieving its goal” (1991:135). After some more consideration, Lilu emphasized that, “meaningfulness is when others feel that I am a leader, mentor, and an overall great person, and a dependable person.” She later indicated that she does not have hobbies per se, but meaningfulness to her is making other people “feel good” and “cared about” because it likewise makes her feel good. Lilu then insisted, “if people feel cared about, that’s what’s meaningful. And when I feel cared about, that’s meaningful. I have to feel loved or else my whole world will shatter. And also my family is number one.” Although the literature often designates meaningfulness as a result of the loss or death of loved ones, it rarely discusses the little acts of spending time with them. Lilu also described going shopping and watching television and movies with her family as meaningful activities. These are common everyday occurrences that are often slighted.

When thirty-nine-year-old Val spoke about meaning, he stated in a slightly facetious tone, “we can all make the world a little better place by helping each other one day at a time.” But then, more seriously, he asked me if I had ever watched the Monty Python movie, “The Meaning of Life.” When I replied, “no,” he proceeded to describe a restaurant scene where a patron exploded and the waiter declared, “if you want to know what I think the meaning of life is, when I was just a boy, my mother put me on her knee and said, Gaston my son, the world can be such an angry place, go into the world and try to make people happy, make people laugh, try

to make peace with everyone. That's why I became a waiter." In earnest, Val said, "I believe in this philosophy." Throughout the interview, he expressed that meaning, for him, involves living the "golden rule" of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Similar to Val, many of the participants highlighted meaningfulness through their "little acts of kindness."

The phrase "making a difference," although vague, also appeared frequently. For example, Portia, a seasoned employee, stated, "Making a difference is what I would say is meaningful. Well that, and helping people, and like feeling needed, yeah, feeling necessary, not like a lump of nothing, with nothing to show for." In addition to the ambiguous understanding of making a difference, Portia and other workers indicated that meaningfulness meant helping others and feeling needed, regardless of what this may actually entail. The ways the participants constructed meaning in general (e.g., generosity, kindness, respect, listening, and compassion) permeated their ideals about meaningfulness in and around restaurant employment.

Meaningfulness in and Around Restaurants

Meaning...okay, wait, okay, like so I do hair, right? That seems so little in comparison to everything that's going on in the world, like war [laughs]. And I wait tables, well that's little too. But who the fuck's to say that isn't meaningful, like, okay, I make people smile, I listen to them, I like am their therapist for free, wait, hmmm, okay, now that I think about it, I should be getting paid as much as a therapist [laughs]. Anyways, okay, I would say what is meaningful is helping people, and like, *I do that, I do that every day.*
(Aster)

The ways the participants broadly conceptualized meaningfulness seeped into their constructions of meaningfulness of restaurant employment, specifically. Despite the prevailing "bad" qualities of restaurant work, discussed extensively in Chapter 3, the participants detailed the "good" and "meaningful" in the everyday occurrences at work. Again, meaning, to the workers, did not develop only after a major loss or something extraordinary happened. Rather, it surfaced

through simple “little things” (e.g., conversations at work) and exceptional workplace practices, such as volunteer efforts of the restaurants.

What the participants constructed as meaningful was not always tied to the restaurant in and of itself. Meaningfulness did have a direct relationship to the work, but much of it also came from the tangential characteristics associated with the work. In their constructions of meaning, the participants were cognizant of the negative outside perceptions of restaurant jobs, and their accounts of meaningfulness expressed ambivalence about the value of their employment. They made distinctions between meaningfulness of particular workplace practices and meaningfulness that the work provided them elsewhere. The data presented five major categories of meaningfulness in and around restaurant work: *Helping*, *Mentoring*, *Expanding*, *Belonging*, and *Supplementation*. The categories are not mutually exclusive, but sometimes appear contrary. Employees talked about these categories of meaningfulness both individually and simultaneously.

Helping

When the participants told me about meaningfulness in workplace practices, they described acts of giving back to the community, helping others, and providing people jobs with livable incomes. For example, Lilu said, “What else is meaningful is, our restaurant also gives back to the community. Because we are a corporation and make money, they think we should give back, like donating and feeding the homeless, serving at a homeless shelter kitchen. But they set these give backs on our days off without pay, and we do not get replacement days off. So I like to give back, but the corporation is still a corporation in the ways that they do things, you know what I mean?” One can hear her ambivalence about the meaningfulness of restaurant “give backs”

because of the way they take place. In other words, Lilo believed that helping others is meaningful, but that meaningfulness is diluted by the corporation's exploitation of its employees.

Meaningfulness through helping others revealed itself in the quotidian and the extraordinary. The restaurant is a space where the employees can feel meaningful connections at a distance and in an abstract form. Val illuminated this phenomenon when he said that restaurant workers "experience humanity on some of the most prime levels. I mean you can have the family out celebrating a wedding tomorrow, you can have a family come in after a funeral for a grandchild, you can have people who just eat, I mean, shit, everybody eats, not everybody can afford to eat out, but everybody eats." He added, "We have an opportunity to make memorable moments very special for complete strangers, and I think that's important. You know, somewhere in the world is the picture that you took of all those people together at those tables you served, even though the people may be separated by miles. Someone, somewhere, is saying, 'Oh yeah, we had that waiter take that picture for us.' So you've influenced the positive, the positive life, and that's meaningful." Val also acknowledged food service as a "hard industry," and explained that the hard work made him grateful. "It makes me appreciate what I have more," he said. "You know, you see families come out with the wheelchair, and the oxygen tank, and you know the daughter with the multiple sclerosis, or my co-worker's daughter has MS, so it just reminds me." He paused, and added, "it's an old saying, but by the grace of god, my feet work, my hands work, my eyes work." He knocked on the wood table and said, "I'm in good shape, and it's something to be thankful for. That, and the cash."

For Seymour, meaningfulness is a byproduct of restaurant culture. He explained that the restaurant is place where people help their co-workers and have the means to help their family members. He told me, "We are all pretty tight knit, we all look out for each other when we need

it. If somebody needed some money or something, or somebody needed to be picked up from jail, we'd go pick 'em up, just like looking out for each other." Furthermore, Seymour explained that restaurant work enabled him to help his mom pay bills when she lost her job.

In Chapter 4, we heard from Storie that restaurants help provide "a lot of jobs and money for more people than anybody would know." Maria maintained a similar assessment. She reflected on the meaningfulness of restaurant work based on the number of jobs it can provide. She said, "what is meaningful about restaurant work is providing work and jobs to people. A lot of people cannot find work, and we can give jobs to those people who maybe don't have an education or the skills for other jobs. Often people do not speak enough English, and we have hired a few refugees. Also, it is meaningful to provide a place for people to enjoy, like working and a fun environment." Similarly, Jesse explained the enjoyment of helping people acquire jobs. For instance, he mentioned helping his friend obtain a restaurant management position after he was downsized from an electronics store.

Tia provided details on meaningfulness as helping others by comparing different types of jobs and the tasks that accompany each. She stated, "meaningfulness is not like stocking clothes at a department store. It doesn't impact the workers or someone else's life in a good way." Alternatively, she indicated that, "Meaningful work is something that will help others make their lives better, like working at a job to help stop human trafficking. That is what I thought I would be doing when I was in school. And now, it is a government job that I think *will be eventually* meaningful." Tia also expressed equivocation about the meaningfulness of restaurant employment, but she explained that it allows her to pursue occupation and life goals that are meaningful to her.

Other participants talked about how employees will not “get rich” working in the restaurant industry, but it helps secure a living to support a family. Oliver explained,

For the kitchen staff, I know for a fact, you know, there’s a few, a couple salary guys, that can afford to have their own apartment, they are all married, and they all have at least two kids, and I don’t know if their wives work, but I know they have an apartment, and they have a car, and their kids go to school, and they’re not starving, and they don’t have crappy cars...I make 32K a year, and I don’t think it’s great, but it’s not horrible, I mean there are families that live off 32K a year.

Overall, the participants conceptualized meaningfulness in and around restaurants in terms of how much they and the restaurant establishments gave, helped, and provided others.

Mentoring

The participants discussed meaningfulness in relation to mentoring, guiding, and leading other workers. Still ambivalent about the meaningfulness of restaurant work itself, the participants described indirect meaningful characteristics of the employment. In a follow-up conversation with Jimmy, a man in his early forties, he exemplified uncertainty of meaningfulness and the theme of mentorship:

Yeah, I guess, I don’t know that I’d say that restaurant work is meaningful, like I change the world or shit like that, but I make awesome food [laughs], and people need to eat to like live [laughs]. But, shit, that’s a hard question. But, yeah, I guess like my life is more meaningful now that I am executive chef ‘cause I make more money and I get to mentor the newbies and kick them around for a while to get them into shape [laughs], so I guess I’m like a teacher, so that is like meaning, that helps.

One hears apprehension in the nervous laughter in Jimmy’s account, as if he is not allowed to be proud of his employment until he can justify a form of implicit value.

The manager, Lili, also presented this meaningfulness equivocation about her work, but felt that mentorship helps personal feelings of meaning. “My job? Meaningful? *I guess so,*” she said slowly. “Well ‘cause you need it to pay bills, but I do like mentoring the hourly workers and the new managers. That gives me meaning. We are a team at work. That’s meaningful.”

Similarly, Maria mentioned, “The restaurant is not necessarily meaningful because I feel like the restaurant is entertainment, like fun and entertainment, but not meaningful, at least in the way that I think is meaningful. But what could be meaningful at the restaurant to me, as a manager, is shaping the employees when they first come to the restaurant to work, like when they are young, like teaching them about how to work, and hard work.”

Maria wavered between whether the restaurant had meaningfulness or not, but she enjoyed mentoring employees:

But, like I said, I like and enjoy working at the restaurant, and I like helping the workers grow up. Ultimately, though, serving lunch and dinner is not meaningful, but you can be good at it or shitty at it. It’s a job that sustains life, but it’s not torture. For the most part, it’s enjoyable. I’m not *just* going to work there ‘cause I have some kid to take care of, I mean I have me to take care of [laughs], but ultimately, I could choose somewhere else to work, like at any other job, secretary, nurse, I don’t know, like any lower level job, well a nurse is meaningful, but then you have to deal with gross stuff. Nurses can make a lot of money though, at least from what I’ve heard.

Chiefly, Maria conveyed that she is not compelled to remain working in restaurants because of limited occupational options or because of necessity, for example, to support a child. She intimated having a choice and insisted that she enjoyed the work.

Finally, participants also highlighted the other end of the spectrum where they were the pupils or apprentices, thus illuminating the meaningfulness of receiving guidance. Storie showed her appreciation when recalling how the executive chef “hired me, and he gave me a chance. Nobody would hire me, nobody would hire a girl that didn’t have much experience in a restaurant, so he gave me a chance. He is very protective over me. I always say he is like my dad, and it is very much, you know, a father, daughter relationship.” Storie also described the importance of the mentorship of the other cooks and chefs. She told me that culinary school did not teach her “shit” compared to what the back-of-the-house did. For instance, she exclaimed, “These men taught me how to do it faster, how to do it better, make it easier, like it’s amazing,

I'm like why didn't they teach me how to french a lamb rack like this in school? Honestly, I mean, this takes me two minutes. The other way takes me twenty."

Expanding

When the participants described meaningfulness, they discussed how they expanded their growth, horizons, self-sufficiency, and responsibility to thwart abusing their power. For example, Nicole found restaurant work meaningful because it helped her grow out of her shyness and insecurity. She explained, "I think serving was good for me. You know, at seventeen when I first started, the idea of going up to a table, and talking to strangers was intimidating, and then a couple years down the road, it was no big deal at all. Now, going to talk to restaurant owners is not so scary, you know, and so I think that naturally my personality isn't social and outgoing, but I like being that way as opposed to being shy, and so I think that my job has shaped me into being that way. I think that came second, 'cause I wasn't born that way." Moreover, Nicole described the restaurant as "just a really good place to enhance your understanding of people, in general. You just meet like so many people, you become friends with people, it helps pay for your bills, and it always something you can fall back on." Similarly, Lucie noted, "I think restaurants are a huge part of enhancing life and people, and I mean it's been such a huge part of my life, and also just the people you meet, I mean the restaurant industry brings so many different kinds of people together, so I definitely think it enhances your life in many ways. Like seriously, probably all my best friends I have I once worked with in a restaurant, or met through restaurants, or you know that culture for sure." Adding to this theme, Abigail mentioned, "You meet a whole bunch of different cultures, you know, lifestyles, so I mean I wouldn't trade it, not right now, not at the age I'm at." Furthermore, Seymour said, "I think the restaurant has definitely opened my eyes to seeing even a broader spectrum of different kinds of people that are

out there, whether it be racially, or age, or gender, differences, [or] just behavioral. There are just so many different personalities out there. It's just mind boggling, you know, so I don't know, that is definitely something that has come to my attention since I have worked in the restaurant industry."

The data showed how the restaurant motivated some of the workers to expand their educations, too. For instance, Cindy stated, "I graduated high school. I took a class here and there. I never really did well in school. I didn't get serious about my education until I was about twenty-four, when I was working in the restaurant industry, and I think that was probably what motivated me to get serious about getting a degree, because I don't want to work at a restaurant forever." Similarly, in a follow-up conversation with Jesse, he explained that work is a means to financial stability so he can pursue things he considers meaningful. He specifically said,

All I care about is that I have, you know, I can pay my bills, and seriously, work is just to pay bills. It really is just that. And, yes, and there is also some social connection. But, what it is, work allows for you and I to enjoy this telephone conversation, you know what I mean? I don't like people who are married to their work, you know, but if they're happy, god bless them. You know what I mean? That's their gig. But work just provides me money so I'm able to go spend time with family and friends. That's the most meaningful thing.

Jesse then reasoned that the restaurant aids in his pursuit for meaningfulness by saying, "I look at it as me almost using the restaurant to better my life. Consistent with Baumeister's (1991) conception of a *job*, Jesse added, "I'm using the restaurant to pay for my bills."

One element of meaningfulness that emerged from the interviews was the participants' intention to avoid positions of power and authority. The literature does not address this component. For example, Jesse specifically told me he did not become a police officer after his military duty because he did not want to abuse his power. He said, "I didn't become a cop 'cause, I mean, I could ruin your day. I could throw you in jail. I could impound your car. I

could write tickets. My word is god. You know what I mean? I'm just like, there's no way. I didn't want to have that much power, and still now, even as a manager, the bad sides of me are not good. You know what I mean? So I think it's just best for me to chill and relax and enjoy life." Similarly, Seymour told me he liked his non-authoritative positions in the restaurant as a server, bartender, and part-time shift-manager because he did not want to be tempted to "misuse power." He said, "I just don't like being in charge and having to tell people what to do. It's not really my thing. I mean I can do it, but like most of the people I work with are my friends also. We're all kind of at the same level. It'd just be awkward like if I had to boss them around, or like something like that."

Along similar lines as thwarting the abuse of power, participants spoke about treating others with respect and acknowledging that all people have "value." Icarus explained that people who work in restaurants learn to feel "that they aren't important, or that they're not skilled or valued in society." He elaborated by saying, "it's just a cycle of treating people like shit, which sucks, and I wish we all could just get that empathy for each other and realize that we are all human beings and that we all have value, you know, no matter what, we all do, we all mean something. Who's to say a CEO of a company is more important than a dishwasher at a restaurant?"

Meaningfulness, for the participants, comes in all shapes and sizes and is a subjective experience. Their accounts made a nontraditional understanding of meaningful work apparent. Namely, despite the constructed idea that a combination of *a calling* and *a career* will provide people with the most thorough source of meaning (see Baumeister 1991), restaurant workers found meaning in employment that many would not classify as a career or a calling, let alone a combination of both.

Belonging

Although company handbooks or orientations do not mention a sense of belonging as an intrinsic workplace factor, it represented a salient part of meaning to the restaurant workers. Despite the lack of meaningfulness that the workers disclosed about their work, belonging, in part, explained why they remain employed for such long time periods. Belonging included making friends and maintaining friendships among co-workers and customers, as well as feelings of “fitting in.”

When interviewing Portia, she first described her ambivalence around saying whether restaurant work is meaningful, and then provided insight about the meaningfulness of belonging: “It isn’t that restaurant work isn’t meaningful,” she said. “It’s that other people think it isn’t. That hurts me because, even though I don’t wanna do it forever, and I have hope for better, just because I work in a restaurant doesn’t mean I’m worthless.” She then added, “restaurant work has some meaning. Maybe not like the meaning everyone thinks is meaningful, but you serve people. You help out people. It gives you the ability to do other stuff too, like pay your bills, help your family. It’s hard to say what is meaningful. It’s anything that makes you feel good about yourself, and makes you happy, even if it isn’t all the time.” Gradually, Portia began to describe the importance of belonging. “My friends at the restaurant are important,” she said, “and talking to the customers and learning new things from them, from their daily lives to like what they do for a living. Maybe, it’s just that we all just need to feel like we belong, and fit in. That’s meaningful to me.” Her account of restaurant employment reflected the meaning and importance of the quotidian and actually incorporated several categories of meaningfulness—*belonging, helping, and expanding.*

Like Portia, Cindy mentioned friends in the restaurant as meaningful and described the theme of *expanding* as well. During the interview, Cindy worked as a restaurant server and manager and as a sales representative during the day. She noted,

I have worked in the industry for a long time. It's definitely been my point of networking for friends. It is where I have met a lot of my friends. It basically gave me the skills to even advance into the sales position I am in now, and it just fits my personality. Basically, it molded me into what I am. So in the future, it will continue to be a big part of my life, and hopefully, it will be to go into restaurants to sell food and wines.

All of the participants recounted enjoying their restaurant friends, and the vast majority of them directly described friends as a meaningful part of restaurant employment. Cliff said, "I like it. I think working in a restaurant is more satisfying, more exciting. You meet more people. You make more money. You make more friends. I mean you make friends with the workers *and* customers. I have had a couple of regulars follow me from restaurant to restaurant, but mainly I am friends with people I work with. You just meet a lot of friends. I have kept in touch with most of them over the years to a certain extent."

For Tia, as for Cliff, Cindy, and Portia, friends are the reason she has stayed so long. To her, the restaurant is not simply a workplace; it is a space full of "meaningful relationships." She explained:

I definitely enjoy working there, I have friends there, I get along with management, that's why I have stayed there as long as I have, because it's not just a workplace, because I have meaningful relationships with people. When I first started there, I was just thinking, like, oh, okay, I'm gonna stay here for like six months, and then I'll be out, like I just don't want to do this forever. And then after a while I started building friendship...and the harder you work, you're recognized for that, and then you get better sections and shifts and stuff, so I think that's why I get along with management so well because I know that they appreciate me, and like you get their acknowledgement for it...and that I have relationships with them outside of work. You know, they are more than just a manager. They are friends.

In addition to having relationships, Tia explained that the appreciation and acknowledgment she felt in those relationships are meaningful.

As Tia alluded, friendships within the restaurant exist well beyond the restaurant space.

Val elaborated on these friendships, too. He elucidated that there are numerous co-worker bonds as well as presented the theme of *helping*:

I will go to their house, they will come to my house, we'll go to dinner, we'll meet for a drink, but um, or we will have email communication, in the age of Facebook, and all that. As a matter of fact, I still keep in contact with old co-workers. And it's weird, once you go through the hell of a restaurant, I mean if you go through hell on a bad night, I mean you bond like brothers, right? Band of sisters. So yeah, I still talk to people I worked with, you know, 15 years ago. We don't talk often, we talk a couple times a year, you know, but some people I work with, I would pee on if they were on fire, 'cause I have to help people at all times.

Again, friendship and bonds are not written into restaurant employee manuals, but they are an extrinsic benefit of the work.

Accompanying co-workers bonding, the participants discussed circumstances where they made meaningful connections with customers. In general, Nadia said, "I think the main thing that I got out of it was the relationships that I formed with people." She proceeded to convey the most significant memory she had about working in restaurants; she discussed a powerful bond she formed with a father and his two-year-old daughter, who ate at the restaurant every Wednesday night. Nadia explained that although she tried to speak to the girl, who never spoke, Nadia told me that, every Wednesday night, she was determined to have a conversation with the little girl, and "finally, just one day, she said something back to me. So then, week after week, she'd start talking more, and then like a year later, it was to the point where his daughter would come running in to give me a hug, and he told me, 'I really want to thank you. You've really helped her a lot. She would not talk to anybody.' And that is what I'm most happy about working there, is the people." Human interactions and connections, no matter how big or small, were meaningful parts in and around restaurant employment.

Supplementation

In a final category of meaningfulness that emerged, the workers' recounted the activities in which they participated outside of the restaurants to supplement their meaningfulness. To them, such activities added value to their work. They frequently mentioned volunteering or interning at a particular charitable organization and participating in various hobbies.

Maria told me, "I think because most people do not consider restaurant work meaningful—a lot of the employees, and the outside world—many workers, in general, often supplement meaningfulness with volunteer work, you know, to find more meaning in life." As discussed earlier, Maria volunteers with refugees to help them learn English and find job placements. She later revealed that her restaurant sponsors volunteer activities for the workers. At the same time, she said the employees also have their own volunteer efforts. Specifically, Maria explained that "some have internships or volunteer at nonprofits. Other people supplement meaningfulness with school, getting an education, or working toward something else."

Describing her feelings before and after completing her Master's degree, Tia assessed how she supplemented meaningfulness while working in restaurants. In addition, she speculated about what other restaurant workers engage in for meaningfulness beyond restaurants:

So, what makes my life meaningful while working in a restaurant then is, well, before, when I was in school, school made my life more meaningful, my internship made it more meaningful, because I always knew, I thought, I would have a job, a career later. And, I think a lot of people are like that because they are in school or doing something else. But, at the same time, I think a lot of people are completely fine with restaurant work without needing anything else that is meaningful. But then, others have day jobs for meaning and work in restaurant for more money.

As previously mentioned, Tia was pursuing an entry-level government position—one that she believed would provide her mobility and meaningfulness in the long run.

Chloe talked about meaningfulness as working toward a “collective good.” She told me that she has “always volunteered at animal shelters,” and for two years, she has volunteered at a non-profit for rape and sexual assault issues. Chloe stated,

I feel so passionate about it. I love being connected with survivors, and watching them go through that growth cycle from the trauma to the healing, and being at that point of contact, and feeling like I made a difference to somebody. Whether or not the world sees that I’m making a difference in people’s lives, I know that I changed that person’s life...Some things are more important, and these are the things that are important to me, I’m really excited now that I’ve been so involved, I really feel like I know what I’m doing.

Chloe’s account reflects normative constructs of meaning. In other words, the experience of trauma—albeit in others’ lives—enhanced her meaningfulness. Later in the interview, Chloe also mentioned several hobbies, such as dance, music, burlesque, physical fitness and working out that gave her meaning beyond the workplace and her volunteer efforts.

Many of the other participants also talked about their volunteering experiences or internships at nonprofit organizations. For instance, Lucie explained that she volunteered at a women’s clinic and even noted that there is something “so inspirational about it.” Edna also mentioned that she volunteered with an organization that served the needs of homeless children and their mothers. Likewise, Griffin, a forty-one-year-old server, volunteered at a men’s homeless shelter, preparing meals and cleaning the quarters.

The hobbies that the participants considered meaningful consisted of many outdoor activities, such as rafting, hiking, skiing, snowboarding, camping, exercising, and various sports. Wayne said, “I lead a pretty active lifestyle. I play hockey, I ski, I play basketball, I swim a lot, so yeah, I have a lot of hobbies.” He also described himself as “a really laid back guy” rather than a “go, go, go kind of guy” and needing to unwind after restaurant work because the restaurant is “always going, a really fast-paced lifestyle.” Others found meaningfulness in the

everyday activities outside the restaurant. For instance, Jose said, “I spend time on the internet, chill with my friends, play sports, [do] school work, talk to friends, go outside, go to the beach. I like reading, so I seldom get bored.”

The dominant understanding of meaning is that it lies beyond the quotidian. In the literature, significant traumas (e.g., death of a loved one) or extraordinary events (e.g., surviving cancer) foster meaning. However, restaurant workers established meaning in the everyday occurrences in and around restaurants, as well as in exceptional pursuits, like volunteering and helping others. The participants were generally content with their restaurant employment and they enjoyed the meaning from the “little things,” such as music, television, food, motorcycles, friends, family, and social time. Additionally, they described their participation in extraordinary activities as supplementing meaningfulness outside restaurants.

* * *

My research revealed that restaurant work *can* be meaningful, but prevailing views treat it as ordinary, or even less than that. While scholarly literature typically alludes otherwise, restaurant workers have agency and actively seek meaning, rather than having meaningfulness simply happen to them. Moreover, although people can be exceptionally skilled as restaurant workers (e.g., an extraordinary dishwasher), these skills are not normatively considered meaningful. Yet, the participants emphasized the meaning, value, and satisfaction found in serving people or providing them with a memorable experience. In addition, many could readily enumerate the ways they supplemented meaningfulness outside the restaurant. Because they faced contradictory cultural messages about the meaningfulness of restaurant work, they resolved their feelings of “incomplete” meaningfulness in arenas external to the restaurant.

Meaning has myriad definitions. Moreover, meaning in and around restaurant work varies widely. I discussed five such variations in this chapter: helping, mentoring, expanding, belonging, and supplementation. Although the first four categories of meaning appear contrary to supplementation, they actually coexist. That is, while the workers believed that restaurant employment allows for helping others, mentorship, belonging, and expanding their lives in meaningful ways, they also struggled with their sense of meaning while employed in restaurant work and felt an urge to develop additional meaning elsewhere.

Given the many explanations of meaning, this research reframes the prevailing notions about meaning, meaning making, and meaningfulness. Like my arguments in previous chapters about the normative constructions of “good work,” the traditional linear developmental stages, and the “appropriate” timing of and engagement in deviance and crime in the life course, I contend that essentializing the concept of meaning does not advance the scholarship on how people experience it. By challenging normative definitions of what it “means” to have and hold meaningfulness in one’s life, this study engages with issues at the very heart of human existence. I examine this contribution, and others made in this study, further in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Indeed, standards are the recipes by which we create reality. The heart of the difficulty is that all standards invoke the linguistic categories we also use to organize the world. (Busch 2011:2)

This research has both specified and problematized a dichotomy among jobs, especially in the United States. Work and occupations scholars distinguish between *standard* and *nonstandard* work. They define nonstandard work as including part-time work, independent contracting, temping, on-call work, day labor, and self-employment (Kalleberg et al. 1997; Kalleberg, Reskin, and Hudson 2000; Kalleberg 2000). Roughly 30 percent of the current U.S. workforce labors in nonstandard jobs, many of which are called “bad jobs” because of their lack of salaries, benefits, and stability (Hudson 1999; O’Rand and Henretta 1999; Loughlin and Barling 2001). Over 30 million jobs in the United States are designated “bad jobs,” and this number includes restaurant employment (Boushey et al. 2007).

When discussing the power of standards in organizing the social world, Busch (2011) argued that people commonly overlook their consequences—positive and negative—and their very existence. In other words, these taken-for-granted standards provide the reference point for inclusion, exclusion, and for ideas about what belongs and what does not and what is conventional and what is deviant. For example, there are standardized tests, standard blood alcohol levels for driving, standard speed limits, standard cuts and quality grades of beef, standard deviations, standard measurements, pronunciations, grammar, and an indefinite number of other standards. Similarly, norms pervade the ways in which people behave, make decisions, and navigate through the life course. People initially learn standards and norms in early

socialization, but socialization does not end at a certain age. A continuous learning process occurs over the life course as people's standards and norms shift and shape. Typically, people navigate their lives considering the standards of the community where they grew up, were socialized, and/or currently reside.

Although I reflect on many paradigms in my sociological analyses, I predominantly view social phenomena from a social constructionist perspective (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Shultz 1967), whereby I explore how people impose and assign meaning and construct social reality. How people construct meaning and reality develops through the often-unquestioned everyday language, conversations, interactions, events, and institutions. This research served to underscore the standards and norms among the relationships between jobs, identities, behaviors, and feelings. It also highlighted various frameworks that scholars use to organize the social world. I, specifically, examined how restaurant workers view their employment based on constructions of appropriate identities, careers, life transitions, conduct, and meaningfulness. Moreover, because of the various contradictory cultural messages that workers faced, they attempted to reconcile their perceived incongruence with paradoxical accounts about their lives.

Along with the constructed divide between "good work" and "bad work," standard measures exist for "successful" developmental stage transitions. Life course scholars use various markers to discern the transitions from infancy to childhood, childhood to adolescence, adolescence to adulthood, and adulthood to old age. Moreover, scholars predominantly evaluate the transition to adulthood by the benchmarks of leaving home, finishing school, marriage, bearing children, *and* entering full-time employment (e.g., Settersten 2012). In regard to a "completed" transition to adulthood, a central division exists between people who work in part-time jobs and those who work in full-time ones. Scholars additionally discuss the appropriate

timing of the transitions and subsequent consequences for ill-timed transitions (Wight et al. 2010; Burb-Sharps and Lewis 2012; Mortimer 2012). Furthermore, they define normative onsets, persistence, and desistence of unconventional behavior in the life course and argue that deviating from normative behavioral paths risks life-long disadvantages and deficiencies (e.g., Sampson and Laub 1993).

I also investigated the standard measures of meaningfulness. Most scholars conceptualize meaningfulness in terms of purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth. Without these characteristics, people will purportedly feel and experience lack of meaning (e.g., Baumeister 1991). I pointed out that little research examines meaningfulness in the quotidian and in and around employment. Most focuses on the meaning that occurs after trauma, loss, suffering, or after something extraordinary happens. Scholars that do address meaning and employment make a distinction between meaningful and non-meaningful work. They posit that this demarcation depends on whether people describe their employment as a job, a career, or a calling. Researchers deem the most meaningful employment as that which combines a career and a calling.

In this research, I did not intend to whitewash the potential disadvantages of nonstandard work, life transitions, behavior, or meaningfulness. The participants, however, detailed the advantages of each. Additionally, they exposed and problematized the power of standards and norms by unveiling the frequently hidden consequences of dichotomies, divisions, and the conventional language that people use to talk about employment, developmental stages, crime and deviance, and meaning. In short, they uncovered exclusionary frameworks and the feelings of inadequacy that can result from such schemes. The data thus inductively led me to the main

purpose of examining restaurant workers' nonstandard experiences and the reconciliation of any incongruence in their lives because of such experiences.

Because the world is saturated with standards, norms, and guidelines for how people should act, feel, and behave, people confront numerous internal and external conflicts about their values and goals. On the one hand, people feel compelled to fit in the middle of the proverbial bell curve; on the other hand, they covet exceptionality and an existence on the fringe. Restaurant employees constitute an empirical example of this struggle; they exhibit ambivalence about jobs, identities, behaviors, and feelings that, more often than not, they thoroughly appreciate and enjoy. I found that when a misalignment or disjuncture occurred between the workers' identities, behaviors, and occupations and standard identities, behaviors, and occupations, they attempted to resolve these discrepancies through contrary evaluations of restaurant employment. I contend that these paradoxical statements provide powerful discursive tools to harmonize incongruent presentations of self. I showed how the workers rectified incongruence through an ongoing negotiation of their stigmatized work, choices, and decisions.

Throughout the dissertation, I argued for a general reconceptualization of standards and norms. The data portrayed the restaurant as a *professional back place*—a space with porous boundaries—that highlights the need for a new understanding of traditions, conventions, norms, and standards. The organizational, structural, and interpersonal characteristics of restaurants permitted the employees non-normative career, behavioral, and social psychological pathways. However, fears about being on the periphery influenced the participants to justify identities and behaviors that did not mirror “appropriate” societal expectations. I took an approach that emphasizes the importance of examining cultural contradictions embedded in the social world; I found that cultural contradictions provide resources for how people interact, behave, self

identify, and organize and experience the life-world. In doing so, this research contributes to the social scientific and sociological literature in several ways. I address these contributions below.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Identities, Work, and Occupations

I investigated the relationships among employment durations, stigma management strategies, and identity work. Restaurant employment is often depicted as unskilled labor, unsuitable for the educated, and only appropriate for people without any alternatives. Despite this negative image, the data suggested that the workers enter restaurant employment by choice, and they welcome and take pleasure in many elements of the work. However, they were well aware of the stigma associated with restaurant jobs, and they engaged in strategic identity work to resolve any stigma that results from holding jobs that others regard as inferior.

The data challenged and complicated the dominant views of work, jobs, careers, and occupational identities. The participants provided accounts of the “good” in restaurant work, notwithstanding the absence of the conventional benefits connected with “standard work” (e.g., vacation pay). I showed how the workers negotiated and justified their stigmatized jobs, choices, behaviors, and occupational identities. They did so by assigning instrumental, functional and practical value to their employment. Broadly, my research sheds light on the social psychological side of the changing economic and occupational climate.

This research contributes to the literature on identities, work and occupations, and stigma management by reassessing how we understand employment in the U.S. workforce. The data highlighted components of the concept “dirty work,” which goes neglected by many organizational scholars. Instead of reifying images of restaurant work as “dirty,” however, I argued that the past theorization about dirty work that relates to restaurant jobs (i.e., physical,

social, and moral taint) provides insight into why employees have a penchant to negotiate and justify their work identities as “legitimate” ones.

My study illuminated the discursive choices that the participants used to talk about their employment, which proved contrary. For example, they told me that they loved and hated their work at the same time. Their equivocations in part emerged from the contradictory cultural messages that they received from larger society and various associations in and outside the industry. They provided paradoxical statements about their work to try to reconcile the incongruence between the occupational identities that they currently held and the ones that they were actively pursuing. Consequently, the workers unintentionally participated in “defensive othering,” whereby they reproduced the marginalization of restaurant work by reinforcing the dominant group’s claimed superiority. As a final note about occupations and identities, the data opened a pathway for perspective and institutional policy changes to allow for the permission and acceptance of alternative ways of making a living for those who cannot *and* choose not to work in “standard” careers.

The Life Course

I described the constructed developmental stages and investigated how restaurant workers complicated these stages. Through a discursive analysis, I discussed how their talk both challenged and complemented the characteristics of several developmental stages. I showed how restaurant workers “do” what I call *strategic adulthood*, which is a strategy for negotiating the stigmatization of nonlinear life course development. Strategic adulthood is a resource for talking about the self for those whose trajectories are nontraditional. Doing strategic adulthood allows workers to safeguard normative presentations of adulthood by claiming standard benchmarks,

values, and goals but affords them continued participation in nonstandard behaviors and nonlinear life course trajectories.

The data also suggested the need for a new perspective on occupations and the life course by unsettling normative stage development. In this way, this study contributes to the knowledge of how “nonstandard jobs” and “bad jobs” fit into nonlinear development and of the constructed elements of life course stages. In particular, I critiqued the life course literature’s assumption that developmental stages have “real” elements or actual characteristics that signify “successful” transitions (e.g., entering full-time employment). The participants presented a case for a reevaluation of the life course perspective because they showed that the life course is much more nuanced than a model of stage transitions suggests. This research emphasized the importance of examining people’s self-reported experiences of “growing up,” rather than focusing on developmental stages, the chronology of these stages, and the disadvantages of designated ill-timed transitions.

The participants also shifted the understanding of life course pathways because they exemplified the role of *choice*. In other words, *they chose* different life paths (e.g., part-time work), and if they disclosed feeling like adults, they indicated when *they decided* they felt like adults. Paradoxically, the participants felt and did not feel like adults at the same time because they struggled with popular beliefs about what it means to be an adult. As a result, the participants “did” *strategic adulthood* and used *discourses of negotiation* to rectify the developmental dilemmas they faced. Thus, this study leads the way for future researchers to limit their imposed meaning on development, constructed understandings of life course stages, and judgments about nonlinear pathways. Instead, scholars would learn more by focusing on life history narratives, accounts, and on people’s maturation stories.

These analyses are applicable to social inquiries dealing with normative stage transitions and the linked markers of each. Beyond the restaurant industry, people, in general, are “deeply ambivalent about aging” and concerned with whether they are “successfully aging” (NPR 2014). The very terminology we use to discuss aging and the life course model, encourages “opportunities to fail” rather than opportunities to challenge the status quo. Recent discussions suggest tensions with aging, especially during the so-called “golden age.” Not only does the normative life course model fail to capture experiences of those over the age of 50, but it also neglects to explain the experiences of those 65 and older, a group now contentiously and patronizingly labeled part of “the silver tsunami,” “our seniors,” and “senior citizenship” (NPR 2014). Because one-fifth of the U.S. population will be 65 or older by 2030, it will benefit scholarship to consider this group.

Crime and Deviance

I examined how and why the structure, organization, and interpersonal characteristics of restaurant work influenced crime and deviance. Chiefly, I investigated participants’ theft practices and subsequent justifications. Consequently, this research contributes to neutralization theory with the two new techniques, Denial of Excess and No One Cares, which restaurant workers used to mitigate the shame of stealing. In particular, I addressed what existing techniques of neutralization neglect to address. I provided evidence that people violate norms even while simultaneously committed to conventional values and the normative social order. I showed how people cast themselves within the bounds of custom by claiming that “no one cares” if they steal only “a little a lot.” As a result, they maintained positive self-images because they indulged and limited their indulgences concurrently.

By establishing precedence for Denial of Excess and No One Cares, I contribute to the literature on crime and deviance, accounts, justifications, the techniques of neutralization, and the life course. Analyzing theft among restaurant workers and their successive theft justifications adds to “the study of what constitutes ‘acceptable utterances’ for untoward behavior” (Scott and Lyman 1968:61). Significantly, the data documented late life and adulthood onsets and persistence of crime and deviance. Despite the statistics claiming that only four percent of criminal careers begin in adulthood (Elliot, Huizinga, and Menard 1989), scholars should examine employment settings for crime and deviance onsets, especially because of the 75 percent of employee theft that goes undetected (Applegate 1990; Green 1997). In fact, it would enrich the scholarly literature to investigate additional work settings that may influence employees to commit crime and deviate in later life, even though they are not committed to crime and deviance in any other setting or social environment.

In sum, this research reframes how scholars may study crime and deviance in the life course, where they can study it, and how people justify untoward behavior. The conclusions in this study not only contribute to our knowledge of the existence of employee theft, but also suggest that the dominant moral code, both in and outside the restaurant, influences theft behavior. These analyses extend to other research arenas in and outside workplaces and among behaviors that people may not consider criminal or deviant.

Meaningfulness and Meaning Making

I also investigated how restaurant employees describe experiences of meaningfulness in general, meaningfulness in their work, and meaningfulness beyond their workplaces. I found that they consider restaurant work meaningful, despite popular opinion to the contrary. Specifically, I discussed five categories of meaning in the context of restaurant employment: helping,

mentoring, expanding, belonging, and supplementation. Each of these categories widens and broadens the conception of meaningfulness beyond the standard and normative definitions found in the academic literature. Moreover, these categories encourage a less exclusionary and reductive framework for studying meaningful lives. However, although the restaurant employees found meaning in their work, they supplemented meaningfulness outside the restaurant because they nonetheless wrestled with their sense of meaning as restaurant workers. Despite believing that people could be and are highly gifted restaurant workers, such as an extraordinary bartender, they acknowledged that this type of gift is not normatively valued or lauded in the United States.

This research presented a new way of viewing meaningfulness and meaning making beyond that of trauma, loss, and the extraordinary phenomena that *happen to* people. Moreover, the data showed that restaurant workers have agency and actively pursue meaningful lives. Of course, different people have varying levels of agency, mainly due to economic, social, or interpersonal circumstances, but meaning is achievable, it is subjective, and it is also in the quotidian, common, everyday occurrences. Furthermore, this research indicated that just because people have not acquired the established criteria of meaning (e.g., purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth) does not mean that they will have meaningless lives.

This study contributes to meaningfulness scholarship by suggesting a reevaluation of the “meaning” of meaning, especially beyond the field of psychology. Additionally, I argue that it does not advance the academic literature to essentialize the concept of meaning. Given the restaurant workers’ many explanations of meaning, meaning making, and meaningfulness, I call for scholars to shift their gaze on meaning to begin to explore alternative explanations of meaningful lives. From a phenomenological or ethnomethodological perspective, scholars may

more readily access a wide range of interpretations of meaning. This will ensure that people are not excluded, dehumanized, or marginalized simply because of where they work or because they have not experienced “traumatic” or “extraordinary” phenomena. Regardless of definitions of meaning disseminated through socialization, restaurant workers provide an empirical case of meaningfulness outside of the conventional and a launching pad for more comprehensive research.

My analysis of meaningfulness and, in particular, of the concept belonging, connects to social phenomena from as far back as Durkheim (1951) and his book *Suicide*. One influencing factor of suicide, he argued, is a lack of social integration. More recently, Joiner (2005) contended that belonging “is so powerful that, when satisfied, it can prevent suicide” even for people who feel burdensome to others (p. 118). To enhance the study of social integration and belonging in relation to suicide and improve policy options for applied researchers, scholars might examine elements of restaurants that may shield against self-annihilation.

A COMMENT ON INCLUSIVITY

As I confront standard and normative frameworks of social inquiry, I find myself in a precarious position. I stand exposed to scholarly criticism because I, perhaps contentiously, challenged the work and occupations, the life course, the crime and deviance, and the meaningfulness literature by questioning their structural designs for studying unconventional subsets of people in society. I argued for the reconceptualization of aspects of these fields of inquiry to make them less exclusionary. I suggested removing the “failure” label associated with people who take non-normative life course paths and participate in unorthodox behavior. Additionally, I advocated that we examine people’s stories and experiences rather than attempting to place them in dichotomies such as the good versus the bad, adolescence versus adulthood, the standard versus

the nonstandard, or the meaningful versus the meaningless. I am a proponent of focusing on the social reality that people assign and impose on things, the ways they talk about these creations, and the consequences of such constructions. I believe this type of analysis will yield inclusive and powerful explanations about what people “do” and when, how, and why they “do it.”

This study used an empirical case to show that work and occupations, the life course, crime and deviance, and meaningfulness are much more subtle than previously constructed. Definitions are not static. Workers juggled meanings and understandings as they grappled with popularly held beliefs and their own feelings and values. The data also demonstrated that, for various reasons, many restaurant workers cannot have and, indeed, do not want mainstream, middle-class, or normative lives.

The participants exemplified how the restaurant, as a *professional back place*, has its pitfalls and benefits. Many workers who intended to leave the restaurant either did not or could not. In contrast, restaurant employment provides workers “good,” “meaningful,” and extrinsic benefits. Moreover, regardless of difficult economic times, I heard, on numerous occasions, that restaurant work is a safe space for many people to “fall back on,” to have fun in, and belong to. This dissertation thus provides a starting point for researchers to examine, critique, and demystify other settings. Consequently, this study sheds light on topics of scholarly interest beyond the realm of the restaurant and work and occupations.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This dissertation has provided a glimpse into the world of restaurant workers. Many aspects of the research made me curious about other understudied people and topics in the restaurant industry. In closing, I discuss potential research endeavors that I intend to conduct in the near future.

First, I want to expand my restaurant research into several different areas in relation to identities, deviant behavior, and work and occupations. I found little, if any, extant research on the parents and families of restaurant workers, on the back-of-the-house documented and undocumented immigrant restaurant workers predominantly from Latino and Hispanic ethnic backgrounds, on the owners of restaurants, or on retired restaurant employees who entered different professions. Building on my interest in marginal groups, I will undertake research that begins with pilot interviews with members of these four groups of people. One topic in particular that I intend to examine is livable minimum and tipped minimum wages, especially given the recent wage protests among U.S. restaurant industry employees that have transitioned into a global social movement (De Bode 2014; Greenhouse 2014). In addition, I will investigate how retired employees feel, identify, and behave now that they have left the restaurant industry.

Second, my interest in the culture of restaurants has prompted me to consider the sociological aspects of different types of unconventional cuisines. From haute to nouvelle cuisine and into the realm of molecular gastronomy and “bizarre foods,” I plan to interview chefs and culinary schoolteachers about how they view genre and scientific changes in the foods people eat. I want to explore the factors that influence shifts in consumption as well as how restaurants use innovative cuisines to grant legitimacy to culinary occupations and practices.

Finally, I hope to conduct restaurant research relating to corporate social responsibility, “give backs,” “conscious capitalism,” nonprofit restaurants, pay-what-you-can food establishments, and restaurants that support and practice sustainability. My interest in this topic emerged from this study’s interviews about volunteering, “give backs,” and supplementation of meaningfulness. I have already begun to inquire about restaurants that feed veterans and the

homeless. Very recently, I discovered a certification awarded to restaurants if they participate in food recovery and feeding the “struggling” communities (FRN 2014).

This dissertation does not mean the end of my research on restaurants and restaurant employees. It provides a starting point for numerous studies not yet conducted. I look forward to beginning research at new field sites.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

TOPICS LIST:

I. *General Background Information:***1. Demographic Characteristics**

Age/Birthday
 Sex/Gender/Orientation/Race/Ethnicity
 State they live in
 Education (highest level of education completed)
 Income (individual and household)
 Disposable income
 Living situation
 Family (SES, parents, siblings, pets)
 Religion
 Relationship status
 Number of children

2. Occupational and Educational History

First, second, third...occupation
 Type of education or training for each job
 Expectations about the jobs
 Why was job desired?
 Type of educational degree attained
 Educational major/minor
 Are you currently in school? If so, why?

II. *Present Occupation and Restaurant Culture:*

Note: wording depends on the interviewees and their job positions

1. Current Occupation Description

What type of occupation/industry are you in?
 Description of jobs/description of positions of employment
 Hours the restaurant is open/types of shifts
 Salary, hourly wages/income, tips
 Hours work a day/week
 Computer system or paper system
 Customer relations
 Social networks
 Structure of positions/hierarchies
 Managers versus staff/front house versus back house
 Restaurant function/structure
 Overall satisfaction with the job
 What could change/improve?

2. Gender

What positions are people in? Who are the managers, servers, bartenders, busers, chefs, cooks, and dishwashers?

Are they gendered?

Does gender affect your job in any way?

How do you feel about being a male/female/other in your position?

3. Race

Are you aware of the race/ethnicities in the restaurant?

Who are in each position?

Does race affect your job in any way?

4. Socioeconomic Status

Are you aware of the socioeconomic status of those with whom you work?

What positions are people in?

Do you own a house, cars, property?

Can you survive on your wages/tips?

Is this job sufficient for your expenses?

Workers compensation

Health insurance

Because of tips, do you owe taxes to the government?

Has the downturn in the economy affected your wages?

5. Job Procedures

What is the sequence of service, cooking, managing?

Training practices/rites of passage/sidework

Are certain positions better than others or coveted?

Sections in the restaurant, who gets them? Are some better than others?

Doubles/overtime/breaks?

Tips, cash business, pooled or individualized?

Whom do you have to tip at the end of the night?

Do you manage your own money, till, until end of shift?

What happens if you lose money, or end up short?

How are things compensated?

Secret shoppers? Are you told to up-sell? Who does this benefit?

Are there penalties for not following procedures?

What happens in emergencies (e.g. computers fail, missing workers, high turnover rate)

Are you given "family meal"? Bonuses? Raises?

6. Customer and Staff Relations

If there are problems with food served, what do you do?

Hairs, bugs, other problems

How do cooks/chefs/managers feel about problems with food?

Stereotypes of jobs, positions, in media?

Coupons? Discounts? Free meals? Drinks?

Are there walkouts?

How are walkouts dealt with? Do you have to pay for them?
 How are you treated by customers?
 How does it make you feel?
 How do you cope with ill treatment?

7. Tips

Do you earn tips?
 Do you expect tips?
 How do you feel when people do not tip you?
 Do you have regulars? Special treatment?
 How do you earn tips, do you have methods to earn more tips?
 What do you do when someone stiffes you?

8. Self, Sociability, Personality

Are you sociable, outgoing, etc.?
 Are you friends with co-workers?
 Are you friends with the customers?
 Do you hang out with your co-workers/customers?
 What do you do together?
 Do you associate best with co-workers or others?
 Is the restaurant a big part of your life?
 Is the restaurant build on family values?
 Is there restaurant socialization?

9. Romantic Relationships

Are you in a romantic relationship?
 Did you meet them at work?
 Are you aware of at-work relationships?
 What is the protocol for them?
 Can people be fired for this?
 What is policy on family-related co-workers or those in relationships at work?

10. Plans for Future

Do you plan to work at a restaurant in the future?
 How long?
 Are there opportunities for mobility?
 Would you take a higher position if you could?
 If not, what do you plan to do?
 How do you create social networks, opportunities?

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Table 4. Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Race*	Sex	Class Upbringing	Income	Education
Abigail	27	bi-racial	F	middle	\$52,000	some 4-year college
Aster	30	mixed	F	lower-working	\$36,000	associate's degree
Becky	29	white	F	lower-working	\$28,000	bachelor's degree
Benny	22	white	M	middle	\$30,000	associate's degree
Bianca	19	white	F	upper-middle	\$12,000	some 4-year college
Bob	20	multi-racial	M	upper	\$24,000	some 4-year college
Brian	34	bi-racial	M	middle	\$30,000	some 2-year college
Caleb	19	white	M	middle	\$16,000	some 4-year college
Chloe	24	bi-racial	F	middle	\$30,000	some 4-year college
Cindy	33	white	F	middle	\$40,000	some 2-year college
Cliff	23	white	M	upper	\$30,000	some 2-year college
Daisy	19	white	F	middle	\$28,000	some 4-year college
Ebben	20	white	M	lower-working	\$5,000	some 2-year college
Edna	22	white	F	upper-middle	\$30,000	bachelor's degree
Eleanor	19	white	F	middle	\$11,000	some 4-year college
Eliza	22	Hispanic/Latina	F	middle	\$19,000	some 2-year college
Elliot	18	bi-racial	M	middle	\$20,000	some 2-year college
Erika	20	white	F	upper	\$3,000	some 4-year college
George	48	white	M	lower-working	\$52,000	master's degree
Griffin	41	white	M	lower-working	\$35,000	some 2-year college
Guido	28	bi-racial	M	middle	\$37,000	some 4-year college
Guy	35	multi-racial	M	lower-working-middle	\$37,000	culinary of arts degree
Hal	35	white	M	lower-working-middle	\$18,000	some 4-year college
Icarus	22	white	M	middle	\$22,400	some 4-year college
Jesse	45	multi-racial	M	middle	\$50,000	bachelor's degree
Jimmy	43	white	M	lower-working-middle	\$40,000	culinary of arts degree
Jose	25	South Asian	M	upper-middle	\$20,000	bachelor's degree
Lilu	27	multi-racial	F	middle	\$53,000	bachelor's degree
Lucie	23	black/African American	F	lower-working-middle	\$30,000	some 4-year college
Maria	35	white	F	lower-working-middle	\$40,000	some 4-year college
Molly	36	white	F	middle	\$40,000	bachelor's degree
Nadia	20	multi-racial	F	upper-middle	\$12,000	some 4-year college
Naomi	25	Hispanic/Latina	F	middle	\$46,000	some 2-year college
Nicole	29	white	F	middle	\$20,000	bachelor's degree
Oliver	24	Southeast Asian	M	lower-working-middle	\$32,000	culinary of arts degree

Orchid	19	Hispanic/Latina	F	lower-working	\$4,000	some 4-year college
Pedro	28	white	M	middle	\$20,000	associate's degree
Penny	20	white	F	upper-middle	\$13,000	some 4-year college
Portia	37	multi-racial	F	lower-working-middle	\$35,000	bachelor's degree
Rose	22	white	F	upper-middle	\$12,000	bachelor's degree
Sarah	20	multi-racial	F	middle	\$10,000	some 4-year college
Seymour	25	multi-racial	M	middle	\$20,000	some 2-year college
Sophie	27	white	F	middle	\$18,000	bachelor's degree
Spock	22	Southeast Asian	M	upper-middle	\$11,000	bachelor's degree
Storie	23	white	F	middle	\$40,000	culinary of arts degree
Ted	25	white	M	lower-working-middle	\$36,000	bachelor's degree
Tia	24	multi-racial	F	upper-middle	\$36,000	master's degree
Tobias	32	East Asian	M	lower-working	\$30,000	high school diploma
Val	39	multi-racial	M	middle	\$40,000	some 2-year college
Violet	21	white	F	middle	\$10,000	some 4-year college
Wayne	19	multi-racial	M	middle	\$10,000	some 4-year college
Zoe	19	bi-racial	F	middle	\$2,400	some 4-year college

* Bi- and multi-racial participants claimed a racial combination of some of the following: white, black/African American, African, Asian, Native American, Hispanic/Latino, Jewish, and European.

APPENDIX C: GLOSSARY

Terms (by topic in alphabetical order):

Back-of-the-house the area in the back of the restaurant where the kitchen staff work, which is where the dishwashing, storage, office, kitchen, and food preparation areas are located.

Bussers are usually employed as part-time, tipped front and back-of-the-house staff members. They clean the restaurant, reset tables, stock glasses and plates, refill waters, and perform many other duties to help the front and back-of-the-house employees.

Executive/Head Chefs are generally full-time, salaried, benefited chefs who are the managers of the kitchen. They design dishes and menus, delegate back-of-the-house duties, hire and fire kitchen staff, take account of and order inventory, and are in charge of various administrative tasks.

Expeditors/Food Runners are typically part-time, tipped kitchen staff who prepare plates before brining them to customers. Sometimes chefs double as expeditors. In this case, the expeditor manages the timing of dishes and directs the cooks when to begin cooking.

Line/Prep Cooks are usually part-time workers who prepare ingredients and cook dishes.

Sous Chefs are often full-time, salaried, benefited, higher-ranking cooks with similar line/prep cook duties. They stand second in command to the executive/head chef and typically do not have administrative duties.

Front-of-the-house the area in front of the restaurant where waitstaff work, such as the dining area where the tables, bar, and host stand are located.

Bar Backs are part-time, tipped bartender's assistants who stock glasses, alcohol bottles, and other drinks.

Bartenders are part-time, tipped staff members who tend the bar and mix drinks.

General Managers are full-time, salaried, benefited lead managers in the restaurant who take on the responsibilities of directing all employees at their location. The general managers have administrative duties and focus on increasing profits and revenue, keeping costs down, and improving advertising strategies.

Hosts/Hostesses/Cashiers are part-time, tipped staff members who organize the reservations, meet, greet, and seat incoming customers, sometimes take payments for purchases but usually do not deal with money or cash.

Managers are usually full-time, salaried, benefited employees who delegate the front-of-the-house employees on their shifts. They typically do not have major administrative duties, but oversee inventory, job procedures, employee duties, and issues with patrons.

Servers (waiters and waitresses) are part-time, tipped waitstaff who serve the patrons at the tables.

Shift Managers take on many of the responsibilities of any manager but are typically part-time employees without benefits. For example, they oversee the floor and the front-of-the-house waitstaff, delegate responsibilities, and deal with customer complaints.

Regional/District Managers have the same duties as any manager but are the highest ranked managers, have the most responsibilities, and the largest authority to make decisions. They oversee an entire region or district in the corporation, travel from store to store, spend little time on the floor, and monitor the regional performance, profits, and advertising efforts.

Shifts

A Double is consecutively working two shifts in one day, for example, working the morning or lunch shift and then the night shift.

Comping is compensating customers' grievances with free food, drinks, or vouchers.

Shift Covering is when employees have other staff members work their shifts. Generally, it is the responsibility of the workers to get their shifts covered when they do not want to or cannot work (e.g., when they want a day or are sick).

Types of Restaurants

Casual Dining full-service restaurants are purported to be family-friendly, moderately priced, and affordable. They serve any number of types of cuisines.

Chain/Corporate full-service restaurants are a group of restaurants with the same name; however, a large corporation may own several restaurants with different names. Chains may be regional, nationwide, or international. They have headquarters, sometimes offer franchise and/or stock options, are usually well known, and are more likely to be casual dining with any number of types of cuisines.

Fine Dining full-service establishments are restaurants that serve high priced food and allege to provide "high quality" dining experiences (e.g., with décor, cuisines, and highly trained staff, such as sommeliers).

Full Service constitutes table service and a full bar and typically excludes diners, fast-food establishments, or mom-and-pop type of eateries.

Independent full-service restaurants usually have one location and one owner. Many have more than one location and one owner but remain small and local. They can be fine or causal dining and offer any number of types of cuisines.

Individualized Tips are those that remain with the tipped employee who earned them (e.g., a tip from the patron to a bartender). However, tipped employees are usually required to share tips with the other workers, such as bussers, hosts, and anyone else who helped them during service.

Pooled Tips are those that do not remain solely with the tipped employee who earned them. In other words, the tips are shared and divided by a designated percentage system. The percentages are usually based on the amount of labor that the job title specifies.