

Branding Consent:

The Role of Employer Brand in Retail Labor Process Control

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Deborah A. Smith

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Erin Kelly, Advisor

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Deborah Smith's University of Minnesota Sociology Dissertation

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my late parents, Stanley Joseph Smith and Mary Cockroft Smith.

Abstract

This study uses the case of retail work at a high-line branded home furnishings store to examine how employer brand operates in retail labor control. Specifically, the study examines how gender and class as meshed are exploited by the organization for control, and how worker consent to exploitation allows for positive self-feeling linked to positive class and gender identity. Drawing on ethnographic research, I argue that workers buy into the organization's gendered class directives demonstrated through the brand because it allows them to construct enhanced (gendered) class identities. Workers produce, consume, and realize symbolic status in their work, in turn feeling elevated in class, but this feeling is only sustained by continuing the work. I present this as a strong system of labor control, observing that status hits delivered by customers and managers are followed by worker efforts to reverse that damage. I also suggest the system is not seamless, showing how work contradictions are linked to worker resistance, and resistance is linked to workers' class and gender identifications. Introducing the concept of 'identity labor,' I indicate a distinctive labor type associated with the 'branded labor process' wherein enactment of employer brand meanings is part of work.

Keywords: brand, labor process, retail, consent, identity, status, class, gender

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“I’d rather die than work at a place like Target! I couldn’t handle the riff-raff. I can’t stand riff-raff! We don’t get riff-raff here. Happy Homes brings in a different kind of people...a high class of people. None of that riff-raff. And I really can’t stand being around riff-raff...I couldn’t work with that. I want to be around...well, if you will, people of my own kind.” (Happy Homes associate, Gwen, explaining why she likes her job)

“I guess it’s like I feel common ground with the customers. I mean, I don’t have their kind of money - most of ‘em are super rich. And I’m not rich...I mean, I’m never going to be rich like the Happy Homes’ customers...well, you know, unless I win the lottery! But I do feel like, um, like we’re the same. And it’s not just that we appreciate the same things, I mean, like the Happy Homes lifestyle. But, also, there’s a certain kind of Happy Homes person. You know what I mean? I don’t know, I guess it sounds bad to say it, but...well... it’s like there’s two kinds of people. There’s people with class, and people without class. It sounds bad to say it but, you know, it’s just the truth. So, with the customers, I don’t know, I just feel like we’re on the same level.” (Happy Homes associate, Lucy, explaining why she doesn’t get intimidated by upscale customers)

In the service trenches -- that is, the world of front-line interactive service work – the service relationship is not equal. As those on the front lines know only too well, service workers rarely stand on equal footing with those they serve and, in a new economy steeped in customer service idioms and infatuated with the profitability potential in “service excellence,” the front-line worker is often fief to the service-consuming king. And, if front line workers incur inferior status as part of doing their job,

they encounter further assault on their social station by doing a job widely recognized as low level, low pay, and low prestige.

In this service universe of front-line indignities, high-end retail concerns like Happy Homes have the trappings of a front-line worker's worst case. A purveyor of high-line home furnishings, Happy Homes is a branded chain retail store that serves a decidedly upscale clientele, and positions its brand as a signifier of status and style. Surrounded by wares of the if-you-have-to-ask-the-price-you-can't-afford-it variety, and serving a core customer base culled from the ranks of the wealthy, the Happy Homes retail clerk must not only do the "deference work" of service, she must do so looking *upward* across a yawning gap of class. At Happy Homes, where \$8.50-an-hour floor workers serve what is, overwhelmingly, an affluent clientele, the economic distance that separates the ranks of the workers from the ranks of those who regularly, and easily, consume the high priced Happy Homes branded product, is significant.

This fact is not lost on the low level Happy Homes employee. As she bears daily witness to the ability of the wealthy to lay out thousands upon thousands (sums far exceeding her monthly pay) for the pleasure of renewing their home décor, the retail employee becomes expert at measuring the consumer privileges of the upper classes against the limits of her own. As one Happy Homes employee remarked, "It takes them (customers) 30 minutes to buy the entire room set and the next day they're back for more; I can't even buy the chair." Commonplace among Happy Homes' staff, comments such

as “I don’t have that kind of money” or “I’ll never be rich like the Happy Homes customers” confirm that the Happy Homes worker knows full well the location of her economic place relative to her customer’s -- that is, hers is the one that falls on the lower end.

How is it that such a clear understanding of this class gap does not unsettle the Happy Homes worker’s confidence that she and the customer are alike in defining ways? Remark that customers are their “own kind” of people, operating on the “same level” and sharing with them a “common ground,” low level Happy Homes workers express more than a surface affinity with the affluent persons who frequent their store. As the opening quotes suggest, these workers tend toward strong identification with their customers. Not the riff-raff who associate with down-scale retailers, not those shut out from the Happy Homes lifestyle, not the population of others who, more generally, just don’t “have class,” these workers stake out special territory where common ground with customers begins with a likeness of brand desire, unfolds into a category of “people with class,” and bears forth a re-constitution of workers’ own conception of self.

At Happy Homes, workers tack their identity to an upper end of the class scale that they know, by any other measure, is not theirs to claim. Of the front-line Happy Homes workers interviewed for this study, more than 80% indicated that they identified with the Happy Homes customer. Of course, Happy Homes workers expressed this in different ways, some pointing to shared brand appreciation, others explaining that they

did not find the clientele intimidating because they could “relate to them,” and yet others describing kinship with the clientele on the basis of broader shared cultural tastes and refinement. Yet, while most of the workers in this study identify with their high-class customers, none are members of the upper economic strata themselves, and the majority of these workers hail from the middle or lower-middle class, some from the working classes (the determination of workers’ class position follows the Gilbert-Kahl model of class [Gilbert 2003:17]). Given what we know about inter-generational mobility (Gilbert 2003; Arrow, Bowles, and Durlauf 2000; Erickson and Goldthorpe 1992; Hout 1988; Featherman and Hauser 1978), the likelihood that these individuals will ascend class ranks to the level of their Happy Homes clientele is low.

How is it then that these \$8.50-an-hour Happy Homes retail clerks have come to think of themselves as “on the same level” as their high-class clientele, sharing common ground with an affluent customer they consider their “own kind”? To be sure, the Happy Homes worker who expresses class solidarity with customers refers to a world of meaning, not dollars; nonetheless, he crafts a comparison that defies both the constraints of his low level job, and the constraints of his economic, and in the vast majority of cases, culturally situated class position.

In an important way, these workers are doing something common to us all – that is, employing creative interpretative strategies that help bolster self-concept in the face of potential detractions, and low level retail workers who daily serve their social and

economic betters can be forgiven the imaginative strategies they use to manage the class anxiety this situation might provoke. Yet, while the individual effort to maintain positive self-identity is indeed an important *part* of what is going on here, it is by no means the whole story. When Happy Homes employees do “identity work” of this sort and, in the effort to manage the class and status anxieties endemic to their job, conjure the world of the brand as a world in common with their clientele, it is true they are meeting an *individual* need for positive self-concept, but they are doing so as a core entailment of an *organizational* process. The pride-repairing fictions workers construct to safeguard a positive sense of identity, however helpful to the individual worker, are an essential element of a labor process that depends upon workers reconstituting their identities in line with the class and gender meanings of the employer’s brand. Indeed, it is workers’ class anxieties that are exploited in the Happy Homes drive to create and reproduce a cooperative and productive retail workforce. Workers’ re-imagination of their class-defined selves is, then, an *organizational* act, with workers’ reconstructed identities simultaneously an *organizational* product.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why do service workers consent to their work? Prominent studies of work control have pointed to the contemporary importance of cultural strategies in worker consent, proposing that these strategies shape workers’ cognition, affect and identity, and indoctrinate workers into meaning-systems that help engender their loyalty, cooperation,

and productivity (Leidner 1993; Kunda 1992; Hochschild 1983). Receiving somewhat less attention, the question of *why* workers in these systems cooperate in their own transformation has led some scholars to further investigate the role of worker subjectivity, suggesting that cultural forms of work control may play on workers' social identities in ways that encourage consent by linking it to features of workers' class, gender, ethnic and racial identifications (Sherman 2007; Williams 2006; Bottero 2005; Salzinger 2003; Smith 2001). The present study extends these questions to the context of the branded retail workplace, foregrounding the role of the employer's brand in the transformation of workers' class identity and inserting the brand into our understanding of the 'manufacture' of worker consent (Burawoy 1979).

Drawing on participant-observation and interview data, this study examines the case of the high-line branded retail home furnishings chain store, here called "Happy Homes," arguing that control of the front-line retail labor process is accomplished by mobilizing retail workers' class anxieties toward the symbolic reformulation of their social class identity in line with the precepts of the brand. Offering retail workers repair of their class anxiety through identification with the high-status brand and enactment of the class-based brand meanings in the performance of their retail work, the retail employer secures workers' cooperation with the demands of the job by linking consent to positive worker self-feeling. The study presents this as an example of *branding consent*.

Labor Process Control and Worker Subjectivity

This study follows the strand in labor process theory concerned with the role of worker subjectivity in work control. The question of why workers consent to the demands of their work has long been central to the problem of understanding capitalist work processes, and early responses highlight the influence of structural aspects of work organization, foregrounding a structural model of work discipline. For instance, Edwards (1979) outlines the long-range evolution of labor control systems in capitalist development from simple and direct to bureaucratic and technological, noting that large firms of the industrializing era developed methods of organization both more formalized and more consciously contrived than earlier simple forms of control. These more formalized, consciously contrived controls could be embedded in both the physical structure of the labor process (“technological control”) and in its social structure (producing “bureaucratic” control), thus making labor control more institutional and hence less visible to workers while also providing the means for capitalists to control the now extended lines of supervision and power (Edwards 1979). In monopoly capitalism, the direction, evaluation and discipline of workers become accomplished through bureaucratic systems of control marked by the institutionalization of bureaucratic power, impersonal rules, rationalized processes, and codified systems of sanctions and rewards.

Complicating structural models of control, Burawoy’s (1979) early study of factory work illustrates the role of worker subjectivity in labor discipline, arguing that

work control occurs as a specific combination of force and consent. Burawoy's study shows production workers engaging in a game of "making out," working quickly to meet their production quota in order to "goldbrick" for the rest of their shift. Resisting the factory time regime and proving their skill, workers gain psychological rewards from "making out," however their game also means that production quotas get met, thus reproducing the factory labor process and the conditions of their own exploitation. In Burawoy's formulation, the hegemonic nature of labor control in monopoly capitalism replaces force and coercion with limited worker autonomy, and workers can comply with work restrictions and demands out of choice.

More recent scholarship has refined our understanding of the role of worker subjectivity in work discipline, indicating a growing importance of workers' feelings, attitudes, and identity to the post-industrial project of labor process control. Highlighting critical changes in the nature and the organization of work, contemporary work scholars point out that U.S. firms have responded to increased international competition and growing productivity and profitability pressures with corporate restructuring and efforts to downsize operations, flatten multi-layered hierarchical structures, engineer corporate cultures, and institute polyglot flexible work schemes (Perrucci and Perrucci 2006; Osterman 1994; Appelbaum and Batt 1994; Kunda 1992; Smith 1990). At the same time, a historically robust manufacturing sector has witnessed steady decline, giving way to a rapidly growing U.S. service sector that now accounts for roughly 80 percent of non-

agricultural jobs (MacDonald and Sirianni 1996). Critical observers of these changes glimpse an unfavorable picture for workers, describing the dominance of a service economy marked by decreasing employment security, a steady growth of contingent work, a proliferation of “bad jobs” over “good jobs,” and widening ranks of downwardly mobile workers (Barker and Christensen 1998; MacDonald and Sirianni 1996; Dudley 1994; Newman 1988). Other scholars point to elements of post-industrial "economic anxiety " resulting from proliferation of services over manufacturing, flagging the attendant downward pressure on service worker wages, degradation in standards of living, decrease in job security and de-stabilization of career tracks as likely hallmarks of unmitigated service sector growth (Herzenberg et al 1998).

Citing these changes, scholars argue that older models of labor process control with a focus on goods production are inadequate to explain post-industrial dynamics of worker cooperation and resistance. A particular concern of this scholarship is the rise of the service economy. The burgeoning service sector has opened an expanding domain for a type of work, by definition, interactive and relational, and reliant on emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), requiring innovations in labor process control that signal an increasing importance of worker subjectivity to systems of work discipline. Broadly defined, service work cuts a broad occupational swath, from janitorial work to telecommunications, and from health care, food service, clerical and retail work to computer sales, insurance, utilities and legal and financial services, however scholars

have pointed to the predominance of *interactive* forms of service work, highlighting how this form of work generates management interest in controlling workers' attitudes, demeanors, and feelings.

Interactive Service Work

Interactive service work requires employee interaction with the service-recipient through face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact (and, more recently, electronic contact), and relies foremost on the employee's performance of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983). Originating from the "emotion management perspective" which stipulates emotions as socially constructed, and understands individual acts of manipulating feeling as "emotion work" (Hochschild 1979, 1983), the concept of "emotional labor" designates the case where specified forms of emotion management become part of one's labor power. The emotional labor-based job requires the employee to produce an emotional state in another person, while allowing the employer, through training and supervision, to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of workers. Some service jobs call only for a worker's surface acting (the direct management of behavioral expression), however many require the worker to produce a sincere display that relies on deep acting (where emotions are managed such a way that display is a natural result of working on feeling).

Accordingly, service work can be refractory to more direct forms of control, as direct supervision of service labor disrupts the service interaction, often negating the

sincerity of the display (Lopez 2006; Lopez 2007; Sallaz 2002; Fuller and Smith 1991; Van Maanan and Kunda 1989). While managerial and professional workers, such as upper level managers, doctors, lawyers, and therapists, often perform interactive emotional labor, analyses of service work make a critical distinction between white-collar service workers and front-line and paraprofessional service workers (MacDonald and Sirianni 1996). White collar service workers are more likely to exert control over the emotional labor contained in their jobs -- that is, they are more likely to participate in setting emotional labor guidelines (e.g., through professional organizations) and to self-supervise the deployment of their emotional labor. In contrast, the front-line and paraprofessional service workers – sometimes referred to as the "emotional proletariat" -- can expect to receive more explicit instructions from management regarding job-related emotional labor requirements, have their performance monitored by both management and consumers (often with the aid of technologies), and possess only very limited power or authority over the content (emotional or otherwise) of the service labor process (MacDonald and Sirianni 1996).

In response to the proliferation of emotional-labor based interactive service jobs, labor process theorists have identified distinctive qualities which differentiate service from other forms of work, such as manufacturing and technical work, arguing that these distinctive characteristics have mandated new ways of controlling labor in the service context.

First, service is an intangible. Interactive services are not things but acts that are typically delivered as they are produced, and consumed as they are delivered. As a result, service work is difficult to measure, posing special problems for management charged with the task of tracking and maximizing service productivity. Because service is an intangible, service quality also becomes difficult to control, especially when the service worker's discretion plays in the production of the service (MacDonald and Sirianni 1996; Applebaum and Batt 1994). Service work is also distinctive in that there is a third party involved in the labor process. Along with service workers and service management, the service customer is a participant in service production, complicating the dynamics of work governance in service contexts. To take account of the varying roles played by service workers, management and recipients, scholars advance a 'triadic model' of service labor process control that stipulates to the shifts in power and variable allegiances that can occur among the three parties, emphasizing how these shifts destabilize the locus of service workplace power (Leidner 1993; Fuller and Smith 1991). Research in this vein has, for instance, established that service customers and management can coordinate their interests in opposition to workers (Fuller and Smith 1991), and service workers can ally with customers in opposition to service management (Leidner 1993).

Students of the service labor process have turned their attention to the question of how service management directs and monitors a work process which, to successfully produce the service relationship (in a sense, the "product" of interactive service work),

depends on elusive qualities of worker attitude, demeanor, and emotional expression, and presents a situation wherein close supervision proves impractical or disruptive. Observing a management need to determine service interactions in advance, researchers point to novel modes of service labor process control and supervision that combine technical and bureaucratic control with strategies of routinization and indoctrination, and note the emergence of two broad types of service management.

"Production-line" management of service workers relies foremost on routinization, scripting and, often, prompting and surveillance by technology, to direct and monitor the service labor process and provide consistency in service delivery. For example, the fast food chain, McDonald's, relies on routinization, scripting and computer monitoring to control the front-line labor performed by counter workers (Leidner 1993). In contrast, "empowerment" approaches to controlling service labor (or "semi-autonomous" work systems) allow more flexibility and spontaneity, and proceed through careful personnel selection, and training and motivation protocols that concentrate on transforming the worker's character, personality and thought processes according to management design, and indoctrinating workers to internalize management concerns, interests and priorities (MacDonald and Sirianni 1996; Leidner 1993).

Proposing that empowerment strategies constitute a system of "routinization-by-transformation," scholars suggest that service management tries to ensure the consistency and quality of front-line service interactions by transforming the cognitive and affective

schema of service workers (Leidner 1993; Fuller and Smith 1991). While the empowerment approach to service labor control dominates in jobs that require employees to exercise personal discretion and judgment, such as higher-level sales and customer service positions where employees are often "in the field" or otherwise difficult to supervise, research also suggests the approach is widely applied in the control of lower-level forms of interactive service work. For instance, research on direct sales organizations, such as Amway and Mary Kay Cosmetics, demonstrate how these organizations manage an independent sales force through the use of motivational and transformational strategies that aim to influence distributors' personal and psychic lives (Biggart 1989), while other studies have shown how employers use dedicated training in deep acting as a way to control flight attendants' interactions with passengers (Hochschild 1983), in interpersonal and communications skills to sculpt the behavior of low-level technical service workers (Smith 2001), in social competencies and "positive attitude" to control the interactions of front-line call center workers (Callaghan 2002), and in political passion and commitment to motivate the labor of door-to-door canvassers (Smith and Erikson 1997). Findings from these studies indicate that empowerment approaches attempt to engender in employees the attitudinal elements that align worker motivation, morale, and effort with management priorities without necessitating substantive reorganization of work roles or the alteration of authority relations (Appelbaum and Batt 1994).

Cultural Work Control

Of particular significance to these debates, studies of work in corporate contexts highlight the centrality of worker subjectivity in corporate work discipline by articulating the influence of company culture on employee identity and behavior. Identifying these systems as cultural forms of labor process control, this perspective emphasizes the role of corporate designed meaning-systems in the dynamics of employee consent and resistance. A seminal example, Kunda's (1992) study of high-tech corporate culture reveals how company meaning-systems constitute a fundamental strategy of labor control by providing sets of normative rules that bind workers to the corporate community. More recently, Ho's (2009) revealing ethnography of Wall Street establishes the influence of corporate culture on investment banking, articulating how this culture informs the values and strategies of financial actors, while Yanagisako's (2002) study of family firms in Italy stipulates a fundamental role for informal connections and sentiments of kinship in capitalist production. Research in this vein helps confirm the findings of studies that establish the relevancy of ideal and affective elements in the organized behavior of economic actors (Smith 2001; Biggart 1989), and the interplay of rational and affective elements in both non-market and market processes (Zelizer 2005).

Offering another perspective on the role of worker subjectivity, studies of employee involvement schemes, flexible work programs, and new forms of participative management indicate a contemporary project of work control located in sets of cultural

strategies that influence worker loyalty by transforming worker values and revising worker self-image (Vallas 2006; Vallas 2003; Smith 2001). Examinations of employee-involvement programs in industrial contexts show how these programs use ideologies of self-improvement, self-realization and personal autonomy to encourage worker self-management, discourage union participation, and engender worker cooperation with organizational restructuring efforts that erode wage and benefit packages, incentive programs, promotion structures, and job security (Smith 2001; Milkman 1997; Lamphere and Zavella 1993; Fantasia 1988). Alternately, research in white-collar settings have shown how management subjectivities may become implicated in participative labor control schemes as, for instance, with Smith's (1990) study of bank managerial work, wherein the organization secured middle management cooperation with downsizing efforts through training programs that encouraged managers to re-identify as entrepreneurs. And, in a more recent study, Smith (2001) adds further texture to the question of worker subjectivity with an investigation into how workers' aspirations and need for belonging help encourage their consent to work restructuring in both white-collar technical and blue-collar manufacturing new economy work settings.

The question of why workers in these systems cooperate in their own transformation has led some scholars to further investigate the role of worker subjectivity, suggesting that cultural forms of work control may play on workers' social identities in ways that encourage consent by linking it to features of workers' class,

gender, ethnic and racial identifications (Sherman 2007; Williams 2006; Bottero 2005; Salzinger 2003; Smith 2001). For instance, Salzinger's (2003) study of women workers in maquiladoras emphasizes how gendered subjects are evoked in the service of managerial control, and Freeman's (2000) ethnography of Afro-Caribbean women working in high-tech informatics links pink-collar work consent to gendered forms of workers' consumer identities.

Scholars investigating how workers' social identities become implicated in labor process control have looked at a diversity of work settings and occupations, including women workers in Japanese family-owned factories (Kondo 1990), female paralegals in corporate law firms (Pierce 1995), white and African-American front-line toy store clerks (Williams 2006), immigrant workers of color (as well as working-class white employees) in luxury hotels (Sherman 2007), and female counter workers in Chinese department stores (Hanser 2008). Benchmarking work as a site for the reproduction of social inequalities, this research demonstrates the importance of workers' gendered, raced, and classed subjectivities to contemporary forms of labor process control, showing how work processes simultaneously shape worker subjectivities and worker consent.

Work Control and Brands

The topic of brands is almost wholly absent in contemporary labor process scholarship. While studies of work have not paid great attention to the significance of brands, scholars in other fields have. For instance, scholarship concerned with consumer

society has looked at the significance of brands to the sphere of consumer behavior, pointing to the role branding plays in the social relations of consumer society and the construction of consumer identities. Important works in this vein include Juliet Schor's (1998) *The Overspent American*, Douglas Holt's (2004) *How Brands Become Icons* and Naomi Klein's (2002) now classic *No Logo*. There are also several popular accounts of branding, for example, Blumenthal's (2005) *Branded for Life* and Quart's (2003) *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*, and a plethora of business and marketing literature on brands, typified by such works as Ragas and Bueno's (2002) *The Power of Cult Branding* and Gobe's (2001) *Emotional Branding*.

Despite the abundance of popular and business literature on brands, the significance of brands to systems of work discipline has yet to be explored. Still, the possibility that brands may play a significant role in work control is implied by the findings of current work scholarship. For instance, the role of brands in worker consent appears tacitly in accounts that designate the significance of corporate culture to work discipline (Kunda 1992), as well as in those accounts of service work that stipulate a correspondence between the routinization-by-transformation approach and organizational identity.

Though the significance of brand remains implicit, studies of service work control depict company identity conditioning the organization's definition of customer service and serving as a template by which management conceives the ideal form of 'transformed

worker.’ For example, a major airline whose company identity is captured by the logo, “Friendly Skies,” requires flight attendants to act especially friendly on the job, with an authenticity capable of inspiring *bonhomie* in their passengers (Hochschild 1983), while McDonald’s, whose company identity includes the notion of wholesome family fun, and whose purchase on efficiency makes the company’s logo almost synonymous with the term (Ritzer 1995) directs workers to self-present as fast, friendly, and wholesome (Leidner 1993), and “PEP,” a non-profit organization that self-identifies as a uniquely aggressive advocate of progressive causes, expects its employees who do door-to-door canvassing to express political ardency both on and off the job (Smith and Erickson 1997). These findings correlate aspects of company identity with company strategies of labor discipline, suggesting the relevance of employer brand to the governance of work, but have not reconstructed the question of worker consent as a branded process.

More recently, a few work scholars have entertained the question of brands. One strand of this research considers the role of brands but, reflecting the preoccupation with consumption that marked traditional studies of brands, sidelines the issue of worker consent for a focus on the inclusion of consumer identity in working subjectivities (du Gay and Pryke 2002; Warde 2002). A particular strength of this approach has been its reconceptualization of work as located at the juncture of production and consumption (most commonly with a focus on service work, but in some cases, non-service work as well), and a focus on work identity as simultaneously occurring through the dual subject

position of worker and consumer. For example, du Gay's (1996) examination of retailing in the U.K. uses a cultural economy model to argue that management ideologies of the 'enterprising self' create boundary-spanning work-based subjects that are simultaneous agents of production and consumption. Stemming from this recent tradition, Pettinger's (2004) study of aesthetic labor in U.K. fashion retail looks at the roles brand meanings play in consumer expectations of workers, proposing that employer branding reduces the need for active selling by workers and affects the type of customer service the consumer demands. While introducing the question of brands to the study of work, these approaches have not given consideration to the role of employer brand in strategies of labor process control.

Branding Consent

The study presented here extends the insights of contemporary labor process theory to include the role of employer brand in the production of worker consent. Drawing on an ethnographic study of retail work, my research proposes that employer brand provides the tools by which the organization tries to influence worker subjectivity, advancing the argument that governance of the branded work environment occurs through the strategic circulation of brand meanings within the relations of work. Using the case of Happy Homes, I suggest the organization's deployment of brand meanings operates to mobilize workers' class anxieties and motivate workers' re-identification with the class and gender entailments of the employer brand, resulting in workers who

willingly play out, reproduce, and confirm these re-identifications through the process of their front-line service labors. In turn, workers' labor performance of their gendered and classed re-identifications gains them a sense of symbolic status, producing positive worker self-feeling that is reliant on worker consent. I present this labor dynamic as the process of "branding consent."

In addition, I offer this study as an extension of emotional labor theories, arguing that the organizational use of the brand to influence worker subjectivity produces a distinct type of labor conditioned by workers' invested performance of interactive labor as the active reproduction of their positive re-identifications. To designate this distinct form of labor, I propose the concept of "identity labor." Identity labor involves the employee's re-identification aligned with the employer's brand-related meaning-systems, and the identity-labor based job requires the employee to deploy these re-identifications in the service of producing identity in another person – in this case reproducing the social distinction and gendered class identity of the Happy Homes customer – while allowing the employer to exercise a degree of control over employee identities. Thus, identity labor uses workers' social and personal identities as a form of labor power. My aim with this study is, then, to provide both an empirical picture and a preliminary theoretical model of the "branded labor process."

Retail Work

This study also aims to contribute to the empirical literature on retail service work. One of the largest and fastest growing service occupations, retail work has yet to capture significant attention in labor process research. Retail workers hold a significant number of U.S. jobs (4.3 million wage and salary jobs in 2004) and, of all occupational categories, retail sales ranks only third in terms of predicted future job growth (second only to registered nurses and postsecondary teachers), with the number of retail salespersons expected to increase 15% between the years 2002 and 2012 (BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook 2008-09).

Despite the prominence of retail work, discussions of the retail service work process are few. Benson's (1986) social history of American department stores from 1890 to 1940 counts as an early contribution to scholarship on retail work and the service sector. Opening in the late 1800s, department stores were modeled after fancy private clubs and offered a range of luxury services, and, as Benson notes, these "palaces of consumption" (1986: 82) rapidly became a popular destination for middle and upper class women. Department store managers originally treated sales staff like factory workers, creating an overworked, underpaid female retail work force that labored under a set of difficult conditions. The public nature of service work (in contrast to factory work) rendered these unfavorable work conditions visible to the department store's clientele and, as Benson writes, it was the middle and upper class women that frequented the

department stores who initiated the first campaigns to improve work conditions for female retail sales workers. Articulating workplace dynamics of class, gender and consumption, Benson's study reveals contradictions in the retail work process, and introduces a historical view of the three-way struggle among saleswomen, managers and customers for control of the retail selling floor. Benson's work remains a critical reference in the field.

Following a lengthy period of scholarly silence on the topic, retail work has recently garnered the attention of scholars interested in the dynamics of service work. In her 2006 ethnography of work in retail toy stores, Williams looks inside the retail labor process to examine the connection between shopping and social inequality. Williams' study foregrounds the social construction of shopping and how shopping is implicated in reproducing gender, race and class inequalities, and, looking also at retail toy store labor policies and practices and the social relations between customers and retail service workers, illuminates how workers' and customers' racial identities are reproduced in the social practices of retail interactions. Specifically, Williams highlights the habit of retail toy store clerks to discriminate against African-American shoppers. Documenting how these toy store clerks grant priority and privilege to middle-class white shoppers, Williams demonstrates how the racialized social identities of clerks and shoppers become reproduced in the retail work process.

In another strand of work scholarship, investigators have used ethnographic methods to look specifically at the organization of work in the retail context. For instance, Matsunaga (2001) draws on a case study of retail work in a Japanese retail chain store to explore emergent Japanese working practices and recruitment strategies and, challenging prevailing wisdom on primary and secondary labor markets in Japan, presents evidence that locates part-time female retail staff as part of a core versus peripheral workforce.

In a more focused consideration of the retail labor process, Pettinger's (2004) study of fashion retail in the U.K. investigates multiple facets of retail work, including retail work physicality, the influence of retail brands on customer expectations, and the gender-typing of front-line retail service jobs. Combining observational research as a retail customer with qualitative interviews, Pettinger uses research in U.K. retail clothing chain stores to illustrate how retail employers attempt to match workers to retail clientele, demonstrating that retail employers' hiring criteria stipulates the importance of workers' social attributes, such as gender, age and ethnicity, and their cultural capital as embodied in aesthetic and social skills.

Using ideas of branding and marketing to link the cultural and economic dimensions of retail service, Pettinger also explores how differences in retail customer service paradigms are conditioned by the retail organization's marketing and brand strategies, introducing the concept of "branded workers" to signify a process whereby the

characteristics of retail workers' service performance are influenced by customers' brand expectations. In subsequent analyses, Pettinger applies this research on fashion retail to an exploration of ambiguous workplace boundaries between friendship and collegial relations (2005a), an examination of the dual shopper-worker role of researcher in retail contexts (2005b), as well as to the analysis of materiality in service work (2006). Although Pettinger does not explore the role of brands in retail worker consent, her research introduces the importance of retail employer brand to retail work processes, offering important insights into the linkages that connect retail employers' marketing strategies with retail strategies of recruitment and work organization, and furthering scholarly understandings of gender, race and age segregation in retail work.

Scholars have yet to give dedicated attention to the question of retail worker consent, the dynamics of retail work control, and retail worker experience. Taking recent research on service as the point of departure, I attempt to use the study of Happy Homes to extend these insights toward an analysis of the dynamics of retail worker consent and resistance by foregrounding the significance of employer brand. Additionally, I use this research to reconstruct our theories of emotional labor. Much of the literature on service workers, and specifically that which concerns retail workers, examines those workers' performance of emotional labor and does not consider the "identity labor" embedded in interactive labor demands. The study presented here proposes a model of "identity labor" to understand front-line labor in contemporary retail work, suggesting its potential for

broad application to other types of work, most notably service work, but also non-service types of work where brands and social identities intersect.

Class and Gender

In the analysis of identity labor, the research presented here explores how class and gender are involved in the retail service labor process. Accordingly, I also locate this study as part of a larger movement to integrate gender, and more recently class, in the research on labor process systems and the work experience. In the last few decades, a growing research has emerged concerned with the question of gender and work. Attempting to understand how work is organized by gender, and how gender is organized by work, ethnographic studies have explored the question across a diversity of settings, establishing the significance of gender in a variety of work processes. Hochschild's (1983) now classic examination of flight attendant work links gender with emotional labor, demonstrating how essentialized notions of gender inform the expectations management and customers place on service performance, while Pierce's (1996) study of gender in law firms demonstrates the normative and behavioral convergences of labor and gender in the legal workplace, establishing these firms as gendered organizations and revealing the gender double-binds women legal workers confront as they negotiate the masculinized norms of the professional workplace. In a particularly insightful contribution to ethnographic research on gender and work, Salzinger's (2003) nuanced account of women workers in Mexico's global factories ascertains how gendered

meanings and identities are constructed in and through the work process, and reveals the contingency of gendered working subjectivities on production priorities and systems of factory labor control. In other research, investigators have established the centrality of gender to work in such diverse contexts as engineering work (Fletcher 1999), wall street firms (Roth 2006), prisons (Britton 2003), social services (Parkin 1993), direct selling organizations (Biggart 1989), retail work (Pettinger 2004; Williams 2006) restaurant work (Erickson 2004; Paules 1996; Guiffre and Williams 1994), domestic work (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Romero 1992; Rollins 1985), sex tourism (Brennen 2004; Kempadoo 2004), and nail salons (Kang 2003).

Race is also central to the organization and control of work. Racial identities exert a powerful influence on the retail labor process, and research indicates that the retail store constitutes a site for the reproduction of racial inequalities (Williams 2006). Yet, the role of race in emotional labor based jobs remains under-explored, and much of the research on this topic reproduces what Mirchandani (2003) calls the “racial silence in studies of emotion work.” While the study presented here does not analyze the racialized dimensions of the retail service labor process, it acknowledges the insights of critical race theory (e.g., Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Omi and Winant 1994; Roediger 1991), and understands the Happy Homes retail setting as a specific site for the reproduction of whiteness and white privilege. Accordingly, this study recognizes that the shared whiteness of Happy Homes workers and customers allows for an implicit understanding

of cultural sameness. This common understanding of normative whiteness is the backdrop against which specific dynamics of gender and class can play out in this workplace the way they do.

Recently, scholars have moved to integrate class into analyses of work process and work experience. For instance, Smith's 2001 study of flexible work systems uses the analysis of Reproco technical service work to demonstrate how low-level service workers come to consent to flexible management programs on the basis of aspirations linked to their class (and race) identities. In a different context, Bearman (2005) uses the lens of social distance and social class to articulate the relations between New York residential doormen and their tenants.

Examinations of class and gender in non-work contexts contribute to this movement, as for example, Beattie's 2003 examination of white and Mexican-American girls, where an analysis of girls' complex identity performances reveals the relationality of class subjectivities, establishing the construction of class identity in relation to race/ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Theorizing the complexity of class and gender (and race) intersections, feminist theories of class and gender have helped motivate these efforts. As a notable example, Acker's 2006 theoretical proposal of class as a racialized and gendered process intimately tied to the capitalist economic system helps to inform understandings of the intimate connection between gender and class at work. Contemporary studies of class and gender at work also owe significant theoretical debt to

Bourdieu's (1987) concept of cultural economies of distinction and Lamont's (1992) concept of symbolic boundaries. We see this, for instance, in Skeggs' (1997) ethnography of working class women in the UK, where the application of Bourdieu's (1987) concepts of cultural capital and distinction are used to elucidate the ways class and gender are fused in these women's identities and experience.

As yet, only a few scholars have placed class at the center of service work research. In a recent consideration, Sherman's (2007) study of service workers in luxury hotels investigates the complex role class plays in the service labor process, demonstrating how hospitality workers use a variety of practices, for instance, forming meaningful relations with guests or engaging in co-worker games, to negotiate service relations of inequality and maintain a powerful sense of self.

In other recent research, Hanser (2008) uses an examination of salesclerk work in China to consider how class (and gender) are constituted within the context of retail work. Drawing on ethnographic data collected in urban Chinese retail settings, Hanser's study examines the work of female retail sales clerks in a state owned department store, a high status department store and an underground market to chart how gendered and classed service performances are used to construct social boundaries of distinction and cultural inequality. Exploring management approaches to worker control and habituation, Hanser demonstrates the influence of labor discipline on the gendered performances of the female sales staff, for instance, showing how young women sales clerks in the high-

status store follow management directives to enact stylized, deferential practices that create a space of distinction wherein their own visibility is constrained and the customer's class entitlement is reproduced. Stipulating marketplaces in post-reform China as sites where social differences become recognized and justified, Hanser models Chinese retail service labor as a form of "distinction work" and presents service settings as critical sites for producing a new Chinese "structure of entitlement."

Hanser's emphasis on class and distinction leaves the question of why these female retail workers consent to management directives open for further study. Still, signaling an emergent scholarly interest in the class (and class and gender) constituents of front-line service, Hanser provides important articulation of the ways class and gender condition the performance of front-line retail labor and reveals how conceptions of gender powerfully signify class distinctions in service settings. Taken along with Sherman's investigation of luxury hotel work, Hanser's study of retail invokes critical questions about contemporary systems of service labor control and their investment in classed and gendered typifications of front-line service work and front-line service workers, mapping out promising directions for further research into the dynamics of service worker consent.

Incorporating conceptualizations of branded consent and identity labor into this investigation suggests a way to answer the question of why workers in service settings consent to the demands of their work. Proposing that employer brand plays a critical role

in defining the intersection between worker subjectivity, social identity, and consent, my study endeavors to deepen our current understanding of service work and provide directions for reconstructing theories of interactive emotional labor, service labor reproduction, service worker experience, retail work, and class and gender in service labor.

Specifically, I use the case of retail work at Happy Homes to show how gender and class as meshed are exploited by the organization for control and, asking why workers cooperate, demonstrate how worker consent to exploitation allows for worker positive self-feeling and, in particular, for positive class and gender identity. Drawing on ethnographic research, I argue that workers buy into the organization's gendered class messages and organizational directives that are demonstrated through the brand because it allows them to construct enhanced (gendered) class identities, and attempt to show how this identity enhancement is hooked onto symbolic status that is produced in the process of work, consumed in the process of work, and realized in the process of work. I propose that when workers produce, consume and realize symbolic status in the process of work they feel elevated in class but this feeling of class elevation is only sustained by continuing to do the work. My study presents this process as a strong system of labor control, observing, for instance, that status hits (delivered by customers or managers) are followed by worker efforts to reverse that damage. I also suggest that this strong system is not seamless, and attempt to show how labor process contradictions are linked to forms

of worker resistance, and how worker resistance is linked to workers' class and gender identifications.

METHODS

I undertook this study to explore the social relations of retail work and to better understand the ground-level machinations that go into making up the service work process and service workers. My interest in retail evolved as a result of taking a part-time job as a sales associate at the Happy Homes store to supplement my income as a graduate research assistant. Immediately, I became fascinated by the high degree of job satisfaction enjoyed by my co-workers, as well as their inclination to identify with the upscale clientele served by the Happy Homes store. As an Happy Homes sales associate, I knew the downsides of the job -- the inadequacy of the \$8.50 wage, the humiliation that could come with an upscale customer's snubbing, the sore feet from standing all day on concrete-based floors, and the 'hospitality fatigue' (or what I came to call the 'smile cramp') left over from the day's worth of obligatory cheer display. I was curious to understand how my co-workers came to love this work and feel a kindred bond with the social elite who visit the store.

This research combines data from ethnographic fieldwork at the Happy Homes store with in-depth qualitative interviews of Happy Homes retail workers and managers. I conducted overt participant-observation research at the Happy Homes store from September of 2002 through January of 2003 while concurrently employed as a part-time

Happy Homes associate. In November of 2007, I returned to Happy Homes to resume my associate job and gather informal observations through June of 2008. In my time at Happy Homes, I attended approximately 190 mandatory “one-minute” staff meetings (these meetings typically last 15 to 30 minutes and are held at the beginning and/or end of the work day when the store is closed). In my associate job, I spent an average of twenty hours a week on the sales floor, and experienced a variety of different work shifts and different work tasks. I also participated in two Happy Homes training programs and group interviews, and attended a number of social events with other members of the Happy Homes staff, including workplace parties and parties at workers’ homes. In addition to gathering field and interview data, I collected archival data from a variety of official Happy Homes documents, including training materials, policy statements, and employment documents.

During the period of Winter 2007 to Summer 2009, I conducted 19 in-depth qualitative interviews with members of the Happy Homes sales associate staff and management staff. These open-ended interviews lasted anywhere from an hour and half to over three hours, and were held at a location of the respondent’s choosing. Of the 19 interviews, 18 were conducted in a restaurant or coffee shop, and one was conducted in an isolated seating area within the shopping mall that housed the Happy Homes store (the “Aristocade Mall”). Interview questions included questions about workers’ feelings toward their job, their co-workers, customers and managers, and the brand. Questions

were clustered by eight sequential topic modules: introductory (job history); job likes/dislikes; ideas about customer; ideas about co-workers; ideas about management; ideas about the Happy Homes brand; future (employment aspirations); and demographic questions (see appendix A for complete interview schedule). The interviews were casual and conversational in nature and discussion often included talk of tangential topics provoked by the original question. I recorded the interviews, transcribed the recordings, and analyzed transcriptions for recurring themes, coding for key concepts.

I conducted interviews with four Happy Homes managers and fifteen Happy Homes sales associates. The store where I worked and did my research has anywhere from 150-300 sales associates on staff (depending on seasonal need) and approximately 25-30 members of management staff. The Happy Homes staff is predominately female, with approximately a 9 to 1 ratio of females to males (the Aristocade store has 2 male managers and approximately 15-20 male associates). Reflecting the workplace ratio of male-to-female staff, my interview sample included 3 male Happy Homes employees and 16 female Happy Homes employees. Respondents included: 4 female Happy Homes managers, 3 male Happy Homes associates and 12 female Happy Homes associates. The Aristocade Happy Homes associate and management personnel are predominately white (at the time of my study I knew of only two employees of color -- one female African-American associate and one female African-American manager). Reflecting the racial composition of the Happy Homes workforce, all respondents were white (the African-

American associate left Happy Homes early on in my study, and the African-American manager was not available for an interview).

Respondents' ages ranged from 23 to "50-something," with most clustering in the 25-34 age range. The sample included: 1 respondent in the 20-24 range; 12 in the 25-34 range; 4 in the 35-44 range; and 2 in the 45-55 range. Two of the managers were between the ages of 25-34, and the other two were in the 35-44 range. Associates' yearly household income ranged from \$17,000 - \$65,000, with most (10) respondents reporting yearly household income under \$30,000. Three respondents reported yearly household income between \$36,000 and \$50,000, and two respondents reported yearly household income over \$50,000. All four managers interviewed for this study declined to give their incomes.

Close to 75% of the associates in this study reported holding some form of part-time job along with their Happy Homes job, and over 50% were currently members of dual-earner households. Two of the associates in this study reported that they receive periodic financial help from their parents. Of the fifteen associates, only one made the transition to Happy Homes from a bottom-tier entry-level job (fast food counter work), and five entered Happy Homes directly from other retail employment (specialty retail or mid-line department stores). Happy Homes associates reported a variety of previous employment, including copy store clerk, office clerk, elementary school teacher aide, flight attendant, telecom salesperson, golf instructor, marketing assistance, hair stylist,

and small business owner. Three of the study participants were women re-entering the work force following a hiatus at home raising children and taking care of families (the hiatus ranged from two to five years). All associates in this study report having a high school degree. Thirteen of the associates have some form of advanced education; six have a 2-year degree and seven have a 4-year degree (associates earned 4-year degrees at lower-tier educational institutions and/or on-line colleges, and majors included marketing, early childhood education, and psychology). The managers in the study all report attending 4-year institutions and earning bachelor's degrees in business and/or marketing, and one manager had a Master's degree in business.

The occupations of associates' parents included blue-collar, low-level white-collar, low-level technical, and para-professional jobs (for instance, construction, auto mechanic, office manager, insurance sales, nurse, secretary, elementary school teacher, high school teacher, and low-level school administrator). Approximately half of the associates' parents had some form of 2-year technical and/or occupational degree, and another 25% had 4-year degrees.

This research considers Happy Homes workers' social class location as an important force shaping their experience of work and, using these data on workers' and worker families' educational attainment, occupational status, and income, locates subjects on a limited continuum from working class to lower-middle class. As well, the racial homogeneity of the population of the Happy Homes store (both employees and

customers), and of the sample population specifically, conditions subjects' class cultural position. Consequently, the research acknowledges subjects' class culture as shaped by and played out against an organizational backdrop of normative whiteness.

Contemporary trends in social science emphasize the influence that salient aspects of researcher social identity -- such as gender, race, and class -- can have on the research process. Accordingly, I perceive my social location as relevant to this project. Like many of my research subjects, I am white and female, with a lower-middle to working-class background, and it is likely that these similarities helped smooth my entry into the field and made it easier to establish rapport with my Happy Homes co-workers. As well, though I was a Sociology graduate student at the time of this research, I was an older 're-entry' student, and I believe my age provided another arena of common ground with my Happy Homes colleagues.

Other aspects of my social location and identity placed me at a remove from my fellow Happy Homes workers. The most evident of these were my educational attainment and my researcher role. While Happy Homes workers tended toward two-year degrees, I was in the process of pursuing a doctoral degree. In the daily activities of work on the Happy Homes floor, store personnel did not appear to grant my status as graduate student and researcher much if any importance, however Happy Homes workers and managers were aware that I was a PhD student doing research at their workplace and these factors could have influenced subjects' behavior. Still, my co-workers and

managers consistently privileged my role as Happy Homes associate, often to the point of forgetting I was also a graduate student doing a study of retail work at their store.

Considering the emphasis this research places on social class, a further word on researcher social location is in order. While I come from a working class background, I have also had exposure to the world of the upper middle class. By virtue of marriage, I had previously experienced upper-middle class membership, along with the lifestyle and activities associated with this class position, to include consumption of high-line branded goods like those offered at Happy Homes. At the time of this research, I was no longer in this marriage, and my post-marriage economic status closely resembled the working class location of my family of origin and my Happy Homes co-workers. However, as this report will go on to argue, class implies much more than economic standing. Class becomes constituted and reproduced through cultural forms that, in turn, mediate social interactions, color social relations, and inform the architecture of subjectivity and identity. Thus, while I hold class background (along with gender and race) in common with my subjects, my class culture reflects a hybridization of working class and upper middle cultural forms, and this mixture made for dual – and shifting -- reference points in the field. On one hand, my working class upbringing would give a point of reference for understanding Happy Homes workers; on the other, time spent in the upper-middle class (where I erstwhile performed upper middle class forms of femininity) would provide a point of reference for understanding Happy Homes clientele.

As a final point of clarification, when I started this research I regarded the Happy Homes brand as a signifier of upper class status – a presumption that was shared, and continually confirmed, by my Happy Homes co-workers and managers. However, this designation merits an important qualification. Contextualized within an organizational field composed of mass-market home furnishings retailers, Happy Homes stands out as a high status brand. Yet, while Happy Homes undoubtedly targets an affluent clientele and positions itself as a signifier of high-class status, it is still a retailer of mass produced goods and, as an “off-the-rack” purveyor, would possess significantly lesser status (and be likely to serve a lesser status clientele) than organizations dedicated to providing elite custom furnishings, full design services, and/or rare or collectible items for clients’ homes. Thus, Happy Homes upper-class status claims are as likely to reflect the organization’s attempt to tap into consumer class aspirations as they are to represent the actual class location of the brand or its clientele.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

This study is divided into nine chapters. This introduction comprises the first chapter. Chapters 2 and 3 look at Happy Homes’ strategies for locating and indoctrinating front-line retail workers. Chapter 2 gives a brief overview of retail work and the Happy Homes brand, and then examines Happy Homes’ front-line recruitment practices, exploring how Happy Homes culls its future front-line workers from a group of brand-enamored lower- to lower-middle class shoppers known to Happy Homes staff as

“shopper-lites.” Chapter 3 considers Happy Homes’ training strategies, looking at how management attempts to transform workers through training that reframes retail work as hospitality and retail workers as hosts. In Chapter 4 I take up the question of management strategies on the retail floor, looking at Happy Homes management attempts to transform workers into brand ambassadors and into high-class hosts. Chapter 5 investigates the dynamics of worker consent, looking at how Happy Homes’ workers cooperate with management directives and produce symbolic status in the process of their work, specifically through the performance of “identity labor.” Chapters 6, 7 and 8 focus on worker strategies for managing the contradictions of the branded retail labor process. Chapter 6 considers the strategies workers use with customers. In Chapter 7, I consider workers’ strategies with management related to unwelcome categories of Happy Homes labor demands, and in Chapter 8 I look at workers’ strategies with management related to the Happy Homes’ reward structure.

CHAPTER 2

HAPPY HOMES RECRUITMENT AND BUY-IN

In the logic of organizational governance at Happy Homes, spheres of consumption and production cross long before an employment relationship is initiated. This begins with the process of recruitment. Happy Homes draws a significant proportion of new employees from its customer base, with store managers estimating that 75% of their front-line staff start out as Happy Homes customers. In this chapter, I look at the recruitment strategy Happy Homes management uses to staff its front-line labor force, examining how this strategy relies on and exploits prospective workers' attitudes toward the Happy Homes brand. To provide context for this discussion, I begin the chapter with an overview of relevant aspects of the Happy Homes retail work and an introduction to the Happy Homes brand. From there, I move to an examination of Happy Homes recruitment strategies, looking specifically at the practice of mining front-line labor from a sub-group of customers Happy Homes' staff refer to as "shopper-lites," and exploring how customers of the high-line Happy Homes retail brand come to be tagged as prospective \$8.50-an-hour low-level retail workers. I conclude the chapter with a consideration of how shopper-lites "buy-in" to Happy Homes' recruitment strategies, looking at the early stages of the hiring process and Happy Homes selection criteria.

THE WORLD OF HAPPY HOMES

An Introductory Vignette

The Happy Homes doors open into a beautifully decorated interior space. A connected sequence of trend-savvy rooms gives off the air of a well-appointed home, and the tastefully arranged furnishings and casually perfect accessories conjure the world of the affluent. A perfect setting to put confidence to dreams of upward mobility, this interior space invites identification with the Happy Homes lifestyle brand and its branded home décor products. Customers enter, wander the store, checking out merchandise and the latest design concepts. Like their surroundings, these customers appear well heeled, stylish, and savvy. They comport themselves as if confidently ‘at home’ amid a lay out of upscale home furnishings, easily affiliated with the high status Happy Homes’ brand.

Another group is also here. Its members compose the retail service workforce that daily travels the Happy Homes store sales floor. Like the customer, these individuals appear well heeled, affluent, and socially secure. Dressed in permutations of charcoal grey, white, ecru and black, they sport the style of their clientele – the “in” hairstyle, the “right” eyeglass frames, the on-trend watch. Though these workers may make their way through the cached room settings faster than the normal customer, seeming more gregarious, exuding a more palpable bonhomie, they carry themselves with the air of belonging and easy confidence characteristic of the group they serve. To a casual observer who has not yet spied their slim wireless headsets and low-profile nametags, these workers appear as if customers.

The confusion deepens when observing the staff at work. Some look like they’re browsing. They pause to touch and admire the merchandise, passing off-hand comments to standers-by: “I love this rug, don’t you?” “I’ve been wanting this couch since I first saw it – it would look fabulous in my living room – I just can’t decide if I want it in moss or cocoa” “I have this chair at home – the red leather is delicious!” Others look like they’re socializing, chatting about homes and travels, fashion and fun: “I love the idea of red in your living room!” “You just got back from China? Oh, tell me about it!” “What a beautiful scarf, those colors are perfect for you!” “I have a favorite restaurant downtown, here, let me write down

the name” Perceived from a distance, Happy Homes is not a workplace – it is a place of refined associations, a well-appointed home hosting the social recreations of the financially secure and social elite.

The Happy Homes Store

Happy Homes sells all accoutrements for the home, from couches to candles, beds to bars, dressers to dishes. As a high-end retail chain with nation-wide presence for over fifteen years, and international presence for five, the Happy Homes enterprise employs highly visible marketing and image-driven sales and service protocols. Having developed a uniquely extensive “lifestyle” model of product identity, Happy Homes also exhibits a cohesive, integrated public profile consistent with its “lifestyle” image across geographic and modal sites. In its multiple retail stores, its much-loved and widely-circulated mail order catalogue and its profitable internet website, Happy Homes successfully markets its lifestyle brand and sells high-end home furnishings to an affluent clientele.

The stores themselves are beautiful, both in architecture and interior design. Following (and perhaps also leading) a retail trend toward boutique lay-out, Happy Homes stores display their home furnishing wares in room sets that form a cohesive interior space meant to resemble an actual home. To enter the store is to have a multi-sensory experience. Visually, the store is extremely appealing, colorful, creative, elegant,

warm and welcoming. But there is other sensory stimulation, for instance, special Happy Homes music mixes are piped into the store during working hours (and sold as CDs at the counters), and the store space is permeated with the signature scents of Happy Homes candles and potpourri. The space is a brand retail tour de force; everything in the space speaks of the brand.

I conducted my study at an Happy Homes flagship store located in an upscale Midwest mall I call the “Aristocade.” The Aristocade location is one of Happy Homes’ highest grossing storefronts, and it is also one of the largest, both in terms of its physical size and the size of its workforce. The store itself seems to go on forever, with departments of tableware flowing into home accessories flowing into branded ‘living rooms,’ ‘dining rooms,’ ‘bedrooms,’ ‘home offices.’ Staff size is likewise impressive and, depending on seasonal need, the Aristocade location can employ anywhere from 150 to 300 store personnel. Along with retail shopping, the Happy Homes store offers its clientele a variety of services, including gift-wrapping, wedding registry, and bi-monthly ‘tea and cookie’ design seminars.

The Happy Homes Work

The accepted picture of retail work does not fully account for the Happy Homes branded retail process. Front-line service personnel, like these Happy Homes clerks, are supposed to be ‘marked’ in some way to distinguish them from the customers they serve

and, indeed, techniques for differentiating retail workers from customers are supposed to constitute an important baseline in retail management efforts to organize and control the retail labor process. For service work generally, smooth and efficient transactions depend greatly on the ability of workers and customers to know “who’s who,” a problem management typically solves with physical markers, such as uniforms, hats, badges, and name tags. For instance, we know the flight attendants by their uniforms, the McDonalds’ workers by their red caps, the hotel housekeeping staff by their white aprons. This holds true in retail as well. We depend on the Target worker’s red logo shirt, the department store cosmetics worker’s white lab coat, and the Macy’s worker’s badge, to know who to approach when we need shopping help.

But, at Happy Homes, differentiating workers from customers is a complex affair. When I was a newbie Happy Homes worker, unacquainted with my fellow associates, there were several occasions where I greeted co-workers with a cheery, “Welcome, glad to see you! What brings you into Happy Homes today?” and, in one memorable instance, completely baffled a Happy Homes shopper by asking her to show me how to use a cash register. These were embarrassing moments, but I’m not sure they could have been avoided. Though it is not unusual in high-line retail stores to downplay the physical means of marking front-line labor, at Happy Homes the requisite employee name tags and headsets recede by deliberate design and, crafted to look like high-tech jewelry, are physical markers with a subtlety that renders them almost invisible.

The literature tells us that high-line service concerns, retail among them, can replace physical markers with delineating strategies that rest on symbolic displays, notably, service worker behaviors intended to signal deference and servility to the service customer. As Hochschild (1983) recognized over two decades ago, myriad ways have evolved whereby service workers can signal their subordinate status, pliancy, and willingness to serve through emotional management and emotional labor. In the case of luxury services, and specifically luxury retail concerns, contemporary versions of the servant bow and curtsy capture the deference display in worker queries like “May I help you?” or, in recent turn, the friendly deference of “Hi, how are you, what can I do for you today?” But at Happy Homes, where front-line workers are directed to greet guests conversationally with personalized overtures, the discursive signs that mark out the retail service worker are very hard to read. When an Happy Homes worker does as she is told to do and greets her shopper with compliments on the shopper’s hair or dress, or initiates a conversation about weather or restaurants, or starts with the offer to take the shopper’s heavy bags, coat, or to help entertain the shopper’s children, service deference begins to retreat behind what, by appearances, constitutes convivial exchange between peers. Whether we look to outward signs marked by clothing, style, and comportment, or examine sets of practices and rhetoric, the distinction between Happy Homes retail service recipient and Happy Homes retail service provider remains unusually subtle.

Contrary to received knowledge on the retail work process, the Happy Homes organization eschews common strategies for distinguishing workers from customers, instead adopting recruitment, training and supervisory practices that seem intentionally designed to blur those differences. At Happy Homes, organizational discourse and practice regularly obscure boundaries between the spheres of consumption and production, creating modes of employee conduct and self-representation closely aligned to the ways of the Happy Homes clientele. For instance, Happy Homes management attempts to get employees to think like customers. Managers who lead the meetings that preface each shift – dubbed “One-Minute Meetings,” but typically lasting 30 -- often start off by asking retail staff to name the Happy Homes item they would buy if they could: “If you could purchase one item today, right now, what would it be?” Employees are asked to explain why they like the item and how it would affect, enhance, or change their lives: “Okay, now, think of why you chose that particular item...what does it mean to you? What do you like about it? If you had that item, how would your life be different, what would be better?”

As a management strategy, this exercise has a fairly straightforward purpose -- it encourages Happy Homes retail workers to discuss and learn more about the merchandise, and gives them practice in articulating important selling points of Happy Homes brand products. Or, as one manager put it, these exercises help “improve sales associates’ brand expertise.” Thus, exercises like these enhance workers’ brand expertise

by enhancing their product knowledge and promoting their identification as representatives of the brand. But the exercise also calls on Happy Homes retail workers to imagine themselves in the form of their counterpoint, that is, as the object of their own interactional labor – the high-class consumers of the brand.

As a service management priority, attempts to forge worker empathy with customers' needs and desire are nothing new, and the sociological literature has given substantial voice to the variety of tactics management uses in pursuit of this goal. But Happy Homes takes this to an extreme. In conjunction with encouraging empathy with customers, Happy Homes management directs its workers to adopt the refined habits and ways of the guests they serve. In dress and comportment, the Happy Homes employee manual suggests the employee strive for an “understated elegance” that is “always tasteful,” and, for workers' conduct, Happy Homes managers instruct on the arts of high-class hospitality and politesse. For instance, in Happy Homes training and on-going supervision, managers will guide employees in attitude, body language, and conversational skills, and a manager may direct an employee to “make eye contact,” “to smile with your body as well as your mouth,” to “hold your head up,” and “to show () appreciation with actions as well as words,” or, instructing employees on how to mingle, recommend a demeanor of “warmth and welcome,” an attitude of “interest in the (other),” and give a reminder on manual instructions which say to “(offer) a

compliment,” “exchange a few good-natured remarks,” and “inquire about the customer’s day.”

As this study will attempt to show, when Happy Homes workers cooperate with these directives they become more “like” the customers they serve and, in turn, receive symbolic enhancements to their class and gender identities that operate to cleave them tightly to their work. The conventional picture, which shows retail management using physical and behavioral signifiers to mark off front-line workers from customers, does not depict what goes on in the Happy Homes work world. Why would a high-line retail concern like Happy Homes work so concertedly to conflate the identity of its front-line service workers with the high-class Happy Homes customer, and how is this accomplished? The answer revolves around the role of the brand in the Happy Homes labor process. To understand the role the brand takes in Happy Homes work discipline we first need to grasp the brand’s significations, both as they appear to the consuming public, and as they become construed within organizational confines. Describing the Happy Homes brand as marketed to consumers at large and within the workplace to organizational members, the following section attempts to sketch a picture of what the Happy Homes brand means.

The Happy Homes Brand

I am due at Happy Homes at 6 p.m. for my first new employee training session (one of a three part training program). I arrive early to the shopping mall where Happy Homes is housed, drive into the parking lot and slip easily into a parking space by the mall entrance closest the Happy Homes store. The Happy Homes store dominates the northwest corner of the mall. Overhanging the parking lot, a large windowed triangle juts out from the mall structure like a ship's prow, displaying a glass-enclosed "room." From previous visits I know the contents of this room will change. Today they present a tastefully appointed bedroom, Happy Homes style – everything from the heavy wood platform bed and matching nightstands, the khaki embroidered comforter, and stylish wrought-iron bedside lamps, to the retro alarm clock, beaded accent throw pillows and pseudo-Persian rug. To those who know the style, the display directly signals the "Happy Homes" branded world of warmth, comfort, style, and status. To those unfamiliar with Happy Homes, the effect is equally impressive, if more generic – speaking a stylish kind of upper-class-ness, the self-assurance of affluence, a yuppie dream.

Looking at this bedroom you can imagine the residents; casual, confident, financially fortified, secure in the knowledge their tastes in home furnishings establish their worth. I get out of my car and, looking again at the display, am stopped by an unsettling sense of my own inadequacy. Mixed in with anxiety at starting a new job, there is a feeling that I come up short against the standard of that bedroom. I feel "not good enough" for Happy Homes, not good enough even for this \$8.50 an hour retail clerk job. What does it mean that a brand can inspire such feelings of inadequacy in its beholder? Is this the so-called "power of the brand"? (Field note excerpt).

In organizational rhetoric the question of what the Happy Homes brand means is the question of "Who is Happy Homes?" and the company's answer (to its own question) is, "warm, comfortable, welcoming." The company-become-brand, the "what" now become "who," renders a meaning-system anchored to an imagery of "home" and

“hospitality” and, in this symbolic sense, the brand takes on a “personality” that eventually helps justify the organizational intent to reframe its retail workers as sociable high-class hosts. But, how is this imagery used to garner workers’ consent? Part of the answer lies in the central role this imagery plays in Happy Homes brand success.

Happy Homes recognizes that the appeal of its lifestyle brand rests in its ability to confer status to the holder. The organization is actually much less circumspect about this than one might expect. According to Happy Homes training materials, one of the main reasons customers want Happy Homes products is for the power of those products to “improve or enhance their (the customer’s) self-image or status.” In Happy Homes lingo, this customer is “aspirational.” Asked to describe the Happy Homes customer, the managers interviewed for this study pointed to this “aspirational” characteristic by name. But, as these Happy Homes management personnel also made clear, “aspirational” should not be taken to mean the customer is at an economic or status deficit. At least as professed by Happy Homes management, the typical Happy Homes customer has, for all intents and purposes, already arrived at the high-class station. As Happy Homes managers tell it, the typical customer is not looking for products to give him status he does not otherwise have but is looking for products that will duly reflect his achieved status to others. In the words of an upper level Happy Homes manager, “the customer is aspirational, this doesn’t mean they’re striving to achieve...they’ve already achieved, they know that. What they’re trying to do is complete the picture, present a home that

really *says* they've arrived, they're *there*, financially yes, but it's really about *arriving in style*.”

Undoubtedly, we read this as a contemporary confirmation of Veblen's early 20th century précis on “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen 1912; 2002). But there is also a quirk, and the customer who might buy Happy Homes products to show he's “arrived in style” sets up a problem that Happy Homes has to help solve. Happy-Homes-the-organization is an upscale home furnishings retailer, but Happy-Homes-the-brand is the up-scale *lifestyle* expressed *at home*. The aspirational customer, buying Happy Homes products for status-enhancement, cannot fully exploit the status potential unless the symbols of prestige can be made somehow, and somewhat regularly, visible to others. And, insofar as this holds, the distinction-value of the Happy Homes branded home can only be fully realized through entertaining, that is by inviting the eyes of others inside the domestic sphere where they may gaze appreciatively (and perhaps enviously) at the branded domestic scene and, by extension, increase their estimation of its owner.

Correspondingly, Happy Homes marketing puts a central emphasis “entertaining.” Merchandise descriptions (both those in marketing materials and those provided to sales associates as “talking points”) include references to an item's value for the practice of entertaining in the home, for example, in reference to a butler's tray, marketing materials suggest the tray will “make it easy for your guests to set down their drinks.” The Happy Homes brand of entertaining is not ‘beer and chips’ and, it is fairly clear that Happy

Homes materials present a picture of entertaining that is upscale and high class. Take, for instance, one top-of-the-mast headline from national marketing materials that reads: “We’ve gathered all the tools you need to host parties at home in style and ease,” and then follows with guidance on how to use Happy Homes products to host, with style: a cocktail party, a dinner party, an olive oil tasting party, and a wine and goat cheese party. Conceivably, the audience for this primer on hosting a cocktail or dinner party could include the hoi polloi, but the reference to hosting an olive tasting, or a wine and goat cheese party, speaks to a connoisseurship typically the reserve of the higher classes. The trope of social hospitality is also extended through the physical presentation of the store and store floor sets include accoutrements (for sale) that suggest the act of entertaining. If you walk the Happy Homes floor you will see, for instance, calligraphied place cards on the dining tables, cheese trays and wine glasses on the coffee tables, and teapots and teacups on trays nestled neatly on the beds.

Happy Homes customers must be able to realize their purchases as symbolic capital, and the Happy Homes organization grasps the critical importance of this fact. Happy Homes goods, of course, provide use-value to members of the household that consumes them – couches offer a place to sit, tables a place to eat, and beds a place to sleep – and the organization does promote the utility of its wares. But in that the success of the Happy Homes brand stems much less from the purvey of product use-value than the product’s value as a marker of conspicuous, and ‘tasteful,’ consumption, that

consumption needs a way to be made conspicuous, and the Happy Homes lifestyle arrayed in the private home needs to put on a public face. If the Happy Homes consumer is to believe she can realize a profit of status above a sufficiency of utility (arguably, the point of the Happy Homes lifestyle brand), she has to identify, and normalize, a way for her Happy Homes-adorned private home to “go public.” Happy Homes solves this problem by creating a brand that links status to hospitality.

The status-conferring powers of the Happy Homes brand result from an audience at once larger, and more poised to be impressed, than members of the private household where the product’s use-values are mined, and others must be invited into the home. Though we can reasonably expect the consumer could figure this out for herself, Happy Homes does not leave the issue to chance and in its effort to define its brand and market its products (as well as control its labor force), it draws on a cultural norm where bringing others into one’s private space is about extending hospitality and entertaining in style at home. Accordingly, showing the consumer how to do this is a central feature of Happy Homes brand marketing. Happy Homes marketing materials are infused with images and text referring to the creative and impressive possibilities, all embedded in the Happy Homes lifestyle, for the Happy Homes consumer to open her home to guests: “Welcome friends and family to a festive table,” “Invite friends and family over for a memorable evening,” “No matter the occasion, make a room ready to welcome guests,” “Make visitors feel completely at home,” and *always* “Entertain guests in style.” In that the

Happy Homes brand is selling status as much as it is furnishings, and so must convince its consumer that she can realize status-value in bringing the brand into her home, it elaborates a branded story of hospitality. Using this story, the consumer can imagine her home in public view, and picture how the Happy Homes style of “entertaining at home” realizes brand prestige.

Happy Homes positions its lifestyle brand as a domain of class distinction. In the meanings of the brand, to furnish one’s home with branded Happy Homes merchandise is to possess symbolic capital advertizing not only the *fact* of high-class status but also its *normative superiority* over lesser class styles of life. If Happy Homes class-based brand meanings operate successfully by signifying ascendant class status joined to a virtuosity of taste, they do so by prescribing standards that discern legitimate embodiments of upper middle class taste from “illegitimate” tastes belonging to the classes (and classed brands) below. This brand message, broadcast to Happy Homes consumers at large though ambitious marketing effects, is also broadcast within the workplace. Both Happy Homes managers and associates, rarely thinking to point to product quality as a measure of Happy Homes superiority, regularly and enthusiastically hail – to their customers and to each other -- brand superiority based on “taste,” “style,” and “class.”

As one Happy Homes sales associate puts it, “Target tries to copy us all the time, but they never get it right. We’re classy. No matter what they do, Target can’t be classy. Face it, Target is tacky.” When this sales associate compares Happy Homes to Target, he

locates a prideful association with his employer's brand in a ranked system where the superior Happy Homes brand stands *above and in opposition to* the inferior Target brand, not by virtue of product quality, but by the ineluctable thing called "style" or "class." For Happy Homes workers, this is an extremely important feature of the brand and, as the upcoming chapters will attempt to show, the status entailments of the brand play a pivotal role in the Happy Homes system of work governance, and in the experience of the Happy Homes workers.

In organizational rhetoric, Happy Homes justifies its branded strategies of work control on the basis of holding to a 'customer first' policy. A 'customer first' policy is standard in most retail, and in service provision more broadly. Still, by privileging a particular type of consumer identity aligned with the class, status and lifestyle meanings of their brand, Happy Homes reconfigures this policy in an interesting way. What's unusual about the case of Happy Homes is not their 'customer first' philosophy, nor the association of brand with lifestyle, nor even the training techniques which encourage the worker to think like a customer and identify with the brand. What's remarkable about Happy Homes is the managerial alchemy by which the organization uses its brand to turn nascent worker class aspirations and anxieties into an active force of service labor. The managerial alchemy through which this is accomplished circulates through the mystique of the brand, and when Happy Homes 'makes up' the type of retail workers it needs, both in initial training and as part of on-going supervision on the floor, it does so by drawing

on this mystique and, specifically, by deploying the class (and gender) meanings of the brand as tools of organizational labor control.

But before Happy Homes can ‘make’ retail workers’ it must ‘mine’ them. Happy Homes does so in a particularly interesting fashion, related to the classed meanings of its brand. Thus, tellingly, the significance of the brand to the Happy Homes labor process is *first* expressed in the Happy Homes practice of recruitment.

RECRUITING HAPPY HOMES WORKERS

Guests of the Happy Homes retail store stand in proximity to the trappings of affluence. Happy Homes home furnishings come in at a high price point, with sofas costing as much as \$6,000, media storage units \$5,000, and bedroom suites \$3,000. Even Happy Homes loss leaders can come dear: logo embossed soaps come in at \$40, plain white vases at \$80, and serving platters at \$100. Not everyone can afford to furnish a home with Happy Homes products. Granted there are those who would find Happy Homes “off-the-rack” products lacking in comparison to custom furnishings and one-of-a-kind objects d’art. But, in a ‘new’ economy characterized by the rising dominance of low paid service work, a shrinking middle class, and contingent employment, the majority of consumers would be likely to consider the Happy Homes brand a mark of affluence, and unlikely to consume Happy Homes products across the board.

If the starting price of decorative pillows at Happy Homes hovers at \$50, starting pay for front-line hourly retail work is set at \$8.50. At a significant remove from the income implied by the cost of an Happy Homes lifestyle, an Happy Homes employee working 30 hours a week would gross approximately \$1020 per month, or \$23,249 a year. While this may lead many to wonder how and why guests of this high-line branded retail space could become, in such significant numbers, willing members of a low paid retail service work force, Happy Homes retail workers and management well-comprehend the underlying logic that leads seekers of the Happy Homes brand to work for the brand. Within Happy Homes work culture, this logic is articulated through the concept of “shopper-lites.”

Happy Homes Shopper-Lites

Happy Homes staff believes new employees can be effectively culled from a subgroup of store visitors designated as the “shopper-lites.” In workplace parlance, “shopper-lites” are those customers who admire the Happy Homes lifestyle brand but can’t afford it. According to one Happy Homes assistant manager, shopper-lite behavior can be summed up as follows:

They come in the store and go through every zone, checking out the new stuff, and they’re usually here for a while. Most of them aren’t going to buy anything, or not anything big anyway. And some of their faces get familiar, I recognize some of them because they come in all the time.

As a big player in the retail home furnishings industry, Happy Homes markets up-line products associated with the Happy Homes lifestyle brand, itself positioned to appeal to the category of consumers whose capacity to afford high-line, big ticket merchandise is matched by their desire for lifestyle brands. Happy Homes marketing strategies and price-line indicate a lifestyle brand directed toward consumers with upper-middle to upper class status and incomes. However, like many up-line retailers, Happy Homes stores attract a variety of visitors, including those whose primary home furnishing purchases will be made elsewhere at mid-to-low-line retailers or big box stores.

On any given day, the Happy Homes retail shop sees a good number of visitors who, upon leaving the store, have failed not only to make big-ticket purchases but any purchase at all. This will not surprise most retail workers or retail shoppers. To do retail work is to be familiar with the on-going, unending chore of sorting serious shoppers from those who are ‘just looking.’ In consumer culture, visiting retail venues ‘to look’ without intention to buy is a widespread practice, constituting a commonplace and acceptable leisure pastime. This practice is what many of us know as “window-shopping.” For all but the most exclusive retail outfits, contending with window shoppers is a taken-for-granted reality of doing business.

Window shoppers are there to look not buy, and to the extent window-shopping is a form of recreation, these individuals stand at a remove from the retailers’ consumer base. However, in the context of a branded retail environment such as Happy Homes, the

window shopper's failure to make a purchase should not be confused as a refusal to consume. To be 'just looking' at Happy Homes is also to be entering, and so susceptible to, the allure of brand culture. The Happy Homes guest who does not consume the tangible Happy Homes retail product nonetheless consumes the brand experience.

Happy Homes retail workers know this. As one sales associate insightfully pronounced, "Coming to the store is like breathing happy gas, you don't know you breathed it but it affects you." Though this sales associate was not familiar with the notion of "brandsapes," he aptly summed up the concept. The concept of the 'brandscape' (otherwise known as 'entertainment retail') refers to retail stores that are carefully, and sometimes extravagantly, designed to firmly anchor visiting customers' identification with the brand by lodging it in a deeply embedded emotional experience (Riewoldt 2002; Wickstrom 2006).

Without question, the brand experience visitors receive by frequenting the Happy Homes store is designed to encourage a desire that will lead to consumption of the branded product itself. But, as our sales associate recognized, the brand experience does not have to lead to a purchase to have important effect. Spending a half hour talking with a female guest on her inaugural visit to the store, our sales associate understood the guest's enthusiasm as a response to an emotionally stimulating and desire-producing Happy Homes *experience*. When the guest left without making a purchase, the sales associate was not worried, nor was his confidence in his retail skills shaken. The

brandscape, he felt, had done its work, preparing for the time when he would do his (the ultimate goal of which is sales). The newbie visitor would come back, and on her return visits might decide to purchase Happy Homes product.

Of this particular shopper, we can't be sure, but of shoppers-at-large, we can be confident that some significant proportion of those who visit the Happy Homes store become seduced by the brand experience. Like "happy gas" the brandscape changes how you feel, and like other intensely positive emotional experiences, the memory of being under "happy gas" creates an effect that continues after exposure. Workers realize that guests to the Happy Homes store are consuming the brand experience, and know the effects are not confined to the duration of their stay.

Recruiting Shopper-Lites

Seeing the promise that a brand experience might create the paying consumers of the future, Happy Homes staff also grasps the probability that the brand experience will ready a front-line workforce. It is in consuming the brand experience that "shopper-lites" are created, and come to possess the raw materials that make for branded workers. When, at Happy Homes, retail workers identify window shoppers as "shopper-lites" they are alluding to their belief that those who enter the Happy Homes space only 'to look' still desire (or are soon to desire) the brand.

Given the scope of Happy Homes marketing efforts and its remarkably successful efforts to insert the brand into the parlance of consumer culture as a trope of “good taste,” brand desire – or at the very least, brand familiarity – is likely to precede a stop at the store for all but a minority of visitors. Individuals who seek out and consume the brand experience, but, because of financial constraint, do not rigorously consume the branded product, have the makings of the branded Happy Homes worker. They are the target of Happy Homes’ need for new labor.

These shopper-lites may make a modest purchase, a candle or picture frame, something that signifies the Happy Homes lifestyle, and allows them to tote a piece of the Happy Homes brand experience back from this virtual home to their real homes, but they are unlikely to select big-ticket items to furnish those homes. Within the workplace culture of Happy Homes a rich language has evolved to designate and describe this particular subset of shoppers. While it’s not unusual for these customers to spend time trying out sofas, opening entertainment armoire doors, and admiring dining sets, these “shopper lites” are discussed by store personnel as brand tourists who visit the store as much to “vacation from their Target lives,” as to shop. One enthusiastic shopper-lite put it well. After browsing the Happy Homes’ Bed and Bath department for a full half hour, and settling on the purchase of a small clearance candle at \$10.00, this shopper exclaimed:

I'd like to live here! I wish this were my bedroom. When I'm here everything's so perfect. I don't want to go home to my own house. My house doesn't look like this. I want this to be my bedroom, I want this to be my home.

According to Happy Homes employees, this category constitutes a subset of guests whose purchases rarely exceed the fifty dollar mark, but who dream of the brand and come to the store in order to consume *in situ* the Happy Homes brand experience. These shoppers are there to collect a few souvenirs from a brand culture that signifies an elevated social status, and that would, in imagination, promise ascendancy in social ranking. As one small-purchase shopper effused:

I want my house to be Happy Homes, to look just like this store. I'll get this pillow, I saw them in my friend's house, she has all this (points to living room layout), and when I got home from her house I hated the way my place looked. But I love this pillow, it's so 'Happy Homes.' I know what...I should just start coming here everyday! (laughs)

Happy Homes employees are instructed to watch out for phrases like this. When a customer says something like, "I should just start coming here everyday," the sales associate is trained to respond with an inquiry about the person's interest in working at Happy Homes. But even as our customer expresses desire to return to Happy Homes, and so becomes a potential recruit, she likewise expresses the meanings of the brand, hinting at their intersection with class aspirations, pointing to their association with class distinctions rooted in consumption choices. Brand keepsakes become the stuff of class and status dreams. For those whose aspirations respond to the promise of the brand,

token purchases can stand in as imaginative objects to close some of the distance between the promise of a certain style of life which greets them inside the Happy Homes doors and the limits to its attainment.

According to one Happy Homes retail worker, these shoppers are the ones “with taste but not money” for Happy Homes living (to be distinguished from those with neither, those with both) who have come to find a way to “disguise Target furnishings” with a Happy Homes vase, candle or coaster set. And not coincidentally, they are the pool from which Happy Homes picks its front line service personnel.

To the extent the Happy Homes brand has found an iconic place in their heart, these customers make up a reserve retail service labor force that Happy Homes management turns to in times of need. A stack of employment applications sits at every register counter, and store employees are educated on how to pick up subtle leads from customers that might indicate a customer’s affinity for Happy Homes brand along with an unspoken desire to work at the Happy Homes store. It is organizational policy to offer monetary reward to sales associates who “refer” customers in this way, and each employment application has a space dedicated to writing in the name of “Referring Happy Homes Associate.”

That Happy Homes relies on the recruiting potential in this subset of customers becomes palpably evident during seasonal hiring times. These are times when Happy

Homes must bring on a large number of additional front-line staff to handle upsurges in sales volume – a process that must happen quickly and can involve, in some stores, the hiring of over 200 new employees in less than a month’s time. It is a lucky fit, as least as held in Happy Homes lore, that these are also times that see an upsurge in the number of shopper-lites who visit the store. At the beginning of each seasonal hiring surge, Happy Homes holds employee meetings in which management rallies sales associates to sharpen up their eye for these potential hire-ees. Meeting attendants are reminded to share with “prospectives” the benefit of a significant employee discount, giving round estimates of dollar differences on items a shopper-lite admired.

In that a large proportion of sales associates were themselves recruited this way, their ability to identify prospective hires from the pool of store visitors relies on keying into their ability to recognize “self in other.” At \$8.50 an hour, this ability is likely still with them. Management relies on this in its recruitment process, and indeed, in that this process works and obviates the need to hire recruiting services or pay for ads, management has corralled not only reasonably priced service labor, but virtually free recruiters.

Through the relentless efforts of a goliath marketing and advertising machine, Happy Homes has created nation-wide recognition of and cross-class desire for what its product represents. Some people can afford it, some can’t. But it is specifically the subject who experiences the desire for this Happy Homes “world of meaning” without

the means to attain it, who constitutes the ideal Happy Homes service employee. As an added benefit, the process that produces this particular type of subject also represents a successful way to externalize the costs of employee recruitment and, to some extent, the rudiments of employee training.

This policy of culling front-line workers from its window shoppers allows Happy Homes to harness consumer desires as a raw material that can be worked on and molded through training and management into an eventual self-directing labor force. While models of service management as a process of “routinization-by-transformation” (Leidner 1993) or “employee empowerment” (Smith 2001) tell us much about the ways in which service management attempts to construct self-directing workers, they do not reveal how labor process control - and the laborer himself - becomes secured in the branded retail service context. In branded retail, the center of the process through which workers are transformed and become self-directing is the brand, and worker identification with brand can start long before the job becomes a glimmer in the new hire’s eye.

Shopper-lites-become-Happy-Homes-recruits are already identified with the employer’s brand before they’ve even filled out an employment app. In the section that follows, I look at this initial “buy-in” phase, and take a brief look at selection criteria Happy Homes imposes when choosing new members for its front-line retail staff.

THE “BUY-IN”

When I got the job at Happy Homes, it felt like a privilege. It made me feel a whole lot better about myself as compared to the places I worked before, I guess because Happy Homes was a whole lot classier. (Male associate, previously employed at a retail specialty chain store)

To work at Happy Homes, what an honor! (Female associate, previously employed in office supply sales)

For the Happy Homes labor process to work, the employee’s class anxieties must first be provoked by the brand. A Happy Homes manager made this point unambiguously, if in different language, while sharing thoughts on what goes into making a good Happy Homes employee. Asked what she thought might be the most important factor in ‘making up’ a good front-line sales associate, this manager answered without hesitation:

There’s a buy-in. The employee has to have made a buy-in. Because the first thing (that makes for a good employee) is that they love the brand and love the product, they want that in their home...you know, even if they can’t afford, they want it...they don’t have to have it, they just have to want it... so, absolutely, I’d say the first thing if you want to get a good employee is there has to be that buy-in. If you’ve got that buy-in, if the employee buys-in, the rest follows.

As suggested by the Happy Homes recruitment practices, many future employees have begun the “buy-in” process before they start their job. When they start their sales associate position, newbie workers recruited from the ranks of shopper lites are poised to be impressed and, to the extent they’ve been enamored by the cachet of the brand, hopefuls may see the Happy Homes retail opportunity as something of “an honor” or a

“privilege.” Whether perceived as the chance to work in “classier” place, impress one’s friends, or conquer self-doubts and class anxieties stimulated by the Happy Homes shopping experience, many workers talk about the Happy Homes job as if it has allowed them some measure of status enhancement which, in return, has made them feel better about themselves.

Aside from its fancy trappings, the job – or more accurately, the work the job requires – differs little from retail work everywhere. Happy Homes retail workers assist customers, ring up sales, stock, move, manage and arrange merchandise, and of course, clean up and maintain the shop floor. To be sure, if incoming workers were transitioning from particularly low ranking entry-level jobs, say counter-worker at a fast-food joint, gas station attendant, or even retail clerk at a big-box discount store, making a first foray into a “dressed up” and “classed up” work scene, the Happy Homes job could be considered a step up in the world -- but such is not the common case.

Of the Happy Homes employees interviewed for this study, only one was making a transition from a bottom-tier entry-level job (e.g., fast food counter work), and even though five did enter Happy Homes directly from other retail employment, their prior retail employment was either with specialty retail or mid-line department stores (as opposed to, for instance, big box retail such as Walmart or Target). At a remove from the bottom tiers of entry-level employment, all but two of the fifteen Happy Homes associates in this study had earned at least an Associate’s degree, and seven had earned a

bachelor's degree. More than half of the respondents had held, or were currently holding, low-level white- or pink-collar jobs, for instance, copy store clerk, office clerk, elementary school teacher aide, flight attendant, telecom salesperson, golf instructor, marketing assistant, hair stylist, and small business owner. Three of the participants were women re-entering the work force following a hiatus at home raising children and taking care of families (the hiatus ranged from two to five years).

The interview subjects were, overall, typical of the Happy Homes workforce as a whole such that, broadly, Happy Homes workers can be seen to fall out into a core and a peripheral group. In the first, men and women associates have held fairly solid, if not terribly lucrative, jobs in the recent past, and enter the Happy Homes job, in some cases replacing their prior job, but in many instances, holding down both jobs at once. In the second camp are women re-entering the workforce following some period of time-out raising children and taking care of families.

When asked if it took a special kind of person to work at Happy Homes, managers tended to give the same initial response. They rejected the notion that it takes a special kind of person, claiming that "anyone could work at Happy Homes," yet, further into the interview these same managers gave descriptions of specific qualities that an Happy Homes worker should have (the initial prompt -- "does it take a special kind of person to work at Happy Homes?" -- may have provoked management caution in respect to EEOC principles leading them to claim that anyone could work at Happy Homes). The

“special” qualities that managers believe a Happy Homes sales associate should possess fall into the category of “soft skills.” For instance, once they got talking, managers would say that it was important for a Happy Homes worker to “love the brand,” also emphasizing that Happy Homes front-line employees should be “out-going,” “polite,” “cheerful,” and “enthusiastic.” One manager pointed out that that she looks for the virtue of patience in new recruits, explaining that “some people do not have the patience for waiting on our clientele, you have to have a personality for it, you have to patience,” and another manager mentioned the importance of the applicant’s appearance, explaining that it can be “all about presentation, if a person presents themselves well it makes a difference.”

Even before managers make their selections, a certain amount of sifting has already occurred. In that Happy Homes plucks a good number of its personnel from the shopper lite camp there is a selection bias in the recruitment process itself, such that those not likely to visit a Happy Homes store become much less likely to get a Happy Homes job. And a high prestige home furnishing store in a tony shopping mall does not draw in the widest range of comers -- as one employee so bluntly put it, the store does not get “the riff-raff.” So, from the outset, the pool of potential hires is bounded by a “lower limit” that excludes, if not the “riff-raff”, then those whose lives and lifestyles do not embrace, or at least aspire toward embracing, the Happy Homes brand. Though a store manager will tell you that virtually “anyone can work at Happy Homes,” not anyone can.

Compounding the selection bias that comes with the practice of pulling new hires from the customer base, Happy Homes cherry picks from the array of potential workers, pulling out those that have mastered the “soft skills” it values, leaving out others whose soft talents fall short. When it chooses new workers, management favors those who possess an attractive appearance, display conviviality and interactional competency, have some sense of a home décor aesthetic, and, of course, exude enthusiasm for the brand.

It is, for instance, illustrative of this point that of the two group interviews observed for this study (including, in all, a total of sixteen interviewees) the four individuals who did not end up receiving a job offer were those who displayed “poor performance” on one or more of these soft skills. In contrast to the interviewees who won the job – to a person, professionally dressed, well-groomed, well-spoken, enthusiastic and agreeable – three of the four not hired arrived to the interview casually dressed in jeans or sweats, and less than perfectly groomed (for instance, one woman was a need of a hair color touch-up, sporting a good half-inch of grey at the roots), and the third, though well put-together on the outside, spoke in a loud, overly confident manner, using coarse language and incorrect grammar and, perhaps as damning, insisting on comparing a down-line home furnishings brand (Target) favorably to Happy Homes wares.

Whether you take their measure by their job experience, educational attainment, consumer tastes, personality, or just self-presentation or looks, the persons who get the

Happy Homes job are not slouches. But neither are they members of the elite social ranks that make up the store's main customer base. Though there are doubtless some exceptions, for the majority of Happy Homes hires the draw of the job comes from the status-rich character of the brand and some, as yet shapeless, notion of the Happy Homes job as status enhancement.

There is, of course, nothing wrong that Happy Homes worker wannabes – who suspect that affiliation with Happy Homes brings status -- would want to experience the enhanced self-feeling that might come with the status enhancement they suspect to enjoy through the job. And, if we ask those who do work at Happy Homes, it appears the 'wannabes' suspicions are spot-on. As one associate describes:

After I got hired at Happy Homes I felt like I was on top of the world, because people would be like, "oh, I've seen you before...you work at Happy Homes"...and that made me feel good, all my friends, um, everyone found out I worked at Happy Homes and they were "oh my gosh, you work at Happy Homes!"

Many of the workers interviewed for this study not only report feeling good about their Happy Homes jobs but good about themselves as a result, some even pointing to new and improved aspects of their identity discovered in the act of working the Happy Homes sales floor. Returning to an opening quote, the employee who feels that Happy Homes employment is "a privilege" puts this point in focus, telling us his own self-feeling changed as a result of the job: "It made me feel a whole lot better about myself as

compared to the places I worked before, I guess because Happy Homes was a whole lot classier.”

While many Happy Homes workers report feeling better about themselves because of their job, we would be making a mistake to conclude this positive outcome is the result of chance. The process by which Happy Homes workers’ self-feeling changes is not arbitrary, nor is it idiosyncratic. As the discussion of Happy Homes recruitment suggests, there are labor process objectives at work here, and the employee’s perception of his job and concept of self are elements of great interest to Happy Homes management. Indeed, the identity the employee claims for himself *as a consequence of internalizing brand meanings* provides Happy Homes an indispensable resource for ensuring productive sales and service work, and compliant sales and service workers.

To be sure, prior to their employ, workers-to-be may have done some measure of this internalization on their own, but once they’re on the job, the organization takes over as guide. Happy Homes puts the meanings of its brand to on-going use in daily management and supervisory efforts, playing on aspects of workers’ class and gender selves, and tapping into workers’ class anxieties as way to inspire their identification with the brand. Key to this effort is the process by which Happy Homes reframes its low-level retail work as high-class hospitality – a process that unfolds within the on-going reproduction of the front-line labor process, but is initiated in the new employee training program. The following chapter takes up the question of how the organization attempts

to shape its new hires, examining the methods and practices Happy Homes uses in its employee training and the various outcomes this training has for newbie Happy Homes workers.

CHAPTER 3

NEW EMPLOYEE TRAINING

“Your role at Happy Homes is different from other Sales Associate positions you may have held or experienced.” (The first line of the Happy Homes training handbook)

In its effort to produce a cooperative and productive front-line retail labor force, Happy Homes selects its front-line recruits from the population of shopper-lites who visit the store. While most of these recruits have already bought into the appeal of Happy Homes goods and are familiar with the grammar of the brand, Happy Homes needs to organize these brand sentiments in ways that encourage the kind of front-line labor it wants. It does this through an ambitious three-part program of new employee training. In this chapter I examine the Happy Homes’ methods of new employee training, asking how the training program draws on the meanings of the high-status brand to recast retail work as hospitality and retail workers as hosts. The chapter concludes with an examination of the influence of the Happy Homes employee discount on employees’ experience of their training.

HOSPITALITY TRAINING

To stand in the middle of the Happy Homes brandscape is to enter an imaginary space of hosts and their guests: the open doors of a mahogany bar topped with cocktail shakers and martini glasses reveals a collection of fine wines; a fully set dining table holds individual name cards which, in calligraphy, tell the seating plan for six; easy

chairs draped with throws are angled toward a thick cushioned couch, all anchored by a coffee table set with scented candles, glossy art books, and a tray of cordial glasses. Reinforcing the image of its retail store as a warm, upscale home ready to welcome visitors, Happy Homes considers customers as “guests” to store. As Happy Homes training literature explains, “We think of the people who visit our stores as our guests. All our guests should leave the store having had a positive experience from beginning to end.”

Here, the retail environment comes off less a place of commercial activity than of sociability and conviviality. It is a place where guests are welcomed. And, as might be expected, guests need hosts. In the world of Happy Homes training, the project of turning out a productive and cooperative retail work force begins with the project of making incoming low-level retail workers into gracious, accommodating hosts. But these are not just any hosts. In accordance with the brand meanings, the ‘home’ and its occupants are specified as embodiments of affluence, and when employees become hosts they are hosts as hosts would be from the upper classes.

As the Happy Homes retail store effects a remarkably successful simulation of the affluent middle-class home always at the ready to welcome guests, its new employee training will provide these needed hosts. The theme of retail-work-as-hosting dominates the training protocol, and though first-day trainees may not suspect the degree to which this theme will be developed and refined over the course of the training meetings they

will attend, it is prefigured in the introductory demeanor of the Happy Homes trainer. From the first moments of the trainer's introduction, new hires are audience to a type of casual but *refined sociability* that will not only set the tone for the training hours to follow, but will also mark the character of their future interactive service work at Happy Homes. A story from my fieldwork helps demonstrate how, in the early moments of Happy Homes training, trainer display of hosting behavior anticipates the content of the formal training materials and sets the tone for proper Happy Homes trainee behavior.

At the store I studied, new hires arriving for their first night of training are instructed to wait for their trainer at a small grouping of mall café tables adjacent to the main doors of the Happy Homes store. Though the training is to start promptly at 6 p.m., a Happy Homes staff member informed our waiting group that our trainer had received an unscheduled visit from a Happy Homes corporate executive and would be delayed as a result. When the trainer arrived, it was almost half past the hour. As she exited the Happy Homes store, heading in our direction, the trainer's fast step indicated haste and, along with her frowning expression, her overall demeanor spoke of distress. Yet, very soon, nearing our tables, the trainer was smiling, and when she greeted us, it was with an easy poise:

Hello everyone...welcome! My name is Peggy. I'm so sorry to make you wait, but I'm so glad you're here. Let's get this training started, what do you say? Just follow me...this way."

This friendly greeting caused many of these first-day trainees to smile, lightening the overall mood of the waiting group. As one trainee remarked, by way of a whispered aside, “She seems nice...maybe this is going to be more fun than I thought.”

Much like a good host, Peggy had greeted her trainees as if they were welcome guests and, despite the stress of a corporate visit, the delay, and the clear need for haste, had managed to set a tone of conviviality, and, at least for some, inspire a happier sense of anticipation about the evening training to come. But this display brought another equally important inflection to the evening. Peggy’s display of poise, and the self-control it represented, also worked to communicate a particular type of decorum. Many trainees had had the chance to witness Peggy’s original hasty, frowning demeanor as she exited the Happy Homes store, and, indeed, the trainer’s look of distress was obvious enough to cause one new hire – upon first catching sight of Peggy – to make comment. Addressing her co-trainees at large, this young woman put into words what observant others might well have been thinking: “Look...I think that’s the trainer...oooh! I don’t think the visit with that bigwig from corporate went well!”

But if trainees saw Peggy’s distress, just moments later they were also the recipients of her affable and cordial welcome. In performing such a quick recovery from distress, and convincingly offering her trainees this genial, courteous welcome, Peggy was demonstrating a class-specific style of politesse – that is, a style of politesse commonly associated with the social behavior of upper class members. It is a hallmark

of the well bred that crude or negative emotions be put aside for the sake of good manners and pleasant sociability. As a representative of Happy Homes, Peggy performed a class-marked etiquette, sending the message that proper decorum at Happy Homes requires the ability to control one's less refined emotions in the service of performing gracious hospitality. In doing so, this trainer gave a clue to a lesson that would be later developed in the training proper: not only do workers at Happy Homes take on the role of host, but they do so according to a set of decidedly upper-class standards.

Peggy's dramatization of upper-class hosting etiquette did not stop here. Following the greeting at the mall café tables, Peggy ushered her group of new hires trainees along a mall corridor and into a private conference room, where she politely asked all to take a seat. Excusing herself briefly while she retrieved materials from an adjoining room, Peggy returned to the assembly of waiting trainees in a manner reminiscent of the hostess to her party. Pausing at the door to smile and glance around the room, she entered at an easy pace, and proceeding to the head of the conference table, took time and care to acknowledge several of the seated new hires with eye contact, a nod, or a smile. In place, Peggy hit a further note of sociability as, still standing, she leaned forward, put her hands on the table, and offered the following greeting:

Hi everyone, I'm Peggy...good to see all of you! I've met some of you. I see some familiar faces here. Hi Sarah...Hi John, how are you?...Hi Lisa...Hi Deborah...Hi Jen.

In this brief moment of name recognition, Peggy struck a chord of familiarity and informality, but with a measure of social adroitness, stayed her hostess pose, so keeping the deference of her assembled trainees. But Peggy's name recognition of trainees is in itself an important fact, and one that speaks to a sophisticated brand of social finesse. It is in the role of upper class host to recall the names of her guests, and in this feat, Peggy exemplified another element of upper class decorum – one that, given Happy Homes hiring methods, does not come without effort.

Hiring at Happy Homes is the purview of Peggy's super-ordinates, and if Peggy were to be involved in the hiring of these trainees it would only be in the most peripheral way. Even in cases where Peggy had received introduction to new employees, the Happy Homes hiring process is typically rushed, occurs in the course of normal work routine, and is rapidly discharged within the span of a few minutes. Moreover, in times of high seasonal need, Happy Homes can bring on as many as 10-20 new hires in a week's time. Peggy's exchanges with the newly hired would be perfunctory, making it unlikely that she would recall names without a deliberate attempt to do so. But it is in her successful attempt, against these odds, that Peggy models an important aspect of hosting at Happy Homes. In the branded Happy Homes retail context, customers are guests that deserve individual attention. And though hundreds of guests may traverse the Happy Homes retail floor in any given day, each is to be acknowledged and treated as a unique individual. As the Happy Homes training manual advises:

Our guests are all individuals, with their own unique and personal style.
At Happy Homes, we treat each guest as the unique individual they are!
At Happy Homes, we believe each guest deserves our personal attention!

While individual sales associates cannot be expected to know their guests by name, Peggy's behavior as trainer nonetheless reflects the Happy Homes motto that all 'guests' be regarded with respect as unique individuals. Of equal significance, Peggy is modeling a perquisite of the upper class host. In the elite ranks, good hosts make an effort to remember – and to use - their guests' names. It is a mark of good breeding to take the time at a social gathering to individually acknowledge each guest who attends, and apparently – if Peggy's manner of greeting her trainees is any indication – this is a mark of class that also inscribes the terms of proper Happy Homes conduct.

Peggy continued, following up these personal acknowledgements with one final pronouncement of welcome. Lifting her palms and surveying the room, Peggy smiled broadly and, in a voice one might use to greet comers to a special event, capped off her informal greetings with an enthusiastic reception addressed to the room as a whole: “I want to welcome you *all* to Happy Homes New Employee Orientation! Thank you all for coming!” This introduction had such a surprisingly hospitable, celebratory, and promising tone that I wrote about it at length in my field notes:

After Peggy's welcome, I felt for a moment I should clap. I feel baffled and expectant – baffled in that this warm welcome somehow doesn't fit with a job training setting, expectant in that the heartiness of the welcome seems to promise something...what?...something good to come? Reading

the tone, that's what it seems. I admit, that after the personable and spirited greeting, I feel a momentary, pre-analytic kind of happiness and excitement about the training itself. But I also feel a little confused, as this is not what I expected of a retail job-training program. I glance over at Lisa and Ann (two other new trainees I chatted with before the session started), and think I see on their faces something like what I'm feeling... a confused eagerness? They are smiling back at Peggy, but they look to me to be a little confused. I'm thinking that such a gracious, host-of-the-party welcome might make for a kind of cognitive/emotional dissonance for job trainees. Before meeting Peggy, I'd guess that most of us knew, at least generally, how to dispose ourselves to the events of evening: our roles being that of newly hired retail employees at the first job training session, with Peggy's role that of "employer" in the guise of manager in the guise of trainer. A welcome like hers in a setting like this makes me feel a bit unsure on my social feet – are we to be compliant trainees, or gracious guests at a social gathering, or eager participants in/consumers of a fun, exciting event?

With her open-handed gesture of welcome, Peggy wrapped up a ritual of greeting that – from the early nods, to the by-name hellos, to its enthusiastic finale - was not without effect on her trainees. As mentioned earlier, Peggy's ability to call some trainees by name was impressive, but it also represents an effective interactional tool by which to enhance trainees' disposition toward the training as a whole. As one to be included in the by-name greeting, I was amazed to hear Peggy remember my name. We'd been introduced in the course of my hiring, but it was on the fly while Peggy was working, and our interchange was very brief – only a few seconds – a bit harried, and altogether unremarkable. Indeed, on this evening I barely remembered her. But in her ability to remember me, Peggy made a positive impression. Though only one of over 20 trainees, I was not just a face in the crowd, but important in my own right. Moreover, I found

myself inspired toward positive feelings about the training as a whole and, in a way, called to be a responsible participant.

That Peggy's behavior might have had similar affect on other new hires came out later during break, when the trainee, Lisa, exclaimed:

That was kind of cool! I can't believe Peggy knew who I was, how did she know my name? I don't even remember meeting her before. She's good.

Another trainee, John, agreed that he was pleasantly surprised to be called by name, adding, "It made me feel good, I wouldn't of thought she'd remember me, yeah, I like Peggy, she seems really nice." And, confirming my sense that to receive personal recognition in this context could also inspire a sense of responsibility toward the training, Lisa added, "Yeah, I like her too, but, so much for slacking off tonight... she knows who we are."

Not the ambience entry-level retail employees are likely to expect in their job training, the sociable mood Peggy set for the evening made a positive impression even on some whose names she didn't know. Peggy could not acknowledge all trainees by name, but then, she had taken care during her entrance to nod and smile to those she had not previously met - a gesture that could inspire a sense in these new hires that they had been individually welcomed to the training. Suzy, joining the break conversation, remarked that she was meeting Peggy for the first time tonight, and she agreed that Peggy seemed

“really nice.” This prompted another trainee, who was also meeting Peggy for the first time, to pitch in a more detailed account of her positive impressions: “I didn’t expect this. Peggy’s kind of like a boss, isn’t she? I heard she’s a manager, my managers at (names her previous retail employer) weren’t anything like this!” Turning to John, she adds:

They (managers at her prior job) probably wouldn’t even know your name if you’d worked there a year. I was all ready to zone out tonight, now I don’t think I could get away with it, she notices everyone. I thought this was going to be boring, but now it seems it might be fun. I hope the other managers are like her.

Such a protracted, personal and spirited welcome may seem unexpected as part of a job training session – more so, when we recall this is a training session for low-level retail work – but as the words of these first-night trainees reveal, it can be an effective way to create a receptive audience. However, in this brief performance, Peggy has done more than just create a receptive audience. She has communicated a set of very important job-related messages to the Happy Homes trainees.

First, this trainer has represented herself as host to a gathering, implicitly framing job-related activity, e.g., training, in the shape of a social event. In this, she has begun a process – to be continued in training – in which the paid (controlled) work of Happy Homes retail is reconstituted as a self-directed (recreational) social activity. Second, she has given class-specific parameters to how the role of host should be played. In her poised “recovery” from the distress of an unplanned corporate visit, gracious apology for

being late, and expression of pleasure at our presence, to the care she takes to acknowledge individual trainees and the ease with which she does so, Peggy has modeled an upper class version of hospitality.

By adopting the role of host, Peggy dramatizes Happy Homes' expectations of the role its new hires will inhabit, but by specifically demonstrating their class dimensions, she is drawing the first outlines of how that hospitality should be played out on the retail floor. This twenty-something retail manager-qua-trainer put on her hostess face, adopted a refined and gracious rhetoric, declined any 'folksy' talk or slang, and made sure to welcome and acknowledge her guests individually (that is, by name as she could, and if not, by directed smiles and nods). These behaviors constitute an important element of Happy Homes interactive service work, and mark an upper class hospitality, standing in contrast to both the casual hospitality more commonly seen in mid-line service performances (e.g., Target greeters) and to more formal types of business conduct in non-service venues.

Though the training will deepen new hires' understanding of their work as a form of upper class hospitality, Peggy's initial actions communicate that hosting behavior suitable to the realm of the upscale Happy Homes home furnishings brand will show an upper class decorum, demonstrating refinement, self-control, tact and poise. In the first few minutes of their training, new Happy Homes hires have not only been introduced to their trainer but have received a demonstration of the kind of well-bred sociability that

will be a primary focus of their upcoming training, and will eventually constitute the lion's share of their front-line retail interactive work.

As a harbinger of the training modules to come, when the Happy Homes trainer enters the training theatre as if hosting a social event for the well bred she is modeling the end result of the Happy Homes training process – a process by which Happy Homes management attempts to transform its entry-level retail workers into branded high-class hosts. In Happy Homes training, all roads lead to the brand, and the process of transforming workers into hosts begins to take more formal root with an introduction to the Happy Homes brand manifesto. Following their welcome, new recruits participate in the first of several training exercises that formulate the retail job as hosting, and calibrate that hosting according to the prerogatives of their employer's brand. Asked to open their manual to its beginning, trainees are instructed to follow along with the trainer as she reads aloud the manual's answer to a single question dominating the top of the first page. The question asks, "Who is Happy Homes?" Reading from the manual, the trainer gives the answer:

Warm. Comfortable. Welcoming. Happy Homes stores are known for being a place to explore new and unique home furnishings. It's the kind of place guests want to visit every time they walk by, just to see what new products are in store for them. We offer our guests high-style home furnishings with an exceptional service experience. Our guests are loyal to the Happy Homes brand and they look to you, the Sales Associate, to be a brand expert. As a brand expert, you have the power to make every guest's experience at Happy Homes the best, from beginning to end. Often, our guests have invested their time shopping for products on which

they're spending quite a bit of money – a dining table, a rug, a new set of dinnerware. They are trusting you to make their experience easy and fun. From greeting the guest promptly, to communicating in a winning way, determining and satisfying their needs, and showing them appreciation with actions as well as words, you have the power to exceed your guest's expectations.

While new Happy Homes recruits, and especially shopper-lites, may enter training with a broad understanding of what the Happy Homes brand is meant to signify, this training opens with an exercise that ensures these hires will be apprised of the *specific* terms by which Happy Homes itself defines the meaning of its brand to its employees. The imperative that Happy Homes retail service work should be implemented as high-class hospitality begins to take shape. The brand is “warm, comfortable, welcoming” but “high-style”...it is “unique” and though it may require “quite a bit of money” to possess, it is the kind of place “guests want to *visit* every time they walk by,” and when they do visit, they expect their experience to be “easy and fun.”

While the descriptors, “warm, comfortable, welcoming” and “easy and fun” conjure this workplace as a space of social hospitality, the designation of that space as “high-style” makes clear that it is not the hospitality of the corner bar. Rather, observant readers will imagine a space where a type of well bred and refined hospitality reigns. But what will happen during a guest's visit, or more aptly, what are Happy Homes employees expected to *make happen* when the guest visits the store? If new trainees are paying attention during this first exercise (and they should, as they will be quizzed shortly on its content), they will begin to understand that it is the job of the front-line Happy Homes

retail worker to make their guest's experience at Happy Homes "the best, from beginning to end." And the manifesto's answer to how this might be done reads much like a list of the responsibilities incumbent on the gracious host: greet and communicate with guests in a winning way, attend to their needs, and show them appreciation in both actions and words. The paid work of retail, as described on the first page of the Happy Homes training manual, begins to morph into a class-marked form of social hospitality.

Still, the fact remains that this is paid work, and low-level work at that, and this raises the question of why low-paid retail workers would be motivated to play the role of high-class social host, dedicated to ensuring their guests' experience "is the best, from beginning to end." An earlier discussion of Happy Homes recruiting methods advanced the argument that brand desire, coupled with class anxiety, can motivate individuals to seek work at Happy Homes, but, as a way of ensuring that the work gets done according to corporate vision, what kind of motivation does the employer try to instill in its front-line retail employees?

The manifesto gives a partial answer to this question. As this introductory literature explains, by making their guest's visit "easy and fun," the Happy Homes employee will merit the guest's trust and live up to her loyalty. Re-configuring the fleeting commercial relationship between a retail worker and retail customer as something much more solid, lasting and personal, by using words like "loyalty" and "trust" the Happy Homes training literature conjures workers' moral selves. Words like

“loyalty” and “trust” are loaded for most and, by injecting these terms into the training literature and using them to anchor a definition of its brand, Happy Homes begins the process of calling workers private selves – that is, not only their “social selves” but their “moral selves” – into the public place and the contracted practice of retail work.

Over the course of the training, these moral tropes will join with others in a complex set of normative directives that itself operates as part of Happy Homes labor process control, but in this early introduction of “trust” and “loyalty” we see how Happy Homes training attempts to set moral stakes in the ground of its front-line retail work. To the extent the private self of the worker intersects with his economic self, hosting well in the context of the Happy Homes job makes a debut in the training literature as a matter of trustworthiness and loyalty, a matter then of almost-personal honor. A motivation to do the work well? Perhaps. If in the process of realigning its hires’ normative orientations toward their employer’s priorities, Happy Homes training can successfully implant the logic of the brand into the calculus by which the worker estimates his personal worth, the worker may well be compelled to host his guests in the exemplary fashion as defined by, and finally profitable for, the Happy Homes enterprise.

TRAINING AND THE EMPLOYEE DISCOUNT

To successfully control its service labor process, Happy Homes management deploys two control strategies prior to the work process. The first inheres in its recruitment strategy; the second occurs when Happy Homes introduces the new

employee to her employee discount at the moment of hire. The discount need not be realized to have its effect; as a labor process control strategy, the discount both provides for worker *self-directed indoctrination* during the interlude that separates hiring from training, and makes the worker receptive to the Happy Homes training modules that will re-translate front-line workers to hosts and customers to guests.

The utility of the employee discount as a labor process control strategy relies on the power of the Happy Homes brand. The power of the brand relies on its ability to define boundaries of class distinction and therefore class identity. By defining specific (consumer) cultural boundaries to class, the brand can actualize both class aspirations and class anxieties in those who admire the brand but lack the means to have the brand lifestyle. Happy Homes seeks to turn these aspirations and anxieties into a source of productive service labor -- turning frustrated desire for the brand into work for the brand - - but must also try to avert the possibility that work at Happy Homes will frustrate aspirations attached to the brand, escalating class anxieties such that labor becomes unproductive or uncooperative. Happy Homes attempts to mediate these potential problems in many ways but at the outset, that is, at the point of hire, it does this through emphasis on its employee discount.

Before Happy Homes begins training the desiring consumers it has recruited into the self-directing branded workers it desires, those workers are set loose with knowledge of the substantial discount they'll receive once training is completed and work begins.

This can keep the employee motivated during the interlude that spans the moment of hire and the onset of training (anywhere from a few days to a week) but also positions her as receptive to the brand-derived metaphors that anchor Happy Homes training rhetoric. Furthermore, by encouraging the employee to imagine herself as possessor of brand merchandise, and so to further that employee's identification with the brand and its associated class meanings, the offer of discount provokes new hires toward a set of self-directed indoctrination behaviors that occur prior to and set the stage for those orchestrated in the formalized Happy Homes training.

Happy Homes workers may buy into the status-myths of the brand and use them toward the effective deployment of their interactive service labor, but the realities of front-line work at Happy Homes - low hourly wages, irregular work schedules, and on-going subordination to affluent customers – can threaten to undo that productivity by undermining workers' sense of status allied to the brand. The employee discount can make the Happy Homes brand, and therefore the Happy Homes lifestyle, appear accessible to the worker despite the realities of the work. In this role, the discount can become an important managerial tool in the effort to mitigate a potential tension between workers' status aspirations attached to their employer's brand and the lower status suggested by their actual employment.

The uses of the discount as a labor process control strategy will, of course, find their broadest scope within the service work process itself. However, one of the most

powerful ways in which the employee discount provides for labor control happens before the employee starts work, and in many cases before the employee begins training. In the time span that separates hiring from working, and the days that separate hiring from training, the new hire's anticipation of an employee discount on Happy Homes merchandise is a time when a Happy Homes lifestyle can seem suddenly more attainable. The new hire is left to imagine the purchases that couldn't be made yesterday but, with the promise of a significant discount on Happy Homes retail goods, might be possible in a soon-to-come future.

In this way, the discount works early toward managerial purposes by igniting the class imagination of the worker and cleaving that imagination to the Happy Homes brand. For new employees who have already developed identification with the brand, the discount can bring the possession of branded products out of the realm of the imagined into the realm of the feasible, so bridging a gap between desire for the brand and realization through actual consumption of Happy Homes goods. Even in cases where new hires' identification with the brand is less developed, the discount can spur brand curiosity and desire by planting the expectation that this desire can be satisfied as an important benefit of an otherwise low-pay, low-status job. In both cases, the employee discount acts early to imbricate workers' consumer selves onto their laboring selves, so encouraging the Happy Homes employee to bring consumer sensibilities and emotions to the performance of retail sales and service work.

The discount plays an important role in the process of branding worker identity, but significantly, conjures worker's consumer identity to do so, so branding workers' consumer identities in the same stroke. And, reflecting the class imperatives of the brand, the dual consumer-worker selves that are to result from this process must also incorporate certain cultural forms reflecting upper middle class identity. In this way, the reproduction of this service labor process works through the cultural play of class distinction, the workers themselves being set forth to perform class even as they perform the labor of retail service.

Keeping Recruits in Training - The Discount Carrot

The employee discount emerges as an important first step in producing a class and brand savvy retail labor force, the kind of labor force that Happy Homes will find to be most cooperative and most productive. By introducing the discount at hire, Happy Homes incents workers to imagine themselves as inhabitants of the classed world the brand represents. But, as an element of labor process control, the power of the brand that brings employees in must be cautiously managed not only once the work process has begun but also before the new employee starts the job.

At the moment of hire, and before formal training takes place, Happy Homes introduces the worker to one of its most important labor process control techniques – the impressive employee discount on Happy Homes merchandise. Notably, the discount is

not discussed in new employee training – neither in the training literature nor by the training leader – to be explicitly mentioned only once at the moment of hire. But this one-time announcement of the employee discount actually serves multiple labor process control purposes even though no work is yet being done. Making the new employee aware that a substantial discount on store merchandise awaits her completion of training has at least three advantageous consequences to the Happy Homes labor process: it motivates the employee to complete the training, inspires the employee to engage in a process of *self-directed indoctrination* during the interlude that separates hiring from training, and renders the employee receptive to the training modules that will re-translate front-line workers to hosts and customers to guests.

The Organizational Perspective: Defraying Trainee Attrition Costs

Recalling that training for this \$8.50 an hour job requires new hires to commit 15 hours of their time, and this in three discrete sessions together spanning a week, it is reasonable for Happy Homes to expect some new hires will drop out, miss some part of the sessions, or, at minimum, fail to be attentive in the session hours they do attend. Such transgressions would come at a cost to Happy Homes. First, the training program itself is costly. Happy Homes training is a formal program, replete with manuals that have been professionally produced, printed on high-grade paper, and, because of their exceptional length, broken into a set of five bound booklets. Moreover, a Happy Homes manager is paid to lead the training sessions and new hires are paid for their time in training (as the

following discussion will make clear, new hires do not necessarily know they are being paid for this time, and if they do suspect they are, do not know the hourly rate). Training sessions may include anywhere from ten to twenty trainees, and the inefficiencies of losing members, so having to conduct training for a smaller group, scheduling “make-up” trainings that require more leader labor, increasing the size of subsequent trainings to accommodate previously truant trainees, or replacing booklets absconded by disappearing trainees, would all equate to dollar losses on the Happy Homes books.

For accounting reasons alone, Happy Homes has good reason to want to motivate new hires to complete their training. Yet, a more pressing concern for Happy Homes may lay in the labor control purposes the training is meant to serve. The training stands as a critical time when new employees are inducted into the meanings of the brand from within, that is, from the perspective of the worker not the shopper-lite. If this induction process becomes undermined by trainee absenteeism and tardiness, or merely obstructed by trainee skepticism, significant costs can be brought to bear to the organization in the form of inadequately indoctrinated, hence inadequately branded, Happy Homes retail workers. The costs of this would be realized later, once these below par employees are set loose on the Happy Homes shop floor, but can be avoided early if new hires can be properly motivated to fulfill training requirements.

Between the time of hire and the onset of training, new employees will have no necessary contact with their new employer, so if Happy Homes is to motivate them to

show up for and participate in the training program, it has to do so in some way during the hiring process. But with hiring happening often on the fly, and apt to predate training by several days, a week, or even longer, the incentive must be of a type that is quick, clear and convincing. An indistinct promise of great things to come, similar to that which will be laid out later in the training manuals, would not do it - but something along the lines of “substantial employee discount” might.

Most new hires I talked to described hearing about the discount during their hiring, and though the exact amount of the discount was rarely specified, the discount was described with superlatives, alternately called “substantial,” “big,” “huge,” “significant,” and in a few cases, “standard setting for the industry.” Despite the omission of many other job-related details from the hiring conversation (hours, job title and responsibilities, even pay rate), it seems Happy Homes staff rarely neglects to mention the benefit of an employee discount. And this practice, whether by design or coincidence, proves very effective in motivating new hires to attend and stay in training.

The Trainee Perspective: Opportunity Costs of Happy Homes Training

But how would new hires become dedicated to training as a result of learning that a discount on Happy Homes merchandise comes as part of their employ? Knowing that their discount does not take effect until they start their jobs, hearing that they must complete training first, and seeing Happy Homes trainers measure their trainees’

attendance and performance, it is reasonable for new hires to assume that entry to their new job – and, thus, access to the discount - comes through the portal of training. And indeed, when new hires talked about this sequence, they often placed strong import on the discount, and viewed the training as a necessary step toward official discount access. However, many expressed a related anxiety about getting through the training, with fears that below-standard attendance or performance at training might jeopardize the chance at a discount.

In this concern, new Happy Homes hires seemed particularly vulnerable to the fear that truancy at training would cause problems with their discount. Though trainees remained unclear what these problems could be, they were prone to act as if a discount on Happy Homes merchandise could somehow revolve around the quality of their performance, and specifically their attendance, in training. But these fears about losing access to an employee discount were largely mistaken. When asked if a new hire's discount would be cancelled, delayed or otherwise reduced as a result of attendance problems at training, a Happy Homes manager responded that the new employee – provided they started work – would get the discount in any case. If a new hire failed to attend all three training sessions, the person's employment would probably not be initiated. Although this is not hard and fast policy, the necessary employment documentation is completed during training, thus the employment relation is not made official until training has begun. Still, according to this manager, there is no official

policy for dealing with trainees who missed a session, left early, or arrived late. In these cases the new hire would most likely start work soon after the training program ended and, though they could be asked to make up the missed part of training at a later time, they would still - as an Happy Homes employee - qualify to receive the discount. New hires were not clear on this policy.

From my conversation with the Happy Homes manager, it appears these matters are dealt with at the discretion of the trainer. The trainer could, in the case of tardiness or absence, ask the trainee to make up the missed training time. The trainer could also do nothing. This decision can depend on variables such as the store's current staffing needs and the availability of management personnel to act as trainers, or it can be on the trainer's whim. In either case, the absent or late trainee still starts the job and receives the job benefits.

There was no discussion of the discount, or of policies surrounding the discount, during training, and so trainees were left to their own resources when sorting the terms of their discount-related anxieties. In casual conversation, many trainees spoke as if the discount might hinge on their good attendance in the training, and often with the lament that this would compel them to attend all three of the lengthy (5 hour) sessions. As enamored as some of these individuals may be with the Happy Homes brand, the thought of devoting fifteen hours (in one week) to training for the Happy Homes job was not

something most trainees relished. This was particularly the case for the many trainees who were employed at another job and were fitting the training into their off hours.

For many of these new employees the Happy Homes training time-commitment raised opportunity costs that might, if it weren't for the promised discount, win out over their new employer's request that they attend training. While some trainees complained about minor sacrifices, such as missing their favorite TV show, the chance to go out with friends, or an evening to catch up on sleep, others described much more specific and, in some cases, significant sacrifices. In a particularly pointed example, a new hire described how her time in Happy Homes training meant a significant loss of income from her restaurant job. Yet, as she explained, she had decided to absorb that loss in the interests of gaining the Happy Homes employee discount:

If I were doing a shift at the restaurant I'd be making good money tonight, and going to this training is going to cost me several hundred dollars in tips. All I can say is the discount better be good, the restaurant even called to see if I could pull a shift this Friday and you can make a lot of money on Fridays, that's two hundred bucks easy, but I turned it down because of this training...that's two hundred dollars out the window, but I really want that discount, it better be good.

Reckoning the trade-off, this trainee chose to sacrifice the two hundred dollars she could make for Friday restaurant work so she could attend the second Happy Homes training meeting, and did so in the interest of gaining access to the employee discount (a discount she hopes will be big). When she weighs Friday's tips against the Happy

Homes discount, this new hire reveals a perception shared by many of her co-hires: to miss training is to jeopardize access to a coveted discount on high-line branded home furnishings goods, and the longer term value of the discount justifies the more immediate costs of the effort to gain that discount.

Of course, most trainees did not have such exact computations of what the training would “cost them,” yet those with less exact computations still factored in the risk of a discount loss. Facing a different kind of dilemma than our restaurant worker, one trainee’s problems with childcare threatened to keep her from attending training for the full five hours, and as a consequence, made her fear losing out on a much-anticipated employee discount. During an evening session break, this new hire explained that her babysitter was threatening to renege on an original commitment to do three five-hour shifts that week (corresponding to the scheduled training), and might need to cut her stay two hours short of the needed duration. Anxious that the babysitter might call to announce an early end to tonight’s childcare (and to the two sessions yet to come in this week of training), this recruit described what she projected as the costs of cutting short her own attendance at Happy Homes training:

I hope my babysitter doesn’t call to say she’s leaving. I’m going to do all my Christmas shopping at Happy Homes this year, I picked everything out (shows me her list)...I came in the other day with the list (so) it’s all done, except for buying it (...) there’s no one to watch my kids until my Mom gets back from Michigan, I found this girl, I hope she pulls through, if she leaves I can’t do this training...and I’d have to start all over with

Christmas shopping...there's no way I can get gifts at Happy Homes without a discount.

For this trainee, full attendance at each Happy Homes training session relied on stable childcare arrangements. Knowing these arrangements were not stable for the week of training, the trainee feared she would have to leave sessions early – something she equated with the potential to lose access to the Happy Homes employee discount. And she dreaded the labor-intensive consequences that would ensue. Without the discount, this woman would need to redo her holiday shopping list almost entirely, and most certainly with products from a different, down-line store. While this trainee may have exaggerated her fears because she so dreaded their consequence, her imagination of what it might take to safeguard the discount sounds much like our restaurant worker's.

An enhanced ability to purchase Happy Homes branded goods holds allure for many of these trainees, and as these set of comments suggest, in the absence of clear information on Happy Homes discount policy, that allure seems quickly able to morph into a strong incentive to abide by the organization's training requirements.

The Trainee Perspective: Costs of the Training Itself

Emblematic of other comments made by both the women and men in the training I attended, these trainees' words capture the early labor control potency in the Happy Homes promise that an employee discount waits at the end of training. At Happy Homes,

the temptation of the employee discount exerts a persuasive power over new hires in sync with a managerial concern that new employees complete the multiple segments of their 15 hour training, and this became clear even in the cases where trainees did not perceive the kind of opportunity costs described above.

Some trainees simply resented the conditions of training itself. Though they were few, this handful of trainees made clear that they found the training experience very unpleasant, and openly discussed their complaints with other trainees when out of ear-shot of the trainer. For these new hires, the training sessions were overly long, painfully tedious, and sometimes physically uncomfortable. But, again the discount held sway.

When one particularly unhappy trainee was asked by a co-hire why she stayed despite her many repeated grumbles, this new hire – like her compatriots - conjured the lure of the discount. Over a break-time latte, the young trainee summarized her grievances about the training, explaining why she was choosing to suffer them:

This training thing really sucks, the room is hot, the chairs are hard, I don't want to do three nights of this but if it gets me that discount, I'll do it, I don't care. The whole time I'm sitting there I'm thinking what I'm going to buy. So, yeah, I'm going to stay in the training...who wouldn't?"

As this young woman's words suggest, the discount on Happy Homes merchandise (promised, if not specified, at the point of hire), could - like a carrot at the end of the stick – motivate new employees to bear up under the various hardships of their

training. Even when new recruits' concerns pertained less to opportunity costs than grievances about the training itself, the discount proved an important incentive, keeping new hires eager, or at least willing, to participate in Happy Homes new employee training. In this way, an organizational interest in maximizing retention dovetails with new hires' desire for the brand and, in the offer of the discount, Happy Homes has happened on a strategy that keeps new hires leaning toward the deeper end of the training pool.

As these comments reveal, many new employees dedicate themselves to fulfilling the training because they believe at the end of that training rainbow rests the Happy Homes discount pot of gold. In this interim that separates hiring from work, the Happy Homes brand discount can be understood as a "positive reward" new hires believe they earn by completing their time in employee training, so motivating them to attend the entirety of sessions. As one trainee put it after completing an exhausting second training session, "I'm tired, but that much closer to bringing a sofa home."

Still, as noted earlier, Happy Homes management does not sanction truant trainees with discount penalties, and new employees will receive their discount when they start their jobs whether they attended all sessions and aced the training materials, or cheated on training time and spaced out during training activities. Yet, many new hires behave as if the sought-after discount depends on good trainee status. Granted, some of

these employees may quite consciously fear the withdrawal of the job offer itself; even so, the discount-as-labor-control-strategy operates with the same efficiency.

If Happy Homes has no formal policy in place by which to sanction misbehaving trainees, it does not seem to need one. Left to their own devices, without clarification of the Happy Homes discount policy, new hires look at the discount carrot and self-impose a set of terms and conditions by which the carrot can be reached. That the terms and conditions trainees are wont to imagine suit Happy Homes' need to fully train its new hires, and, importantly, its need to have its hires cooperate in this process, produces happy consequence for the organization. Jobs that pay close to minimum wage (and the Happy Homes retail job, at \$8.50 an hour, qualifies here) do not, in general, have the power to reap any particularly serious commitment from their takers, if only for the fact that these types of jobs – especially those in retail – are increasingly ubiquitous and fairly easily had. Moreover, faced with a front-end request that they do fifteen hours of training for a close-to-minimum-wage job, new Happy Homes hires may balk for other reasons. For the many who are trying to hold down another job simultaneous to entering the job at Happy Homes, the training week introduces a non-negotiable schedule of hours against which the elsewhere-employed must creatively adapt their other job commitments.

Once new hires officially become workers, they will have some control over their work schedule. In training, new employees write down the days and hours they will be

available to work and, overall, managers respect the parameters of employees' availability and schedule them accordingly. However, for the week of training, the new hire is asked to accommodate other commitments to the pre-set Happy Homes training schedule. This can become especially tricky for those trying to make a transition from a full-time job elsewhere to a new one at Happy Homes. Their first paid week at Happy Homes promises to produce a sadly diminished paycheck (that is, for that first week of their new job their new employer will pay for the fifteen hours in training and nothing more), but should they then wish to supplement by maintaining their previous job during the same week, it must be made to combine, both in terms of hours and employee energy, with the hours and demands of Happy Homes training.

For these reasons and others, new Happy Homes hires may approach the fifteen hour training requirement with less than full-hearted commitment despite pre-existing brand identification. Still, Happy Homes relies on this training as a key element in its effort to construct the kind of branded workers it needs and must find a way to encourage new recruits to engage their training experience. As a labor control mechanism, the discount creates a juncture where new hires' desire for brand access meets up with anxieties over what it takes to win that access, producing for many a special kind of willingness to accept their employers' instructional plan.

Keeping the Discount Amount a Secret

If new employees carry misunderstandings of Happy Homes policy at the outset, these are not misunderstandings they will find readily clarified in their Happy Homes training. During instructional sessions, trainers avoid discussion of monetary topics, including the Happy Homes employee discount. From the perspective of management, this would be the better part of wisdom. At Happy Homes, employee discounts are scaled according to job ranking and all new store employees regardless of rank will attend the same training sessions. In any one training module newly hired managers assemble with new full-time employees, both alongside the lower ranked part-time, casual and seasonal employees, and each category of employment will be allotted a different discount amount commensurate with its rank on the Happy Homes organizational chart.

Discussing the discount during training means new hires would be made aware of these differential discount amounts, a recipe for fueling discontent among new trainees. Knowledge of the lesser discount could reasonably be expected to inspire dissatisfaction in some of those at the lower rankings, but new employees in higher positions could also become discontented if they think the extra discount margin they receive not great enough for their station. Moreover, discussing the differential nature of any type of employment rewards during a training session threatens to introduce the trope of “us and them,” that is, to insinuate an aura of competition within the training group. This is the

opposite of what the Happy Homes training tries to accomplish with its emphasis on conviviality and hospitality.

Along with the potential to negatively affect new employee morale, a training session discussion of the Happy Homes employee discount is likely to raise some difficult questions for management: Is it fair that seasonal employees, who work as hard and as many hours as part-time employees, enjoy a smaller discount than their part-time co-workers? Why do part-time workers receive a penalty on their discount percentage in relation to their full-time co-workers, when both are regular workers, and part-time weekly hours can sometimes ratchet close to 35, only 5 short of the 40-hour weeks their counterparts pull? If the part-time worker pulls an occasional 40-hour week (reported as possible during crunch times, or when staffing becomes unexpectedly short due to employee absence, resignation or disappearance), does that worker receive a greater discount amount for that week of full-time work?

Questions such as these would detract from management efforts to indoctrinate employees into an Happy Homes culture defined as cooperative, collaborative, convivial, classy and “fun,” and it is not surprising that Happy Homes trainers avoid opening the door to these types of questions by avoiding talk of the discount. Yet, however much these trainers sidestep the topic of the discount, it is at the forefront of their new hires’ concerns. Somewhat oddly, though, new trainees do not seem overly willing to broach the topic in training. In the training sessions I attended, trainees posed questions

appropriate to topics covered by the trainer but demurred when it came to advancing concerns about discount policy.

In light of the primary place the discount took in conversation among trainees outside of the training sessions, this blanket silence toward the topic during training seems unexpected. And it would be, if it were not for the quick intuition on the part of trainees that monetary topics are taboo behind the door of the Happy Homes training room. As one trainee put it after the first night's training, "I was going to ask about the discount, but then I got this feeling that I shouldn't bring it up. I don't know...it just doesn't seem we're supposed to mention it."

Other conversations that occurred outside the training confirmed that this employee's intuition was shared by many of his co-trainees. Indeed, the question of whether the discount was really as taboo as it seemed became the primary topic of one 20-minute long evening session break. Gathered at Starbucks with coffee drinks in hand and no trainer in sight, an assembly of six trainees took up the topic in earnest. All seemed to have quickly gathered the unspoken rule that trainees were not to raise pecuniary concerns in the Happy Home training sessions, and though they were not particularly happy about this, by the end of the conversation all seemed more or less resigned to positions of compliance. An extended field note excerpt of that conversation helps to illustrate the ways in which Happy Homes trainees perceived this unspoken rule, and gives some clarification of why they would choose not to buck it:

We are all seated at Starbucks – five female trainees and one male. The trainee Kim speaks first. Holding up her Starbucks cup as if in a show of camaraderie, she asks of the group: “Hey, when are we going to find out about our discount anyway? Has anyone heard anything?” In unison, we all mumble out a “no.” It seems no one knows exactly how much the discount will be. To his ‘no,’ Ralph adds, “but I’d sure like to know!” Linda chimes in, “Me too! I wonder why they’re keeping us in the dark?” Everyone else nods, as if in agreement with Linda’s tone of frustration. Kim just shrugs, then speaks our thoughts, saying: “I hope it’s good...I heard from a friend who knew someone who worked here that they get 50% but then I heard that it’s less for seasonal...I hope it’s good.” She pauses, expectantly, as if one of us can clarify the confusion, but we all continue to sip our coffee drinks in silence. Aside from a few neutral shrugs, no one answers. A beat passes, then Cheryl adds, “Well, when I was hired, they told me it would be a really good discount, but they couldn’t tell me exactly what it was.” Cheryl trails off, and everyone’s silent for a moment, save nods of agreement.

Kim breaks the silence, and in a much shyer tone than before, broaches what seems the real question she’s been wanting to ask: “Do you think I should bring it up tonight? I mean, do you think that’s okay...to ask how much our discount is? Nobody else brought it up that first night...I’m not sure it’s okay...I don’t think it’s okay...do you?” Up to this point, the conversation was sluggish, likely because these trainees had talked about this before and no new information seemed to be forthcoming tonight. But Kim’s new questions energize the group, and trainees start talking all at once: “Yeah, I noticed that! What’s that about?”...“Me too, but the vibe didn’t feel right”...“Yeah, I don’t get it, but I picked that up too”...“I’m glad somebody else feels this way”...“I don’t think we’re supposed to bring it up”...“I felt it the first night”...“No, I don’t think it’s okay,”...“Don’t do it, you’ll stand out”...“I think it would be a mistake”...“You don’t want to look bad”...“I’m pretty sure we’re not supposed to talk about that stuff in there”...“Just ask one of the managers at another time.”

Though no one here can nail down exactly what the rule is or where it came from, to be sure they all know it exists and agree with Kim’s hunch that it’s not okay to bring the matter of the discount up. One older trainee, Dana, turns to Kim, and sums it up: “You’re right. I didn’t notice much room for us to ask those types of questions. No room, really. I got the

strong feeling it's off-limits and I wouldn't do it if I were you. I think you should just wait."

Other trainees nod, and Kim agrees, but in a cavalier tone, adds: "Well, they better be paying us for this training! Have they told you how much we're making an hour? Nobody's told me yet. They better be paying us for this! Didn't they take our social security number and all that stuff at the first meeting? I think they're paying us." Dana thinks Kimberley's got a point here, but adds, "You're right, they should pay us for the 15 hours of training we're doing this week, but I wouldn't ask about that either." Another trainee, Jane, joins in, putting yet a finer point on these topics: "You know, it seems Happy Homes is keeping us in the dark...not only with the discount, but with our pay, and if we get paid for this training...but if we can't bring it up in training, which it seems we can't, then what are we supposed to do?" We all nod, but no one suggests an alternative. Ralph, seeming ready to let it go, says, "Hey, who cares? Let's get back." Kim looks at her watch, and noting to the group it's time to go, caps off the discussion with what seems to be more or less a matter of group consensus: "Well, I'd sure like to know about these things, but I'm not going to be the one to put my foot in my mouth. Oh well, I guess we'll find out eventually...right?"

No one broached these important topics during training later that night, or in the remaining third training session. If this is any evidence, it seems most trainees had picked up the strong impression that discussion of monetary matters – whether pertaining to wages or discount – was off-limits in the training sessions. Certainly, this conversation makes clear that Kim and her compatriots had received, and finally accepted, the message that issues of money and wage should not be discussed in the Happy Homes training. That the other trainees agreed with Kim, likewise seeing these topics as off-limits, helps confirm that this rule becomes somehow communicated early on in the training program,

and though never made explicit, is communicated with enough force and clarity to discourage trainees from asking about things they find very important.

Keeping the Discount Amount a Secret: The Rhetoric of Training

But how is this rule communicated, and, as a trainee asked in the break-time conversation, why would these issues be off-limits during official job training? In broad strokes, the answer lies in the point that Happy Homes job training is about culture, that is, instruction on the culture of the Happy Homes brand. More specifically, the Happy Homes training is marked by tropes that militate against the intrusion of the baser tones implied by talk of such things as money, wages, and discounts on brand products.

True to its roots in a branded organization, and true to the meanings of the Happy Homes brand itself, Happy Homes training is intent on painting Happy Homes work as not actually work at all. To do this it conjures two metaphoric worlds: the world of the upper middle class home, and the world of brand ambassadorship linked to professional service. For the world of Happy Homes retail-store-as-home, the training calls up metaphors of retail employment as a form of (privately extended) upper class hospitality, a place where fun happens and good times are had with one's guests. This is not a place where hosts talk about their own financial concerns (nor a place where one would expect hosts to have much in the way of these concerns). From the perspective of Happy Homes, talk in training of the "baser" motivations for work - factors that are indeed on

the trainees' minds, such as the need for work, the expectation to receive pay for that work, the question of what that pay will be, and the anticipation of an employee discount as a benefit of that work – would undermine the metaphoric construction of the Happy Homes workplace as high class home, and Happy Homes workers as high-class hosts.

As well, this kind of talk would challenge the secondary metaphors, those that suggest the illusion of work as a type of freely entered “fun” and interaction with customers as casual (but still classy) “good times” with friends. Under these prescriptions, it could well be considered a form of rudeness to bluntly acknowledge Happy Homes activity as a job, and a job done for money, e.g., personal gain.

In a second metaphoric slight of hand, Happy Homes also casts its retail work as the lofty job of brand ambassador, this linked loosely to the professional art of interior design. Trainees learn that they will be embodying the brand, and “helping their guests to decorate their homes.” They hear front-line retail work described as “an important service provided by brand professionals.” In training, new hires discover that these are sensitive, and very important services, only learned “brand ambassadors” or “brand experts” can provide.

Though these trainees may not be familiar with the BLS definitions of a professional occupation, to be sure they understood the colloquial meanings conjured when one is described as a “professional” or an “expert.” It would be unbecoming for

the professional, especially the professional service provider who attends to sensitive matters, to wonder much (or openly) about the compensation he will receive for his services, and though the trainees may not understand what they hear in training as the professional imperative toward altruism, they do more vaguely grasp the inhibition against expressing too much self-interest.

Trainees hear this rhetoric early, within the first half hour of their initial training session (and will continue to hear it throughout the training), and it is not surprising that they would soon develop a hunch that questions about wages and discounts would come out (if they dared ask them) as less than appropriate. And, since there is no significant break in this rhetoric, this hunch only grows stronger as the training proceeds.

The organizational ‘illusion,’ at least as it is developed in training, is that trainees are here for other reasons than work, and while many a trainee lusting for the discount may disagree, the reasons Happy Homes conjures in training are of a different, much less self-interested, type. Happy Homes tells the new trainee she is here to host and entertain her guests and/or provide an expert, professional and very personal service, and these are not reasons that dovetail well with concerns about discounts and wages. Indeed, they almost make workers’ concerns about wages and discounts incomprehensible. At minimum, workers grasp that raising these issues is somehow wrong and, in the main, refrain from doing so – behavior that, coincidentally, will help preserve the Happy Homes training illusion that retail work for the brand is not quite retail work at all.

Why This Works: Employee Perspective and The Power of the Brand

In pointed fashion, the persuasive powers of the discount rest on the fact that it is a discount on high priced merchandise that is also *high-status branded* merchandise. It is no mistake that our earlier trainee who feared the loss of childcare later added a second count on which nullification of her discount would have been, to her mind, disastrous. Not only would loss of the discount create extra gift-selection work but, as this woman explained, it would also ruin the Christmas she had planned. When the training ended with childcare intact, this new hire shared with me her happy anticipation of the kind of Christmas she now felt sure of having:

I've always wanted to have Christmas like the pictures in the Happy Homes catalogue. I want to see my family open up really nice gifts, not something I just settled for. Especially my sister-in-law, she always gives expensive gifts and it makes you feel embarrassed when you give her yours, and she loves Happy Homes...I can't wait to see her face when she opens up that Happy Homes fur throw.

Happy Homes has a stake in training its new hires well, and instilling in new hires the hope of a discount can serve to motivate these new hires toward cooperation with their employer's training protocol, including good attendance and good attention. But does it really matter that these trainees attend, engage and accept the Happy Homes training program? In the world of retail, brand profitability operates in the conjoined worlds of production and consumption, and while profit, in the classic sense, will still be borne as surplus value at the site of retail goods production, when the goods are branded,

a significant margin of profit potential exists in the space of retail service. How well a front-line retail service work force sells the brand will help determine how much of this margin can be realized. Control of the front-line service labor process becomes a matter of corporate profitability, more so in a branded world of retail where front-line service is meant to embody the meanings of the brand even as it sells branded things.

A closer look at the logic of Happy Homes training brings this point home. The Happy Homes retail training is largely the effort to indoctrinate new employees into the Happy Homes culture, but with special emphasis on indoctrination into the Happy Homes brand. In the branded retail environment, indoctrination into organizational culture *via the brand* will craft the mainstay of its front-line employees' future emotional labor, and Happy Homes has good reason to want its retail-workers-in-training to stay tuned without interruption. The Happy Homes training program is designed in modules, with each module building from the content of previous modules, and laying the groundwork for the ones to come. At minimum, a new employee who misses a module may find the remaining training less understandable, or less convincing. But more, the trainee who misses a module or two may well come out the other end "less moved" by the power of the brand than Happy Homes intended.

The Happy Homes training program is called "The Journey" and, indeed, it unfolds like a dramatic tale. Using an emotionally powerful, often hyperbolic rhetoric, the training script casts the participant as a main character in a transformative adventure -

the trainee is setting out on a meaningful passage, will grow and learn, will be changed in the process, and will arrive finally at a destination that is both exciting and fulfilling. The dramatic rhetoric is linked to a training practice that carefully walks the new employee through the various *meanings* of its brand culture, instructing on what these meanings require from the employee's on-the-job roles and identity.

Still, consistent with a management-by-transformation approach, the practical instruction relies heavily on an emotionally persuasive rhetoric for its full purchase, and the training is designed to increase the new hire's emotional response to the brand, module by module, so that the graduating trainee leaves the training theatre fully moved by the Happy Homes brand story. A midstream absence not only leaves the trainee inadequately prepared to receive subsequent modules, it renders him inadequately inducted into the *emotional* connection with the Happy Homes brand. Failing to arrive at the destination Happy Homes intends, new recruits who miss part of the training may well fail to take the meanings of the brand to heart (worse, adopt an ironic distance), and end up without the "deep understanding of what it means to be a 'brand representative,'" that, according to the Happy Homes training manual, is "essential to the success of the Happy Homes employee."

The cost here to Happy Homes management pertains to the productivity of its future retail labor force and the degree of control it will have over that retail labor process. Trainees who do not fulfill the complete training requirements cost the

organization twice – once with the brute costs of instruction, and twice with costs to service productivity that can result from insufficiently “transformed” workers. Happy Homes has an organizational stake in getting its new hires to attend, participate and satisfactorily complete the full training program. Offering a substantial discount on Happy Homes merchandise to be realized after training is not a bad way to do this.

Happy Homes advance notice of employee discount also serves another labor control purpose, one that unfolds during the interlude that separates hiring from working. When new hires are told they will receive a hefty discount on Happy Homes merchandise, they are encouraged to engage in an imaginative process of brand consumption - a process that engenders employee *self-directed indoctrination* into the meanings of the brand.

When a new employee spends the days following hire browsing the Happy Homes store, she is newly armed with the knowledge of special access to Happy Homes products. While Happy Homes retail employment allows a kind of symbolic access to the brand products through proximity and association, the discount makes that access much more concrete. And the new employee, soon to become a brand representative, can imagine herself no longer a “shopper-lite” but a “real” brand consumer. Of course, the majority of “real” brand consumers – given the level of income that would be required to easily and regularly consume high-priced Happy Homes products – would not be likely to hold jobs as low-level service workers. Nonetheless, at Happy Homes the low-level

service work of front-line retail comes equipped with a benefit that helps these front-line service workers imagine themselves in the roles of upscale consumers.

The Moral of Training

Opening the first training booklet, the new hire sees a forceful, if somewhat mystifying, proclamation: “Your role at Happy Homes is different from other Sales Associate positions you may have held or experienced.” If in previous musings, new hires conjured meanings of the Happy Homes brand, they will find a more much succinct and official proclamation once they hit the first mile of training. No moral transformation should be forced, and in Happy Homes training the incoming worker is cued to the importance of his volition in this process. As the Happy Homes training literature reads:

Your opportunity to participate in the success of your store, and ultimately the success of the company, is enormous. If you choose, your impact can be great and you can reap the rewards of a successful career with Happy Homes. This is your first step on that Journey. Learn. Discover. Enjoy.

While the manual goes on without explanation of how the recruit can make this impact or reap those rewards, it does take the new employee on what might qualify as a transformative journey. For, at Happy Homes, the key tool by which training attempts to make retail workers is by unmaking them, with the new employee training protocol largely an attempt to bring workers’ cognition, emotion, and values in congruence with the meanings of the brand. If for these new front line retail employees this requires an

identity shift, the training will successfully map out the basic contours of what this new Happy Homes-inspired self should be.

A new hire entering Happy Homes job training may be daydreaming about the brand, fantasizing about future Happy Homes purchases, visualizing her home decked out in the Happy Homes style, or even picturing herself a member of the upper class associated with Happy Homes goods, but if these fantasies – and other elements of worker subjectivity - are to suit Happy Homes purposes they must become organized in normative accord with the employer’s priorities. And this is a primary task of Happy Homes new employee training. The training is as much induction into a moral universe of the brand as it is instruction in the practical art of retail labor. Submitting new hires to indoctrination into the “philosophy” of the Happy Homes brand, and pacing them through very careful instruction on brand-appropriate identity, Happy Homes training initiates fledging employees into the art and ethic of a Happy Homes culture.

CHAPTER 4

HAPPY HOMES MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

In this chapter I take up the question of Happy Homes management strategies, asking how Happy Homes managers attempt to produce a consenting, productive front-line labor force. Control of the Happy Homes retail labor process is anchored in management efforts to brand retail workers according to two primary strategies: transforming workers into brand ambassadors, and transforming workers into high-class hosts. This chapter draws on field and interview data to examine the processes by which management accomplishes these tasks within the work process. I begin with an examination of the ways in which Happy Homes managers attempt to make brand ambassadors out of low-level retail clerks, concentrating on how this process plays out in the context of Happy Homes store staff meetings. From here, I move on to consider Happy Homes management strategies for transforming low-level retail workers into high-class hosts. Asking how management attempts to turn the work of front-line retail into the work of high-class hospitality, this segment looks at Happy Home managers' practices as they occur within the retail work process and on the retail floor.

RETAIL WORKERS AS BRAND AMBASSADORS

At Happy Homes, workers and customers occupy two different socio-economic classes, but they do meet on one common ground -- and that is the symbolic territory of the brand. It is no coincidence that this symbolic territory also forms the scaffold on

which the hosting organization builds its approach to labor process control. The brand, as organizational materials attest, and Happy Homes staff continually remind, is stylish, prestigious and high-line and, in daily management practice, as well as formal training, Happy-Homes-the-organization informs front-line workers that they, by virtue of their employ, have attained status as “brand representatives.” The title is nothing to scoff at, at least according to the senior manager who, responding to an interview question about the effects of the brand on Happy Homes work, defined the brand representative as “an ambassador, if you will, of Happy Homes.” Asked what a brand ambassador accomplishes, this senior manager explained:

He believes in Happy Homes, and because of this it is much more easy to sell and the guest believes what he says...he can translate it for them...it makes it much more palatable I think to them...they believe everything he says and it has an intrinsic value to them, it has quality to them, because to them, and to himself, he's a Happy Homes ambassador.

Whether or not the Happy Homes guest believes what an ambassador-like sales associate says, Happy Homes is quite serious about making their retail floor workers into brand representatives, and if our senior manager is right, the organizational pay-off comes with an improvement in overall sales. But to be a brand representative at Happy Homes requires a great deal more than, say, substantive product knowledge, or the display of professional conduct. It is, in a word, to become something other than what one is. Addressing a morning staff meeting, one manager put it succinctly: “you (sales associates) don't just ‘sell’ the brand, you *stand for* the brand.” In management's view,

brand representation is much more than a “sign-holding” task and, as this same manager went on to explain in her staff meeting address, the Happy Homes employee-turned-brand-representative should form a deep-level identification with the brand:

Well, people are going to think this about me, that’s it. And it really is, it really is, *you*...it really is me, you know, if I emulate this “feel,” this look, this is how strong it makes me. I want to be recognized as part of this “feeling”...that’s the feeling of Happy Homes. I’m a brand citizen. Like the guest feels when she comes in, I feel that too. I feel good in this space. I belong here. I am awesome. So, it’s that, it’s that kind of aspiration that people look to when they walk in the store...yes, they are, I mean they want to be ‘that.’ They’re going to think ‘that’ about me...it’s that recognition (for the individual worker) that, hey, I am ‘that’!

Speaking in the moment as if she were a sales associate, this manager’s answer to the question of “how to stand for the brand” is a script by which workers can order the content of their own subjectivity -- *and* an attractive set of reasons why they would want to do so. The Happy Homes sales associate is, or can be, a certain special ‘something’ that this manager refers to as “that.” “That” is the aspiration people look to when they walk in the store, and “that,” though intangible, is not ineffable – it is a pointed reference to the high-style, high-status allure of the brand. “That” is what the Happy Homes worker should want to “be.”

Why? Answering the question of how “standing for the brand” should feel, the manager describes to her assembled subordinates the experience of a feeling of strength, and a sense of “citizenship” in the domain of the brand. In Happy Homes culture, this

ranking of weakness and strength reflects perceptions of class standing and social status, and, typical of the pep talks managers give in staff meetings, this manager's presentation aims to persuade workers of three related points: (a) class standing resides predominantly in cultural forms, (b) the Happy Homes brand embodies high class cultural forms, and (c) brand identification allows the worker to embody high class cultural forms. Embodying the brand thus gives the worker competitive "strength" in the contest for status.

For the employee who "emulates this feel, this look" the reward is to "feel good in this space," to be able to say with confidence, "I belong here," and, as a result, to conclude, "I am awesome." At Happy Homes, "belonging," then, transcends an attachment to the organization by virtue of the employment relationship or participation in workplace culture, taking root instead in the employee's identification with the world of meaning signaled by the brand. The promise? The Happy Homes employee who so identifies with the brand will feel good about himself, ostensibly a great deal better than he did before. It is not a trifling matter to think oneself "awesome," yet, according to Happy Homes management, it comes with the territory when workers take the brand to heart. In their initial formal training workers are told to be the voice of the furniture they sell, and training activities include exercises where new hires are asked to answer questions such as "what would this couch say if it could talk?" But, as this manager

suggests, it is in personifying the brand while personifying the goods that Happy Homes employees will win the prize of bolstered self-regard.

Clearly, when managers instruct associates to emulate the feel of the brand, they want more than ‘surface acting,’ and by prompting associates to *be* the brand, signal that even the more ambitious labor of ‘deep acting’ is less than what they expect. From the literature we know that producing emotional labor through ‘deep acting’ involves the worker’s effort to re-imagine the job and the job role, often by reframing the paid activity as a private one -- as for instance with the flight attendant who re-imagines the plane’s interior as her living room, and the passengers as her personal guests (Hochschild 1983). However, as this manager’s presentation reveals, Happy Homes emotional labor is not bounded by a worker’s re-imagination of the job or the job role, but, according to Happy Homes instruction, extends to the worker’s re-imagination of herself. Thus, at Happy Homes, ‘emotional labor’ is a matter of an identity-level commitment that will bring the worker project of self-making onto the Happy Homes retail floor, and into the Happy Homes retail labor process. When our manager personalizes her rally to troops, calling out “it really is, it really is, *you*,” conjuring for workers’ imaginations a revelatory experience where, by virtue of oneness with the brand, they can realize “hey, I am ‘that’!,” this is not simply the effort to get workers to conform to standards of Happy Homes conduct or produce front-line sentiments fitting to the Happy Homes brand. It is the attempt to motivate workers toward the project of re-identification. Hailing workers

to *be* the brand, this manager asks workers to *identify* with brand meanings, with the implicit promise that workers can thus absorb some of the brand status, and realize a new self more valuable than the old.

It is not only, nor primarily, through proximity that the low wage Happy Homes retail clerk can share in the status of the brand. In fact, if the organization wants its workers to have more than a fleeting, and always-potentially-conflicted, relationship to brand status, association-through-proximity to high-status branded goods is not enough to transform workers' class anxieties into a force of retail production. As this manager describes, the route by which workers *will* enjoy an increase in their status as an entailment of deep-level identification with the brand involves a re-imagination of self. Somewhat curiously, given the Happy Homes worker's inherent status deficit in relation to her customer, this re-imagined and more status-worthy self starts with the worker seeing her retail-clerk-self through her retail customer's eyes. The manager who prompts her employees' visualizations by asking them to consider the gaze of others -- "Well, people are going to think this about me...(t)hey're going to think that about me...it's that recognition that, hey, I am 'that'!" -- means for her employees to take on the perspective of the Happy Homes guest.

In light of the class divide that separates Happy Homes workers from their clientele, this strategy seems to come with an imminent risk that the worker, upon seeing herself through the eyes of well heeled customers, will feel the full, and potentially

shame-inducing, impact of her lesser status. But if this manager seems willing to run the risk of unleashing workers' class insecurities, something that could well alienate the worker from both the brand and the brand customer, she does so only insofar as these insecurities now become available to be turned on their head. Quickly, the manager, acknowledging that her assembled employees would want to be recognized "as part of this feeling (the brand feeling)," confirms this recognition is all but in-the-bag for the clerk who can emulate the brand feel, the look, the *zeitgeist* of the brand. If the customer does not gaze down her nose at the brand, (and no self-respecting shopper-lite-become-Happy-Homes-sales associate would believe that an Happy Homes customer would) she will not gaze down her nose at the brand-representing worker. Forthcoming from the very customer who, just a moment earlier, might have seemed to the worker's mind a status superior, is an estimation of the worker's worth equal to the customer's perception of her own. In this imagery, it is not the manager who is giving workers permission to feel "like the guest feels when she comes in," but the customer who, by transferring the "aspiration that people look to when they walk in the store" from its location in brand status to a location in the worker, has made the worker a partner in high prestige, and an object of deserved esteem.

Rightly so, this management-guided visualization assumes that the Happy Homes employee has a picture in her head of the class of people who consume Happy Homes goods, and posits this class position as an object of workers' aspirations. The Happy

Homes worker is to consider herself through the eyes of her customer, yet to do so while seeing herself *in the same light* as that in which she views her customer -- and this, to the end result that the worker inherits a sense of pride in her status equal to, or even greater than, that which she presumes her customer to feel. How could such an improbable conceit make landfall in a worker's psyche? Reflecting on this manager's words of guidance, logic must be slightly bent toward the brand, while the employee is led to consider the customer, arguably an object of envy for the worker, as directing envy *her way*:

So, it's that, it's that kind of aspiration that people look to when they walk in the store...yes, they are, I mean they want to be 'that'. They're going to think that about (you)...it's that recognition that, hey, (you are) 'that'!

That which the customer purportedly wants to be, the employee purportedly is. The sense of this manager's instructions, if a primer on how the worker might project his own envious feelings onto its object, and so characterize his customers as those with potential to feel envy of him, rests in the unique powers the organization attributes to its brand. To the typical Happy Homes worker, the brand represents, and in both a symbolic and economic sense, belongs to, the upper social echelons where prestige and affluence are the order of the day. In its introductory statement, the Happy Homes training manual sets out the terms of this perspective with the following question and answer round:

“What is different at Happy Homes than at other stores? We are not cute or commercial – we have high-quality products in a classy, high-quality store.” Still, as evidenced in our

manager's proclamation that "they want to be that," Happy-Homes-the-organization takes things a step further, casting the brand as uniquely necessary to the customer's effort to stylize her combined social, economic, and cultural capital.

Stylizing one's capital with Happy Homes is *the* way to fully realize the potential for status incumbent to that capital. Granted (and this would be critical to the success of the Happy Homes retail enterprise), the securely high-status, high-class customer, responding to brand marketing efforts, may aspire to have a more stylish home ala Happy Homes, thereby hoping to expand her (likely, already significant) symbolic capital. Still, unlike a typical Happy Homes worker, the customer does not experience exclusion from the brand as a result of her socio-economic class position nor, as the organization would promote, any substantive decline in her position as a consequence of eschewing the brand (indeed, the party most vulnerable to status loss in eschewing the brand would seem to be the Happy Homes worker). The typical Happy Homes customer, an established denizen of the prestigious, wealthy classes, does not need the brand to get her position, or to keep it.

To its workforce and consumer base alike, Happy Homes promotes its brand as adding unmatched and unmatchable "style" to a consumer's already accumulated (social, economic and cultural) capital, the brand providing an *indispensible* way to mark and enhance these capital forms. The capital-rich shopper does not necessarily buy this logic (else Happy Homes' competition would go completely out of business), however, there is

evidence that many Happy Homes workers do. When a Happy Homes sales associate, reflecting on what makes for common ground with customers, remarks “there’s people with class, and people without class,” she is expressing exactly this point: money doesn’t automatically give you class; but style (and that would be specifically the Happy Homes branded style) does. It is on this premise that the Happy Homes employee, standing in secure relationship to the brand, can say she “feels like (she’s) on common ground with the customers,” or that she’d “rather die than work at a place like Target” because she “can’t stand the riff-raff,” or that she wants to be at Happy Homes because it allows her to be around “people of (her) own kind.” And, it is on this same premise that the Happy Homes employee might understand herself to be recognized by the customer as possessed of the same meanings as the brand – and, given that (in Happy Homes rubric) status is inchoate without style, come to believe that these brand meanings could be those that the high-class customer yearns to appropriate for herself, and even envies in the person of the Happy Homes clerk.

When the manager says to her workers, “it’s that kind of aspiration that people look to when they walk in the store...yes, they are, I mean they want to be ‘that,’” the aspirations attributed to the Happy Homes customer look very much like the aspirations experienced by the Happy Homes worker. But, the class-insecure Happy Homes worker who has heard and responded to the call of brand logic and, with the help of Happy Homes managerial techniques, learned to project his aspirations onto those he serves,

may end up believing – not always, nor at every moment, but perhaps at those times when he needs to tamp down his own class anxieties – that his Armani-clad, diamond-studded, confidently big-spending guest harbors secret envy toward his, the retail worker's, insider-status with the brand.

Managing Brand Ambassadors

A defining feature of the Happy Homes customer base, and a feature that clearly differentiates the Happy Homes customer from the Happy Homes worker, is wealth, but when Happy Homes is trying to get its employees to identify with its brand this feature gets minimized. As previously noted, these workers do not belong to the constituency that make up the core Happy Homes clientele but, to take the manager at her word, \$8.50-an-hour-retail-workers, when they become brand representatives, become persons like their customers. They are (just as they might imagine their customers to be) strong, stable, and “awesome” brand citizens. This echoes the sentiment of another Happy Homes manager, Don, who, discussing what it means to be a brand representative, shared in his interview the belief that “associates should revel in the brand appeal.” Indeed, encouraging this, he said, was one of his favored “coaching” techniques. Asked why he favored this technique, Don explained:

Well, being here, it's the point! It's what the guests love so much. I want my associates to love it, I mean, really, *really* embrace it, really take it in as their own. *It's their brand.* That's what I mean. That kind of energy,

when I can show my associates to get into that kind of energy, they're going to feel great. Everything gets easy, and fun. I...for me, the associates, the guests, everybody.

Efforts to fetishize the brand aside, when Happy Homes superiors spell out a rationale for using the brand this way, it is not without its own managerial logic. Happy Homes is well aware that, despite the employee discount, workers can't afford to consume the brand product at anywhere near the same rate nor extent as does the typical customer. But it doesn't take direct and conspicuous consumption of branded goods for workers to become, alongside their customers, rightful citizens of the brand. Instead, "reveling in brand appeal" and emulating the 'brand feel' can, according to the message of management, naturalize workers into a Happy Homes body politic where the Happy Homes brand is *their brand*, where they can feel assured of their belonging "to that kind of energy," and "feel great."

As Don points out, when workers embrace the brand it can make everything "easy." Notwithstanding Don's belief that this ease spreads to all constituencies (managers, workers, and customers), getting a worker to embrace the brand facilitates the priorities of Happy Homes management. From his subject-position as manager, when Don invites workers to revel in brand appeal, he is applying a *coaching* technique, and is self-consciously engaged in managing his employees. And his coaching technique can indeed have salutary consequence to labor process control.

One such consequence lies in the success of this technique to bolster the employee's positive self-feeling. Especially adept at reflecting brand status back onto his subordinates, Don (who is a remarkably enthusiastic promoter of the brand, both in terms of brand aesthetic and brand status), often uses personal compliments to promote employee brand-identification. For instance, when one of his associates (prior to store opening) decided to try out the newly arrived Happy Homes "Dumetz" chair, Don heaped praises on the scene. Rushing over to where the associate sat, and clapping in applause as he went, he gushed, "Ohmygod, you look like a *queen* in that chair! The Dumetz is just fantastic!!! I love it! But ohmygod, look at you! You own the place...the Happy Homes poster girl...you're so awesome!" This clerk need not purchase the Dumetz chair to bask in its reflected glory; she need only sit in it and be seen. The employee is "awesome," not on her own, but as part of the setting, awesome because she is perfect as the "Happy Homes poster girl." Blurring the lines that separate brand product from brand worker, Don adroitly crafts a compliment the full purchase of which depends on its recipient identifying with the brand, internalizing brand appeal (and her ability to personify that appeal), into the confidence of the self.

Surely, workers who respond to this type of technique are led to invest some measure of self-worth in their ability to personify the Happy Homes brand. In this instance, the employee – who smiled and laughed, seemed to even puff up a bit – appeared to be very pleased by Dave's compliment. Moreover, this associate – who had

just the previous day lamented the size of her credit card balance, confiding to me that she “absolutely couldn’t buy anything more or her husband would kill her” – started to show some interest in buying this chair. At Happy Homes, you can spot an employee’s growing interest in purchasing an item not only by their comments or the frequency with which they ‘visit’ the desire item during their shift, but by their effort to accurately figure out the discounted price. This female sales associate did her adding machine work later that morning, figuring out (to her dismay) that the chair in question, even at 40% off, was still way beyond her means. However, she also found a way to appease her disappointment and, in a comment to me, shared her hopeful plan: “Maybe I can buy it when it goes on floor-model!” While the floor-model price reflects a drastic (and affordable) end-of-season price reduction Happy Homes makes on older floor model furniture, this associate’s plan is more wishful thinking than reality. These items tend to fly out the door as a customer purchase the day of price reduction, and since employees are not allowed to pre-purchase floor models or put them on hold, and management gives no advance notice about when the reduction will occur, it’ll be the luck of the draw whether this associate will be on shift the day the Dumetz is reduced. But, even if this worker does not fulfill her purchasing desires, in her lust for the Dumetz chair she helps illustrate another interesting feature of Happy Homes management strategies. In an effort to transform front-line workers into brand ambassadors, Happy Homes managers deploy practices that can encourage workers’ dual identification as brand representative *and* brand consumer. Looking at the consequences Don’s coaching technique has for this

associate, we can see how a manager's effort to get an employee to identify with the brand can constitute a form of labor control that sells the branded product to the worker even as it 'sells' that worker a form of positive self-identity attached to the brand.

Workers who revel in the brand are apt to be better salespersons, and this is a plus for Don when it comes time to tally his department's sales. But there is another benefit. These employees are also more likely to self-direct their labors. It would be, for instance, much easier for Don to convince his associates to assume responsibility for cleaning and maintaining the retail floor – necessary tasks of questionable reward -- if, as a result of taking the brand status as if it were their own, these associates experience a personal investment in the store's condition. The brand-representing Happy Homes sales associate who internalizes brand appeal, that is, “really take(s) it in as (her) own,” has grounds to take personal pride in that which physically instantiates the brand, that is, in the product and the retail-scape at large. And when an employee develops this kind of personal stake in the appearance of the retail floor, the physical labors of tending the floor can become simultaneously the labors of tending self-image. This is a persuasive rationale for worker self-direction.

Whether or not Don is fully deliberate in this goal, encouraging his employees to revel in the brand suggests a way to motivate their self-directed labors, even when the job tasks are – like neatening, straightening and cleaning – of low appeal, easy to ignore, and generally easy to avoid. Indeed, my observations on the Happy Homes shop floor attest

to this result. During my time in the field I rarely saw Don instruct his associates to neaten, straighten, and clean his departmental area, yet they did so with consistency and close attention. In fact, these sales associates did this so well that Don (who doesn't do much of this work himself) received regular praises in staff meetings for how tidy, clean, and fully-stocked he kept his department. It is also telling, given Don's personal abrogation of these responsibilities, that his subordinates voiced no resentment. To the contrary, Don's direct subordinates, described him as "easy-going," "a great guy" and "an awesome manager." As a labor process control strategy, Don's efforts to get his workers to "revel in the brand" appear to pay off in more ways than one. If, by Don's coaching, the worker's subjectivity is moved closer to brand ambassadorship, and her identification with the brand consumer is deepened, her ability to self-direct her own labor appears enhanced as well.

Brand Ambassadorship as Symbolic Capital

In their efforts to turn low-level workers into brand ambassadors, Happy Homes management casts a wide net, even basing hiring decisions on a reading of a prospective employee's potential to fulfill the ambassador role. Thinking through what makes a good employee, a senior-level Happy Homes manager explains her strategy for identifying the potential brand ambassador inside the job applicant. Describing the characteristics she looks for when interviewing job hopefuls, this manager sheds light on how the "brand ambassador" strategy links up to Happy Homes labor governance priorities:

You want to have a criteria that it's going to be an enthusiastic person, enthusiastic about the brand, and we look for people who are going to love Happy Homes...they say, 'Oh, I love Happy Homes' and I say 'Great! Tell me about that.' If they love Happy Homes, they can relate to our guests, and if they can relate to our guests they can sell to our guests. It's that simple. The brand unites people.

Here, the labor process purpose is explicit. Happy Homes employees who, being good brand ambassadors, "love Happy Homes," will be able to relate to, and consequently, sell to the Happy Homes guests. From the perspective of the organization, this is clear and makes good sense. Accordingly, the organization has a stake in its workers experiencing a sense of commonality with customers. This manager also clearly indicates where the organization hopes to locate that commonality, that is, it will be found in a depth of attachment to the brand – a depth of attachment akin to "love." But, in clarifying these precepts of work control logic, our manager also obscures a crucial organizational truth. The proclamation that "the brand unites people," in a way that is just "that simple," optimistically suggests that this process occurs (to organizational benefit) unmediated. But it doesn't. Uniting Happy Homes workers with Happy Homes customers, or rather, inspiring workers to feel united with their customers (which is surely what this manager means), requires a significant and on-going organizational intervention.

Insofar as this manager suggests the brand can be used to unite these cross-class groups, she is right, but the brand does not automatically lend itself to this end and, in fact, can just as easily run at cross-purposes. For many Happy Homes sales associates

the brand evokes images of an ascendant and stylish class of consumers who can have a steady, and class-based, confidence that they belong in the Happy Homes world. But Happy Homes employees do not, on their own, easily experience such confidence. Reflecting on her pre-hire days, one Happy Homes associate sums up the type of anxiety that future employees can feel about their own class-based shortcomings:

Honestly, I was always a little afraid to walk into Happy Homes...it seemed, so...I guess, above me or something...I did go a lot because I love it but I'd always be, I don't know, a little nervous, or self-conscious or something that that...like maybe they could tell, I don't know, by my clothes or something, that I didn't belong.

This sales associate, describing her feelings as a long-time shopper-lite, highlights the power of the brand to both seduce and intimidate those at a lower remove from its regular clientele. Many associates voice similar sentiments, with one recalling how she was hit by a particularly bad case of nerves in the days before she started the job. This associate, explaining that her bad case of nerves was the result of not “know(ing) how to rub elbows with this type of crowd” reveals how Happy Homes employees’ cognizance of brand meanings may find them feeling at odds with, and not kin to, their customer base.

For the organization, this power of the brand to intimidate employees is as essential as it is troublesome, and Happy Homes devotes significant effort toward managing employees’ feelings of intimidation, and “repurposing” their resultant

anxieties. Tied to its power to seduce, the brand power to intimidate rests in its ability to mark boundaries of class distinction, designating upward classes a place of rightful stature and brand belonging, relegating lesser classes to the potentially restless, and unstable, state of aspiration. If, as the logic of its “brand ambassador” technique suggests, the organization seeks to cleave worker subjectivity to the meanings of its brand, generating a perception of likeness with customers, too much intimidation poses a problem by stressing difference between the worker and the customer she serves. On the other hand, this intimidation is critical to the Happy Homes labor process, such that management strategies must aim not at its elimination but at its containment. When the organization can offer the intimidated-just-enough worker a way to relieve her anxiety by coming *closer to the brand*, it binds worker positive self-feeling to the branded employment, and secures an important foundation of worker loyalty and consent. For this labor control strategy to work, the employee must feel *some intimidation and anxiety*, but *not so much* that they feel separate from their customer and alienated from the products they sell.

The brand ambassador strategy signifies the Happy Homes organizational effort to repurpose worker class anxiety. As we saw in the example from the Happy Homes staff meeting, likewise common in Happy Homes training exercises and informal coaching interactions, Happy Homes management will summon the “brand representative” role as a route to employee self-empowerment, suggesting that the status

attached to that role can elevate the worker to a level where, equal to her customers, she can enjoy rightful belonging to the brand. Certainly, this is what's going on when managers tell employees that their status as brand representative makes them "strong" and "awesome," and certifies them as "brand citizens." Yet, tellingly, in these settings Happy Homes management is acknowledging the brand's power to intimidate its workers. While these acknowledgements are rarely direct, folded instead into proposals of how the worker might resolve class anxieties provoked by the brand, they comprise the unspoken premise of the brand ambassador rallying cry.

Our manager who led the morning staff meeting illustrates how this strategy plays out. After scripting the nature of the good feeling in store for those workers who inhabit the brand, thus reaching the "recognition that, hey I am 'that'!", this manager continues with her staff meeting presentation. Dropping back into her real-time role, she offers her audience of assembled employees the following words of guidance:

We all want to be "that." Individuals here who aren't as secure with their own style, you have Happy Homes as your mantle. Your guideline is Happy Homes. You're a member of the brand team...there's no insecurity in that. Be proud of that. So there is this, our shopper's aspirational, she wants to feel as if she's this awesome. Other ways, you know, maybe it's that she knows she's awesome when she walks in, she's like, "oh my gosh! I love, oh my god, look at this place, it's amazing!" She wants to be 'that'...she sees you, the person with the knowledge to tell her how to be 'that.' You *know* about this, it's using the mantle of Happy Homes, it's that, as a brand representative, being that, it's all that, the *expertise* you have...there's no insecurity, I mean, look where you are...they need *you* to help them be *that.*'

In an act of implicit recognition that sales associates may feel themselves at short-fall against both brand standards and the high station of their regular clientele, this manager, speaking to a group of about fifteen sales associates, has just made an appeal to her workers' class anxieties. Though the call to "individuals here who aren't as secure with their own style" might seem benign in its reference to "style" and directed only to those who lack confidence in their 'stylish-ness,' the meaning changes when translated into Happy Homes code. As a reference to brand allure, the phrase "we all want to be 'that'" gathers all but the most cynical associate into the fold (the "we" effectively places Happy Homes workers up next to the guest). Though some Happy Homes old-timers do develop cynicism about the brand, most sales associates maintain a high esteem for the Happy Homes brand, indeed reporting a kind of brand-infatuation that seems remarkably resilient to an erosive effect by, for instance, the detractions of low wages and "flexible" work hours. Remembering, too, that many of the employees assembled this day were once shopper-lites, it is not a stretch to assume that most would have felt properly included in their manager's "we." Moreover, most would have felt included in the group of individuals at least potentially insecure in "their own style."

But at Happy Homes, "style" is rarely used in the generic. As we saw in the earlier discussion of employee training, even the newbie hire picks up that "style" is part of a polite code used to refer matters of the customer's class, status, or wealth. In a practice that reflects the class-cultural norms of the group they serve, Happy Homes

employees learn to eschew any overly direct mention of money and power (in particular, their customer's money and power), and instead, demonstrating a kind of high-class politesse, will prefer to use the more mincing words, such as "affluent," "prosperous," or "upscale." But, of the available synonyms, "stylish" seems to be one of the most popular. Happy Homes staff frequently choose "stylish" as a way to denote the better-heeled clientele, such that speaking about a "guest with style" is an effective way to communicate to co-workers that the subject is a big-spender, and not, for instance, a shopper-lite.

Particularly possessed of "style" in the eyes of Happy Homes staff, and very likely to be dubbed so, is the well-heeled customer who impresses by sailing through a high-dollar purchase with sangfroid. One sales associate, having just closed a spectacularly large sale, illustrates this point as she tells her co-workers what she makes of the customer's nonchalance:

When I rang up the total I was like 'ohmygod, no way,' but she was like 'no big deal, hey, I do this everyday,' ... I mean, I was like shaking, it was a *\$12,000 sale*, but she...it didn't phase her at all, I mean, *she had style*, she just acted like \$12,000 is nothing.

As we, and our Happy Homes sales associates, might assume, it is the high-class, comfortably wealthy customer who can remain – as did this shopper -- unperturbed by large expenditures. And, when associates want to signify this matter of class, the word "style" will do quite well. So it is too that, in Happy Homes code-speak, when a manager

wants to tap into workers' doubts about their own social and economic worth she can call out for "individuals here who aren't as secure with their own style," and be pretty sure that listeners will get her drift.

Clearly, this manager doesn't raise workers' class anxieties simply to let them hang in the air. From the organization's perspective, workers' class anxieties, always (potentially) at risk of being triggered in abstraction by brand meanings, daily at risk of being triggered (corporeally) through interactions with "stylish" customers, and even at-the-ready to be evoked by management in its efforts to transform workers into brand ambassadors, need some kind of mediation. If class insecurity overtakes a Happy Homes worker, she becomes less likely to "relate to the guests" – this is to the organization's harm, as the ability to relate to the guests is, by our senior-level manager's claim, crucial in their ability to sell to those guests. Moreover, the sales associate who suffers a surfeit of this kind of insecurity might become much less apt to think herself "awesome" as a brand representative, or to "feel great" as a result of doing her job. If management apprehends the importance of these kinds of employee positive self-feeling to worker cooperation and consent (and these examples give us reason to think that they do), they will not let workers' class anxieties go un-modulated. And, as evidenced by this morning meeting, they do not.

In this meeting, hailing worker's anxieties goes to the purpose of channeling those anxieties in line with organizational needs. Specifically, the manager offers the anxious

worker mitigation of his fears through deeper identification with the brand. In her words, front-line Happy Homes workers will resolve insecurity about “their own style” by taking the brand as their “mantle.” The insecure worker is assured that with Happy Homes as his guideline, “there’s no insecurity.” In the picture this manager paints, the brand has a halo effect, and brand cachet spills over, onto and around, the Happy Homes worker. As a strategy to inspire workers to embrace their brand representative role, this manager elaborates a case where the front-line Happy Homes worker, touched as it were by the brand, has “expertise” (the content of which remains undefined), of a sort the customer very much needs and very much wants. In this rendering, the worker gains a form of symbolic capital - vested in his relationship to the brand – which he can parlay into confidence and power when faced with the intimidating stature of his clientele. As an organizational answer to the problem (and promise) of workers’ class anxieties, this manager’s tract makes clear that the brand, even as it has the potential to stimulate workers’ class anxieties, is the way out of these fears. Symbolic, not economic, capital is what matters, and the low level Happy Homes retail worker *can claim symbolic capital through identification with the brand.*

A different member of Happy Homes management personnel gave her own take on how workers might inherit important symbolic capital by virtue of identifying with the brand. Asked about the relationship between employees and the brand, this female manager told a fairly extended tale about the semiotic value of cocktail shakers:

You know, I remember when we did more in the way of cocktails and cocktailing, you know, there are very few people who use a cocktail shaker on a regular basis...there aren't that many...very few people drink martinis on a regular basis, but that represents a very big part of our entertaining...it's aspiration...I mean, it's like, I don't use a cocktail shaker, I don't know how to make a martini, but it looks good, that cocktail shaker looks really swank and really hip in my bar...you know...so, it's the aspiration people have. And I tell my team, so what if you don't know how to use a cocktail shaker? It's hip and it's swank and it's in, that's what *you* know if you work here. It's on the front bay. But, so, there is this association with the person she (the customer) sees when she walks in, because (customers) are going to expect one thing out of you...you *get* the cocktail shaker.

Just by looking around the store, noting, for instance, what products Happy Homes is pushing by putting on its front bays, these low-level retail workers can realize a symbolic edge over their customers. While the Happy Homes customer may have the economic capital to buy the Happy Homes cocktail shaker, laying down a quick \$100 for something that, at least according to this manager, she will seldom use (and, in any case, probably wouldn't know how to use), the Happy Homes retail worker has something that, supposedly, her client doesn't. The card up the worker's sleeve is her immediate knowledge of what's hip, what's swank, what's in, and this is knowledge that purportedly holds great importance to the "aspirational" customer. The worker herself becomes important when she presents (again, to the customer's real or imagined eye) as the primary holder of that knowledge. In mapping a portion of the Happy Homes worker's clout according to a kind of "I got here first" code, the manager would seem to be granting the worker little by way of real standing, but this manager is also hinting at a

more esoteric power, one that rests in the fact that the Happy Homes worker *gets* the cocktail shaker. The worker has authority – not because she knows how to use the shaker – but because she knows that the cocktail shaker, and the Happy Homes one specifically, *counts*. What’s being counted is capital of the symbolic kind, and here the Happy Homes worker is definitely still in the game. At least in the imagination of this manager, if not also in the imagination of workers (if employees’ claims about equality with customers carry weight), in a status competition between Happy Homes workers and their clientele, the Happy Homes retail-brand-ambassador earns important points for *getting* the symbolic value of the goods he sells.

As the quotes at the front of this section suggest, many of the Happy Homes front-line workers have come to believe they share important common ground with their affluent clientele, and by all indications, locate this common ground in the territory of the brand. Furthermore, these workers seem to derive significant positive self-feeling from their identification with the brand, and to self-consciously enjoy a profit of symbolic capital as a result of their job. Recall our Happy Homes worker from a previous chapter, who, when asked how the Happy Homes job affected his feelings about himself, had this to say about a gain in “symbolic capital”:

When I got the job at Happy Homes, it felt like a privilege. It made me feel a whole lot better about myself as compared to the places I worked before, I guess because Happy Homes was a whole lot classier.

And then there's Liz, a laid-off flight attendant who, after taking the job at Happy Homes, described feeling an enhancement in self- and social worth as a result of her association with the Happy Homes brand. As we learned in an earlier chapter, when Liz got hired at Happy Homes it made her feel like she "was on top of the world." And, as Liz went on to say:

All my friends, um, everyone found out I worked at Happy Homes and it was like, "oh my gosh, you work at Happy Homes!"...I'm like, you know, proud. I feel really good about that.

Some of this enhanced self-feeling must, of course, be linked to employees' general knowledge of the brand status. To that extent, our manager who speaks of the automatic power of the brand to unite people has a point. But, as this review of the brand ambassador labor strategy suggests, Happy Homes also strategically deploys its brand meanings within the workplace to support, increase and maintain this type of positive self-feeling in the Happy Homes worker, resulting in workers who feel kinship to their customers and a bond to, if not also a "status dependency" on, the brand and branded employment.

Happy Homes management makes no bones about the fact that it wants its worker to identify with the customer, but to join these cross-class groups the organization must find ways to channel workers' brand-inspired anxieties such that class boundaries blur rather than define. Some workers, left to their own devices, might accomplish this

without the organization's help, but for this process to happen systematically and serve organizational needs Happy Homes must intervene, and the "brand ambassador" strategy proves critical to this effort.

Brand Ambassadorship in Labor Process Control

Does inculcating these precepts of Happy Homes brand ambassadorship into workers' selves help to produce productive, compliant laborers? It would seem, from the organizational standpoint, it does. A high-level Happy Homes manager gave an insightful analysis of this point. Asked to describe what she liked about her job at Happy Homes, this manager spoke with first-hand authority about the value of Happy Homes brand-identified employees to the retail employer's priorities:

I've enjoy it here, I love it, I really enjoy it. You know, one of things I really insist on is...is loyalty and, *it's been easy to harness here*. When I say "loyalty" I mean loyalty to the brand, to the team, to yourself, like, understand who you are, understand your obligation to the brand, understand what you bring to the team... and bring it, bring it every day, and bring it hard, today, you need to bring it here everyday. I've been in retail management for a long time and I've worked for other companies, so I know, loyalty like this can be very hard to inspire...*but here, and I think this has a lot to do with the brand, it's been easy to harness loyalty...very easy.*

If this seasoned retail manager is correct, it seems that the Happy Homes labor control strategy embodied in the "brand ambassador" concept, itself reliant on a very specific exploitation of workers' class anxieties, can produce especially loyal front-line

retail workers. But, if this organization might imagine that socializing a worker into an anxiety-relieving identification with its brand earns that employee's loyalty, cooperation, and consent, would the worker himself agree? The class-anxieties the worker suffers, provoked as they are by the high-status Happy Homes brand and its tony clientele, must find some relief through the methods his employer encourages for this process to work. But does brand ambassadorship actually help workers modulate their status anxiety, thus sustaining that anxiety as a force of retail production? The words of one long-tenured Happy Homes employee provide intriguing, if provisional, support to the claim that ambassadorship helps turn workers' class anxieties into a productive force:

When I first started working here I did feel uncomfortable sometimes...the customers are pretty high-level and, when I first started, sometimes it could be intimidating but then after a while, well, it's just (shrugs)...who cares? People who work here, they want to be at that level but they're not. They want all this stuff but it's out of their range, they want the discount, because of the discount they can have the Happy Homes life, it'd be totally out of their range otherwise. So I guess people can feel intimidated, that they're below the clientele, because the people who come in here are upper crust. But I think it's only at first (...) then once you've been here a while you're comfortable with the brand...and I think you start to feel like you're equals with them.

As this Happy Homes sales associate explains, the comfort-level of the low-level Happy Homes employee with his high-class surroundings depends on his right to a brand discount as well as his growth into an identity that is formed in and around the brand. Brand ambassadorship does not, alone, relieve the Happy Homes worker's class anxiety, but if it does allow the low-level retail clerk to feel like he fits in the Happy Homes

world, even allowing him the chance to relish a sense of superiority over his customers in the belief that his symbolic brand ownership could actually trump theirs, it goes some significant distance toward creating working selves who feel a great more up-class than they did before. And for the employer there is a pay-off in this. When an organization like Happy Homes uses its brand to exploit workers' class anxieties, and manages those anxieties well enough to produce class-confidence in class-insecure workers, it not only produces brand loyalists, but branded workers who are very likely to evince productivity and consent.

We've seen how the Happy Homes brand ambassador strategy functions to channel workers' class anxieties toward organizational ends, asking that the employee's identity be re-made, at least in part, according to the precepts of the brand. But re-inventing workers' selves is a tall order, and Happy Homes management tackles this project creatively, deploying multiple strategies in its efforts to instruct and motivate its workers to re-imagine themselves in the image of the brand. The brand ambassador strategy is a critical piece in the Happy Homes labor process puzzle, facilitating the re-invention of workers' selves by persuading workers of three things: that the Happy Homes brand embodies a pre-eminent category of symbolic capital, that identification with the brand gains workers symbolic capital equal to their customer's, and that symbolic capital counts as the authoritative marker of class.

To the extent these persuasions work, they encourage both the re-invention of workers selves and the reproduction of worker consent. However, the brand ambassador strategy does not stand alone. If it primes workers for their Happy Homes service productivity and consent, it gives no fine-grained instruction on how they should do the service proper. To answer the labor control question of how to invent self-motivating front-line retail workers who are able and willing to spontaneously produce the type of service interactions management desires, management draws on another trajectory of brand meaning: high-class hospitality. In the section that follows, I take up an examination of how Happy Homes managers reframe front-line workers as high-class hosts and front-line work as a form of high-class hospitality. Using the trope of high class hospitality, Happy Homes management attempts to capture the imaginations of workers powerfully enough that workers are motivated to cooperate in their own transformation while enacting that transformation as part of their front-line interactive labor.

RETAIL WORK AS HIGH-CLASS HOSPITALITY

As most shoppers know, a new “service paradigm” has reached the retail world. Expunged from the vocabulary of the retail clerk, the blunt or distant “Can I help you?” of the retail past has been almost entirely replaced – in policy if not in practice -- by one or another version of the friendlier, “Hi, how are you?” In many retail contexts, and particularly those up-line from warehouse discounters and big box retailers, new customer service precepts also mean the floor clerk must ramp up her work of sociability,

doing more of what scholars identify as the emotional labor that underwrites the successful performance of service interactions. But if the paid work of service pleasantries has intensified across the retail world, in the branded retail environment of Happy Homes the sociability of clerking has become finely tuned to specifications of the brand. In line with a brand identity that poses its up-scale home furnishings as symbolic of a person's social and economic arrival, Happy Homes has rewritten the low level work of retail sales and service as the performance of high class hospitality, assigning its shop floor the part of a well-appointed home at the ready for entertaining, its floor worker the role of refined and gracious domestic host.

Setting the Stage for Retail Hospitality

Recasting the paid work of retail clerking as the social event of high-class hospitality does not happen without careful orchestration by the organization. As much as Happy Homes workers do cooperate in this process, retail-service-turned-high-class-hosting (as well as retail-service workers-turned-upper-crust-hosts) is the product of deliberate management efforts. Of course, the insinuations of the brand lend strong support to such a re-interpretation. To recall a previous point, the organization's branding strategies intersect with its labor control strategies, and the question of how Happy Homes uses an imagery of hospitality to redefine its retail work and retail workers overlaps with the question of how Happy Homes weaves this imagery into its brand marketing. Not surprisingly, the imagery of high-class-hospitality-at-home that saturates

Happy Homes brand marketing reaches many Happy Homes employees through conduits outside their workplace, and prior to their enlistment in the Happy Homes labor process. All of the Happy Homes employees interviewed for this study report having some knowledge of the brand prior to working at Happy Homes, with the majority having gained extensive familiarity with the brand prior to getting the Happy Homes job. And exposure to Happy Homes marketing can create not only a familiarity but an emotional attachment to Happy Homes brand meanings. One sales associate, when asked if she knew of the brand before pursuing the Happy Homes job, highlights the type of emotional resonance the brand can create in its more dedicated followers:

Oh yeah, yeah, I did, I definitely did! I use to love to get that catalog, as soon as the catalog came, I'd have it all dog-eared up, and I'd be like, oh my gosh, I want that and that and that. I'd hold onto those catalogs, it's funny, I went back and looked through some of my old things I had kept, I had Happy Homes catalogs from Christmas that I had kept because I like the mantel, how they decorated it, and the table, the holiday table...I wanted to recreate that inspiration in my own home and throw a holiday party...I would love to get the catalog, I mean it was something I would pour over...I loved it...I loved it...

While not all employees enthuse to quite this extent, brand familiarity is something Happy Homes workers are likely to bring into the job, and many develop positive feelings about the brand before taking the Happy Homes job. At minimum, the brand's ubiquity means that the typical employee, when confronted by organizational attempts to impose brand imagery onto a definition of paid retail work, will not find the imagery in itself strange. The in-coming employee is, then, primed to import an

understanding of the brand into the branded employment. Moreover, as we saw in the discussion of shopper-lites, private fantasies surrounding the meanings of the brand can inform the desire to work at Happy Homes, inducing an expectation that the branded employment will allow some personal realization of those meanings (almost 90% of those interviewed for this study cited their positive feelings about the brand as an important factor in their decision to take the Happy Homes job). A new recruit who explains his desire to work at Happy Homes, declaring, “I want to be ‘that’,” speaks to an anticipation of his own transformation, a readiness as it were, to be refashioned in the image of the brand. The organization wants the same thing. Or, more aptly, the organization wants the employee refashioned in the image of the brand insofar as this refashioning results in a consenting, complying worker who performs the paid work of retail as if a voluntary labor of refined hospitality.

The Happy Homes organization efficiently puts its brand meanings to dual uses: on one hand, Happy Homes corporate operatives deliberately craft and disseminate brand meanings to create consumer desire for the branded product, on the other, Happy Homes store management uses those brand meanings to inform the shape and content of the labor required to serve these desiring consumers. The home that would adorn itself in Happy Homes style is decidedly upscale and the inhabitants who would enjoy the Happy Homes lifestyle, decidedly upper class. These classed meanings of the brand are also gendered. The image of the one who oversees this domestic perfection (and enjoys a good deal of

its reflected glory) implies a quintessential feminine role, as it were, the personification of the “domestic goddess.” As the Happy Homes brand represents high status and class, its articulation as “entertaining-in-style-at-home” represents the behaviors of an upper class form of femininity. For the organization, this means producing workers who will identify with, so as to personify, not only the classed but also the gendered meanings of the brand.

Propping up the brand meanings of hospitality, the material presentation of the store conjures up explicit images of the welcoming domicile. The physical layout of the store and the manner in which Happy Homes merchandise is arranged and displayed seems planned to disguise, or at least obscure, the store’s economic purpose behind a social-domestic one. In contrast to retail stores where merchandise is clustered by category, size or price, Happy Homes displays its merchandise by what it calls “lifestyles.” In effect, these lifestyles are the equivalent of furnished rooms in a home.

Though these rooms are not walled in, as they would be in an actual home, they are staged as if discreet domestic spaces, each composed of artfully arranged floor sets appropriate to the “lifestyle” on display – that is, appropriate to Happy Homes’ version of a living room, a dining room, a home office, entertainment room, a bedroom or bathroom. The careful arrangement of each lifestyle includes touches that lend the impression of a lived in, rather than commercial, space – for instance, in a living room lifestyle, throw pillows will be deliberately indented at their top edge, comfy throws will

be draped to look as if casually thrown over a chair's arm, and coffee tables will be set with wine glasses, cheese trays, and glossy-paged books.

Apart from the merchandise displayed in the lifestyle settings, minimal stock is kept on the floor, and cash registers, dunnage, and other sundry equipment of retail sales are kept largely out of view behind tasteful chest high "bars." Entering the Happy Homes store, one need hardly squint to imagine they'd entered an affluent someone's private space rather than the very public place of a retail home furnishings shop. Obviously, comers know Happy Homes is a retail venue, but the up-scale air of the setting is still home-like, the design spirit welcoming, and visual cues that announce a retail business largely muted. For the organization's branded labor process purposes, this type of stage – where the workplace is made to look like the interior of a beautiful home -- is very well-suited to its intent that front-line retail labor play out their work as a form of high-class hospitality.

Making Retail Workers into High Class Hosts

A good setting, of course, is not enough, and Happy Homes labor control strategies concerned with branding its work and its workers end up written into its policies and procedures. An interesting example lies in the common Happy Homes practice of placing a newbie worker on first-day duty at the store's front doors.

Fresh from training, the newly budded Happy Homes retail clerk may find herself standing in the store's "Grand Lobby," executing the task of greeting incoming guests and thanking outgoing shoppers. This new worker is responsible, as it were, for greeting her guests at the front door. She will have arrived dressed for the part. According to Happy Homes code, she will be dressed in daytime-professional style, portraying an understated elegance writ in neutral tones, with tasteful but modest adornment – a string of pearls, the employee handbook suggests, is quite appropriate, while a garish necklace definitely is not. "Impeccable personal grooming is essential," says one paragraph of the manual (even the state of one's fingernails - clean, manicured, trimmed - gets mentioned here), while another paragraph instructs on hair length, style, and color. In its rules for male front-line Happy Homes workers, the dress code instructs male associates to wear slacks (as opposed to khakis or jeans, or shorts), and "nice shirt(s) or sweater(s)." As with female associates, male associates' dress must be in neutral shades of grey, white, black, brown, tan, beige, or navy. Happy Homes also instructs male associates that their dress should be "tasteful" and "avoid a casual look." As we might assume, Happy Homes does not allow either male or female associates to sport personalized body jewelry or adornment, and Happy Homes workers are not allowed to show tattoos, or wear jewelry in piercings that are visible, excepting ear piercings, these limited to one per ear. Like their female compatriots, male associates appear to comply happily with the dress code, and my observations on the Happy Homes floor indicate that male associates

are generally just as well-dressed in their masculinized style as their female co-workers are in feminized style.

Having read the instructions in the manual, and gained exposure to her well-dressed trainer and other well-dressed associates, a new worker realizes the importance of proper costume at Happy Homes and, if she abides by the rules, will arrive the first day looking the part of well-bred hostess. During my months at Happy Homes, I was impressed by the extent to which sales associates complied with dress and grooming codes (not once did I see a female – or, for that matter, a male -- associate who wasn't dressed to play the part). Moreover, sales associates often seemed to enjoy this part of their job. As one sales associate said when describing positive aspects of her job, “it’s fun to get the chance to dress up!”

This dress and grooming code represents the reproduction of the Happy Homes version of classed femininity in the person of the female front-line worker. For their part, female front-line associates appear to comply with these rules happily, and often with enthusiasm. For instance, it is not unusual for floor worker conversation to include the exchange of compliments on appearance, often in reference to a particular item of clothing or jewelry, with comments such as “I love that sweater!” or “That’s a gorgeous skirt!” Happy Homes floor workers seem to understand the up-class parameters of their employer’s dress code and, by all appearances, embrace the opportunity to “dress up” – and dress ‘up-class’ -- for the job. Of course, the vast majority of these front-line

workers cannot afford the high-line clothing that the upward classes sport, but associates have strategies that allow them to mimic the look for less. As one associate explained:

I really enjoy getting up and getting dressed for work, like, you know what I mean, it feels good to look good. And, it's like, you really don't have to spend a lot of money to look nice...you know, you don't have to spend a lot to look like you spent a lot...you can go to...I know, I've been learning that I can buy pants at JC Penney's that look like they're Ralph Lauren...and for 20 bucks, and I'm like, okay, and they're washable!

Associates like to share their strategies for finding nice clothes for less. Another bargain-savvy associate, having just received a compliment from a co-worker on her "gorgeous top," shared her secrets with a group of workers while chatting in the break room:

I get most of my clothes at Marshalls or TJ Maxx, I find really nice things...what I do is I look for the designer labels, you know, like DKNY or the Ralph Lauren stuff sometimes I like, so if it's a good price and I like it I get it.

The topic of finding designer clothes for less is popular among Happy Homes workers, especially female workers, and I learned a lot during my time at Happy Homes about how to dress well on a budget. Perhaps one of the most interesting tips I received came from my co-worker, Nela, who one day confessed to me her secret for 'dressing well on less.' We were chatting in the break room, and I made a comment about what beautiful clothes she had. Since Nela and I often worked shifts together, I'd had the chance to see many of Nela's ensembles, and was impressed by both the variety and the

apparent quality of her clothes. Nela decided that day to reveal her special source for high-line clothing. Leaning in to whisper, she said:

I don't buy *anything* retail, you know where I get my clothes? Goodwill. You find Eileen Fisher, Jones New York, once I even found a Chanel jacket, the buttons were gone but I got some buttons and sewed them on.

Like her co-workers, Nela sought out designer labels, or clothes that looked like they might be designer labels, in order to dress in an upscale style. While I can't be sure that these associates developed these habits because of their Happy Homes job, I can establish that the goal to look *as if* you're wearing expensive stylish clothes is important to most of the workers I got to know. Interestingly, one worker remarked that her family had noticed a positive change in her 'personal style' since she'd taken the job at Happy Homes. Very pleased that both her mother and her father had observed a change, this young associate shared what her father said: "you look so professional, it makes a father proud to take his daughter out to dinner."

These kinds of comments suggest that the associate's participation in the Happy Homes labor process, and specifically her engagement in class re-identification, may influence her behaviors and experience outside of work. At the very least, this evidence raises the possibility that a worker's consumption habits, and perhaps also her style of dress, are affected by her experience in the Happy Homes job. If the Happy Homes associate's paid identity work shapes some larger sense of who she is, and affects other

parts of her life, then consequences of the Happy Homes system of branded labor control have reached beyond the retail workplace.

The Happy Homes dress code imports the gendered and classed meanings of the brand into the labor process and, when associates enthusiastically comply, the code intersects with the reproduction of the worker's gendered and classed self. As these examples suggest, inhabiting the up-class femininity implied by the Happy Homes brand provides the front-line worker positive self-feeling attached to a class identity. Associates admire elite clothing brands and seek out affordable ways to purchase what they consider to be up-line clothes. Even in the case of our Penney's shopper, the value of the JC Penney's pants seems to lie less in their easy-care than in their resemblance to a status brand symbolic of an elevated class position. The worker who internalizes the motivation to dress in these elite brands, or even to dress in clothes that successfully mimic elite brands, is engaged in a process of self-making related to her class aspirations and class re-identifications. And though this is speculative, the evidence seems to suggest that the Happy Homes job helps shape worker's choices, interests, and behaviors beyond the walls of the Happy Homes store.

This clothing-based self-making process is also powerfully gendered, and a (classed) construction of femininity is inscribed in the wording of the Happy Homes dress code and in the practices by which female associates comply and support the code. These illustrations show us that female associates enthusiastically dress to code, while

also suggesting that these associates find personal pleasure in the process. Reflecting a feminine pre-occupation with appearance, the associates who gain pleasure from dressing up for work seem to gain an enhanced sense of their gendered identity – as our associate says, “it feels good to look good.” But, importantly, in the context of Happy Homes, looking good also means “look(ing) like you spent a lot.” As part of the Happy Homes labor process, the female floor worker who is dressing to code reproduces a class-marked femininity, revising her own gender identity in terms of its classed components. And this leads to the suggestion that the gendering of Happy Homes working subjects, as well as their ‘classing,’ is linked to the production of Happy Homes worker consent. Female associates express this fact when they remark (as they often do) on how much they enjoy dressing up for work. One female associate puts it this way:

I always make the effort to look as good as I can (when I come to work), I think that’s important, you know, making a good impression, but it’s also about how you feel about yourself. It’s like, well, I watch the guests a lot to see what they’re wearing and then kind of try to put it together myself but, um, you know, if a guest makes a compliment on something *you’re* wearing that can feel really good. So, for me, I just feel better about myself when I look good, and I think that confidence comes through, you know, and it makes it fun for me that I get to be dressed up at Happy Homes.

As this worker illustrates, female associates embrace the dress code as something that facilitates enhanced self-feeling attached to gender (and class) identity. And the female associate who garners positive gender and class self-feeling through compliance with Happy Homes work rules is not only engaged in producing her own up-classed and

‘up-gendered’ self, she is also producing her own consent to the demands of the retail job.

In forthcoming days the Happy Homes floor work that the well-dressed newbie associate tackles will become much more complex and the worker will be asked to assume a broad gamut of tasks – physical, mental, social and emotional – that will constitute the expected labors of her sales associate role. Still, however much Happy Homes needs its employees to master the mechanics of the sales associate job, store management opts to limit a worker’s initial assignment to playing the part of Happy Homes “greeter” and nothing more.

This seems like a cushy first day assignment, however, as I found, it can also breed its own kind of anxieties. On my first day, I was assigned this role of greeter, and was told: “Don’t worry about anything else today, just greet and thank the guests.” While Happy Homes gives new hires extensive training in the symbolic dimensions of their work, it offers only perfunctory instruction in the mechanics of the job -- cash register operation, special order paperwork, wedding registry, and the like -- assuring associates they will get this type of training on the job. I had hoped to get hands-on experience in these practical tasks while the little I’d learned in training was still fresh in my mind, and expected this would be the case on my first day. Given my nervousness about mastering the complexity of the computerized cash register system, I was especially anxious to have a few “dry runs” before jumping full-fledged into the job, and

this is what I pictured would happen my first day. However, when I learned that I was only to play greeter, my original low-level worry about learning the Happy Homes job mechanics increased. Granted, performing the job of greeter was fairly easy, and relatively stress-free, but watching other sales associates multi-task at labors I had yet to learn -- ringing up sales, processing returns, setting up wedding registries, calling for carry-outs, retrieving items from back stock – served to intensify my otherwise normal first day jitters.

When Happy Homes stations a newly minted sales clerk as grand lobby host it takes a forfeit. The labor is redundant to the work of associates already circulating the floor (greeting and thanking is an on-going required part of the sales associate role) as well as an under-utilization of new worker labor power -- the organization is, after all, paying this new worker the associate wage of \$8.50 an hour, an amount for which it typically expects much more intensive and varied labors. Yet, Happy Homes may take this forfeit, and place new employees on front-door duty, in order to observe the new hire's interactional style and skills. In this way, the organization might be testing the employee before fully immersing her in the job (and before making a further organizational investment in her employ). If the art of hospitality is as important to the Happy Homes labor process as I am suggesting it is, it would be a wise move for the organization to give the new employee a "test-run" on this critical skill, and do so right off the bat. With this strategy, the organization could quickly cull employees whose self-

presentation turns out to be especially substandard. Certainly reasons like these may be at play in the organizational choice to release new workers from so many of their official job duties. But, if limiting the new employee's tasks to the work of greeting makes her transition smoother, it is definitely not because the organization considers the work she is doing to be minor league. Extending gracious hospitality to guests, as the new employee is called to do in her demonstrations of welcome and gratitude, will be one of the most important elements of her Happy Homes job. Whatever else the organization is doing by placing the new worker as greeter, it is making sure that she has several hands-on hours of concentrated practice performing the Happy Homes version of hospitality.

As we saw in the discussion of Happy Homes training protocol, the new associate doesn't go into this cold. In preparation for this first foray onto the retail floor, the new hire's training experience will have already gone a long way toward making the following point crystal clear: the warm greeting and solicitous attention to one's quests that constitute Grand Lobby hosting are core qualities of Happy Homes sales associate labor.

Happy Homes isn't shy in its effort to redefine its low-level retail work as refined hospitality, resting its official description of the sales associate role on the claim that "every sales associate has the power to make every guest's experience a positive one from beginning to end," and defining an associate's job goals in terms of behaviors that will "entertain guests in a winning way," "assure that the guest's experience is easy and

fun,” and “make the guest feel welcome.” We have to conclude that the ultimate goal of Happy Home associate work is the sale of merchandise, and that these behavioral objectives, given as goals, are at best intermediate goals designed to lead up to sales. The employee manual does not put it that way. Instead, these behaviors, such as “entertain(ing) guests in a winning way” as given as *the* goals of the sales associate role.

At Happy Homes, friendly hospitality has very distinct parameters – we might say *branded* parameters – that situate the demonstration of front-line sociability within norms of well-bred carriage and politesse. Happy Homes does not leave the interpretation of warmth and solicitousness to chance. For example, in a description of how to make the guest feel welcome, the employee handbook states that the associate should put forth “a polite and pleasant demeanor” that is not “over-done or fake,” and, in instructions designed to help employees understand how to project a “professional, friendly image” and a “warm and inviting feel,” the manual reminds that “looking professional isn’t just about the way you dress, it also has to do with acting in an alert and courteous way,” adding the instruction that an associate should be “attentive, understanding and accommodating” while also projecting “confidence and pride.”

These instructions have some interesting, if uneven, class implications. While confidence and pride are attitudes we expect from the upward classes, at Happy Homes they become the required disposition of a front-line retail labor force, a group that can be generally categorized as lower- to lower-middle class. On the other hand, the Happy

Homes front-line worker who is required to project the upper class attitudes of confidence and pride is also called to be “attentive, understanding, and accommodating,” with a “polite and pleasant demeanor.” Happy Homes associates are not asked to show the more extreme forms of deference -- defined by the principle of “the customer is always right,” and often manifested in “speak only when spoken to” behaviors – that so often are required in front-line service jobs (including jobs in front-line retail). Yet, while the Happy Homes request that its associate be attentive, accommodating, polite and pleasant, does not ask for its employees’ servility it does recommend some manner of deference to the customer. And deference of this order is an attitude expected of the lower to lower-middle classes. The Happy Homes organization is then asking its front-line workers to meld attitudes befitting the upward classes, namely, attitudes of confidence and pride, with an attitude of deference more suitable to the lower and middling classes.

Remembering that the forms of self-presentation Happy Homes wants from its sales associates are framed within the meanings of the Happy Homes brand, the hospitality that issues forth is meant to take on up-class outlines. Nevertheless, for the Happy Homes worker who follows her employer’s guidelines for demeanor and attitude, thus displaying pride and confidence, the requirement to likewise be deferential – that is, “accommodating” – assigns to the worker the tricky task of displaying deference without seeming like a lower-class worker. Hospitality at Happy Homes is, then, more than a

matter of displaying the gracious confidence of the up-class host while performing the deference of the lesser classes – it is a matter of keeping the deference in balance such that the overall up-class tenor of the service performance is not unsettled.

Happy Homes Hospitality Rituals

In training, new employees get exposed to these and other tenets of up-class behavior. As we saw in the discussion of Happy Homes employee training, these tenets range from the taboo on talk of money (recalling that trainees, wondering about their pay rate, grew to understand that it would be uncouth to ask), to composure in the face of stress (as modeled by the trainer who received unexpected corporate guests), and the genteel assignment of censure (as given in the case where the same trainer encountered a new hire's belligerent behavior and responded with a calm silence, followed by measured speech). As in training, so on the floor, and the dominant theme in employee induction is likewise the dominant theme in on-going work governance at the Happy Homes store. As part of the training a new hire receives in well-bred – and winning - ways, she learns that when she greets arrivals, she should “look the guest in the eye” and offer up “a genuine smile” – “a smile with your eyes as well as your mouth,” the manual exhorts, “is a direct way to show you're interested and friendly, and leads to a positive connection.”

The in-coming worker also comes armed with sample methods of greeting. As outlined in her employee handbook, a Happy Homes sales associate might greet her guest

by “mak(ing) a comment about the weather,” or “if (the sales associate) notice(s) that the customer has a good sense of humor from a funny comment he makes,” she might “exchange a few good natured remarks with him.” Still, the worker on first day duty is likely to receive on-the-job instruction from management on what constitutes, by Happy Homes standards, the proper way to receive guests.

On my first day as Happy Homes sales associate, I received tutoring of this sort from a floor manager who accompanied me to my assigned post in the Grand Lobby. Emphasizing the significance of my first-day task, this manager noted that greeting was going to be an important part of my sales associate labors, and gave a shot at explaining why: “Greeting,” she said, “is all about relationships...you want to create a connection with each guest by extending a personal greeting to them.” Suggesting that I try greeting customers with a “Welcome, what brings you in today?” or even the simpler, “Welcome, good to see you” the manager was also quick to caution against becoming too “robotic.” “The key,” she said, is in “try(ing) to switch it out, and try(ing) to tailor your greetings to the individual guests.”

As this was my first day on the job, it seemed quite natural for my new employer to give me these kinds of pointers but, as I also learned in time, managerial guidance on how to greet guests isn’t reserved for just the wobbly newcomers. It is a matter of daily practice for Happy Homes management to keep its eye on its employees’ exercise of

greeting politesse, and Happy Homes sales associates are very familiar with this habit of their superiors.

It is not unusual for the daily staff meeting to include a management “pep talk” on the value of making eye contact or on the importance of exuding warmth in one’s greeting, as well, employees in attendance can be called to offer up instances from their own on-the-job experience that illustrate a particularly poised or well-executed style of greeting. Managers in staff meetings will also often offer up suggestions of innovative ways to greet the guest, for instance, proposing that the guest who is paused right outside the store’s threshold be greeted with, “Isn’t it a lovely morning to be out and about? Good to see you! Welcome to the store, please, come on in, we’re glad you’re here!”

This could be a Katherine Hepburn line from some 1950’s black and white movie, but the manager who offered this suggestion was quite serious. This manager, Barbara, has a winning way with customers giving her some authority in the matter -- and, in fact, these lines, or some permutation thereof, are her regular form of greeting. To give Barbara credit, she pulls it off with admirable aplomb, appearing gracious and sincere. On the other hand, at least two sales associates who decided to try out this type of greeting found it patently awkward.

This point came up during separate interviews with two Happy Homes associates, with both associates indicating something of awe toward Barbara’s poised delivery of her

lines -- lines that one associate likened to “something (his) grandmother might say.” This is not an allusion to Barbara’s age – Barbara is in her mid-thirties, roughly the same age as is this associate. Nor is the associate speaking scornfully, as he also comments that he wishes he could emulate Barbara’s manner. Still, as this associate explains, “every time I try to do what Barbara does it comes out sounding, uh, clunky. It doesn’t feel natural to me, I get self-conscious and trip over my words,” adding with humor, “*way* to make a good impression on the guest - *not!*” Continuing, he explains “Me, I’m better if I stick to humor...I like to joke with them, you know what I mean? So I usually joke with them -- within limits, of course!”

Like most of the front-line Happy Homes workers, this associate settles on something of his own style in greeting guests, but “within limits” that adhere to the Happy Homes code of politesse. As witness to this associate’s style, I can confirm that he is both very funny and very poised in his role on the Happy Homes retail floor, and even though he uses humor in his interactions with customers (as he did in his interview), he runs scant risk of offending his employer’s standard of proper conduct.

Overall, floor workers will stay true to the Happy Homes code of politesse, but there are also times when a worker can drop below the standard, and fail to master the Happy Homes greeting style. This risk becomes particularly high after a busy day on the floor and at the end of the associate’s shift. This was the case for one sales associate who, approaching the end of a very long and hectic day, was greeting customers properly –

saying “welcome, glad to see you” – but in robotic fashion. Overhearing this, the floor manager took advantage of a lull in customer traffic to coach this employee on how to “innovate,” suggesting that the associate try mentioning the weather (stormy), and as a way of showing concern for her guest’s safety, inquire after the condition of the roads. The associate could, this manager suggested, say “Welcome, glad you made it safely! It looks nasty out there...was it hard getting to the mall? Don’t worry, you’re welcome to stay here until it blows over!” In scripting the greeting option this manager seems to undermine the very “innovation” she is trying to coach, however the type of intervention she is making in order to fine-tune her subordinate’s manners is very typical of the Happy Homes supervisory style.

The Happy Homes worker may also find management supervising more than just her style of her greeting. As a sales associate, she is expected to be gracious, and this means, among other things, taking notice and making complimentary mention of some detail of the customer’s person. “Offering a compliment,” says the company manual, “lets the guest know that you are paying attention to them and that they are important.” For instance, continues the manual, the sales associate might comment on some item of the guest’s attire, as in “what a pretty scarf you’re wearing” or if they notice a guest has an infant in a stroller, take a moment to say, “what a cute baby!”

Likewise, when Happy Homes management is on the ball, it will supervise the floor workers to see if, in the act of greeting, they are also remembering to “take care (of

the guest's) unspoken needs," as the employee manual says they should. In keeping with its reframing of retail work as hospitality, the organization's definition of its customers' unspoken needs extends far beyond those directly associated with retail commerce (e.g., a need for product information, or help finding something in the store), and the employee in the process of greeting should look out for, and try to ensure, a guest's *overall* comfort. For instance, if the guest comes in carrying multiple shopping bags, the manual suggests that the associate who greets this guest should also try to relieve her of her burden, and recommends the associate open conversation by saying, "It looks like you're having a successful shopping day! Would you like me to store any of those bags behind the counter to make it easier for you to browse?" Reading the signs of a guest's unspoken needs and ensuring a guest's comfort are part of the refined arts of gracious hospitality. They are also behaviors representative of *feminine* arts, typifying conduct associated with traditional forms of femininity.

On the floor, this attention to the guest's comfort gets plenty of play. Managers and associates alike can often be seen swooping in to improve a guest's comfort-level – offering to relieve guests of burdensome objects they carry (not only shopping bags, but things like umbrellas, and even coats), suggesting weary-looking shoppers take a seat, or making an effort to entertain misbehaving toddlers while their mothers shop. In one particularly memorable episode that I witnessed, a manager - having spotted a guest's bored looking male companion – made a point to engage this man in friendly

conversation, and, upon learning that the man was tired from the previous night's red-eye flight, invited him to take a nap on one of the Happy Homes couches. The man resisted, of course, but after much urging by the manager (and her assurance to him that she was a *manager*, and so had authority), he accepted the invitation, and proceeded to curl up on one of the floor sofas for what turned out to be a very long snooze. Of course, by allowing this man his lengthy nap, the manager was giving the female companion an equally long time to shop in the store, pointing to the possibility that a more instrumental and less purely hospitable motive could lie behind the manager's offer (of course, instrumental-commercial purposes can co-mingle with affective-social ones, and both could easily be at play in manager's motives).

Over a year later, the staff still mentions this episode, taking care to pass the story onto newer employees. This is a favorite shop floor story, often referred to in staff meetings, as well as in informal conversation among sales associates. But, no matter the context, the event is consistently reported as emblematic of the exceptional level of hospitality that Happy Homes extends to its guests.

The organization takes these types of hospitality rituals very seriously. As we've seen, in many cases these rituals are written into Happy Homes policy, codified as official parts of the retail sales associate's job. Thanking every guest for their visit as they depart the store is, for instance, more than a nicety. It is a matter of policy. As matter of policy, the ritual of thanking guests nonetheless seems to flow naturally from a

type of retail work that plays out simultaneously as the work of entertaining-in-style-at-home. The passage in the Happy Homes company manual on the ritual of thanking highlights how the organization attempts to shepherd this flow. Marking a parallel between Happy Homes retail sales work and at-home-entertaining, the official Happy Homes statement on thanking reads: “Just as you want to thank your guests for coming to your home, you want to thank the Happy Homes guest for taking time to visit our store.”

Managing Hospitality Rituals

With greeting, the Happy Homes policy is likewise writ in these terms of a non-commercial politesse. However, the parameters this politesse should take are made much more explicit, and the organization specifies that every guest should be greeted *within 30 seconds* of entering the store. While we can imagine this time-standard reflects the findings of marketing research which suggest that customers greeted within 30 seconds are more likely to make a purchase than are customers receiving tardy greeting (or no greeting at all), the Happy Homes policy statement on the 30-second standard instead conjures up rules of politesse, explaining that “(i)t is courteous to promptly acknowledge the guest.” When the guest is a silent shopper, woe the store whose staff doesn’t greet in 30 seconds or less. This counts as a demerit on the silent shopper report, and the Happy Homes corporate office considers this a serious transgression – enough so that it will, in response, require store management to announce the transgression to staff, along the

offending worker's name, and devote a segment of the staff meeting to communicating the "non-negotiable" nature of the 30-second time frame.

Happy Homes managers persist in emphasizing the politesse behind the 30-second greeting rule, even as they might sometimes vocalize its importance to sales. The assistant manager, Nicole, put it this way:

I'm coaching them (associates) on the fly real quick, like, 'hey I love how you're getting to the guest so quick, tqhank you so much, you're getting to the guest within 30 seconds, that's so great, that's going to make the guest feel welcome, and you know, that's going to make sure the guest is staying in the store longer, therefore they're going to buy more, fantastic, thank you so much.' Whereas if I'm seeing someone just tasking (doing tasks, like stocking or cleaning, that are not related to helping customers), they're letting guests fly by them, and I may have to go up to them and say, 'hey, you know, Sue, um, I noticed that you're letting a lot of guests go by, what can I do to help you make sure that, you know, you're being considerate to the guests?' The associate still might (think), 'oh that Nicole, she's just being mean to me,' but I'm like 'no, that's my job, I'm here to make sure that the associate is interacting with the guest...so, as a floor lead, I'm here to drive the pace of the business.

Talking about her supervisory responsibilities, Nicole acknowledges both sides of the 30-second rule – on one hand, it's a matter of being considerate and interacting with one's guests, on the other, it's a matter of leading the guest to buy more and, more generally, driving the pace of the Happy Homes retail business.

Where Nicole puts the emphasis seems to depend on how well an employee is implementing the rule. For the efficient employee who gets to the guest within 30

seconds, Nicole approvingly confirms that this is not only good manners, it's good business. Nicole's willingness to name the business priorities behind the Happy Homes code of politesse in the case of the good worker is interesting. Nicole would reward the conscientious behavior by offering praise and thanks for the good manners: "I love how you're getting to the guest so quick, thank you so much, that's so great, that's going to make the guest feel welcome...fantastic, thank you so much." But, apparently, she would also mention the commercial purpose for the politesse, praising prompt greeting as a way to "make sure the guest is staying in the store longer, (and) therefore they're going to buy more."

This could be interpreted as another gesture of reward. Obviously, Happy Homes floor workers know that their work of politesse serves business priorities, but in that the Happy Homes workplace rhetoric so often privileges the picture of retail-work-as-hospitality over retail-work-as-sales, a worker might reasonably take her manager's mention of business motives as a sort of confidence that momentarily casts the two as peers. By allowing a quick glimpse into the priorities which rule the Happy Homes managerial 'backstage,' Nicole could be offering the hard-working associate a bit of flattery, in effect bringing the worker in on matters that, of concern to her superordinates, are typically veiled in an alternative rhetoric.

But Nicole would take a different approach with the task-consumed employee who is letting guests fly by. In this situation, she would note only the lapse in courtesy,

politely offering to help the worker find a way to be “more considerate to the guests.”

Clearly, Nicole does not consider the commercial purposes behind the 30-second rule to be management’s secret. Yet, when she needs to correct employee behavior, she lets the code of politesse stand alone -- implying that Happy Homes management finds the code of politesse the more effective motivational tool.

Nicole’s way of insuring her employees’ performance of the 30-second rule through the use of positive reinforcement also suggests the gendering of Happy Homes management techniques. Though gendered management techniques are not the focus of this study, Nicole’s example is an interesting illustration of how a female manager can exert authority and yet remain gender-appropriate by couching orders, correction, or reprimand within a rhetoric thick with positive reinforcement.

Using Nicole’s case, we can see how the use of positive reinforcement, as a feminized form of asserting authority and control, likewise draws on contemporary strategies of mothering that recommend correcting a child’s behavior by ‘laying on the positive, thick.’ Indeed, the possibility that feminized management strategies at Happy Homes are informed by strategies of mothering seems very likely when we listen to the words of one manager. Speaking of the approach she takes to her Happy Homes job, Roxanne describes how she applies the insights gained from her experience as a mother to the job of managing Happy Homes front-line workers:

You have to read how the associates want to be treated. Someone like a, like a Rhonda, I can say, 'okay now Rhonda, quit what you're doing and go talk to a customer,' and she'd be like, 'okay,' and that's very blunt, and she's like, 'okay, no problem.'" I wouldn't be able to say that necessarily to like a Kendra or something because she would (get upset). You know what I'm saying, in the same way you would be a parent or something. I have one child that I can say 'okay, put your shoes on now' okay...I'm changing my voice, so he's like, 'mom's serious, I better put my shoes on now,' or my other child would be like, 'what?!' Ooohhh...he'd be crying, he'd be like throwing himself on the floor, like where I have to make a game out of it, 'let's see how fast we can put our shoes on, help mommy, be mommy's helper.' So you have to change your coaching styles to get what you need to have happen, to get your result, you have to change gears, and that's the same with your guests and your associates...to get the end result.

Whether Happy Homes managers' gendered management strategies reflect mothering strategies or simply embody feminine tendencies which privilege positive over negative reinforcement, Happy Homes store managers do tend to ladle out positive comments quite liberally when correcting front-line workers' behavior. And the managers who correct workers on transgressions of the 30-second rule will sound much like Nicole, giving the errant employee lots of compliments and positive 'props.' Yet, positive reinforcement notwithstanding, Happy Homes managers remain vigilant supervisors of the speedy greeting, and the upbeat tone they use when correcting employees who miss the 30 second window does not communicate that the 30-second time frame is, in itself, negotiable.

Overall, Happy Homes managers seem to accept – or at least repeat – the politesse-based justification for the 30-second rule. Talking about the importance of

greeting, one manager endorsed the company's rigid time standard as a "just a matter of common courtesy." The Happy Homes general manager gave a similar justification, but she upped the ante from a "common" sort of courtesy to the more rarefied manners of the well-bred, describing the behavior of promptly greeting guests – as this happens out in the world – as "something an individual learns if they've been brought up well." In this instance, the store manager was responding to the interview question, "does it take a special kind of person to work at Happy Homes?" While she'd answered "no," she talked about the difference between individuals who know how to interact with the public and those who don't. In the context of this discussion, the manager mentioned the greeting ritual, sharing her belief that prompt attention to one's guests, as a habit of conduct, reflects good breeding and up-bringing.

In a particularly revealing discussion of the Happy Homes greeting ritual, another assistant manager, Shelley, tried to fill out the picture of why prompt greeting matters so much. Adopting a bird's eye view of the Happy Homes labor process, Shelley took pains to help me understand how very important the greeting rule is:

It (Happy Homes retail work) is really like hosting kind of a party in your own home as working in the Happy Homes store and I use that a lot of times with my training. Like, you know I talked about greeting the guest, welcoming the guest...you wouldn't just let, if you're having a party in your home, you wouldn't just let them ring the doorbell, ring the doorbell! You open the door, "oh my gosh, come in, come in, let me take your coat, I'm going to put it over here, I've got cocktails over here, what do you want? Here, I'm so glad you could come, meet Bob, meet Cindy, you know, here's the agenda tonight, we're going to have some hors

d'oeuvres, this is what's going on, we're going to have a great dinner, great conversation, we're going to play games." You know, you're telling them what's going to go on for them that night, and that's kinda what you're doing in welcoming them into the store. You wouldn't be just like, "yeah just throw your coat over there," and then just ignore them and walk away...you know...that would be rude!

Shelley's last point is hard to debate. Yet, in her attempt to explain the 30-second greeting rule, Shelley is unmasking a great deal more than just the propriety of prompt greeting. The centerpiece of Shelley's explanation is not the greeting per se, but the social conventions that govern entertaining at home. Crafting an analogy between the private home and public workplace, Shelley positions the decorum of private life as template for conduct in the Happy Homes workplace. And, when she does so, she takes care to draw the distinction between lower class (rude) conduct and higher class (polite) behavior. Wanting her workers to conceptualize their Happy Homes retail work as the event of hosting a party in their own home, and transfer the attendant standards of personal conduct into their performance of paid labor, Shelley puts a class standard on workplace conduct. In her rendering, when the workplace is felt to be one's high class home, and one's working self re-imagined as the sophisticated host, certain class-marked rules of conduct would seem to automatically follow – indeed, as if naturally.

Shelley is putting the fine point on a core piece of Happy Homes labor process logic: workers are to re-imagine themselves as the gracious proprietors of their Happy Homes workplace, with that workplace re-imagined as their own elegant home and, from this position, act accordingly. In Shelley's picture of this retail labor process, workers'

self-imagery becomes a force of retail production. And the benefit to the employer would seem clear: if a re-imagination of this sort takes place in the worker's psyche, a great deal of the required type of labor will be self-generated (and, likely, self-monitored).

But, as beneficial as such a worker re-imagining might be for the employing organization (by producing the kind of labor, and laborers, it needs), why should workers cooperate in the process? Earlier discussions of Happy Homes "shopper-lites," the "employee buy-in," and "brand ambassadors" provide some preliminary answers. Workers' class anxieties, as provoked by the Happy Homes brand, get channeled into the desire for Happy Homes employment and create in the worker an emotional readiness to comply with workplace rules. Once on the job, workers can use the fact of their Happy Homes employment to mediate class anxiety by calling on their symbolic proximity to brand meanings, and can use their employee discount to allay anxiety by actually consuming the branded product. As a result, Happy Homes workers generate both positive self-feeling *and* consent to the demands of the job. But Shelley's depiction of the Happy Homes labor process sheds further light on this question of why workers cooperate, and what they have to gain by doing so. Sharing her ideas about what constitutes a good Happy Homes worker, Shelley explains:

The key to that is workers who feel almost like it's their home, feel proud of it, it's that sense of pride. When you have a beautiful home, you want somebody to come over, right? Right. And it makes you feel good about

yourself, you get sense of pride, right? Yes, that's what I'm talking about. And so, like, when you walk into (names a mid-line retail store), workers don't feel it, but something happens at Happy Homes, it's that workers, and I mean the good ones, feel proud.

If, by doing the 'imagination labor' their employer wants -- in this case, imagining that the Happy Homes brandscape is their own home -- Happy Homes retail workers can come out with an enhanced sense of pride, this could be a real gain. And, in that the gain would be pride of personal self as much as pride of paid work, cooperating with the employer's agenda has even greater appeal. For, in this case, offering consent to Happy Homes labor demands doesn't just relieve workers' class anxieties, it replaces them with a new and improved identity.

CHAPTER 5

WORKER CONSENT

The management strategy of recasting paid front-line retail work as the social event of high-class hospitality provides workers direction for their interactive labor while also facilitating the production of worker consent. As we've seen, this work governance strategy is reflected both in the company's policy statements, and in the on-going daily management practices that take place on the retail floor. But the process of turning front-line retail work into high-class hosting and low-level retail workers into high-class hosts cannot be solely a top-down affair. Happy Homes workers must engage the process if the process is to work.

In the previous chapter, I examined the ways in which the Happy Homes organization deliberately imposes brand-inspired meanings onto the operation of its labor process. In this chapter, I turn my attention to workers' experience of the Happy Homes labor process, asking how front-line Happy Homes workers come to consent to the demands of their job. Specifically, I look at how Happy Homes workers cooperate with their employer's project by identifying their customers as social guests, themselves as high-class hosts, and their front-line retail interactions as hospitality. When workers personify high-class hosts, the rules of politesse that guide their conduct make resistance to managerial demands less likely. I consider this implication within the context of

Happy Homes workplace culture, and as an important constituent of Happy Homes labor control.

THE CUSTOMER AS 'GUEST'

As part of a mode of labor governance rooted in reframing retail work as hospitality, Happy Homes requires that customers be referred to guests. Referring to the Happy Homes customers as guests is by no means a throw-away rule and, as one new employee discovered, breaking this rule can be taken very seriously on the floor. This newbie sales associate, unable to answer a guest's question, had excused herself and sought out a manager nearby but, as the sales associate describes, the interchange did not go as she expected:

I went to Janice, and I said something like 'my customer wants to know if the Soquel table comes in black', and Janice said 'Guest!', I didn't get what she was saying and I said 'what?' and she was again, 'Guest! Guest!' and I was confused, I thought she was saying 'Guess!,' like she wanted me to guess if the table came in black (laughs), and I said something like, 'I don't think so' and she gets on the walkie and gets another associate to help my customer, pulls me to the corner and says 'we call them *guests* not *customers*.' I know this, I told her I'd just forgot, and she was, 'don't forget again.' It was weird, her saying 'guest' over and over...like she didn't want to have to say the word 'customer' if she didn't have to (laughs).

This associate was responding to the question, "How do you feel about your managers?" She describes her feelings about managers as generally positive, however mentions this manager, Janice, as an exception, and uses this story to illustrate that

“Janice is a little weird (and) snappy.” I suspect another motive for sharing the story was that she knew it was a good one and would get a laugh (which it did).

While this worker clearly appreciated the humor in her story, chuckling as she shared the event in her interview, she also indicated that she took the message to heart. In further comment, this Happy Homes employee justified her lapse, arguing that it was understandable given the short time she’d been on the job, but when asked if keeping to this rule had been a problem in the months since the event, she responded: “No, not really...it’s not an issue, I guess I don’t even think about it anymore...you know, it just seems natural. It’s more like I think of them that way so it’s not even an issue for me.”

In contrast to the days of her original stumble, this worker has – over the course of several months on the Happy Homes floor -- successfully mastered the art of calling the Happy Homes customer “guest.” As she describes, a task that once required conscious effort has been transformed into a behavior that, she says, “just seems natural.”

What this associate is describing could be a predictable result of lots of practice and repetition – she has, after all, been working the floor for over four months, so will have had thousands of opportunities to practice the behavior. But, as she points out, it is not repetition alone that gained her solid footing in this workplace rule, and the ease she now experiences in calling her customers guests results from the fact that she *thinks* of them as guests. This sales associate finds it easy to adhere to the Happy Homes policy of

referring to shoppers as “guests” not by virtue of learning the rule, but by virtue of adopting the concept.

Happy Homes staff members abide by the policy with remarkable consistency, referring to the customer as “guest” as regularly and, one could say, as naturally, as calling a friend by name. Moreover, they do so in both supervised and unsupervised settings, both on and off duty. It is impressive that of the countless interchanges I observed among staff on the floor during store hours, only rarely did I hear a worker refer to a shopper as ‘customer’ and not ‘guest’ (drawing on field note data, I estimate these ‘slips’ occur less than 10% of the time). And, when a worker slips and says ‘customer,’ she often corrects the mistake as it happens: “I have a customer...I mean guest...who needs a carry-out,” ”Laurie, you’ve got a customer...um...you’ve got a guest calling on line two.” Here, employees are accommodating their employer’s language rules in talk that is an integral part of their work – in these instances, directing merchandise carry-outs and routing customer phone inquiries -- but a similar accommodation comes with the more casual talk that often emerges among employees during lax moments on the shop floor.

Sociability on the Floor

When business is slow, employees working the Happy Homes floor tend to gravitate toward one another, striking up casual conversation and, while, as a rule,

management does not approve such chats, they nevertheless happen quite frequently. Here, as in many workplaces, the managerial rationale for limiting co-worker chats holds that socializing on the job represents an unproductive use of paid labor time. As one manager put it, “they’re getting paid to be here and if there’s no guests, they (the sales associates) could be cleaning up their area, or, you know, restocking the bays, or doing something productive, instead of just standing there gabbing.”

This manager’s comment is uncharacteristically blunt in locating Happy Homes front-line work as, well, work. The Happy Homes labor control practice of reframing retail work as sociability is also the act of obscuring that this activity is work at all, yet our manager’s remark serves to highlight the responsibilities of the front-line Happy Homes clerk as specific obligations of the worker’s paid labor. In this sense, the manager’s comment would seem to countervail the organizational effort to reframe retail work as high-class sociability. But there is also something in the manager’s comment that is decidedly well-aligned with this organizational purpose, at least as that purpose intersects with the attempt to produce workers as particular kinds of gendered selves. In the code of feminine domesticity, if the lady of the house is not entertaining guests (or taking care of her husband and children), she should be taking care of the home, e.g., straightening, styling, cleaning. Granted, this picture does not capture the “lady of leisure,” a figure more traditionally associated with high-class femininity. But definitions of femininity have also changed over the years, and in the 21st century it is the rare

woman who can gain social approbation and positive self-feeling from a life of idleness. Moreover, the display-state of the home, itself connected with constructions of femininity, has gained cultural value in recent decades, becoming an increasingly important signifier of (and site for the production of) social status and personal worth (Casey and Martens 2007; Miller 2001; Clarke 2001).

Calling on these meanings, the manager's remark conjures a gender stereotype where up-class femininity is expressed through vigilant maintenance of a 'perfect home.' The manager's comment also communicates a second gender stereotype, that is, the stereotype that women tend to "gab" and the "gabbing" they do is frivolous or silly. Framed this way, "gabbing" is not an activity that can legitimately supplant the feminine responsibility to take care of home and hearth. Gendering an interpretative frame with these tropes of femininity turns out to work well with management priorities. In the context of the Happy Homes retail brandscape, the retail floor stands in as the elegant home that a high-class female should tend to a state of perfection, and job tasks like fluffing pillows, straightening displays or restocking bays, stand in for the feminized labor of creating perfection in the private up-scale home. This is a gendered duty that should ultimately come before one relaxes into idle girl-talk.

Happy Homes employees can exhibit self-monitoring in regard to intra-group socializing, keeping an eye out for their superiors as they talk, and may try to abbreviate conversations or appear busy should a manager happen to walk by. Associates who chat

on store time can also be quite creative in avoiding discovery by management if they sense the need. In one incident, a group of three sales associates (I was a member of this group) ended up huddled together during a morning lull, debating the merits of area restaurants. An upper level manager speeding through the area glanced over and, catching the scene, aimed a disapproving stare our way, turned quickly on her heels and headed in our direction. A member of our group spotted the approaching manager, yet, instead of signaling to her coworkers that they should disperse, (something that seems a more normal reflex, if also a tacit admission of guilt), deftly shifted the conversational topic from food to work. By the time the manager reached our group, this associate, who had a second earlier been describing the salmon she'd enjoyed at a downtown restaurant the weekend prior, was casually talking about delegating Happy Homes work tasks: "Okay, sounds good, I'll dust the bays, Carrie'll re-tag sales items, and Deb'll restock pillows and candles." This is what the manager heard when she reached the group but, seemingly irritated by what she thought she'd seen, or by her failure to catch chatty sales associates in the act, the manager barked out a scolding remark. Directing her comments toward the group as a whole, she tersely instructed, "You should be watching out for guests. That's more important than dusting. Keep your eyes up, ladies!" With this, the manager walked away, and our group of sales associates dispersed, looking interested in spotting store guests.

As an instance of enforcing the host role, this manager's intervention represents an interesting counterpoint to our other manager's argument that 'gabbing' workers should be tending the physical state of the Happy Homes store, yet the meanings she conveys in this intervention are similarly gendered. However, in this case, these gendered meanings speak directly to framing retail work as high-class hospitality. The attentiveness to one's guests that this manager recommends is part of the social arts that would be required in the gendered performance of up-class femininity. As well, the command to privilege one's guests over one's domestic tasks corresponds with a normative impulse of a refined femininity (of course, privileging the social over the practical is also the prerogative of upper class women for whom heavy, and even not-so-heavy, housework is often delegated to paid help). Furthermore, the phrase, "keep your eyes up, ladies," directly conjures normative rules of femininity. Reminiscent of what we might imagine to be the charm school teacher's reprimand for a girl's bad posture (e.g., "stand up straight, ladies"), the directive to "keep your eyes up, ladies" specifies the desired femininity as one that is refined and cultured, against a femininity that might be read as common and coarse.

Though this manager's intervention effectively aborted the assembled associates' conversation, it didn't prevent subsequent chats that day between the same workers, nor did it seem to inspire much chagrin in these employees. One reason that associates might be carefree about post-reprimand chatting pertains to the markedly sociable nature of

their interactive work. At Happy Homes, sociability is so much a part of the front-line job that it might be difficult for a sales associate to feel guilty for doing it, even when the type of socializing runs counter to management directives. The kind of conversation these associates were having – about restaurants and food – lines up with the type of civilized conversation a hostess might have with her guests, and corresponds closely with the gender and class roles these associates are supposed to be playing. Moreover, this is exactly the type of conversation an associate is encouraged to have with her Happy Homes guest. In practice, associates' conversations with customers often sound a lot like casual conversations among friends.

As this example suggests, changing retail work to high class sociability raises an interesting dilemma for the organization's labor process control efforts. On one hand, Happy Homes wants to encourage these type of classed and gendered identities in its workers, such that the art of civilized conversation and sociability seems to “come naturally” from the workers. Yet, at the same time, Happy Homes cannot afford to allow employees free reign to practice this art among themselves on the floor, and Happy Homes management must also contain the ‘natural’ flow of its workers' sociability. Thus, in reframing retail work as high-class hospitality and retail workers as high-class hosts, the approach that Happy Homes management takes to work governance can also produce its own novel problems of labor process control.

Identifying the Customer as Guest

Though shop floor topics can range from weather to family to politics, associate talk leans strongly to the immediate, and employees often end up discussing aspects of their work, the customer chief among those. As the following interchange between two female sales associates illustrates, even in these casual, unsupervised discussions, Happy Homes workers are – as their employer would prefer – likely to present the customer in the guise of guest:

Karla: I just had the best time with a guest! She was really nice. Did you see her? Look – there she is...over by glassware

Grace: Standing next to the guest with the stroller? Yea, I've seen her before...she comes in a lot. I think she visits every week to see what's new. Yeah, I know what you mean, she's a great guest...

Karla: This is the first time I've seen her...she's so nice, though, and we really hit it off. We had such a good time. It was so much fun. I love guests like that!

These two women, talking about their customers-as-guests, were not in earshot of management, and though they were talking about work, they were not engaged in this talk as a necessary *part* of their work. If an employee calling across the store to request a carry-out for a “guest” is engaged in a kind of public talk that is very much a part of her job, we can expect that her talk will adhere, or at least attempt to adhere, to formal job rules about language. Service employers frequently designate scripts for workers to follow in their interactions with service recipients, and following these scripts is a good

part of the interactive service worker's job. A worker's on-the-job adherence to the script outside of the moment of interactive labor – as a Happy Homes employee would do when calling for a carry-out – is then not unexpected. And the weight of workplace norms might induce service workers to stay true to script in work-related interactions with co-workers or management (for instance, relating information about work tasks or customer problems). Further, employees may do this as a way to ensure the understandability of utterances or in the interests of impression management (i.e., to avoid being seen as “unprofessional,” to impress as a good and competent worker). But, when talk is less formal and free from supervision, as in the example above, motivations like these lose some sway.

As we see in the chat between the two sales associates, Happy Homes sales workers cleave to the organizational patois. Clear of management surveillance, these sales associates repeatedly conjure the customer as guest, moreover, they do so in terms that make their interactive retail service work look to be casual socializing. This interchange also suggests that employees may accept more than just the language. When a sales associate beams about how well she hit it off with a guest, talks about what a good time they had, describing it as a lot of fun, the picture of this as the paid work of sales retreats behind that of the pleasant (and non-commercial) social event. In this sense, her employer's presentation of work as sociability seems to have found purchase – or, if not

purchase, at least reinforcement – in the interpretive frame she uses to understand her experience on the job.

These meaning-frames also bleed through into Happy Homes workers' off-duty talk. This was the case with Happy Homes workers' responses to interview questions. When asked in the interview about the Happy Homes *customer*, the Happy Homes employee was apt to switch that term out, and respond by talking about the "guest." For instance, an employee, asked how she would describe a typical Happy Homes *customer*, offered these first words in response: "The typical guest has some sense of taste." Adroitly stepping past the specific vocabulary of my verbal prompt, this speaker replaced my colloquial "customer" with the term her employer prefers. Knowledge of the interview topic (work) could have influenced this respondent to adopt a work persona and work terminology. However, this interview took place in a casual setting, at spatial and temporal remove from the subject's work life, and against the backdrop of familiarity and good rapport between researcher and respondent. Arguably, these characteristics mitigate the potential for this effect.

Many of the workers interviewed for this study would use the word "guest" when responding to questions that asked about *customers*. Such easy adoption of work language beyond organizational purview is interesting, if only as an indication of the subtle (and far-reaching) ways the rules of work can affect low-level workers. When control of workplace language counts as a strategy of labor process control, workers who

default to Happy Homes vocabulary in talk that occurs outside of the workplace and off the clock, are demonstrating – at minimum – that they accept this form of governance broadly, and uncritically, enough to carry its effects into their non-work life.

Happy Homes workers' sanguine compliance to employer language-rules – both in and out of work – speaks of the incorporation of organizational mandates into employee behavior, but does not, on its own, indicate that workers have accepted the concepts behind the words. However, the workers interviewed for this study showed a tendency to link the terms of hospitality up with their meanings. For example, staying with the Happy Homes argot, the respondent mentioned above mused at length about “guests who visit” the store, giving descriptions that remained remarkably immune to contagion from the vocabulary of interview questions that referred to “customers,” “consumers,” and “shoppers.” Significantly, this sales associate, when speaking of customers, couched the term “guest” in phrases connoting “guest-like” situations. Accounting for the pluses in her job, the associate pointed to the good feeling she gets when she can “make a guest feel welcome,” describing techniques of interacting with her guests that include efforts to “get to know a little something about them, like whether they have kids or not.” Sounding undeniable tones of sociability and hospitality, this sales associate imparts meanings to “guest” that suggest more than word-habit. When the Happy Homes sales associate averts a tug to borrow the more colloquial language in her interviewer's questions, forging ahead instead with talk of customers as if they really

were “guests,” she is not just mimicking organizational language. Instead, when this happens, the Happy Homes employee seems to be taking on “guest” not as preferred term but preferred frame of meaning.

As in their workplace interchanges, Happy Home employees who referred to their customers in terms other than “guest” when responding to interview questions would self-correct, inserting the term “guest” soon after a term such as “customer” or “shopper.” In an interesting set of exceptions, some interview respondents *would* use the terms “shopper” or “customer” when referring to consumers at other retail stores, or drop the guest metaphor when speaking of Happy Homes customers perceived as atypical or problematic. In many ways, these are the exceptions that would prove the rule. For instance, one respondent, discussing the difference between Happy Homes and big box retailers, shifted from using the “guest” term when he discussed the big box clientele: “Our (Happy Homes’) guest is smart, educated...the (big box store) shopper doesn’t really care, he’s just there for the cheap prices.” In another instance, a respondent who tended to refer to the Happy Homes customer as “guest” dropped that term when describing a problematic encounter with a particular pair of store visitors:

I had a couple of “looky-loos” trip in the other day...it was the worst because that restaurant is right across the hall and they were, like, sitting on the sofa, and I was like, “Oh, hey, how are you? What can I help you guys out with tonight?” and they were like “oh, we’re just waiting for our table” and I was like “oh my god, you’re messing up my store!” You know, they were like “oh we’re just killing time, we’re waiting to eat” and

I was like “we’re not a waiting room for the restaurant!” I have a difficult time if it’s customers like that, it’s like, what the hell are they thinking?!

Elsewhere in his interview this respondent talks about “the guest,” yet when he relays this story about badly-behaved store visitors, he drops that term in favor of “looky-loos,” adding that this is a type of “customer” he finds particularly “difficult.” In his selective use of the guest term, this respondent is drawing what he finds to be *meaningful* distinctions between customer types. However, the interesting question lies in how this meaning-system is organized. Here, the respondent indicates that he finds this customer conduct to be inappropriate, ostensibly in contrast to the conduct of others who he would call “guests.” Yet, were he framing the situation strictly in terms of a retail commerce encounter, the customer conduct – while perhaps insensitive -- would not seem to warrant this judgment. As retail clerks know, retail shoppers are notoriously self-serving. By definition, shoppers prioritize their own interests over the interests of the retail organization and its employees and, notwithstanding a retail clerk’s right to be treated with respect, self-interested behavior is inherent to normative constructions of the customer role. This is no less true at Happy Homes than at other retail venues. Because of its high class clientele, Happy Homes may be more likely to have customers trained in the arts of politesse than, say, a big-box discount store, but high class or not, those individuals, as *customers*, are supposed to be motivated by self-interest, and this self-interested role cuts a wide swath for less-than-polite behaviors.

The infraction our associate describes appears inconsequential in this light. Albeit, these customers have admitted that they are in the store to kill time, but then, this is not unusual customer behavior either. Though the practice might qualify as a nuisance factor for clerks on-the-job, it is a fact of life in the retail world, and, like other retail venues, Happy Homes sees its fair share of looky-loos. As the respondent himself points out, the store's proximity to a popular dining spot regularly brings in a mealtime flow of visitors whose sole objective is to kill time until their table is ready.

Granted, as our associate describes, these looky-loos are lounging on a floor model sofa, messing things up in the process but, to recall an earlier point, his employer's version of hospitality abides this practice – in fact, Happy Homes visitors are encouraged to “take a load off” and enjoy the comfort of Happy Homes couches and chairs. An employee new to the Happy Homes job might be unfamiliar with the protocol, but this associate, having held his post for more than three years, regularly working the evening shift (corresponding to the restaurant's dinner hour), knows his employer's policy, and is accustomed to looky-loo ways. Moreover, as he reports later in the interview, his more general attitude toward the looky-loo customer type is positive and tends to agree with his employer's. These type of store visitors, he reasons, are “very important,” because, as he explains, “they are the people that might come back again, they are the people that have a lot of friends.” “It never hurts to have people in your hip pocket,” he concludes, arguing that the Happy Homes sales associate who realizes this will welcome the idle non-

spending guest as much as the one who makes purchases. Though we can't be certain whether this employee's notion of back-pocket value implies a hope for future sales or social networking, or both, it is clear that he regards the looky-loo customer as, in principle, a welcome visitor to the Happy Homes store.

If the customer behavior this respondent describes in the tale of the waiting diners is not unusual, or even unwelcome, why does our respondent take offense? Is he making a mountain out of a molehill? When this associate tells his story, he communicates indignation over the fact that these visitors are using the store as a convenient place to sit while waiting for a restaurant table. The store is not, he says, "a waiting room for the restaurant" – indeed, he thinks the offense serious enough that it should cast doubt on his guests' basic command of civility, an accusation he expresses rhetorically with the question, "what the hell are they thinking?" True, this pair wouldn't win any awards for courtesy, but judged against the standards that govern customer conduct, they are still playing within the rules. And, as I can attest from my many months on the Happy Homes floor, clients of the neighboring restaurant often use the store's couches as their "waiting room" without complaint from Happy Homes staff or management. What is it, then, about this event that our associate finds quite so objectionable?

Looking at the event as a retail encounter, the visitors as customers, and the respondent as retail clerk, it is difficult to answer these questions. This associate's response becomes reasonable only if we return to the original point about employees' use

of the term ‘guest.’ Happy Homes deploys the meanings of its brand to cast its front line retail labor as high-class hospitality, its front-line workers as high-class hosts, and its customers as social guests, and when workers talk about their guests they show they have incorporated elements of their employer’s meaning-frame into their own interpretative schema. Our employee’s response is hard to understand when judged by the norms of retail commerce but, borrowing his employer’s framework, recasting the event as one of high-class hospitality and reframing the encounter from commercial-retail to a social one, this customer behavior comes into focus as unequivocally offensive, a violation of the terms which govern well-bred sociability. As customers interacting with a sales clerk, the visitors’ behavior is irritating but not insulting, however, as *guests interacting with their host* their behavior is downright rude.

Warmly greeting his guests and solicitously asking after their needs, this sales associate is fulfilling his responsibilities as the gracious host, however his guests respond by signaling their detachment from the situation and rebuffing his overtures -- decidedly un-guest-like behavior. Worse, his visitors proceed to exploit the benefits of their setting (the comfy sofa), even causing a mess, while making it clear they have no inclination to participate in the world of that setting (looking, shopping, admiring the merchandise), and no interest in engaging the conversation their clerk-cum-host has initiated. Failing to offer up the social niceties of the guest – acknowledgment of their host’s gracious welcome, a show of pleasure and gratitude to be received in the setting, some polite

conversation – these customers breach rules that dictate proper behavior for a refined *sociable* encounter. In offending the rules of refined sociability, they likewise offend their host. Arguably, when the sales associate breaks from his pattern of calling his customer “guest” to levy a negative judgment on that visitor’s behavior, what is being judged is the visitor’s conduct as a *social guest* not as a retail customer.

Plainly, I don’t mean to suggest that this employee forgets that his hospitality occurs in a retail context, that his host role is paid, and that these are, after all, retail customers. Nor am I suggesting that these two available frameworks – commercial and social – are mutually exclusive (see Zelizer 2005 for an analysis of the interplay between social and commercial frameworks). To the contrary, I am arguing that they *are* intermeshed, and that this interdependency is a key feature in the Happy Homes labor process. Individuals carry, as if in reserve, multiple frames of meaning that needn’t form a coherent system but can be applied to the same situation, and persons will adaptively privilege one over the other depending on the situational sway (Swidler 2001). When this respondent makes a judgment call on what counts as inappropriate customer behavior, as he has done here, he is privileging the notion of his work as hospitality over and above the notion of his work as low-level retail sales, and to do this he draws on an interpretative framework that incorporates his employer’s picture of Happy Homes retail work as a form of high-class hosting, and the retail customer as honored guest. In this way, the associate cooperates with his employer’s project to repaint low-level retail work

as high-level hospitality. As it turns out, this associate is not making a mountain out of a molehill; he is making a guest out of a customer. And this is much as his employer would have it.

The incorporation of “customer-as-guest” into the workers’ lexicon does not end at the edge of the workplace nor stop at the end of the working day, bleeding into workers’ off-duty talk, both in interviews and casual conversation among workers. Moreover, many Happy Homes employees use the term “guest” in a deliberate way, embracing the meaning behind the word. As in the instance of the indignant associate, Happy Homes workers’ perception of customers as guests can affect how they view their job and interpret their workplace experience. Do workers cooperate with their employer’s project of reframing retail sales and service as high-class hospitality? When it comes to understanding their retail customers as social guests, it appears they do.

IDENTIFYING AS HIGH-CLASS HOST

To have a social guest you need a social host. When Happy Homes management calls on its brand meanings to present its floor work as high-class hospitality, it places the front-line retail worker in this role. As we’ve seen, Happy Homes managers expect those who work the floor to personify the Happy Homes host role according to rules of high-class politesse, and performing host-like behavior stands as a requirement of the sales associate’s job. By and large, Happy Homes employees on the floor are remarkably cooperative with this job demand – on the job, they are welcoming, hospitable, friendly

and solicitous to their customers needs -- but this cooperation with the employer's project can also easily extend beyond a willing enactment of on-the-job hospitality, especially if Happy Homes associates take up the ethos of high class hospitality as a template by which to evaluate their own worth. Though, without a doubt, the organizational bottom line of a retail sales clerk's success will be the sales they make, when Happy Homes workers themselves reflect on their job performance it is often their expertise at playing host that takes precedence. As the following snippet from one off-the-clock conversation suggests, Happy Homes associates can interpret their success as retail workers in terms of their success as hosts:

Cindy: "Our guests all seemed to be in a good mood today..."

Rich: "Yeah, I noticed that too...good energy..."

Cindy: "Yeah, I think they had a good time with us today...you know, when that happens...it makes me feel good."

Rich: "Like we're rockin' and rollin'..."

Cindy: "Yeah, and when it's like that I always think that's what I call a successful day. When we can give the guests a good time, make it fun for them, that's what I call a success..."

Like workers often do, these two associates are taking a moment after work to hash over the day's events, deciding if the day should count as good or bad. By the tone of their conversation, they seem to have had a pretty good day, and will leave feeling proud of their work. From the conversation, we don't know if the day in question was a

good one for sales. The metric these associates are using to judge the day is not dollars – either those they would earn for the store by making sales or those they would earn for themselves by making a wage. When Cindy declares it was a “successful day” she is not referring to the money her guests spent, but the way the guests felt, or at least, appeared to feel. Did they have a good time? Did they have fun? When Cindy can answer yes to these questions, she calls it a successful day. Moreover, as her conversation with Rich reveals, she does not perceive the happy guest as an accident, but as the outcome of concerted efforts the Happy Homes staff make to give their guests a good time.

Remarking on the good mood of the guests, Cindy stakes out credit for this mood when she talks about *giving* the guests a good time and *making* fun for them. To successfully entertain guests is to ensure that guests enjoy themselves *with* the sales associates -- the sales associate is actively engaged, and purposively so, in creating the guest’s “good time.” And, indeed, this jibes with the role of the good, and well-bred, host. In line with precepts of well-bred hospitality, these associates appear to be most concerned with their guests’ pleasure, a pleasure defined primarily in terms of the guest’s experience (in contrast to the pleasures of consuming the Happy Homes product). And the guest’s pleasurable experience is understood as a reflection of the host’s expertise in creating the “good time.”

This priority on entertaining also lines up with the precepts of well-bred femininity. When Cindy talks about her guests enjoying a good time at the store, she

captures a crucial element of an upper class feminine role. Lockstep with tenets of upper class femininity, not only is Cindy concerned that her guests have a good time, she sees it as *her job* to ensure that they do. Well...in fact, it is her job, her *paid* job, at Happy Homes. But Cindy, like other Happy Homes workers, seems to take a personal stake in the outcome, and this muddies what would otherwise be a clear distinction between the actual high-class hostess and the Happy Homes front-line worker. For the high class hostess, the perfection of refined entertaining is a matter of living up the expectations of her station and gender, a matter of performing, and hence reproducing, her class-specific gender identity. It is not, as it would be for the Happy Homes worker, a matter of obeying the strictures of paid employment. For the well-heeled woman, entertaining would be *her job* precisely because she is both “well-heeled” and “a woman.” But, Cindy’s rendition of her work suggests that the Happy Homes worker may take on refined hospitality as her job in both meanings of the word; because she’s paid to do it *and* because it helps produce an (enhanced) sense of her own classed and gendered identity.

As our two associates talk about their workday, evaluating whether their guests had a good time, their host role takes center stage and, highlighting things like mood and energy over product sales or wages, they read the temperature of a commercial clime as if it were a social one. When Rich says they are “rockin’ and rollin’” on the Happy Homes floor, we can be reasonably sure he’s referring (with pride) to an up-tempo social mood

the associates have helped create for the Happy Homes guest. The going line at Happy Homes is that a festive mood facilitates sales, and management promotes the idea that when the Happy Homes social scene rocks and rolls, the cash register will answer. We don't know if giving guests a "good time" puts them in the mood to buy and helps to produce sales -- this belief may just as easily serve as an economic, and therefore acceptable, justification for the pursuit of what are primarily social goals in the workplace. What we do know is that when Happy Homes workers are on top of their game, and performing their labors of hospitality well, good feelings aren't only promised the guests, they are almost assured for the workers.

When Cindy says "it makes (her) feel good" should store guests appear to have a good time, she speaks for most of her compatriots. The majority of Happy Homes associates interviewed for this study hail the ability to create an enjoyable time for the guest as one of the best parts of their job – as one associate put it, "the thing I just love about my job is when I can make it a good time for the guest." Clearly, Happy Homes workers' show of hospitality creates an ambiance consistent with brand meanings, that is, the ambiance of an elegant home ready for entertaining, thus setting a stage that might inspire product desire in the person of the up-scale guest. But, as Rich and Cindy illustrate, the front-line Happy Homes work of hospitality creates very positive feelings for front-line workers. And this is to the organization's benefit. When the Happy Home social scene rocks and rolls, and employees enjoy (as they participate in creating) a high

social mood on the retail floor, whether it brings higher sales (as both Happy Homes managers and workers believe), or simply creates a more pleasant work environment, this employer enjoys happy workers as a result, and happy workers tend – happily for the organization – to be cooperative and productive workers as well.

But why are these workers happy? What are the contours of the positive feelings they experience, and how much do these feelings actually translate into cooperation, productivity, and an often generous consent to the demands of the job? In the following section I take up these questions, beginning with an examination of how the Happy Homes brand of hospitality informs the norms of the Happy Homes workplace culture. From there, I turn to an examination of work on the Happy Homes retail floor, exploring the links between the positive feelings front-line workers experience as a result of their labors, and the class and gender entailments of the Happy Homes sales and service job.

Workplace Culture

Happy Homes management purports that Happy Homes associates can, by personifying high-class hosts, help to produce sales, thus boosting the overall profitability of the enterprise, and making an important contribution to the organizational bottom-line. Yet, if by getting its workers to personify high-class hosts Happy Homes is satisfying its corporate-level need for profitability, it is also satisfying its enterprise-level need for effective labor process control. By casting the front-line retail labor of service and sales

as the work of high class hospitality, Happy Homes brands its retail labor process and, by turning low level clerks into high class hosts, it brands the retail workers who do this labor. But, in this process whereby Happy Homes jointly manufactures branded work and branded workers, it also manufactures worker consent.

As we saw earlier in the discussion of shopper-lites, Happy Homes workers' class anxieties become stimulated by the upscale brand. In requiring its front-line workers to perform their retail work as high-class hospitality, Happy Homes establishes conditions under which workers can allay these class anxieties and generate positive self-feeling by identifying with the class and gender roles they are required to enact on the retail floor (roles that reflect the class and gender entailments of the Happy Homes brand). The more strongly a worker identifies with these classed and gendered work roles, the greater can be the gain in positive self-feeling; and the greater the gain in positive self-feeling, the greater can be the worker's motivation to consent to the conditions of his work. By identifying with the class and gender entailments of the Happy Homes brand that he will stylize in his job behaviors, the Happy Homes worker redresses class insecurity and produces positive self-feeling *in tandem* with the performance of his retail labor. Thus, motivated toward positive self-feeling, workers are motivated to cooperate with the Happy Homes work process that is the primary condition of that feeling.

The rules of conduct that govern the sales associate's host role reflect the class and gender meanings of the employer's brand, but these brand meanings are also

articulated within the broader culture of the Happy Homes workplace. The norms of the Happy Homes workplace repeat many of the same rules that govern the work role of the front-line clerks, and the work culture reflects the code of high-class politesse. As interpreted at Happy Homes, high-class politesse betokens a mannerly attitude, good grace and poise, and advocates the values of tact, self-possession and self-restraint. Thus, on the Happy Homes floor, the worker-as-well-bred-personage would present as calm and collected, polite and mannerly, even-tempered and genteel. And indeed, my observations of Happy Homes workers tell me that these employees tend to present this mannerly way in both front and back stage spaces of their workplace, and are as likely to behave with courtesy and poise in the stock room or the employee break room as when on the retail floor.

Some measure of these qualities will be required from the Happy Home employee who wants to fit in at work and, indeed, some presentation of these qualities may well have been a stipulation (albeit implicit) of his hire. And, of course, for the Happy Homes sales associate, they are a core component of the labor itself. While the reality of employee conduct can never match the ideal (the personnel are, after all, a mix of many different personalities, and the environment can be very fast-paced, and stressful) these are nonetheless the standards that direct the etiquette of the Happy Homes workplace.

This etiquette also happens to be of a type that can help indemnify worker consent. As we've seen, at Happy Homes, high-class manners combine with an

imperative toward hospitality. Happy Homes front-line workers are emblematic of this combination, but the ways of high-class hospitality also infuse the work culture at large. And, when high-class politesse combines with the mandates of hospitality to compose a workplace ethos, participants face social pressure to combine tact and good manners with an attitude that is conciliatory and accommodating. The Happy Homes employee who practices his retail work as if high-class hospitality learns to behave in ways that are respectful and accommodating, and when the code of conduct that informs his job repeats in the larger workplace ethos, this lesson is doubled. Still, to the extent the Happy Homes sales associate confronts double pressures to practice high-class hospitality (in the exercise of his work role, and more widely as part of his participation in workplace culture), he will also find the rightness of his behavior doubly confirmed.

Of course, the set of worker behaviors that issue from up-class rules of politesse are generally pleasing to Happy Homes customers, but they are generally advantageous to Happy Homes management as well. By its nature, a code of behavior based on high-class hospitality encourages a cooperative spirit. When agreeableness is the order of the day and workers, following workplace etiquette, conform to this order, the chances for workplace conflict are greatly minimized, and management's job is partially done. Indeed, insofar as the rules of good breeding that attend politesse also imply the value of such smaller things as good grooming and punctuality, management can find even its

more quotidian chores – such as managing employee tardiness or correcting dress code violations -- a great deal easier.

The key organizational advantages to issue from a workplace code of upper-crust politesse become clearer when we look at the types of worker behavior that this code discourages. Obviously, rude or crude behavior is off-limits. But, more significantly, when workers personify high-class hosts, the rules of politesse that guide their conduct make acts of complaint, insubordination, or resistance to managerial demands, extremely tricky affairs. For instance, as we saw earlier in the discussion of the Happy Homes training, these rules of politesse discourage any talk of money. To voice a concern with money, a concern that in the sales associate's case may take the form of questions about wages, hours, scheduling, on-call shifts, benefits, promotions or the like, would be -- according to the code of Happy Homes etiquette – in bad taste. A worker who would voice such a complaint cannot avoid offending the code of politesse without casting the topic so obliquely that a manager would be well within the bounds of politesse should she dismiss it. Similarly, other forms of worker complaint and resistance have a very hard time threading the needle of Happy Homes etiquette. Of course, theoretically, the Happy Homes workers are free to break with etiquette at any time but, as mentioned, doing so will bring opprobrium from co-workers and managers, a risk that carries its own social (if not also occupational) costs.

Getting along in the Happy Homes workplace means adhering to the code of politesse, and adhering to this code makes grievance very difficult. It is not high-class to impose on others your complaints or discontent, nor is it hospitable to ignore concerns and needs these others may have toward you. When “others” are managers, and you are the low-level worker, there are few allowable practices that you, the worker, can use to resist your own exploitation. At minimum, if workers abide the rules of high-class politesse (and it is difficult to do otherwise on the Happy Homes floor without risking disfavor), their discontent will be quieted, and their resistance suppressed. Without a level playing field, the practice of politesse has its evils, and in the context of the hierarchical workplace, it can leave discontented workers without much recourse.

This is not to say that the Happy Homes behavioral conventions don't also have good effect for those involved, including low-level workers. These conventions engender a workplace spirit of civility and propriety. If this strikes as appealing, it is rightly so. Regardless of the type of job one does, it's arguably much more pleasurable to do that job amidst this type of atmospherics than in a workplace marked by rudeness and disrespect. But this code of workplace conduct, as it plays out at Happy Homes, can also shrink the social space in which worker grievances find voice. Indeed, under the conditions that prevail at Happy Homes, the gracious acceptance of one's work conditions and (elegantly wordless) suppression of one's discontent can be, quite simply, a matter of proper etiquette.

This workplace ethos, that so well captures and expresses the meanings of the brand, has obvious benefits to labor process control. The rules of politesse shore up the organizational effort to provide for the smooth reproduction and control of its work process -- even if all that workers are doing is following the rules as a way to avoid social reproach, this still contributes to Happy Homes labor governance, and supports the organizational need for a cooperative workforce. Yet, as a labor process control strategy, an ethos of high-class politesse operates in a relatively mechanical way, and as a way to manage workers, it lacks the organic efficacy of measures that rely on worker transformation (Leidner 1993). But, at Happy Homes, the effectiveness of this ethos as a form of labor process control can be multiplied many times over when the employee identifies with the brand meanings and internalizes the class and gender entailments of her job. Indeed, when the process works this way it can be an outright boon to work governance.

When the trope of retail-work-as-high-toned-sociability infiltrates workers' perception of self as well as job, it supports an organizational need for productive, cooperative front line retail labor. For the employer who wants its \$8.50 an hour front-line service workers to act like high class hosts, a worker who identifies with the class and gender entailments of his job, and reaps positive self-feeling as a result, not only perceives his customer as social guest and himself as the high-toned host, but is likely to *self-generate* the kind and quality of labor the employer needs, also being equally likely

to turn around and *self-supervise* his performance of these labors. In short, a Happy Homes worker who does what I am calling *identity labor* will self-monitor and self-motivate the execution of his work, participating in the manufacture of his own consent and productivity.

When a worker takes his employer's vision of retail-work-as-high-class-hospitality to heart, the trope not only serves as a guide by which to pattern his labor, but a standard by which to evaluate his own worth. When this happens, the worker has a very personal stake in doing the job well. In the section that follows, I look at the ways in which this process plays out at Happy Homes, examining how front-line Happy Homes workers identify with the class and gender entailments of their paid retail role, and how workers' identity labor serves to dually produce positive worker self-feeling and worker consent.

The Status of the Happy Homes Host

If there's one thing a front-line Happy Homes worker doesn't like, it's being called a clerk. Actually, since the organization calls these workers "sales associates" it's understandable that Happy Homes workers might reject other terms. The term clerk has fallen into disuse more generally, with most retail employers now preferring to define their front-line staff as "associates," "affiliates," or "team members." Ditching old-school occupational titles (the plain-speak of which often made it pretty clear what it was

that the person did) and replacing them with titles of more dignity (if also more ambiguity), has become a fairly common managerial practice across industries, and particularly in respect to lower-level positions (Kunda 2006; MacDonald & Sirianni 1996).

As the office lackey is becoming a creative specialist, and the contingent worker a consultant, the retail clerk is, by and large, morphing into the “associate.” But, even as this trend takes the retail industry by storm, the shopping public holds onto the old term and, at Happy Homes as elsewhere, this public can innocently refer to store helpers as a ‘clerks.’ This does not go over well with Happy Homes associates. When it happens, the Happy Homes worker may even take it upon herself to correct the shopper’s misstep. In one instance, a Happy Homes floor worker, trying to answer a phone query, was interrupted by a customer asking that she “call for a clerk” to attend to shoppers in the back part of the store. Very politely, but without hesitation, the sales associate responded, “I’m sorry, we don’t have ‘clerks’ but I’d be very happy to get you a *sales associate*.” Though the rules of politesse often preclude more than this most gentle of upbraids, a customer’s use of the clerk title to refer to a Happy Homes associate can be a cause of that worker’s umbrage. As the sales associate, Gwen, explains:

But you want to look at them and say, you may think I’m just a clerk here but you’re so, so wrong. And that word, clerk, sends me up a wall...and it has! We aren’t clerks, we’re “associates” – *never* a clerk! That’s what you get if you’re in a Macy’s or a Target. You can call yourself a hundred different things, but when I’m called a clerk, that is sickening to me.

That's low. It's sickening. But I suppose it's the same as flight attendants being called stewardess, isn't that the old term, stewardess? They wanted to be called flight attendants. But what I want to say is it's different. Cause I'm more than a clerk, I'm more than that...a clerk is someone who stands at a cash register in a grocery store...they probably have a new name for themselves (laughs). So, anyway, and I am, I'm more than a clerk, but um, and I correct people. I do. Like, something about, if they call me a clerk or something, I'll say I'm a sales associate. Cause I don't like that.

Gwen is defending her status as a Happy Homes associate. For Gwen, her job on the Happy Homes retail floor is categorically different than the same type of job elsewhere. While it might be easy to understand why Gwen sees her job as different and better than that of a grocery store clerk (though, by some standards, even this logic is flawed), it is less easy to accept the contrast she draws between her front-line retail job at Happy Homes and a similar job at a Macy's or a Target. Though Gwen probably spends less time playing cashier than a Macy's or a Target worker does, many aspects of her job are the same. Like Target and Macy workers, Gwen will stock shelves, ring purchases, answer customer questions, and bag merchandise. As a Happy Homes employee, Gwen is no more likely to enjoy a decent wage, steady hours, benefits, or chance for advancement than front-line workers employed by Macy's, Target, or almost any other retail company. Moreover, as Gwen herself admits, her job doesn't necessarily carry more status in the eyes of the shopping public than other retail jobs, nor does the general public necessarily apprehend that Gwen deserves a job designation other than clerk –

after all, if they did, Gwen would not need to defend herself against the customer perception that she is a clerk.

Still, Gwen ranks her status as Happy Homes sales associate above the status of workers in other retail jobs. The word ‘clerk,’ a term Gwen associates with grocery store cashiers, department store workers, and workers in big box stores, raises her ire. Indeed, Gwen is adamant in her rejection of the term -- just the word itself, she says, “drives her up the wall,” and should a customer mistake her as a clerk, she would find it “low,” even “sickening.” “We aren’t clerks,” Gwen indignantly proclaims, “we’re ‘associates’ – *never* a clerk!”

Differentiating “clerk” from “associate,” Gwen is not, however, arguing that “associates” everywhere (and they are just about everywhere, from Macy’s to Target) should have higher status than clerks by virtue of their more distinguished title. While Gwen misses some of the finer details of occupational renaming (for instance, failing to recognize the gender equity argument behind the substitution of ‘flight attendant’ for ‘stewardess’), when she mentions the shift from stewardess to flight attendant, Gwen registers an awareness of a trend to rename occupations. And when she jokes that grocery cashiers may have also found a new name, she lets us know that she sees this practice as an attempt to artificially inflate the importance of a low-level job. Gwen is not arguing that all clerks who have gained the title of associate should be regarded as something more or better than clerks. She *is* arguing that she should, and she *is* arguing

that her case is different. Hers is not a case where an employer tried to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, imposing a fancy title on scut work, or landing a highfaluting name on a low class job. Rather, hers is the case of Happy Homes and, in her telling, it is exceptional. The collectivity Gwen refers to as "we" is the coterie of front-line Happy Homes retail workers, and it is specifically this group of Happy Homes associates who, in Gwen's eyes, deserve the elevated status. Gwen is "more than a clerk" because of *where* she works.

Gwen doesn't expand on what it means to be "more than a clerk" but, given the terms of her explanation, we might be safe to assume that the "more" is constituted by the up-class status of her employer's brand in conjunction with her employer's effort to cast Happy Homes front-line retail clerking as up-scale hospitality and workers as up-scale hosts. Class and gender status constitute defining values of Gwen's employer's brand, and these values -- subsequently portrayed in the style and substance of her front-line interactive retail labors -- are values that allow Gwen to differentiate herself from other front-line retail workers.

Because Happy Homes has its front-line workers act out the class and gender meanings of the brand, doing their front-line retail work as if it were high-class hospitality, it sets up the conditions under which workers can identify with these symbolic enactments over and against the practical labors they perform as front-line retail worker. Returning to Gwen, the problem she has with the term 'clerk' is not that it

misunderstands her practical job responsibilities – remember, she does not try to argue that her practical tasks are significantly different from those of other retail workers. The problem is that the term misrepresents, and profoundly so, the class and gender status Gwen has symbolically consumed in the process of doing Happy Homes front-line retail work as the work of high-class hospitality. In a word, Gwen can *identify* as the upper class host she plays. And this suggests that Happy Homes has had some success playing off of workers’ class anxieties and extracting the type of identity labor it needs from front-line personnel to ensure the smooth reproduction of this work process. As Gwen’s example illustrates, the perceived status gain can be very important to the Happy Homes front-line worker in that it provides a source of positive self-image. The word “clerk” becomes repellant precisely because it threatens a negation of the status gain, thus threatening a basis of worker positive self-feeling. And this could be why it strikes Gwen as a *sickening*, not merely unfortunate, proposal.

Gwen’s case shows us how Happy Homes workers might patrol the borders of the positive self-identity they gain through their Happy Homes retail work (and hints at its vulnerability), but it doesn’t tell us much about how they produce and consume that identity in the first place. This is something that happens primarily (though not exclusively) on the retail floor. As we’ve seen, Happy Homes retail associates often perform their retail sales and service labors as if a form of high-class hospitality, and a key requirement when they perform this hospitality is to socialize with the store’s guests.

This on-the-job practice of socializing with guests, while a requirement of the job, is also a key method by which Happy Homes workers produce and consume symbolic class and gender status.

IDENTIFYING RETAIL WORK AS HIGH-CLASS HOSPITALITY

Happy Homes front-line workers enjoy their labors of hospitality. Indeed, many of the sales associates interviewed for this study say that socializing with the Happy Homes guests qualifies as the best part of their job. In response to this question, workers tended to cite more than one aspect of their job, and other answers to this question included an appreciation of the Happy Homes brand, good relations with co-workers, and the opportunity to be creative in their job. Still, workers tended to emphasize interactions with customers as an extremely enjoyable element of their work. Indeed, when asked to name what they liked about their Happy Homes job, nearly 85% of associates interviewed for this study referred to their interactions with customers, and over half named it as their favorite part of the job. As one enthusiastic sales associate put it, “working with our guests is the best!”

Other associates were more specific about the reasons they liked interacting with Happy Homes customers. In the case of Rosie, a sales associate known for her solid sales record, the interaction with customers gives her a sense of accomplishment and suits her nature:

I think it's about people, I like the people we get. And I love that accomplishment of being in my area and working it, it's so easy for me, it's *so* easy for me...so some of it's the easiness for me, I like that it's easy, and again I think it's about people here – I'm a people person, so, it's that I enjoy talking to the people we get, and part of me also likes I can be as good as I am at what I do without pressure.

A self-proclaimed “people person,” Rosie enjoys talking to the Happy Homes customers, and it is one of her favorite parts of the job. But Rosie is also interested in analyzing why she likes socializing with Happy Homes guests, and is able to name the factors that contribute to making customer interactions enjoyable. For Rosie, the pleasure that comes from socializing with guests is due to the *type* of people who come to the Happy Homes store, and the *ease* with which she can interact with these people. As a result of these factors, Rosie gets a sense of accomplishment when she performs the paid interactive labor essential to her job. Certainly, the accomplishment Rosie feels is reflected in her sale numbers but, as she tells it, there is also a sense of accomplishment that comes from simply being good at interacting with her guests.

Socializing with customers seems to come effortlessly to Rosie, but she also prides herself on this social expertise, betraying her awareness that she is, in fact, practicing a skill not everyone has, and finding reward in its mastery. Though not sentimental about her relationships with customers, Rosie appreciates the type of persons they are and enjoys deploying her social skills in her customer interactions. Rosie's un-sentimental approach contrasts to that of other associates who, in reporting customer interaction as a favorite part of their job, would sometimes speak of their customers in

markedly affectionate terms. These associates seem to take a very personal stake in having successful social interactions with their Happy Homes guests. Lucy is a good example of this. In the sales associate job for nearly three years, Lucy sees socializing with customers as the most fulfilling part of her job, and feels that these customer interactions give her personal, as well as job, satisfaction. Asked what she liked most about her job, Lucy responded in emotional tones that highlight how important this socializing can be in a Happy Homes worker's experience of the job:

It's my guests, I just *love* them...I don't know, they look at me like I am, just, like I'm...I don't know, I just love the interaction that I get with the guests...like sometimes they hug me, and they say, thank you so much, and they keep on coming back to see me again and again and I just, I love it, I really do.

Lucy has some difficulty naming what it is she thinks her guests see when they look at her, but she's quite clear that whatever it might be called, it makes her feel good. Though she doesn't cite Cooley's ([1902] 2009) concept of the looking-glass self, she might as well have. In her telling, when Lucy sees herself through her customers' eyes she sees herself in a positive light, and as a result experiences positive self-feeling. Confirmation of this positive self-feeling can go a second round when guests thank her, a third when they hug her, and a fourth when they return to see her. It is important to Lucy that her guests return, in her words, to see her "again and again." Though returning guests likely have commerce in mind, even if they also intend a hug, their recognition of

Lucy builds her self-esteem and, in their return visits to the store, she sees validation of her own self-worth.

Lucy's unguarded description reveals that socializing with the Happy Homes customers can be a 'self-worth-building exercise' for the Happy Homes front-line worker. In its candid emotion, Lucy's description is exceptional, but her message is not. Among those associates who see socializing with customers as one of the best parts of their job, Lucy is most effusive, and though many other workers speak in terms that personalize their relations with customers, Lucy is the only one who mentions hugs. Still, when asked what they liked about their job, many front-line Happy Homes workers point to similar personal-level rewards from relations with customers, suggesting that socializing with Happy Homes guests can serve as a boost to worker self-image.

Though the most effusive, Lucy is not the only sales associate to talk about feelings toward customers in terms of love, and many of the Happy Homes associates rely on that word when expressing their regard for their clientele. Like Lucy, Greta, a sales associate who has been at the job for over five years, claims to love her Happy Homes guests. Discussing what she enjoys about her job, Greta echoes the sentiments of many of her co-workers when she names the clientele and describes the personal gratification she gets from her socializing labors:

Well, I really like working in the store, I really like what I do. But, mainly, I love the clientele that comes in the store. I love the guests. I

like meeting them and talking with them and, you know, finding out something about their lives. It's just making that connection. That's what I like the most. I love that part.

Naming interactions with guests as the most pleasurable part of her work, Greta portrays those interactions as decidedly *friendly* ones, that is, she casts her interactions with guests as friendly sociable encounters, not formal commercial ones. Indeed, in her telling, it is precisely because the interactions have a friendly tone that they can be so pleasurable. Greta likes to “meet” the guests, she likes to talk to them and, in particular, she likes to learn personal details about their lives. But, as she says, what she likes most is that these measures lead to “making that connection” with the guest. For Greta, the pleasure she gets from doing her front-line Happy Homes job comes specifically from forging a bond with the Happy Homes customer. Thus, much like Lucy, Greta conducts her paid interactive work in a style of friendliness, evaluates those labors according to their personal flavor, and defines a fulfilling encounter as one where she can accomplish rapport with her Happy Homes guest.

Research shows us that friendliness like Greta's can be used strategically at work (Pierce 1996), and researchers have elaborated several variations of “strategic friendliness” in the context of different work situations (see Pierce 1996 for the way attorneys use strategic friendliness to manipulate paralegals, Paules 1996 for the way waitresses use a sexualized friendliness to maximize tips, and Rollins 1985 for the way employers use the guise of friendliness to get unpaid labor out of their domestic workers).

But “strategic friendliness,” which can indeed play an important role in workplace interactions, particularly in negotiations of power, appears to be something other than what Greta is doing. Of course, it would be fair to say that the congeniality Greta practices with her guests – that is, meeting them, talking to them, and learning about their lives – resembles overtures of friendship. And we can also assume that Greta realizes these brief commercial encounters are, in fact, commercial, and knows that the efforts she makes to connect with guests (good vibrations notwithstanding) happen as part of her paid labors at Happy Homes. For all that, her congenial behaviors aren’t “strategic friendliness,” at least not in the sense the social scientific literature intends. Rather, for Greta, applying the social art of friendship-making to the enactment of paid interactive labor allows these encounters to be personally satisfying, indeed, enough so that they constitute the feature of her job she finds the *most* satisfying.

Greta may know that her on-the-job congeniality qualifies as a form of productivity in her paid labor, but, in her hands, friendliness is not meant to serve the type of strategic purposes we might imagine – for instance, as an effort to close a sale. As Greta herself explains, her on-the-job friendliness is not the servant of commercial-transactional purposes, but of private-relational ones, if not also personal-identity ones:

I like when I can establish trust with the guest. It’s a trust thing, absolutely. It’s not like, you’re nice to them and then turn away and say okay you’ve made your decision now and bye bye. It’s so insincere to do that. And I feel that way, and, you know, frankly, I don’t care what they buy...I don’t care! I don’t want you to buy what you don’t like because

that's a reflection off me. I want you to like what you buy, but I don't care! And here's the fine line that I think is important. In a store like Happy Homes dealing with the caliber of people we get, you have to know how to handle things gracefully. Absolutely...yes, but don't you remember, if you watch the old movies, when you'd go into department stores it was a privilege to have a job at a department store, the name tags, the...you had to wear a sharp dress, only a dress. The only store that does that to this day is Von Maur, or Neiman's probably too...but Happy Homes does a bit of that. It does, it really does, absolutely. So that said, I am a true believer in that every experience in your life leads you up to where you can be the best you are now, and hence where I'm working now, I can be the best I can be working with the guest. And that's a reflection off me too.

Deploying her friendship-making skills in her Happy Homes floor work, Greta isn't trying to put one over on the customer – as she says, she really doesn't care what the customer buys. Yet, while Greta may not care about realizing a sale, she does care about realizing a personal benefit. When her effort to create trust with a customer succeeds, Greta feels good, not only about the interaction, but also about herself.

It appears Greta produces positive self-feeling on at least two counts. It is, as she tells it, a positive “reflection off” her when she is at her “the best” with her guests, and in Greta's opinion, being her best means being sincere and graceful, comparable to the elegant department store clerk of bygone days. Likening her position to the elegant clerk of yore, Greta sketches a stylized form of traditional femininity expressed through an upscale, sophisticated persona. And, as Greta says with a touch of pride, “Happy Homes does a little bit of that (old department store style),” thereby indicating that she believes this persona has become – at least “a bit” -- hers by virtue of her Happy Homes employ.

For Greta, this is also a philosophical matter (albeit, philosophy in pop psychology terms). Believing that every experience in life has led her up to a place where she can inhabit the best possible version of herself, Greta sees her Happy Homes job as allowing this “best self” to be actualized through her encounters with the Happy Homes guest – or, in other words, she views interaction with the guest as her vehicle for a sort of *self-actualization*. Greta believes that her on-the-job interactive practices help her to fulfill a human need for self-actualization, signaling that this self-actualizing activity makes her feel good about herself. Here, Greta takes us back to Cooley’s mirror. In a comment reminiscent of Lucy’s allusion to liking what she sees of herself in her customers’ eyes, Greta speaks of her best self, realized through working with the guests, as anchored in a *reflection* of that self. And, of course, since that reflection happens through interaction with the Happy Homes customer, it is the Happy Homes customer who would mirror Greta back to herself in this positive light. In this sense, just as Greta eschews strategic friendliness as a behavior that would reflect negatively on her character, she embraces successfully friendly interactions with guests as victories that positively reflect her personal worth.

The high tones Greta takes to describe her Happy Homes work may strike as a bit odd, given that the work she is describing is, after all, front-line retail clerking. Yet, her manner of response cooperates with her employer’s portrayal of floor work as high-class hospitality, and typifies the responses of associates who, like her, report that guest

interactions constitute an especially enjoyable part of their job. Of course, Happy Homes workers do not speak with one voice, and many of the associates interviewed for this study identified both positive and negative aspects to their interactive work. But when Happy Homes workers report that they enjoy socializing with their guests, they often frame that activity according to the norms of a friendly encounter, and note a personal, identity-level, pay-off in return.

A similar message comes through with workers' conversations on the shop floor. Going back to the on-the-job conversation where Karla tells Grace about the good time she'd had with a guest, Karla's description of the interaction illustrates that Happy Homes workers can get significant pleasure from this part of their job. Excited to share the story with Grace, Karla describes how "nice" her guest was, and clearly delighted to have "had the best time with (this) guest," happily adds that the interaction was "so much fun," venturing the thought that the two of them (Karla and the guest), had "really hit it off." In this telling, Karla casts a commercial interaction in very personal terms, and her association with the Happy Homes guest appears distinctly social in its nature. Privileging the bonhomie over and above the commercial outcome, Karla evaluates the interaction in terms of her compatibility with the guest, and is delighted by the synergy she feels with the customer. When she boasts about the incident to her co-worker, Karla presents the successful interaction as if it were a personal accomplishment. Indeed, Karla seems proud of the camaraderie she developed with this customer and, clearly, she feels

elated as a result – we might say Karla gets a “high” from the successful interaction.

When Happy Homes associates take compatibility with customers as a form of personal achievement -- as Karla, and the other associates mentioned here, seem to be doing -- the good feeling that comes with this success carries positive meanings for their self-feeling. And this suggests that Happy Homes associates respond positively to conviviality with guests for very personal reasons that have to do with *how workers see themselves*. In other words, the positive rewards a front-line Happy Homes worker enjoys as a result of socializing with guests may register at the level of that worker’s identity.

We should not, perhaps, be surprised that Happy Homes floor workers enjoy socializing with their customers. In terms of their attitude toward socializing, the pool of working Happy Homes sales associates suffers from a selection bias. First, recalling that the Happy Homes employment application asks the applicant to designate the type of job he wants (e.g., sales associate, stock room associate, etc.), it is highly likely that outgoing, ‘pro-socializing’ applicants self-select into the Happy Homes front-line, while introverts opt out of these front-line positions. The organization makes its selections too, of course, and extroversion appears to be one of the criteria the organization uses to choose front-line personnel. Moreover, as we saw in the training chapter, the in-coming sales associate can’t miss the organizational message that socializing with guests is a very important part of her job. Any associate trainee who doesn’t like socializing would be right to be scared off at the training stage. However, should an introverted newbie make

it past training to the floor, her unsocial ways will be quickly addressed through manager coaching and, if this doesn't work, she'll likely be moved off floor duty for good. It seems to follow, then, that Happy Homes front-line workers will tend to be the type of people who would enjoy interacting with customers.

Yet, if the base-line fact of their enjoyment is thereby explained, its intensity is not. For, in many cases, these front-line workers appear not only to enjoy this socializing but to get an emotional "high" as a result (recall, Karla's excitement over hitting it off with the guest or Lucy's passionate assertion that she *loves* interacting with her guests). Indeed, if we believe Happy Homes associates when they report what they like most about their job, the lure of this "high" that comes from socializing with guests even trumps the Happy Homes employee discount. Only a small percentage (less than 20%) of associates mentioned the discount as one of the things they liked about their job, while, again, almost 85% of the associates interviewed for this study pointed to interactions with customers as a particularly enjoyable part of their Happy Homes job.

This cannot be bad for the organization to have front-line workers who get a "high" from their sociability labors, indeed, chances are this would just increase the quality of the workers interactions with customers, boost sales, and strengthen the worker's overall commitment to the job. At first cut, it does not sound bad for workers either, at least in principle. Most people enjoy some positive social interaction, and, for outgoing personalities, jobs that require intensive interactional labor can be a good fit.

More, social science research on the topic (Wharton 2006) suggests that when interactive service jobs allow the worker some measure of autonomy in crafting interactions with customers, the worker's job satisfaction tends to increase. Arguably, this condition would hold for the front-line worker at Happy Homes. Within the parameters of high-class politesse, these front-line workers have significant autonomy in how they perform their interactive labors. Happy Homes management gives its front-line workers a great deal leeway in how they craft the content and style of their interactions and, notwithstanding the prompts frequently given by management, or the samples of greetings and gratitude offered in the employee handbook, Happy Homes regards these rituals as largely unscripted acts. For instance, associates are allowed to creatively fashion their own ways of greeting and thanking (as with the male sales associate, mentioned earlier, who applied his natural knack for humor to his greeting and thanking tasks), and apply their own style to their socializing labors. While the organization offers sample scripts for customer interaction and imposes a *code* of conduct, it cannot be said to routinize its front-line labor, and sales associates can, and often do, apply their own touch to their customer interactions.

Still, for all their autonomy – or perhaps more rightly, because of it -- the socializing that the Happy Homes associate is required to do with their guest could be said to comprise a particularly intensive form of interactional labor. The fact that Happy Homes expects its sales associates to put their own wits to the challenge of socializing

with customers exacts a significant cost on these wits. Their employer verses them on the style of interaction but, when it comes down to it, Happy Homes workers must figure out *how* to make polite conversation with their guests. For instance, it is to the front-line worker to determine what topics she should pursue, and how far to pursue them; the associate must determine what tone she will take, how casual or formal she will be, and how much familiarity she should assume with guest. At the same time, she must gauge these labors against the individual personality, mien, and mood of each new guest. And, while doing all of the above, the worker must be perpetually tacking back and forth between the exigencies of her own social skills and comfort-level, on the one hand, and the need to ensure that the guest experiences her sociable ways as positive and appropriate, on the other.

This is the stuff of intensive interactional work, as required by the Happy Homes employer, and performed by front-line workers on the Happy Homes floor. But the stuff of intensive interactional labor on the retail floor is also the stuff of identity labor in the retail worker, and here we return to the question of why Happy Homes workers get a high from socializing with their customers. We've seen that many front-line Happy Homes workers enjoy doing sociability as part of their job, that they realize a sense of accomplishment from this labor, see the rewards of this labor in personal terms, and experience positive self-feeling as a result. Happy Homes workers can get a "high" from socializing with their guests, yet if we explain the worker's high by saying that

socializing with guests boosts worker self-esteem, we are begging the question: how does it do this and why?

As noted earlier, it is likely that Happy Homes front-line workers tend toward extroversion, and so would find interactional labor appealing. A priori, this “good fit” theory should inform the question of how and why the worker landed in her job and ended up doing the Happy Homes form of sociability labor. However, the proposal that a good fit between worker personality and type of work *explains* Happy Homes front-line workers’ keen enjoyment of their socializing labors is incomplete, and, in the case of Happy Homes, potentially misleading. Beyond the individual-level effect of an alignment between worker personality and work, the positive outcomes the Happy Homes worker experiences from socializing with his guests depend on the persistent *structural misalignment* of worker and customer class positions that is an inherent characteristic of this workplace. To understand the intense pleasure Happy Homes workers can take in their socializing labors we need to look at how the structural conditions of the Happy Homes workplace guide a Happy Homes worker to interpret pleasurable encounters with customers as a reason for positive self-feeling, and which aspects of a worker’s self-concept are altered through these customer encounters.

Class Difference on the Retail Floor

The typical Happy Homes customer is a member of the upper socio-economic classes. As a rule, Happy Homes stores cater to an affluent clientele, but this is particularly true of the store in this study. This store is located in one of the nation's premiere up-scale shopping malls, "The Aristocade." And, while Aristocade visitors are not exclusively pulled from the ranks of the wealthy, the mall's array of tony shops attracts a very up-class type of shopper. For this reason, the Happy Homes store in this study can count on a fairly regular stream of up-class visitors, and this type of visitor represents what these Happy Homes personnel experience as their typical guest. The Happy Homes store general manager, when asked to describe the typical customer, put it this way:

That's a really good question, and it's pretty well established, there are demographics...they are between the ages of, you know, 27 and 50, mostly women, and mostly women with children and, um, these are individuals that have means. I don't remember the exact income bracket, but these individuals are financially secure, very much so. They've sought Happy Homes as guideline for their creative style, and I will tell you, they come in to get ideas and they take those ideas in full and replicate them in their homes. Here especially. These are individuals who can do that. And that individual I'm describing comes in all the time, so she's with us, and I say "she" because it's primarily a "she." She comes in frequently, she's a major repeat shopper.

As the manager describes, the typical Happy Homes customer is affluent and female. And, while the typical customer is a customer of means, as the general manager

tells it, affluent customers are especially in evidence at this Happy Homes store. This is the upper-class female who, according to the manager, visits this store frequently with the goal of replicating the Happy Homes design concept in full in her own home. In other words, this typical female guest spends a lot of money at Happy Homes, and has a lot of money to spend. In the words of one associate, the typical guest is “very comfortable.” Another sales associate gave his version of the typical Happy Homes guest, summing it up this way:

They are the guests who know what they want, they come in and afford it and can just buy it, like they, you know, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam...they're the typical Happy Homes guest...if they want it, for them it's just bam, bam, bam, bam, bam.

Sharing his view of the typical Happy Homes customer, this associate takes note that this customer is one who can easily afford the Happy Homes merchandise. To get his full meaning across, this associate uses alliteration, telling us that the typical Happy Homes customer is the one that can go “bam, bam, bam, bam, bam.” His alliteration works. We know that when this associate describes this “bam, bam, bam, bam, bam” behavior, he is communicating that the typical customer is so affluent she can lay out very large sums of money without giving it a second-thought. While our general manager speaks in terms of demographics, this associate shares knowledge he has gained from direct experience of those who represent typical clientele. In other words, he has

seen the ‘bam, bam, bam, bam’ behavior many times over, and knows that this is likely to be the type of Happy Homes customer who walks in the Happy Homes door.

This associate speaks for his compatriots. Happy Homes floor workers often express a keen awareness of their guests’ level of affluence. In the words of Ella, a seasoned associate who has held her Happy Homes position for seven years, the behaviors of the Happy Homes guests make it clear that they have substantial wealth and, actually, in light of that wealth, Ella sometimes finds their behaviors a little hard to understand:

The thing that’s so unique about the Happy Homes at the Aristocade is the clientele that comes in there...you get the very high end people from (names surrounding suburb), or their lofts and condos downtown, it’s nothing for them to pick up this, this, “oh I got a stash going up at tabletop” kind of thing. I can sell them a thousand dollars worth of draperies and they don’t blink, and in my brain, I’m thinking if you got that much money, why wouldn’t you do custom? I would. I would, but, hey! Or, you know, the other thing is it’s more like they’re the people with two homes, the cabin thing, a vacation home, (sometimes) two vacation homes.

As Ella’s comments suggest, it would be almost impossible for a Happy Homes associate to miss the fact that her guest has money. This is the guest who finds it nothing to pile mountains of merchandise at the tabletop register, lay down a thousand dollars for drapes without even blinking, and in general, spend big money to decorate what are likely to be her multiple homes. Though Ella may sometimes question her wealthy customer’s choice of off-the-rack over custom, she’s very clear that the persons who frequent her

store are at the high-end of the socio-economic scale. Happy Homes associates can also have this picture of the wealthy Happy Home customer in their head before they start their job, but, as Ella proceeds to tell, if this awareness is not in place beforehand, it will soon develop as a result of being on the Happy Homes floor. Musing on the impressive wealth of her guests, Ella shares a story about the first time she got the big picture on the Happy Homes guest's level of affluence:

Well, I'll tell you a little story, the first time I got the big picture about money, I was working up front. There was a huge glass bowl, you know we have just those oversize things that you know restaurants will come in and buy and put it in their lobby or whatever. And we sold tulips, we used to sell tulips every spring, fake tulips, and the entire *huge* bowl was filled with all the tulips but it was part of like that "wow power" when you walk into what they call the grand lobby. It's the wow power at the center door where you walk in. There's always a lifestyle up there which is like a 'living lifestyle,' it's the wow power. And right there in the middle of the door was the wow power, was the huge vase with all, with probably 100 tulips in it, no joke. A woman walks in and goes "oh my god, that's beautiful!" I just happened to be standing there and I went, "isn't it gorgeous?!" and I said, "you know, but you could just pick from it whatever you want." She goes, "no, I'll take the whole thing." I was standing there, looking at her, like, okay I'm still like "well, which ones...?" It's like, that didn't translate. I'm going, "how many of these would you like?" and she's going, "I just want the whole thing." It was \$680 dollars, yeah, they were eight dollars apiece. But she just wanted the whole thing, didn't bat an eye, wanted the whole thing. I don't know where it went. But I remember just thinking..."huh?...oh...ohhh!" That was my first, and I will never forget that.

Most front-line workers will have an incident like Ella's very soon after their first foray onto the floor, and if they didn't already get the big picture about the Happy Homes

guest's economic class status, the penny will surely drop then. As Ella says, and her co-workers also know, the typical Happy Homes guest is a person of considerable means.

In comparison to this customer, the typical Happy Homes front-line worker stands at a socio-economic and class-cultural disadvantage. As noted earlier, sales associates hail from the lower to lower-middle socio-economic classes, and the Happy Homes worker's socio-economic position is far beneath that held by his affluent customer, as is his social status. Of course, by virtue of his service work role, the sales associate already inhabits a subordinate position vis-à-vis the customer. This is a condition written into the structure of most low-level interactive service jobs. However, in relation to his customer, the Happy Homes associate occupies a second subordinate position, this time in terms of his social class. And this is a condition that is written into the structure of the Happy Homes service job.

This structural reality of the Happy Homes workplace, whereby sales associates are subordinate to customers in a double sense, by work role and by social class position, has cultural dimensions. Class difference is also cultural difference, and the rituals of inclusion and exclusion that embody and protect the distinctions of class status are expressed, reinforced, and reproduced through cultural means (Lamont 1994, 2002; Bourdieu 1987). Among other things, class distinction is produced through consumption patterns, and Happy Homes has carefully positioned its brand as a cultural means by which to signify upper class-ness and inscribe class boundaries. Workers by and large

want to stake a claim to the class status the brand represents, and that their customer possesses (a class status they could not otherwise claim). Unable to do so through consumption of brand product on the scale that their customer accomplishes, workers attempt to do so in other ways, and an important way the Happy Homes worker gains a sense of elevated class status is by socializing with the affluent Happy Homes guest. When workers have fun with their high-class guests, they can feel on a par with these high-class others, and thus experience their own social standing as elevated and enhanced. And this symbolic gain in class status can serve as proxy for the actual social status the worker desires but cannot claim on other more instantiative grounds (that is, on grounds such as income, wealth, occupational status, educational attainment, and so on). The reason front-line Happy Homes workers get such a high out of socializing with their high-class guests is because these interactions, when they have the tone of friendship, are interactions that allow the Happy Homes workers to feel *class parity* with these guests.

Motivated to socialize with their high-class guests as a way to produce this sense of class parity, and thus produce (and consume) symbolic class status for themselves, workers experience positive self-feeling as result – indeed, so much so that this can produce an emotional “high.” In this light, we can begin to understand why Happy Homes front-line workers emphasize associations with their guests as one of the most appealing features of their job. Here, I don’t mean to suggest that these interactions can’t be agreeable for reasons other than their ability to hoist a worker’s sense of class and

gender status. There are many reasons the paid interaction of the Happy Homes job could be enjoyable, the basic pleasure of comity among them. And, as earlier mentioned, these front-line workers are apt to be the type who would experience generic satisfaction from pleasant interchange with customers. But, at Happy Homes, the front-line worker's efforts to build rapport with his customer remain contextualized within, and influenced by, the class disparity that separates worker from customer, and the potential pleasures that might wait for front-line employees in their socializing labors are performed (unavoidably and ceremonially) conditioned by that worker's double subordination of class position and work role. In this context, the extrovert's pleasure is, of necessity, mediated by the affect-level incitements, good or bad, of crossing a status divide.

When Happy Homes front-line workers gain the sense of class parity via friendly interactions with guests, so winning an enhanced impression of their own class and gender status, their win depends on two conditions within the Happy Homes work process: the disparity of class that separates the Happy Homes retail worker from Happy Homes customer, itself a structural feature of the Happy Homes workplace, and the worker behaviors designed to create amity across this class divide, this a feature of social action, both controlled and agentic, in the Happy Homes workplace. As our unsentimental associate Rosie demonstrates, this point can be put much more simply. In Rosie's words, the work of paid interaction becomes gratifying on the basis of two

factors: the *type* of clientele that Happy Homes gets, and the *ease* with which the front-line worker can forge good connection with them.

The type of clientele affects the type of gratification the Happy Homes worker receives. If the Happy Homes work of sociability is to become an arena of enhancement for worker class and gender identity, it needs an up-scale customer. And this is something the front-line worker appears to know. Though the direct mention of their customers as “upper class” is largely forestalled by the Happy Homes code of politesse, when describing why they like interacting with their Happy Homes customer, these front-line workers find capable ways to articulate how important their customer’s upper class status is to the architecture of their own job satisfaction. For instance, Rosie, the least sentimental of our associates, claims more than once that her job enjoyment is “about the people Happy Homes gets,” inferring that this group of people carries a distinctive quality. We see the same inference when Lucy, describing what she likes about her job, enthusiastically offers, “it’s my guests, I just *love* them,” and when Greta sums up her main reason for liking the job with “I love the clientele that comes in the store.” This is not “a” clientele, but “the” clientele. While we can suppose that these front-line workers have in mind a clientele of social and economic distinction, we actually don’t have to guess. The workers tell us. From Ella, we hear that the typical Happy Homes guest is “high-end,” from Greta we know the guest is of a certain “caliber” (one that requires grace in the person who serves them), while other associates tell us the Happy Homes

guest as “very comfortable,” and able to make a “bam, bam, bam” sound when dropping large sums of money. Though often barred by manners from calling a spade a spade, the front-line Happy Homes worker has quite effective ways to convey his recognition of the Happy Homes customer’s upper class standing and signal the importance of customer’s status to the pleasures of front-line retail work.

Likewise, those on the Happy Homes front-line have effective ways to convey the importance of high-status clientele to the enhancement of worker self-image. Often, this message includes the worker’s profession of high regard for the Happy Homes customer, with that customer cast as a representative of an upper social class. As mentioned, associates interviewed for this study demonstrate a well-developed awareness of their customer’s up-class status (this is almost to a person), but as well, these associates tend to express consistently positive feelings about this social group. These positive feelings are often set in place before the worker takes the Happy Homes job. Earlier, in the discussion of shopper-lites, we saw how job applicants view the Happy Homes brand as a signature of up-class stature (the brand functioning both to define applicants’ class aspirations and stimulate their class anxieties), and when we heard from members of this group, we witnessed the admiration with which they can view all things and persons associated with the Happy Homes brand, and the way this admiration can extend, in abstraction, to the high-class Happy Homes customer.

IDENTIFYING WITH THE HAPPY HOMES GUEST

As a disposition with which the Happy Homes employee enters her job, admiration for the high class Happy Homes customer is a complex matter. For a shopper-lite-soon-to-become-Happy-Homes-worker, the high class customer is, again in the abstract, an object of envy, but likewise a model of what the shopper-lite would like to be – the Happy Homes customer, as imagined by the new hire, is both a symbol of that worker's desire and an irritant to her own class anxieties. As we've seen, shopper-lites who are in the process of becoming Happy Homes workers express their admiration for the high-class Happy Homes customer in markedly superlative, and oftentimes, anxious terms. Just as we might expect, the newbie's over-the-top regard for the high-class Happy Homes consumer, and the fear it inspires, tend to be tempered by the worker's time on the front-line job. But front-line workers do not lose their admiration for these members of the upper social classes. An excerpt from my interview with the sales associate, Delia, is especially instructive in this regard. Sharing in the interview that she finds interaction with the Happy Homes guest to be an especially gratifying part of her job, Delia explains a little bit more of why she thinks the Happy Homes customer deserves her respect, in the process also exposing the degree to which she has come to identify with this guest:

I think that people who shop at Happy Homes are very, um...not that they're all educated across the board, but they're a different class. They understand the world a little bit better, I think, they appreciate things a

little bit differently. Yeah, I think that they, they enjoy things that they enjoy, like I can talk to them about what restaurants they've eaten at downtown. Never would I have had that conversation with people at (names previous employer) about restaurants, or what theater they were going to, or...but at least at Happy Homes I do.

Delia clearly respects her high-class guest. But she also crafts a complex world of meaning around that guest. Working from her knowledge of their class position, Delia envisages her upper class guest as a worldly individual with a high-level education. In Delia's eyes, this upper class Happy Homes customer is a person who appreciates the better offerings of life, for instance, the theater, or fine dining, and in this regard, the person becomes more admirable for a confident possession of a sybarite's self-knowledge, or, as Delia says, "they enjoy the things that they enjoy." Obviously, for Delia, her guest's worldly ways, as she imagines them, are a source of her pleasure. She enjoys having conversations with her guests about restaurants and theater because, as she points out, "they understand the world a little bit better (and) appreciate things a little bit differently." And, with this claim, Delia implies – none too faintly -- that she shares this enlightened appreciation for the cultural objects that fill the recreational domains of the upper classes. Working from an understanding of her guest's economic capital, Delia extrapolates to the world of their cultural capital, and in so doing imbues her clientele with a host of qualities that Delia admires and, by innuendo, would lay claim to herself.

Listening to Delia, we get the sense that the Happy Homes position has rescued her from the coarser types she's had to fraternize with in her past job. Prior to getting her

position at Happy Homes, Delia worked in telecom sales – a job which, as she tells it, paid a great deal more than her Happy Homes position. But, when the industry contracted, and Delia was let go, she was happy to leave the great unwashed of the telecom customer and telecom worker behind. Or so she says now, from her one-year old position as Happy Homes sales associate. Saved from the hoi polloi, if also catapulted into a lower income bracket, Delia looks back disapprovingly, noting that she could never have had the type of cultivated conversation she has with the Happy Homes guest when she was thrown in amongst the likes of those who peopled the telecom world. We don't know if Delia had these same thoughts when she worked in telecom (we do know that Delia stayed in her telecom job for over six years), but it seems probable that Delia's current identification with her high-class Happy Homes clientele affects her view of the telecom group who, put up against the Happy Homes type of person, could come out looking lowbred. Given the Happy Home emphasis on the value of high-class ways, it would not be surprising if Delia had gained some measure of condescension toward the telecom population through her experiences working the Happy Homes job. And if, as is argued here, Delia enjoys symbolic gains in class and gender status as a result of her job, the view she forms of former clients and co-workers is likely to reflect the perspective of her newly-gained status. Insofar as this is the case, Delia's perception of her former job becomes in some measure an artifact of her current one.

In addition, Delia's comments suggest the possibility that Happy Homes workers use their relations with high-class customers as a positive counterweight to the negative attributes of low-level front-line service work. As she tells it, Delia would never have had conversations about restaurants or theater in her former job, but "at least at Happy Homes" she gets to have these types of cultured conversations with her up-scale guests. Knowing that Delia's previous telecom job paid significantly more than her Happy Homes retail job, we can take it that Delia's "at least" is meant to convey that her low-paid, low-level Happy Homes job still delivers some benefits that her previous job couldn't supply. In this sense, Delia views the opportunity in her Happy Homes job to fraternize with her class betters as consolation for the job's low wage and status, suggesting that the Happy Homes front-line worker may use the fact that they get to interact with a high-class clientele as a way to offset the detractions of low level retail work. Clearly, Delia sees the chance to socialize with the Happy Homes high-class clientele as a benefit of her job. But this raises an important question: what constitutes the benefit?

When Delia expresses her high regard for the upscale Happy Homes customer, she helps us unpack the relationship between the type of retail clientele Happy Homes sees, and the manner of gratification Happy Homes workers enjoy from their interactive floor labors. Presenting the clientele as a distinctive group, Delia asserts, "people who shop at Happy Homes (...) are a different class." In the typically coded way of Happy

Homes politesse, Delia is telling us that the guest is *upper* class. As we've seen, the Happy Homes associate recognizes the customer's wealth, and even a newly vetted worker (and Delia is not newly vetted) grasps that the first certificate of their customer's social difference is economic class. Reflecting the class-based rules of propriety governing the Happy Homes workplace, Delia must mince words in order to talk about money, so offering us "different" as proxy for "higher." In context, of course, "higher" is what we hear, and Delia ably points us to the customer's membership in an upper socio-economic stratum.

But, tellingly, Delia also stacks that deck. Adding cultural bona fides to economic credentials, she imputes education, worldliness and a sophistication of cultural taste to the customer who would be her economic better, thus expanding the range of the customer's admirable, if not also enviable, qualities (this type of extrapolation may in itself be a reflection of Delia's class anxiety). Delia is not the only sales associate to do this. Like Delia, those who work the front lines of the Happy Homes store tend to write other positive qualities onto the person of their customer on the basis of that customer's economic class. One associate notes that her Happy Homes clientele are not only wealthy but "smart and educated too," and from this draws the further conclusion that these people probably "all send their kids to private schools," another casts her high-class customers as members of the cultural cognoscenti, claiming they are "the connoisseur type," while a third mentions his notion that his upscale customers are "well-traveled."

Offering a particularly interesting example of this sort of extrapolation, one associate articulates a belief that the Happy Homes high-class customers are “rare birds” who are “beautiful in a way.” Asked to explain, this associate points us to a cache of psycho-social resources that she believes to issue from the customer’s economic class identity:

It’s that these people are comfortable with themselves. And this goes back to confidence. It’s where you are, you know who you are. So these are people who know who they are, and have that kind of confidence that can take them anywhere. And that’s a really powerful thing.

As this associate illustrates, front-line Happy Homes workers can attribute a variety of “powers” to their high-class clientele, powers that extend beyond the high stakes realm of economic capital to emerge in the high stake realm of cultural capital. And here is a trick of the Happy Homes identity-labor trade. Returning to Delia, we notice how she uses her customers’ superior economic status as indication of superiority on cultural measures. Expanding the realm of a customer’s superiority in this way would seem to accentuate the difference between Delia and her customer, and heighten Delia’s awareness of her subordinate position. Yet, the result can be quite opposite. With her admiration for the customer expanded to include their cultural distinction, Delia now has the ability to translate that admiration into identification – not because Delia herself possesses a likeness of the cultural superiority she envisions in her customer, but because the pretense of cultural sameness is possible where the presumption of economic parity is not.

By virtue of her position as a Happy Homes sales associate, Delia engages sociable conversation with the high-class guest. When those conversations have the air of friendship, Delia can picture herself in equipoise with this upscale customer who is both the object of her admiration and the object of her class anxiety and, as a result, rewrite her own classed and gendered identity into an improved version. When Delia comments on her customer's special understanding of the world ("they understand the world a little bit better"), noting their special talent for appreciating the things of that world ("they appreciate things a little bit differently"), she implies these special qualities are hers as well, thus explaining the value she puts on this opportunity (given by her job) to sociably consort with like-minded others. In this way, Delia uses her paid labors to break ground where her own anxieties of class wrought from economic difference can be restructured into the possibility of cultural sameness.

As we saw earlier, this presumption of cultural sameness can be written onto a presumption of a gendered likeness. The Happy Homes brandscape simulates the well-appointed home, and the parties meeting in that arena (the sales associate and the guest) appear to share a mutual priority on creating beauty in the domestic sphere. This presumption of shared interest in a domestic aesthetic can be used by the associate to signify a commonality based on the conventions of a particular type of up-class femininity. This is what is happening when, for instance, the Happy Homes associate expresses empathy with a guest's design dilemma, or commiserates on the difficulties of

keeping a perfect home with children (or husbands) around, or volunteers information about her own home and the beautification she's accomplished by using Happy Homes products.

Such are common elements in the conversations Happy Homes associates have with their guests and they can serve to establish a gendered common ground based on a purportedly shared feminine preoccupation with the domestic sphere. Of course, in the context of Happy Homes -- and certainly in the person of the typical Happy Homes guest -- femininity has distinctly up-class tones. By provenance, the typical Happy Homes associate would have trouble laying claim to this type of femininity, but in doing her job -- that is, simulating the up-class hostess in the store's simulated up-class domestic environment -- the associate can approximate-through-performance enough elements of up-class femininity to present as if she and her customer share the same gendered concerns. The associate is, then, poised to make inroads with the customer on the basis that they share a set of gendered priorities related to the management, if not the perfection, of the domestic sphere. In turn, this can provide the associate with an opening for rapport-building, itself an activity associated with, and recuperative of, conventional femininity. When the associate's rapport building efforts result in friendly conversation with the Happy Homes guest, the associate has a chance to affirm this element of a feminine gender identity.

If a female associate's rapport building efforts, resulting in friendly connection with customers, affirms that associate's gender identity, they also open the chance for her to revise her class identity. When on-the-floor interactions with high-class customers have the tone of friendship, the Happy Homes associate can produce, for her own consumption, a felt sense of class parity with her upscale guest. For the associate, assuming an attitude of gender similitude can thus open the door to constructing an attitude of class similitude. Of course, gender is never without its class entailments, and as we'll see in more detail in the upcoming discussion of Happy Homes worker resistance, a commonality of gender can quickly run up against a dissimilarity of class. Still, the guise of female camaraderie can provide entrée into the type of conviviality that allows the associate to feel class parity with her guest.

As Delia confirms, socializing with the likes of the Happy Homes guest is the crux of her on-the-job gratification, and it is so because of pleasures found in the feeling of *kinship* she experiences with this up-class clientele. This kinship is rooted in Delia's identification with her customer on the basis of that which grants her customer *cultural* distinction. Delia needn't have consumed the cultural products -- for instance, fine dining and theater -- that her high-class guest enjoys for her to have a feeling of parity; she need only generate and ratify a similar appreciation of those products in and through her convivial interactions with her guest. In this way, Delia produces and consumes a sense of class parity with her guest in the process of doing her job. (I am not saying

Delia *doesn't* consume these cultural products, only that she needn't, yet it remains that Delia's ability to consume pricey cultural products like theater and fine dining would be limited by her modest income).

Since I am arguing that the front-line Happy Home worker's identification with her customer's high-class tastes, and thus highly ranked status, is generated in the process of doing the job, the question of whether Delia and her front-line compatriots entered the Happy Homes job with these patterns of up-class taste already in place is a legitimate one. However, when we recall the patterns of class anxiety that plague Happy Home new hires during training, we see that newly budded workers do not so much enter the job identifying with high class tastes, as much as they yearn toward that identification. Moreover, stories like Greta's, where she relays how a customer's extravagant faux tulip purchase comprised a memorable piece of her on-the-floor education about "the big money picture," demonstrate that front-line Happy Homes workers *learn* the ways of the upper classes in the process of performing their retail labor. In important ways, the Happy Homes front-line worker's identification with the upscale Happy Homes customer, and that worker's adoption of his customer's upper class tastes, can be produced in the doing of the job.

As we've seen, Delia's perception of a shared zeitgeist with the upper classes likely comes as a result of her paid interactions, and not as a precondition to those actions. Yet, the doubly imposed subordination written into the structure of Delia's job

would seem to make it unlikely for Delia to be able to conjure this feeling of parity with her up-class guest, notwithstanding any gender-based commonality she might construe. But, remembering that the Happy Homes brand is a signifier of upper class tastes, we remember also that Delia can claim a point of entrée into kinship with the upscale customer on the basis of mutual brand appreciation. Once “in,” that is once performing the sociability labors that are a requirement of her job and getting purchase on a friendly tone, Delia can use her paid interactive labors as a way to manufacture a sense of class and gender co-equality with her guest on the pretense that they share a broader range of sensibilities – a world of “shared tastes” that, by no mistake, signifies for Delia the distinction of the upper classes.

Identity Labor

This is what identity-labor looks like in the context of front-line Happy Homes work. At Happy Homes, the realm of social action that is both demanded of and allowed to the front-line worker can broker the associate’s identification with the up-class customer, in turn, producing improved worker self-feeling. The contradiction is not lost on us. The local reason the worker needs to improve self-feeling is a product of his work as well. The Happy Homes associate position is one that insists the worker’s double subordination by job role and class position, and daily puts him in direct contact with the symbol of his subordination – the wealthy Happy Homes guest who can easily consume the Happy Homes products and rightfully consume the conferred status of the brand.

The class anxious worker, facing the foreclosed option of economic parity with the Happy Homes guest, and positioned in a low-level service role in relation to the guest, has immediate reason to want reparations to an anxiety that, by virtue of the job, is perpetually reproduced. In this way, the worker becomes *personally* motivated to use the performance of her required interactive labors to produce the tone of friendship that allows a sense of class and gender parity. For the front-line Happy Homes worker, feeling simpatico with the guest is a way to commandeer that guest's status as her own and for her own uses – uses that, on one hand, pertain to the positive maintenance of personal identity, and on the other, to a desire to equalize a social relationship that is unequal by virtue of both class and status.

The way Delia speaks of class parity with the guest is in cultural, not economic terms, yet it remains clear Delia has come to identify with the high-class clientele who frequents the Happy Homes store. Moreover, her case illustrates how friendly interactions with the Happy Homes shopper can constitute a practice wherein Happy Homes workers “work on” their sense of self by creating a sense of class parity with their guest. Though Delia's retrospective evaluation of those she met in her telecom job might lead us to think her own identification with the upper classes predates her time at Happy Homes, in further comment Delia reveals her belief that the Happy Homes job produces this identification. Asked how she feels about her co-workers, Delia has complementary things to say, and, parsing the reasons why her Happy Homes compatriots are likeable,

points to what she sees as the positive effects fraternizing with high-class customers can have on worker personality:

Now there's a few associates that I, that don't, you know...but I think that just in general people who work at Happy Homes are just a little bit, um, classier. It's that they're around people of a higher class, so that you strive to be, just, you strive to know a little more...so I think that it's, I think instantly you're around people that are already of a little bit higher intelligence level, higher class level, and this affects who you are.

The first thing we note is that Delia seems to like her Happy Homes co-workers to the degree these co-workers personify class in the style of the Happy Homes guest. There are, as Delia sees it, “a few associates that () don't” have class, and Delia is less fond of these few. From Delia's comments we infer that the co-workers she likes the least are those who, to her mind, don't strive (or don't succeed in their striving) to be like their upscale guest. However, to Delia's approval, it seems that “just in general people who work at Happy Homes are just a little bit () classier.” And, as she explains, this case is likely to prevail in that the front-line Happy Homes worker's “classiness” is actually produced through their Happy Homes job. It is, as she says, a result of the associate being “around people of a higher class,” that this worker will want to “strive to be (...) a little more” than who they are, and in that striving will become a “classier” version of their original self. To wit, Delia concludes with the maxim: when you are around people who are at a “higher class level,” (if not also, by Delia's presumption, at a “higher intelligence level,”) it will “affect() who you are.” As Delia sees it, this effect is a

salutary one. Happy Homes front-line workers are made somehow better through their fraternization with the upper classes, attaining a self that is higher, classier, even smarter, than before.

Delia is telling us that Happy Homes front-line workers can become more like the customers with whom they interact. As Delia makes clear, the presence of a specifically up-class clientele is essential to the process of ‘classing up’ workers, but, as she makes equally clear, in and of itself, the presence of a high-class clientele is not enough. If a low-level Happy Homes worker is to ‘class up’ in a way that Delia would applaud, it will demand his effort. In Delia’s telling, Happy Homes workers are not passive in this transformation and, as she points out, the conditions of the associate’s work induce the worker to *strive* to be “more.” The front-line worker is, then (or at least by Delia’s account), active in his own transformation. Likewise, Delia suggests that the worker who has learned to act in an up-class fashion, that is, enough that she would find them likeable, has taken the lesson much deeper than the level of surface display. We notice that Delia’s maxim does not instruct that being around high-class people changes how you *act*, but rather that it changes “who you *are*.” And, to the extent that Delia is talking about herself as well as her co-workers -- which clearly appears to be the case -- we are compelled to grant her some authority in this matter.

In this way, Delia’s indication that the Happy Homes worker transforms at the level of identity (i.e., “who you are”) has, at minimum, the credibility of the first-person

account. Of course, staying with Delia's maxim, the person who is changed at the level of their 'being,' would, by her equation, display the attendant behaviors (if not, there would be a good deal more co-workers that Delia didn't like). But, when Delia describes the change to workers as a change in *who they are*, she suggests a transformation of worker identity along with worker behavior. The Happy Homes associate that Delia pictures (and prefers) is one who actively pursues the project of re-identification in order to cast the self in the image of the customer.

We know that Happy Homes front-line workers recognize the extent of their customer's relative economic advantage but, as we've seen, these workers may readily assume that their clientele's superiority extends to many other domains – from their greater educational attainment and worldliness, to the distinctiveness of their leisure pursuits, the connoisseurship of their cultural tastes, and even to their possession of enhanced psycho-social powers. When Delia envisions her customer, extrapolating from their economic class position to their cultural distinction, she believes that customer to be possessed of a world of enviable talents (e.g., education, distinctive tastes) and engaged in a set of enviable activities (e.g., theater-going, fine dining). But with her last comment, Delia raises the stakes once again -- and in a very interesting way. Lauding the ability of the upscale customer to create a beneficial social environment for front-line workers, this time Delia describes a high-end Happy Homes guest who boasts not only better education and more sophisticated tastes, but also a "higher intelligence level."

Talents and elite consumption practices, as Delia and her co-workers ascribe to their guests, are attributes available through the privileges of class and developed on the basis of class, and they act as forms of cultural capital that function simultaneously as affirmations of distinction and as supports to relations of social inequality. Nevertheless, we are talking attributes that are acquired and not inborn. However, when Delia adds superior intelligence to the mix of the high-class customers' advantages, she implies that this group possesses a native talent, rendering them superior *by nature*. This time, as Delia imagines the advantages of class, she extends the basis for admiration of the Happy Homes customer beyond that customer's socio-economic class position, and even beyond their cultural capital, to the realm of inherent superiority. And, effectively, by granting her up-class guest the natural gift of superior intelligence, Delia has allowed a logic that would naturalize not only intelligence, but all the other advantages of class she so admires.

Attributing native gifts to the upper classes could be dangerous territory for the class anxious worker. Much as we saw earlier, Delia is reading a complex narrative onto the fact of class, this time naturalizing her customers' superior social and economic position by crediting them with a "higher intelligence." If, by granting the customer cultural and symbolic advantages on the basis of their economic class, low-level Happy Homes workers find an avenue by which they can identify with that customer and thus enjoy enhanced self feeling, naturalizing their customer's superiority would seem to do

the opposite. From the belief that the upper class customer is naturally more intelligent, it is not a far cry to the idea that the other advantages of class -- economic, cultural, symbolic – are engendered through, and justified by, this inherent superiority. Thus, these advantages would be closed to those without the inborn intelligence, and those who occupy lower social and economic positions would, by a commonly applied *a posteriori* logic, be understood to lack the necessary inborn traits for success.

In allowing the customer the natural advantage of a higher intelligence, Delia would seem to closing off her avenues for symbolic status and positive self-feeling that she can otherwise produce by identifying with the high class Happy Homes guest. I am not suggesting that this is Delia's conscious intent, and do not read Delia's presentation of the upward classes as more intelligent to be a deliberate attempt to naturalize their superiority. In the context of Delia's point, that is, the ability of the Happy Homes customer to create a social environment for the Happy Homes front-line worker that allows for that worker's personal uplift, it is more likely that a reference to the customer's higher intelligence is part of her effort to drive home the point of her customer's upper class-ness without breaching rules of politesse. In this sense, Delia is not so much hoist by her own petard, as she is trying hard to maintain a difficult balance along the slippery discursive boundaries by which Happy Homes workers understand and talk about class. Still, as Delia illustrates, the project of understanding the social relations of class within the setting of this retail workplace can transform all too comfortably from imaginations,

and celebrations, of the customer's acquired cultural capital into understandings that hint at a customer's possession of natural superiority, and therefore that customer's rightful claim to other advantages of class.

Though Delia does not appear to be promoting this idea, such an idea may yet serve a purpose for Happy Homes workers. If natural talents are used to explain economic and social success, it cannot be the worker's fault that he does not have his customer's level of economic and social status. Countering a broader cultural commitment to ideas of meritocratic individualism and fantasies of upward mobility, a pinch of social Darwinism --while not doing much for the self-confidence of those who inhabit the lower strata -- may go a long way toward helping unsuccessful social members avoid self-blame. And, in the case of Happy Homes, where low-level, low wage retail service workers daily encounter and interact with the upper classes, having such an idea on tap may give the retail clerk a source of comfort should the situation arise where he needs to find a blameless solution to the puzzle of why the customer has economic and social success and he does not.

As it stands, though, most front-line Happy Homes workers avoid this rationale, and stop short of naturalizing their customer's social and economic superiority (Delia's example notwithstanding). It is true that these front-line workers tend to write complex narratives onto the fact of their guest's economic privilege, thus expanding the territory of the customer's perceived worthiness, while also expanding the grounds for the

worker's admiration, yet overall Happy Homes associates tend to envision that territory as filled with talents, privileges and activities that are not, by any rule of nature, the exclusive domains of the upper classes and so are, in theory, available to anyone. In this way, the attributes that these workers see in their customers – as forms of symbolic and cultural capital -- can qualify as legitimate objects of workers' desire and legitimate (or legitimate-in-theory) objects of identification. In other words, the cultural and symbolic capital that the Happy Homes worker attributes to his guests can look to be possible for his own possession, or at very the least, possible to possess through *simulation* within the practices (both interactive and physical) of the Happy Homes front-line job. The front-line Happy Homes worker can both simulate upper class cultural capital in the practice of his job, for instance, through her performance of hospitality and brand appreciation, as well as use her interactions with customers as a way to re-fashion her own *sensibilities* toward a closer resemblance with what she pictures to be the cultural capital of the upper classes. And it is on these grounds – grounds of cultural and symbolic capital, in contrast to economic and human capital -- that the associate can gain traction in her attempt to identify with the upscale Happy Homes guest, and in the process elevate her own classed self-concept and rectify her class anxiety.

Workers' Class Anxieties and Identity Labor

Why would Happy Homes associates want to manipulate their own identity toward a semblance of their customer's? In many ways, Delia nails it. Though her

description of the motive force that drives this process of identification is not fine-grained, Delia tells something important about the reason workers would want to strive to be “more.” Describing the Happy Homes clientele as *higher*, Delia positions Happy Homes associates as *lower*. As we know, the typical Happy Homes associate first admires the typical Happy Homes consumer on the basis of that customer’s membership in an upper economic class (a membership which gives them the freedom to consume the branded product in the way the associate would like to do but can’t). But when associates use their customer’s economic status as a marker of various other admirable qualities, as they are wont to do, the territory on which a worker would feel esteem becomes greatly expanded, as does the potential ground on which the worker can perceive his own inferiority. On one hand, this seems to promise to exacerbate the workers’ status anxiety – after all, the cache of what the worker doesn’t have, and his customer does, is duly expanded. On the other hand, it offers a technique of amelioration.

As Delia says, fraternizing with these guests can change ‘who you are’ and it follows that the fraternizing associate, by virtue of that fraternization, becomes more like the customer he admires. The first motive force behind a worker’s willing re-identification comes from the class anxiety that finds cause for daily re-stimulation in the person of the high-class Happy Homes guest. But the very thing that would expand that class anxiety – the expanded realm of symbolic capital that the worker sees in, but also

projects onto the customer – can offer the worker who is daily faced with (the embodied and practical form of) the social relations of class inequality a way to mediate the potential for symbolic violence and negative self-feeling. For it is onto this universe of the customer’s symbolic capital that the Happy Homes worker can project his own desire for ‘class place’ (Beattie 2003), and attempt to satisfy that desire by identifying with the customer on symbolic grounds. As a classed process and a process of constructing class, the Happy Homes front-line worker’s on-the-job project of self-making recuperates relations of social and economic inequality, remakes them, indeed, also obscures them, in the attempt to redress personal status insecurities.

Writ large, the need for Happy Homes workers’ identity labor is conditioned by the broadly instituted social relations of class and gender inequality that inscribe the differential allotment of economic, social, political, and cultural resources. Prior to her employ, the Happy Homes worker’s brand literacy, combined with her brand admiration (if not often brand lust) has her primed for the task of identity labor. Within the bounds of the Happy Homes workplace, the condition that causes the need for the worker’s re-identification is the worker’s daily interaction with his economic and social betters, as embodied in and represented by the person of the typical Happy Homes customer. Inside the dynamics of the Happy Homes labor process, the condition that causes a front-line worker’s need for re-identification – interaction with economic and social betters – becomes also the vehicle for its accomplishment; for it is in this practice of interactive

labor that the worker finds purchase for rewriting her own sense of classed and gendered identity.

Contextualized within, and provoked by, the relations of work at Happy Homes, this dynamic of self-making – which is both a dynamic of the Happy Homes front-line labor process and a dynamic of the front-line laborer’s subjectivity – is captured in and played out through the worker’s performance of identity-labor. This form of identity labor is both inter-subjective, as it occurs in interaction with the Happy Homes guest, and intra-subjective, as it occurs as part of the worker’s on-going evaluation of her own classed and gendered worth. But, while self-making, and the insecurities that can direct it, are often thought of in terms of a personal-social process, here at Happy Homes, where self-making and its motives form a critical force of front-line retail production, the process of making a self is likewise the process of making a wage. The Happy Homes associate is, thus, driven to remake the self for very personal reasons that are produced, not accidentally, but as part and parcel of the front-line retail labor process. The process of individual self-making that Happy Homes associates engage, what I am calling here “identity labor,” is not only *linked to* the organizational process of “making up” the kind of retail labor force that Happy Homes management desires, it is *motivated by* while also being *constituent of* the required labor that these workers perform.

As Delia illustrates, the admiration that the Happy Homes front-line worker feels for his customer is significant, and at times protean. In some cases, workers appear to be

projecting their own fears and desires onto the high-class customer. For instance, the associate who imagined his customers as well-traveled talks a lot about his own desire to travel, a desire thwarted by his low income and his unforgiving Happy Homes schedule (remember, the majority of Happy Homes workers do not get paid vacation). But this has also to do with the ways in which specific customers signify their own distinction, for instance, some Happy Homes customers talk a lot about their travels, while others can talk about their homes, the schools their children attend, or their leisure activities. In this way, the “interior design” of worker subjectivity interacts with the self-presentation of customers, their “curb-appeal,” to modify the nature of the worker’s projections onto the Happy Homes customer, and inform the imaginations the worker constructs of the Happy Homes customer’s life.

Yet, the newbie who expresses intense admiration for the Happy Homes guest, will, with time on the job, tend to speak of his guest with a greater sangfroid. But where we originally took this to mean the worker’s admiration was tempered by time on the job, this analysis should suggest a slightly different interpretation. Time on the front-lines of the Happy Homes job may not so much temper the worker’s *admiration* for his guest as allow the worker a way to temper the *class anxiety* fueling that admiration.

The Happy Homes worker who converses sociably with the up-class guest, creates a friendly rapport, and thus, enjoys a sense of class parity and can identify with that guest – much in the way Delia does. The front-line worker’s class anxiety excites

this desire to locate a sense of parity with the guest and, providing a motive force that can energize the associate's interactive labors, helps him to look for areas of similarity (as well as construct them) by altering his own sensibilities. In this way, the Happy Homes associate can actuate the type of interactions that lead to comity with the Happy Homes guest in the interest of fulfilling an important personal objective while simultaneously fulfilling the interactional and identity labor requirements imposed by his employer.

When this works for the employee, and the upscale Happy Homes customer agrees to participate in a friendly encounter, the associate has grounds to identify with the guest, initiating a revision of his own classed and gendered identity and so enhancing his self-feeling. The worker's original admiration for the high-class customer is then channeled into its own modulation. The modulation of the Happy Homes worker's admiration for the up-class guest comes as a result of an associate being motivated by this admiration to repeat the experience of kinship with the upscale customer, time and again. Consequently, the "tempering" of admiration that we hear in the voices of tenured associates reflects their *identification* with the guest, an identification that is made possible in and through the friendly interactions with customers that are a fundamental requirement of the associate's front-line retail job, and that induces a level of positive self-feeling in the worker adequate to temper his class anxiety. In this sense, the class identity that the shopper-lite yearns to have is the identification that the Happy Homes employee learns to produce.

In a story that harks back to what we know of the enthusiastic (if also sometimes a bit awe-struck) disposition of Happy Homes shopper-lites toward the brand and its consumers, Delia shows us how the experience of doing the Happy Homes job can put distance between the worker and the insecurities the brand and its up-class significations tend to stimulate. Talking about the ease she now feels in her interactions with the Happy Homes guests, Delia recalls an incident that occurred at the time of her initial group interview and, careful to distance herself from a shopper-lite's position of class anxious awe, describes the insecurities of her fellow Happy Homes applicant in a way that places herself as comfortably removed from the type of intimidation her co-applicant so clearly experienced:

It was funny because one of the girls that did not get hired, we actually met in the hall before our interview on that Saturday morn, and we were talking and, cause she was the only other girl standing around, and I said, "oh are you here for the Happy Homes interview?" and she said like, yeah, she said she was getting ready that morning and her boyfriend said, 'well, why are you getting dressed up?' And she said, 'well I'm going for the interview at Happy Homes' and he was like, 'but, yeah, why would you get dressed up for that?' and she's like, 'well, it's *Happy Homes*, and it's at the *Aristocade!*' And, and...she was like "I never, I never even thought they'd want me for an interview here." So she was clearly of the mindset that Happy Homes is way up here, it's a, you know, unreachable thing for her, and in my world, I think Happy Homes is very nice, but it's, it's not, like I don't think of it as above me...but for her it was like, she couldn't even believe that she was sitting in Happy Homes, like talking to a manager, like getting an audience with the queen, and I was like, 'Oh, okay, you know, interesting that you'...I mean, but I understand...so, I think that it's, and I think that you're, yeah, you're thrown in with these people that are just a little bit more...you're just thrown into being around

people that are a little bit more...worldly...and that can be intimidating at first.

Delia shows us how, for the shopper-lite-become-employee, “the view from here” -- where “here” is the established role of Happy Homes associate -- can be a great deal different than the view one had while in the process of getting (or trying to get) the Happy Homes job. Though we can imagine from Delia’s portrayal that she was, at the time of initial interview, more at ease than her nervous co-applicant, her comments elsewhere in the interview establish that she too suffered from that initial class-based type of ‘brand intimidation’:

It (applying for the job) was kind of a little bit nerve racking...yeah, yeah, because I didn’t know, you know, I’d never shopped in that store, I had been to the Aristocade maybe once...because I wasn’t making *that much money*, although those were the type of stores that I’d like to shop I haven’t been in a financial place to shop those kind of stores...and I hate walking around the mall and like “Oh, I love that, can’t buy it...love that, can’t buy it.” It’s painful...I’m not a looker, like if I find something I want, I want to be able to purchase it, so it was awful, so I was more like at Target buying stuff, so it was a little nerve racking...but I did it, I got dressed up and went in and asked to speak to a manager.

Asked about her initial job inquiry at Happy Homes, Delia describes being made uncomfortable by the prestigious character of the Aristocade and the Aristocade stores and, much like her co-applicant, Delia took pains to get “dressed up” for her entrance into the Happy Homes store. Yet, when Delia reflects on the anxious applicant who joined her group interview, she does not identify with her fellow prospective employee. In fact, Delia seems intent to signal her difference from the insecure Happy Homes wannabe,

remarking that this applicant was “clearly of the mindset that Happy Homes is way up here” as if “an unreachable thing,” while she, Delia, does not think of Happy Homes as above her station. Indeed, if we are looking for Delia’s identification, it seems to lie with the “more worldly people” who inhabit the Happy Homes universe and, because of their ‘worldliness’ have the power to intimidate. And, again, Delia’s code is easily read: “worldly” means high status and high class, and the people Delia refers to are the high status, high-class clientele who frequent the Happy Homes store.

At one time, these ‘worldly’ people might have had the power to intimidate the likes of Delia, but with the advantage of time on the Happy Homes job, and the many interactions with upscale guests that this time brings, Delia’s identification has shifted. Her mention of her clientele’s ‘worldliness’ tells us Delia’s admiration for that clientele is still in place, however, it is tempered by her identification with that clientele – an identification that brings Delia a measure of symbolic status and an enhancement of self-image. As Delia and the other associates mentioned here illustrate, the prize the associate can gain by doing the interactive *and* intra-psychic work of Happy Homes identity labor, and doing it well, is a great deal more valuable than receiving workplace approval from management. The valuable, and very personal, prize that the associate receives is a reformed identity of a type that will gain her some relief from the class insecurities which, nonetheless, will continue to daily energize her work on the Happy Homes floor.

As we have seen, the type of clientele affects the type of gratification the Happy Homes worker receives, and the upper class status of the clientele is an important piece in the worker's own status puzzle. The work of sociability that the Happy Homes associate is paid to do is also a venue for that worker's identity labor and a vehicle for the worker to realize positive self-feeling by revising her own sense of her class and gender status. In this way, the sense of accomplishment that Happy Homes workers report feeling when they successfully create *bonhomie* with customers reflects the accomplishment not only of interactional good will, but also of improved worker identity.

To produce this positive self-feeling and improved sense of self, the front-line Happy Homes worker must cross lines of class, and must do so successfully enough that an ambiance of kinship is created between lower-class retail clerk and higher-class retail customer. But crossing lines of class is never easy, especially for the person in the lower position, and while this challenge of crossing boundaries of class to produce amity and social intimacy – a challenge that constitutes the daily job of the Happy Homes front-line worker – may be the vehicle of the worker's symbolic status gains, it is also the site of status dangers. In each customer encounter, the front-line Happy Homes retail worker faces the risk of rebuff, put-down, snubbing, and humiliation, and is thus exposed to the on-going threat of class-based symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1987).

While we have seen how Happy Homes retail floor workers produce and consume symbolic status in the process of doing their interactive retail work, this is not a seamless

process. How then, in the face of customers' symbolic violence, do Happy Homes associates maintain the sense of symbolic status otherwise gained from the job? The following chapters take up this question, examining the contradictions of the front-line Happy Homes labor process, and looking at the various ways in which Happy Homes floor workers navigate, negotiate, and sometimes resist the conditions of their work.

CHAPTER 6

WORKER STRATEGIES WITH CUSTOMERS

If front-line workers' class anxieties can be appeased in the Happy Homes job, they can also be incited. Happy Homes management mobilizes workers' class anxieties, encouraging front-line workers to identify with the class and gender entailments of the brand. For their part, Happy Homes associates who take on their employer's framework will actively deploy and redress this class anxiety in the process of performing their interactive front-line labor. Creating bonhomie with the up-class guest, the Happy Homes worker experiences an enhanced sense of status simultaneous with the productive execution of her front-line services. In this way, the associate produces and consumes symbolic status in the practice of doing her work.

Yet, even as the front-line Happy Homes worker can produce symbolic status in the process of working, she does so from a place of subordination imposed simultaneously by her work role and her class station. The Happy Homes associate is, after all, a low-level retail worker and a member of the low to lower-middle classes, and the job that provides her symbolic status likewise means her subordination to Happy Homes management and Happy Homes customers. Thus, the worker's gains in symbolic status are vulnerable to challenge and negation from two different directions, and the parties that enable her status gain -- management and customers -- are also positioned to disable it.

Front-line Happy Homes workers, faced with these contradictions, devise strategies to resist the status challenges they receive from customers and managers. In this chapter I address front-line workers' strategies with customers, beginning with an examination of the ways in which status vulnerability is built into the structure of the associate position. From there I move to a discussion of workers' responses to their status vulnerability and, drawing on field and interview data, propose that workers use three types of strategies to resist status assaults from Happy Homes customers. These strategies range on a continuum from passive to active resistance, and include workers' intra-psychic redefinition of the interactive situation, worker resistance by interactive negotiation, and explicit opposition to customers. I conclude the chapter with a closer look at Happy Homes workers' gendered responses to labor process contradictions, examining resistance in the Happy Homes workplace in both its feminized and masculinized forms.

STATUS VULNERABILITY

The smooth operation of the Happy Homes retail labor process is linked to the ways in which front-line workers find gratification in their job and, as we've seen, the primary gratification these front-line workers receive comes in the form of symbolic status they generate through their interactions with customers. But this symbolic status relies on the ability of the worker to successfully cross class lines and produce amity with the high-class customer, and crossing lines of class can be treacherous for the person in

the lower position. Attempts at upward “class crossing” raise dangers of dismissal and snubbing, and, as work scholars have demonstrated, the lower class person who tries to court his betters can run significant risk to her own sense of dignity, legitimacy and worth (Romero 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Paules 1996; Rollins 1985). These risks of class-crossing inhere in a variety of low-level occupations, from domestic service work where they are often also racialized (Romero 1992; Rollins 1985), to child-care work (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; MacDonald 1996), and food service work (Paules 1996). Affronts to dignity in work, whether from class-crossing or other sources, can have significant negative effects on workers (Hodson 2001), and indeed, as research on homeless scavengers (Gowan 2006) has shown us, even workers at the very lowest levels of the occupational scale (those attached to the underground economy) put significant value on work dignity, even as they encounter protracted, chronic, and structural embedded patterns of work-related humiliation.

“Class crossing” is the daily duty of the Happy Homes associate. Crossing boundaries of class to produce social intimacy with class betters is both the mainstay of the front-line Happy Homes worker’s labors and, as the basis of his positive self-feeling, the foundation for his consent to the job. As it is, even in retail contexts where the class gap between workers and customers is relatively narrow, front-line retail clerks are exposed to a certain amount of interactional risk. Not all shoppers receive a retail clerk’s overtures gladly, and working the retail front lines means dealing with customers who

reject a clerk's friendly greetings and offers of help. But, at Happy Homes, where workers and customers occupy such distinctly different class ranks, the front-line retail worker is exposed not just to rejection per se, but to rejection by his class superiors.

As a dominant force shaping the social relations between front-line Happy Homes workers and their guests, the worker's subordination by class has the potential to color any rejection the Happy Homes clerk receives – in other words, the worker's class subordination in relation to his customer means that his vulnerability to rejection is likewise a vulnerability to symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1987). Accordingly, the situation of the Happy Homes worker reflects the claim that the primary penalty of low status is the challenge to a person's sense of self-respect (de Botton 2004).

Located in the class gap that separates Happy Homes worker from the Happy Homes customer, the refusal of a store guest to engage an associate's overtures can, for the associate, quickly turn into an experience of class snubbing. Yet, it is in the very nature of her job that the Happy Homes clerk who seeks amity with her customer will expose herself regularly to this potential for class-based rebuffs -- rebuffs that, in turn, have the power to animate her class anxieties and negate her symbolic status gains. Countless times each shift, the Happy Homes floor worker must approach upscale shoppers and try to initiate a type of interpersonal exchange marked by tones of parity and friendship, thus repeatedly leaving herself open to the threat of symbolic violence. How do front-line Happy Homes workers handle this risk? What do they do when their

upscale customers pull class rank, thus challenging the associate's claim to symbolic status?

The Structural Context of Workers' Status Vulnerability

With her typical guest a member of the upward classes, the Happy Homes associate who works the floor must daily navigate the class gap as she tackles the project of gaining entrée to conversation with her upscale guests and inviting them to engage in friendly interchange. Of course, by definition, the associate who approaches and greets the incoming upscale customer has a legitimate form of entrée on the basis of her role as front-line retail service worker. In other words, most shoppers expect that retail clerks will approach them with some sort of greeting and an offer of assistance.

The Happy Homes associate, then, would enjoy social permission to approach her class betters and initiate an exchange *if* doing so with the deference and subservience of the retail clerk. Though expected to maintain a modicum of sociability, the low-level retail clerk inhabits a subservient position vis-à-vis her customer, and her main job is to serve the customer's shopping needs, acting strictly in response to the customer's direction. A worker who enacts the low-level clerk role is expected to maintain her deference by displaying surface-level niceties and accommodating shoppers' requests, without seeking a deeper level of interpersonal engagement with the customer. As many shoppers can attest from their experience at big box retailers, discount warehouses, and

even department stores, the behavior of the low-level retail clerk can be adequately deferent while also being robotic. Withdrawing one's engagement and affect from a job, or "going into robot," can serve as a coping strategy for service workers overwhelmed by emotional labor demands (Hochschild 1987), work routinization and boredom (Leidner 1993) and general job stress (MacDonald and Sirianni 1996), and when practiced by low level service personnel in mass- and discount-retailing, does not necessarily offend the prevailing workplace norms.

Even a low level clerk who does not "go into robot" can fulfill her role by being significantly less engaged with the customer than the Happy Homes hosting role requires. The role of deferent low-level clerk also assumes the worker is less directive in the service encounter – the low level clerk is not expected to pro-actively explore and interpret the customer's needs, thus is not likely to up-sell, suggest "add-ons" (merchandise related to a customer's purchase) or otherwise interpolate a shopper's choices. At Happy Homes, workers are supposed to be proactive in their encounters with customers, interpreting the customer's range of 'needs' for the brand merchandise, and actively up-selling and pushing 'add-ons.' For example, Happy Homes workers are expected to suggest complementary pillows and throws to a customer buying a sofa, or coordinating towels to a customer buying bedding.

Arguably, the more typical role of low-level retail clerk might actually provide the associate some protection from upper class acts of symbolic violence. The Happy

Homes worker who acts the front-line retail clerk, with the attendant attitude of deference and subservience, can also practice 'role-distancing' (Goffman [1961] 2005), and would thus have the option of framing customer affronts as behaviors directed toward her occupational role and not her person. 'Role-distancing' can serve workers in a variety of settings, and for a variety of purposes. For instance, as Kunda (1992) demonstrates, technical workers use role-distancing playfully such that the performance ultimately confirms the validity of their employee role. For the front-line Happy Homes worker who can accomplish role distancing, playing the 'retail clerk' would be a way to disarm the power of the high-class customers to negatively affect her sense of self.

Yet, among the options a front-line Happy Homes worker might use to protect her sense of self, acting the low level clerk is the least viable. On one hand, her work superiors insist she do otherwise. Happy Homes management, defining the front-line worker's role as that of the high-class host, scripts front-line interaction in a way that forestalls the behaviors of a deferent, low-level service worker. When Happy Homes managers describe the behavior they want to see on their retail front lines, what they picture is a far cry from the servile stance of the low-level clerk, as they often direct front line staff to approach the guest under the presumption of social intimacy. Indeed, in the words of one manager, associates are to greet the high-class guest as if approaching their own kith and kin:

When you come into Happy Homes you should feel a very different energy. There should be a very friendly note. I've said it, I've said it a million times, and I use that kind of spiel when I'm interviewing associates, potential candidates to work at the store, it should feel like a very different energy when you come in the store, it's exciting to be here, "I'm happy you're here!" It should feel like family, you know, it should be that atmosphere, "oh my gosh, come on in, it looks like you've got helpers today," you know if they've got some kids with them...or, they've got bags with them, "oh my gosh, it looks like you're on a shopping spree, how's it going? Let me help you with those bags." It's like we almost embrace them. It should be wonderful, energetic, buoyant...you know, it's just very, well, genuine...it's just like welcoming friends in your home.

Whether Happy Homes managers want their clerks to approach the upscale customer as they would approach an honored guest, a friend or, as this manager seems to be suggesting, a member of the family, Happy Homes management as a whole clearly *does not* want the associate gaining entrée with the guest along the conventional lines of access allowed the retail clerk.

In management's eyes, the front-line Happy Homes associate should approach his class betters with a comportment befitting a relationship of social closeness and, leaving most vestiges of service deference behind, do front-line retail labor as the enactment of social bonds that translate to relationships of parity. Denied the protective distance of the low level clerk who, if the situation requires, can go "into robot" and brush off a customer's affront as an affront to the occupational role and not his person, the Happy Homes front-line worker is foisted into a presumption of social closeness with the high-class guest that the guest may not, by any particular logic, share. And, indeed, high-class guests can take the Happy Homes associate's presumption of social closeness as an

invitation to aggressively re-assert the lines of social distinction, and thus distance, often enacting symbolic violence in the process. For instance, upscale guests can rebuff an associate's friendly overtures and, using both body language and speech, communicate their perception of the Happy Homes employee as a rank inferior. In this context, the class anxious worker attempting to woo the high-class customer into a relationship of parity can be laid open by a customer's refusal as if to an assault on his own social worth. In other words, this is a recipe for front-line worker status vulnerability.

By management directive, the front-line Happy Homes worker is denied a protective distance from his class superiors that make up the majority of customer traffic. But if the worker is denied this protective stance by management directive, he is also denied it by virtue of the personal objectives he brings to the job. Happy Homes clerks are motivated in their work by class anxieties as those are stimulated by the brand meanings, on the one hand, and by the exclusive social world of brand consumers, on the other. The worker's personal objective in his job is to realize a gain in symbolic status that would redress these class anxieties. And it is precisely in the practice of front-line interactive work as a form of friendly hospitality marked by the *absence* of social distance that the worker's personal objectives could be met. It follows that front-line workers would eschew the option of performing their Happy Homes job as retail clerking with as much, if not more, conviction than do their managers.

As our associate Greta illustrates when she denounces the title of clerk, Happy Homes workers insist their work is “much more” than clerking and, referring to themselves variously as “sales associates,” “brand representatives,” “brand ambassadors,” or “design assistants,” tend to locate their social position closer to that of their high-class customer than to the ranks of a front-line retail labor force. Accordingly, the characteristics that mark retail clerking can be anathema to the front-line Happy Homes worker, in evidence with the adamant distinctions Happy Homes associates draw between their job and retail jobs in general. For example, associates clearly mark these lines of difference with claims like “if I had to work at a place like Target, I’d shoot myself” or “I’d rather die than work at a department store.” For most associates, the option of performing the role of subservient front-line clerk -- while a safer form of entrée to the high-class customer -- is taken off the board before it can be considered. And, conceivably, associates eschew this option less because Happy Homes management has closed off the avenue than that such a strategy would directly countervail their identity-level need for status enhancement.

Granted, acting the high-class host rather than the low level clerk exempts the front-line Happy Homes worker from some of the worse indignities of the front-line service role. The associate, for instance, does not automatically have to display the servility and deference so often required of the service proletariat, and thus does not, as a rule, endure that particular brand of humiliation. But if doing his Happy Homes retail

work as high class hosting saves the employee the indignities otherwise packaged in his occupational role, it does so at the cost of increasing his vulnerability to class-based rejection.

Later in this chapter, I draw on field and interview data to illustrate the variety of ways in which this class-based rejection plays out in interactions between Happy Homes workers and their customers, exploring workers' different responses to this rejection. But, as front-line Happy Homes workers tell it, and as I myself experienced while working the floor, class-based rejection is a regular feature of the front-line Happy Homes job.

Though, as we have seen, Happy Homes sales associates point to interactions with guests as one of the best parts of their job, thus indicating that, overall, they are successful enough in their class-crossing efforts, not all upscale customers respond positively to the front-line worker's attempts at co-equality. Inevitably, the front-line worker will come across the Happy Homes guest who rejects her friendly overtures.

In the best case, rejection of this sort takes a passive form, for instance, a customer may try to avoid eye contact with the associate, walk away when the associate approaches them, or dismiss the front-line worker's invitation to chat by giving a 'conversation ender,' such as "I'm just looking," or "I'm fine." Notwithstanding the fact that some associates will express indignation over this type of passive dismissal (as with

our associate earlier, who took offense when the restaurant goers refused his efforts at conversation), Happy Homes associates tend to take this type of rejection in stride, interpreting it to mean simply that the guest wants to be left on her own. Associates can think themselves savvy on this count, able to read a customer's cues. As one front-line Happy Homes worker put it, "when you're working in retail you catch on when guests want you to leave them alone, you know, they come in, they see you looking at them but they look away. So I can usually tell when someone wants to be left alone."

The passive rebuff is a relatively benign, if also fairly common, form of rejection the associate will face when working the Happy Homes floor. But customer rejection of an associate's overtures toward friendly parity can also be quite active, as when a customer engages the associate while clearly signaling social distance and demarcating lines of social inequality. Whether a customer's snubbing is meant to signal their class superiority, and thus their social distance from the Happy Homes associate, or is simply an artifact of their mood, or quirk of their personality, when the Happy Homes guest engages the associate but gives the cold shoulder, the worker is likely to take it as a status assault.

Because of their class anxieties, Happy Homes front-line workers are poised to interpret customer rejection as class-based symbolic violence, thus making their hold on symbolic status *more* vulnerable than it might otherwise be. The class anxieties that motivate these retail workers to produce and consume status in the practice of their work

also make the worker much more sensitive to real or imagined status insult. In this way, the anxieties that drive a worker to try to gain symbolic status also make that status more difficult to sustain. Among other things, this means the worker must constantly engage the project of status repair and, since his main source of symbolic status is interaction with high-class Happy Homes guests, the worker thus regenerates his commitment, and consent, to the demands of his paid interactive labor.

Symbolic Violence on the Happy Homes Floor

In my interviews with Happy Homes associates, I heard many stories of “stuck up,” “snobby,” and “high-horse” guests who treated associates as “dirt,” “the help,” and their “servants.” In fact, of the many questions I asked associates, the query about difficult customers got one the most animated responses, and seemed to open a floodgate on tales of the distress workers experience when snubbed by high-class guests.

In one such story, the associate, Lila relayed an encounter she had with a high-class shopper who, as Lila saw it, pulled class rank by treating her as “the help.” In this story, Lila illustrates how Happy Homes workers feel about high-class customers who refuse to treat them as equals, revealing both the status-level and affect-level vulnerability of the Happy Homes associate in the face of those who act her class betters:

There are guests who look down on you. That’s what I hate. They try to make you feel like dirt. I just had a guest like that Tuesday, she ended up

buying from me, but, she was *haughty*, her nose way up in the air... here's how you know, they say "go get me this," "I saw so and so, pick me out a pillow to go there" not "would you please." I was so nice to her, I tried to find out if she had kids or something, what design concept she had. I thought if I could get a sense of where she was going (trails off). But she wouldn't even answer. It was "go get me this" and "go get me that" like I was 'the help.' When people speak to me like that, they think they're better than me, that's what it is. I don't know, to me it's just part of common courtesy, but those are the people that tell you what to do (...) that's when you know that they look down on you. (This guest) was really horrible... I was in tears.

From my own experience working the Happy Homes front lines, Lila's story has a familiar ring. Among the many encounters of this sort that I had while working at Happy Homes, one incident serves particularly illustrative of the front-line worker's vulnerability to class-based offense. Fairly early in my Happy Homes tenure, and while I was working the front lobby, I came upon a group of three shoppers entering the store – a very elegantly dressed 30-something woman, accompanied by a pre-teen girl and another adult woman whose attire, next to that of her companions, seemed quite plain (I later learned from the plainly dressed woman that she was the elegant woman's paid assistant). My interchange with these guests helped teach me the grammar of Happy Homes symbolic violence.

The elegant woman began by dismissing my friendly greeting, responding to my "Welcome, how are you today?" with the clipped announcement that they were shopping for her daughter (the pre-teen she had in tow) followed by the no-nonsense instruction that I was to "get her (the daughter) whatever she wants." Similar to the guest Lila

describes, this young girl and her mother refused to converse, instead issuing a series of orders that can be roughly summarized as “get me this” and “get me that.”

In their almost hour-long shopping excursion, I raced to keep up with the daughter as she ran from one part of the store to the other, rapidly pointing to item after item, with orders like “get me this in blue” or “bring me two of those.” Like Lila, I attempted to fill out the picture of the customer’s needs by asking questions, however, neither the mother nor daughter would respond directly, often ignoring me completely, at other times responding dismissively. In an especially revealing moment, both mother and daughter responded to my query in a way that seemed meant to establish their social superiority and warn that I was overstepping my social place. While the daughter picked out bedding, I asked after her bedroom’s color scheme. In return I got one of those looks reserved for persons who ask impossibly stupid questions, and, with unmasked disdain, the daughter shot back: “I have *several* bedrooms.” For her part, the mother gave me a firm chastisement: “We really don’t care to share with you the details of our home.”

Comments like the latter impose social distance, asserting a rank order and placing obdurate limits on possibilities for class crossing. Admittedly, this was an especially egregious case of a customer pulling class rank, but by tone, if not also effect, it is representative of the way in which some upscale Happy Homes customers draw strict lines of class distinction between themselves and the Happy Homes front-line worker.

Most commonly, customer rejection takes a less acerbic tone, and a customer will, for instance, refuse to offer a friendly response to the Happy Homes worker's sociable overtures, give abrupt or impatient answers to the worker's questions (these can be questions about the customer's design concept, or more sociable questions about the customer's lifestyle, or both), or address the worker as servant rather than peer (for example, by issuing orders instead of posing polite requests). Yet, while not a daily event, heavier handed snubbing occurs with some regularity, and the Happy Homes front-line worker can expect, on average, to encounter this kind of pronounced snobbishness about once a month.

The Happy Homes floor worker is not barraged by snobbish customers -- many customers are receptive to an associate's overtures of friendly interchange -- but associates do have regular interactions with upscale guests who assert superiority over the worker. In my time at Happy Homes, I experienced at least one incident of snubbing per shift, and my observations of co-workers suggest that this is the norm. This observation finds support in the interview data, as many of the associates who participated in this research reported 'snubbing' as a daily part of their job experience. Estimating the Happy Homes floor worker encounters, on average, about 5 customers per hour, and assuming a five-hour shift, one in every 25 customers plays the privilege card.

The mildest possible form of customer rejection -- that is, when a customer avoids interaction with the Happy Homes clerk altogether -- is the most common, happening

several times a shift. But, as mentioned earlier, Happy Homes workers tend to interpret this as passive avoidance and not as a class-based assault on their status. On the other hand, when snubbing is active, occurring as part of the customer's interaction with the associate, the Happy Homes worker is apt to see a class-based assault. Describing the customer snubbing she receives as part of her job, the associate, Miranda, does a good job summing up the class-based meanings that front-line workers read into their customers' rude behaviors:

I hate it when that happens, I mean, I know it's part of the job, but I don't like it, you know. And you know what it is? It's the "I'm-better-than-you-because-I-have-a-lot-of-money" attitude. If you boil it down, that's what it is every time.

With class snubbing a daily occurrence on this retail floor, front-line workers who wish to subdue their class anxieties and construct symbolic status through their work must devise strategies to cope with, if not also, diffuse the potential for class-based insult.

Happy Homes management is not much help in this project. While managers offer associates multiple techniques for *enacting* friendly hospitality with their high-class guest, they rarely acknowledge how badly things can go for the associate when efforts at crossing the class divide fail, and are more or less mute on the question of what to do when the techniques of hospitality don't work. Happy Homes associates are, then, left on their own to figure out just how to manage the inevitable moment when the high-class

customer rejects an invitation to parity and actively imposes an order of social hierarchy, placing the associate in the down-class position.

Happy Homes associates devise, and actively deploy, a diverse range of strategies to help safeguard their symbolic status gains and protect against the customer's use of symbolic violence. Of course, among workers' strategies of self-protection, there are those that support management priorities and those that run counter to those priorities and, as we can guess, those that support the objectives of the Happy Homes managers get much easier play than those that counteract managers' goals.

WORKER STRATEGIES: REDEFINITION

Among those strategies that, if not actively supporting management goals, are at least no worse than neutral in their effect, is one that relies on the worker's ex post facto evaluation of a class snubbing. This is a very common strategy for Happy Homes associates, and these workers often use creative re-evaluation to recuperate a sense of status in the wake of encounters with customers who have pulled class rank. This technique can serve both social uses within the work group, as way for the worker to influence how his co-workers view him, or to comfort and bolster the self-image of a fellow worker, and intra-psychic uses for the individual worker, as a way for the worker to recuperate and maintain positive self-feeling. Put to intra-psychic uses, the associate's act to redefine the situation is a passive strategy for navigating the contradiction between

the structural position of class inferiority and the symbolic position as high-status branded worker.

“Troubled Customers”

Workers’ attempts at re-evaluating bad encounters with customers can take many different forms, however, associates most typically approach the project by assessing customer encounters against a categorical model of guest personality. With this strategy, Happy Homes workers put aside the class-specific provenance of their customers’ behavior in favor of a psychologistic assessment that evaluates a customer’s behavior on a scale of individual mental and emotional health. Reflecting the tendency in broader American culture to individualize and medicalize (or, at least, pop-psychologize) structural processes, the Happy Homes associate counters the sting of a class-based snubbing by putting it down to the customer’s neuroses (I am grateful to Erin Kelly for pointing out this link with broader cultural processes of individualism and medicalization).

The equation for this strategy is fairly simple. Customers who reject the worker’s invitation to parity can thus be categorized as “troubled” while those who agree to a tone of social closeness can be seen as “well-balanced.” For instance, Sheila, an Happy Homes associate for a little over three years, analyzes the problem of what she dubs the

“pompous guest” by the rule that the guest’s demeaning treatment of her is really a sign of “something wrong with them”:

Then there are the pompous guests. Some of them treat you like you’re their barista or server or whatever and it carries this message like a put down cause they’re passing judgment on who you are and what you are and what you’ve done...you can feel it. Not everybody’s like that, and I will say there’s a very little percentage of visits, but absolutely...there is that edge. And I’ve just decided that a lot of these are women that, um, I think it’s about what’s wrong with them, as opposed to...well, they must treat everyone like that I guess. So I think there’s definitely something wrong with them, I mean, they’re wrong in the head somewhere.

By categorizing pompous guests as persons who have something wrong with them, Sheila buries the class content of the guest’s affront under a plank of mental illness (albeit, mental illness writ loosely in terms of something “wrong in the head somewhere”). As Sheila reasons, there is something wrong with the guests who mistreat her, the reason they mistreat her is because there is something wrong with them, thus they must “treat everyone” the way they treated her. Using this logic, Sheila can discredit the guest’s act of symbolic violence by categorizing it as a sign of their psychological failings. She can also de-personalize the bad treatment she’s received, thereby minimizing the damage the guest’s symbolic violence could incur to her own sense of social worth and status. Moreover, by refashioning the entitled behaviors of upper class members into psychological flaws, Sheila can also place herself in a superior position vis-à-vis these members of the upper classes on a scale of mental health. Yet, while this psychologistic explanation may help Sheila recuperate a positive sense of self, it does

little to change the situation, or protect her from future vulnerability. By framing the guest's symbolic enactment of class superiority (which is likewise the symbolic reproduction of social inequality) at the level of individual psychology, Sheila also tacitly lends her support to the unequal social order in which class entitlements are embedded. That is to say, by pathologizing the acts of symbolic violence that come when upper class customers do their own version of "distinction work" (Hanser 2008), Sheila effectively removes the possibility to critique or challenge class-based inequality.

Sheila also genders the class content of the guest's symbolic violence, that is, she feminizes the class content of the guest's affront, and in her categorical re-evaluation, genders "pathology" female. While it is true that most Happy Homes store visitors are women, there are still a good number of men who visit the store, and male visitors also pull class rank with Happy Homes clerks. With over three years tenure, Sheila knows this, making it interesting that her analysis of customer snubbing pertains only to women: "I've just decided that a lot of these are *women* (with something) wrong with them." Yet, by eliminating the male visitor from her analysis, seeing pathology only in the high-class female guests who snub her, Sheila is reflecting her own identity-level claims to symbolic class and gender status. Happy Homes associates engage a project of self-making through identification with the subset of high-class guests who allow a tone of peership, producing enhancements to self-feeling in terms of class *and* gender identity. It would make sense that the high-class customer able to pose the most daunting challenge to a

female associate's symbolic status gains would be her high-class female customer (the upscale female guest who snobs the low-level female associate puts a challenge to the associate's combined class and gender status). Given this, it makes sense that Sheila would focus on symbolic violence committed by female guests. Furthermore, associates may grant male guests more permission to assert authority (class-based or otherwise) than they do the female guest. While high-class female guests who enact symbolic violence against a clerk may be perceived as offending gendered precepts of femininity, male guests' enactment of similar symbolic violence may be perceived as acting consistent with gendered precepts of masculinity.

The strategy of pathologizing customers who challenge associates' sense of status is remarkably widespread through the front-line ranks. Happy Homes associates often talk about customers in terms of these two groups; the sane and healthy ones who treat associates like peers; and the troubled ones who refuse to treat the clerk as their equal. Not all associates are as diplomatic as Sheila, with some describing the snooty Happy Homes guests as "warped" and "sick."

The associate Batia, at Happy Homes for almost two years, has come to recognize a few of the more pretentious guests who frequent the Aristocade store, and, having decided that these guests are "sick," shares her own theory about the psychological problems that lie behind the guest's standoffish ways:

There's a couple, couple very standoffish ones...one in particular, her name's Mrs. Smith. Everybody knows her, she returns all the time, always orders you around. And then there's an older lady that comes in there, and I've come up behind her and asked her how she is...she'll turn around and, be like, "oh, hi, it's you" like I don't have a right to come up and speak to her. Another one, she'll buy a thousand dollars worth of stuff, and just boss you around the whole time, literally tell you to carry her bags to the car. Sick...sick! She wants me to spend a lot of time helping her, but...she's sick. There's something wrong with her. There's something wrong with all of them that act like that. I really think they're sick. And you know what I think? I think it's just one of those things that that's how they feed their sick need for attention.

To explain customers' acts of symbolic violence, Batia advances the theory that customers pull class rank as a way of getting attention, emphasizing that the customer's desire for attention stems from a neurotic -- or "sick" -- need.

In light of this theory, it is interesting to note that the customer behaviors Batia describes actually seem, by her own telling, to *minimize* the attention these guests receive from Happy Homes associates. Arguably, the customer who responds to Batia's greeting with a dismissive "oh, hi, it's you" is rejecting attention more than she is seeking it. But Batia may still have a point. As we've seen, the kind of symbolic status Happy Homes workers gain through their interactions with high-class customers retains a perpetual vulnerability to challenge and negation by upscale guests who refuse to accept workers as peers. In that these customers can degrade the associate's sense of status, and thus sense of self, they are a threat. And the class-anxious Happy Homes worker's attention is thus likely to be riveted by the guest who, behaving in the way Batia describes, poses this level of threat to her self-feeling. We could say, then, that Batia is half-right. It is not

obvious that the guest behaviors Batia describes are intended as a way to get attention, and it might be more accurate to propose that these guests are motivated by a desire to assert their social superiority. Still, it is very possible that these behaviors do *grab* the attention of class-anxious Happy Homes workers precisely because they qualify as a threat to positive worker identity.

Along with Sheila, Batia assigns the customers who would snub her to a category of “sick” persons, thus protecting herself from the assault to her symbolic status that is otherwise imminent in these types of encounters. But, also like Sheila, Batia formulates a psychologistic explanation that, while facilitating her ex post facto recuperation of positive self-feeling, does not empower her to influence future encounters with snobby guests in a way that might serve her own interests. Again, when a Happy Homes associate deploys this type of interpretative framework, casting the guest’s symbolic enactment of class superiority as a matter of individual psychology, she does little to challenge the unequal distribution of social entitlement that is the source of her own status vulnerability.

In another example of psychological categorization, Natalie, a sales associate on the job for nearly four years, echoes Batia’s sentiment, if putting the same point in a slightly more politic way. Talking about her experiences with customers who carry a lofty attitude, Natalie suggests that the cause of this attitude lies in the fact that these guests are “troubled souls” who carry a chip on their shoulder:

I guess sometimes I still have a problem with guests that come in on their high horse, you know, “god’s gift.” But what I’ve figured out is that they’re troubled souls. I mean, part of it, it’s the chip on the shoulder, they have a chip on their shoulder, and part of it is their attitude towards you being less than what they are. And I deal with that now. Um...I think back when I was new, I was not very good with those people then, and I maybe got a little intimidated...and...maybe didn’t spend as much time with them as I should’ve. But I think that over the years I’m realizing that they’re just very troubled people and that I shouldn’t take it personally. You know, just because they’re troubled doesn’t mean I shouldn’t give them my time.

Natalie has developed an adaptive strategy for dealing with a snobby customer that allows her to depersonalize their demeaning treatment. Much like her compatriots, Natalie psychologizes the customer’s enactment of class entitlement, reducing the class-related meanings of the behavior to an individual personality flaw and, by categorizing these customers as “troubled souls,” is able to disarm the power their acts of symbolic violence might otherwise have to negatively affect her sense of self.

But Natalie also puts her own twist on the ex post facto strategy such that, re-interpreting a customer’s symbolic violence as a problem of their ‘soul,’ she can negate the customer’s claim to superiority while trumping it with a claim of her own. The snobbish customer, as troubled soul, not only loses the power to intimidate (thus the power to challenge Natalie’s symbolic class and gender status gains), but no longer appears fully-abled – after all, trouble at the level of the soul implies a serious, and perhaps irreversible, disability. In comparison to the ‘troubled soul,’ Natalie can imagine herself the moral superior, crafting a position of beneficence from which to abide the

customer's affronts. Thus framed, the high-class customer who refuses to treat Natalie as a peer becomes deserving of Natalie's patience, kindness, if not also her pity. In this way Natalie marks class boundaries as 'moral boundaries' (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Fournier 1992).

Class and racial boundaries often become marked as moral boundaries. Lamont's (2000) study of working class white and African-American men demonstrates how lower status social groups mark class and racial difference on the basis of moral 'capital,' establishing a ground of moral superiority in relation to other more powerful social groups (this also works the other way, and moral boundaries can be used to establish the inferiority of less socially and economically powerful groups). Lamont's study also suggests that lower status groups use moral boundaries as a way to mitigate the pain of social, racial and economic subordination.

In Natalie's case, making a claim to greater moral capital mitigates the discomfort that could result from her class inferior location. But Natalie also commandeers the upper class standard of noblesse oblige (that the snobbish customer fails to practice), and rewrites it for her own purposes. In Natalie's rendering, her charity toward the customer is demanded not on the basis of social and economic superiority (which, in any case, she couldn't claim), but on the basis of a moral superiority that obliges Natalie to treat the snobbish guest with benevolence.

This strategy, by which Happy Homes associates perform an ex post facto critique of the snobbish guest's psyche, seems to have the potential to run at cross purposes with management priorities – that is, a worker who pathologizes the snobbish guest might withdraw the gracious show of hospitality, if only to put distance between himself and a customer he deems to be psychologically “sick,” if not also to protect himself from symbolic violence. Though, indeed, some of the strategies associates use to manage their status vulnerability do end up undermining the goals of Happy Homes management, this appears less the case here. For all the times I heard Happy Homes associates “explain” class snubbing by diagnosing something “wrong” in a customer's psyche, I didn't witness co-workers attempting to “slow down” their hospitality labors in a way attributable to, or consistent with, this rationale, and when associates put distance between themselves and a shopper, it was for reasons other than a belief that the shopper had psychological problems.

It is interesting to look for a minute at customer behavior that causes associates to make an exception to this rule. During my Happy Homes tenure, I learned from co-workers that there were two regular store visitors I should try to avoid. According to my co-workers, each of these two visitors (both women), suffered from mental illness that compelled them to buy and return merchandise. These visitors, each of whom came to the store once a week to make high dollar purchases, came back without fail a few days later to return their purchases. My co-workers told me both women had been doing this

for several years (five years or longer). Working the Happy Homes floor, I had many chances to see these women in action, and agree with my co-workers that this behavior looks like mental illness. Each of these regular customers made large purchases on an almost weekly basis and, to the best of my knowledge, ended up returning every single item they bought. On these grounds, I came to understand why my co-workers warned to avoid interaction with these guests as, after a while, helping them make purchases started to feel both sad and futile. But, it is also worth noting, these women were not known for enacting symbolic violence on Happy Homes associates and, in fact, were always exceptionally polite and respectful (neither appeared to be members of the upper classes). It appears, then, that a worker's avoidance of customers on the grounds of those persons' mental illness is a very different case than using that rationale to avoid snobby customers.

Returning to Natalie's case, it seems very likely that a strategy of pathologizing the unpleasant upscale guest could support a front-line worker's performance of her hospitable interactive labors, likewise supporting the priorities of Happy Homes management. In that an associate's psychologistic analysis of snobbish customers detracts from the customer's ability to threaten that worker's status, the associate has less reason to avoid those customers and so is better able to extend gracious hospitality to *all* guests, even those who treat her in a demeaning fashion.

This is as Happy Homes management would have it. But, as Natalie illustrates, the strategy of pathologizing customers who refuse peership with Happy Homes

associates, could actually lead the worker to *intensify* her labors. In other words, the worker who adopts an interpretative framework like Natalie's may feel compelled from a sense of moral obligation to extend hospitality even in circumstances where a customer treats her in a belittling and denigrating way, making a situation where the worker would otherwise feel justified to pull back on her hospitality and "work to rule," into a situation where she must double-up her interactive efforts. In this case, management's purposes could be considerably furthered by workers' self-protective strategies.

"Class Imposters"

Roland, an associate on the job for almost two years, has not developed quite the tolerance for these guests as has Natalie. Like Natalie, Roland uses an ex post facto strategy to discredit snobby customers but employs a slightly different rubric. When Roland uses a categorical model to evaluate his experiences with snooty guests, he does so less by distinguishing the psychologically sick from the psychologically healthy, than by distinguishing guests with "fake wealth" from guests with "real wealth." Nonetheless, Roland's equation is fairly simple. A posteriori, the upscale guests who treat him as an equal become bona fide members of the upper classes, while those who snob him are class imposters:

There are some *very* nasty guests...that act like they're entitled. The thing I noticed is, at Aristocade, well I don't know, it's just, this area is so crazy with the suburbs, there's these people who came from, like the southern

suburbs, more like from Prestige Estates, or High Hills, those guests that come from those kind of suburbs and, I don't know if it's just me, but I just got this feeling like they have this sense of entitlement to them because they live in High Hills, and they live in these giant Mc-mansions, and they're house-poor but they expect to be treated this certain way because they live in High Hills in this big Mc-mansion...and I just have, you know, I have a difficult time dealing with those guests because it's like, "you're no better than anyone else." You're house-poor and you need to have this sense of entitlement because you're not really what you think you are, you know, and at the Aristocade, it's the ladies who lunch, and part of that is, you know, some of those people, it's like "yeah, you do have more money," and maybe you do, but I don't think it's real, you know, it's just weird, those are the ones I have a difficult time with.

In some ways, Roland is drawing a distinction between those of the nouveau riche and those of older, established wealth. The suburbs he refers to – Prestige Estates and High Hills -- are newer communities that, while quite wealthy and prestigious, stand in contrast to the elite urban neighborhoods where persons of old money (and multi-generational wealth) are generally thought to reside. In truth, Roland doesn't really know if his snobby guests from Prestige Estates or High Hills are old money or new money, house poor charlatans or gold-plated land barons. Still, when upscale guests look down their nose at Roland, he fights back by framing them as "house-poor" suburb dwellers.

Indeed, in Roland's view, it is exactly because these guests are class imposters that they need to throw around an attitude of entitlement – an attitude that Roland finds very unpleasant. But, by discrediting their class status Roland can also discredit their snubbing. If upscale guests with a condescending attitude are actually class poseurs, when they use an attitude of entitlement in a way that would diminish Roland's sense of

social place, Roland can disable the affront on the grounds that these people “are not really what (they) think they are.” When an attitude of entitlement is not legitimately founded in ‘real wealth,’ it becomes effrontery, the ‘blue smoke and mirrors’ of a foundationless snobbery that, in theory, Roland should find easy to dismiss. However, as Roland says, he does not dismiss this easily. Roland has a difficult time with these guests, and does not quickly shrug off their insults.

In Roland’s telling, these guests bother him because they are faking their class status. In contrast, when Roland comes across the upscale customer who treats him as an equal, behaving toward him respectfully and graciously, the person qualifies as a person of ‘real wealth’ and a bona fide member of the upper classes:

They’re not all like that. There’s some guests who I know they have money and are very nice, because there is one woman I remember in particular who shops at the store who lives on Gold Brick Avenue, clearly has lots of money, but she was the nicest customer, she was so friendly and we’d be like, “oh, do you want to take this home with you today? It’s kind of big” and she’d be like, “no, I have the Jaguar, I’ll have to come back with the Land Rover tomorrow.” You know, but she didn’t have that attitude about her, you know? Clearly had lots of money, but she was so nice and so friendly. But she had real money and, like I said, the other guests, they come in with this attitude like “I live in a Mc-mansion and I’m entitled” and I really have a hard time with that attitude of posturing like you’re better. I don’t know...that still happens...and I think it’s that whole status thing for them and you’re shopping there, and you think because you’re shopping there you’re better than everyone else.

As a protection against the symbolic violence of the upper classes, Roland re-scripts his encounters with snooty upscale guests as encounters with ‘posturers,’ in

contrast, classifying his encounters with upscale guests who are “nice and friendly” as encounters with persons of “real money.”

Much as happens when Happy Homes workers self-protect by discrediting snobbish guests on the basis of presumed psychological failings, Roland’s a posteriori approach to discrediting the snobbish guest does little to empower Roland in the moment of his interactive labor, or to allow him to critique inequalities of class. When Roland discredits this category of guests as poseurs trying to claim upper class entitlements without upper class creds, he frames his primary complaint as the fact that these guests are looking for special treatment they don’t deserve. In Roland’s own words, since these guests are not (as he sees it) bona fide members of the upper classes they “are no better than anyone else.” There is another side to this coin. If by lacking upper class creds a person is no better than anyone else, having those creds means the person *is* better. Roland takes issue with attempts to feign class status, but he does not argue with upper class entitlement. Indeed, the logic of his self-protective strategy would seem to soundly endorse an unequal distribution of social privilege according to wealth.

Other associates echo Roland’s belief that upscale customers who act snobbishly must be class imposters. The associate Delia puts it this way:

It has nothing to do with like physical appearance, I’ve learned that...um, I think that often the people that are really snotty who appear that they can afford it are really the ones that can’t...they’re the ones that make you feel terrible. They’re the ones trying to give this persona off that they really

have it, and then I think the ones that are just people that do have the money and can just walk in and buy whatever they want, I don't think that they tend to show it. I don't think that they tend to be that showy, and they're much more polite. I think they're the people that might come in and you don't expect it and next thing you know they spent 10,000 dollars, yeah, real money. No, the people that come in and whatever and they're acting all snotty, I'll sell them whatever, 'cause, it's like, "you just deserve it (deserve to buy things you don't need)," you just go right at 'er (buying things)." I'll show you all these pretty things, you're going to hate me here (because the end purchase is much bigger than intended), but go right ahead!

For Delia, those customers who act "all snotty" and make the front-line Happy Homes worker feel terrible are class charlatans. They are the customers who "appear that they can afford it but are really the ones that can't" yet try to "give off this persona" of wealth. As with Roland, when Delia frames snobbish customers as class imposters, she has a rhetorical way to knock the bottom out of the customer's right to pull rank.

This strategy allows Delia to repair some of the damage to her sense of status that comes when the snobby customer pulls rank on her. And when Delia takes this strategy onto the Happy Homes floor, as if in an act of revenge for the customer's haughtiness she makes an extra effort to sell that customer as many "pretty things" as she can. Of course, this only works as a form of revenge if Delia is right that snotty customers do not have wealth. Under this premise, Delia gets her revenge by getting the customer who doesn't have money (but acts as if they do) to spend as much money as Delia can encourage. Her revenge, then, is to put the pretentious customer in debt.

As we might imagine, the wealthy Happy Homes guest can be as snotty as the not-so-wealthy class-striver, and Delia's a posteriori reasoning does not actually hold up against the complex class machinations of the Happy Homes floor. Moreover, Delia's active form of revenge does not alter the conditions of her status vulnerability, nor prevent a customer's symbolic violence. When Delia deploys this revenge strategy, her benefit is restricted to whatever intra-psychic advantages she may be able to realize from the act. Of course, in the meantime, the management priority of maximizing sales is definitely being served.

Along with Roland and Delia, the associate Belinda sees a form of class charlatanism in the snobby behaviors of some upscale Happy Homes customers. Telling the story of a recent incident with a snooty customer that, she admits, upset her greatly, Belinda reasons that those customers who snub you are those whose claim to class entitlement is fundamentally shaky:

And, I think the people that seem to have the most money, you know, the ones who act like they have the most money, are the ones that don't. Like the woman I was just talking about...she acted like she had all this money but I'll bet you she doesn't. The people that act like it don't have it. Those are the people that walk in and have their, you know, Coach purses and Gucci purses and their blah, blah, blah, blah, blah...it's unbelievable! They're going to be the ones that come up and have eighteen different credit cards and they are, like, they return stuff constantly, and they buy and they return, and they are the ones that are, like, "hmm, can you give me the last four numbers of the visa" because they had so many visas. So these are the people that are living well beyond their means, which our society has allowed that because of credit. People are living beyond their means, you know. My parents never lived beyond their means, so, my

parents to this day are strict about it, and I've learned from my parents. But these people, they've just gotta have more. So, I think, those people who treat you like that are the ones that are living way beyond their means.

The rationale that snobbish upscale guests are pretending to the wealthy classes gives Belinda some comfort in the face of her recent upsetting encounter. As a way to defray the worst injuries of receiving an upscale guest's symbolic violence, Belinda challenges the guest's right to demean her on the grounds that the guest does not have legitimate membership in the upper classes. In fact, Belinda constructs a category of Happy Homes guests who, with their Coach and Gucci purses, overspend in order to appear as if they have money that they actually don't have. With this, Belinda not only discredits this type of guest on grounds that they are posing as upper class, but on the premise that they pay for that appearance on credit, or in Belinda's words, by living beyond their means. And this logic allows Belinda to accuse the high-and-mighty guest of a moral failing. Referencing her family's values, and casting the practice of living within one's means as matter of moral rectitude, Belinda is also able to give a normative slant to her criticism of this category of customers. In contrast to her pretentious, and sometimes very snobbish customers, Belinda – who does live within her means – comes out on top.

Belinda uses this framing technique to gain an edge on her customers. But, interestingly, she also uses it to gain a comparative advantage over her co-workers. As a person who's gotten a bead on the purportedly fake wealth and over-spending of the

upscale customer, Belinda feels she knows something her co-workers don't. This is knowledge Belinda can use to protect herself from the status assaults that come with the upscale customer's act of symbolic violence, as well as feel superior to her fellow front-line workers:

I'm not at all intimidated by these guests, because I could really care less, I think people are intimidated by these guests, I think a lot of people that work in the store are intimidated by them. I think that, um, because it's the Aristocade and it's Happy Homes, it's like "oh my gosh, these people that are coming in here, I mean they just must be all billionaires, they must be." But I think most of them are phonies, you know, all those credit cards. So I think that goes back to the Happy Homes guests that I see that come in that are these flashy types, you know, they talk about blah, blah, blah, and you know, like everything is, it's grotesque the amount that they talk about the money, and like the way that they appear, like, they come in with all of their like, you know, name brand stuff on, and I'm like, what are you trying to prove? Who cares? I bet all your credit cards are maxed out! And that's why I think some people get intimidated by them because they think that they're (billionaires)...so, it works, it totally works! I think that it's interesting because a lot of people do get intimidated by it, and I'm like, oh my gosh, I'm like, who are you, who cares? Who cares! You know, I don't...I mean right now, I couldn't purchase a thing at Happy Homes, but no one needs to know that, no one needs to know. And I just think it's a weird thing, kinda like the whole Aristocade thing is this weird little pocket to me.

In Belinda's view, without the armament of self-protection that comes from recognizing upscale guests as class imposters, her co-workers are left profoundly vulnerable to intimidation. The way she puts it, the customer's wealthy act *works* (of course, by this, Belinda implies that she sees the 'look of wealth' as an attempt to intimidate others).

To emphasize her own supposed immunity to this sort of intimidation, Belinda deploys an old trick in the face-saving game – she claims not to care. If we ask what it is that Belinda claims to care nothing about, we hear that it is the guest’s appearance of wealth, or put another way, Belinda claims to be unimpressed by the fact that her Happy Homes guest appears to be a member of the upper classes. However, when she points to the fact the Happy Homes product is out of her price range (and that would be including the 40% discount), she does so as if a sharing a confidence. Indeed, she says, “no one needs to know that,” as if it were an embarrassing secret. Tellingly, Belinda’s shameful fact seems to be that she does not have the amount of money most of her customers do, in fact, have.

On one hand, Belinda tries to obscure her customer’s upper status by putting their financial solvency up for question and claiming she does not care about their wealthy appearance, on the other, she tries to obscure her lower class position relative to the customer by treating the fact of her limited financial resources as an embarrassing secret. This double obfuscation works as a tool for Belinda to minimize the size of the class-based gap that otherwise unfavorably separates her from her clientele. Arguably, Belinda is as bitten by status envy as the next Happy Homes worker, and is trying to mask, if not also neutralize, the socio-economic class difference that sets her apart from her upscale customer.

If Belinda can use this strategy, *ex post facto*, to recuperate a positive sense of self following a run-in with symbolic violence, while also using it to feel superior to her co-workers, in an interesting contortion of logic, Belinda also uses this reframing technique as a lead-in to express her pride at working at Happy Homes. In many ways, if we weren't sure before that Belinda is at least a little dazzled, if not also made anxious, by the class rank of the Happy Homes shopping crowd, her description of pride at being a Happy Homes worker lends credibility to the claim that Belinda does indeed care about who fits where in the pyramid of class distinctions:

I mean, I'm really proud to say that I work there. It's not like, I mean, I don't know how I would feel if my job would be like just working at McDonalds. I mean, I've never fortunately been in a situation where that's my only thing so I don't know if I was in that situation would I feel proud to say "yeah I'm a manager at McDonalds." I don't know, I don't think so. But at Happy Homes I'm like, oh, I'm proud to say I work for Happy Homes, it's an outstanding brand, it's, you know, at the Aristocade, and when people find out I work at Happy Homes at the Aristocade, they, you know, they're like "wow, you work there, wow!" So it's a good place to work for, it's very upscale. Now, the Gucci purses and, I don't know, billionaires everyday? I'm not sure that it's really "all that," but some people get intimidated. You know, people think it's "all that" and I'm like, you keep thinking that, cause it's good for me...and I'll have a job (laughs).

Outclassing the Guests

In an interesting version of the *ex post facto* strategy, Happy Homes associates will also try to pull out their own class credentials to trump the class credibility of a customer who has snobbed them. This, of course, is a tricky gambit, in that most front-

line workers have few class credentials to draw upon. Nonetheless, Happy Homes associates can try to soften the blow of an upscale guest's symbolic violence by asserting, after the fact, that they know more about appropriate upper class ways than the guest in question knows. In other words, associates can try to "out-class" their guests.

The "out-classing" technique can be parlayed into self-protection on the floor, used during their interactive labors to salvage their status in the face of a customer's challenge, but associates also deploy this strategy through creative re-tellings shared with co-workers after the encounter with the pretentious guest.

As we know from organizations literature and studies of work culture, employees of many different stripes use the creative re-telling of work events among ranks as a way to cope with difficult aspects of their work. In this backstage ritual, corporate employees share "war stories" about their experiences with co-workers, bosses, corporate culture and bureaucracy, trying to 'de-compress' in the wake of stressful events as well as safeguard a sense of self that has been threatened (Kunda 1992). The same can be seen in other work contexts. In law firms, legal workers recap and re-interpret the bad behavior of their attorney bosses (Pierce 1995), while, in prisons, officers trade tales that help to defuse the stress of daily proximity to violence and danger (Britton 2003). From phone company workers who deride their "Bell Head" bosses (Vallas 1993), waitresses who trade backroom tales of "stupid managers" and rude diners (Paules 1996), hotel workers who regale each other with stories of overly-demanding guests (Sherman 2007), and

doormen who joke and puzzle over the peculiar habits of tenants (Bearman 2005), workers across a diversity of industries share war stories, using these war stories as a way to cope with job stress and fend off threats to their sense of self.

At Happy Homes, where an associate's job stress may be generated by a customer's symbolic violence, workers' war stories can be directed toward the effort to "out-class" the upscale Happy Homes guest. The worker's "out-classing" strategy will frequently include open criticism of the customer's merchandise selections. We saw hints of this earlier with the associate who criticized a guest for spending a thousand dollars on off-the-rack draperies instead of going custom. But, as the associate, Rita, illustrates, this type of criticism can be much more blatant, if not also more harsh. Talking about an upscale customer who behaved dismissively toward her, Rita takes a critical view of that customer based on the particular Happy Homes merchandise the customer chose. The customer in question chose a bright green leather couch and, in Rita's telling, this choice – one she herself would never make -- proves that the customer does not "have class":

Well there's one thing to, like, wear a bright sweater, and there's another thing to have that color on a big piece of furniture! Well, your home, you want your home to still feel...elegant. I mean, I don't want to have to change my sofa out in a month because the color's out, or because I finally figured out that it's *really* tacky. I'm all like for changing a few pillows here, but really? Are you going to put that bright green couch in your house? I mean, would you really?! That would drive me crazy in like a day, and a year from now, I'd be like, what was I thinking? It's not going to look good. So...I'm like, I'm not sure that it's really working...where

would you put that? Okay I'm thinking, okay, maybe this lady just doesn't have any class, okay, I think, yes it would look good in a trailer, but you're not going to spend that kind of money on something for a trailer. And I'm thinking, this woman probably lives in a mansion. A bright green couch...is she really serious?

Expressing shock that a wealthy guest would make such a tacky furniture choice, Rita treats the guest's choice as evidence that this guest lacks the kind of class-based sensibilities Rita herself can lay claim to. A bright green sofa, according to Rita's analysis, is fitting for a trailer, but not a mansion.

The contrast Rita makes between the "trailer" and the "mansion" communicates an undisguised message about class, and the person who chooses an item fitting for a trailer thus has the sensibilities of the person who lives in a trailer (read: lower class). By assuring her listener that she would never choose a bright green sofa, Rita establishes her class credentials – in terms of class sensibilities and taste – above and against the substandard class sensibilities her customer carries. In this way, Rita addresses her own status vulnerabilities by trying to "out-class" her upscale, mansion-residing customer, on matters of taste.

Greta offers another twist on this strategy when she tells the story of working with a guest on a shopping mission to purchase gifts for the employees of her husband's firm:

She liked those bottles with the fake blue coral tops. Those things are wretched, nobody's buying them, I haven't seen anyone buy them. It's not the kind of thing *our guests* like. It looks cheap, our guests wouldn't

be caught dead with one of them in their house (but) this lady loved them. I thought, oh god no, don't do that to your husband, so I tried to steer her away, 'oh, look at this vase, wouldn't this be nice' or, 'how about a nice crystal wine stopper, that's classy, everybody appreciates one of those.' But she wanted the ugly coral things. I'm like, lady, here you are, married to some big powerful man, and you're giving *this* to his employees. The poor guy, that's all I could think, poor guy, I wouldn't put one of those in my house if you paid me. Imagine what goes through the employees' heads when they get fake blue coral!

Here, Greta takes care of the power imbalance between herself, a divorced retail clerk, and her guest, the boss's wife, by demonstrating that the guest – in the choice of fake blue coral – suffers from what Greta portrays as hopelessly poor taste.

Tastes, of course, mark spheres of social distinction (Bourdieu 1987), and to be clear, Greta does not simply mean taste in the abstract sense of aesthetic sensibilities, but in the concrete, and very socially relevant sense as marker of position and prestige. As Greta puts it, a bottle with a fake blue coral top is “not the kind of thing *our guests* like,” by “our guests” meaning persons of high social caliber, and when she says, “I wouldn't put one of those in my house if you paid me” she places herself squarely in that same camp. In Greta's framing, this camp – the camp that holds persons of taste and social station – comes out in stark contrast to the camp of those who, like the guest “want(s) those ugly things.”

Though her guest may be the boss's wife, Greta has her far out-classed when it comes to taste. Moreover, Greta seems to “out-gender” her as well. Expressing pity toward the woman's husband, Greta presents a case where a “big powerful man” must

suffer – ostensibly losing the esteem of his subordinates -- as a result of having married a woman with inferior tastes, those tastes symbolic of lower class ways. When picking gifts for her husband's employees, this man's wife chooses the tacky fake blue coral over the classy crystal wine stopper – a gift that Greta herself recommends. In Greta's depiction, she -- who would choose the crystal wine stopper and wouldn't put cheap-looking fake blue coral in her house if you paid her -- comes out looking the far better choice for the man's partner.

While there is no indication that this guest snubbed Greta, and no evidence that there was anything directly humiliating for Greta about the encounter, the fact that Greta focuses on this woman's role as the boss's wife, and characterizes that boss as a "big powerful man," suggests Greta's class and gender anxieties were stirred by this encounter. By combining rhetorical reframing strategies that allow her to out-class and out-gender the guest, Greta gets a hold on a double measure of symbolic status – that which is vested in her superiority of taste, and that which is vested in her superior suitability as a boss's wife.

As a way to recuperate positive self-feeling in the wake of humiliating encounters with high-class guests, the re-definition strategy is a valuable "damage control" tool for the Happy Homes worker. Of course, techniques of this sort are not uncommon in the world of front-line service personnel. Low level service workers everywhere are vulnerable to assaults on their dignity and, in a variety of contexts, service workers can,

and do, make use of similar reframing strategies, casting the service recipient in a negative light in order to preserve a positive sense of self (Hanser 2008; Paules 1996; Rollins 1987). While it is a form of resistance, strategic redefinition also functions as form of accommodation, allowing the worker to continue to do the job that provides for the original vulnerability. So is true at Happy Homes. The Happy Homes worker who can retroactively erode the credibility of the snobbish customer is better able to abide the persistent vulnerability of the symbolic status he has gained through the Happy Homes job. In a word, he is better able to approach the next in-coming customer with the informal, friendly, and parity-assuming attitude his employer requires, appeasing his own class anxieties by virtue of those interactions that grant him a sense of class parity with the upscale guest. In that the worker's enjoyment of symbolic status is critical to the successful reproduction of the Happy Homes labor process, his ability to reduce the impact of symbolic violence is also a way for him to accommodate the contradictory valences of the Happy Homes retail work process, and, thus is an active mode he uses to produce his own work consent.

These types of rhetorical strategies, as common as they might be in the ranks of low-level service workers at large, take on a very specific quality in the Happy Homes context. Whether pathologizing the snobbish upscale customer, dismissing the customer as a class imposter, or trying to outclass the upscale guest, Happy Homes associates who deploy the ex post facto strategy have one thing in common, namely, a focus on the

customer's class and status measure relative to their own. In this way, workers' strategies for managing the contradictions of the Happy Homes labor process are another on-the-job move in the on-going status gymnastics they perform in the interests of producing positive self-identity.

WORKER STRATEGIES: RESISTANCE BY NEGOTIATION

While Happy Homes associates can use the rhetorical ploy as a means of post-incident damage control, and thus help maintain an enhanced sense of status despite challenges by rank-pulling customers, the technique is of little use in the moment of the humiliating interchange. As we saw earlier, class-anxious workers are motivated to create an aura of friendly equipoise with upscale guests. When customer encounters go south, raising the danger of class-based snubbing, these associates are similarly motivated to act on and alter the tone of the interchange and, toward this end, front-line Happy Homes workers make use of creative interactional strategies that combat symbolic violence as it is occurring. In his amicable interactions with high class customers the associate can find ready ways to bridge class difference -- for instance, by claiming to share his customer's tastes in restaurants or theater -- but when the upscale guest is refusing the associate's invitation to parity and pulling class rank, the Happy Homes worker must negotiate the status gap in a very different way. In this situation, the customer's claim to a superior position is anchored in a presumption of class difference between clerk and customer, a presumption that lends legitimacy to a customer's claim of

class privilege. And, when a Happy Homes floor worker attempts to combat the status challenges that arise when customers pull class rank, it is precisely this domain of presumption that becomes the target of his efforts.

In an encounter with a snobbish upscale guest, the Happy Homes worker often deploys conversational tactics that have the potential to destabilize the appearance of class difference between himself and his guest. Of course, workers' ex post facto strategies also work to challenge the fact of class difference between the Happy Homes worker and Happy Homes customers. Yet, while ex post facto strategies target the class credibility of the store guest, the worker's interactional strategies are aimed at creating an enhanced impression of her own class standing.

One of the most common ways in which front-line workers do this is by communicating to the snobbish guest that they are doing the Happy Homes job "for fun." The majority of Happy Homes clerks fall into lower- to lower-middle class income brackets, and their Happy Homes wage constitutes a large part, and in some cases all, of their revenue. Thus, while Happy Homes workers may very well *have* fun on the job, very few are in a position to be doing the job *only* for fun.

Insofar as this claim – a job done "for fun" – also implies that the worker does not need the earned income the job provides, it is one way a Happy Homes associate can attempt to alter the appearance of class difference and challenge a customer's

presumption of class superiority over the worker. If common thought has it that those who inhabit lower level service jobs (as do the Happy Homes retail workers) are members of lower social and economic classes, the Happy Homes associate's claim that she does the job for fun has the potential to throw this association up for question.

When the Happy Homes worker purports to have a casual relationship to her paid work, painting her job as the pursuit of recreation and not income, the upscale customer who might read the worker's class position from the occupation cannot be so certain. By claiming to do the job for fun, the associate is, of course, engaged in the process of self-making, protecting herself from negative self-feeling while also doing impression management. Yet, by interrupting the automatic inference that her occupation signifies her class, the worker destabilizes the certainty of class difference between customer and clerk, and actively pushes back on her guest's symbolic violence. In effect, it is the Happy Homes worker's strike to undermine the legitimacy of the guest's privileged stance. Remembering that social legitimacy attends the upscale guest who pulls class rank only if class difference elevates that guest above the low level worker, the Happy Homes associate who describes her paid retail work as voluntary activity is challenging her customer's claim to privilege by trying to up-end the customer's presumption that the clerk is a social inferior. If a Happy Homes associate works the retail floor for fun, it becomes -- if not likely -- at least possible that she could be the customer's class peer.

On the Happy Homes floor, the ‘I-do-the-job-for-fun’ strategy takes a variety of forms, and front-line workers can be quite creative when fitting this information into their conversations with snobbish guests. For instance, an associate will tell her customer that she took the job because she “just wanted to get out of the house,” or comment that she works at Happy Homes because she “loves the Happy Homes product,” alluding to her “long history as an Happy Homes shopper,” or, mentioning that she does “the job for fun,” will casually add that she “only work(s) when it’s convenient.” While there may be a partial truth in these claims, the claims are equal part deceit. For instance, Happy Homes associates cannot really work at their own convenience. Happy Homes requires that all associates be available for a weekly minimum of three shifts and 20 hours, also requiring that the associate be available to work one weekend day (Saturday or Sunday). As well, most associates, even those who are part of a dual-income household, need their Happy Home income, and describe the money they make at Happy Homes as necessary to their household budget.

During my months on the Happy Homes floor, I witnessed this tactic in widespread use by the sales staff, and while associates put their own spin on the “job-for-fun” message, the tactic saw most play with upscale guests who were standoffish, with the core message almost always the same: the Happy Homes job is not a matter of the worker bending to necessity but a volitional act done for the worker’s own pleasure. By

inference, this message communicates that the Happy HOMes worker should not be confused as working class.

As we might expect, making this sort of claim to a snobbish customer is something that must be finessed if the associate is to avoid sounding awkward, or worse, disingenuous, but Happy Homes workers seem to manage this challenge with some degree of ease. In one example I witnessed, Adena, a two year-tenured associate, used her guest's critique of a Happy Homes product as a way to turn the conversation to her own motives for working the Happy Homes job. This particular guest, a standoffish female customer known to spend large sums of money at the store, was that day in the market for bedding. The guest was directing Adena to fetch various bedding items (both the bedding itself, and the coordinating pillows, throws, bolsters, etc.) from other parts of the store, and bring them to where she sat perched on a floor model sofa. Adena presented the customer with a bedding set that matched the customer's description of what she wanted, but the customer balked, calling the product "cheap looking," and implying that the fault somehow lay with her clerk's taste. In response, Adena took an interesting approach that not only countered the guest's message of insult but carried the potential to even the interactional playing field:

Customer: That one looks cheap, I don't why you're showing me this -- I've shopped at Happy Homes for years, my house is all Happy Homes, and I'm expecting quality, not this junk.

Adena: Oh, absolutely, I'm the same way, I can't stand anything that isn't the best quality. I've been doing my house with Happy Homes forever, and, oh, I'm always re-doing things in my house, so I was always coming in here to buy something, in fact, that's why I thought I'd try working here, you know, just for fun, cause I love the Happy Homes style. But I've always been one to demand quality. And you're right, we expect quality from Happy Homes...let me show you something else.

In the face of her upscale customer's effort to pull class rank, Adena attempts to disrupt appearances, specifically, the appearance that class difference separates her from her Happy Homes guest. Empathizing with the customer by saying that she too has a long career as an Happy Homes shopper and holds a similarly high standard for quality, Adena paints a picture where she would appear to be, much like her customer, a lady of leisure with the means to furnish her home with the high-end Happy Homes products. Indeed, Adena's reference to "always re-doing things in (her) house" implies that both her discretionary funds and her discretionary time are, and have been for a while, substantial.

Most of what Adena implies is false, but there is also a small grain of truth. While Adena does not any longer enjoy an upper middle class lifestyle, there was a period of time in her life, courtesy of her first husband's family money, when she approached an upper middle class station. Her marriage lasted only three years, but, as Adena tells it, for that period she was an avid consumer of Happy Homes goods. At the time of her interview, Adena had been divorced from her first husband for five years, and had recently entered her second marriage, this time to a low-level electronics technician

who was currently unemployed. With her husband unemployed, the income Adena made in the Happy Homes job was extremely important (in fact, Adena was requesting extra hours, and asking her co-workers if she could take over any of their shifts). Adena was not in a position to do the Happy Homes job “for fun.” Yet, interestingly, when Adena had to contend with a customer’s symbolic violence, the past identity she forged during a brief foray into the upper middle classes served her well. Though it was ‘expired,’ Adena’s former identity could be portrayed a ‘master identity’ as a way to adjust the balance of power with her upscale guest.

Explaining to her customer how she came to do the Happy Homes job “for fun,” Adena distances herself from her clerk role. But, importantly, she also attempts to unsettle her customer’s sense of privilege by challenging its background assumptions, most directly, the assumption that, by virtue of being a Happy Homes clerk, Adena is a member of the lower classes. Adena’s ploy rests on two foundations. First, Adena calls on the status implications of the brand and, by painting herself in the role of brand consumer, unsettles an image of her as working class. Secondly, Adena’s ploy draws heavily on symbols of high-class femininity – for instance, a preoccupation with perfecting the domestic sphere, a concern with domestic aesthetics, and an uncompromising attitude of connoisseurship in consumer choices. Deploying these symbols strategically, Adena represents herself as the *class and gender equal* of her upscale guest. If her customer’s performance of privilege is fueled by a certainty of class

superiority over the Happy Homes retail clerk, Adena's response is aimed at throwing this certainty into question. Toward this end, Adena combines the status meanings of the brand with tropes of upper class femininity.

Adena's efforts appeared to have had some success. In response, this guest's demeanor softened demonstrably and, in contrast to her earlier haughty tone, the guest began to ask for Adena's advice, showing curiosity about Adena's own standards when it came to bedding, this in turn prompting a friendly conversation between customer and clerk on the virtues of high thread count sheets, and a mutual commiseration over the declining quality of consumer products more generally. For at least this moment, in this encounter, Adena's use of the "just for fun" strategy was able to inspire an air of class and gender solidarity where just a second earlier the threat of class-based symbolic violence loomed.

Not all uses of the "I do the job for fun" strategy are this successful in breaking down the social distance between Happy Homes workers and their upscale guests. Still, in the main, when Happy Homes associates use techniques of this sort to signal a casual relationship to their job, snooty customers can make a subtle shift away from their stance of privilege. Of course, this shift may not be enough to create quite the order of customer-clerk solidarity that Adena accomplished, but even so, it can save the front-line Happy Homes worker the worst of the status assaults that guests can, and do, dish out.

In another instance I witnessed while working the Happy Homes floor, the associate, Myra, used the strategy to push back on an up-class guest who was having none of Myra's design advice or her overtures toward friendly interaction. The guest, an impeccably dressed thirty-something woman (a woman who was, as one associate put it when discussing well-dressed guests, "all Gucci-ed and Prada-ed out") wanted to decorate her table for an up-coming dinner party. With five years experience working the Happy Homes floor, Myra is typically very good at helping customers with this kind of request and, known for her talent in putting together a tablescape, had been called in by a newbie to help this particular customer choose her table decorations. But, dismissing Myra's friendly chat, and rudely rejecting her suggestions with retorts like "that's ridiculous" and "I hate it," the customer rigidly imposed a status hierarchy onto the interaction that made the task of outfitting her table a particularly difficult one, even for a veteran like Myra.

For her part, Myra seemed to take this in stride, remaining pleasant throughout. However, when she found an opening, Myra also took pains to challenge her guest's presumptive superiority. At one juncture, the guest rejects Myra's suggestion of a centerpiece on the grounds that it is too fragile to have in a house with small children. To this, Myra responds by sharing "personal information" about her own conflicts with the responsibilities of femininity, giving the guest the impression that she too shoulders the conflicting roles of mother and upscale domestic goddess. Her job at Happy Homes,

Myra explains, is a diversion from the stress of balancing the duties of up-class femininity with the duties of parenting:

Oh, I know what you mean! It's so difficult when you do a lot of entertaining and you have small children. I know, I have two toddlers, and we do a lot of entertaining and I'm one of those who has to have the table just so, you know, just perfect, but how do you do that with toddlers around? It's hard, mine are always getting into everything, they have so much energy, they wear me out sometimes, and I have to say, that's why I'm glad I'm here! I do it just to get a little break, and, it's easier, too, with entertaining, I can plan my table while I'm here. My last dinner party I had fourteen people, and I used the silver and white color story, you see it over there (points to a nearby display), it was gorgeous, so elegant, but look, it's sturdy, so it's safe for the kids too.

As is typical on the Happy Homes front lines, Myra tries first to build rapport with the guest, attempting friendly conversation while also making suggestions of products that might work for the guest's needs. But, when her efforts at class-crossing fail, Myra draws on the "I do the job for fun" tactic, taking care to embed that message in a story of how she faces the trials of fulfilling feminine gender roles that sound, by Myra's telling, to be decidedly higher class.

Granted, this guest did not soften as much as Adena's, but Myra still managed to gain some ground in the interaction and, indeed, with these classed and gendered sympathies in place, the guest was much more willing to listen to Myra's advice. A testament to this is in the guest's final purchase -- she ended up taking home the same silver and white tablescape (in its \$1500 entirety) that Myra had pointed to as part of her

own elegant soiree. Actually, Myra did not purchase this tablescape for her own dinner party. I know from conversation with Myra that this was a family dinner for which she'd purchased only a Happy Homes silver-colored vase, filling in her tablescape with items she already owned. Myra used the silver and white *color story*, not the Happy Homes items that made up that color story.

By mirroring what she believed to be Myra's own decorating choices, the customer both evinces respect for Myra's opinion and confirms (whether wittingly or not) their status kinship, a kinship anchored in the "silver and white" realm of the Happy Homes brand of symbolic capital. If Myra has successfully fended off this guest's symbolic violence, or at least the worst of it, in the moment where the guest chooses what her clerk purports to use in her own home, Myra also captures a small bit of symbolic status for herself.

As both Myra and Adena demonstrate, the associate strategy of combating symbolic violence by claiming a casual relationship to the job can be usefully linked to the gendered entailments of upper class norms. In this way, the trope of high-class femininity becomes a critical part of the arsenal that female Happy Homes associates draw on when they attempt to push back on snooty female customers. Combined with, and often providing critical context to, the message that she does the job for fun, the associate's claim to understand, and even 'own' the priorities of high class femininity can be an extremely effective way to debunk the impression that she is a member of the

working class. And, of course, dis-identification with the role of retail worker follows from, if is not also entailed by, identification with high-class femininity, such that these two conversational ploys mesh together exceptionally well. In Myra's case, the technique mutes some of the guest's condescension and, importantly, allows Myra enhanced credibility in the guest's eyes. And, as we saw with Adena, when this strategy is at its most successful, the associate can gain more than credibility, actually shifting the guest away from the enactment of class-based symbolic violence, and over to an active acceptance of a classed and gendered solidarity with the Happy Homes clerk.

Given the inevitable challenges some up-class Happy Homes guests will make on associates' claim to status, the "I do the job for fun" strategy serves an important purpose in the front-line worker's performance of identity labor. In doing her front-line labors, the Happy Homes worker is simultaneously engaged in producing symbolic status for herself while reproducing the status, and hence sales-worthiness, of the brand. While part of this effort entails legitimizing her customer's claim to class-based privilege, making the worker complicit in the active reproduction of social relations of inequality, when the worker rejects a position of class-based subordination by dis-identifying with her retail clerk role, and makes insinuations that suggest she enjoys class parity with her upscale guest, the worker destabilizes the symbolic foundations that typically allow for the performative reproduction of her guest's presumptive privilege. The Happy Homes

worker who successfully deploys the “I do the job for fun” strategy is then less involved in *reproducing* the unequal allotment of privilege than she is in *watering down* its effects.

Of course, it is also true that Happy Homes worker’s use of this strategy makes, overall, for a better environment in which she can continue to produce and consume symbolic status for herself. It takes a little more work on her part than does the interactive labor she performs with friendly upscale guests, but it still reaches the same end, that is, it still serves the worker’s self-making goal, aimed as it is at enhancing a sense of her own classed and gendered identity. The associate who persuades a snobbish customer that she does the job for fun can thus undermine an important basis of the guest’s position for symbolic violence, and in so doing, safeguard the symbolic status she has already gained through the job.

In some particularly successful cases, as we saw with Adena’s interaction, the Happy Homes associate can use this technique to create – from the threat of symbolic violence -- a changed set of conditions under which she not only safeguards but actively *reproduces* her symbolic status. Moreover, as the examples here suggest, there is good reason for Happy Homes management to be happy with this strategy. Front-line workers who, like Adena and Myra, succeed in their class crossing with snooty guests by using the “I do the job for fun” tactic, also gain a measure of credibility with the guest, and that credibility can in turn make them more persuasive as salespeople. In this case, the mode by which Happy Homes associates resist-in-order-to-negotiate a guest’s class-based

symbolic violence bolsters not only an employee's ability to make symbolic status gains, it bolsters their retail labor productivity as well.

As we might expect, the "I do the job for fun" technique takes on different outlines when used by male associates. During one of my shifts on the Happy Homes floor, I had the chance to watch Trent, a male associate eighteen months on the Happy Homes job, slip his snobby customer the message that this retail job was something he did for fun. Having less access to the metaphors of high-class femininity than his female co-workers, Trent nonetheless succeeds in drawing on classed-based gender meanings. But, in contrast to his female compatriots, Trent draws from an upper class masculine frame that allows for male aesthetic sensibilities. After taking a few condescending hits from his female guest, Trent asserts himself as her social equal by establishing his possession of refined upper class tastes, in the process, adeptly distancing himself from the role of retail clerk. Listening to his guest's description of her mansion-like home, Trent pulls out a masculinized rendition of the "I do the job for fun" technique, and explains to the snooty guest why he is here, doing the Happy Homes job:

Your home sounds like Tudor-style, and that works best with our Expedition line. Believe me, you *do not* want to stray too far from classic lines. Not everybody can see that, but as an artist...I'm actually an artist, this is just my little side job, cause I thought, well that would be interesting to see how the commercial design side works...but as an artist I can tell when things flow and when they clash. It takes a trained eye, but there's certain things you don't mix, you see, the eye has to read it in a certain way.

Presenting the Happy Homes clerk job as something he does on the side, and claiming his real identity as artist, Trent establishes himself as person of refined tastes. Moreover, when he tells the customer “this is just my little side job, cause I thought, well that would be interesting to see how the commercial design side works,” he paints himself as someone able to dabble in retail work on a whim, and with the motive of seeing how ‘the other (commercial, read: less refined) half lives.’

With these comments, Trent challenges the guest’s presumption of superiority, attempting to re-negotiate the balance of power in the interaction with his upscale female customer. But, tellingly, Trent does not imply, as do female associates in similar situations, that he identifies with the upscale guest, and thus does not invite the guest to identify with him. Instead, Trent draws on the identity of artist to simultaneously communicate his professionalism (in contrast to his low-level clerking occupation) and his distance from the working classes (though, of course, artists can come from the lower classes, public perception tends to associate artists with the middle and upper middle classes rather than the working classes). Moreover, by identifying himself as an artist, Trent can also borrow the trope of upper class masculinity where artistic tastes and sensibilities indicate refinement and high social standing. Importantly, Trent is likewise parlaying a particular construction of gay male masculinity, characterized by an emphasis on the aesthetic sphere and an overt display of mastery in aesthetic matters (for a discussion of the different types of gay male masculinity, see Hennen 2008).

By identifying as artist, Trent assumes an edge, however slight, of superiority over the guest based on his “trained eye.” Remembering that the trained eye Trent conjures is the eye of refinement associated with professionalism and masculinity (both up-class masculinity and a form of gay male masculinity that garners respect in this retail home furnishings context), Trent’s comments actually function to stake claim to a position of multiple authority. Trent claims explicit authority on the basis of professionalism, but he also links this to an implicit authority anchored in *both* masculinity and class. In fact, it is precisely the *masculinity* Trent lays claim to that lends the important weight to his presentation of a profession- and class-based authority. Trent’s female co-workers confront symbolic violence by attempting to give an impression of their class and gender affinities with the upscale female guest, but Trent’s strategy is quite different. When Trent confronts the haughty female guest with “I do the job for fun” he is not crafting affinity but inscribing difference, matching his guest’s presumptive superiority by class but trumping it by gender melded with sexuality.

While I can’t be sure that Trent’s tactics intimidated this female guest, my impression is that Trent was quite successful in getting his guest to back off from her lofty stance. I later witnessed the guest asking Trent a series of questions about appropriate aesthetics for her Tudor home, and listening respectfully to his answers. Moreover, after the guest left the store, I learned from another co-worker that Trent had sold this guest the Expedition sofa, two Expedition chairs, and an Expedition coffee table.

If nothing else, it appears the customer took Trent's claim of aesthetic expertise to heart. Yet, given the context, it is safe to say the purchase also implies a certain amount of respect and deference flowing from customer to Happy Homes salesclerk, making it also safe to say that Trent's tactic worked.

Again, as we saw with the female associates, Trent's method of pushing back on a customer's symbolic violence by framing the Happy Homes job as something done casually becomes a constituent of his identity labor. When Trent uses this tactic he engages the process of self-making, not only protecting his symbolic status from assault, but aiding its reproduction. Like his co-workers, Trent deploys the gendered meanings of class in his efforts to revise his customer's evaluation of his social worth, however he melds gender with sexuality, and the type of masculinity he presents does not ask for solidarity with the upscale female guest. Rather, it demands an upper hand in the encounter. While female associates use this the "I do the job for fun" tactic to break down the customer-clerk hierarchy by elevating the appearance of their own class and gender status to the level of their customers, for male associates, the tactic, when successful, does not so much break down the customer-clerk hierarchy as reverse it.

The trope of Happy Homes retail work as 'fun' gets fairly wide play in the Happy Homes workplace, and associates find support for framing their work as fun from their fellow workers and their managers. Yet, while both Happy Homes workers and managers somewhat readily represent the Happy Homes floor work as a form of worker

fun, the fact remains that many of these front-line workers rely on income from this job, and are working at Happy Homes for reasons much more practical, and more pressing, than a desire for pleasurable diversion.

WORKER STRATEGIES: “POLITESSE-AS-RESISTANCE”

Not all worker strategies for mediating status challenge are this light handed. In response to the contradictions of their job, Happy Homes workers also resist in ways that are overt, active, and, in terms of their standing on the job, potentially risky. This is evident when Happy Homes workers directly refuse to accept demeaning treatment from their upscale customers. Though intra-psychic reframing and interactive negotiation are the most common strategies associates use to resist customer threats to their symbolic status, front-line workers can also openly reject degrading treatment from guests by assertively interrupting a service interaction to challenge a customer’s bad behavior. When Happy Homes workers do this, they use the Happy Homes code of politesse in a way very different than what management intends.

As we know, Happy Homes managers impose the code of up-class politesse as a standard for the associate’s conduct with clients. However, when workers actively resist their guests they repurpose the code into a standard for customer conduct. Here, the Happy Homes worker -- faced with an upscale guest who, refusing to engage a “courtesy of peers,” thus also threatens the worker’s symbolic status -- applies the code of politesse to find the customer guilty of breaking the rules of good manners. Of course, this alone

does not constitute active resistance, and the worker may yet respond by drawing on indirect strategies such as intra-psychic reframing or interactive negotiation to manage interaction with ill-mannered guests (as we saw with the story of the disgruntled dinner hour worker in the previous chapter). Yet, on occasions when workers use this strategy as the basis for more direct intervention, they tap a force of “principled resistance” that can lead them, for instance, to criticize their guest for rudeness, demand more respectful treatment from the guest, or, in some cases, refuse to continue with the service interaction altogether.

As a strategy for workers to maintain a hold on symbolic status, this is much riskier than an indirect approach – Happy Homes management has no tolerance for direct resistance toward customers, and a Happy Homes worker who criticizes a guest’s behavior runs the risk of receiving a reprimand, or worse, from management. At the same time, Happy Homes management is responsible for providing the worker the raw material that makes this type of resistance possible – and, perhaps, even inevitable. The organization uses the code of polite, well-bred behavior to govern the successful performance of front-line retail labor and, insofar as the code facilitates workers’ symbolic status gains, it is also one of its key tools for garnering worker consent. As we’ve seen, this system of labor governance works because associates internalize the code of politesse as a normative principle that helps support their own re-identification as high status persons. But, as the discussion that follows will illustrate, the code of

politesse become *principle* can widen – quite organically -- to encompass an evaluation of guest behavior and, when it does, it can firmly anchor a worker's direct resistance to the labor demands manifest as the requirement for the worker's constant pleasantness. An outgrowth of the contradictions that inhere in the system of Happy Homes work control, "politesse-as-resistance" – while a subversion of the organizational code – is yet true to its principle.

How do Happy Homes workers redirect such a critical piece of work control, and thus of their own consent, for the purposes of resistance? In her interview, Margaret, a seasoned associate, describes this process. Responding to a question about what makes for 'good' customers and 'bad' customers, Margaret tells how Happy Homes associates actively push back on snobbish customers, countering the guest's efforts to assert social superiority and rejecting the role of status lesser. As Margaret points out, workers who do this deploy their employer's code of politesse in a way that gives their resistance a good part of its rationale -- and, interestingly, a good part of its method as well:

I'd say mostly associates try to be cordial but I've also seen a lot of times the associate is trying to be cordial but the guest is being rude back to them, *extremely* rude, 'you're trash at the side of the road' level of rude...and I can say I've seen associates who say 'I've reached my limit,' they go 'No, no, I'm not taking this, I deserve respect, you need to treat me with respect.' I've seen it happen, not every day, but a lot and, I'll say we'll all end up doing it some time. I won't say I'm surprised, because it's that you have that guest with lots of money that comes into the store and can't even be civil because they're coming in thinking they're so much better than you are, which I say there's no excuse for. So, sometimes you're going to need to speak up and go 'look, I don't know

what you're thinking, but we're all bright and sophisticated people here, and it's not appropriate, it's not appropriate for you to be *rude*." You know, you tell them "you're way out of line here." I think there's a limit and you need to show them where the line is. You need to let them know that it's not appropriate to treat you that way. I mean, cuz, c'mon, it's not *ever* okay to be that rude.

My observations of Happy Homes workplace practices corroborate Margaret's depiction of overt worker resistance to customers. I worked the retail floor a total of twelve months, and in that time observed a number of encounters between associates and customers where a customer's refusal to grant an associate the basic "politesse among peers" was met by this form of assertive worker push-back. I recorded eight qualifying incidents from direct observation, and five qualifying incidents that I did not directly observe but learned of through co-workers. The following tale from my time on the floor, emblematic of this type of worker strategy, depicts how a Happy Homes worker can mobilize their employer's code of well-bred conduct for the purposes of resisting a customer's assault on their status.

It was a mid-afternoon weekday shift, and I was stationed with my co-worker, Courtney, at the front of the store, adjacent to the Grand Lobby. An attractive, plucky woman in her late-30s, Courtney was relatively new to the job, employed by Happy Homes for less than six months, yet remarkably at-ease on the floor and, as one manager commented in the morning staff meeting, "a natural with the guests." Typical for a weekday, store traffic was slowing as the afternoon wore on and dinner hour approached, and as Courtney and I were busying ourselves with cleaning tasks we both happened to

spot the elegantly dressed female shopper approaching the store entrance. Seeing my arms full of cleaning supplies, Courtney suggested she ‘take’ this incoming shopper. I gave Courtney a nod, and was about to resume my task when she leaned in a little closer and, making a gesture with her eyes indicating she wanted to say something about the incoming customer, quietly mouthed the word “rich.” With that, she was off to greet the guest with this cheery welcome:

Hi, come on in! Isn’t it beautiful outside? I think it warmed up a little, at least it looks like the sun came out, I’m glad for that! Hey, it looks like you’re having a successful shopping day (pointing to the customer’s shopping bag, the visible side of which was imprinted with the name of an upscale women’s clothing store in the Aristocade mall). Oh, I love that store, they have the cutest things! How fun! And, so, what brings you into Happy Homes today?

Courtney’s greeting was standard – similar to the type of greeting her co-workers often use. Usually, the customer responds with some version of “I’m fine,” then names a goal for visiting the store (“just browsing,” “looking for a gift,” “checking out the new merchandise,” “killing time before dinner,” and so on), and this would have been what Courtney expected. At the very least, the look on Courtney’s face when she heard the guest’s response suggested she didn’t expect what she got. The newly arrived guest, having just received this friendly welcome, stopped still, looked straight at Courtney, and slowly, with no hint of smile, said “Excuse me.”

Ending on vocal up-note, “excuse me” becomes a question a listener asks when they don’t hear the speaker clearly. But there was no up-note here and, matched with the guest’s imperious expression, this “excuse me” appeared to indicate the guest had designated Courtney’s friendliness an act of interactional vandalism – an act by which a social subordinate breaks tacit rules of everyday interactions valued by the more powerful person. Whether Courtney read it precisely this way, I can’t tell, but the guest’s response did seem to put Courtney off-balance. Stripped of her usual composure, Courtney muttered something like “oh, hi, I was just, um, I mean, um, well, hi...um,” sputtering along in this manner for a few painful seconds before finding her footing and coming back with the boilerplate question: “Can I help you with something?”

Rebuffing Courtney’s earlier invitation to friendly exchange, the guest accepted this offer of service and, stating a need for dinner party decorations, began a lengthy shopping spree that far exceeded the purchase of table decor. For Courtney, this spree promised a huge sale. It also meant tolerating a great deal of discourteous and demeaning treatment. Systematically ignoring Courtney’s many efforts at friendly chit-chat, and indeed, barely acknowledging Courtney’s existence short of her facility to bring Happy Homes products to where the guest stood, the customer maintained an attitude of social superiority, treating Courtney as social inferior. Her address to Courtney was scripted almost entirely in commands, these void of the softer edge that might have come from a “would you mind?” here, or a “thank you” there. I watched as the guest ordered

Courtney to “get me a soup server,” “bring me the blue bowl,” “bring me the yellow bowl,” “put it on the table with a placement so I can see how it looks,” “find something to go in this vase,” and “bring me something taller,” and witnessed Courtney running from one end of the store to the other to fetch the requested items.

Impressively, Courtney maintained a pleasant demeanor throughout most of the exchange. For almost a half hour, as this customer dismissed Courtney’s friendly overtures while strafing her with orders, Courtney complied without complaint. But as the interchange wore on and the degrading treatment continued, Courtney’s facial expression took on a firmer set, her voice becoming slightly less cordial, her efforts at friendly exchange sounding more strained. When the customer, seeing the display model of a picture frame she liked, pointed to the stack of five boxes that held packaged frames and ordered Courtney to “take those out of their boxes and line them up for me,” Courtney surprised the customer by responding with a blunt ‘no.’ Happy Homes associates know that removing frames from their boxes without damaging the interior packaging can be a bear, and entails the even harder task of re-fitting those frames into their original Rubik’s cube of cardboard, paper and Styrofoam. It is something most associates would prefer not to do. Understandably, Courtney would want to avoid this task, especially with a display model so readily at hand. But, as Courtney’s further comments revealed, it wasn’t the task on its own that she found objectionable. It was the manner in which the task had been requested. Announcing, “No, I’m not going to do

that, I'm sorry, but no," Courtney continued and, in a short speech that was both ultimatum and reprimand, drew her line in the interactional sand:

I'm happy to help you but not if you speak to me that way. I'm sorry, I don't care, I'm not your servant, and I really don't care who you are, you can't treat me like that. I mean, I'm asking myself here, didn't anyone ever teach this lady her manners? How to say 'please' and 'thank you'? I'm happy to help, but you need to show a little respect, and *some manners*. You could start with 'please' and 'thank you.' That would be an *excellent* way to start.

Taken aback, the customer did not try to make peace. She huffed, demanding that Courtney get her "another clerk...now!" and Courtney, countering with an equally huffy "fine!," barked into her walkie-talkie a request for an associate "ASAP to frames." Almost instantaneously a replacement associate arrived, and Courtney, anxious to leave the scene, tore off toward the stock room – but not before she tossed back, for her customer's benefit, the coda: "Oh, and we're not clerks, we're *associates!*"

We've seen that Happy Homes floor workers dislike being called clerks, at times correcting customers on their use of the term. But Courtney's intervention intends a much more significant target than a customer's mistaken use of terms. With this 'no,' Courtney mounts an offensive that targets her customer's claim to social superiority -- telling the customer as much when she says, "I'm not your servant, I really don't care who you are, you can't treat me like that."

This is likewise Courtney's refusal to inhabit the subservient role of social inferior, something she communicates with the demand for "a little respect." While indirect and passive strategies help front-line Happy Homes workers to *manage* their status vulnerability, active strategies like Courtney's have the aim of *limiting* that status vulnerability – if only for an interactional moment. Courtney is drawing her version of Margaret's 'line,' "speaking up" as Margaret calls it, to mark the "limit and (show the customer) where the line is" between acceptable behavior and behavior that's "not appropriate." Capturing the spirit of direct confrontation with customers, Courtney's act of resistance exemplifies the dominant mode in which front-line Happy Homes workers take initiative, using the code of politesse as a way to interrupt their customer's performance of entitlement and thereby limit the pervasive fragility of their own symbolic status.

Though Courtney's response represents one of the more assertive, and lengthy, expressions of 'customer push back' I witnessed while working the Happy Homes floor, her example still typifies this category of resistance. In another instance, the associate Jonas drew on the "politesse-as-resistance" strategy to resist the haughty attitude of a female guest. This guest, a wealthy-looking and particularly hard-to-please 40-something woman, was in the market for a family room sofa. Jonas, who knew more about the Happy Homes furniture than most of his co-workers, was the right person for the job. Unfortunately, the customer didn't seem to see it that way. When Jonas shared

information about a piece of furniture, she challenged it, when he remarked on the benefit of a sofa style, she argued against it. For instance, when Jonas explained that the Canoga loveseat only came in green and brown, she said “that’s not true, I’ve seen it in grey” and when Jonas offered that the Oso sectional was a particularly good choice for families with children and pets, she scoffed, “are you kidding, that wouldn’t hold up five minutes.”

This customer’s behavior toward Jonas bordered on the dictatorial, and though the nature of her demands fell within Jonas’s duties, she demanded service after service, “staple this swatch to a card,” “bring me a sample of the velvet upholstery, “show me a product information sheet,” without acknowledging the work it took Jonas to satisfy these demands. Finally, Jonas -- who was known to have a talent for humorous sarcasm – went on the offensive, first noting the customer’s absence of thanks by offering her an anomalistic “you’re welcome” after handing her a sample, and then, wearing a big smile, chastising the woman for her bad manners: “You know, this isn’t Walmart. Not that either of us has ever been in a Walmart, heaven forbid! But here we say please and thank you.”

Perhaps because Jonas used humor, affirmed his customer’s status (by assuming she didn’t frequent Walmart), and capped his rebuke with a non-hostile laugh, the woman was less insulted than she might otherwise have been (the fact that Jonas is male may have also had an influence on the interaction, working as well to Jonas’s benefit). I

overheard the guest apologize to Jonas, and when I later saw Jonas walking her to the door, the two of them were smiling and engaged in friendly chat. This bonhomie notwithstanding, Jonas had deployed “politesse-as-resistance” against his customer, calling her out on her rudeness as a way to limit her status assault.

And, taking the bonhomie into account, Jonas’s incident represents another potential pay-off for the worker who practices this type of overt resistance with the customer. When the resistance results in bad blood between associate and guest, the worker receives a pay-off by preserving her symbolic gains in status. However, in the case where “politesse-as-resistance” works to elicit respectful treatment from an upscale guest, the worker pay-off may well be realized not just in preservation but further *gain* in symbolic status. Most workers do not possess Jonas’s talent for humor, at least not in the heat of the humiliating exchange, and from my observation, Jonas’s “happy ending” is rare. But, as his case demonstrates, it is not impossible.

Happy Homes workers also deploy an abbreviated version of the “politesse-as-resistance” strategy. This shorter version is the most common, likely because it *is* short and thus, fairly easy to deliver. In this abbreviated version, front-line workers rebuke their guests for ‘bad manners’ – again, ‘bad manners’ serving as a stand-in for a customer’s effort to pull rank -- with a short but clear, and sometimes one-worded, quip that communicates to the customer she is in the wrong for declining to extend civility to the worker. This resembles Jonas’s use of the anomalistic “you’re welcome” -- and I’ve

heard of other associates using exactly this sarcastic response (though without the humor). Still, this version of the strategy will often proceed by the worker intervening on a guest's imperious behavior to demand a 'please' or a 'thank you.'

The case of Rhonda demonstrates this well. Helping a duo she later described as "the stuck-up ladies who lunch," Rhonda was having her fill of their dismissive behavior and, when one of the women ordered her to fetch some draperies, Rhonda snapped back, "Don't you mean 'please'?" As is fairly typical when workers use this abbreviated strategy, Rhonda did not hang around to hear her customer's response, and dashed off toward the back of the store before she could catch one of the women saying "oh my god, she's in a bad mood today, who does she think she is?"

The associate, Gwen, confessing to using a similar tactic with "rude guests," admits she has "a lot of practice" with this approach. "One of these days," she predicts, "I'm going to get myself in trouble." Asked why, she explains:

Because when that (a guest's bad treatment) happens to me, that 'go get me this, go get me that,' I say something, they're going 'get me this, get me that' and I'll say out loud "please!" And when I go to get them something and then I come back and give it to them and they don't say anything, I'll say out loud "thank you!" So that's why I say one of these days I'm going to get myself in trouble. But if that happens you know what I'll say? I'll say there's just so much you can take. Some of these people don't have any manners at all. And that's not my fault. *I* have manners, so what do you expect?!

According to Gwen, the front-line worker's use of the abbreviated strategy, ostensibly a regular part of Gwen's own repertoire, should be understood as the foreseeable outcome of a situation where the retail clerk has manners but the retail shopper doesn't. Like her compatriots, Gwen is using the concept of "manners" to frame, and thus to judge, the customer's performance of entitlement. This makes sense, not only because her employer has provided the perfect interpretative tool with its code of politesse but because the other option, that is leveling a negative judgment directly on the customer's *position* of social and economic privilege, negates the logic that informs, and legitimizes, workers' own status goals.

Still, it is precisely the customer's superior socio-economic position -- expressed in the situation and reproduced through the interaction -- that confronts the worker as the initial challenge. To see this we need only consider the case where an associate receives rudeness from a guest they take to be their class inferior.

Though guests from the ranks that make up the class inferiors of Happy Homes clerks (the lower range of the working classes and the under-class) are a rarity at Happy Homes, the store does get the odd envoy from the leagues of what one worker calls the 'riff-raff.' And though the fact of any guest's class membership is really a perpetual mystery to the Happy Homes associate, the play of the Happy Homes floor is the play of appearances, and front-line workers tend to believe they can spot the lower classes, for instance, trusting signals like shabby, out-of-date and ill-fitting clothing, a person's poor

grooming, sallow skin, and/or an excess (or extreme deficit) of body weight.

Interestingly, when these lower class signifiers are particularly pronounced in any one guest it tends to arouse the suspicions of Happy Homes personnel and, indeed, as part of its loss prevention protocol, Happy Homes management warns associates to be on the look-out for the degenerate guest (especially if the guest is wearing oversized clothing).

Normally, these types of guests enter, survey the landscape (and price tags) and leave apace, but some will wander about the store and interact with associates. In the case where an ostensibly 'class-inferior' guest shows rudeness to a Happy Homes clerk (and this does happen more than you'd guess), the clerk is extremely unlikely to deploy "politesse-as-resistance." In fact, in the overwhelming majority of cases, workers respond with a form of noblesse oblige (the key exception is a response of suspicious watchfulness, also very different from "politesse-as-resistance").

For instance, while helping a beggarly-looking female guest sort through clearance items, the associate Cindy cheerfully acquiesced to the guest's orders to "hold this," "move that," and "get me another of these," though not once receiving a 'please' or 'thank you' for her efforts. Furthermore, when the guest, trying to dig through a pile of clearance placemats, shoved Cindy rudely to the side, pronouncing "you're in my way," Cindy's response was to smile and say, "oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't realize, here, let me help you get to the ones at the back." Far from taking offense and mounting push-back, Cindy was friendly, helpful, and accommodating to this very rude guest. This is typical

of how Happy Homes workers comport themselves with the hoi polloi, even when the hoi polloi cannot show any manners. This pattern, in turn, suggests an interesting possibility: it's not rudeness per se that triggers a worker to pull out the politesse-as-resistance strategy – it's rudeness as *surrogate* for a customer's socio-economic superiority.

Framing the behavior of entitlement as rudeness gives Gwen the justification she needs to overstep the behavioral constraints of her retail service role and admonish the guest. In this way, the broad and flexible application of the code of politesse is a tool in Gwen's own project of crafting symbolic status (arguably, a worker's noblesse oblige also serves this function, but under a different set of conditions). In a field where the customer's enactment of privilege shuts down workers' avenues to status enhancement, framing the customer's display of entitlement as a matter of manners is thus an effective technique for the worker who wishes to protest the social and economic inequalities that position him as subordinate (though, granted that protest is confined to the micro-setting).

In this sense, politesse-as-resistance is the worker's resourceful re-invention of his own identity labor toward the formation of political critique. As things actually play out in the Happy Homes workplace, this political critique never really reaches past its nascent state. The highly individualized, and highly personalized, status contests that take place on the Happy Homes floor are fundamentally unfriendly to structural analysis, evoking instead a highly constrained and situationally-bounded concept of power that must, for the Happy Homes worker, be re-negotiated with each new customer encounter.

Taken together, these examples of “politesse-as-resistance” suggest that when Happy Homes workers apply the rules of polite social exchange to the commercial retail encounter, a customer’s attempt to pull rank can elicit a fairly forceful worker reaction – a reaction that, as Gwen implies, violates the norms of their occupational role. Coming back to Courtney’s case, we can see how forceful this reaction can be. Though Courtney initiates her resistance by refusing to accommodate the customer’s request, she follows this up with a threat to withdraw her services altogether, a threat she delivers when she says, “I’m happy to help you but not if you speak to me that way,” emphasized with the declarative “you can’t treat me like that.” Though, again, Courtney’s example shows more force than most, Happy Homes associates can be assertive with this strategy. And, while the worker’s power over the guest is severely limited, associates will pull out the one chit they do possess – that is, the power to provide or withhold service – and, with comments such as “if I’m going to continue working with you, I’d ask that you take a more civil tone,” or “you’re not making me want to help you,” couple their rebuke to the strongest threat they can muster.

Whether forceful, abbreviated, or humorous, resistance of this sort is anathema to principles of customer service. In general, retail clerks are expected by management and by customers to provide services as related to the retail encounter without complaint. It is no different at Happy Homes. In fact, as we saw earlier, Happy Homes management has a particularly expansive definition of customer service such that, along with the typical

retail services, for instance, locating specific items for a customer, answering questions about products, ringing up sales and bagging merchandise (or, removing frames from packages), Happy Homes management expects front-line workers to extend a plethora of other courtesies to customers, such as assisting with packages and coats, helping a customer entertain and corral her small children, or providing the customer a place to rest on floor model furniture should he seem weary. Befitting the aura of high-class hospitality Happy Homes management wants its workers to create, managers direct front-line workers to regard the customer as social guest, with all the generosity, attentiveness and pleantry this implies. As such, workers' overt resistance to customers seems a direct departure from the principles that make up the system of Happy Homes labor process control.

This appearance is deceiving, and the fact that Happy Homes workers, whose consent to the work rests in status gain, devise a strategy for use *against* customers so as to limit the vulnerability of that status, attests to a contradiction of the Happy Homes labor process. This contradiction has very specific contours related to the platform upon which Happy Homes workers mount their offensive against customers. While the stakes of the demeaning service interaction can rest in status, when associates reach their limit with snobbish, condescending guests, they deploy the terms of politesse to locate, define, and communicate that limit. The employee who practices politesse-as-resistance is mounting an offensive *based* on her employer's official code of conduct, and this

constitutes a form of resistance that upholds a code of work governance in principle, while simultaneously subverting it in practice.

As Margaret explains, and the stories of other associates demonstrate, when the high-class Happy Homes guest pulls rank on an associate and, asserting a role of social superiority, exceeds the worker's tolerance for status threat, the worker who pushes back mobilizes her resistance as a call for civility. In Courtney's terms, it is a call for the customer to practice "respect and (show) some manners," evinced, at the very least, by the effort to say "please" and "thank you." As we've seen, her co-workers are looking for much the same thing. And, indeed, it is the customer's failure to proffer 'please' and 'thanks,' or, in short, a failure to practice good manners, that gives these workers the *justification* they need to breach the element of their own occupational protocol that otherwise requires them, as retail service workers, to accept the demeaning treatment. Politesse is their leverage, and their offensive is aimed at the unequal exchange and distribution of courtesies in their interactions with customers. Yet, insofar as the balance of courtesies is also the expression of a balance of power, these workers are drawing on the principle of politesse to mount situational challenges to the power inequalities that define their relationship with their upscale guests.

A Happy Homes worker's justification for mounting this strategy resides in the worker's perception that a customer has transgressed the rules of polite social intercourse. For this to happen, the worker must apply the rules of polite social interaction to the

service interaction, something her superiors encourage. But she must also extend those rules past the organizational goal of worker self-evaluation to an evaluation of customer conduct. And this is something her superiors don't want. Yet, as Margaret's earlier telling suggests, the worker who has successfully internalized the vision of her commercial workplace as a social setting, duly incorporating the notion of the self as high-class host into her identity, is poised to experience this kind of slippage. And, when this slippage occurs, a customer's lack of civility becomes, to borrow Margaret's words, an "extreme (form of) rudeness" for which "there's no excuse." Almost by definition, the Happy Homes worker who reframes a customer's act of pulling rank as *inexcusable* rudeness will be motivated to push back.

Pushing back violates the occupational norms of front-line retail clerking, but not the norms of politesse. This is what Margaret is getting at when she claims there is no excuse for rudeness. Though the well-bred host, true to politesse, may be expected to tolerate or ignore a guest's minor improprieties, she is also expected to thwart, if not also censure, a guest who commits significant transgressions of the rules of polite society. In other words, the code of high-class politesse includes the right to set limits. Of course, Happy Homes management does not intend to import all the meanings high-class politesse takes in the world-at-large into its world of work – it wants workers to internalize the principle as a guide for their behavior, but not along with the right to this limit-setting. Yet, in the context of the status maneuvers that play out the Happy Homes

floor, a worker's interpretation of politesse, and her rights therein, reflects the pull of her class anxieties and the sensitivity she experiences to symbolic violence. This is the deeper motivation in Happy Homes workers' active resistance toward customers. The principle of politesse that allows workers to judge their customer deserving of push back is the means, not the motive.

Customer transgressions of the type Courtney and her co-workers encounter and Margaret describes are inevitable, their potential written into the structural imbalance of power that orders the relationship between the Happy Homes worker and the high-class Happy Homes clientele. A customer's incivility – while unfortunate and unpleasant -- is not inappropriate to this arrangement of status and power. However, recalling Margaret's depiction, the customer claim to social superiority, expressed in the refusal to offer the clerk civil niceties, hits the Happy Homes worker as an inexcusable form of rudeness, and an offense to the rules of politesse. This is what Margaret expresses when she says, "it's never okay to be that rude," it is also Gwen's message when, commenting "there's just so much you can take," she absolves herself of fault on the grounds that she has manners while "some of these people don't have any manners at all."

Happy Homes workers actively resisting a customer's status challenge, and motivated by a need to protect their symbolic status gains, find their *will* to do so by privileging the principles of politesse over and above those that guide their paid occupational role as retail service clerk. As Courtney later explained when reflecting on

her run-in, she knew her behavior with that guest could get her in “deep s—t with management,” and does believe that, as a rule, associates “shouldn’t talk back to their guests,” yet she also reasons that associates “can’t be expected to swallow” a customer’s rudeness, feels deeply that she “couldn’t help” herself from defending “the principle of the thing,” and has conviction that her action was valid.

Insofar as Happy Homes frames its front-line work as high-class hospitality and its workers as high-class hosts, clinching the deal with a principled code of politesse, this strategy of worker dissent, embedded in “politesse-as-resistance,” is *not* a fantastic contortion of the system of Happy Homes labor control. It is its logical extension. When symbolic status becomes destabilized through interaction with an imperious upscale guest, the worker’s class anxieties – typically a mobilizing force for their consent – has the energy of a force of resistance. Combined with the work governance principles of politesse, the status dynamics of the front-line labor process thus allow a logic of resistance to flow smoothly out of a logic of consent. And this is the other, much deeper, level of contradiction that runs through this branded retail labor process. As Gwen might put it, if you encourage low-level retail workers to re-identify as high-class hosts and internalize the principle of politesse, “what do you expect?”

Although “politesse-as-resistance” may come as a necessary outgrowth of the Happy Homes system of work governance, managers don’t like it, and the workers who practice it are running a risk. Luckily for Courtney, there was no manager around to

witness her exchange. Of course, in such an instance, a customer could track down a manager to complain on the spot, or lodge their complaint retroactively by phone, or with a subsequent visit to the store. But this just doesn't seem to happen. Of the incidents I witnessed where Happy Homes workers used the politesse-as-resistance strategy, only one had a manager witness (and thus brought the worker negative repercussions), and, at the time of this research, the workers involved in the other incidents had not received any form of management reprimand for their acts of resistance. This suggests that the customers who received resistance from these workers did not complain to Happy Homes management, or, at the very least, did not lodge a complaint specific enough to be traced to the culpable worker. Feasibly, the customer does not find a negative encounter with the sales clerk significant enough to merit the time and energy it would take to call or revisit the store and speak to a manager.

But not all Happy Homes workers are as lucky as this group, and the associate, Gwen, was on the mark when she claimed this practice could get one in trouble with management. As I observed during my field research, Happy Homes managers strongly disapprove of workers using the code of politesse against their customer and a manager who catches an associate rebuking a customer will reprimand that worker, and may even issue her a formal warning. I witnessed one such incident while on Friday evening floor duty, when my fellow associate, Evelyn, chastised a customer for declining to offer Evelyn "a simple thank you" for her help. To be fair, this guest, a well-dressed middle-

aged female, had taken a big chunk of Evelyn's time, during which she'd run Evelyn ragged, given clipped, impatient answers to most of Evelyn's questions, and rolled her eyes disdainfully when Evelyn attempted cordiality. It appeared to be a classic class snubbing, something most front-line workers experience during their Happy Homes tenure and often try to manage with indirect strategies. In this case, Evelyn – who had become visibly unhappy with this customer's treatment – chose the more direct route. After handing the customer her bags, Evelyn made an 11th hour attempt to push back on this shopper's snobbery, calling out to her customer's back: "a simple thank you would've be nice." Not sotto voce, her comment -- audible to the departing customer – was also audible to the group of Happy Homes workers and guests milling around nearby which, unfortunately for Evelyn, included an on-duty assistant manager. Rushing first to offer the customer profuse apology for Evelyn's behavior, the manager promptly returned to where Evelyn stood at the register to give her this stern reprimand:

We do not insult our guests, do you understand? Ever. If you feel like you're going to lose it, take a couple of deep breaths, or call in another associate, or if you have to, just walk away, but don't ever take it out on the guest. Do you understand? I want you to consider this a warning, okay? This is a warning. I don't ever want to see you do that again.

Though this reprimand was meant for Evelyn, with several associates standing near the register (myself included), it was hardly a private supervisory moment, and those of us assembled were, with Evelyn, reminded to choose our battles carefully. If tempted

to assertively resist demeaning treatment from our customers, we would want to make absolutely sure we were positioned in a manager-free zone.

Though, as Margaret reports, overt resistance in relation to customers is not overly common, it is a predictable part of life on the Happy Homes floor. When interactions with upscale customers go well, high-class politesse is the worker's ticket to symbolic status. But when interactions with upscale customers go south, high-class politesse becomes the key tool of worker resistance. Still, the Happy Homes associate deploying "politesse-as-resistance" is asserting the rightness of that principle. If the principle of politesse is an anchor for productive front-line work at Happy Homes, this means that the worker, in her push back on customers, is simultaneously *reinforcing* the foundation of her own productive identity labor. Managers may feel that this strategy is an offense to the smooth and proper operation of the Happy Homes work process. In the moment, it is. However, in the long run "politesse-as-resistance" may contribute as much to work governance as it takes.

In this chapter we have looked at a distinct class of service worker resistance, that is, worker resistance aimed at service recipients. But what happens when workers push back on management, and resist the conditions of their work? In the chapter that follows, I take up this question asking how Happy Homes workers construct and deploy strategies of resistance toward management, exploring the uneven outcomes that befall those workers who oppose their managers' demands.

CHAPTER 7

WORKER STRATEGIES WITH MANAGEMENT

In point of fact, the Happy Homes labor process proceeds with remarkable smoothness. Relatively unobstructed by employees' resistance to customers, the front-line work process also sees little systematic disruption as a result of workers' resistance to management demands – a fact that attests to the effectiveness of the Happy Homes branded labor process in securing its front-line workers' consent.

Of course, like other retail businesses, the Happy Homes store experiences some of the more common forms of retail worker misbehavior, namely time theft, truancy, and pilferage, but Happy Homes management reports that the rates on these are low. Arguably, the store's system of technical control, embodied in such things as surveillance cameras, time clocks, and computerized inventory tracking, helps keep these rates down (and, for all practical purposes, the large size of most of most Happy Homes products poses an additional barrier to employee theft of merchandise). Still, Happy Homes managers – who are proud of the low numbers – point to such things as associate job satisfaction, respect for the brand, respect for management, and appreciation of the generous employee discount, to explain their employees' obedience to the rules. As one manager puts it, “most of our associates enjoy their job...() they're here because they want to be, so we don't see much in that area (time theft, “short shifting,” tardiness, truancy).” Adding to this line of thought, another manager boasts, “yeah, sure, we do

loss prevention, that's standard in retail, but I think (the low rate of pilferage) is about associates respecting the brand, and respecting their managers, and the discount, the associates really appreciate that we give them the discount.”

In large part, these managers are right. Overall, associates want to be at Happy Homes, have a high respect for the Happy Homes brand, appreciate the size of their discount, and have overall positive regard for their managers. Nonetheless, Happy Homes isn't completely free of management-worker conflict. There are conditions of work, traceable to contradictions of the front-line labor process, that create dissatisfaction in the Happy Homes associate, and this dissatisfaction has the potential to ignite resistance to work demands and opposition to management. The management-worker conflict that arises at Happy Homes tends to occur in relation to one of two categories of worker concern: those having directly to do with work demands, and those having to do with work compensation. In this chapter, I examine workers' oppositional strategies in relation to the first of these areas of conflict, looking at the complaints and responses Happy Homes associates develop in reaction to unwelcome labor demands.

WORKER RESISTANCE TO JOB DEMANDS

The most common form of conflict between Happy Homes workers and management stems from an exaggerated contradiction in the associate role itself. On the one hand, the role of associate requires the performance of high-class hospitality. This is the mainstay of the associate's labor, and it is something most associates embrace, many

to the point of incorporating it into their own identity. However, the associate job also entails the performance of work that is physically demanding, and often quite dirty. Happy Homes associates are called on to do forms of light-industrial labor, for instance, unpacking shipping boxes, climbing stock room ladders, and lifting heavy merchandise. They also do janitorial labor, including the lighter cleaning tasks that fill up the lull spots in their day, and the heavier, ‘facilities-maintenance’ cleaning that occurs in the hours before the store opens and after it closes. Associates, who can gently balk at any variety of these light industrial and janitorial duties, tend to reserve most disfavor for the off-hours janitorial work involved in maintaining front and back regions of the brick and mortar store – duties such as vacuuming rugs, sweeping and washing floors, cleaning the break room, and cleaning the store’s two bathrooms. Of course, our associates are in good company – there are few people in the world who would, say, embrace the job of scrubbing toilets, and it would be a surprise if the associate’s array of cleaning chores popped up on anyone’s top-ten list of fun things to do. Still, the real problem Happy Homes workers have with these chores is in reconciling the vast *difference* between what it means to be a toilet-scrubber and what it means to be a high-class host. And it is at this point of difference that worker resistance can surface.

Charging its associates with the “clean, well-lit” job of high-class hospitality *and* the “down-and-dirty” work of facilities maintenance, Happy Homes management creates two spheres of contradiction for these employees. On one hand, there is an ideological

contradiction. As broadly understood, the role of high-class host carries the message that one is above the execution of menial, physically laborious chores, and most certainly excused from the very worst of them. Conversely, the role of low-level janitor implies one is ‘below’ the activity of high-class hosting, assumed unlikely to possess the refinement required for participation in the activity of well-bred sociability. Simply put, it does not make sense (at the level of meaning) to pair high-class host to janitor, and, as we shall see in a minute, this pairing creates cognitive dissonance, and identity and status anxiety, for employees.

In addition, Happy Homes management’s decision to combine hosting and janitorial roles presents front-line workers with a complementary range of practical conflicts. For instance, what one wears to host at Happy Homes is hardly what one would wear, or prefer to wear, when sweeping dusty floors or cleaning dirty toilets, and it is nearly, if not fully, impossible for associates to dress for work in a way that would adequately fit both roles. These opposing valences of the associate role, where associates must be both the high-level host and the low-level help, confront the worker with conflicting demands that her manager, turning a blind eye, does very little to mediate. Considering the managerial stake in maintaining uninterrupted control over its labor process and its laborers, this is a mistake. Faced with these contradictions, and unaided by their managers, front-line Happy Homes workers are apt to respond with strategies unfriendly to the interests of Happy Homes management – but friendly to their own.

Workers' Custodial Duties

Happy Homes associates experience cognitive dissonance when they try to incorporate the notion of custodial duties into their occupational self-image. As we've seen, associates tend to see themselves as cultivated hosts and professional ambassadors of the high-status Happy Homes brand, and they realize a fair measure of personal value from this occupational identity. When managers insert custodial work into their responsibilities, front-line workers spot a troublesome contradiction of roles that can lead them to resent the assignment and question manager decision-making. For instance, the associate Delia, citing heavy cleaning duty as a job dislike, explains how this low-status labor requirement creates role confusion for the Happy Homes associate and thus helps open the door on a critical view of management:

The managers think cleaning is part of the job, but I have issues with it. To me, it doesn't make sense to have associates cleaning the store, we're here to help the guests, it's that thing where you have to have what it takes to get along with them and be professional. That's how I think of it. I'm a Happy Homes associate, not some Walmart clerk. The managers ask me to clean the store, and it's like, 'wait, that doesn't compute.' I don't know why they do that, to be honest, it's a real issue for me.

Whereas elsewhere in her interview, Delia spoke in positive terms about her Happy Homes job and her Happy Homes managers, when discussing the heavy cleaning duties she is critical of a managerial logic that would assign such low-level work to a Happy Homes associate. As she reasons, front-line Happy Homes workers are special

because they “have what it takes” to socialize with the Happy Homes clientele and, although Delia doesn’t say this explicitly, it follows from her reasoning that persons possessed of professional expertise in the Happy Homes arts of sociability are not of the ranks you’d draw from to do janitorial work. To emphasize this point, Delia reminds her listener that she is “an Happy Homes associate, (and) not some Walmart clerk.” So it is that when Happy Homes management asks Delia to add store clean-up to her duty roster, it hands her an equation that, as she says, “doesn’t compute.” Seeing her associate position at Happy Homes in much the way her managers want her to see it, that is, as possessing significant symbolic status and thus elevated far above other front-line retail jobs, Delia makes the sensible extrapolation that this position is, or should be, exempt from the world of hard, dirty janitorial labor of the type that presumably burdens the likes of the low-level Walmart worker.

Many of Delia’s co-workers experience similar confusion over being asked to play janitor, and like Delia, question why Happy Homes management would ask them to do this sort of work. Of course, associates don’t particularly like the heavy cleaning work, but their main complaint seems to lie in the way this management decision offends the putative status of their position. Moreover, since the fact of an associate’s custodial role is not made clear at the time of hiring, nor mentioned in training, the discovery of these duties can come as an unpleasant surprise to the working associate. As the associate Rhonda explains, the key element of the associate job – as she has learned it

from her managers -- is to serve as public representative of the fashionable, high-status Happy Homes brand. This, Rhonda says, is what she understood when she was hired, and when Happy Homes managers ended up throwing custodial duties into the mix, it came as a big surprise. Indeed, listening to Rhonda, we pick up her suspicion that she could have been hornswoggled by her employer:

A huge part of our job is about representing the brand to the public, and we're on the floor and we're representing Happy Homes so how we look and act is everything. This isn't just my idea, it's how they (managers) make it out when you're hired, and that's how they were with me, they didn't say, 'oh, by the way, you're the cleaning-lady.' I didn't know about it and it was a month before they put me on opening and then I had to vacuum the store. That really took me off-guard. I had *no idea* that was supposed to be part of my job.

We might caution Rhonda that since it is a widely accepted practice for retail management to delegate light industrial and janitorial tasks to front-line workers (and such tasks are spelled out in the official BLS description of retail clerk), it would not be unusual for retail management to consider these duties implicit in the retail clerk's employment contract. But if we did, we'd be missing the larger point. Rhonda was encouraged to think of herself as a brand ambassador, and if she couldn't predict she'd be given custodial work it is because *this* category of work does not fit with *that* cognitive schema.

The associate, Cindy, who typically works the opening shift, and is thereby accustomed to Happy Homes janitorial work, is no more ready than her co-workers to

accept these duties as a reasonable entailment of the associate role. Cindy's reasons agree with Delia's and Rhonda's, but she spins her explanation in a different way. Asking us to imagine how this situation might look to the Happy Homes customer, Cindy uses the 'customer's eyes' to highlight her own concerns that the image of an associate with scrub brush in hand undermines an associate's status as Happy Homes branded worker:

And I don't think our guests would like it if they knew we did the cleaning, I don't think it looks good. Like Tuesday, Maria (a manager) told me to scrub stuff off the front floor, and this lady came to the doors and tried to see in (and) saw me on my knees, I mean, it's like, what if she came in later and I helped her? 'Oh, weren't you just scrubbing the floor?' It doesn't look good.

In the associate's janitorial duties Cindy sees a role contradiction that she feels would be obvious to outsiders – obvious enough, she predicts, that the Happy Homes customer privy to the facts will be jarred by the disjuncture. Yet, Cindy's key point may have less to do with the customer's impression of associates than with the associates' impression of themselves. Though an occasional passerby might catch a peek at a Happy Homes associate doing store clean-up, insofar as the mall sees little traffic during the pre- and post store hours when associates do their janitorial work, Cindy's concern – as stated -- is overblown. Undoubtedly, Cindy, who's worked the opening shift for over a year, knows this. Still, by borrowing the customer's perspective, Cindy can successfully pinpoint the discrepancy between a management directive that has its associates playing

high-class hosts and the one that would have those same associates shouldering custodial duties. And this discrepancy, as Cindy implies, can unsettle a Happy Homes associate's self-image, causing the associate not only a generic confusion over job roles but also a specified, and quite personal, anxiety over their own status.

For the most part Happy Homes management is successful in obscuring the low-level, low-status character of its front-line retail job, however, when managers decide to delegate janitorial work to associates they help bring the ideological tension between high-class hosting and low-level clerking much closer to the surface. As these examples suggest, associates are sensitive to this shift in occupational meaning. Responding with a mix of cognitive confusion and status anxiety, workers who are called by management to drop the identity of well-bred host for janitor can become insecure about the symbolic status that otherwise serves to anchor their consent to the job. Thus positioned, the Happy Homes associate is primed to develop a negative appraisal of management and, as we'll see in a minute, can become motivated to deploy oppositional strategies that might resolve the conflicted, and conflict-producing, job demands.

The Happy Homes management decision to turn associates into custodians creates more than ideological tensions. In grafting this category of physically laborious and dirty work onto the associate role, Happy Homes management presents its workers with some fairly sticky practical problems as well. The custodial tasks that management asks its workers to do – vacuuming, sweeping, bathroom cleaning, etc. – are at best dusty and

dirty jobs, but when combined with the poor equipment Happy Homes provides, the sheer size of the store, and the volume of usage, hence dirt, that the store gets in any one day, these tasks can become the stuff of a downright sweaty, filthy job. Yet, these associates are not dressed in any way remotely suited to this type of work. If we recall the fastidious personal grooming and semi-professional attire required by the Happy Homes dress code, we see that the associate faced with the work of cleaning inherits at least one perplexing problem: how does a clean, well-kept and fashionably dressed person stay that way while doing heavy-duty custodial work?

The answer is not simple. To do the primary job of high-class hospitality, Happy Homes workers must dress the part, and both male and female associates live up to this requirement, often with considerable enthusiasm. Not once in my months on the floor did I directly observe a dress-code transgression, and although I heard stories about employees who tested the limits of the dress code, the tales of workers who stretched the limits upward, to over-dress for the job, were as many as stories of employees who fell below requirements. And, the mention of those who under-dressed were stories of employees who did this unintentionally, either because they misinterpreted the requirements or because they failed to find an opportunity to change en route from another venue.

In a word, Happy Homes associates are remarkably compliant with their employer's dress code. But it is also something more than this. With daily exposure to a

natty up-class clientele and immersion in a work culture that values aesthetics, status and style, associates -- both male and female -- tend to be keenly aware of matters of personal fashion and, putting a great deal of stake in their own appearance, excel beyond their employer's minimum requirements to dress in a way that, by deliberate effort, looks sharp, stylish, and higher-end. Moreover, the "dressing up" part of their job is something Happy Homes associates seem to enjoy. Indeed, as one associate describes, getting dressed up can contribute to associate positive self-feeling and help 'psych' the associate up for her hospitality labors:

You come into work, you're all dressed up...you're on, it's show time, and it puts you in this space where you think 'hey, I look good, I feel good, I'm ready for the party.' It's fun...and that's mostly where your head's at when you come in the doors.

The Happy Homes front-line staff presents as a *very* well dressed crew -- a feat that undoubtedly takes their time, their care, and some amount of their money. Thus, as both a requirement of their work and a matter of personal pride, Happy Homes workers make a sizable investment in looking good at work, more often than not, succeeding in their goal. Throw in cleaning duty and a lot of the good stuff begins to unravel.

Groomed to perfection and often dressed to the nines, associates are asked to get down and get dirty. Instructed by management to tackle the job of vacuuming, sweeping and scrubbing their grimy acre of retail space, these well-dressed workers encounter a variety of practical challenges, few of which can be easily resolved within the strictures

of workplace rules. The associate, Rita, captures this dilemma when she talks about the cleaning task she most dislikes:

I don't like the cleaning part, I really hate the sweeping, it kicks up dirt and it gets all over you, your clothes, and in your hair – and your shoes, that's the worst, it covers your shoes. Most of us wear nice shoes, I do...they don't allow us to wear crummy shoes, you don't care about getting crummy shoes dirty but you can't wear them.

Rita's janitorial tasks are secondary to her primary role as well-dressed, fine-carriage host, but when these requirements of the primary job role meet up against the demands of her secondary labors, Rita is hit with a practical dilemma. How do you keep your well-pressed, well-groomed visage intact while whisking around midst a cloud of dirt and dust? By doing the custodial work management requires, Rita may also find that the fall-out from her secondary role, in the form of dusty shoes, incurs a measure of collateral damage to her first. In other words, for the Rita who plays well-bred Happy Homes host, the fact of dust-covered shoes can cost her some measure of pride in her appearance, make her land short of her employer's grooming expectations, and conceivably lose her some credibility points with guests.

Has Rita found a way to avoid this shoe problem? "Well," Rita replies, "I've tried holding the broom out from my body, like this (mimes the action) but the dust still settles on my shoes, and it hurts my back." Asked if she's come up with any other solutions, Rita shares a story of the time she tried out what she thought was a "bright

idea” for protecting her shoes, only to have it fail. In itself, Rita’s fix for the dusty shoe problem was simple, practical, and resourceful, however, when it ran up against exigencies of her other work demands, it fell short of the mark:

One morning I tried wearing old tennies. I had black heels that I put in my locker to get them before we opened. I told Luella (a manager), because you’re not supposed to wear tennies and I wanted her to know I had the heels. She was like, ‘okay, as long as you have the heels with you, that’s fine,” and I’m like, great. So, um, that was my bright idea. But Rick (another manager) called a one-minute, and you get stuck there (...) then they said, ‘ohmygod, we’re supposed to be open 5 minutes ago,” they’re unlocking the doors, I’ve got the tennies on, so I run in the back and put the heels on, but the managers didn’t like it because I wasn’t supposed to be off the floor then.

Rita reports that since this failed attempt she has not tried the shoe change trick again. She is right in her reasons -- floor workers cannot count on getting a break between their pre-opening duties and their appearance on the floor, making the shoe change gambit impractical. My own experience on the opening shift confirms Rita’s observations, as there is virtually no time, and in fact, often an overlap, between the associate’s morning duties and the store’s opening, and associates typically scurry from their cleaning tasks, restocking duties, or one-minute meetings -- adjusting personae as they go -- to greet the first customers of the day in the required 30 second time-frame. A lot of the Happy Homes workday follows this type of “time crunch” logic, where one endeavor can’t be finished before another one starts, and for those on the opening shift there’s little room to break from duties. This suggests an added caution to the morning

floor sweeper -- one Rita neglects to mention, but my own experience bears out: while you definitely can't bank on having time to change into another pair of shoes, don't be surprised if you barely have time to bend down and dust off the pair you're wearing.

Rita's problem is not unique. Other associates report similar frustrations with the cleaning tasks, and like Rita, have tried to seek out their own solutions. But, as the associate Natalie tells it, trying to find a work-around that suits management's custodial biddings and preserves dress and grooming standards might be a fool's game:

Nobody likes it, but honestly I don't...I don't know what you can do. If you're going to be cleaning you're going to be getting dirty. Like the vacs, if you have to vacuum you'll be sweating, or dirty water's going to splash up from the bucket (used when cleaning the bathrooms). It's just how it is, I mean, I know some people try not to get sweaty or whatever, but I don't think you can do it.

Natalie has a point and, when combined with a rapid-fire work pace, the inherently dirty nature of cleaning means that Happy Homes workers' goal of maintaining an upscale, neat appearance while completing custodial tasks is hard to realize. But there is yet another factor adding to our associates' dilemma, and this has to do with the tools Happy Homes gives them to do these cleaning tasks. For all the money Happy Homes pours into loss prevention and technical means of labor control, it doesn't appear to invest a lot into the appliances and tools needed for store maintenance, and the poor equipment it provides tends to aggravate the employees' dilemma, making the

already difficult cleaning tasks that much harder. The most obvious case of this is with the store's vacuum cleaners.

The vacuum is arguably the most critical tool an employee needs to clean the store – the dust, debris and dirt that daily collects on the Happy Homes rugs and wood floors has to be removed and without a working vacuum associates are left to sweep up debris where they can and hand pick debris where they can't. Yet, while the absence of a working vacuum cleaner creates the greatest employee hardship, the machine is in itself a worthy object of employee dread. As Natalie points out, these are the kind of machines that make their operator sweat. Heavy, cumbersome, and loud, the store's three industrial grade vacuums are also tip-prone, hard to push, and impossibly awkward to swivel, factors that have earned these machines the nickname of the "monsters" among some front-line employees. Moreover, as these vacs are also old and poorly maintained, they are constantly breaking, making it rare to find more than one in full working order. Since broken machines aren't tagged, the question of which vac is operational can often only be answered by schlepping the monsters, one by one, from their jumble in the stockroom corner to try them out at the front of the store.

A working vac is not guaranteed, and an associate may also find all three machines out-of-order. This is a cringe-worthy eventuality, not only because it can mean bending your back and using your hands to remove floor debris, but because the most likely candidate for the job is one who's already absorbed measurable frustration, and a

fair bit of physical exertion, toting three non-working vacs from the stockroom to the floor and, as the machines can't stay on the floor, back to the stockroom again. As a case in point, problems with the store's vacs reflect Happy Homes overall failure to invest in good cleaning equipment that, if more reliable and user-friendly, could make the associate's custodial duty less burdensome. As it is, poor equipment adds considerably to the associate's custodial hardships and, combined with the problems of inappropriate clothing and workplace time shortage, can make cleaning duty into a positively awful assignment.

Dirty work, poor equipment, and role confusion combine to make custodial labor a burden to front-line Happy Homes workers. For some workers, the icing on the cake is that Happy Homes managers don't do the cleaning work themselves. In their interviews, several workers make mention of this fact and express resentment toward managers for keeping their own hands clean while freely asking workers to get theirs dirty (five of the workers interviewed for this study made direct mention, another two implied the point), and in daily life on the Happy Homes floor, workers will discuss this complaint among the ranks. The associate, Delia, makes the point well. Describing a strong dislike for the Happy Homes cleaning work, Delia suggests that her resentment toward these duties would be likely to soften if Happy Homes managers would try to pitch in, even if all they gave it was a token effort:

It's hard, it's frustrating...because it's kinda like, okay, and I will say the part that's probably the most frustrating to me is the managers don't do it *at all*...which I understand if they've got lots of other stuff going on but I think if even just every now and then, they were in the back room helping or they were vacuuming every now and then, I wouldn't resent it so much. I think it's important, even if you're a manager and you have a lot going on, I think just to pick up the vacuum cleaner, for five minutes, who cares...just do it and show you're not any different...

Delia's sentiment, shared by many of her co-workers, is understandable. When managers assign the dirty work to their front-line staff, they could do a lot to reduce worker resentment by throwing some of their own labor into the effort. Delia makes the point that this would be a way for managers to show that they're "not any different," however, the reality is that they are. Having authority to delegate the dirty work of retail to front-line staff, managers are able to avoid it themselves. This is one of the privileges of being a manager. And while Happy Homes associates tend to speak well of their managers, when management exercises this particular privilege, avoiding the work of cleaning, resentment can begin to brew in the rank and file.

All of these factors increase the chance that front-line Happy Homes employees will withdraw their cooperation from Happy Homes work demands. Asking associates to be both high-class hosts and low-level janitors, Happy Homes management puts its workers in shooting range of a work process contradiction, which, at close proximity, translates in worker experience as a mix of ideologically-based tensions and practical double-binds. Happy Homes managers really do very little to help their associate resolve

these conflicts and, in fact, as we saw in the case of Rita's shoe-change tactic, they can impose conditions – such as an ad hoc meeting -- that freeze the conflict in place.

If an associate wants to play closely by her employer's rules, she is not likely to find solutions to janitorial hardship, and some workers, such as Natalie above, seem resigned to the fact that there's nothing to be done but grin and bear it. However, when a contradiction of the work process moves this close to the surface, complicating workers' practical concerns and undercutting the basis of their positive self-identity, it also ignites dissent, and for every front-line Happy Homes worker who seems to passively accept her custodial demands, there are many more who do not. While obedient workers cannot generally escape these conflicts, workers who actively oppose the host-janitor dichotomy seek – to often find -- their remedy in the selective transgression of their employer's rules.

In the section that follows, I take up the question of front-line Happy Homes workers' active strategies for resolving the tensions of these dual roles, examining how associates resist the imposition of the janitorial role through the use of strategies of subterfuge that transgress workplace rules and resist management demands. Here, I look at several different strategies that Happy Homes workers use in relation to the demands on their custodial labor, including 'shift-shifting,' 'hiding-out,' excuse strategies, the 'short-cut' strategy, and the labor slow-down strategy.

The 'Shift-Shifting' Strategy

Though some workers might speak with fatalism about their host-vs-janitor predicament, the vast majority of front-line associates prefer a pro-active – if also transgressive – approach. In an effort to manage these conflicting work demands in a way that might serve their own interests, Happy Homes workers have developed a spectrum of strategies to circumvent the management demand for their janitorial labor. Though associates' techniques of circumvention differ from worker to worker, and situation to situation, the majority of these tactics rely on worker subterfuge, and Happy Homes workers use deception with their managers as a way to circumvent the negatives of cleaning and preserve the dominance of their host role. Whether it's dodging shifts when cleaning duty is the hardest, hiding out in the back when cleaning duty is assigned, feigning an illness or injury that precludes exertion, giving the pretense of task-completion despite task neglect, falsely claiming to be occupied with a task for different manager, or simply slowing down ones' cleaning labor to a pace so glacial it takes little exertion but all available time – worker subterfuge often succeeds in minimizing both the ideological and the practical tensions that arise when an employer expects its worker to be both the high-class host and the low-class cleaning help.

One technique associates use to circumvent cleaning duty is to alter their working hours. In its opening and closing shifts, Happy Homes management uses front-line laborers to accomplish a wide variety of tasks to include, of course, cleaning, but also

things like pricing, restocking, and floor set change-outs. Barring the heavy cleaning work, Happy Homes workers don't mind their off-hour jobs. As we've seen in previous chapters, associates tend to have a deep appreciation for Happy Homes merchandise and, when performing labor that has them interacting with products, often find pleasure by turning the activity into a form of "fantasy shopping." Although restocking, floor set changes, and pricing are all activities that require some measure of physicality (and, in fact, are activities that kick up their own quotient of dust), workers do not find them tedious and many report enjoying these duties.

The opening and closing shifts also appeal to workers for other reasons. Workers with a preference for the opening shift say they like having the morning time to acclimate to changes in merchandise or merchandise display that occurred since their last work shift, and workers with a preference for the closing shift report enjoying the store's "more relaxed" atmosphere in the evening hours. Most significantly, though, the morning and evening shifts allow workers more off-time in the day to pursue other activities, including social and recreational activities (exercise, hobbies, and time with friends and family) but also second jobs, and both opening and closing employees see this as a key benefit of these shifts. If it weren't for the fact of heavy cleaning work, openers and closers would have little reason to want to change their schedule.

But the heavy cleaning work is a fact. And this can be a conundrum for associates on opening and closing shifts who resent the incumbent custodial labor: on

one hand, they value their shift assignment, on the other, they seek a way out of cleaning duty. But associates who have worked these shifts for any amount of time will also pick up on managerial patterns, realizing that morning cleaning assignments are usually given in the first hour of the opening shift, and nighttime cleaning assignments are usually reserved for the last hour or so of a closing shift. This means that the associate who arrives an hour later in the morning, or leaves an hour earlier at night, lowers her odds of getting cleaning duty.

Workers looking for a way to push back on demands for their janitorial labor can take advantage of this pattern and, while the employee can't get away with simply showing up late or leaving early, she can look for ways to reconfigure her official hours of availability such that they exclude the hours most likely to include cleaning, yet still suit an opening or closing shift. Mary, a veteran associate of four years who prefers the opening shift but detests the cleaning tasks, is one such case. She loves her Happy Homes job but, as she tells it, after two years' worth of morning cleaning she'd "just had it." Still, not willing to change shifts, she needed to find a creative solution and, when she landed on the idea of moving her morning availability later by an hour, she felt she had a real "aha" moment:

That part blows me away, it took so long to work it out, I was doing it (the cleaning) the whole time (her first two years), and I was at the point, I've had it, it was...I'd be driving to work and it was, "god, please don't let Richard (her manager) say the store has to be vacuumed." I...um...I know it's gotta be done, but...it gets old fast. Then one day I was talking

to a gal in tabletop and she wanted to be home in the mornings to get her kids off to school, and she was changing hours for a later start time, and a bell went off. It was, 'I could do that.' That's pretty much how it happened. I put in new hours for an hour later, and it's good, now I come in and the managers want shelves filled, or something needs to be changed on the floor, or what have you.

Mary makes the schedule change tactic sound easy but, in reality, it's not.

Though some workers seem to have managed this kind of arrangement (at the time of this study, I was aware of five associates who'd worked out this type of altered schedule), not everyone who tries the tactic is able to pull it off. Two workers I spoke to used this strategy to circumvent cleaning work only to have their efforts boomerang -- in one case, the associate did reduce her frequency of janitorial duty but at the cost of a larger-than-expected reduction in weekly hours, while the other described withdrawing her request for the change when her manager made it clear she would lose priority for the closing shift if she insisted on getting off early.

The bureaucratic part of this process -- submitting a form that adjusts one's availability (with a three week notice) -- is straightforward, but getting your manager on board with the plan is another story. And managers need to be on board. Though they have no authority to block an employee's availability change, they do have power over the employee's weekly schedule, including what days and hours they work (within the parameters of worker availability), how many on-call shifts they have, and how many total weekly hours they get -- or don't. Thus, a change that management doesn't support could end up costing the employee in multiple ways, including the loss of her manager's

good will (which, if reflected in her job review, might reduce her eligibility for pay increases), a loss in convenience if her schedule begins to include more on-calls and fewer preferred times and days, and a loss of income if her weekly hours get cut back.

Technically, no subterfuge is required for the shift-timing tactic – the mechanics are a simple matter of putting numbers and dates on a form. However, in the real life of the Happy Homes floor, associates who want this tactic to work need to somehow finagle their managers' support. And they start from a disadvantage. Happy Homes managers frown on these types of changes *in principle*, and, from a management perspective, employees who change availability are making trouble by complicating the manager's scheduling tasks and removing experienced labor power when and where it is needed.

One manager put the point this way:

We need them (associates) to commit to certain times they can work and stay with those times as close as possible. Don't get me wrong, we're going to try to work with you, but if you're the type that's always asking to change your times or change your days, that's going to be a problem for us, and we'll have to look at it. (When workers change their hours) it creates problems with the schedule and that's more headaches for us, plus we lose good experience on the floor.

Managers do not like it when workers announce changes in availability. Yet, Mary and others like her have been successful with their 'shift-shifting' efforts, changing their hours to eliminate the times of cleaning, retaining their prized shift, and receiving no noticeable negative repercussions from management.

Why do Mary and some of her compatriots succeed while others do not? In terms of the two employees whose strategies backfired, it is salient to note that neither worker had been on the job long when they tried to change their hours (one month and five months, respectively), nor had either fully secured their managers' endorsement for the change. In this spirit we might see how Mary and others like her who successfully pull off 'shift-shifting' have bargaining chips our two employees do not. First, unlike the two employees with scuttled plans, associates who succeed appear to have some tenure on the Happy Homes job at the time they change their shift hours (at least a year, in Mary's case two years, and in another case, almost four years), and plausibly this earns them close relations with managers as well as the status of valuable (experienced and trusted) employee -- factors that may well encourage managers' flexibility.

If Mary's case is any indication, a worker also needs to have a darn good story about why they need to change their shift time by an odd hour. Talking further about her strategy, Mary explains how she devised a story that successfully persuaded her manager to endorse her request:

It was the time my brother's wife got sick, she's better now, but she was really sick then, and I was trying to help, I couldn't do much but I'd check in on her, and I'd go over to her house after work, I'd go maybe one, two afternoons a week, I'd stop by and visit, but none of us knew how it was going to go, it could've gone any way (describes possible outcomes). So, what I told Richard was I needed the mornings to help my sister-in-law who has cancer. I remember how he...he was really sweet about it, I think he felt bad, and he was like "sure, that's the right thing to do, no problem

Mary,” and it kind of went like that...now it’s just an accepted fact, that’s the time I start and it’s just how it is.

In an effort to subvert her employer’s labor demands, Mary plays on her manager’s sympathies to elicit his cooperation with her request. Banking on the cultural norm that says those worthy of sympathy deserve special consideration and leniency, Mary exploits the social rules of the ‘sympathy economy’ (Clark 1998), using the story of her sister-in-law’s illness to make a culturally legitimate claim to ‘sympathy credits,’ subsequently redeeming her credits for a shift change that exempts her from cleaning duty.

Sympathy is, of course, a common manipulative tool in everyday encounters (Clark 1998), but Mary’s case demonstrates how sympathy can enter the relations of work as a tool for negotiating differentials of power. Still, while sympathy provides Mary a method of leverage, subterfuge is her method of dissent and, to make sympathy work, Mary mixes truth with lies. Though Mary’s sister-in-law was indeed sick, Mary’s visits happen in the afternoons, not the mornings, and the reason she gives her manager for needing a later start time is false – even if the basis for claiming his sympathy is not. Thus, when Mary’s own interests conflict with those of Happy Homes management (i.e., management’s interest in securing employee cooperation with custodial duty, and employee commitment to standard, stable hours), a “good story” comes in very useful -- and, as Mary suggests, once the “good story” hits its mark, getting her the change she

wants, time takes care of the rest and her special circumstance becomes the unquestioned routine.

This is resistance that relies on guile. Mary knows of other associates who have done the same thing, for the same reason, but she points out that success with this tactic is necessarily limited to a small portion of the employees on any given shift:

It's one of those things not everyone can do because managers are going to need a set number of people there for the whole shift. They're not about to let everybody go later...then they'd be there all by themselves and then they'd have to do the work.

As a way to avoid cleaning, the 'shift-shifting' strategy isn't foolproof – a morning manager may tell an associate to vacuum a half hour before the store opens, or a night manager may set a worker to sweeping just as the store closes, but for some associates this technique of revising their availability to exclude the likely cleaning hours is a workable solution to the problem of playing contradictory host and janitor roles. Employees who have clout and good stories are going to be most effective with the 'shift-shifting' strategy. But, taking Mary's point, the process also follows a "first come, first served" logic and, in a context where quantities are limited, this makes it a zero-sum game. If some associates succeed in circumventing custodial work by shifting their schedule an odd hour this way or that, by definition, others cannot. Thus, as a strategy of resistance, 'shift-shifting' discourages workers' realization of their interests as collective,

instead pitting one against the other in competition for a scarce resource, atomizing their concerns as well as their actions.

The Hide-Out Strategy

Fortunately for Happy Homes workers there are several other strategies they can use to navigate the contradictions between high-class host and janitor roles and circumvent their cleaning labors. One of the more popular strategies in this regard involves the employee “hide out.” Here, the front-line worker keeps herself closely tuned to fluctuations in managers’ moods, as well as to the clock, and when cleaning duties seem in offing, quietly slips away, hiding out from managers in some far corner of the store until the threat of cleaning passes. For some, the “hiding out” practice is part of their daily routine. As the associate, Gwen, describes, the practice – while requiring the worker’s attentiveness – is easy enough to implement and can be used on a more or less regular basis. Talking about the morning moments when managers are apt to put employees to cleaning, Gwen describes how she relies on “hiding out” to keep her clear of cleaning labor:

Well, honestly, I just try to make myself scarce...I hear some manager who’s like ‘oh, look at this, it’s a mess’ and that’s my cue to get the hell out of dodge, so I’ll be rummaging in the stockroom somewhere, or over in Bed and Bath, I’ll get myself behind the wall and I’ll be back there folding towels, like la-di-dah-di-dah-di-dah....

Like Gwen, other front-line employees report watching and listening for cues that Happy Homes house cleaning's soon to start, and then taking their exit posthaste. For instance, the seasoned associate, Rosie, draws on her own experience to offer a bit of advice about when to hide out and where. Noting that the day's retail exigencies influence whether management chooses to assign cleaning duty or let it slide, Rosie also describes how the managers' moods can play a key role in an associate's need to "hide out":

Usually (the cleaning's) in that first hour, but it depends what else is up...if it's a new lifestyle coming in they'll maybe ask you to dust, but the lifestyle's the biggest thing...but if there's something else, like if our numbers are down, the managers are panicky and it can be 'our numbers are bad because the store isn't clean.' They get intense if they think the store looks bad, it (cleaning) has to be done right away, so you want to keep your head down and find something to do in the stockroom.

For the hide-out strategy to work the front-line Happy Homes employee must be able to read the signs that say janitorial work is coming, and correctly divine their meaning. This can get complicated. While some signs are concrete, for instance, the arrival of a new lifestyle furniture set that takes precedence over cleaning, others are less so, as when managers panic over low numbers (that the low level employee may know nothing about). Rosie rightly points out that a manager's mood has as much to do with whether that manager orders associates to clean as anything else – including the question of whether the store actually *needs* cleaning. Accordingly, the Happy Homes employee who aims to hide out from cleaning has a stake in learning how to read the subtleties of

her manager's temperament. Still, as moods and their indicators are cryptic, and will vary from manager to manager and circumstance-to-circumstance, learning how to read managers' minds is a formidable enterprise, requiring an associate's on-going vigilance as well as accumulated background knowledge born from her experience on the Happy Homes floor.

It might take honing one's sensibilities through time on the job, but given the associates' success with the hide-out tactic, these workers – even those employed for less than a year – look to be remarkably accomplished at discerning managers' moods. Perhaps associates' talent for intuitive skills should not be a surprise. As we know from research on low-level and disadvantaged workers (Romero 1992; Rollins 1985), those with little power in an employment relationship learn to rely on heightened senses that allow them to gain a “greater knowledge of the other” – knowledge the worker can deploy as a clandestine source of power. In much the same way, front-line Happy Homes workers, whose workplace power and authority are tightly conscribed, attune their senses to their managers' behaviors. In turn, Happy Homes workers use the “greater knowledge” they gain to enact covert strategies (such as the hide-out tactic) to help to safeguard their own interests against incompatible priorities of management. For low-level disempowered workers, necessity is often the mother of invention, and if Happy Homes workers -- who lack any real authority in the workplace – can develop ‘intuitive

powers' that allow them to divine their managers' moods, it may be largely because they need to.

Putting aside the question of whether employees actually *have* these intuitive skills, many front-line Happy Homes workers believe they can read their managers' moods and discern with accuracy the early onset of a manager's impulse to have the store cleaned. When discussing their managers, associates tend to use fine-grained descriptions, and sometimes quite colorful vocabularies, to depict the nuances of managers' personalities, including what workers believe to be the content of managers' emotional and mental states. Lorelei, an associate on the job for a little less than two years, is a good example. Discussing her use of the "hide-out" tactic to sidestep cleaning, Lorelei takes a tangent to talk about what she knows, or believes she knows, about her managers' personalities. Ticking off the signs she watches for (manager-by-manager), Lorelei becomes animated when she talks about her supervisor, Vicky, and, in her description of Vicky's behaviors, demonstrates the careful attention Happy Homes workers apply in their efforts to read the minds and hearts of their superiors:

Vicky gets a crazy look in her eyes, I mean I've seen it, absolutely, and if she's waving her hands around, watch out, when I see that I know it's bad luck if you're on floor (because) if she sees you, she picks you off, and she'll go 'hey, you, there, vacuum these rugs, and you, there, clean these counters.' You need to watch for that, I've learned to get out of her way.

Hiding out, as a form of subterfuge, allows Happy Homes workers to sidestep janitorial work, and depends for its efficacy on the worker's apprehension of subtle behavioral cues – a look in the eye, a movement of hands, an aura of panic, all of these become important information in the associate's efforts to resist labor demands. But the hide-out strategy has potential problems. This tactic works because the employee is out of managers' sight, but in a modern workplace with technical means of labor control, managerial sight is not confined to the visual. At Happy Homes, the employee walkie-talkie – as much as it serves very practical purposes on the floor – is also a form of surveillance technology.

Happy Homes associates are expected to don a 'walkie' on as soon as they come in for work, turn that walkie on, and keep it on for the duration of their shift (excluding their breaks) and, all things being equal, this can mean the associate is never out of electronic 'sight,' so never out of the manager's reach. A manager can, for instance, use the walkie to ask employees to report their location in the store, or to hail one, or all, of the employees to her presence. Thus, the surveillance capacities of the walkie have the potential to undo Happy Homes workers' hide-out ploy.

Though during my tenure as an Happy Homes associate I didn't witness a case where walkie-talkie surveillance foiled an employee's hide-out attempt, I did hear from associates about their deliberate choice, done for the purpose of avoiding management directives, to bypass the walkie station and go without the equipment until closer to the

store opening. I also heard stories from co-workers about how they intended to respond if their manager tried to reach them with the walkie during a “hide-out.” Thinking ahead, these associates had already planned what they would do if “busted” by the walkie, and taking advantage of existing problems with the walkie equipment, intended to report that technological difficulties prevented them from hearing their manager’s walkie-talkie call.

Though two years new at the time of this study, and, as Happy Homes managers repeatedly mention, an extremely expensive system, the walkie-talkie technology has glitches that complicate managerial surveillance, as well as associates’ sales and service labors. The walkies operate on rechargeable batteries, and the units are supposed to be charged nightly. Upon arrival, associates will grab one of several walkies lined up on a long charger in the back, to return it to the charger when they leave – however, it’s quite tricky to maneuver the gizmo into a charger slot so that it connects for battery charge, and it’s also quite easy to think it’s properly placed when it’s not. On any given day, some proportion of walkies will be unusable because they failed to charge, and this can mean that some associates must go without their walkies. In addition, these walkies have a small, unmarked on/off/volume knob that is extremely sensitive, so sensitive that it can rotate, sometimes wildly, from a slight touch. As a result, walkies easily get turned down, or even off, without the user’s knowledge, and an associate who believes she’s wired-for-sound may not be – in which case she can’t hear, but *won’t know* she can’t hear, a manager’s call.

Since dead batteries and accidental turn-downs and turn-offs are a fairly common Happy Homes occurrence, employees who anticipate a walkie interruption of their hide-out ruse know they have a credible excuse for missing a manager's on-air request. Strategists that they seem to be, associates have thought this through and come up with a plan to combat electronic surveillance by exploiting its weaknesses.

But hiding-out has other problems. Though, admittedly, the employee stockroom huddle can get quite impressive -- you might, for instance, catch five or six workers gathered in hushed conversation in the shadows of a stockroom hall -- it is the nature of the beast that it can only work for a portion of the staff. To recall Mary's earlier point, Happy Homes managers need associates present and accounted-for so that they might accomplish pre- and post-store hour tasks (lest managers have to do it themselves). The success of the hiding-out tactic for some precludes its use by all: if associates were to disappear from the floor en masse, you can bet managers would come looking (chronic walkie problems or not). Employee invisibility is, then, a scarce resource that can only spread to a certain number of front-line workers before it fails and worker subterfuge becomes visible to management. Notwithstanding the nascent collectivism within the stockroom huddle, hiding-out, like shift-shifting, is a form of worker resistance that inspires division among the ranks -- often between more experienced workers and newbies -- and not worker solidarity.

The Excuse Strategy

Along with 'shift-shifting' and 'hiding-out,' Happy Homes workers come up with other contrivances that can win them relief from the contradictory valences of their roles - - and an exemption from cleaning duty. Having failed to take advantage of other options, and finding themselves confronted with a manager's demand for their custodial labor, Happy Homes workers will often try to fabricate a reason why they should be excused from the labor demand.

In its most common form, the 'excuse strategy' unfolds with the worker's pretense that her labor power is already "spoken for" -- the associate claims to be on task-assignment for another manager and, as a result, unavailable for cleaning detail. During my time on the floor, I observed countless versions of the 'I'm-already-spoken-for' excuse, hearing associates twist, turn, or fully ignore the truth, responding to a custodian-hungry manager with canards such as "oh, I'm sorry, Swoozie wants me to get the new vases on the floor before we open," "I've got to finish the pricing for Louise," "I told Samuel I'd take care of switching out ornamentals in design studio," "Sue said yesterday to call our wedding registers first thing this morning," or "but I thought I was supposed to be stocking the bays, that's what Fiona told me to do."

Granted, it can also happen that an employee is in fact on task for one manager when asked to clean by another, but if you are working the floor as an associate (as I

did) you typically know, or will find out, which excuses are real and which are not.

Though, as a rule, this view is obscured to management, Happy Homes associates often observe each other's ploys, and will openly communicate among the ranks about their use of the excuse tactic and its outcome. Moreover, associates can declare beforehand their intent to concoct an excuse, as with the one associate who, worried about bathroom duty, told a gathering of co-workers, "If Vicky asks me to do bathrooms I'm just going to say Samuel's freaking out cause we got a whole bunch of new sales stuff and corporate wants it out today, so I need to work on that."

To use an "I'm-already-busy" strategy, an associate must have a broad knowledge of what work tasks are going on in the store at the time. An associate would not, for instance, claim to be on a job that wasn't in some way insinuated by the activities of the day (i.e., newly arrived stock, floor set change-over, end-of-season price reductions, etc.). As it is, workers are generally made aware of what projects are on the roster when they arrive. But this is not an orderly, systematic process, and instead occurs as an organic, ground level expression of the Happy Homes habit of overwork. Workers find out what's up in the Happy Homes workplace because harried managers and associates vocalize their stress through on-going commentary about all that has to be done.

As mentioned earlier, the pace of work at Happy Homes is hectic, and the workload is always greater than the available time and labor such that, on any given day, Happy Homes work activities reflect multiple -- and cross-cutting -- matters of "first-

order” business, the full accomplishment of which is rarely possible. This creates a chronic level of workplace stress. Responding to the pressures of overwork, both associates and managers tend to regularly voice the nature of their workplace pressures with spontaneous comments about what and how much they have to do.

In a “this has to be done and that has to be done” fashion, managers and associates automatically communicate to anyone nearby what’s on the plate for the day, often with the complement of “should’ve been done yesterday” deadlines. Though some to-do list items will be visually obvious, such as the scene of on-the-floor associates hurriedly unpacking boxes, or jumbles of piled furniture yet to be fully assembled and arranged for display, most of a worker’s info about the day’s activities come from other employees’ random vocalizations. If, for instance, a front-line worker overhears a department manager’s gripe that there’s not enough time to get all new product “x” on the floor, or passes by a co-worker who follows up ‘good morning’ with a comment about all the sale pricing of product “y” that has to be done, she knows that the day’s commotion will include the standard activities associated with the arrival of this new product and price reductions on the other. In this way, the associate arriving to work quickly learns the day’s ASAP agenda, and by the time she’s grabbed her walkie, clocked in, and made her way back from the stockroom to the front floor, she’ll have passed enough mumbling employees to know what’s on the docket – and what info to use when she deploys the excuse-based subterfuge.

Happy Homes has no systematic way for disseminating daily store project information among front-line employees, but this haphazard method works surprisingly well *and* is a useful, and necessary, resource for employees who want to concoct a believable version of the “I’m-already-busy” story. This points out an interesting and unanticipated consequence of Happy Homes corporate policy. If, in the first place, Happy Homes corporate policy engenders those conditions that make for employee resistance, the corporate decision to keep labor costs down by speeding-up store work also creates the conditions – namely, stressed-out employees who vocalize their burdens – that make it possible for associates to gather information they need to effectively resist. At the very least, when employees circumvent cleaning labor by making a pretense to other tasks, their oppositional strategy depends on a workplace pattern wherein staff remark on the burden of speed-up to anyone who will listen.

To effectively deploy the excuse strategy, and circumvent one manager’s labor demands on the pretense of obeying another’s, the front-line Happy Homes worker must also be able to make an in-the-moment estimate of the location of individual on-duty managers as they are scattered throughout the store, as well as the probable location of the work projects for that day. An associate is not going to give one manager a fish tale about being on duty for another if the manager she ostensibly obeys is standing close by, nor is she going to deceptively claim to be on a work project that would logically be located in full view of the manager requesting her cleaning labors.

Still, this is a minor challenge. In her journey from the front doors to the farthest hall of the time clock and back to the front floor again, the arriving associate cobbles together a mental picture of how that day's managers and that day's pockets of work activity are arranged in space. The enormity of the store helps her cause. Though the store's gigantic footprint and sight-blocking walls can make the interior a source of frustration (and calorie-burn) for the associate hunting down customers, merchandise, or managers, these features also constrain the horizons of managers' surveillance-by-sight zones.

In this way, the labyrinthine design of the store lends itself to certain forms of worker subterfuge -- something Gwen gave hints of earlier when she mentioned hiding-out behind the wall in Bed and Bath. For the associate who wishes to float an "I'm busy" excuse, the design of the store gives her a variety of visually blocked spaces to choose from when she concocts her story about being tied to another task. A few examples cited earlier can help to illustrate this point. For instance, the associate who tells her manager she can't clean because "Swoozie wants (her) to get the new vases on the floor," conveniently chooses a mid-store area (where vases are displayed), that is blocked in by four interior walls, and would be impossible to see from where this manager is stationed. Similarly, the other associate who gives the excuse that she needs to "call () wedding registers first thing this morning," knows that the phone an associate uses for such tasks

is located in a back corner of the store, at the farthest possible remove from the supervisor asking for her custodial help.

Still, an associate who has every factor of an “I’m-already-busy” excuse in place couldn’t get far without a bead on the Happy Homes managerial pecking order. The Happy Homes store has a multi-tiered managerial structure, and when a front-line worker launches her excuse tactic, the district manager, the store manager, assistant managers, and department coordinators can all be roaming the Happy Homes floor. Of course this means there are moments where the excuse strategy is off the table – simply put, associates can’t (and don’t) use this tactic when cornered for cleaning by the store manager or district manager (in that situation, you *will* be cleaning). Still, the single most important factor affecting the outcome of the excuse strategy will be found in the relations of power between the manager who wants the cleaning done and the one the employee names as having laid claim to her labor time, and if the associate purportedly unavailable for cleaning can name a manager high on the organizational chart, or at least higher than the manager she wants to avoid, she would be very wise to do so. Why? If an associate neglects to do this (or simply can’t), and the custodian-seeking supervisor holds superior rank to the manager (ostensibly) calling dibs on the worker’s time, that associate will be very likely to have her excuse dismissed and hear her prior commitment described as less important than a need for clean bathrooms, swept floors, or vacuumed rugs.

The associate, Claudia, had this truth brought home one morning when she tried the “I’m-already-busy” excuse with a department manager. While passing through the main lobby, Claudia got nabbed for cleaning duty by Vicky, a department manager who, as we learned earlier, can get quite exercised over the desire for a clean and tidy store. Quick on her feet, Claudia told Vicky that she was already on task for the department coordinator, Samuel, and had committed to changing out ornamentals (faux flowers, vase fillers, etc.) in design studio before the store opened. So far, so good – Claudia (who hadn’t actually received this assignment) was citing a legitimate task -- the store had just received a big shipment of new ornamentals – plus she was naming a manager and location that were both outside of Vicky’s viewing range. Yet, while Claudia nails the important elements of a good pretense, she names a manager positioned one rank subordinate to Vicky. This means that Vicky has ample authority to yet commandeer Claudia’s labor and trump Samuel’s priorities with her own – which, with her announcement that “the ornamentals can wait, the store needs to be vacuumed now” is precisely what she did. Had Claudia cited a manager with authority at least equal to or, ideally, greater than Vicky’s, she might have pulled off the ruse and circumvented cleaning duty. As it turned out, she spent the morning vacuuming.

To play the excuse gambit well, an employee must know who fits where on the store hierarchy and be positioned to exploit this knowledge -- but if she is to play a truly expert hand, she must also have insight into the less formal relational dynamics of the

management staff. Resentments and preferences can ripple through the ranks of Happy Homes management and cause shifts in power that are not visible on a formal org chart and, as a result, a Happy Homes manager's on-the-floor authority, relative to other management personnel, can be enhanced or eroded. For the excuse-giving employee, insight into these informal dimensions of managerial power is a duly important piece of the puzzle, yet, insofar as this insight depends on information seldom available to the rank and file, her excuse strategy is persistently vulnerable. This means she can launch (what she believes to be) a flawless version of the excuse strategy and still end up on cleaning detail.

One such instance occurred for the associate, Rosalee, during the pre-hours of the morning shift. Waylaid by a department coordinator who wanted her to clean the breakroom, Rosalee knew she was faced with a lower-ranked manager and cleverly gave the excuse that she was on stocking duty for a *department* manager (a rank one notch senior to the coordinator). As Rosalee later explained, this tactic usually works, however, this time her name-dropping ploy fell flat. The coordinator, unfazed by the greater power of the department manager, ignored the excuse, pulled Rosalee off the purported re-stocking duty and put her to cleaning.

That a coordinator would blithely override the authority of a department manager didn't fit with the normal machinations of the Happy Homes power structure – and, for Rosalee, who later recounted the event in stockroom conversation with co-workers, this

was a source of confusion. However, as Rosalee was to learn a few days later (and I had already learned from interviews with other managers) the department manager in question was soon to transfer to another store, doing so against the wishes of management personnel at the Aristocade location. In a word, the department manager was on his way out the door, and in the doghouse with his Aristocade store colleagues. Though we don't know if the coordinator calculated her actions on the basis of this information, or simply acted without thought, displeasure with the department manager's transfer choice was widely shared among management ranks. And, while this was not information Rosalee would have had in the moment, it was definitely something the coordinator knew and could recognize as a justification for disregarding the departing manager's authority.

Multiple factors conspire to determine the outcome of associates' efforts to resist janitorial labor with excuse-based subterfuge. Yet, even as this excuse strategy buys associates periodic relief from cleaning duty, in point of fact, its odds of success are not impressively high. While Happy Homes associates advance this type of false excuse on a regular basis (I observed the excuse-strategy on average once every two or three days), relief from cleaning duty occurs in only about half the cases. Sometimes the strategy fails because workers miscalculate the organizational hierarchy, other times because workers name a task that can be done at any time (e.g., during the store's open hours), or one that can be done so quickly it can be postponed for cleaning -- and, of course,

sometimes it fails because workers lack critical information about inter-personal dynamics between managers and the influence those have on the distribution of power.

Nonetheless, the “I’m-already-busy” tactic is one way the Happy Homes worker *might* shimmy out of cleaning detail, and it gets a high rate of play despite a relatively low rate of return. When alternate avenues for resistance are foreclosed, lying to one manager about your obligations to another is a reasonable fall-back option for the front-line Happy Homes worker interested in circumventing unwelcome labor demands.

Granting its uneven outcomes, we might still wonder why the “I’m-already-busy” strategy works *at all*. How is it that front-line Happy Homes workers can slip specious claims to one manager about the work orders of another without detection or the negative consequences that would likely follow? In my months on the Happy Homes floor, I was not aware of any worker getting ‘busted’ for false claims associated with the excuse strategy. Yet, given the bureaucratic features of Happy Homes work control – to include corporate oversight, centralization of power, hierarchical arrangement of authority, delineated lines of command, and the requisite mountain of codified policies and procedures – this seems surprising. At the very least, it would seem that the size of the bureaucratic hole through which a lie about command chains and work projects might pass undetected would not be as large as workers’ success with the strategy implies. But if bureaucratic work control would, at least in theory, constrain possibilities for this type

of worker subterfuge, the corporatization of the Happy Homes enterprise, combined with the nature of the industry helps expand them.

In the context of the Happy Homes store, the corporate blueprint for organizational power and procedures – on paper, neat and orderly – meets up against the chaotic life of brick and mortar retail. A fast pace, on-the-fly, multi-tasking energy is the leitmotif of Happy Homes labor at both clerking and managerial levels, and when the store is open as well as in those pre- and post hours when cleaning occurs, a certain aura of bedlam prevails. Of course, for retail, as with many service industries, the presence of a third party – the service recipient – introduces an element of unpredictability to ground-level work activities, still, at Happy Homes, workplace chaos will be as much, if not more pronounced, in the store's off-hours as when the store is open and customers are flowing through.

Though these off-hours lack the front-stage work of customer service, they burst at the seams with the amount of retail back-stage work that must be done in the short spaces of time before store opening and after store closing (pricing, stocking, floor-set change outs, display reconfigurations, wedding registry calls, and, of course, cleaning). There is more work than there is time. In these off hours, stock employees will be dashing in and out of the back room, moving impossibly large amounts of merchandise at warp speed, upper level, assistant and lower-level managers will be zipping about,

barking orders at anyone who's nearby, and assorted floor staffers will be flitting from task to task, dispersing their ranks through the store.

Very few of these players have much time to think twice. Under these conditions, the neat and tidy corporate plan for structural control of work and workers loses a lot of its shape. For instance, it becomes not just possible but likely that the manager who receives a worker's false claim of task-assignment will herself have other priorities take hold before she can wonder *if she should wonder* whether the employee's work task sounds right, the chain of command seems correct, and the claim rings true. In all probability, this supervisor runs into, and interacts with, the other manager (with alleged dibs on the worker's time) several times over the course of that day, but her own on-going stream of urgently immediate tasks -- that are most often the reason for the interaction -- are also likely to have caused the morning incident to drop off her radar long before (if even there to begin with).

It is in this way that the pre- and post- hour store bedlam allows workers freedom to practice the "I'm-already-busy" subterfuge without fear of immediate detection, and the more generalized fever-pitch of store operations gives them good confidence that delayed detection will not occur. But the bedlam, of both off- and open- hours, has itself a definable and traceable source -- not to be found in the quotient of unpredictability introduced by the third-party service customer (that so often occupies discussions of service work control), but as the predictable outcomes of corporate policy.

The lion's share of Happy Homes retail bedlam comes from the fact that there is more work to be done in the Happy Homes workplace than there is time to do it, or, better put, than there is labor to do it. The corporate policy that generates store understaffing creates speed-up and overwork for store personnel. For Happy Homes store managers this means a chronic shortage of labor power, and in terms of their own jobs, a chronic shortage of time. This is the situation that creates the 'bureaucratic holes' through which workers thread the needle of their resistance.

These harried conditions are made worse – at least for the managers – in further consequence of Happy Homes corporatization. The top-down Happy Homes corporate structure means many of the decisions that directly affect the pace, character and content of day-to-day store operations are made non-locally, at the corporate level, and remain opaque to local management until the moment they materialize in such surprises as the arrival of a new floor set, a large shipment of season-sensitive new product, or multiple ASAP orders to reconfigure store lay-outs and displays.

When the managerial left hand doesn't know what the corporate right hand is doing, store managers are left vulnerable to a capricious variability in labor needs -- which, in light of the evident corporate policies for cutting labor costs, can't, in any case, ever be quite met. Moreover, for store managers (and sometimes associates) these top-down corporate decisions generate a persistent store-level sentiment of 'anticipatory urgency' – for, no doubt, one must complete the project at hand as quickly as possible

since, at any minute, a new one can come flying through the door unannounced. Of course, these conditions affect all levels of store personnel, but they are particularly taxing on managers. One Happy Homes department manager, reflecting on workplace urgency, likens her job to that of a stock trader. Speaking about the fast pace, overwork, and unpredictability of Happy Homes management-life, this supervisor's depiction directs us to how Happy Homes top-down corporate policies become the stuff of chaos at the brick and mortar level:

It's a roller coaster, it's a roller coaster. It's not as emotionally damaging as being a trader, you know, like on the NY stock exchange. It's different, it's not ripping your guts up and down, but it's like that, cause as a trader, every day it's unexpected, you don't know what the heck is going to come your way, and what you're going to have to respond to, you can't be too risk averse, you won't make it. And so it's like this gamble, every single day. My day changes all the time, I don't go to a cubicle and I'm not on the phone cold-calling people and I'm not with the same people every day, but it's that unpredictability. You're doing something different everyday and you don't know what's going to happen, and you always need to ramp it up, and you need to operate at that level *all the time*. You have to think so fast, snap, snap, snap. You don't have the time to unpack the ideas for people, I don't need you on the bus, I just need for you to do IT, so, let's just hop on it NOW (laughs) and move on, you know, you just move on...

Under these conditions a lot can slip by. The corporate policies that require store management personnel "to ramp it up" and "operate at that level *all the time*" are the same policies that open the door for associates to slip their subterfuge by unnoticed. In its efforts to keep labor costs down, and maintain a centralized (opacity-based) hold on decision-making, the Happy Homes corporate office has made the excuse strategy a no-

brainer for its front-line workers. Happy Homes associates can skip out of cleaning with a specious “I’m-already-spoken-for” claim, avoid detection, and then both they and their managers “just move on.”

The “I’m-already-busy” tactic may have a relatively high rate of failure, but without the risk of penalty for insubordination, the cost of losing is simply that which the Happy Homes worker faced in the first place -- assignment to cleaning detail. The occasional win makes up for the losses. This stands in contrast to another, very different, and much less common rendition of excuse-based resistance.

In this alternate formulation, the Happy Homes associate uses the ruse of temporary physical affliction or disability to escape the burden of cleaning duty. The most common affliction excuses (and the ones that work the best to gain exemption from cleaning), are those based on temporary muscular-skeletal issues. An associate may claim, for instance, that a minor back injury, a twisted knee, or a bum shoulder, make cleaning labor a temporary hardship. Over the months of my study I verified seven cases where employees used the affliction/disability ruse to escape cleaning, six based on muscular-skeletal problems. In three cases, the workers feigned back problems, describing a minor injury or strain, in another three, workers claimed other muscular-skeletal issues - a twisted knee, a sore shoulder, and ‘tennis elbow’ - and in one case, a worker claimed vertigo, offering that it might be an early symptom of a flu. With the muscular-skeletal excuses, workers stayed on the job for the day but gained relief from

cleaning as well as other physical tasks associated with the work (e.g., stocking, carrying heavy items, moving furniture, etc.), while the worker with the illness-based ruse was sent home by a manager who wished to prevent contagion. An illness-based alibi may lose a worker her shift; still, it appears the affliction excuse has a very high rate of success for Happy Homes workers who wish to avoid cleaning duty.

As we saw in the discussion of “hiding out,” Happy Homes associates can be quite candid with one another about their subterfuge, and this is true in relation to their use of the affliction ruse. One associate, who had earlier that day escaped cleaning on the pretense of a low-back spasm, responded to my words of concern by confessing that her back was, in reality, perfectly fine. As this associate describes, she felt she’d done her fair share of cleaning for the week, and opted for the “back problem” excuse as the cleanest, quickest way to exemption:

I did the vacuuming twice already this week and I think someone else should do it today, not me, but you can't tell Swoozie that, she's not going to hear you, so, that's why I said my back was out and vacuuming would make it worse...that way there's no drama, and she gets it.

As this associate implies, resisting Happy Homes cleaning labor with the affliction strategy “avoids drama,” is something managers “get,” and runs little-to-no risk of refusal and rebuttal. Whether out of sympathy, practicality, or fear of worker comp claims, managers do in fact tend to accept the affliction-disability excuse with little resistance, and it is an almost sure way for any associate to get out of custodial work.

But, if this is true, and the affliction strategy is all but fail-proof, why don't associates use it more often? As we saw earlier, associates are strongly motivated to avoid cleaning for both ideological and practical reasons. In the affliction ruse it would appear they have their solution, yet, in contrast to the frequency with which workers use the "I'm-already-busy" subterfuge, the affliction excuse gets surprisingly scarce play. Though we don't know from these workers why they decline to use this strategy more often than they do, we can estimate that workers' judicious use of this tactic involves an effort to manage impressions and avoid negative stigma in the workplace.

Given that the associate's number of weekly hours is at managers' discretion, an employee who cares about the size of her paycheck has a stake in maintaining a good reputation among the management ranks. In this regard, a one-time use of the affliction strategy seems relatively safe. All else being equal, a one-day reprieve from the physical labors of the Happy Homes job on the basis of a temporary physical limitation should have no effect on an employee's reputation (barring the unexpected 'day off' for the worker with the flu symptom, none who used the affliction ruse appeared to suffer the type of negative repercussions that can result when losing a manager's favor, e.g., reduced weekly hours, increased on-call shifts, or the like).

The consequences of this strategy are likely to change in the case where a front-line Happy Homes worker deploys the affliction-excuse multiple times. To anyone looking, a front-line worker's repeated use of the affliction excuse would seem to suggest

chronic physical limitations, in turn suggesting an employee who is unable to fulfill the demands of her job. We can imagine that a front-line worker who launches serial claims of physical limitation that narrow their work tasks may begin to strike management as a liability to front-line retail productivity, a legal liability to the company, or both. If we can imagine this, so can workers. While we can't be sure that Happy Homes workers' motivation for eschewing the affliction excuse is part of a larger strategy to manage workplace impressions and avoid the stigma of "bad worker," a trade-off that sacrifices an easy out from cleaning for the sake of maintaining positive workplace impressions, and one's managers' good graces, does not seem a bad bargain.

Interestingly, the stories of Happy Homes workers who do, in fact, have physical afflictions lend some support to this idea. Working the floor, I got to know two members of the associate staff who suffered on-going back problems. Both of these workers, middle-aged and female, describe having chronic back pain that makes it difficult for them to do some of the physical tasks included in the Happy Homes job.

A significant amount of physicality is built into front-line Happy Homes retail work (for instance, the ladder-climbing, lifting, bending, moving and toting, that goes along with merchandise handling), and against these light-industrial requirements, an associate's back pain *is* a problem, one that impedes their ability to do the job. But neither of the female associates with bona fide back problems wanted to inform Happy Homes management about their physical limitations -- as one put it, "no, I don't want to

bring it up, I can work around it.” Instead, for these two associates, the fact of a physical limitation was a source of anxiety, and a reason for secrecy.

Far from using the “affliction excuse” to get out of cleaning, or any other type of physical labor, these two associates chose to “work around” their limits, and preferred to keep their physical ailments secret from Happy Homes managers. Asked why, these women both offer the same reason. If word of their physical problem gets out, these associates fear that Happy Homes managers will begin to question whether they are suitable for the associate job – as one of two explained, “I can do this job and I’d be handing them (managers) a reason to think I can’t.”

Enjoying the Happy Homes job, and wanting to keep it, these associates – who could legitimately claim exemption from many of the physical labors involved with the job – want their managers to see them as able-bodied, productive workers, and for them this means keeping a physical affliction under wraps. While the women’s fears may be somewhat exaggerated, if there is any truth to them at all, we can understand why the more able-bodied members of the Happy Homes front-line crew might hesitate to use the affliction strategy any more often than they do. Skirting the boundaries of management’s tolerance for lapses in worker productivity, an associate’s over-use of the disability feint may well cause the Happy Homes manager to red flag a worker as unsuitable for the demands of her job.

As strategies for resisting Happy Homes janitorial demands, both versions of the excuse strategy – the affliction ruse and the “I’m-already-spoken-for” gambit – carry their own sets of risks, and the worker, balancing risks against the odds of pay-off, calls upon the form of subterfuge that best ensures the bypass of unwelcome labor demands without undue jeopardy to job standing, management approval, and weekly wages. Yet, again, much as with strategies of shift-shifting and hiding-out, associates use of excuse tactics unfold at the level of the individual worker and not the group. Granted, workers will sometimes share with each other their plans for, and successes with, excuse-based forms of resistance, however, they do not collaborate in this subterfuge as a collective act. Indeed, the efficacy of these resistance ploys depends on their character as individual acts. Happy Homes managers are going to find *someone* to do cleaning, and if the excuse tactic is to remain a viable option for individual workers, it is only insofar as its use remains restricted to a small portion of those workers who share any one shift. In this way, work resistance expressed through the excuse-strategy slants the worker’s consciousness toward self-, and not group-based, interest.

The Short-Cut Strategy

Of course, not all associates avoid cleaning tasks and, more or less daily, floor workers can find themselves up against a manager’s demand for custodial labor. Whether their manager wants vacuuming, sweeping, break room wipe-down, or bathroom scrubbing, what that manager wants is what that associate will do. However,

an associate's capitulation to what is, at that point, a non-negotiable demand is not the same as cooperation. As we know, Happy Homes associates have many reasons for resenting their cleaning duty, critical among these the desire to maintain the sense of a high-status identity, and when workers are compelled to clean as part of their Happy Homes job they are yet motivated to resist that work, along with its unfavorable identity-level implications. Stuck doing this hard and dirty work, associates contrive ingenious ways to make the work less hard and less dirty, and what associates do to make the cleaning work more palatable – both in practical terms and in its consequence to their self-image – means that a lot of the cleaning doesn't actually get done, or at least not in the way managers intend.

Foremost on the mind of the associate who sweeps or vacuums or scrubs is the question of how to do the task without really doing it, and the use of creative 'short-cuts' provides a very straightforward solution. With the short-cut strategy, Happy Homes workers apply an 'efficiency' principle, taylorizing their own work process so that their performance of custodial chores reflects an economy of personal effort. Similar to the worker practice of gold-bricking (or soldiering) in industrial settings (Burawoy 1979), the Happy Homes retail worker's short-cut strategy involves the creative evasion of work, often combined with an effort to appear as if working. And while short-cut strategies can make for 'fast work,' a superficiality of work is the employee's primary goal.

Workers make this clear when they talk about their cleaning chores, describing how they minimize the amount of physical and mental energy they give to these tasks while still maintaining the semblance of a task completed. One worker, complaining about Happy Homes custodial work, explains a short-cut strategy she devised for making the job of vacuuming rugs less noisome: “There’s a lever at the side that pulls the bottom part up, it still runs, but it makes it easy to push.” Asked if this might not counteract the purpose of pulling up the dirt that’s been ground into a rug and lifting up the rug’s pile, the associate agrees, but, explaining that her goal is slightly different, points out that the method “gets the stuff you can see, so it looks okay,” adding, “that’s all I care about.” If going for the visual appearance of task completion seems to be less an oppositional act than a practical one, in her follow-up comments the associate reveals a somewhat more transgressive meaning to her short-cut idea:

The managers want to see someone pushing the vacuum, they want to hear the vacuum running, that’s all that matters, so you can make it hard on yourself or easy and as long they think I’m doing what they told me to then everyone’s happy.

It is not clear, however, that everyone would be happy with this arrangement. Happy Homes store managers are responsible for preserving the condition of their store and the merchandise in it. The rugs on the floor represent many thousands of dollars worth of inventory and, even though these rugs will eventually be sold as floor models, a manager’s ability to move floor models quickly out the door (as she needs to do) depends

on how close the condition of those items is to 'new' (overall, the affluent Happy Homes clientele are averse to buying anything that looks worn or dirty). According to one manager, a key reason for the store's industrial vacuum cleaners is to maintain the condition of the floor model rugs, and on corporate recommendation managers are to make sure the rugs are vacuumed regularly, and in meticulous fashion (this manager mentioned that the standard is to use 5-8 passes of the vacuum cleaner for each area of a rug). Thus, short-cut strategies, such as our associate describes, are not part of the managerial plan.

Short-cutting takes a variety of forms depending on the nature of the cleaning task and the predilections of the worker. During my time in the field, I witnessed dozens of inventive variations on the short-cut strategy, many of which combine reduction of cleaning effort with tactical surface displays of cleaning activity. For instance, one opening shift associate, when asked to clean a cash-wrap station, was able to reduce her cleaning labor to almost nothing while also giving the appearance to managers in the distance that she was doing what they asked. This associate bypassed the supplies designated for the job (a spray bottle of blue-tone liquid cleaner, rags, and paper towels, all stored in a corner of the back room), instead pulling a Kleenex from her pocket to wipe at the counter's dust and debris, brushing it off onto the floor. After this effort (which took under a minute), the associate waved and flapped the tissue at parts of

various equipment and supplies for another few minutes and, having given the task not quite five minutes, was done and off to restock some shelves.

One might say my colleague made quick work of her assignment, but crediting this worker with efficiency is problematic on at least two counts. First, this associate did not actually accomplish the task of cleaning the wrap counter, at least not in any manner Happy Homes managers (had they the time to check) would recognize as satisfactory. Second, in the several minutes of tissue waving that followed the initial ‘wipe-down’ this employee’s time was exchanged for virtually no improvement in the cleanliness of items on the counter. My co-worker did not clean the cash wrap station, she made a *display* of cleaning the cash wrap station. As is generally true when associates are asked to clean, this worker’s approach to custodial duty combines effort-saving techniques with theatre, illustrating that one goal of the short-cut strategy is to look as if one is cooperating with management demands when, in fact, one is not.

I had my own introduction to this aspect of the short-cut strategy during a first stint on a closing shift. It was the end of the night, and we’d just closed the store when a manager nabbed me for custodial duty, pointing to me as she zoomed by, calling out, “you take the bathrooms.” Barely one week on the job, and facing my first bathroom detail, I had no idea what to do and went looking for advice. Finding an experienced associate, I asked about the protocol for this task – where to find the supplies, what

supplies to use, what part or parts of the bathroom to do, and so on – expecting I would get some nuts and bolts advice as well as counsel on how to do the task correctly.

What I got instead was an initiation into Happy Homes workers' strategies for circumventing janitorial work demands. After describing management expectations (the worker is to fill an industrial cleaning bucket with water and cleaning fluid and, using a mop, a scrub brush and rags, clean the floors, the toilets, the sinks, and the counters), my colleague declared Happy Homes management “crazy” and, suggesting a different approach, offered up the following blueprint for short-cut: “Get the bucket, roll it in, fill it up, close the door behind you, get a couple of wet paper towels and wipe whatever looks the worst, that’s it, just make sure to keep the door closed.” This associate gave instructions on the mechanics of a short-cut strategy, but she also offered instructions on how to accomplish the subterfuge that is required to make the short-cut strategy work.

Another bathroom-related example helps to illustrate just how far Happy Homes workers can go to truncate their engagement with the activities of cleaning. Cleaning the bathrooms is a dreaded task, or as one associate indelicately put it, “a total gross-out.” As I discovered early in my tenure, Happy Homes workers have done their fair share of thinking about how to sidestep – and cut short -- their engagement with this chore. But, as intent as these employees are on cutting back their bathroom cleaning efforts, few go as far as the closing shift associate, Rachel.

Rachel, who, in her own words, is “furious that they (the managers) make us to clean,” usually avoids cleaning duty by making herself scarce when managers are doling out the tasks, but one night Rachel got stuck at the front counter with a customer phone call when the manager started assigning cleaning chores to workers. Rachel ended up with bathroom duty and, when I came across her a little later, she was moving toward the store’s two bathrooms with a bottle of spray cleaner in her hands. As I stood on, Rachel opened the bathroom doors, fired a few squirts of cleaner toward the ceiling of each room and, announcing “there, it smells clean, I’ll empty the trash on my way out and be done,” signaled her departure from the area.

Rachel’s case is extreme, and most workers put a little more effort into their display, as well as into the cleaning itself, however Rachel’s approach is true to the ‘goldbricking’ spirit of the short cut strategy – do *something* to make it seem as if you’re cooperating with management’s requests, but limit your cleaning labor efforts as much as possible. Indeed, using short-cuts to resist janitorial demands is a worker’s way to minimize the energy, exertion, and time she gives the cleaning task, but when a worker is pushing around a barely-functioning vacuum cleaner, waving a tissue at equipment, or rolling a bucket into a bathroom to let it sit idle, she is not just limiting her labor, she is producing a strategic display, and the feint of work consent is part and parcel of her practice of work resistance.

At its most extreme form, the short-cut strategy edges very close to the practice of shirking duty. Here, the worker performs an initial display of cooperation -- she might, for instance, retrieve a vacuum cleaner, broom or bucket, or signal consent to a manager with a nod or a verbal "okay." Following this, she slips away, engaging a few task-associated motions but neglecting most of the work. In some ways, this version of the strategy resembles Rachel's approach to bathroom duty, but there are also differences. While cases like Rachel's -- where the worker completely ignores the task components -- do occur, more often the worker will engage some smaller components of the task. For instance, a worker called to do break-room cleaning may empty out the day's stale coffee from the pot and toss out sandwich wrappers her co-workers left scattered on the lunch table, yet leave many other elements of break-room cleaning undone. As well, workers who push short-cutting to the extreme are very good at finding ways to take advantage of their bonus time, frequently using time saved from cleaning to participate in other more pleasurable pursuits, such as fantasy shopping or social interaction with co-workers.

Of course, when a short-cut strategy gets this close to shirking it works best if the task area is blocked from managers' view, but there are many cleaning tasks that make this possible. During the shift times when heavy cleaning occurs, managers are apt to be gathered at the front cash-wrap station, occupied with the task of reviewing the day's sales goals or the day's sales take. The worker who is assigned to break-room or bathroom duty has an easy go of it, as managers will expect her to be off the floor and out

of their view, but even the worker who is supposed to vacuum or sweep can escape notice by initiating her work at a far side of the store.

A good example of the short-cut-as-shirking tactic, and one I witnessed several times, involves a ‘stand-in-place’ approach to cleaning. Here the worker cleans the part of a counter, sweeps the part of the floor, or vacuums the part of the rug that she can reach from where she stands, but moves very little to clean areas that are out of her range. This is a very common practice for workers on vacuuming duty, and it is not unusual to see an associate, positioned at the rear of the store, standing in place and repeatedly pushing the vacuum, one or two feet that way and one or two feet this way, over the same area of rug.

This is not the worker’s capitulation to her corporate employer’s recommendations about proper care of floor sample rugs. As she chats with co-workers, flips one-handedly through a new Happy Homes catalog -- or just stares into space – she vacuums one small area of rug to leave the largest areas undone. Employees who sweep can do much the same. For instance, one closing shift associate, assigned to sweep the Design Studio area, spent a full 15 minutes describing the décor of his home to a co-worker, all the while idly pushing a broom back and forth over the same area of floor.

Short-cuts-as-shirking can occur anywhere in the store, but perhaps the most common location is the employee break-room. This makes sense for several reasons.

First, the break room is off the beaten path for managers, especially during the pre- and post-store times when managers are occupied with numbers work, and this makes it prime spot for the worker to avoid surveillance. In addition, the break room offers better opportunity for diversion than most other locations in the store. An open area adjacent to the stock room, the break room sits across from shelves packed with Happy Homes merchandise, making it a convenient place from which to launch a fantasy-shopping escapade. It is also the perfect place for employees to socialize. At opening and closing, the break room attracts a flow of associates who, whether putting their meals in the frig, grabbing their leftovers, or just passing by on their way to the time clock, like to linger and shoot the breeze.

On several occasions I had the chance to witness my co-workers on their break-room cleaning duty and, in the majority of cases, these workers devoted a good chunk of their designated cleaning time to socializing with other workers and fantasy-shopping through the stock room shelves (on average, workers with break-room duty seemed to turn about half of their time to these diversions). In one particularly pronounced example, an associate with break-room duty took the opportunity to initiate an intensive fantasy-shopping spree, lasting roughly a half hour. This was an ambitious effort -- this associate shuffled through merchandise on a dozen different shelves, pulled out multiple pieces of fast-moving products to reserve for future purchase by 'hiding' them behind other stock, and played out a variety of design schemes by gathering various items from

around the stock room, arranging those items on the lunch room table, and standing back to appreciate her work -- in between, munching on cookies leftover from someone's lunch and gabbing with other associates who were passing by.

Although this worker did take the last few minutes of her shift to do a quick break room clean-up, removing obvious trash, and giving a swipe to the counters, the half hour prior -- devoted to fantasy-shopping -- did not see any cleaning labor. Not all break-room cleaning efforts look quite like this, however workers on break-room assignment are especially well-poised to replace cleaning with diversion and, in fact, most manage to get in a fair amount of fantasy shopping and socializing when charged with this category of custodial duty. Moreover, as the case of our fantasy-shopping associate suggests, when workers insert this manner of pastime into their short-cutting efforts, they are both resisting unwanted labor demands and actively producing their own pleasure.

As a component of short-cutting, pleasurable on-the-job diversions such as fantasy shopping, design play, and socializing are not confined to those on break room duty. Even if their opportunity is limited to flipping through a Happy Homes catalogue or having a 15-minute chat about design preferences, associates on cleaning assignment will grab at the chance to participate in these activities.

When this is part of an associate's soldiering efforts, Happy Homes worker resistance takes an interesting twist. Surely, by inserting these diversions into a short-cut

strategy, the worker is finding a way to hover above the low-status cleaning task and coast past an affiliation with the custodial role, but she is also confirming the positive identity generated in and through her hosting labors. These activities of diversion – fantasy shopping, design play, and socializing – reflect the core meanings of her high-class host role and when the worker, in opposition to management’s custodial demands, diverts her energies to these pastimes she is producing not only work resistance, and personal pleasure, but confirmation of the symbolic status otherwise gained in the front-line job.

To the extent this occurs, a Happy Homes worker’s strategy of resistance can also be ballast to her employer’s strategies of labor process control. We can see this in the case of our break-room cleaner. This associate, turning her attention away from the custodial work, opts for activities that closely align with the symbolic class and gender meanings of her branded hosting role. By playing at shopping, decorating, and design, this worker participates in stereotypically feminine behaviors that, correlating closely with upper-middle and upper class gender roles, also closely correspond to the virtual identity she enacts on the floor.

Part of this worker’s resistance to her employer’s custodial demands is engagement with a species of ‘play’ that artfully reflects the gender and class meanings in her primary set of job demands. And, in her act of ‘play,’ the worker is reproducing a particular kind of self that, identified with aspects of well-bred femininity, can do the

interactional work of Happy Homes retail well – meaning that her play, as a project of self-making, is thereby coterminous with the organizational objectives of front-line worker productivity and cooperation. To the degree this play reflects and enacts job elements that appease a worker’s class anxieties, it has the potential for solidifying the link between that worker’s positive self-identity on the one hand, and that worker’s consent to the labor of Happy Homes hosting on the other. Happy Homes workers’ resistance to one set of work demands can then deftly serve another, such that workers’ goldbricking -- even as it frustrates managers’ efforts to get the store clean -- abets the organizational priority of work governance.

There are, then, certain forms of work resistance by which the Happy Homes associate counters the unfavorable identity of ‘cleaning person,’ reinforces her identification with the symbolic class and gender status of the hosting role, and helps to (re)generate her own consent to the front-line Happy Homes labors. We see this in workers’ behaviors, but also in the characterizations they give of their cleaning short-cuts. While pointing to cleaning techniques that do not, in fact, make much of anything very clean, workers’ descriptions of their cleaning short-cuts reveal both the creative energies they use to resist the low-status meanings of cleaning, and the manner by which their resistance might further amalgamate the symbolic status gained through front-line labors. In an apt illustration, the associate Gwen describes her own personal protocol for cleaning the break room, one based on replacing cleaning with labor of a different sort.

Management's protocol for break room cleaning includes wiping down the inside and outside of the refrigerator, tossing out old food, and scrubbing down all surfaces used for food and beverage preparation, however Gwen approaches the task much differently, aiming at an aesthetic result that allows her to feel she has engaged a more refined activity than brute custodial labor:

I try to make it look nice, for me it's straightening cause I always like things in their place, so I find myself putzing and straightening things up back there. I got razzed by the stock guys because I put botanicals in a vase and put them on the table, and I put all the supplies in alphabetical order, cause otherwise you have to look through all the cabinets, so I make things neat, orderly, in their place, and make it look nice.

Gwen diverts her cleaning task into an opportunity for "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987), privileging a feminine preoccupation with prettifying and organizing this ersatz domestic space over and above her employer's request for custodial work, and thereby casting her resistance in gendered terms. The stock guys' razzing is the masculine counterpoint that confirms, even as (and perhaps even because) it belittles the femininity in her performance. But, as Gwen does femininity-as-resistance, she also constructs a femininity that is refined in nature, geared toward beautifying the surfaces of a space while leaving the nuts and bolts maintenance to others. Thus, Gwen's version of short-cutting has the low-status work of heavy cleaning receding behind the higher-status performance of a type of femininity that is, in fact, very appropriate to the exigencies in her front-line Happy Homes service role.

When asked about the down-and-dirty aspects of break room clean-up not included in her description, Gwen is forthright about her position, declaring: “I don’t clean up other peoples’ messes, I don’t deal with moldy leftovers, I don’t scrub counters.” Had she ever received complaints from managers about skipping these tasks? “No, I don’t think they notice, they’re too busy, and it gets messed up so fast how would they know?” As mentioned earlier, the life of the Happy Homes manager is hectic -- after she’s given her associate the order to clean she will rarely have time to check on the results – and this opens ample room for associates who, like Gwen, aim to cut short the energy they give the janitorial elements of the task, and replace those elements with activities that carry class and gender meanings favorable to the worker, and consistent with their front-line retail role.

As a way to transgress custodial work demands, short-cutting differs from other resistance strategies in that it is, at least in theory, open to all. And, in fact, most Happy Homes workers use it. Short-cutting then represents an inclusive oppositional practice shared by most members of the rank and file, however it remains a form of transgression that manifests as the individual worker’s pursuit. When workers pursue their individualized short cuts they often engage in diversions, such as fantasy shopping and beautification, which then help to reinforce their identification with the classed and gendered meanings that are packaged in the role they play on their front-line job. As a consequence, the short-cut form of resistance – even as it represents dissent to Happy

Homes custodial labors – has the ability to inspire worker cooperation with the employer’s demands for productivity in Happy Homes front-lines retail sales and service.

The Slow-Down Strategy

Happy Homes workers commonly resist on-duty cleaning by cutting the custodial labor short, but they can also resist by prolonging it. As we saw with the ‘stand-in-place’ tactic, some variations of the short-cut strategy can also have the side-effect of slowing down workers’ cleaning labor, but when associates deploy slow-down as an oppositional method in and of itself, the process unfolds in a different way. Here, a Happy Homes associate expresses resistance through the deliberate slow down of her cleaning labors, or, put another way, the deliberate contraction of cleaning productivity.

Though less common than the short-cut strategy, the slow-down method is particularly useful when other cleaning tasks are in the offing that an associate wishes to avoid. When a shift is understaffed, or managers have special concern about the cleanliness of the store (for instance, in preparation for a corporate visit), Happy Homes workers can use the slow-down tactic to reduce the possibility that they will end up shouldering multiple cleaning responsibilities at once.

If Happy Homes workers dislike the assignment to a cleaning task, they dislike even more the assignment to several. Venting frustration over a morning’s duties that included sweeping, furniture polishing, and scrubbing at spills on the hardwood floors,

one worker opined: “It’s too much, I don’t like any of it, but this is too much.” In agreement with this sentiment, another more experienced associate tells of how she relies on the slow-down strategy to ward off this eventuality. Thinking back on a recent morning when the store was preparing for a corporate visit, this associate tells of the tense mood brewing while managers scoured the store finding fault (and dirt) at every turn. Realizing it was going to be a jam-packed cleaning morning, the worker received her sweeping detail and made it into an almost hour long affair, thereby restricting her availability for any further cleaning assignments before store opening. As she explains:

I started in the back, there you sweep under the pillow bays, nobody does, it’s hard to get under the bays, but I think you’re supposed to. I took my time (...) because if I finish this they just put me on something else and it could be worse, so I might as well be doing this.

Reasoning that sweeping might be ‘the better of two evils,’ this associate decided to drag out the time it took her to sweep the store so that it would fill up the remaining hour before store opening. While this Happy Homes store has an unusually large foot print, it is not so large that it takes an hour to sweep. Under normal circumstances, the employee on sweeping duty is so keen to get it done that she can discharge the task in less than 15 minutes. True, a sweeper will generally avoid the awkward task of sweeping under the bays (instead, often using that area as a convenient place to push the rest of the debris gathered in sweeping), but she avoids it because it’s awkward not because it takes a great deal of time.

As this case of our floor sweeper suggests, the slow down tactic can sometimes mean a demonstration of ‘cleaning excellence.’ Nobody knows how long it would have been since the under-part of these bays were swept and this associate’s slow-down effect probably means that the floor was cleaner than it had been in awhile. This manner of labor slow-down doesn’t seem particularly disadvantageous to management – especially if the managers are fretting about the state of the store and anxious about an upcoming corporate visit. Yet, again, an hour is an excessive amount of time to spend on this chore, no matter how good the results, thus, from the perspective of management, our associate’s hour-long sweeping venture represents the theft of paid labor time.

Associates have other motivations for slowing down their cleaning labors, and slow down can be a way to get back at management for assigning these labors in the first place. Happy Homes associates express resentment toward management for assigning them heavy cleaning chores, and sometimes a fair amount of animus over the fact that managers don’t do any of this cleaning themselves. This resentment can foment a worker’s use of slow-down as revenge.

Happy Homes workers view this tactic as a way to create difficulty for their superiors (who almost always want to see as much done as possible in the time available) by landing them with a backlog of tasks that their associates, who seem to be on interminable cleaning duties, are not available to fulfill. In addition, Happy Homes associates can view the slow-down strategy as an appealing mechanism by which to force

their managers to do some of the dirty work themselves. If workers are busy with the cleaning tasks they've been assigned, and there's more hard and dirty work that needs to be done yet time's running out, managers may have no choice but to pitch in and do some of the lowly work on their own.

Though the use of slow-down-as-revenge is not overly common at Happy Homes, in my time on the floor I saw it enough times to become accustomed to the strategy and to understand my co-workers motivations (I recorded seven incidents in field notes, and learned of at least three more instances from interviews). Managers really don't do any of the dirty work and, even if not otherwise occupied, they're extremely unlikely to lend a hand to help clean.

A particularly good example how slow-down can be used as revenge came one day when the associate, Belinda, had performed a special type of high-status labor for her managers in the morning, only to find herself on lowly cleaning duty in the evening. On a semi-regular basis, the store puts on "design clinics" for customers. These by-invitation clinics, held in the mornings before the store opens, are almost always led by managers and are set up as instructional sessions on a particular aspect of design (during my tenure, design clinic topics included how to use faux botanicals, how to assemble a tablescape, and how to decorate using picture frames). In an unorthodox move, a Happy Homes manager asked Belinda to lead that Sunday's clinic on bedding. For Belinda, this was a source of excitement and pride, as well as a reason to wear her very best clothes:

It was Sunday...I got asked to do a presentation. They do these clinics, you know, where they come in and they talk about (design), like for guests to come in and they're free. And Sunday was talking about arranging a bedroom. So they asked me to do it, which was really exciting. I couldn't believe they asked me to do it. So I got to stand up in front of 50 women and talk about bedding and they have it kind of all laid out but that was really fun. And they were like, you're not scared to do this, and I was like no, not at all, nope (laughs) nope I'm not, I mean, yes a little bit scared, a little bit but not to the point where it was going to make me sick to stand up and talk. It was exciting that they asked me, so then, that day, I wore my best suit because I knew I was going to be in front of all these people.

Belinda knows that associates are rarely asked to lead clinics, and takes it as a special honor deserving of her "best suit." However, at the end of the day, the same manager who bestowed the honor effectively took it away. At the close of her Sunday shift, Belinda, who was dressed in her best suit and still riding on the high of her morning's special role, was asked by her department manager to vacuum the store:

That night, she needed vacuuming, and she told me to do it so there I was vacuuming in my nice suit and the vacuum cleaners are awful! There's like dust coming out the side of the vacuum all over my suit. And I'm like, you know, I wouldn't mind vacuuming so much if I was in jeans, however I have a suit that has to go to the dry cleaners and it's going to take me like three hours of pay to pay for the suit that has to go to the dry cleaners. So, you know, you're like, you had me do the clinic this morning and now you're having me do the vacuuming, and it's like, it's hard, it's frustrating, I was very frustrated with her.

Belinda was so "frustrated" with this particular manager that she decided to get even. The manager told Belinda that candles had to be restocked that evening, and it was clear to Belinda this was the task she faced when she finished vacuuming. Aware that candle-restocking requires a great deal of ladder climbing (candles are on upper stock

room shelves), is quite dirty in its own right (candle handling means getting wax all over one's hands and clothes), and is something her manager would not want to have to do herself, Belinda decided to drag out the time it took her to do the vacuuming so that she could shift the burden of candle-restocking onto her manager's (relatively empty) plate:

She was standing around, doing nothing, she could be doing some vacuuming. I'm wearing my best suit, and I'm doing vacuuming, plus the candles. So it was a thing like, I'm sure not going to rush through the vacuuming tonight. She can see how it feels when all of a sudden she's the one who has to restock candles. I mean, they're not at all a fan of you standing around, which I understand, but when they do it it's okay. And they're always wanting you to do, like, heavy cleaning...and you're just like, if I wasn't dressed nice, maybe that could be okay, but you get dust all over you from the vacuum and you're climbing in heels up on ladders and you're like, well, maybe they need to know what this is like.

The manager has committed dual offenses. She has instructed Belinda to do low-ranked dirty work when Belinda is outfitted – both externally, in her dress, and internally, in her disposition – toward much more refined activities, and she has made this managerial request while she herself malingers. In response, Belinda relies on the slow-down tactic, hoping her ruse creates a need for her manager to take on the candle task. Belinda confirms that her tactic worked, and describes watching her high-heeled manager spend the last half hour of the evening climbing ladders and schlepping armfuls of candles out to the floor – a sight Belinda found satisfying. For Belinda, this is turn-about as fair play, and labor slow-down works as a strategic mechanism by which Belinda can exact a little bit of revenge on the manager who, she feels, has acted so unfairly.

But we might also wonder if Belinda isn't in some large part motivated to get revenge as a result of the uncomfortably stark contrast between her morning role and her evening role. By assigning Belinda the role of 'clinic leader,' the manager gave Belinda a chance to consolidate her identity as high-status brand ambassador. While Belinda inhabits the brand ambassador role daily as part of her interactive floor labors, the fact that the 50 female clinic attendees are the *crème de la crème* of Happy Homes high-class clientele makes the clinic leader personage a brand ambassador par excellence. This is a role that could go a long way to help certify Belinda's hold on symbolic social status. Moreover, with its 'Martha Stewart' flavor, the clinic leader role confirms this social status as an unquestionably gendered one, such that Belinda's morning started out with very powerful confirmation of her own belonging in a world of high-class femininity.

Predictably, when the same manager who appointed Belinda to this esteemed role was able to later casually demote her to the janitor role, Belinda would have been disoriented, not just about her roles, but about her own claim to status. Adding cognitive dissonance to the other more practical conflicts Belinda was facing (e.g., running a dirt-spewing vacuum while wearing her nicest suit, and calculating the cost of dry cleaning), this manager's cleaning orders reversed the sense of high social station Belinda had developed at the start of her day, bringing it down to the low level of the front-line retail clerk – a level at which one must take orders from others, even those that insist on janitorial duties. This dramatic variance between Belinda's symbolic status and her

actual status seems not only likely to stimulate Belinda's disorientation but her status insecurities as well. If this is the case, Belinda's use of the slow-down tactic may be as much an effort to tamp down class anxiety as it is to teach her manager a lesson.

As we know, workers of many different stripes practice slow-down as a way to resist the conditions of work. For front-line service workers, resisting work demands through the use of slow-down often means slowing down their emotional labor (see Hochschild 1983 for a discussion of flight attendants' retraction of pleasantness). In recognition of the fact that their employer wants them to use their emotions for commercial purposes, front line service workers resist by withholding these emotions and refusing to provide the required display in their interactions with service recipients -- for instance, the worker may refuse to cooperate with the service employer's requirement for a demonstration of friendliness and concern and instead provide a display of aloofness or hostility (Leidner 1993; Paules 1991; Hochschild 1983).

In this way, service labor resistance differs greatly from resistance in industrial contexts. As the going wisdom has it, a service worker's emotions, constituting a force of front-line service production, become the likely target for a worker strategy of labor slow-down. Yet, while this may be true in other service workplaces, at Happy Homes it is *very* rare. As a rule, aggrieved Happy Homes workers do not withdraw their consent from front-line labor demands, continuing to perform the required display despite their grievances with management.

Given the high level of positive self-feeling these workers can gain through their front-line interactions, this makes some sense, as the Happy Homes worker who would pull back on emotional labor to protest work conditions would seem to be shooting herself in the foot. But if service worker resistance looks different at Happy Homes than the literature would predict it could also be because Happy Homes workers are using something more than just emotional labor to produce their service interactions. Inarguably, emotional labor is part of the Happy Homes worker's job, and when the Happy Homes worker creates the publicly observable display that her employer requires, she is doing much as the literature on emotional labor says she will, that is, accommodating the requirements of a commercial relationship by tapping into a "source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality" (Hochschild 2006:72). However the research presented here suggests that the element considered "deep and integral" to the Happy Homes worker's individuality, to be mined for commercial purposes and given up as a force of retail service production, might well go deeper than the level of emotion, to implicate the worker's sense of who she *is*.

In the successful execution of her front-line labors, a Happy Homes worker engages an iterative process that simultaneously produces her enhanced sense of class and gender status while deploying this enhanced identity as a force of her interactive labor, thus binding her personal identity to her work identity. If our Happy Homes worker faces labor demands that counteract her status gains -- as happens when an

associate is given janitorial duty – slowing down low-ranked labor may serve the worker twice: as a protest to management for assigning the work, and as a designation to self that these chores are not of the type a person like herself should be doing. However, when a worker's sense of self is so intimately bound to the performance of her Happy Homes interactive labor, a choice to dissent by pulling back on *that* labor – no matter how serious the grievance – has the potential to vivify that worker's class anxiety and erode her positive identifications. Thus, we might not be surprised to find that Happy Homes front-line workers generally fail to comply with what we know about emotional labor slow-down in service work. For the typical Happy Homes worker, there is no emotional labor slow-down that isn't also a slowing of identity labor and, as we'll see in the next chapter, a choice in this direction can incur personal costs, if not, at times, occupational costs as well.

Slow-down, like short-cutting, is not a matter of collective dissent and, again, the Happy Homes worker's practice of resistance comes out to be a very personal affair. But, perhaps this is a logical result of the Happy Homes front-line retail labor process. Lodged firmly in individuality's deep and integral center, the worker's stake in labor is a matter of her own identity, and no matter how heavily she draws on a matrix of social identities to support the private enjoyment of symbolic class and gender status, the resulting sense of self – even as it constitutes a form of labor power useful to the organization -- becomes a profoundly personal matter as well.

Resisting cleaning labor is a very common practice for Happy Homes workers. We can certainly imagine a retail worker failing to take pride in her custodial tasks and, as a result, approaching them half-heartedly, but what Happy Homes workers do in respect to cleaning is neither this automatic nor this casual. Workers' avoidance of custodial duty, or their lackluster performance, is often the result of deliberate strategies to resist the implications of the janitor role and preserve a high-status identity. Positioning themselves at an upper remove from what they see as lowly labor, workers on cleaning duty regard the work as an insult to their station. One associate captures this perspective, albeit with a hefty dose of political incorrectness (and attitudinal racism), when she explains why Happy Homes associates shouldn't be required to clean: "That's immigrant work, Mexicans do that, we shouldn't have to." Though other associates avoid racial stereotypes when explaining why the work is below them, in essence, they say much the same thing – they believe the paid work of cleaning is for persons they consider their social inferiors, and their employer's demand that they do this labor is a degradation to be opposed.

It is interesting at this point to recall that many associates claim to enjoy cleaning *when* they are cleaning their home. As one clean-house enthusiast remarked, "I like things spick and span, my husband thinks I'm nuts, but I *love* to clean." Yet, while many of this associate's co-workers share her sentiment and report that they enjoy cleaning their own home, they also agree with the next point she makes:

But I think it's very stressful to be asked to clean the store because it, um, it doesn't fit the qualities that a person needs to do this job. It's a different thing, like some people are better at some kinds of work than others, and I think that's what's hard for me with the cleaning. When you think of people who clean for a living you think of a different kind of person, it's not how you think of yourself. I love the selling part and I love the talking with guests but I *hate* the cleaning part.

As does this associate, most Happy Homes workers make a very clear, and to them, critically important distinction, between cleaning for oneself and cleaning for someone else. Workers who begrudge their employer's requirement for custodial labor do not resent the work of cleaning per se, what they resent is being asked to do a *form of work* that, in their minds, is associated with persons of low social rank. So, as they can and when they can, they resist.

The reader might be wondering why Happy Homes doesn't hire a professional cleaning service to do this work. During my time at Happy Homes, I wondered the same thing. Asking around the management ranks, I learned that at one time the store did rely on a professional cleaning service to take care of most of the custodial tasks now assigned to associates, but then came the corporate decision to cut store budgets and integrate custodial work into the responsibilities of store staff. This kind of bottom-line thinking, so often incontrovertible at upper points in a corporate hierarchy, can have a much more ambiguous logic when translated into ground-level practice. From what we've seen here, the Happy Homes corporate decision to cut costs by cutting the contract

cleaning service succeeded in introducing a new arena of worker-manager conflict into the local labor process that, by all indications, isn't going away anytime soon.

CHAPTER 8

WORKER STRATEGIES AND THE HAPPY HOMES REWARD SYSTEM

Though Happy Homes corporate-level strategies to ‘in-source’ previously outsourced custodial labor have constructed the primary store-level location of worker-management conflict and worker resistance, corporate policies about wages, benefits and promotions can also generate employee grievance. Among the rank and file, serious grievance about Happy Homes employment policies is actually uncommon, and associates who joke about a small paycheck, lament the lack of medical insurance, or fantasize about advancement to managerial positions, nonetheless report enjoying their jobs and wanting to keep them. But, of course, liking a job and wanting to keep it does not preclude -- and may even help instigate – worker stress over inadequate job compensation and discontent with the employer’s reward structure.

Happy with the work itself, these workers are not immune to concerns about their wages, benefits, and promotion prospects and, at times, Happy Homes associates can grow unhappy as a result of their employer’s reward structure and translate these complaints into workplace transgressions and oppositional action. When this happens, the strategies that workers use and the risks they encounter are significantly different, and at times much more consequential, than with workers’ resistance of cleaning duty.

In this chapter, I take up the question of how Happy Homes workers come to be dissatisfied with their employer's reward structure, looking at the strategies they use in response as well as the coping mechanisms they draw on when these strategies fail. I begin with a review of the Happy Homes reward structure that looks closely at the conflicts this structure imposes on front-line workers, particularly those conflicts associated with the Happy Homes employee discount. From there I move to a discussion of workers' responses, considering workers' attempts to navigate these conflicts through the use of 'creative moonlighting,' and identity labor slow-down.

THE HAPPY HOMES REWARD STRUCTURE

Oddly, most associates – while fully aware of the inadequacy of their pay – don't seem to begrudge their employer on this count. Naming her job dislikes, an associate can say "pay, a big dislike is the pay," and in the same breath, add, "but I love the job." As mentioned previously, Happy Homes associates start the job at \$8.50 an hour, and though yearly review often means a up-tick in hourly wage, at no more than 25-cent-per-hour annual increments the standard pay raise does not make an impressive difference in the worker's paycheck.

Promotional opportunities for the Happy Homes associate are also very limited. Though a rare associate may climb to lower management ranks, for the most part the organization hires management personnel externally, often poaching from other retail concerns, and prefers individuals with retail management experience and relevant

education (e.g., a bachelor's or master's degree in business). Thus, the average front-line Happy Homes worker, lacking both the required experience and education, has little hope to raise their pay by rising up in the organization. Without internal opportunities for further training and advancement, the Happy Homes associate position qualifies as an example of a "dead-end job" (Perrucci & Perruci 2006; Hodson 2002; MacDonald & Sirianni 1996).

If Happy Homes associates do not enjoy much in the way of promotional opportunities, neither do they enjoy much in the way of employee benefits. Like many other new economy service employers, Happy Homes sidesteps a need to provide expensive employee benefits, keeping most front-line staff on part-time status (Sweet 2007; Perrucci & Perrucci 2006; Edgell 2006; MacDonald & Sirianni 1996). Thus, while part-time Happy Homes workers approach (and often exceed) 30 hours a week, they do not receive medical insurance, paid vacation, sick pay, or other like benefits.

Of course, their employer has made one important exception to the no-benefit rule, and that is to allow front-line workers a hefty 40% discount on the purchase of Happy Homes merchandise. Along with, and related to, employees' gain in symbolic status, the desire to have rights to this discount is one of the reasons Happy Homes associates tolerate their low wages and lack of benefits.

As we saw in the discussion of Happy Homes recruitment and training, incoming front-line workers are excited by the belief that a discount will make Happy Homes merchandise accessible and, once on the job, associates continue to place a high value on the discount benefit -- even if they don't make enough money to use it on a regular basis. Most Happy Homes merchandise comes dear, and no matter how substantial a 40% discount appears, for the \$8.50-an-hour employee who is pining after, say, a \$4000 sofa, or a \$700 coffee table, the remaining 60% price tag is still often worlds away from making sense in her personal budget.

Yet, the typical Happy Homes employee – unable to use her discount to full advantage -- still sees the fact of 40% off Happy Homes branded product as a very special privilege. One associate, explaining what she values about her job, makes this point well when she chuckles, “I can barely make my rent so the discount shouldn't make any difference to me, but *it does!*”

We can see how the Happy Homes employee discount might serve as an extremely effective recruitment and retention tool – a possibility not lost on front-line workers. Happy Homes associates tend to appreciate how smart it is for their employer to offer a generous discount to the likes of their own ranks where a strong aspiration to the Happy Homes brand is so widely shared. One savvy associate put it this way:

I think that (associates) *love* having the discount! And I think that Happy Homes was brilliant at getting part-time people to come in that loved

Happy Homes, give them a 40% discount, and they're still making money off of us. They did it right... they're smart. They did it and they knew what to do and I think the managers know how to push it. They know that we can't afford it, but we all love that we get the 40% discount anyway, it's a great situation for Happy Homes, very smart...

As this worker says, Happy Homes front-line employees "love that they get the 40% discount" even if they can't afford to use it. For workers who so admire the brand, lust after the product, and dream about having a Happy Homes lifestyle, having a right to the discount (even if it remains largely unused) can become an asset in and of itself and, along with status enhancement, a reason to stay in the job.

This raises an interesting point about retention at Happy Homes. Despite its meager compensation package, Happy Homes does appear to have a reasonably good rate of retention in the front-line ranks and many of these front-line workers have significant tenure with the company (I did not have access to official company data on employee turnover, but estimate that 30-40% of the Happy Homes front-staff at this location had been on the job for three years or more at the time of this research). When we think of the things that keep low-level, low-wage service workers like Happy Homes associates in their dead-end jobs our first consideration is usually the existence of blocked opportunity structures that prevent socially and educationally disadvantaged workers from improving their lot (Hodson 2002; Appelbaum & Batt 1994). Certainly, this is true at Happy Homes as it is elsewhere, yet Happy Homes workers' attachment to their discount, as this combines with their attachment to symbolic status, suggests a greater complexity to this

question, at least as the question applies to this workplace. If, in the Happy Homes context, the employee discount has the potential to meld with an associate's sense of status enhancement in a way that discourages front-line turnover and helps keep low-level retail workers in place, there is the possibility the discount operates symbolically as 'golden handcuffs.'

The 'gold' here may have little market value, but if it can inspire associates to cleave to their \$8.50-an-hour job and reject other more lucrative possibilities it would constitute a meaningful factor in Happy Homes retention, and a meaningful reason why these low-level, low-wage service employees stay where they are. Listening to front-line Happy Homes employees, it appears that Happy Homes' symbolic version of golden handcuffs works reasonably well. Certainly, when it comes to lateral mobility, the high prestige of the Happy Homes brand combined with the generous employee discount can be a rationale for the associate to resist a financially favorable job change. Echoing the sentiments of many of her co-workers, the associate Sheila highlights this point as she explains why she eschews other better-paying retail jobs, preferring instead to stay with her job at Happy Homes:

I suppose I could go to work some place like Sears and probably make more than I do now but I couldn't stand that kind of environment. Not even if they had our discount, which they don't, I don't think, theirs is more like 20%, but even if it was higher I wouldn't care because it wouldn't do me any good, there's nothing I want at Sears.

The more lucrative retail opportunity that Sheila would reject might be no less a dead-end job than is her Happy Homes position, but it could be more money. We would not think that Sheila -- a self-supporting single woman of 40 who lives primarily off of her Happy Homes income -- is in a position to scorn higher paying jobs, yet, as she suggests, the promise of better pay would not be incentive enough to sacrifice the symbolic status of the Happy Homes job and turn her back on discounted access to high-status branded merchandise.

While working at Happy Homes, I heard many other workers articulate a similar perspective. Musing over their knowledge of front-line retail jobs that pay better than Happy Homes (some with benefits), these workers repeat Sheila's logic, arguing that the "pleasant," "up-scale," "classy" and "fun" atmosphere of Happy Homes combines with discounted access to "high quality" and "stylish" brand-name home furnishings to trump the higher wages, and sometimes benefit and promotion options, that could be available in retail clerking jobs at lower-line stores (workers' examples of lower-line retail employers include Sears, Target, Costco, and Macy's, with references also to the UPS store and chain grocery stores).

As the only bona fide employment benefit most Happy Homes workers can claim, and one they appear to value, the discount is still a very mixed blessing. For those employees who, though lacking the means, cannot resist the lure of the Happy Homes product, the fact of a 40% discount can often be a reason to go into debt. Of course, in

the post-industrial economy, consumer debt of the type incurred by Happy Homes workers is by not unusual and, as some scholars have observed, the squeeze on American incomes combined with the rise of consumer credit, has created growing ranks of “post-industrial peasants” whose illusion of prosperity is bought at the cost of extensive credit card debt (Leicht & Fitzgerald 2007).

Debt incurred from Happy Homes shopping is a problem for many an employee, and constitutes a popular strain of on-the-job associate conversation. Admitting they find themselves unable to resist temptation, front-line workers report they frequently spend more than they plan on Happy Homes products, and some confess to sometimes spending more than they make in a given pay cycle. A brief excerpt from my field notes helps to reveal the scope of this problem among Happy Homes associates, as well as the shared understanding with which these workers talk about this topic:

There’s a midday lull in store traffic and the associates, Lorelei, Cindy and Desiree are gathered chatting at the front counter. They are talking about Happy Homes products they want to buy. Cindy’s talking about wanting the Greenbriar bedding set, Desiree chimes in that she wants the Amherst area rug, and Lorelei tops them all by saying wants the Calistoga love seat. They go back and forth passing various words of approval for the other’s choices, as well as compliments on each other’s good taste, then the talk moves from what they want to buy, to what they’ve bought in the past and how much money they spend at the store. Laughing, Desiree says, “We’re going to be spending our whole paychecks,” to which Cindy responds, “What do you mean our whole paycheck? How about *more* than our paycheck?” They all laugh, agree, and Desiree adds, “Yeah, but *how much more* than our paychecks?” Before anyone responds, Desiree announces the answer, “Two times! That’s what we’re going to spend, we’re going to spend two times our paychecks!” (Everyone laughs.)

Good humor aside, not one of these three associates is in a financial position where spending twice their paycheck on Happy Homes products is a painless affair. Cindy, for instance, worries about her lack of medical insurance but can't afford to purchase it privately, and the recently divorced Lorelei frets that her settlement money is running out and, when it does, the Happy Homes paycheck will be her only funds.

These associates are in good company – the majority of their co-workers live paycheck to paycheck and, while a good number have secondary part-time jobs or the cushion of an income-earning spouse or generous family members, many still carry large credit card debt loads that reflect over-spending on Happy Homes merchandise. Associates talk surprisingly freely about the debt they've incurred through use of their discount and, over my months in the field, I heard at least a dozen of my co-workers confess to carrying credit balances because of their Happy Homes purchases. Expressing anxiety over their card balances, these employees also continued to express a desire for more Happy Homes product. As one of these workers, while in the middle of purchasing Happy Homes sheets, guiltily explained: "I shouldn't even be buying anything now, I spent way too much here last year and I've still got the credit card bills to prove it so I don't know what I'm thinking buying more stuff now...I guess I just can't stop myself."

Overspending on Happy Homes merchandise is a common problem for these front-line workers, and it is one they would not be likely to have, or at least, to have in this degree, if it weren't for the seductive pull of the 40% employee discount. Since we

can be reasonably sure that this type of profligate behavior would create a host of financial problems for these low-income associates, as well as generate a significant level of personal stress, we'd be right to wonder why these workers do it. In part, the answer comes from the constant exposure they have to temptation. Happy Homes workers, infatuated with the brand to begin with, spend their days surrounded by a kaleidoscopic range of Happy Homes products that beckon to be had. And, as we recall, these associates are no strangers to the prestige value of this merchandise. Exposed to a constantly revolving flow of inventory, with each new round presented as 'bigger and better,' and all designed to signify status and style, it is hard for the class anxious worker to resist a desire to consume the product -- and what the product signifies.

The temptation that the inanimate Happy Homes product represents is significant, but it can be multiplied many times over by the animate Happy Homes customer. Happy Homes customers tend to consume Happy Homes goods at a high rate, and in an interesting reversal of the salesperson-customer roles, the Happy Homes guest's patterns of luxury consumption can incent employees to try to do the same. In the act of buying Happy Homes product, the customer sometimes (unwittingly) ends up selling the product to her sales clerk.

As one associate explains, this does not take any special effort on the consumer's part, only the display of a freehanded ability to consume as much Happy Homes product as that customer wants. This associate, perseverating about whether to buy one of the

\$100 pillows she just sold to a customer, takes a moment to reflect on why she would want this pillow in the first place. Sharing her thoughts, she explains how the Happy Homes customer's display of wealth can act as a persuasive force that motivates even the less materialistic of workers toward consumption of Happy Homes product:

I really love Happy Homes products but I'm not really a material kind of person, so I didn't think it would bother me. But then, when you see some one coming in and they're just running around saying 'I want this and that' and they blow thousands of dollars in a half hour...yeah, I start to notice it, and then I want the stuff too. They all want it, and so then I want it too, and then I end up buying it.

If workplace talk about employees' credit card balances is true, mimicking her high-class guests' consumption patterns is not necessarily the Happy Homes associate's best idea. Yet it is an idea that has been around for a long time. As Thorstein Veblen ([1899] 2000) noted a century past, the conspicuous consumption that helps to maintain the social status of the wealthy leisure class easily transmutes into this kind of "invidious consumption" that creates envy and consumer desire in those of lesser wealth and status. Or, as our associate puts it, "When you see some one coming in and they're just running around saying I want this and that and they blow thousands of dollars in a half hour...yeah, I start to notice it, and then I want the stuff too."

Another associate, Lila, tells a story that helps drive home the power with which a Happy Homes customer's purchase can incite consumer desire in the Happy Homes associate. Lila, having one morning helped a very upscale guest purchase one of the

more expensive leather sofas in the Happy Homes portfolio, developed a sudden urge to have one of those sofas for her own. Lila says she wanted it so badly she “could taste it.” This sofa – the ‘Boston’ model -- original retailed at almost \$7,000, but had that day gone on sale for \$6000, and Lila knew that with her employee discount she could get it for \$3,600. Compared to the retail price this struck Lila as a very good deal, though still far outside her budget.

Lila describes her desire for the sofa as incredibly strong, and reports that she spent a good part of the next several days strategizing how she might afford it, finally hitting on the idea of borrowing money from her father. Yet, when Lila did put in a call to her father (who lives four states away) to ask for money, the conversation went much differently than planned. Aware that her father did not have much money himself, Lila was prepared for the loan gambit to fail -- what she was not prepared for was the sudden deflation of her desire for a Happy Homes Boston sofa:

It’s funny, because a long time ago I used to always, always, always want a leather couch. Now I have space in my house for it. But I really hadn’t thought of it in years until I sold the Boston sofa to a guest. And there it was, a Happy Homes Boston leather couch that was on sale. Suddenly it was like I wanted it so bad I could taste it, it was like I had to have it somehow, I had to have it. So finally I called my dad, and told him that with all the discount and with everything, all the blah, blah, blah, and I got 40% off the sale price, and everything, it was just such a great deal. My dad and I talked and he was like, “Lila, one of our neighbors just got a leather couch from (a local furniture store), and with delivery it was \$500 and it’s a really nice couch.” And I was like, “so you think this \$3,600 deal isn’t really a deal?” And he’s like, I’m willing to help you if that is what you honestly think you want, but he’s going, I’m pretty sure it’s not

that good of a deal. And then suddenly I was like, you're right. He's right, I got totally sucked in, I got sucked in by that rich guest in love with the Boston sofa. It sucked me in, totally sucked me in.

Workers' class anxieties, by motivating employees to identify with the brand and cooperate with their front-line labor demands, serve Happy Homes as a force of retail service production, but these examples suggest there is also another way in which associates' class anxieties enter the Happy Homes work process. When Lila remarks that her guest's desire for the Boston sofa helped create for her a similar desire, she indicates how the desire for Happy Homes product can be 'contagious.'

This alone does not explain the dynamic by which this desire travels from customer to clerk, but when Lila underscores the point that the customer is, to her mind, *rich*, it reveals the importance that class-based difference takes in this process. In contemporary consumer society, primary structures of social inequality become channeled through commodities (Holt and Schor 2000), and while the Happy Homes associate who helps a rich customer spend large sums of money receives positive confirmation that Happy Homes commodities symbolize high social status, she also gets the negative confirmation that symbolic status is not the whole game. In the moment the up-scale guest makes a high dollar purchase it's clear that the customer's social power expands beyond the symbolic to the material, and the customer's buying power can be a potent reminder to the associate that her own status is merely symbolic.

This type of reminder carries the potential to stimulate a worker's class anxieties, but it also instructs on how those anxieties might be rectified. If the worker exercises the one concrete material privilege she does have, namely her employee discount, she can convert her position of symbolic status as Happy Homes branded worker into the kind of market power it takes to own the high-status branded goods her customer consumes. This is something the associate Lila expresses when she realizes with excitement that the Boston sofa she had just sold to a rich customer for \$6,000 could be available to her for 'only' \$3,600. By virtue of their employee discount, Happy Homes workers' class anxieties – even as they operate as a force of retail production, embedded in the worker's performance of her service labors – have the potential to likewise become a force of worker consumption.

This point raises some interesting parallels with recent work scholarship that proposes we conceptualize front-line service workers at the juncture of production and consumption (Du Gay 2009; Pettinger 2004). This stream of thought argues that older production-centered approaches to work process analysis ignore the confluence of production and consumption in service work, and thus ignore the dual role of service workers as producers and consumers and the influence this has on worker identity. Though it is not the purpose of this research to test this proposition, the dual role of Happy Homes workers' class anxieties as a force of both production and consumption suggests a further need to integrate insights about consumption into our explorations of

front-line service work and front-line service workers' identity, particularly in the context of front-line retail work.

Lila's experience with the Boston sofa demonstrates how consumer desire can be activated in the Happy Homes worker by the Happy Homes customer. And the employee discount -- as the one concrete benefit the Happy Homes employer provides -- might be a very effective vector for passing this consumer desire from high-class shopper to low-level clerk. In this way, the behavior of the retail consumer helps craft the meanings, and the consequences, the Happy Homes reward structure has for front-line employees.

If Happy Homes customers are players who act on the associate's relationship to her discount, so too are Happy Homes managers. On the Happy Homes floor, managers take a very active role promoting workers' consumption of Happy Homes product and, as a regular practice, these managers alert associates to special employee deals on particular items of merchandise. These 'special deals' -- good for only a day, or in some cases, only a few hours -- come with an atmosphere of urgency, and insofar as quantities of the special product are typically limited, the urgency is further heightened by a sense of scarcity. These specials also come as a surprise. Happy Homes managers announce employee specials without warning, and at any moment -- in a meeting, over the walkie, or simply as they travel about the store -- managers will drop the news that associates can get an 'extra' discount above and beyond the normal 40% on a specified Happy Homes

product. These broadcasts tend to come with a good amount of fanfare and hype as, for instance, with the following manager's staff meeting announcement that there is a special morning deal on lamps:

Hey guys, I've got something really exciting for you this morning! You all know the Avial lamps? Love those, love those! This morning you can get 60% off on the Avials, can you believe it, you get a \$200 lamp for 80 bucks! That's a rock bottom price! Even if you don't need one for yourself, you could get some as gifts. But there's not many left so if you want 'em you better grab 'em up right now!

Reminiscent of 'blue-light specials,' these special deals for Happy Homes employees appear to come out of nowhere, are limited-time-only (on limited quantities), and can seem just too good to pass up. Jumping on the bandwagon, many an associate will do just as this manager suggests and grab up the product du jour at its "rock-bottom" price. Indeed, workers often interpret the extra discount as a stand-alone reason to buy products they don't otherwise desire or need, sometimes buying large quantities of the item simply because it is priced so low. For instance, one day-shift associate, learning about a morning special on frames, dashed over to the pile and grabbed up as many as she could get her hands on – over 20 in total. Admitting she had no idea what to do with all the frames, this associate reasoned that the 75% discount was justification enough to buy them now and "worry about what to do with them later."

Happy Homes associates recognize that their managers have their own agenda for hyping products to their employees. As one worker put it, "they do (these specials)

because they need to get rid of the product to look good to corporate.” Yet, even as associates realize this, they still find themselves succumbing to managers’ persuasion.

As the associate, Delia, explains, it’s hard not to get caught up in the hype:

Well, you get wrapped up in it though, when you’re there all the time, and the managers come in and they say “oh, we’ve got this great deal, somebody’s gotta buy this, one of you guys *have* to buy it today.” And you’re like, okay I will! And you’re like, ‘Oh, gotta get it before someone else does, I don’t know where I’ll put another couch, but I’ll get it.’

When Happy Homes managers promote these specials, they create excitement and consumer desire in the Happy Homes worker. But also, by creating these special deals, Happy Homes managers convert the employee discount into a *variable* asset, thus enhancing the worker’s perception of her discount as an important, valuable, and *potentially expansive*, benefit of her Happy Homes employment.

Happy Homes managers actively encourage their employees to exploit the discount benefit, and they will even go so far as to urge workers to apply for and use an Happy Homes store credit card in order to take further advantage of their discount. Like many retail enterprises, Happy Homes issues its own store credit card and the company policy is that all associates are to encourage Happy Homes guests to apply for and use store revolving credit. But Happy Homes managers also take it upon themselves to encourage Happy Homes workers to do the same. As with most retail store credit cards, the interest rate on the Happy Homes card is scandalously high, still many of

associates I worked with claimed to have a Happy Homes credit card that they use regularly.

Again, for the worker in an \$8.50 an hour job, this may not be the wisest practice. The higher the credit card interest rate, the harder to pay down the balance, and the Happy Homes associate who yields to the persuasive power of the discount, using her Happy Homes credit card to do so, can end up quite literally ‘in debt to the company store.’ Many Happy Homes workers use common sense and avoid this type of bind, but there are quite a few others who end up carrying large balances on their high-interest Happy Homes credit cards that they just can’t seem to pay off. As we’ll see shortly, when workers’ use their discount to overspend – whether on Happy Homes credit or otherwise – it can generate tensions that not only articulate as personal problems for the worker but also as labor control problems for the employer.

These risks notwithstanding, Happy Homes associates tend to be persuaded by their interactions with customers and managers, and are often avid consumers of Happy Homes products. Appreciating the chance to exercise consumer power and satisfy some portion of their constantly changing but also constantly re-invigorated desire for Happy Homes goods, employees perceive the discount as a very valuable part of their employer’s reward system. And this reminds of the associate who described Happy Homes’ employment policies as very smart. In this employee’s estimation, Happy Homes’ decision to bring in part-time people who love Happy Homes and give them a

40% discount is “smart” because the organization is creating for itself “a great situation” where it can make money off its front-line workers. The associate appears to be right, but there is also another logic to this system. However smart it is for Happy Homes to organize its reward structure around an employee discount and thus turn workers into consumers of the product, it is at least as clever to create a reward system that *makes up for skimping on everything else* by giving low-level workers the chance to consume material signifiers of social status in a way that complements the symbolic status these workers consume as part of their front-line service labors.

However pleased Happy Homes associates are with their discount, the configuration of their employer’s reward system is not necessarily worker-friendly, and can produce a variety of work process tensions that these workers must somehow navigate. I turn now to the question of these tensions, beginning with a look at how overspending workers adopt transgressive ‘moonlighting’ strategies as a way to manage the conflicting valences of the employee discount, the low wage, and the desire for Happy Homes product.

THE MOONLIGHTING STRATEGY

Enamored with the brand status and the promise of a chance to acquire Happy Homes merchandise at a discount, Happy Homes associates tend to accept their employer’s relatively stingy compensation offerings with little complaint. In this regard, the discount – or more precisely, its lure – can operate as a pacifying force, helping to

mute associates' potential concerns over the Happy Homes reward structure. Yet, even as the discount can quiet employees' concerns, it also has the potential to become an indirect, but still powerful, source of Happy Homes worker discontent.

Of course, one way in which the discount can breed employee discontent happens when Happy Homes workers are simply unhappy that they can't afford to use their discount as much as they'd like. This constitutes a problem in its own right, yet, given that Happy Homes products turn over continuously, and the consumer's claim to the brand lifestyle requires she continuously 'turn over' her own personal Happy Homes inventory, replacing last year's big thing with this year's big thing, consumer desire for Happy Homes goods is, in effect, never fully satisfied. And Happy Homes employees get this. They've also developed ways to cope, as we see, for instance, with the worker practice of fantasy shopping. Interestingly, another way in which associates deal with limits on their own Happy Homes consumption is by consuming vicariously through the Happy Homes customer.

Vicarious consumption is a worker strategy that, if it helps the worker cope with the limits of her income, also has potential to up the productivity of the worker's sales and service labors. Making this point well, the associate Ella talks about how she uses the strategy of 'vicarious consumption' to deal with the limits on her own ability to purchase Happy Homes goods:

I can get real jazzed about home decor, you know, I mean, I can never get enough, but you know, they bring in new stuff everyday and you can't buy something new everyday, you can't do a new green dining table every day, you can't buy new bedding every day, but you can have a really great time creating that for someone else. I like spending your money because I get to live vicariously through you. I can live vicariously through you because I am selling you the black and white bedding, and you know I am selling you the new bedding with fun colors, oh my gosh, we could do the new lamps and look at this fun orange rug. But I can't recreate that in my own home, so I have a great time doing that for you. And if I'm having a great time, I'm having fun, you do too. I like spending your money so you do too. I mean, like, it's effective that way too for selling.

Though we don't know if Ella is right that customers buy more because she herself is engaged in vicarious consumption, we can see how Ella's strategy of 'vicarious consumption' serves her employer's purposes of maximizing front-line worker sales and service productivity. Ella's comments also help us see how the Happy Homes customer may help influence workers' relationship to their discount in more than one way. While sometimes the customer's interest in Happy Homes merchandise motivates an employee to use her discount, at other times the employee can consume vicariously through the customer. The Happy Homes worker who approaches a guest's consumption of Happy Homes product with this attitude has a strategy for avoiding the use of her own employee discount.

Although associates may opine that their Happy Homes acquisitions – and their use of the discount -- remain limited, this in itself does not generate serious employee discontent or breed conflict with management. The real problem seems to come when associates use their discount *too freely*, overspending on Happy Homes merchandise.

Employees in this situation become highly motivated to make more money but, insofar as they want to keep their Happy Homes job (and the Happy Homes discount), but harbor scant hope of meaningful wage increases or promotions, the options they have for improving their financial status are limited. As it is, many of these workers are already tapping a second source of income. Close to 75% of associates in this study report holding some form of part-time job secondary to their position at Happy Homes, about half say are in dual-earner relationships, and a small percentage (roughly 10%) say they receive some financial help from their parents.

Still, among the associate staff, there are few who can solve the problem of affording their Happy Homes purchases with the resources they have. Thus, in an effort to support their consumption of Happy Homes merchandise (which often can mean resolving substantial debt already incurred by prior purchases), overspending associates must turn their attention to more creative money-making strategies. Here is where they start to run at cross-purposes with their employer's policies.

One of the most common ways Happy Homes workers attempt to solve this problem is through a type of 'third shift' moonlighting. As we might expect, Happy Homes has no complaint with its employees working other jobs as long as the activity occurs outside of the Happy Homes workplace and does not interfere with the associate job (and does not involve working for a direct competitor). However, many of these front-line workers already have other significant commitments outside of their Happy

Homes job (e.g., second jobs, children, families) and are unable to integrate a ‘third shift’ into the hours of their day. Thus, these workers look for ways they can make more money *while* doing the Happy Homes job. For many, the logical answer is to do direct sales of a non-Happy Homes product while doing their work at Happy Homes. And this is something their employer’s policy does not support.

A surprising number of front-line Happy Homes workers adopt this ‘third-shift’ moonlighting strategy, becoming ‘distributors’ for direct sales organizations that proffer everything from beauty supplies, costume jewelry and cookware, to home organizing services, cleaning products, and baked goods. As many might know, direct sales organizations (or DSOs) are loosely organized structures (often designed on a pyramid scheme) that eschew traditional bureaucratic forms, have little to no recruitment criteria, and will allow almost any one who applies for a distributorship to try their hand at selling the organization’s products (Biggart 1989). Thus, DSOs offer Happy Homes workers an accessible, low-commitment ‘third shift’ option that is both suited to workers’ experience (e.g., retail floor sales), and can fit within the limits most workers have on their available time.

As mentioned, a significant number of Happy Homes workers take advantage of the DSO ‘third shift’ option. In my months at Happy Homes, I met more than a dozen associates affiliated with DSOs (and I would have to guess there were probably more I hadn’t met). Specifically, these were Happy Homes associates who had joined up with

one or the other direct sales organization and were attempting to make extra money by hawking that organization's wares *while on the clock for Happy Homes*.

Some associates' direct sales efforts are aimed at their Happy Homes co-workers. On any given day, you are likely to run across a Happy Homes worker who has cornered another associate – sometimes in the break room or stockroom, but often right out on the floor – and is delivering her spiel about the incredible qualities or amazing price of whatever item it is that she's selling. This can be a source of irritation for cornered co-workers. As one of my colleagues, herself not involved in direct sales, said about these co-workers:

They're driving me crazy. They won't stop talking, trying to sell that stupid face stuff, or the stupid jewelry. They just keep talking and they'll keep following you. Like Jenny, she's tried to sell that stupid face stuff to me so many times that I've had to be flat out rude to her.

While associates' efforts to sell to other associates can strain co-worker relations, as long as these efforts don't interfere with the Happy Homes work proper, Happy Homes managers don't pay much mind. However, one of the reasons associates are motivated to bring their direct sales efforts into the Happy Homes workplace is that this workplace allows them access to the Happy Homes clientele. As these associates know only too well, upscale Happy Homes customers have generous discretionary funds that, if so motivated, they can throw around. And, other than the Happy Homes workplace, associates-cum-direct-sales-workers would have little forum in which to access this

affluent consumer group. So, with hopes that the Happy Homes customer will throw some of those generous discretionary funds their direction, Happy Homes associates doing direct sales can see their on-the-job proximity to these elite social strata as an opportunity to sell DSO products to a deep-pocket clientele.

Finding a second sales job that can be performed within the labors of their Happy Homes job may seem like a very resourceful, if also clever, move for the associate who has little free time, but needs more money. And, if you're going to do direct sales, taking advantage of the proximity to a wealthy consumer base afforded by your primary job might also make good sense. But, there's an obvious rub. Happy Homes managers do not approve and, in fact, this worker practice violates Happy Homes workplace rules and the terms of the associate's employment contract. This means that a Happy Homes associate who is caught trying to sell her DSO product to a Happy Homes guest is at risk of formal warning, probation or even dismissal. In other words, the associate who brings her DSO business to the Happy Homes floor does so at the jeopardy of her job.

This would be a good moment to remember that many of these workers took the DSO distributor position for the express purpose of earning extra money to spend on Happy Homes products, to pay for Happy Homes products they've already purchased on credit, or, often, both. Of course, these associates-become-DSO-distributors may have all manner of reasons for wanting or needing to make more money – in fact, it is hard to imagine that, at \$8.50 an hour, the Happy Homes associate *wouldn't* need more money.

But still, seven of the Happy Homes associate/DSO distributors I met during my time at the store described their DSO position as a way they might better afford to use their discount and purchase Happy Homes merchandise, and another four mentioned their DSO position as part of an effort to pay off their Happy Homes credit card. A desire to purchase Happy Homes product, or pay off prior purchases, does not preclude the possibility that these associates have other reasons for taking on the extra DSO job, but, in many cases, the Happy Homes associates who do DSO sales are motivated to make extra money as a way to enhance the use of their employee discount. Thus, many of the Happy Homes employees who take their DSO work out onto the Happy Homes floor are risking their jobs in order to exploit its one tangible benefit – the employee discount.

Predictably, most Happy Homes associates doing DSO sales try to be very discreet about these on-floor direct selling efforts. Still, they come prepared, carrying DSO business cards in their pockets and, in many cases, stashing product samples in their back room lockers. And when managers are out of sight, and the occasion with the customer allows, very few of these DSO-affiliated workers will hesitate to mention their DSO product to the Happy Homes guest.

While Happy Homes associates look for opportunities to insert their DSO sales spiel into their service interactions with Happy Homes customers, these insertions are rarely forced, and will usually follow a thread of the on-going conversation the associate is having with her guest (even if the associate is manipulating the conversation in her

own direction). Thus, when the Happy Homes associate puts on her DSO hat with the Happy Homes guest, it is usually with tact and poise. For instance, Jenny, a Happy Homes associate who sells beauty products on the side, is quite adept at weaving her DSO sales into her Happy Homes sales. As we learned earlier, Jenny can take a very aggressive approach when trying to sell to co-workers, however when she's on the Happy Homes floor and performing her hospitality labors with a store guest, her mention of her DSO product will tend to meld seamlessly with whatever conversation she happens to be having at the moment. In one example, Jenny is helping an upscale female guest pick out patio furniture. In the course of the conversation, the guest mentions that she doesn't need an outdoor chaise because her doctor has advised her to stay out of the sun. Jenny, finding a convenient opening, commiserates with the guest and, saying she's had the same advice, finds an opening to promote her skin care line:

Jenny: I love the sun but I was in it too much for many years and it ruined my skin

Guest: What do you mean? Your skin looks lovely!

Jenny: Oh, thank you! You know, I think it's this product I use, I can't believe what it's done for my skin, it's like a miracle! You should have seen me before, I was wrinkled like a prune.

Guest: What is it?

Jenny: Oh, it's called (names product). You might not have heard of it before, it's only sold privately.

Guest: No, I've never heard of that.

Jenny: Oh, it's the most amazing skin care line, really a miracle! Here, I think I have a card. It's very hard to get, but I be happy to help you with that if you wanted.

Though Jenny is very good at this, so are her other DSO-selling Happy Homes co-workers. Whether it's skin care products, costume jewelry, cookware, baked goods, or other DSO products, Happy Homes workers tend to finesse DSO sales efforts into their interactions with Happy Homes customers smoothly. Recalling that these Happy Homes associates have become practiced in the arts of tact and politesse as part of their Happy Homes job, perhaps we should not expect anything less.

I do not know how successful my co-workers are with their DSO sales, but I do know that bringing the DSO sales onto the Happy Homes floor can be very risky business for an associate. In the course of my tenure, I saw two Happy Homes associates receive formal warning and probation as a result of trying to hawk their DSO product to Happy Homes guests, and learned of a third associate who was terminated (my understanding of this third case is that the employee had already been caught and warned once, and was dismissed as a result of ignoring that warning and being caught a second time). In short, this version of the employee's moonlighting strategy can backfire – and in a big way.

One of two probation cases offers an instructive picture of the way third-shift moonlighting serves as a worker strategy for navigating the tensions that arise from the

Happy Homes reward structure, also illustrating how the employee's motivation for moonlighting can arise from a desire to use the Happy Homes employee discount.

Franklin is one of the two associates who received probation for hawking DSO wares on Happy Homes time, and his experience with moonlighting on the Happy Homes job reveals how the employee discount, as part of the Happy Homes reward structure, operates indirectly to generate conflict between workers and managers.

Franklin, a fanatic about interior design, is a 3-plus year tenured associate who loves the Happy Homes brand and the Happy Homes product. For the first year of his Happy Homes job, Franklin lived in a small, run-down studio apartment "too small for a couch," thus, even though he wanted badly to use his employee discount to decorate his home (and had a long list of Happy Homes products he wanted) he was prohibited by the small size of the space. When he met his current partner all that changed. His partner's parents helped the two of them buy a small house. Now, in Franklin's words, he has the room for furnishings and wants nothing more than to "make it into a Happy Homes space." He and his partner are both very excited about the fact of Franklin's employee discount. The problem is, neither Franklin nor his partner make much money (his partner works in food service), and are stretched by the mortgage, so both took on second jobs, with Franklin (who's second job is also in food service) taking on an additional 'third shift' as a DSO distributor selling cookware.

Barely a month into his DSO career Franklin was ‘busted’ by a Happy Homes manager for trying to sell cookware to a Happy Homes customer and put on probation as a result. Franklin, in general a person who follows the rules, was extremely disappointed as he’d already had some good success selling cookware on the Happy Homes job, and had hopes that this was going to help make up the difference for the Happy Homes sofa and coffee table he had just purchased. He tried to explain all this to his managers but, as he says, “they didn’t care.”

Franklin stopped selling the cookware at work, but continued to look around for other ways to make some extra cash. As he says, he was very motivated at this point to make extra money as he’d already bought over two thousand dollars worth of Happy Homes furnishings for his new home, and there was a lot more Happy Homes merchandise he planned to purchase. So Franklin landed on another solution. One day, as he was working the Happy Homes floor, assisting a customer with a furniture purchase and trying to help this customer figure out how to transport the items to her home, Franklin realized he might be able to sell delivery service to Happy Homes guests. He’s strong, owns a truck, and has a few free afternoon hours between his Happy Homes job and his food service job -- as Franklin emphasized, “it sounded perfect.”

Not wanting to offend his employer’s rules and risk losing his discount, Franklin mentioned his plan to the Happy Homes store manager. As he tells it, “she didn’t say no,” and so Franklin started selling delivery services to Happy Homes customers, and

this, he said, made him enough extra money to use his discount to buy a Happy Homes rug and a Happy Homes chair.

Though Franklin doesn't describe it this way, it seems he must have kept this 'third shift' business low-key at the Happy Homes workplace. I worked the Happy Homes floor with Franklin during the first month of his delivery business, and not once did I observe Franklin mention the business to a customer or pass out a business card (in fact, I didn't know about Franklin's delivery business until his interview, at which time he'd stopped doing these deliveries).

But, apparently, Franklin did not keep the business low-key enough. One day, when Franklin was working the Happy Homes floor and arranging with a customer to deliver a table he'd just sold, the Happy Homes District Manager – who was visiting the store that day -- overheard his transaction and promptly called Franklin into the back, to terminate him on the spot. Understandably, Franklin – who believed he had his manager's tacit approval for the delivery business – balked and, describing himself as “very angry,” informed the District Manager that the decision to terminate him was “probably illegal (since) the store manager knows about the delivery service.” Franklin says, “I told her (the DM) to take it up with our store manager.” The DM told Franklin that the termination decision would be put on hold until she had the chance to talk to the store manager. In Franklin's mind, this would be all it would take to clear up the

confusion, and aside from wanting an apology from the DM (and fearing his delivery business was coming to an abrupt end), Franklin believed the issue was over.

Three days later Franklin was called (unexpectedly) off the floor and into the store manager's office for a three-way meeting between himself, the store manager, and the District Manager. In Franklin's version of the story, the DM started the meeting by saying, "One of you is lying and I'm going to find out which one." Apparently, the store manager denied having any knowledge of Franklin's side business and also told the DM about Franklin's probation for the DSO-related episode. Franklin felt "betrayed by that bitch (the store manager)." "She was," he says, "protecting her own ass and throwing (Franklin) under the bus." An excerpt from Franklin's interview captures his sense of betrayal:

She knew about my business, she knew. You know, maybe we didn't talk about it again (after that first time) but she knew about it. And she was lying through her teeth, going 'Oh, I don't know a thing,' and that's a bunch of BS, because she knew. And she wouldn't even look at me, the whole time, she wouldn't look at me.

In light of the conflicting stories, the DM decided not to terminate Franklin. But she did request the store manager put him on probation (his second) and, of course, Franklin had to suspend his delivery business. However, this was not all Franklin ended up suspending that day. Up to that point, Franklin felt he had a good working relationship with this store manager, but from that moment forward he didn't trust her,

and, as he describes, she had also started to treat him differently, dismissing his comments in staff meetings, and failing to celebrate or compliment his sales success. Making matters significantly worse, this manager had just announced she was moving Franklin off the floor and into the stock room. This happened the day before our interview. At the time of our interview, Franklin seemed extremely upset by this news and was talking seriously about leaving Happy Homes.

In the context of Happy Homes workplace meanings, it makes sense that Franklin would be unhappy with this job reassignment. An unrequested transfer from floor to stock, while not bringing a reduction in pay or official job rank, is still regarded as a demotion -- and, for the typical associate, it signals an upsetting loss of symbolic social status. Few associates would embrace this sort of transfer, but for Franklin it was especially intolerable, not only because of the bad blood with the Happy Homes store manager (and his belief that she did this to punish him), but because his persona crafts such a close reflection of his Happy Homes host role. Notwithstanding a willingness to do few hours of heavy afternoon delivery labor, Franklin is very particular about his dress and his grooming and, being a self-proclaimed clothes horse takes great pride in his appearance and “love(s) to dress” for the Happy Homes job. He is also an extremely gracious Happy Homes host who revels in his interactions with the clientele, a fact that is reflected in his consistently strong sales performance. For Franklin, this transfer was a

deal-breaker and, while he truly hated to give up his affiliation with the Happy Homes brand (and his discount), he was starting the process of looking for another job.

The last I heard, Franklin had left Happy Homes and was working for a nearby competitor. Franklin lost his discount, and a job working for a brand that he loved, and Happy Homes lost an extremely effective and loyal front-line worker. Given Franklin's responsible nature, and his loyalty to the Happy Homes brand, how did such events come to be?

First, Franklin's choices can be understood as reasonable extensions of his brand – and job -- loyalty. The tactics that got Franklin in so much trouble arose from his desire to make use of his Happy Homes employee discount and, in his choice of the moonlighting strategy, Franklin was attempting to *serve* his identification with his employer's brand. Initially with his DSO adventure and later with his delivery business, Franklin was trying to make more money for the express purpose of purchasing Happy Homes goods, and this toward the ultimate goal of creating an "Happy Homes space" he could call his own. This was an extremely important goal to Franklin, and, as he envisioned, once he'd created his branded home, he would be able to entertain his friends and family in style. "My big thing," Franklin shares, "is having people over (and) I want people to go, 'ohmygod, this is incredible!' when they walk in the door."

Franklin's 'third shift' moonlighting efforts were motivated by a desire to *materialize* the symbolic status of his paid front-line performative role through the consumption of Happy Homes branded goods, thereby transporting the symbolic meanings of his work role outside the Happy Homes workplace – in concrete terms, by bringing Happy Homes product into the confines of his private home, in symbolic terms, by bringing the meanings of his work self into his private life. When Franklin went moonlighting, he was actively trying to reproduce his own identification with the brand *in order to extend* that identification to other parts of his life. In this sense, the strategies that got Franklin in trouble represent his efforts to more fully embody the role his Happy Homes managers assigned him.

Franklin's moonlighting strategies can also be understood as a reasonable response to the tensions of his employer's reward structure. On one hand, Happy Homes pays Franklin a low wage, gives him none of the standard employee benefits, and offers him little hope of promotion. On the other, the one concrete benefit that Happy Homes does offer – the employee discount – is a benefit that, in order to be used in any robust way, requires a level of income that this employer, with its stubbornly meager wages, doesn't provide. Still, Happy Homes actively promotes its workers' discount use, hawking 'special employee deals' to motivate associates to purchase Happy Homes product, and supporting the associate's use of the store credit card.

In response to these incongruities, Franklin did what many associates do. Aiming to realize the value of his employee discount, Franklin attempted to increase his funds by generating income from sources *other* than his Happy Homes employer -- even though this included transgressing his employers' rules. Though it caused conflict with his managers and eventually led to the dissolution of his employment relationship, Franklin's 'third shift' moonlighting strategy was his good-faith effort to navigate the conflicting valences of his employer's reward structure in a way that would ensure his continued work consent.

Though Franklin's case is extreme, it illustrates the pressures that motivate associates to adopt the moonlighting strategy, and the risks they encounter when they do. Happy Homes crafts a reward structure designed to compensate for low wages, absent benefits, and lack of advancement opportunities, with an employee discount. To the front-line employee, the discount represents access to Happy Homes products, but its value lies in its promise that the worker will be able to *materialize* the symbolic status produced and consumed on the Happy Homes floor, and thereby extend that status beyond the confines of work. Yet, for most associates, any significant fulfillment of this promise can be largely illusory. True, associates consume Happy Homes products at an impressive rate given their \$8.50 an hour wage, but it is by hook or by crook, and often by credit, that they do so. And, as Franklin's case demonstrates, the struggle to realize the promise of Happy Homes symbolic status by realizing the promise of the discount can

require the worker to adopt strategies – such as ‘third shift’ moonlighting – that come with their own jeopardy, not the least of which can be a risk to the Happy Homes job.

While capable of creating worker-management conflict, employees’ moonlighting strategies enact small oppositions that generally end up accomplishing the persistence of work consent. When associates respond to incongruities in the Happy Homes labor process, and specifically those brought about by the Happy Homes reward system, they can end up transgressing their employer’s rules. But, as in the case where workers’ moonlighting means bringing DSO business out on the Happy Homes floor, these workers are resisting one rule of the workplace in order to accommodate the requirements, both explicit and implicit, that come with their employer’s larger system of work control. This is, then, a form of ‘accommodation-through-resistance.’

But what happens when workers efforts to navigate these same incongruities lead to strategies that contest the actual logic of the Happy Homes labor process? Positioned between symbolically-constituted status produced on the Happy Homes front-lines and delimited material rewards received in return, some workers can end up turning away from the ‘Happy Homes promise,’ and, when they do, the basis for their consent to identity labor becomes undermined. The retraction of front-line identity labor is not common on the Happy Homes front-lines, and, as mentioned earlier, there is good reason for this – identity labor is a key tool in the amelioration of workers’ class anxieties and a source of their positive self-feeling. Yet, however much workers’ consent to identity

labor becomes thus secured, the disjuncture between symbolic and material rewards carries the potential to destabilize their consent, and workers who confront the repeated failure of their material status to match the promise of their symbolic one, can become disillusioned. When they do, withdrawing their consent from their front-line identity labors becomes a proximal strategy.

THE IDENTITY LABOR SLOW-DOWN STRATEGY

The slow-down of front-line labor is very unusual at Happy Homes, but in the rare case where it does happen there is a link to the worker's experience with the Happy Homes reward system. In particular, a worker's choice to slow-down the performance of her identity labor can be traced to the conflicting meanings of the employee discount. In this section, I examine a case of identity labor slow-down, looking closely at how one worker's effort to use the employee discount as a way to materialize her symbolic status and export that status to her non-work life led to oppositional action. I begin the section with a consideration of workers' experience with the Happy Homes discount, asking how the discount offers workers hope that the symbolic status gained in their work-life can be made real in their private lives.

The Employee Discount 'Promise'

The employee discount is a critical element in the Happy Homes system of labor process control, but it can also contribute to worker resistance. The power of the

discount as a labor control mechanism lies in its ability to ‘promise’ the worker that she can extend the symbolic status produced and consumed in the workplace out into her non-work life. For Happy Homes workers to embrace the discount in lieu of a living wage, health benefits, and promotional opportunities, they must do two things: they must accord it value and they must accord it credibility.

The process by which workers come to value the discount is not at all magical -- it is a direct parallel of their motivation to perform front-line Happy Homes identity labor as a way to produce symbolic status. Neither is it mysterious how workers come to believe that this promise is credible: 40% is a (standard-setting) discount, Happy Homes management offers ‘special deals’ that make for multiple opportunities to raise that discount percentage, and a store credit card that makes it easier to take advantage of that discount. And, in that most associates report that they furnish their homes (as much as they can) with Happy Homes merchandise, any incoming worker who doubts that the discount promise can be in some part realized will have many co-worker examples to convince her she’s wrong. Some associates actually go so far as to furnish non-existent homes. For instance, one 26-year old associate describes having made multiple Happy Homes purchases over her two-plus-years on the job, all of which have remained in storage because she lives with her parents and doesn’t have a place of her own:

I live at home with my parents but yet I have a brand new sofa, loveseat, ottoman, bed, daybed, desk at my grandfather’s house waiting for when I move out. So apparently I need to buy pillows for this sofa and I just

bought pillows and I'm like I'm not even using it (the sofa). But I'm buying pillows for it! It doesn't go in a house now but it'll go sometime. Oh, and apparently I need to buy like accessories and everything. Like I have all my towels. When towels went on sale last year (and) we got our additional discount or whatever, I'm like, okay I'm going to buy towels for my bathroom, I don't have a bathroom, but I have four sets of towels to go in it!

This dowry of Happy Homes goods is not fully explained as the result of our associate 'thinking ahead.' As she went on to explain, it is the high-status appeal of the Happy Homes goods that catches her fancy and inspires her to stock-pile a household's worth of furniture without a home:

Being at Happy Homes I find that I'm willing to pay a little bit more for certain things, just because it's a better brand. I can spend a little bit more and get this lamp. Normally I wouldn't spend a hundred dollars on a lamp. But I always knew that Happy Homes was good furniture. Again like I said, a much higher price range. But, you know, I always knew it was in the higher ranks but I didn't realize exactly how high it was until I came here. I mean, the level of the customers, I didn't realize what a high level they are and the loyalty they have to the brand. And I obviously learned more about the quality of the furniture and all that too just from working there, but mostly it's been seeing the level of the customers that re-emphasized my thoughts on the furniture and made me want to buy the merchandise.

As noted earlier, the discount-empowered associate's consumption of the high-status Happy Homes goods can come at a steep price – namely, debt. Some associates lust after the product more than others, but many of these workers overspend on their Happy Homes purchases, and this can lead to a variety of problems. In some cases, associates have gotten into trouble with their spouses and significant others for their

Happy Homes spending habits, which in turn has caused conflict in their personal relationships. For instance, the associate Ghislaine, complaining that her husband doesn't understand her desire to re-decorate their house in Happy Homes style, also explains how she works around his disapproval of her purchases:

A lot of times I try to hide things from him. If I come home with something big in the trunk and I need him to help me bring it in I'm busted. You can't hide big things in the closet. But he works 8 to 5 and delivery happens during the day. So if it's big I get a delivery service to bring it when he's gone. If it's smaller I just sneak it in so he doesn't notice.

The associate, Roland, shared that his purchasing habits at Happy Homes had at one point become so "out of control" that his partner threatened to leave. As Roland explained, neither he nor his partner make generous incomes, and the Happy Homes purchases had put the two of them in a worrisome amount of debt. Roland said he was "watching" himself now and holding back in respect of his partner's wishes. However, as he remarked with a sigh, "It's hard, it's really hard, especially when Margarite (the store manager) says to me, 'hey Roland, you can have that couch for 75% off if you buy it today.'"

When making purchases they can't afford, or that go against the wishes of their spouse or significant other (or, as is often the case, purchases they can't afford that *also* go against a partner's wishes), associates can betray feelings of guilt and fear. Guilty spenders will often share their rationalizations with the co-worker who is ringing up the

sale. For example, one associate who, buying \$300 worth of home accessories that, as she herself described, “breaks the budget,” justified her purchase to the co-worker who was manning the register. As the associate paid for her home accessories, she explained that her live-in boyfriend had just bought himself “a hundred dollars worth of toys from Radio Shack,” thus she too deserved to get herself “a little something,” though, as she quickly added, “this isn’t just for me, it’s for the house, it’s for the both us.”

In a related type of logic, the associate Ruthie used anger at her husband to justify buying a new set of dinnerware. That morning the Happy Homes store had received a shipment of a new line of dinnerware called the “Rustic.” For Ruthie it was love at first sight, and she spent a good part of the morning telling anyone who’d listen how much she liked the Rustic set, bemoaning the fact that she’d had the same set of dishes for 20 years, and agonizing over whether she should spend the money. Most of her co-workers knew that Ruthie was strapped of late – her husband had been out of work for a month, they were having trouble paying their bills, and Ruthie was taking extra hours at Happy Homes – and though Ruthie seemed to really want the new Rustic dishes, she decided the purchase could wait. This is what Ruthie was saying before she left for her midday break. However, when Ruthie came back from lunch, clearly agitated, her mind had changed. Venting to a group of her co-workers (myself included), Ruthie shared the cause of her anger – a cause that served as Ruthie’s rationale for throwing caution to the wind and buying the Rustic set:

When I was at lunch I called my husband. He put his hand over the phone but I heard anyway, he's saying 'Give me a Bud Light and a scotch and water.' He's out with the guys at the bar, I'm working, he's out partying. Forget it, I'm going to get the set (the Rustic), he wouldn't want me spending the money, but forget him. I've had the same set of dishes for 20 years.

The incautious use of the Happy Homes employee discount can create stress in associates' personal lives, but it can also lead to circumstances that engender workplace conflict between employees and management. Though most associates – even when weighed down by debt from Happy Homes purchases – do not dispute their employer's reward structure, there are cases where a worker, keen on building a branded Happy Homes life outside of work, becomes anxious to improve her Happy Homes compensation -- sometimes looking for an increase to her associate wage, but also looking for the opportunity to rise into management ranks.

Navigating the Discount Promise

As noted earlier, the chances for an associate to land a Happy Homes management position are very limited – but they are not entirely closed. At this Happy Homes store, for instance, there is a department coordinator (the lowest level of store management), as well as a store Assistant Manager, who claim to have started as front-line employees. Thus, the ambitious associate who sets her sights on a management position is not completely starry-eyed.

Of course, there may be a variety of motivations for a front-line worker to aspire to become a manager (not the least of which, to escape a dead-end retail clerking job and gain health benefits). But the two associates I got to know who sought management positions had very certain reasons for doing so that could be traced back to their desire to live the Happy Homes lifestyle. A close look at one of these cases helps reveal how incongruities in the Happy Homes reward structure can end up promoting a worker's resistance to her front-line identity labor.

Robin, an associate in her late 20's, had an uncontrollable lust for Happy Homes brand goods, and during her first many months on the job was a regular sight at the cash register, using her discount for multiple purchases. Robin's intense admiration of the brand was obvious before she even started the job.

I first met Robin in her role as a 'shopper-lite.' This was Fall of 2002, and I was working the Happy Homes Grand Lobby when Robin approached me with a wedding registry list in hand, asking if I could help her find the serving spoon that matches the 'Princess' flatware set. Assuming that Robin was shopping for a wedding gift, I made a casual comment about the betrothed couple, to which Robin gave a quick correction, informing me the spoon was for her. Thinking this meant Robin was betrothed, I asked about her upcoming wedding, prompting Robin to correct me again: she was not planning a wedding, nor was she engaged to get married, and actually, she shared, she didn't even have a boyfriend. The Happy Homes wedding registry list she carried in her

hand (a multi-page list that easily included 60 items) was her list of the Happy Homes products *she* wanted. Today she was buying a spoon.

After I got Robin the spoon she was after, she went to browse the store and that is the last I saw of her that day. A few weeks later, when I arrived for my shift, there was Robin standing in the Grand Lobby, greeting guests and performing Happy Homes hospitality. As I found out later, Robin had submitted an application the day of her spoon shopping venture and was now, very proudly, a Happy Homes associate with claim to 40% discount.

From the beginning, Robin was one of Happy Homes' more enthusiastic associates, gushing over the product and thrilled to interact with the store's affluent clientele. Robin was one who learned quickly how to perform high-class hospitality, orchestrating her customer interactions with impressive finesse, often to be seen engaged in friendly conversation with a Happy Homes guest.

As one of her workplace habits, Robin liked to share little things she learned about her guests with co-workers, and it would not be unusual for Robin to immediately follow up a guest interaction by seeking out a co-worker or two who would listen to the tidbits. Very often the information Robin learned (and cared enough to share) were also signifiers of the guest's prestige. In one typical case, Robin regaled her co-workers (myself included) with a tale of her guest's many homes. Standing at the cash wrap

station, Robin shared that her recent guest had just returned from her vacation home in the south of France, but, as Robin emphasized, this guest actually “has *three* homes, *and* a condo in Aspen,” and, Robin adds, “I think she was wearing *Prada*.”

Robin was also an avid promoter – and consumer -- of Happy Homes products. However, this got her in a little trouble. According to Robin, only a few months into the job she had already emptied her small savings and accumulated over \$2,000 of debt due to her Happy Homes purchases. As a result, Robin was forced to slow down her Happy Homes spending – a reality that left her depressed and frustrated. As Robin put it, she wanted a way to continue the project of making her home “look like the catalogue,” explaining, “my place isn’t ‘there’ yet, I’ve still got lots of things on my list.”

Thus, when Robin learned that Happy Homes managers enjoy a larger discount than associates (and as she could assume, make more money), she hatched a plan that she felt would solve her problem -- if she could become a manager, the higher income plus better discount could put her back on the road to the Happy Homes lifestyle she desired. So, Robin began to nose around, looking for opportunities for promotion, and letting all her managers know that she was interested in “moving up.” When one of the store’s department coordinators took a transfer to another location, Robin jumped on the opportunity, campaigning heavily among Happy Homes management ranks for a chance at the position. During this time, Robin shared with me her excitement at the possibility of getting 60% or more off Happy Homes products. Indeed, she was so excited that she’d

already calculated the 60%-off-price for the remaining products on her Happy Homes ‘wedding registry’ list, writing the price next to each of the list items.

Robin did not get the department coordinator job. Happy Homes filled the position with a department coordinator from another store, and Robin, who believed she had a good chance at the job, was painfully disappointed. She was also now stuck with a dilemma: to buy the Happy Homes items that would give her the Happy Homes lifestyle she envisioned, she needed to make more money, but making more money seemed to mean a job change that, in turn, would mean the loss of her discount (and although Robin didn’t say this, the list of things she didn’t want to lose may well have included proximity to the high-status brand and clientele). In addition, Robin was upset with her department manager. She felt the manager had misled her, giving her reason to think she would get the coordinator job, then much-too-casually announcing in a morning meeting that the post had been filled. As Robin put it:

She was making it sound like I was going to get that job. She’s saying, ‘yeah, that’s great, you’re going to make a great manager.’ Then this morning (in the meeting) she says they’re bringing in a coordinator from another store. I almost started to cry. I thought I was getting the job, I don’t understand what happened.

Identity Labor Slow-Down

In the subsequent weeks, Robin’s behavior on the floor took on a noticeable change. Before, her enthusiasm on the floor was palpable. Indeed, for the early part of

her tenure, Robin's performance of high-class hospitality and brand ambassadorship was so outstanding that Happy Homes managers held up Robin's version of friendliness and politesse as a template for other associates to follow. For instance, in one staff meeting, the main message of the manager's pep talk was for other associates to pattern their behavior after Robin's:

I want you to attach yourself to guests, attach yourself to people! Like Robin here...she's totally amazing. Try to do it like Robin. Start up conversations with people, like "I like your hair," it doesn't have to be around the product, just start up conversations with guests, people really like that. I want you to watch Robin, she does that, and people really like it. Then after you've made a connection with people, you can tell them about a benefit of a product, you know, but make that connection first. Watch Robin today and see how she does it.

In her early tenure, Robin often received kudos like this from Happy Homes management (making it little wonder she would think herself to have an 'in' for the coordinator position), but following the failed attempt at promotion, Robin's efforts to "attach" herself to guests seemed to wane. Robin became less gregarious, subdued in her interactions with guests, no longer initiating the kind of conversational efforts that had previously allowed her to gather 'inside info' on her privileged customers' lives. Accordingly, she had also dropped the habit of recapping guest interactions with her fellow associates.

Robin was also showing less enthusiasm for the Happy Homes product. At the beginning, Robin's success with selling "add-ons" was, according to management,

spectacular, and managers would remark in meetings that this was a reflection of Robin's talent for "communicating a passion for Happy Homes" to her customers. Whether or not this claim is true, to watch Robin in those early months was to see a person who seemed always excited about Happy Homes merchandise, and thrilled at the prospect of helping her customer shop. To borrow our earlier associate's phrasing, Robin appeared to thoroughly embrace the vicarious pleasures of "spending (the guest's) money."

But this associate, who had so quickly earned workplace fame as a master of Happy Homes sociability arts and a standout brand enthusiast, appeared now to be 'working to rule.' Whereas Robin's previous approach to greeting guests reliably included friendly entrees such as "I like your hair," her new approach more closely resembled the obligatory pleasantness of the routinized service clerk. Admittedly, I didn't witness Robin drawing on that most common of scripted retail greetings, "can-I-help-you," but I did watch as this 'new Robin' received one after the other guest with some version of the similarly stock question, "Hi, is there something I can help you find today?" In most retail contexts, a scripted greeting like this is par for the course, but, as we know, at Happy Homes it's a manager's eyebrow-raiser, and, more to the point, the early Robin would have never done this.

Along with her pared-back greetings, Robin's interactions with customers – though convivial -- often seemed perfunctory. Robin continued to pleasantly accommodate customer requests (for instance, retrieving a requested item from the stock

room, directing customers on where to find items in the store, or answering customer questions about product availability, quality, and use), but she did not appear to be making the overtures toward social intimacy that were her habit in the past. In contrast to the bubbly Happy Homes host that earned management praises, Robin's persona on the floor had become more reserved, and at times, almost aloof.

By all appearances, Robin had curtailed – or ‘slowed-down’ -- her hospitality efforts, opting instead for the low-commitment performance of a service worker's surface display. In part, this reflected Robin's resentment at being passed over for the department coordinator job. As Robin shared with me at the time, she felt she'd been unfairly treated, and resented her department manager for making her think she had a good chance to get the job and then giving the job to someone else. Talking about her department manager, Robin says, “she led me on (...) I don't think it was fair.” Moreover, Robin had very critical things to say about the new department coordinator – who was now Robin's immediate supervisor – describing her as “incompetent (and sloppy.” Asked if she would consider going up again for a management position if one should come open, Robin replied: “I don't know, I'm not sure they mean it (referring to the possibility for associates to move into management), I think the managers just say what they think you want to hear.”

At an immediate level, Robin's choice to slow down her front-line hospitality was then an expression of resentment toward Happy Homes management and an act of

resistance triggered by tensions in the Happy Homes reward structure, in particular, blocked opportunities given by its promotional policies. But, talking with Robin during this time, I learned she had another equally, if not more important, reason for ratcheting down her Happy Homes identity labor, one related to a need to manage her own class anxieties.

As a result of her initial overspending – or, put another way, her initial use of the discount benefit – Robin had reached a point where her own Happy Homes buying power had been reduced to almost nothing. And, of course, Robin’s constricted finances likewise reflected the inadequacy of her Happy Homes wage. After she’d been passed over for the management job, Robin realized that, at \$8.50 an hour, it was going to be very difficult for her to resolve her current debt. And, in light of that debt, it was going to be very difficult for her to take advantage of her Happy Homes employee discount. As Robin explained: “I can’t buy *anything* now...I need to get them (credit cards) paid off. I won’t be able to spend *any* money for a long time.”

On one hand, this is a practical problem – albeit, at high credit card interest rates, not quick to resolve. However, for Robin this was a practical problem that came with steep emotional – and identity-level – costs. As Robin pointed out, the reduction in her Happy Homes buying power was not matched by a complementary reduction in her desire for the Happy Homes lifestyle and product. This left Robin with an unsettling feeling of deprivation.

“It’s really hard,” she said, “I’m around all this stuff I want and I can’t have.” And, as she explained, this situation had actually been made a great deal worse by the recent arrival of new seasonal product that Robin “really, *really* want(s), even more than what’s on (her) list.” In this last respect, Robin’s relative newness to the job worked against her. Those associates who have been around for awhile, having had surges of consumer desire at many a newly arrived Happy Homes product, describe a process whereby they learn to treat ‘new product lust’ as temporary, and thus choose to practice restraint by “riding it out” (at least, they say, until the merchandise goes on first mark-down). Had she the insight of the Happy Homes old-timer, Robin would have known to take a desire for new product with a grain of salt. But, as it were, the colorful array of new seasonal merchandise was just that much more desirable stuff that she couldn’t have, and this left Robin feeling that much more deprived.

On its own, Robin’s sense of deprivation does not explain a choice to slow-down her front-line labors. For instance, had Robin been amenable to the use of the ‘vicarious consumption’ tactic, she might have performed front-line hospitality with some of the same gusto she had before, at the same time being able to modulate her own sense of deprivation. However, Robin recognized the rise of other strong feelings that, when combined with her sense of deprivation, rendered the ‘vicarious consumption’ tactic an unlikely option. For Robin, the stream of events – beginning with excitement over access to the employee discount ‘promise,’ moving through the effort to realize that promise,

and coming to a halt with the restrictions on her finances – brought a deeply frustrated desire for the Happy Homes lifestyle and a grudge against her Happy Homes managers -- but it also brought a rising bitterness *toward the Happy Homes customer*:

Guests can pretty much buy whatever they want. They don't have a clue what it's like for the rest of us. I know it's just the way it is, Happy Homes and the Aristocade, it's that way. But when you're in my position and you can't really buy *a thing*, it starts to get to you. They think they can have anything they want, it's no big deal. Some of us out here can't do that. It doesn't seem fair.

For Robin, the guest's level of affluence – which otherwise plays such an important role in workers' ability to produce symbolic status and, in turn, in producing their consent – had become a reason to *resist* the demands of Happy Homes front-line work. As Robin shared, it had become painful for her to watch the well-heeled Happy Homes customer so easily consume Happy Homes products that she herself strongly desired but couldn't possess.

Thinking back to Robin's initial pleasure interacting with customers, and her delight at getting an inside look at their privileged lives, this was an associate well on her way to mastering the dynamic of identity labor, already shifting her definition of self in the customer's direction, and ready to experience her own social status as thus enhanced. But, that was also at an early point in her trajectory, a point where the promise of the Happy Homes lifestyle (and the discount) was still an open road waiting to be explored. In the aftermath of overspending on Happy Homes merchandise and over-estimating her

chances at promotion, Robin's dim view of her own chances to inhabit the Happy Homes life meant that proximity to the upscale clientele was a reminder of *what she lacked*.

For Robin, her own inability to exert buying power and thus materialize the symbolic status of the Happy Homes job was, when put up against the guest's superior power to consume Happy Homes goods, a matter of injustice. And the injustice was made worse by the fact that these empowered Happy Homes consumers didn't "have a clue what it's like" for people like her, who "can't really buy a thing." Unlike most of her co-workers, Robin was experiencing her Happy Homes identity labor as catalyst, not anodyne, to her own class anxieties. And, of course, under these circumstances, Robin's coping strategies were not about to include techniques like 'vicarious consumption.' Celebrating the guest's consumption of Happy Homes merchandise would be the last thing someone in Robin's shoes would want to do.

For most associates, front-line identity labor is an appealing process of self-making that, rooted in on-going identifications with Happy Homes customers, becomes realized through sociable interactions with these Happy Homes guests. When this happens, workers' class anxieties function as a force of retail service productivity. However, in Robin's case, class anxiety becomes channeled elsewhere and, as we see in her complaint, Robin's class sensibilities become directed toward feelings of envy and resentment for Happy Homes guests who "can pretty much buy whatever they want (without) a clue what it's like for the rest of us." Rather than serving organizational

purposes of work control and productivity, Robin's class anxieties – channeled now into class resentment – become a source of work dissent, motivating Robin to slow down the performance of her identity labor.

If class envy and resentment serve to mobilize Robin's opposition to work demands rather than her consent, they are no less true to the central logic of the Happy Homes labor process. In the normal operation of this labor process, workers' class anxieties are mobilized into the practice of their own amelioration, as the class anxious worker engages interchange with the high class Happy Homes guest, producing a sense of parity culled from shared rubrics of distinction, tastes, and gender. When these interactions are positive, and the worker feels parity with the guest, the validity of the worker's symbolic status is confirmed and reproduced. However, in a case like Robin's, tensions between material rewards, represented in the Happy Homes reward structure, and symbolic rewards, represented in the worker's identity labor, became configured in such a way to undermine the value that the symbolic status could have for the worker who earns it.

In Robin's case specifically, the validity of the symbolic status gained on the front lines became too closely linked to an ability to materialize that status through accumulation of Happy Homes goods, or put another way, an ability to use the discount benefit. When Robin was unable to accumulate the material signifiers of status in the way she felt entitled to do, the inadequacy of the Happy Homes symbolic status to redress

her class anxieties began to surface in her interactions with the upscale Happy Homes clientele, resulting in sentiments of envy and resentment. In turn, sentiments of class envy and resentment helped create an identity-level need for Robin to resist her employer's demands for labors of sociability and hospitality. Thus, this dynamic of Happy Homes work resistance -- arising when Robin's class anxieties are activated without modulation -- hails from the same source as worker consent. Robin's case, then, points to an inherent weakness in the Happy Homes system of front-line labor process control: by mobilizing workers' class anxieties to generate low-level worker consent and service productivity, Happy Homes helps create the necessary local conditions under which those anxieties gain potential to engender worker dissent.

This potential is rarely realized, and Robin's story stands out as one of only a small handful of cases where workers resist by withdrawing consent from identity labor. As mentioned before, the cost to the worker's identity in doing so can be prohibitively high. Yet, to the Happy Homes worker who adopts the logic of social status as it is writ beyond the Happy Homes workplace, exporting the entitlements of her job-related symbolic status to her non-work private life can make perfect sense, and trying to do so through the accumulation of Happy Homes goods is, frankly, what the employer's brand is all about. Most front-line employees do not lose the hope that this can be done and, in fact, many workers accumulate Happy Homes products in impressive number, and speak

with pride about the Happy Homes items they own and the success they've had creating their own version of a Happy Homes home and a Happy Homes life.

However, as happened to Robin, when an employee comes to believe that this goal is out of her reach, her valuation of the job-engendered symbolic status – and thus her motivation for doing the work of Happy Homes hospitality -- can begin to wane. And when this happens, the associate position, now stripped of the promise of status enhancement, can start to look suspiciously like the unremarkable, low-level, low-pay, front-line retail service job that it is.

POSTSCRIPT

When I returned to Happy Homes five years later I was surprised to find Robin still there. Robin no longer worked on the Happy Homes floor. Now in the stock room, Robin held the stock room equivalent of a department coordinator position, thus she had succeeded in climbing to management ranks. But, from what I learned from other Happy Homes staff, Robin did not request her transfer to stock. Four years earlier, management had moved Robin off the floor to a comparable (low-level) position in shipping and receiving, a symbolic demotion. Robin had only this last year received the promotion to management.

When I'd met Robin in 2002 she was a trim, perky, well-dressed, well-groomed young woman. The Robin I saw five years later was a different person. She appeared

unkempt, was (even for stock) poorly dressed, and had put on a significant amount of weight. And she had gained a reputation among the staff as being cranky, impatient, and difficult.

I wanted to find out from Robin why she stayed, and what had happened in these last five years at Happy Homes. But Robin declined an interview. Most associates were enthusiastic about my research, and excited to participate in interviews. Robin was the only associate who immediately, unequivocally, said ‘no.’ I would note that Robin and I were on good terms, even friendly terms, during this time. When Robin declined to participate in the research, she gave the reason that she had nothing of value to add.

I can piece together only a partial picture of Robin’s last five years. Many Happy Homes associates mentioned Robin in their interviews and, interestingly, her name came up most often in response to the interview question, “Do you think your co-workers want to furnish their homes with Happy Homes merchandise?” The first person that associates think of is Robin. Though only a few of these associates have visited Robin’s home, they are all certain it is furnished in Happy Homes style. But they also call her a “lifer,” talk about her “giving in and giving up” and say she’s “lost hope.” But hope for what?

One associate, responding to the question about workers’ desire to furnish their homes with Happy Homes merchandise, thought immediately about Robin, and had this to say:

Robin has worked there a long time, her home is a lot Happy Homes. She's worked there for like 5 years. So, um, she's one of those people, again, who couldn't have...I don't think she ever would have thought she'd have anything from Happy Homes. Not from where she came from. But now that she's worked there, she does. And, um, and what's so sad is...um...how she looks...um...she lets herself go. She's one of those people you'd never guess has a Happy Homes style home.

To my ear, Happy Homes associates describe Robin as someone who gave up her belief in the value of front-line Happy Homes symbolic status. She no longer dresses the high-class part, she no longer acts the high-class part, and she no longer seems to care about the high-class part – at least as it is expressed symbolically on the Happy Homes floor. And Robin's co-workers judge her negatively for this.

Robin seemed to have gotten one prize she wanted: a Happy Homes style home. We know that much. What we don't know is if this was Robin's brand-status consolation prize.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

Why do workers consent to their work? This study has attempted to show some of the ways in which the employer's brand can be implicated in the project of contemporary labor control and the garnering of worker consent. Looking at the case of branded retail, I have examined how brand meanings become deployed by the organization as a tool of work discipline. Demonstrating how gender and class meanings of the Happy Homes brand are used to mobilize workers' class anxieties toward the symbolic reformulation of their social class identity, this study has argued that the organization exploits these re-identifications toward the goal of front-line retail labor productivity and consent. The study has also attempted to show how conflicts engendered by the branded retail labor process promote specific forms of worker grievance, resistance and dissent.

The study demonstrates how retail workers generate symbolic status and receive repair of their class anxiety by enacting these re-identifications in their front-line retail labors, and examines how this process turns workers' class anxieties into a force of front-line retail production. Illustrating how the retail employer's use of the brand garners workers' consent by linking positive worker self-feeling to the productive performance of the paid work, the research has defined this process as *branding consent*. Bridging the concept of branded consent with identity labor, the research presented here articulates

this worker project of self-making as simultaneously an organizational act, with workers' reconstructed identities simultaneously an organizational product.

The study has advanced a model of *identity labor*, applying this model to an understanding of how workers' re-identifications become actively produced, consumed and realized in the process of their labor. With the concept of identity labor, I have attempted two things: to represent workers' re-identifications as an *active* process accomplished within work, and to represent those re-identifications as key components of the work itself. Examining how workers' active accomplishment of reformulated class and gender identities makes up the substance of their service interactions, this study has used the model of identity labor to articulate how workers' re-identification constitutes a distinctive form of retail labor power.

In that this study involved a single organization and that the data were collected by a single observer, the findings must be viewed with caution. Nonetheless, the results of this study raise some interesting issues for those working in the fields of labor process, service work, and emotional labor. First, these findings suggest that studies of contemporary labor process control might benefit from a more complete understanding of the role the employer's brand takes in work discipline. Particularly interesting would be further investigation of the branded labor process within other branded retail settings. For instance, future research could investigate whether similar labor dynamics prevail in other high-line branded retail contexts. The question of branded consent should also be

explored in mid-range and lower-line retail contexts, and comparisons of branded work control across higher and lower status branded retail workplaces might prove especially fruitful to our understandings of why retail workers consent – or don't -- to management directives.

More generally, this study has relevancy to those interested in the dynamics of service labor processes. Certainly the findings of the research could have relevancy to a gamut of branded front-line service settings, including hospitality services, food services, and personal services, but they may also be relevant to studies of para-professional and professional services insofar as the employing organization is branded. Given the ubiquity of branding, this research could find promising application across a wide variety of contemporary service contexts.

Future research might pursue the question of how different service employer brand meaning systems elicit different types and intensities of employee identification. Specifically, research might explore if brand significations that link to employees' social identities – for instance, classed and gendered brand meanings – have greater power to garner employee identification, and thus worker consent, than brand meanings with less relevance to workers' social identity. For example, in service workplaces such as the much heralded 'World Famous Pike Place Fish Market' in Seattle where brand identity is rooted in notions of "fun and vigor" (Yokoyama & Michelli 2004), or the corporate retail giant, Target, where the identity of the brand is defined as "Fast, Fun, and Friendly," the

process by which the organization generates worker consent through brand identification may take on much different parameters than in the retail workplace studied here.

This study also offers an extension of emotional labor theories that may prove useful to those interested in emotional labor processes. The findings of the research presented here suggest that the organizational use of the brand to influence worker subjectivity produces a distinct type of ‘identity labor’ conditioned by workers invested performance of interactive labor as the active reproduction of their positive re-identifications. This model of ‘identity labor’ model may hold interest for scholarship concerned with work alienation in emotional labor jobs. In her hallmark study of flight attendants, Hochschild (1983) applied Marx’s ([1867]1967) theory of alienation to an analysis of emotional labor, suggesting that paid emotion work requires workers to relinquish control over a private source of self. As Hochschild argues, when workers’ emotions and emotional expression become the target of employer control, the character of alienation changes, and workers can become alienated from their own feeling capacity, in turn losing the critical signaling functions that these emotions provide. Paid identity work may operate in much the same way. However, in the context of identity labor, the private source of self that’s being tapped for service quality might be thought of as going deeper than emotion, implicating the basic architecture of workers’ personal and social identifications. In this image, the alienating consequences of wage labor would occur at the level of worker identity and sense of self. In a related vein, this model of identity

labor may be useful for those investigating the myriad ways that “selves” get formed (and used) in contemporary contexts, and offer interesting texture to analyses of how social actors make cultural choices, drawing on and reproducing ideological structures (Fine and Sandstrom 1993).

More specifically, the model of identity labor raises new questions regarding the emotional aspects of service labor. Interested researchers may want to apply the combined concepts of branded work control and identity labor to investigations of how workers in emotional labor jobs deploy identifications with the employer’s brand as part of their interactive work, and how worker brand identifications can become used to further the employer’s emotional management priorities. Emotional labor researchers might also find it interesting to look at differences in ‘identity labor’ between routinized service workplaces, where observers note the prevalence of surface emotional labor, and empowerment workplaces where employees do deep emotional labor. In this regard, future research could investigate variances in the employer’s use of brand meanings as labor process control across the two types of work settings in relationship to the ‘depth’ of workers’ emotional labor performance as correlated to workers’ investment in their identity performances.

This study has focused on a particular type of service work, but the concepts of branded consent and identity labor may have implications for studies of non-service places as well. Research on corporate culture has indicated that company meaning-

systems constitute a fundamental strategy of labor control, providing sets of normative rules that bind workers to the corporate community, and thus constituting cultural forms of work discipline (Kunda 1992). Researchers interested in the corporate work process may want to investigate the role that corporate brand meanings take in corporate labor control, and explore how corporate actors gain positive self-feeling and enhanced symbolic identities through identifications with the corporate brand. Insofar as research on corporate culture has shown corporate meaning-systems to circulate through members' performance of those meanings within the social relations of work, and has established that this circulation contributes to organizational control purposes (Kunda 1992), researchers may also want to test the applicability of an identity labor model in this context.

Similarly, investigators interested in new forms of work organization based in teams, flexibility, and principles of participation, may want to consider how the employer utilizes brand meanings to garner worker consent to changes in the organization and social relations of work. We know from the literature that these systems frequently rely on management attempts to transform organizational members' values, beliefs, and self-image (Smith 1990; Smith 2001). Correspondingly, studies of new work organization may want to investigate how these employers utilize the company brand to transform employees by promoting their re-identification with the brand meaning-system. In addition, it would be interesting to explore how these organizations use brand meanings

to interpolate ideas of teams, flexibility, and participation, into workplace practice, how brand meanings inform consequent expectations the organization imposes on its employees, and what role brand meanings take in legitimating the re-structured work conditions.

Finally, the research reported here reinforces the importance of worker subjectivity in contemporary labor processes, highlighting in particular how class and gender subjectivities may be exploited, transformed and deployed in work. These findings correspond to other investigations of class and gender at work that stipulate work as a site for the production of certain types of classed and gendered subjects (Salzinger 2003; Hanser 2008). Importantly, this research demonstrates how class (and gender) subjectivities get borne through the work process to become implicated in organizational reproduction through organizational uses of its brand. Research that actively incorporates the concepts of branded consent and identity labor into studies of class and gender (and race) subjectivities at work would help to illuminate the extent to which these practices prevail, and, more significantly, help us to better understand *why* workers willingly participate in work processes that target their subjectivities as the location of work exploitation and work control.

A central conclusion of this study is that approaching the contemporary labor process as branded reveals central contradictions, conflicts, types of subjectivities, and forms of agency that are critical to the ways in which such workplaces are reproduced

over time. Hopefully, this will inspire other researchers to take fuller account of the centrality of employer brand to contemporary systems of work organization and control, and to further the consideration of how working subjects and social identities get produced, reproduced, and transformed as part of organizational reproduction.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

A. Introductory Questions

Tell me about your jobs at Happy Homes? (Hiring, positions, hours, schedule, wages, benefits, promotions)

What were your main reasons for taking the job at Happy Homes?

B. Job Likes/Dislikes; Match of Job with Worker Personality

What do you like about working at Happy Homes? Can you give an example?

What do you dislike about working at Happy Homes? Can you give me an example?

Do you think anyone could work at Happy Homes or does it take a special kind of person?

How do you feel about Happy Homes products?

How do you think working at Happy Homes differs from working at other retail stores? Do you have any specific examples that help explain this difference?

Has working at Happy Homes changed how you feel about yourself? How?

C. Ideas about Customers

How do you describe a typical Happy Homes customer as opposed to an unusual Happy Homes customer?

I've heard from some people that the different kinds of customers who come to Happy Homes can be categorized into different groups. Do you think this is true? If so, how would you categorize customers?

D. Ideas about Co-workers

How do you feel about your co-workers? Why do you feel this way?

How do you think your co-workers should feel about the Happy Homes brand?

Do you think your co-workers want to furnish their homes with Happy Homes merchandise? Why do you think this?

E. Ideas about Management

How do you feel about your managers?

How do you think your managers should feel about the Happy Homes brand?

Do you think your managers want to furnish their homes with Happy Homes merchandise? Why do you think this?

F. Ideas about Happy Homes Brand

What were your impressions of Happy Homes before you got your job?

How do you think your impressions of Happy Homes have changed as a result of working there?

How do you think working at Happy Homes has affected your consumer choices?

How does the Happy Homes brand compare in style and taste to other home stores or big box discount stores?

What do you think Happy Homes products say about the person who buys them?

If you were to describe the opposite of the Happy Homes brand, what would it be? Why do you think it is different?

In what ways do you think your feelings about the Happy Homes brand affect how you do your work at Happy Homes? Can you give examples of this?

Have you purchased items from Happy Homes? Why/why not? If so, what Happy Homes merchandise did you buy?

G. Future

Where do you see yourself in terms of employment in the future?

How would you like your home to look five years from now? Ten years from now?

H. Questions for Former Happy Homes Workers

Why did you leave your job at Happy Homes? How did you feel about leaving?

What are you doing now? (Where do you work? Are you still in retail?)

Do you think you feel differently about Happy Homes products now than when you worked there? If so, why?

I. Demographic Questions

What is your age?

Are you married?

Do you have any children?

How old are your children?

What is your education?

About how much formal education do your parents have?

What kind of work did your parents do when you were young? How about now?
About how much do you make each year?
What kind of home do you live in? (Apartment, duplex, single family, etc.)