SERVING HAMBURGERS
AND SELLING INSURANCE:
Gender, Work, and Identity in
Interactive Service Jobs

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Through an analysis of two highly routinized interactive service jobs, fast food service and insurance sales, this article explores the interrelationship of work, gender, and identity. While notions of proper gender behavior are quite flexible, gender-segregated service jobs reinforce the conception of gender differences as natural. The illusion that gender-typed interaction is an expression of workers’ inherent natures is sustained, even in situations in which workers’ appearances, attitudes, and demeanors are closely controlled by their employers. Gender-typed work has different meanings for women and men, however, because of differences in the cultural valuation of behavior considered appropriate to each gender.

All workers look for ways to reconcile the work they do with an identity they can accept, either by interpreting the work positively or by discounting the importance of the work as a basis of identity. Hughes, emphasizing the active process of interpretation, recommended examining the “social and social-psychological arrangements and devices by which men [sic] make their work tolerable, or even make it glorious to themselves and others” ([1951] 1984, 342). If the work cannot be construed as glorious, or even honorable, workers will look for ways to distance themselves from their jobs,

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assuring themselves that the work they are doing does not reflect their true worth. One of the most important determinants of the meaning of a type of work, as well as of how the work is conducted and rewarded, is its association with a particular gender. Acceptance by a worker of the identity implied by a job is therefore determined in part by the degree to which the job can be interpreted as allowing the worker to enact gender in a way that is satisfying.

Much contemporary theory and research on gender shares an emphasis on its active and continual construction through social interaction (Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1977; Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987). West and Zimmerman argue that “participants in interaction organize their various and manifold activities to reflect or express gender, and they are disposed to perceive the behavior of others in a similar light” (1987, 127). One of the most striking aspects of the social construction of gender is that its successful accomplishment creates the impression that gender differences in personality, interests, character, appearance, manner, and competence are natural—that is, that they are not social constructions at all. Gender segregation of work reinforces this appearance of naturalness. When jobholders are all of one gender, it appears that people of that gender must be especially well suited to the work, even if at other times and places, the other gender does the same work. Thus Milkman’s analysis of industrial work during World War II demonstrates “how idioms of sex-typing can be flexibly applied to whatever jobs women and men happen to be doing” (1987, 50).

In this article, I will argue that jobholders and their audiences may make this interpretation even under the most unlikely conditions: when the work might easily be interpreted as more suitable for the other gender, and when many aspects of the workers’ presentations of self are closely dictated by superiors and are clearly not spontaneous expressions of the workers’ characters, interests, or personalities. My analysis of the flexibility of interpretations of gender-appropriate work draws on research on the routinization of jobs that involve direct interaction with customers or clients—what I call “interactive service work” (see Leidner 1988). These sorts of jobs merit attention, since service work is increasingly central to the U.S. economy: The service sector is expected to continue to provide most new jobs through the year 2000 (Personick 1987; Silvestri and Lukasiewic 1987).

Interactive service jobs have several distinctive features that make them especially revealing for investigation of the interrelation of work, gender, and identity. These jobs differ from other types of work in that the distinctions among product, work process, and worker are blurred or nonexistent, since the quality of the interaction may itself be part of the service offered (Hochschild 1983). In many kinds of interactive service work, workers’
identities are therefore not incidental to the work but are an integral part of it. Interactive jobs make use of workers' looks, personalities, and emotions, as well as their physical and intellectual capacities, sometimes forcing them to manipulate their identities more self-consciously than do workers in other kinds of jobs. The types of relations with service recipients structured by the jobs may also force workers to revise taken-for-granted moral precepts about personal interaction. Workers who feel that they owe others sincerity, individual consideration, nonmanipulativeness, or simply full attention may find that they cannot be the sort of people they want to be and still do their jobs adequately (Hochschild 1983). While a variety of distancing strategies and rationalizations are possible (Rollins 1985), it may be difficult for interactive service workers to separate themselves from the identities implied by their jobs (Leidner 1988).

When interactive work is routinized, workers' interactions are directly controlled by employers, who may use scripting, uniforms, rules about proper demeanor and appearance, and even far-reaching attempts at psychological reorientation to standardize service encounters. The interactions are expressly designed to achieve a certain tone (friendliness, urgency) and a certain end (a sale, a favorable impression, a decision). Analysis of how employers try to combine the proper interactive elements to achieve the desired effects can make visible the processes by which meaning, control, and identity are ordinarily created through interaction in all kinds of settings. Workers' and service recipients' acceptance or rejection of the terms of the standardized interactions and their efforts to tailor the prescribed roles and routines to suit their own purposes are similarly revealing about the extent to which people sustain beliefs about who they are through how they treat others and are treated by them.

Gender is necessarily implicated in the design and enactment of service interactions. In order to construct routines for interactions, especially scripts, employers make many assumptions about what customers like, what motivates them, and what they consider normal interactive behavior. Some of the assumptions employers make concern how men and women should behave. Once these assumptions about proper gender behavior are built into workers' routines, service recipients may have to accept them in order to fit smoothly into the service interaction. My research on the routinization of service jobs was inspired in part by my astonishment at one such script: I learned that employees of Gloria Marshall Figure Salons were expected to ask their customers, "Have you and your husband discussed your figure needs?" (Lally-Benedetto 1985). The expectation that workers could toss out the term figure needs as if it were everyday speech was startling in itself, but I was
especially intrigued by the layers of assumptions the question implied about the natures of women and men and the power relations between them.

As this example illustrates, scripts can embody assumptions about proper gendered behavior in fairly obvious ways. To do such jobs as intended, workers must "do gender" in a particular way (Berk 1985b; West and Zimmerman 1987). Even where the gender component is less obvious, workers in all kinds of jobs need to consider how their work relates to their own identities, including their gender identities. Whether workers take pride in the work itself or see it as stigmatizing, whether they work harder than is required or put in the least effort they can get away with, and whether they identify themselves with the job or seek self-definition elsewhere are related not just to job tasks and working conditions but to the extent that the jobs can be interpreted as honorable, worthwhile, and suitable for persons of their gender (Ouellet 1986).

This process of interpretation may be unusually salient and unusually open to analysis in routinized interactive service work. In such jobs, a convincing performance is important, and so employers are concerned about the degree to which workers enact their roles with conviction. The employers may therefore participate in reconciling workers' selves with the identities demanded by the work by providing positive interpretations of the work role or psychic strategies for dealing with its potentially unpleasant or demeaning aspects. In short, employers of interactive service workers may be unusually open in their attempts to channel workers' attitudes and manipulate workers' identities.

Gender is more salient in some service jobs than others, of course. There are routinized interactive service jobs for which the gender of employees and customers is not particularly relevant to how the jobs were constructed or how the interactions are carried out—telephone interviewing, for example, is apparently gender neutral and is done by men and women. However, the gender of workers is not irrelevant in these jobs, since respondents may react differently to men and women interviewers. Similarly, while airplane flight attendant is a job currently held by men as well as women, Hochschild found that men flight attendants were more likely to have their authority respected and less likely to be subjected to emotional outbursts from passengers than were their women co-workers (Hochschild 1983). At the other extreme are jobs that are gender segregated and that would be virtually incomprehensible without extensive assumptions about how both workers and customers enact gender. The Gloria Marshall salon workers' job assumed that both workers and customers would be women. The script used by Playboy Bunnies, who were trained to respond to being molested by saying, "Please, sir, you are not
allowed to touch the Bunnies” (Steinem 1983, 48), took for granted a male customer (see also Spradley and Mann 1975). Both scripts dictated “common understandings” about what men and women are like and how power is distributed between them.

I studied two jobs that fall between these extremes; they are neither gender neutral nor entirely saturated with assumptions about gender. I conducted fieldwork at McDonald’s and at Combined Insurance Company of America. At McDonald’s, my research centered on the food servers who dealt directly with the public (window crew, in McDonald’s parlance), and at Combined Insurance, I studied life insurance agents. These jobs were not strictly gender segregated, but they were held predominantly by either men or women, influencing how workers, employers, and customers thought about the jobs. Most, but not all, of McDonald’s window crew were young women, and almost all of Combined Insurance’s agents were men. Their gender attributes were not essential to their jobs. In fact, both jobs can be gender typed in the opposite direction — in its early years, McDonald’s hired only men (Boas and Chain 1976), and in Japan, door-to-door insurance sales is a woman’s job (Life Insurance Business in Japan, 1987/88).

Workers in both jobs tried to make sense of de facto job segregation by gender, interpreting their jobs as congruent with proper gender enactment. Examination of these two jobs and of how workers thought about them highlights a central paradox in the construction of gender: The considerable flexibility of notions of proper gender enactment does not undermine the appearance of inevitability and naturalness that continues to support the division of labor by gender. Although the work of the insurance agents required many of the same kinds of interactive behavior as the McDonald’s job, including behavior that would ordinarily be considered feminine, the agents were able to interpret the work as suitable only for men. They did so by emphasizing aspects of their job that required “manly” attributes and by thinking about their interactive work in terms of control rather than deference. Their interpretation suggests not only the plasticity of gender idioms but the asymmetry of those idioms: Defining work as masculine has a different meaning for men workers than defining work as feminine has for women workers.

Because interactive service work by definition involves nonemployees in the work process, the implications of the gender constructions of the routines extend beyond the workers. When service jobs are done predominantly by men or predominantly by women, the gender segregation provides confirming “evidence” to the public that men and women have different natures and capabilities. This appearance is especially ironic when employers, treating
their workers' selves as fairly malleable, reshape the self-presentations and interactional styles of the service workers. A brief account of my fieldwork and of the routinization of the two jobs precedes further discussion of how work, gender, and identity are enmeshed in these jobs.

ROUTINIZED INTERACTIONS

My data were gathered from participant observation and interviewing. I attended classes at McDonald's management training center, Hamburger University, in June 1986, and spoke with "professors" and trainees there. I conducted research at a local McDonald's franchise from May through November 1986, going through orientation and window-crew training, working on the window, interviewing window workers and managers, and hanging around the crew room to observe and talk with workers. At Combined Insurance, I went through the two-week training for life insurance agents in January 1987. Between January and March, I interviewed trainees and managers and spent one-and-a-half weeks in the field with a sales team, observing sales calls and talking to agents. Since insurance agents must be licensed and bonded, I did not actually sell insurance myself. I also conducted follow-up interviews with Combined Insurance managers in the summer of 1989. The workers and managers with whom I worked at both companies were aware that I was conducting research.

These two jobs were similar in a number of ways. Both were filled, by and large, with young, inexperienced workers, and both had extremely high rates of employee turnover. Neither job is held in high esteem by the public, which affected both customers' treatment of workers and the workers' willingness to embrace their roles (see Zelizer 1979, on the low prestige of life insurance agents). The companies, however, took training very seriously, and they carried the routinization of service interactions very far indeed. McDonald's and Combined Insurance each tried to exercise extensive control over their workers' presentation of themselves. However, they went about this task differently and placed different sorts of demands on their workers' psyches. The differences largely have to do with the kinds of relations that the companies established between workers and customers and are related to the gender typing of the work.

McDonald's

McDonald's has been a model of standardization for many kinds of service businesses, and its success, based upon the replication of standard
procedures, has been truly phenomenal. The goal is to provide the same quality of food and service every day at every McDonald’s, and the company tries to leave nothing to chance. Individual franchisees have considerable leeway in some matters, including labor practices, but they are held to strict standards when it comes to the McDonald’s basics of QSC — quality, service, and cleanliness.

At the McDonald’s where I worked, all of the workers were hired at the minimum wage of $3.35. There were no fringe benefits and no guarantee of hours of work. As is typical at McDonald’s, most men worked on the grill, and most women worked serving customers — about three-quarters of the window workers were women. About 80 percent of the restaurant’s employees were Black, though Blacks were a minority of the city’s population. Few of the workers were older than their early 20s, but most were out of high school — 65 percent of my sample were 18 or over. The clientele, in contrast, was quite diverse in class, race, age, and gender.

The window workers were taught their jobs in a few hours and were fully trained in a couple of days. The job involved carrying out the “Six Steps of Window Service,” an unvarying routine for taking and delivering orders. The modern cash registers used at this McDonald’s made it unnecessary for window workers to remember prices or to know how to calculate change. The machines also reminded workers to “suggestive sell”: For example, if someone ordered a Big Mac, french fries, and a shake, the cash register’s buttons for apple pies, ice cream, and cookies would light up, to remind the worker to suggest dessert. (Garson [1988] provides a scathing view of McDonald’s routinization and computerization.) These workers were closely supervised, not only by McDonald’s managers, but also by customers, whose constant presence exerted pressure to be diligent and speedy.

The workers wore uniforms provided by McDonald’s and were supposed to look clean-cut and wholesome — for instance, a young man with a pierced ear had to wear a Band-Aid on his earlobe. The lack of control workers had over their self-presentations was brought home clearly when a special promotion of Shanghai McNuggets began, and window workers were forced to wear big Chinese peasant hats made of Styrofoam, which most felt made them look ridiculous.

Workers were told to be themselves on the job, but they were also told to be cheerful and polite at all times. Crew people were often reprimanded for not smiling. Almost all of the workers I interviewed said that most customers were pleasant to deal with, but the minority of rude or unreasonable customers had a disproportionate impact. Enduring customers’ behavior, no matter how obnoxious, was a basic part of the job. Unfortunately for the
workers, they completely lacked what Hochschild calls a “status shield” (1983, 163). Some customers who might have managed to be polite to higher-status workers seemed to have no compunction at all about snarling at McDonald’s employees. The window crew could not escape from angry customers by leaving, and they were not allowed to argue or make smart-alecky remarks. Their only legitimate responses to rudeness or angry outbursts from customers were to control their anger, apologize, try to correct the problem, and in extreme cases, ask a manager to handle it.

The major task for the workers was to serve, and their major psychic task was to control or suppress the self. Workers were required to be nice to one person after another in a way that was necessarily unindividualized and to keep their tempers no matter how they were treated. What McDonald’s demanded of its workers was a stripped-down interactive style, with some pseudo-gemeinschaft thrown in. The workers were supposed to be efficient, courteous, and friendly, but in short bursts and within a very narrow range. While they were told to be themselves, there was obviously not much range for self-expression.

Combined Insurance

Combined Insurance placed very different sorts of demands on its workers. The company’s business is based on door-to-door sales in rural areas and small towns, and its profits depend on a high volume of sales of relatively inexpensive policies. Combined Insurance was founded in the 1920s by W. Clement Stone, and its agents still use many of the sales and self-conditioning techniques that he developed when he started out in the business—The Success System That Never Fails (Stone 1962). Almost all of the company’s life insurance agents are men, most are white, and most are young—all of the members of the sales team I studied were in their early twenties. The prospects I called on with the agents were all white, about equally men and women, and quite varied in age.

The agents’ initial training was more extensive than the McDonald’s workers’, involving two weeks of lectures, script memorization, and role playing. During sales school, trainees were taught what to say and do in almost hilarious detail. They memorized scripts for the basic sales presentations, for Rebuttals 1 through 5, corresponding to Objections 1 through 5, and for Interruption-stoppers. They were taught exactly how to stand while waiting for a door to be opened, how to position themselves and the potential customers (known as “prospects”), when to make and break eye contact, how to deliver the Standard Joke, and so on. A lot of class time was spent chanting
the scripts in unison and rehearsing proper body movements, as well as in practicing responses to be used in various sales situations.

The trainer underlined the possibility of success through standardization with stories of foreign-born agents who succeeded even before they could speak English—they allegedly learned their sales presentations phonetically. It might seem that the message of these stories was that a parrot could succeed in this job, but in fact, the trainer argued that personal characteristics were vitally important to success, and the most important of these was a Positive Mental Attitude—what Stone called PMA. While McDonald's merely instructed workers to smile and behave pleasantly to customers, Combined Insurance tried to affect its employees' psyches quite fundamentally—to inculcate optimism, determination, enthusiasm, and confidence and to destroy habits of negative thinking. The trainees were taught that through proper self-conditioning, they could learn to suppress negative thoughts altogether. The message for agents was somewhat paradoxical: You should do everything exactly the way we tell you to, but success depends on your strength of character.1

While McDonald's workers' main task was to serve people who had already chosen to do business with McDonald's, Combined Insurance's agents had to sell, to take prospects and turn them into customers. The agents' job was to establish rapport quickly with the people they called on (by "warming up the prospect"), to go through the basic sales presentation, to counter any objections raised by the prospects, and to persuade them to buy as much life insurance as possible. Naturally, most of the people they called on were strongly motivated to prevent them from going through this sequence, so their task was not easy. Since the agents' incomes were entirely based on commission, and their desire to handle their interactions successfully was of course very great, the detailed instructions for proper behavior provided by the company did not seem to strike them as ludicrous or intrusive.

Because the agents worked on their own, rather than in a central workplace, and because their interactions with customers could be much longer and cover a broader range than those of McDonald's workers, the agents were called on to use much more of their selves than the window workers were. They had to motivate themselves and keep up their enthusiasm, and they had to respond appropriately to a wide variety of situations, adjusting their behavior to suit the problems presented by each prospect. Although their basic routine was unvaried, they needed to be chameleon-like to a certain extent and adapt to circumstances. They were, like the McDonald's workers, required to control themselves, but their focus was always on controlling the
prospect and the interaction. Virtually every detail of their routines was designed to help them do just that.

**DOING GENDER WHILE DOING THE JOB**

Although their jobs were largely segregated by gender, McDonald's and Combined Insurance workers interacted with both men and women as customers or prospects. Neither company suggested significantly different approaches to men and women service recipients; the Combined Insurance trainer recommended slightly varied techniques for persuading men and women to buy policies without first consulting their spouses. While the gender of the service recipient might well have influenced how the workers experienced their interactions, I did not find consistent patterns of variation in workers' behavior along this dimension.

At McDonald's, most of the window crew took the division of labor by gender for granted and did not seem to feel any need to account for it. Since there were no differences in the pay or prestige of window and grill work, and since there were exceptions to the pattern of gender segregation, few workers considered the division of labor by gender unfair. When I asked the workers why they thought that there were more women than men working the window, about two-thirds of the 23 respondents said that they did not know, with about half offering a guess based on stereotypes about proper gender roles, whether or not they thought the stereotype was justified. About one-quarter of the sample, however, stated explicitly that they disapproved of the division of labor by gender, and three women said that they had asked a manager about it. The store's manager told me that women were typically assigned to start work on the window because “more females have an aversion to grill.” Two of the window workers, however (both Black men), thought that men might have an aversion to window because that job required swallowing one's pride and accepting abuse calmly:

Theo: [More women than men work window] because women are afraid of getting burned [on the grill], and men are afraid of getting aggravated and going over the counter and smacking someone.

Alphonse: I found the men who work here on window have a real quick temper. You know, all of them. And women can take a lot more. They deal with a lot of things, you know.

Although I never heard the masculinity of the few male window workers impugned, it was commonly taken for granted that men were naturally more
explosive than women and would find it more difficult to accept abuse without answering back. The male window workers were usually able to reconcile themselves to swallowing insults, as the women were, either by dissociating themselves from their role or by telling themselves that by keeping their tempers they were proving themselves superior to the rude customers. Refusing to become riled when provoked is consistent with "the cool pose," which Majors says Black men use to "fight to preserve their dignity, pride, respect and masculinity" by enacting an imperviousness to hurt (1989, 86). Thus, while the job did not allow workers to try to get the better of opponents, its demands were not seen as irreconcilable with enacting masculinity. However, no workers argued that men's capacity to tolerate abuse made them especially well-suited to the job, and the Black men quoted above made the opposite argument. Moreover, the job requirements of smiling and otherwise demonstrating deference are not in keeping with the cool pose. Those committed to that stance might well find such behavior demeaning, especially in interactions with white customers or those of higher status.

Other explanations given by workers of the predominance of women on window crew included assertions that women were more interested in dealing with people, that women "were more presentable" and looked better on window, that their nimble fingers suited them to working the registers, and that customers were more likely to find them trustworthy. Several of the workers who offered such stereotyped responses indicated that they did not believe that the stereotypes were sufficient justification for the predominance of women on the window crew.

It might easily have been argued that men were unsuited to work on the grill—cooking, after all, is usually considered women's work. As the work was understood at McDonald's, however, cooking presented no challenge to masculinity. Serving customers, which involved adopting an ingratiating manner, taking orders from anyone who chose to give them, and holding one's tongue when insulted, was more difficult to conceive as congruent with the proper enactment of manliness. Thus, while the crew people did not argue that window work was especially expressive of femininity, most found it unremarkable that women predominated in that job.

The work of Combined Insurance's agents, in contrast, was defined as properly manly, even though the job presented interactive imperatives that are generally identified with femininity, along with some stereotypically masculine elements. The life insurance sales force was almost entirely composed of men, and the agents on the sales team I observed felt strongly that women would be unlikely to succeed in the job. Moreover, the 22-year-
old manager of this sales team told me bluntly (without my having raised the question) that he "would never hire a woman." Since some aspects of the agents’ job required skills that are not generally considered manly, the agents’ understanding of the job as demanding masculine attributes meant that these skills had to be reinterpreted or de-emphasized.

Like many other kinds of interactive service jobs, including McDonald’s window work, insurance sales requires that workers adopt an attitude of congeniality and eagerness to please. This in itself may strike some men as incompatible with the proper enactment of gender, as suggested by the cool pose, which associates masculinity with toughness and detachment (Majors 1989, 84). In America’s Working Man, Halle records that a few of the chemical workers he studied did not support Jimmy Carter’s presidential candidacy because they “suspected that a man who smiled all the time might be a homosexual” (1984, 246). To them, behavior that is transparently intended to please others, to encourage liking, is not considered masculine. Toughness, gruffness, and pride are taken-for-granted elements of masculinity to many blue-collar men (Gray 1987; Willis 1977), and Combined’s agents come largely from blue-collar or agricultural backgrounds. For such men, deferential behavior and forced amiability are often associated with servility, and occasions that call for these attitudes — dealings with superiors, for instance — may feel humiliating. Such behavior is not easy to reconcile with the autonomy and assertiveness that are considered central to “acting like a man.” The rebellious working class “lads” Willis studied were therefore concerned to find jobs with “an essentially masculine ethos,” jobs “where you would not be expected to be subservient” (1977, 96). Sennett and Cobb, drawing on their interviews with blue-collar men, interpret the low prestige ratings of many service jobs relative to blue-collar jobs as a response to the perceived dependence of service workers on other people, whose shifting demands they must meet (1972, 236).

Thus the glad-handing insincerity required of many sorts of businessmen may seem effete and demeaning to working-class men. The job of salesman, which is on the lower end of the white-collar hierarchy, would seem especially degrading from this point of view. Since success is largely dependent on ingratiating oneself with customers, playing up to others is an essential part of the agent’s job, rather than just a demand of the social milieu. Salesmen must swallow insults, treat even social inferiors with deference, and keep smiling.

These aspects of the sales job were quite pronounced for Combined Insurance’s life agents. The warming-up-the-prospect phase of the routine called for agents to figure out what topics might interest the prospects and
display a flattering enthusiasm for those topics and for the prospects' accomplishments. Agents had to be willing to disguise their true feelings and to seem to accept the prospect's view of the world in order to ingratiate themselves. It was crucial that they not lose their tempers with prospects but remain polite and respectful at all times. Like most salespeople, they had to try to change prospective customers' minds while never seeming to argue with them and to stay pleasant even when rudely dismissed.

The skills required for establishing and maintaining rapport—drawing people out, bolstering their egos, displaying interest in their interests, and carefully monitoring one's own behavior so as not to offend—are usually considered womanly arts. In analyses of a small sample of conversations, Fishman (1978) found that women had to do much more interactive work than men simply to sustain dialogues; men largely took for granted that their conversational attempts would succeed in engaging their partner's interest. Judging only by these interactive demands of insurance sales work, it would seem that women are especially well suited to be agents. We might even expect that the association of ingratiating conversational tactics with women would lead men to view the extensive interactive work required of salespeople as degrading, since it requires that they assume the role of the interactive inferior who must constantly negotiate permission to proceed. Given the additional attack on personal autonomy implicit in Combined Insurance's programming of employees to follow scripts, it would seem to be difficult for men to combine successful enactment of the role of Combined Insurance agent with the successful enactment of gender.

On the contrary, Combined Insurance's trainers and agents interpreted the agent's job as demanding manly attributes. They assigned a heroic character to the job, framing interactions with customers as contests of will. To succeed, they emphasized, required determination, aggressiveness, persistence, and stoicism. These claims were accurate, but qualities in which women excel, including sensitivity to nuance and verbal dexterity, were also important for success. While the sales training did include tips on building such skills, determination and aggressiveness were treated as the decisive factors for career success. It was through this need for toughness that the work was constructed as manly.

Of course it was quite true that considerable determination, self-motivation, and persistence were required to do this job. The agents had to make numerous sales calls every day, despite the knowledge that many people would be far from glad to see them. They had to keep making calls, even after meeting with repeated rejection and sometimes hostility. And in sales interactions, they had to stick to their objectives even when prospects
displayed reluctance to continue the conversation, as most did. Some agents and managers believed that women were unlikely to meet these job demands because they are too sensitive, too unaggressive, and not able to withstand repeated rejection. Josh, one of the agents, claimed, “Most girls don’t have what it takes. They don’t have that killer instinct.” Josh had, however, recruited a woman he knew to join Combined’s sales force. “She does have [the killer instinct], if I can bring it out,” he said. Ralph, the sales manager, also acknowledged that there might be some exceptional women who could do the job. He amended his statement that he would never hire a woman by saying, “Only if she had a kind of bitchy attitude.” “A biker woman” is the kind he meant, he said, “someone hard-core.” Obviously, he did not believe it was possible to combine the traits necessary for success as an agent with femininity.6

One manager attributed women’s assumed deficiencies not to their nature but to economics, arguing that women whose husbands provided an income were unlikely to have the requisite “burning need” to succeed that financial necessity provides. An obvious factor that would prevent most mothers from taking the job—at least one week a month was spent away from home—was not mentioned by any agents in explaining the dearth of women agents, though two managers did mention it. Two agents told me that they “wouldn’t want their wives doing this” because of the unpleasant or potentially dangerous places agents must sometimes visit.

This emphasis on aggression, domination, and danger is only one possible construction of sales work. Biggart (1989) and Connelly and Rhoton (1988) discuss in detail the very different ways that direct sales organizations that rely on a female labor force characterize sales work. These organizations, some of which are hugely successful, emphasize nurturance, helpfulness, and service both in relations with customers and among salespeople. Combined Insurance’s training also encouraged agents to think of themselves as providing a service to prospective customers, largely in order to overcome trainees’ reluctance to impose on others, and some of the agents I spoke with did use the service ideology to counter demeaning images of insurance sales as high-pressure hucksterism. For the most part, however, the agents emphasized the more “manly” dimensions of the work, though there is ample evidence that women can succeed in life insurance sales. For example, Thomas (1990) notes that after the Equitable Life Assurance Society made a commitment to recruiting and supporting women agents, the company’s saleswomen outperformed salesmen in sales and commissions.

While most agents would not feel the need, on a daily basis, to construct an explanation for why there were so few women selling life insurance for
their company, they did need to construct an interpretation of their work as honorable and fitting for a man if they were to maintain their positive attitudes and do well at their jobs, which required much more self-motivation than did McDonald's jobs. The element of competition, the battle of wills implicit in their interactions with customers, seemed to be a major factor that allowed the agents to interpret their work as manly. Virtually every step of the interaction was understood as a challenge to be met—getting in the door, making the prospect relax and warm up, being allowed to start the presentation, getting through the presentation despite interruptions, overcoming prospects' objections and actually making the sale, and perhaps even increasing the size of the sale. Since many prospects did their best to prevent the agents from continuing, going through these steps did not simply represent following a prescribed routine; it was experienced by agents as proof of their skill and victories of their wills. Each sales call seemed an uphill battle, as the interactions took place on the prospects' turf and prospects always had the option of telling the agent to leave.

The spirit of jousting was especially clear in some of the techniques taught for closing sales. As the trainer explained "The Assumptive Close," the agents were supposed to "challenge customers"; it was up to the prospects to object if they did not want to go along with the sales. The routine allowed agents to limit the customers' options without seeming to do so, to let prospects believe that they were making decisions while the agents remained in control of the interaction. The pattern bears some resemblance to the seduction of an initially unwilling partner, and the satisfaction that the agents took in "winning" such encounters is perhaps similar to the satisfaction some men take in thinking of sexual encounters as conquests. The agents seemed to approach sales interactions with men in much the same spirit as those with women, however, though they often adjusted their presentation of self to suit a particular prospect's gender, age, and manner—subtly flirtatious, respectfully deferential, or efficient and businesslike.

This sort of manipulation of interactions required a peculiar combination of sensitivity to other people and callousness. The agent had to figure out which approach would work best at any given moment and avoid seeming cold or aggressive but still disregard the customers' stated wishes. The required mix of deference and ruthlessness was well illustrated in an exchange that took place during a sales-team training session. The agents were discussing how to deal with interruptions during a presentation: One of their superiors had advised ignoring them altogether, but the "training module" stated that it was insulting to fail to acknowledge a prospect's comment. When the sales manager instructed, "You have to let them know that you
heard them,” one of the agents finished the sentence for him: “and that you don’t give a shit.”

All kinds of interactive service workers — including McDonald’s window crew — try to exercise control over their interactions with customers, though not all of them are given organizational resources to help them do so (see, e.g., Whyte 1962, on waitresses, and Benson 1986, on department store saleswomen). Women who can successfully dominate interactions at work might well take pleasure in doing so, as did Combined’s life insurance agents. However, it is unlikely that these women’s capacity to control other people would be taken as evidence that the work was womanly, unless it were reinterpreted in less aggressive terms, such as “skill in dealing with people.”

If following a script could be given a manly cast when it involved asserting one’s will through controlling an interaction, it was more difficult to do so when the interactions did not go the agents’ way. Refusals were such a routine part of the job, however, that agents could accept most of them as inevitable, not a result of lack of skill or determination. In sales school, the trainers emphasized that not everyone was going to buy — some people really do not need or cannot afford the product; some are just close-minded and would not listen to any salesperson. A greater challenge to the agent’s definition of himself was presented by customers who were actively hostile. Some people were angry at being interrupted; some had a grievance against the company; some became furious if they felt that they were being manipulated. In any case, it was not unusual for agents to meet with loud insults, condescending sneers, and slammed doors. To accept this sort of treatment passively could certainly be seen as unmanly. However, the agents were expected to keep their cool, refrain from rudeness, and leave graciously. Some agents did tell me, with glee, of instances when they shouted obscenities once they got out the door, in response to particularly outrageous treatment from a customer. For the most part, however, passive acceptance of ill-treatment was reconciled with manly honor by defining it as maintaining one’s control and one’s positive attitude, a strategy similar to that used by male and female McDonald’s workers. In this view, screaming back at a customer would not be considered standing up for yourself but letting the customer get the better of you, “letting them blow your attitude.” Agents proved themselves to be above combative and insulting customers by maintaining their dignity and holding on to their self-concepts as winners, not by sinking to the customers’ level.

Other attributes of the job, not directly connected with job routinization, also contributed to the salesmen’s ability to define their jobs as compatible with properly enacting gender. The most important of these were the sense
of independence agents felt and their belief that they could earn as much as they were worth. Within the limits of their work assignments, agents could set their own schedules, behave as they chose, and work only as hard as they felt like. Because of the importance of self-motivation to success, those who did well could feel justifiably proud, and those lacking in motivation could appreciate the freedom from pressure. The agents thus felt that their jobs provided some of the benefits of self-employment. They could live with the knowledge that many people looked down on them, put up with insults, endure futile days of failure, and still maintain a sense that their work was compatible with manliness and social honor, as long as there was the possibility of “making it big.”

DISCUSSION

Until the 1970s, most sociological work concerning the connection between workers’ genders and their jobs mirrored the commonsense view that men and women hold different sorts of jobs because of differing physical capacities, psychological orientations, and family responsibilities. Moss Kanter (1977) reversed the traditional argument that women’s traits determine the sorts of jobs they hold, claiming instead that the structural features of most women’s jobs determine characteristic attitudinal and behavioral responses, which are then interpreted as reflecting women’s natures. She focused on power, opportunity, and numbers of like individuals in the workplace as the factors determining workers’ responses to jobs. In her analysis, preexisting gender segregation leads workers, managers, and observers to believe incorrectly that gender explains how workers respond to their jobs. As Fenstermaker Berk (1985b) has argued, Moss Kanter understated the distinctive properties of gender and minimized the extent to which gender assumptions are built into jobs by work organizations (see also Acker 1990).

More recently, analysts have called attention to the ways that occupations are gendered—they are designed and evolve in particular ways because of the gender of typical incumbents (Cockburn 1985; Reverby 1987). Moreover, theorists have argued that gender is not simply imported into the workplace: Gender itself is constructed in part through work (Beechey 1988; Berk 1985a, 1985b). This argument applies both to the gender identities of individual workers and to cultural understandings of women’s and men’s natures and capacities and is supported by the cases of McDonald’s and Combined Insurance.
Just how jobs are gendered and how doing these jobs affects workers' gender identities remain to be clarified, however. Cockburn describes the gendering of jobs and people as a two-way process: "People have a gender and their gender rubs off on the jobs they mainly do. The jobs in turn have a gender character which rubs off on the people who do them" (1985, 169). While acknowledging that the gender designation of jobs, tools, fields of knowledge, and activities may shift over time, she treats these designations as cultural givens. For example, Cockburn writes (1985, 70):

An 18th-century man no doubt felt effeminate using a spinning wheel, though he would have felt comfortable enough repairing one. Today it is difficult to get a teenage lad to use a floor mop or a typewriter because they contradict his own gender identity.

Cockburn correctly perceives the relevance of work tasks to the workers' gender identity, but overstates the rigidity of the gender typing of those tasks: At McDonald's, mopping has largely become low-status men's work. I argue that despite the existence of culturally shaped gender designations of work activities, employers and workers retain the flexibility to reinterpret them in ways that support jobholders' gender identities. However, the gender designation of work is likely to have different kinds of significance for women and men.

Workers at both McDonald's and Combined Insurance were expected to adjust their moods and demeanors to the demands of their jobs and to learn to handle customers in ways that might be very different from their ordinary styles of interaction. To some extent, workers in both jobs had to take on the role of interactive inferior, adjusting themselves to the styles and apparent preferences of their customers. They were supposed to paste on smiles when they did not feel like smiling and to behave cheerfully and deferentially to people of every status and with every attitude. The workers were not permitted to respond to rudeness in kind but had to try to remain pleasant even in the face of insult.

This sort of behavior is usually associated with femininity, but in fact the two jobs were interpreted quite differently. At McDonald's, many workers and managers considered it natural, even self-evident, that women were best suited to deal with customers. At Combined Insurance, women were generally seen as ill equipped to handle such work. The insurance agents were able to define their job as masculine by emphasizing those aspects of the work that require "manly" traits (control and self-direction) and by reinterpreting some of the more "feminine" job requirements in ways that were not degrading. McDonald's workers' superiors emphasized that the crew's role
was to serve, and attempts by window workers to assert their wills in interactions with customers were strongly discouraged. Combined Insurance’s agents, on the other hand, were taught that their job was to establish and maintain control in interactions with prospects. They were told that they control their own destinies and were urged to cultivate the qualities of aggressiveness, persistence, and belief in themselves. While success might require that they take on a deferential manner, it was seen as a matter of skill in manipulating situations, not as servility, and therefore was not taken to be inconsistent with manliness. Similarly, accepting abuse calmly was interpreted as a refusal to let someone else dictate the terms of the interaction, not as a loss of control. This conceptualization of the work as an arena for enacting masculinity allowed the agents to accept working conditions that might otherwise have been seen as unacceptably frustrating and demeaning.

When Hughes called attention to the “social and social-psychological arrangements and devices by which men make their work tolerable, or even make it glorious to themselves and others,” he apparently meant “men” to include men and women. In fact, the case of Combined Insurance’s agents suggests that defining a job as “men’s work” is precisely how some men make their work tolerable or even glorious. Willis (1977) and Ouellet (1986) have shown how ideas about masculinity can transform what otherwise might be considered negative job features—danger, hard physical labor, dirt—into badges of honor. In other circumstances, work that seems “glorious” on its own merits—because it is understood to be important, highly skilled, responsible, powerful—is defined as masculine (see, e.g., Cockburn 1985). Identifying work as manly, then, can compensate male workers for hardships, but it also justifies privilege.

Some working-class boys and men insist that only jobs that are physically demanding, exhausting, or dangerous can be considered manly (cf. Halle 1984; Willis 1977), but in fact, the gender designation of particular job tasks is quite plastic, a matter of interpretation in which jobholders, employers, and customers may participate. The actual features of the work do not rigidly determine its gender designation. Nevertheless, the association of a job with manliness serves to elevate the work itself and allows men to construe success on the job as proof of masculinity. The importance of manly work for constructing and maintaining masculine identity may explain some of the resistance of men working in gender-segregated occupations to women co-workers; they tend to define their work not just as particularly appropriate for men but as work that women would not be able to do (Cockburn 1983, 1985; Halle 1984; Swerdlow 1989; Willis 1977). The experiences of women
entering previously male-dominated occupations bear out this interpretation. For example, Schroedel (1985, 20-21) quotes a female pipe fitter:

You see it is just very hard for them to work with me because they're really into proving their masculinity and being tough. And when a woman comes on a job that can work, get something done as fast and efficiently, as well as they can, it really affects them. Somehow if a woman can do it, it ain't that masculine, not that tough.

The Combined Insurance agents sustained the belief that women could not handle their job, even though the work required some skills and qualities typically associated with women.

Interpreting work as womanly has a different meaning for women than interpreting work as manly has for men. Certain jobs, including nursing and elementary-school teaching, are understood to require some positively valued "female" traits, such as nurturance or sensitivity, and the identification of the work with femininity significantly determines how the work is organized (Melosh 1982; Reverby 1987). Even when the work is seen as expressive of feminine capacities, however, it is not seen as offering proof of female identity in quite the same way that manly work supports male identity, because adult female identity has not traditionally been regarded as something that is achieved through paid work. In other words, while women in traditionally female-defined jobs might well take pleasure in doing work that supports their self-identification as feminine, they are unlikely to think of such work as a necessary part of their gender identity. Thus men and women respond differently to challenges to gender segregation of work. Williams (1989) found that women nurses did not feel threatened when men joined their ranks, though male marines much preferred to keep women out of the corps. Furthermore, while male nurses were concerned to differentiate their activities from those of their women co-workers, female marines did not feel that doing quintessentially masculine work was a challenge to their femininity.

Williams draws on the work of Chodorow (1978) to provide a psychoanalytic explanation for male workers' concern with defining their work as masculine and with maintaining gender segregation at work. She argues that because men, whose original identification is with a female caretaker, must achieve masculinity by distancing themselves from femininity, they are psychologically threatened when one proof of their masculinity is challenged by evidence that women can do the work they have defined as manly. Women, who need not alter their original identification with a female caretaker, have no corresponding need to prove their femininity: "What one does has little
bearing on how feminine one is" (Williams 1989, 140; emphasis in original). Whether or not the psychoanalytic explanation is valid, Williams persuasively demonstrates that gendered jobs have different meanings for men and women.

The different cultural valuation of behavior labeled masculine and feminine also contributes to the different meanings that enacting gender at work has for women and men. While the constant "doing" of gender is mandatory for everyone, many theorists have noted that the effects of this demand are asymmetrical, since doing masculinity generally means asserting dominance, while doing femininity often means enacting submission (Acker 1990; Berk 1985a). Frye claims (1983, 33) that the female "cannot move or speak without engaging in self-deprecation. The male cannot move or speak without engaging in self-aggrandizement." Thus many men value the opportunity to do work that supports cultural understandings of masculinity and their own sense of manliness, but we cannot assume that job features that allow or require gender-appropriate behavior will necessarily be welcomed by women workers in the same way. In some cases, women may appreciate the opportunity to enact such "womanly" attributes as nurturance, helpfulness, or sexiness at work, because that behavior affirms their gender identity. On the other hand, servility may be congruent with femininity, but we would hardly expect female McDonald's workers to take the same pleasures in enacting it at work that Combined's agents take in asserting control.

Job features that allow or require gender-appropriate behaviors are not necessarily welcomed, then, but work routines that prevent workers from enacting gender in ways that they are comfortable with are resented and may contribute to workers' decisions to limit their investments of energy, effort, and self-definition in their jobs. Job features that allow gender enactment in ways workers find gratifying, on the other hand, may make up for deficiencies in more objective job benefits. In any case, the variation in the interpretations of similar job demands at McDonald's and Combined Insurance demonstrates that the actual features of the jobs do not themselves determine whether the work will be defined as most appropriate for men or women. Rather, these job features are resources for interpretation that can be drawn on by workers, their superiors, and other audiences.

Despite this flexibility in the interpretation of gender appropriateness, in these two work settings the association of the work with either women or men was made to seem natural—an expression of the essential natures of women and men. Even though the workers' behavior was largely dictated by routines they had no part in creating, and even where the job drew on traits
associated with both femininity and masculinity, job segregation by gender was interpreted largely as an outgrowth of inherent gender differences in attitudes and behavior. In trying to make sense of the fact of gender segregation, many of the workers and managers I spoke with drew on taken-for-granted beliefs about the qualities and preferences of women and men. The prevalence of either men or women in a job became evidence that the job demanded specifically masculine or feminine qualities and that the job-holders must be best suited for the work. For the public, as well as for employers and workers, gender segregation of service jobs contributes to the general perception that differences in men's and women's social positions are straightforward reflections of differences in their natures and capabilities.

NOTES

1. Combined Insurance has recently made changes in its life insurance products and sales techniques. Agents are now taught a more interactive sales routine ("needs selling") for a policy that can be tailored to suit customers' circumstances, allowing the agents somewhat greater flexibility. The company's largest division, which sells accident insurance, continues to follow Stone's original techniques closely. Positive Mental Attitude training is still stressed for all agents.

2. The job of "host," however, was viewed as less prestigious by some workers. That polite job title referred to those whose main responsibilities were to empty the trash and keep the lobby, windows, bathrooms, and dining areas clean. When one woman took this job, I heard two women window workers express their disapproval; they felt that "girls" should not have to do the dirty work of handling garbage.

3. I learned, in fact, that the two other women in my training class had lasted, respectively, only one day and three weeks in the field. Managers interviewed in 1989 reported that the number of women agents had increased since the new selling system was introduced, though women were still a small minority of the sales force. Reduced travel demands were one reason given for the job's increasing attractiveness to women. See also note 5.

4. The higher-level managers I interviewed did not endorse these discriminatory views, and some commented on the many successful women in the insurance industry. See Thomas (1990) for a discussion of the growth of women's employment in insurance sales. She shows that by 1980, women were 25 percent of U.S. insurance agents.

5. Some managers believe that the new needs-selling approach is better suited to women agents because it requires a less domineering stance and allows women to draw on their understanding of families' needs.

6. Similarly, Williams (1989, 32) reports a backlash against women in the military among male soldiers during World War II. She argues that military men claimed that women soldiers must be unfeminine because the men did not want to accept the alternative explanation for the women's presence—that military service is not inherently masculine.
REFERENCES


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