As a cashier, I have a defined set of physical tasks that I have to do: moving items from the left side of the cash to the right side of the cash, scanning them in the process; weighing produce that requires it; placing unwanted or returned items back on their shelves. The obvious strains involved with these tasks are physical: leg and arm fatigue, cramps, exhaustion from standing up for extended periods of time and very little leg movement, eye strain etc. After doing a repetitive task for too long, one becomes mentally drained as well, which is felt physically as a headache.

However, the job of a cashier is inherently interactional. After getting to know all of the necessary technical aspects of the job (operating the cash register, counting change, knowing the produce), we begin automating these actions, thinking about them very little. What we *do* end up thinking about, is the person in front of us. Today, machines automate many of the tedious and physically intensive labour that used to be the standard some decades ago. Because of this, the jobs that remain are jobs that can't be automated or done by machines – at least not yet. So even in jobs like a cashier, where there is still some physical labour involved, the task of the cashier becomes making this labour automatic to be able to do emotional labour. It means becoming a machine to become more human.

Hochschild defines emotional labour as "*[...] the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value.*" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7 footnote)

I work in a delicatessen grocery store in Cote des Neiges, a neighbourhood that is mostly populated by immigrant ethnic groups, as myself. We sell all the basic fruits and vegetables, but also many European and middle eastern products, which attract many foreigners from the respective regions. Not all prices are competitive (some are strangely high), so we serve customers from every socioeconomic class: those who buy 50$ honey, those who look at prices, and those who don't have a roof to sleep under.

Resumes that students tend to bring to our store usually lack much experience and education, which is expected from a young person looking for a job. To compensate, these candidates list skills that go beyond the physical, such as "resilience", "interpersonal skills", "energetic". During an interview for these kinds of jobs, such candidates will try to show a much more vibrant and bright personality, because it matches the job. "*Seeming to "love the job" becomes part of the job; and actually trying to love it, and to enjoy the customers, helps the worker in this effort.*" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 6). These are explicit agreements that a part of their labour will also be emotional. This labour is not directly compensated by the hour, but it ends up setting them above all the other candidates, and potentially getting them the job; while those who can't show they are capable of emotional labour, don't. In that sense, emotional labour is fully compensated, because the lack of it results in no compensation at all.

There is a very unequal gender distribution among the cashiers, with 12 women and only 1 man. However, this visible difference doesn't seem to be caused by biases of the manager's personal preference, but rather on the candidate's performance. The reason why more women successfully obtain this job is probably due to much earlier gendered socialization that made these women better at emotional labour. Their ability to provide the customers with a better experience while also doing their physical tasks correctly is what sets them above other candidates – including most male candidates – that perhaps haven't been socialized to be, well, social.

Indeed, in such an ethnically diverse neighbourhood like Cote des Neiges, cultural values might have strongly influenced the upbringing of the boys and girls raised by immigrant parents, which is also why we would usually see a large majority of immigrant male workers work in the back store, and immigrant female workers work up front. In fact, we have exactly 0 women working in managing the inventory and organizing products on the shelves.

This discussion naturally leads to the gendered expectations placed on cashiers. Our society often socializes people to believe that women are inherently better at emotional labour—that it comes naturally, requires little effort, and demands no skill. "*Yet these skills have long been mislabeled "natural," a part of woman's "being" rather than something of her own making.*" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 167). As a result,

customers tend to expect female cashiers to be warm, engaging, and pleasant. However, these expectations also allow female cashiers more flexibility; if they choose not to engage in emotional labour and remain indifferent, the customer's perception is simply neutralized—after all, what more can one expect from a minimum-wage grocery store cashier? In fact, in many other, less upscale grocery stores in Cote des Neiges, cashiers are typically reserved or indifferent, rarely interacting with customers. Despite this, female cashiers in my store still manage to satisfy customers even when they put minimal effort into emotional engagement. In this way, they can often meet performance expectations without actively investing in emotional labour.

Conversely, male cashiers face lower initial expectations when it comes to emotional labour. Customers are often hesitant to approach them, assuming they will be more distant or unapproachable. If a male cashier does not engage emotionally, it reinforces these preconceived notions, potentially leaving customers dissatisfied—even if he has put in the same effort as his female counterpart. On the other hand, when a male cashier is warm, friendly, and engages in lighthearted conversation, customers are often pleasantly surprised, as if exceeding an unspoken limit on his emotional capacity. Because of this, male cashiers must go above and beyond in their emotional engagement to be perceived as good at their job. Unlike female cashiers, for whom a lack of emotional labour merely neutralizes expectations, male cashiers must significantly exceed expectations to receive the same level of recognition.

Being the only male cashier at my grocery store, I am confronted with the looks and the glares from customers – often old ladies – who seem to have some preconceptions of what I am, what I should be, and why I can't be. They seem to question my quality of work because their expectation of a quality service is positively skewed towards *female* cashiers. A male *cashier* is strange, it's unnatural, it doesn't seem like it should work right. I'm an outlier, an error in the selection. Or worse, I'm not a man at all.

And to be honest, the gender disparity in my workplace does make me reflect on these questions. What makes me capable of performing as well as my female counterparts, allowing me to keep my position as a man in this seemingly female dominated field? Am I emasculated? Am I *gay*? Those are thoughts that seem to permeate the minds of the old ladies when they wait for their bags to be filled by my female colleagues. I don't know how comparable this might be to the opposite situation, of women in male dominated fields, where they would often be seen in a more negative light and negatively associated with traditionally masculine traits, like being more direct, aggressive, blunt, or cold. Even if they aren't always characterized by inherently negative traits, women in positions of leadership will still be seen as having a more masculine behaviour. This is made very clear in "*Race, Gender, and Emotion Work among School Principals*" (Ispa-Landa & Thomas, 2019), where black women with stronger leadership are associated with masculine traits. With men dominating these positions, we tend to associate such behaviour to masculinity. These women are stripped of their femininity, just as I would be of my masculinity.

Fortunately, I don't dwell on these issues too much because my job holds little emotional significance for me. It is simply a means of survival—a source of income that I keep entirely separate from my personal life. Whatever thoughts or feelings arise at work disappear the moment I step out of the store. Perhaps my ability to detach is influenced by my gender, as I have been socialized differently, allowing me to approach emotional labour more objectively. Regardless, I feel distant from my job and have no expectation of fulfillment from it. Some jobs naturally provide a sense of purpose. When we speak of careers, we typically refer to work that offers more than just financial stability—careers, like that of a tenured professor, shape a person beyond their professional duties, contributing to their personal growth. Since my job does not provide that kind of fulfillment, I resort to being fulfilled with the exchange value of my labour. This lack of fulfillment allows me to maintain a sense of detachment from the work itself.

The way race interfaces with emotional labour at my job is also an interesting point. I have previously mentioned that the large majority of the workers in our grocery store is of some immigrant descent. To my knowledge, there are only two native employees, both of them children of long-time customers who wanted them to work there. Regardless, this ethnic diversity is not uncommon for this neighbourhood, and is usually well met by customers, especially when a certain ethnic background is shared (for example, when Moroccan customers interact with my Moroccan colleague, or when I interact with

Bulgarian customers). The ethnic diversity of the local environment and the similar diversity of the grocery store works in favor of a sense of community, in an area with such variation and difference.

Race is only ever pointed out by a very specific set of customers. Usually of older age, of higher economic status, most commonly native Quebecers, and often scrutinizing an employee on the basis of their foreign accent. Since I don't bear such an accent, these specific people will sometimes have the tendency of asking *me* questions instead of the managers on site that are of a much more visible ethnic background. This is comparable to Tamara's and Judy's experiences in "*Race, Gender, and Emotion at the Hospital Bedside*" (Cottingham, Johnson, & Erickson, 2018), where they are thought of working as respectively lower-level and higher-level positions than their actual positions by patients, seemingly solely based on their race. As the authors put it, "*skin (color) can be its own uniform and that its effects are more than skin deep*" (Cottingham, Johnson, & Erickson, 2018).

These forms of aggression are not overt, just like they aren't in the previously cited text. However, they still have an impact on the people who have to deal with this kind of offense, and still keep a respectful attitude towards the customer. Such offenses hit deep, even for some of the more experience managers.

At a fundamental level, however, I do believe that respectful customers are entitled to respect from the employees, as all human beings are entitled to basic respect. However, a lack of respect from a customer does not give us the right to reciprocate this disrespect. If we view a customer's rudeness as inherently wrong, how does mirroring that behavior make us any better? Reacting emotionally to every difficult customer would only drain us, leaving less time and energy for those who treat us with kindness.

The world can be a gloomy place, and constant happiness is an unrealistic expectation. From this, we might conclude that we shouldn't be forced to show positive emotion if we don't genuinely feel it. But if the world is already bleak, doesn't that make it even more important to create moments that feel lighter? We can acknowledge the hardship around us without letting it define every interaction. A simple smile, after all, might not change the world, but it can help someone forget its weight—if only for a moment.

"*Emotional labor is potentially good. No customer wants to deal with a surly waitress, a crabby bank clerk, or a flight attendant who avoids eye contact in order to avoid getting a request. Lapses in courtesy by those paid to be courteous are very real and fairly common. What they show us is how fragile public civility really is. We are brought back to the question of what the social carpet actually consists of and what it requires of those who are supposed to keep it beautiful."* (Hochschild, 1983, p. 9)

References

Cottingham, M. D., Johnson, A. H., & Erickson, R. J. (2018). "I Can Never Be Too Comfortable": Race, Gender, and Emotion at the Hospital Bedside. *Qualitative Health Research, 28*, 145-158.

Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling.* University of California Press.

Ispa-Landa, S., & Thomas, S. (2019). Race, Gender, and Emotion Work among School Principals. *Gender & Society, 33*, 387-409.