

Understanding Servers as a Folk Group
FLK 276 Intro to Folk
Whitney Kuklinski
December 7, 2012

There is a perpetuated myth that Bowling Green boasts the most restaurants per capita in the country. Although this is false, there *is* a variety of dining in the city. Choices range from Bosnian-owned bistros and small-town diners, to corporately owned steak houses and locally managed family restaurants. Though their menus and décor may differ, they have one major commonality: they need servers to deliver their product.

As a server myself, I began this project in order to better understand the very folk group to which I belong. There is a complexity within the whole experience of dining out. A definite barrier between the diner and the server exists, and yet the two must communicate effectively to benefit one another. This very barrier is also what confines and bonds one server to another, defining their social norms, characteristics, rituals, and perceptions. I chose my place of employment, Mariah's Restaurant, to focus most of the research. I conducted six recorded interviews with three female servers and three male servers, and questioned multiple other employees.

Mariah's Restaurant in downtown Bowling Green strives to provide what sociology professor, Elaine Hall, would call *home-style* service. Home-style service encourages a casual atmosphere with a familial form of interaction and can be gendered as feminine.¹ There are at least 35 female servers and 18 male servers at Mariah's. I can estimate that most servers are between the ages of 21 and 26, while a small percentage are in their mid to late thirties. There are two African-American servers employed, with the majority being white. The majority of servers are also

¹ Elaine Hall. "Waitering/Waitressing: Engendering the Work of Table Servers." *Gender and Society* 7, no. 3 (1993): 330.

Western Kentucky University students, considering their employment temporary or transitional while finishing school, and a handful in which serving is a chosen career.

There are certain reoccurring patterns of attitudes and practices within the occupation that must be observed in order to fully understand this group. These patterns are recognized through what folklorist Robert McCarl identifies as verbal art, which can “range from the naming of things and events in the occupation to complex, personal narratives.”² Because serving at its core is such a social practice, verbal art is particularly abundant. Whether it is an argument in the server alley, gossip during a smoke break, or an interaction with a customer, servers are *always* talking about what and who is doing something and how they are doing it.

Restaurant slang, which is usually just simple abbreviations that seem to mirror the hectic environment, is considered by most servers to be necessary in order to perform efficiently and communicate with the kitchen. The use of words like “yo” (mayonnaise), “pot” (potato soup), “japs” (jalapeños), and “sod” (soup of the day) are examples of esoteric knowledge that is commonly used among a variety of servers. The term “86”, which means that the restaurant is out of a particular food or beverage, was determined to be the favorite use of slang at Mariah’s. The consensus seemed to be that the word is often misunderstood or completely unfamiliar to those who have never worked in the food service industry, reinforcing a rare sense of superiority and uniqueness when used outside of the restaurant. Certain terms are also used so that servers can discreetly describe a customer to one

² Robert McCarl. Ed. Oring, Elliott. "Occupational Folklore." In *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1986. 74.

another in an unflattering, insulting, and sometimes even racist manner. “Canadian”, for example, is used to describe a table of African-American diners. It is a common misconception or stereotype that African-Americans are poor tipplers. A server then uses the word to complain of their misfortune to coworkers, veiling racism in a term that makes no sense in regard to its reference. This type of language can be considered a tool of separation, uniting servers in moments of stress or minor defeat, and creating a fine definition between the customers and the employees. Often times, this creates a somewhat aggressive “us against them” mentality.

Once a server has learned this language, other techniques are easily learned, honed, and applied. Quantitatively speaking, certain techniques are nearly identical from server to server due to the rules of the restaurant. Greeting a table, the receiving of drinks, and when the table is delivered food are all calculated in minutes and seconds. At Mariah’s there are four “commandments”: 30 second greet, 2-minute drinks, hot food hot and cold food cold, and the 2-minute bus. All servers interviewed agreed that this was their routine, but what must be altered is the way in which each customer is treated. There is a stage in-between these “expectations” that can be considered a period of judgment or assessment. Not only is the customer judging the server immediately, but the server must assess the one being served. Should the server be friendly and talkative, or quiet and submissive? Brent, a server at Mariah’s for one year says, “I feel like when people come to a restaurant they come for the experience of being served and not for the food. Sometimes I can tell people really just want to be served.” In correlation with the assessment of customers, servers are also aware that touching a customer in some way or writing

a simple “thank you” on a check can increase a tip, whether the customer is conscious of this or not.

Dr. Erving Goffman, a sociologist who believes performing is a part of everyday life, would describe the techniques that servers execute as a part of a performance in which the server is a cynical performer. In this usage cynical is not necessarily a negative quality, but rather an act lacking in genuine intent:

“We know that in service occupations practitioners who may otherwise be sincere are sometimes forced to delude their customers because their customers show such a heartfelt demand of it . . . these are cynical performers whose audiences will not allow them to be sincere.”³

There is a certain area at Mariah’s called the atrium. The tables are extremely close, so a customer can easily hear whatever conversation a server might be having with its neighbor table. Jeff, a server at Mariah’s for a year and a half, explains how his routine must be changed in this area to ensure quality service:

“I do try to switch it up. I try not to use the same greeting on every single table. Especially if I just greeted somebody and turn around and say the exact same thing then it feels like it wasn’t heartfelt. It feels weird.”

Jeff understands what his audience desires from a dining experience, and even expresses some form of guilt when these desires aren’t fulfilled. Goffman would describe these emotions and actions as “. . . the inferior [the server] tactfully attempting to put the superior [the customer] at ease by stimulating the kind of

³ Erving Goffman. "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life [1959]." In *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. 47.

world the superior is thought to take for granted.”⁴ Although Goffman is ascribing this particular “play” to psychiatric patients and nursing students, the similarities are apparent in the dining experience. Essentially, these “roles” that are played out have been socialized. They express how the nature of our society is to place people, places and things into categories or levels of importance. In this scenario, servers must grapple with being considered “inferior”, but proficient servers can often make this work to their advantage. Matt, a bartender at Mariah’s, says that sometimes you just can’t avoid “being treated like a dog”.

Part of when and why these performances are executed, undoubtedly comes down to gender. Every male agreed that being a female server is easier in terms of effort and decent tips; one male server in particular said that female servers are forgiven of their mistakes quicker than a male server would be in most situations. Both male and female servers find it more beneficial to wait on the opposite sex, partaking in archaic gender roles and expectations. 36-year-old server, Cyndi says, “A lot of it is playing to people’s egos”, admitting that she will flirt with a responsive male customer in order to get a good tip. Matt explains that after spilling drinks at a table consisting of all women they laughed and said, “Good thing your pretty”. Overall, the general agreement was that the most difficult part of the job is learning how to correctly assess a table for maximum benefits.

Occupationally, I have never experienced a similar kind of camaraderie that develops among servers. The friendships flood into social lives outside of the restaurant. Kristin, a server of three years at Mariah’s, explains this occurrence:

⁴ Goffman. 47.

“We spend all of our time together. Not only that, we spend all of our *stressful* times together. . . Not only do we work together, we have experienced each others lows, each others tensions...We were there the night so-and-so cried because they got complained on, or the time so-and-so got written up by management. Once you scratch that type of surface, you can only go up from there, so you build a relationship on that.”

Coincidentally, Kristin met her boyfriend, a fellow server, at Mariah’s. Cyndi comments on this tumultuous bond, as well:

“Servers and restaurant workers have a particular sense of humor and attitude that only people that have worked in the business will truly get, appreciate, and understand...it’s like a misery loves company kind of thing.”

The sense of humor that Cyndi mentions as unique to servers may be a direct response to the work environment. Often times, a shift is hectic and fast-paced with very little space to actually work in. The server alley, especially at Mariah’s, is a cramped and intimate place where touching or yelling is often required to warn another server of your presence as you carry a tray of glasses or multiple plates of hot food. This experience tends to form a breeding ground for what most work places would consider inappropriate joking and insults. As sexualized objects themselves, it is no wonder these types of jokes are usually deemed acceptable or welcomed among servers. This “unique humor” works as a conduit to strengthen the bond within the group.

Not entirely surprisingly, the source of nearly all the stress that this job seems to bring its employees also brings most of the joy. When I asked the servers

what motivates them to serve a majority responded that it was the interaction with people. Kristin, who thinks being a PR Major encouraged her decision to become a server said: "I need to be able to intellectually engage and interact with different walks of life at all times . . . I know that ultimately it's gonna help down the road." On that same note, Cyndi agreed by saying: "I'm good at it. It's what I do . . . even though it's the same job everyday . . . you can meet some really neat people." With that being said, the average server makes at least ten dollars an hour, so the "fast cash" that comes with the job was runner-up as far as motivation goes.

When a customer enters Mariah's Restaurant, they are ideally presented with a swift and smiling face. Hopefully, the food is correctly prepared and delivered to the table. The customer pays and may return another day if everything met their expectations. In between these structured moments is a group of people with an assortment of backgrounds, dependent on decent a tips, optimistic for a pleasant customer, and more than likely swearing in the server alley. Their interactions are pertinent to understanding them as the occupational folk group that construct the dining experience.

Works Cited

- Borzuku, Robin . Interview by author. Digital recording. Mariah's Restaurant, November 12, 2012.
- Cardin, Brent. Interview by author. Digital recording. Mariah's Restaurant, November 17, 2012.
- Goffman, Erving. "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life [1959]." In *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. 46-61.
- Hall, Elaine. "Waitering/Waitressing: Engendering the Work of Table Servers." *Gender and Society* 7, no. 3 (1993): 329-344.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/189797>.
- Locher, Jeff. Interview by author. Digital recording. Mariah's Restaurant, November 12, 2012.
- McCarl, Robert. Ed. Oring, Elliott. "Occupational Folklore." In *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1986. 71-87.
- Ruth, Matthew. Interview by author. Digital recording. Mariah's Restaurant, November 17, 2012.
- Wagoner, Cynthia. Interview by author. Digital recording. Mariah's Restaurant , November 12, 2012.
- Young, Kristin. Interview by author. Digital recording. Mariah's Restaurant, November 12, 2012.