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ARTICLES

The Working Life of a Waitress

Mike Rose

*Graduate School of Education and Information Studies
University of California, Los Angeles*

Through a focus on my mother's working life in family-style restaurants, and with corroborating evidence from interviews with other waitresses and from psychological, sociological, and historical research literature, I characterize the interrelated cognitive, social, emotional, and existential dimensions of the work a waitress does. The article is both an homage to a particular waitress and an argument for the complexity of everyday work and for the multiple disciplinary perspectives and kinds of knowledge needed to appreciate that complexity.

INTRODUCTION: ROSE EMILY ROSE

For a good part of her working life, my mother, like many women of her generation, waitressed in coffee shops and family-style restaurants; counters and tables; fast-paced, inexpensive food; quick turnaround; tips counted out in nickels, dimes, and quarters. My father and I would visit her at work, finding space at the counter by the cash register, or, more often, at a back booth where the waitresses ate. We would pass the time with her once the lunch or dinner rush had faded.

The hours stretched out, and since the back booth was usually near the kitchen or dishwashers, there would be the thick smell of the grill or of stale food and cigarettes, scraped and dumped. These odors hung in my mother's uniform and hair. From my own slow time, I would observe the flow of activity on the main floor, waitresses weaving in and out, warning "behind you" in a voice both impassive and urgent. I enjoyed watching things from the inside—to this day I love being in a restaurant or bar at opening or closing time—and I got a big kick out of the lingo. Tables were labeled by the number of chairs—and, thus, customers—around them: *deuces*, *four-tops*, *six-tops*. Areas of the restaurant had names: the *racetrack* was the speedy front section. Orders were abbreviated for the cook: *fry four on two*, my mother would call out as she clipped a check onto that little rotating wheel. To speak this language gave you a certain authority, signaled "know-how."

Although I am more recently coming to understand and appreciate just how much is involved in doing this work well,¹ as a youngster I certainly got a sense through my mother of its difficulty. Not at all a big woman, she could, walking full-tilt, balance seven plates on her right arm while

Requests for reprints should be sent to Mike Rose, GSEIS, Moore Hall, Box 951521, UCLA, 405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521.

¹I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the wisdom I gleaned from Elder and Rolens (1985), Paules (1991), and J. Stevens (1993) in writing this article.

carrying two cups of coffee in her left hand. She always seemed to know where things went: who ordered the hamburger, the fried shrimp, the steak; who wanted the cola; who requested the mayonnaise on the side. Even when she, just for a second, would flop down in the booth alongside my father—"all in," as she would say—she seemed to maintain awareness of who was finishing a meal, of who needed more coffee, of another waitress horning in on her customers. And she could be nice to mean people, cooling them down, taking guff from the cook for a returned order ("he gives you lip ... [so] you catch hell at both ends"), keep moving and smiling, working the complaint, winning the customer over. She would comment on this especially, in quick, whispered bursts by our side.

Many years later—I am now middle-aged, and my mother, in her mid-80s, has not been able to work for a long time—I find myself reflecting with a more analytical frame of mind on those days at Norm's Restaurant or Coffee Dan's, directed by a research project of mine on the cognition involved in various kinds of work, guided by a series of interviews with my mother about the particulars of her work as a waitress.² Other phases of this project on other kinds of work (e.g., physical therapy, plumbing) have yielded fairly traditional articles and essays (Rose, 1999a; 1999b; 2000), but something different has emerged here: a desire to understand and honor a certain kind of work and its meaning for my mother through an unorthodox but, I hope, generative blending of reminiscence; life history; cognitive science; activity theory; and the sociology of work, emotion, and gender. This article reflects the blending of analysis and reflection, of genre, evidence, and mode of inquiry.

An interview with my mother, for example, about the means she used to remember all those orders—who got the hamburger and who got the shrimp—is read in terms of the cognitive science literature on expert memory and the handful of studies within that literature on the memory skill of waiters and waitresses. What I think such a reading makes possible is a heightened comprehension and appreciation of the many tasks of everyday life and, as byproduct, a testing and elaborating of disciplinary knowledge—a grounding of it in the commonplace. My mother's range of memory devices and her complex motives for developing them provide, I think, additional ways to consider that literature on expert memory. And that literature helps me, helps us, appreciate the skills of that woman laying every one of those entrees before just the right person.

This article, as well, emerges from and responds to the varied calls of so many working-class academics to devise ways to integrate the dimensions of their own sometimes bifurcated lives (Dews & Law, 1995; Ryan & Sackrey, 1984; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993). I hope to honor both my mother's working life and the research traditions I've learned that bear on her life, using each to illuminate and investigate the other. Said another way, the article provides the occasion for me to bring together some of the things I've come to know about work and the disparate ways I've come to know them.

WORK HISTORY

Let me begin with a brief history of my mother's working life—a life initially defined by the immigrant experience, poverty, and The Great Depression. This history situates economically and emotionally the waitressing skills I analyze in this article.

²The restaurants my mother worked in were of a particular type, of course, and have changed in some ways since then—for example, in the technology used in placing an order—but in overall structure and practice, they have remained fairly stable, familiar. There also would be differences, although not profound dissimilarity, in some of the routines of practice between a place like Norm's and a more formal and expensive restaurant geared toward a different clientele.

Rose Emily Rose (née Meraglio) came to the United States from Southern Italy as a little girl in the early 1920s, settled with her family in Altoona, Pennsylvania where her father worked as a laborer for the Pennsylvania Railroad (and would eventually sustain a severely disabling accident), and her mother raised seven children, took in boarders, made illegal wine and beer, and did whatever else she could to enable the family to survive. Rose was taken out of school at the seventh grade to help raise her three younger brothers and to assist with the tending of the boarders: cooking, cleaning, laundering. She did this work well into her teens, eventually taking a job in a garment factory and, briefly, in a local Italian restaurant, a job that wouldn't last, for "not a soul came in there." It's important to note that this early work at home and beyond was surrounded by profound economic need; a sense of financial vulnerability would remain with my mother for the rest of her life.

The next phase of my mother's economic history came with her marriage to my father, Tommy Rose: The two opened and ran an Italian restaurant in downtown Altoona, open 24 hours a day to cater to the "round-the-clock" schedule of the Pennsylvania Railroad workers, the core of Altoona's economy. Self-described as a "raggedy" and "shy" girl, Rose developed quickly from private household labors and routinized factory work to a young woman in a public role, laden with new, often unpredictable, responsibilities: from cooking, hiring help, and ordering supplies to hostessing, waiting on and clearing tables, and tending the register. It was not uncommon for her to work 15 to 17 hours a day, for she had to remedy whatever mishaps arose. Here's a not atypical entry in a daily journal she kept during those years:

Mrs. Benner walked out on account of Mrs. Kauffman. So here I am alone cooking. June didn't show up either . . . I'm so tired.

But along with the accounts of exhaustion and anxiety, there is also testament to the fulfillment this new life brought:

On this day, I'm two years in business. I love it.

For all its tribulations, the restaurant contrasted with the lonely oppressiveness of her earlier labors, provided the conditions to gain knowledge about the restaurant business through immersion in it, and enabled my mother to learn how to "be with the public."

Although financially uneven, the restaurant did well enough through the war and just after. But as the Pennsylvania Railroad—along with the railroad industry generally—began its first stage of decline, closing shops, laying people off (my mother's brothers among them), the Rose Restaurant failed, ending in bankruptcy. This was 1951. Over the next year, my parents would move to Los Angeles in search of opportunity and a warmer climate for my father, whose health was failing. They had little money and no connections whatsoever; friends and family were 2500 miles away, a lament I often heard. My father couldn't work. I was seven. This begins the phase of my mother's economic life that is the focus of this article: She went in search of the kind of work her limited formal education and her experience with the restaurant made possible, work she would continue until 1979, when illness forced her retirement at 64.

At first she waitressed in a series of coffee shops in downtown Los Angeles, the largest stretch at Coffee Dan's on heavily-trafficked Broadway. Then she moved to Norm's, a "family-style" chain, working for nearly a decade at the shop on Sunset and Vermont, by major medical facilities

(Kaiser, Hollywood Presbyterian) and corporate offices, like that for Prudential; then, for her last 10 years, at the Norm's in Torrance, amid a more lower-middle class, local merchant, and retirement clientele. During her time at Coffee Dan's and Norm's Sunset, her husband would slip into grave illness and, for the last years of his life, be bedridden. I proceeded through elementary and high school. Mustering what immediate help she could, she struggled to balance work, caretaking, and childrearing. Two things should be noted here. Although my mother learned a great deal about the restaurant business in Altoona, it was in the coffee shops and chain restaurants of Los Angeles where she, by her own account, fully developed the particular physical and cognitive skills that I be exploring here. The second, and obvious, thing to say is that this period, from approximately 1952 to the early 1960s, was another period of severe hardship. As my mother put it simply: "Dad was ill, and you were little ... I *had* to get work."

My father died in 1961. Eventually my mother would meet and marry a man who was a truck driver with the city, a job with stable wages and benefits. They bought a house in Torrance—a nicer house and safer area—and she began her final 10 years of waitressing at the Norm's nearby. This was a decade of economically better times. Even after she had to quit waitressing, my stepfather's employment carried them through comfortably. But my mother's inactivity during these early years of her retirement brings to the fore the centrality of physical work to her sense of who she is. For all the strain—at times to near-exhaustion—of waitressing, the work provided her with a way to feel useful, to engage her mind, and to be in the flow of things. When in the mid-1980s a neighbor got her a job as a noon aide at a local elementary school, she was revitalized. Her primary responsibility was to seat children for lunch and assist in clearing their tables. The job provided a few hours of minimum wage and, of course, no tips—it was barely a postscript to her economic life—but it held great value for her because of its mix of utility and nurturance. And it thrust her back into life's hustle. It also called on some of her waitressing skills. Although work for my mother was always driven by economic need, it was also driven by a complex of other needs: cognitive, social, existential. These needs will be evident in the discussion that follows, particularly in the final section of the article.

ON METHOD

Let me now be specific about the sources of information I used in writing this article and then say a bit more about the elements of its conceptual framework.

I conducted (and tape-recorded) three interviews with my mother during September, 1997 and March, 1998, focusing on her history in the restaurant business and, more particularly, on her work as a waitress at Coffee Dan's and Norm's. A number of my questions dealt with the physical layout of the restaurants, taking and placing orders, managing the flow of work, relations with customers and other waitresses, and tipping. During these interviews and after, I also interviewed six waitresses and two bartenders,³ drawing from the same list of questions. (In several instances, I conducted the interviews in restaurants where the interviewees could observe with me and comment on the performance of other waitresses and bartenders.) As well, I read the small body of

³They varied in years of experience, from 1 to 2 years to over 20 years, and worked in various types of restaurants: from a tourist-oriented bar-restaurant, to family-owned "ethnic" restaurants, to fish and steak houses, to trendy and expensive places. The interviews were 30 min to 1 hr each.

cognitive science research on the memory skill of waitresses, waiters, and bartenders (e.g., Beach, 1993; Ericsson & Polson, 1988; J. Stevens, 1993) and the few ethnographic studies I could find on the kind of waitressing my mother did (e.g., Paules, 1991). I would compare these interview and research findings with my mother's account, looking for points of consonance or difference. Often, there was agreement—e.g., both the other waitresses and the research literature along with my mother report the use of visual-spatial memory strategies to store and recall information about customers and orders. Points of difference led to follow-up questions for my mother and, when appropriate, a return to my other participants. In addition to conducting the interviews, I kept a record (in a notebook) of my mother's spontaneous comments about waitressing and about work in general. The notebook extends from September, 1997 to the present. From a previous project,⁴ I have interviews with my mother and, individually, with four of her siblings about growing up in Altoona, about her early life there extending through the closing of Rose Restaurant in 1951. As well, my mother gave me the daily journal she kept from the early to mid-1940s, a "baby book" she started for me, and several boxes of photographs which provide not only a pictorial record of the times, but which I also used as prompts during our interviews. These materials are supplemented with local histories from the Altoona library on the city during the period of my mother's residence (e.g., Wolf, 1945)—roughly from the early 1920s to the early 1950s—and broader social histories on immigration and rust-belt economics (e.g., Bodnar, Simon, & Weber, 1983; LaSorte, 1985). In addition, I read about the growth and practice of waitressing in the 20th century (e.g., Cobble, 1991; Salisch & Palmer, 1932).

Finally, there are my own recollections of the restaurants my mother worked in from the 1950s through the late-1970s and my experience of her through those years: her demeanor at work and afterward at home; her commentary on that work; her accounts of her tips (spread out on a towel on the bed), her customers, and the other waitresses I met through her. The closeness of this experience contributes, I believe, to the felt sense I have of my mother's work and the many dimensions of meaning it had for her.

To provide analytical tools and a systematic vocabulary with which to consider these sources of information, I rely on the following research traditions and methods.

To consider my mother's memory skill, I rely on the cognitive science literature on memory, especially research on what has come to be called skilled memory (Chase & Ericsson, 1981). I also select from the cognitive science literature on attention (e.g., LaBerge, 1995), motor expertise (e.g., Starkes & Allard, 1993), and expertise in "real-world" physical task environments (e.g., Shalin, Geddes, Bertram, Szczepkowski, & Dubois, 1997) to discuss my mother's ability to attend to and navigate a hurried field of activity and make on-the-spot decisions about sequencing and coordinating her job's many emerging demands. Of particular help here—and with the analysis of memory also—is the newer literature on situated cognition, cognition within natural contexts, "environments that structure, direct, and support cognitive processes" (Seifert, 1999, p. 767; Greeno, 1998). As well, I draw on the somewhat related conceptual frameworks of practice theory and activity theory (e.g., Cole, 1996; Engeström, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991), theories that elaborate the intricate relation between thought, behavior, and cultural traditions and practices—and that have generated research on the workplace, although, to my knowledge, not on work like waitressing.

⁴The project that would lead to *Lives on the boundary* (Rose, 1989).

As the sketch of her working life makes clear, my mother's skill at remembering orders, negotiating the flow of work, and so on was webbed in experience, values, motives, and emotion, part of a complex worldview and life history, which itself was embedded in broader early and mid-20th century contexts. As I noted, social and economic history has helped me understand the era in which my mother came of age and conducted her working life, and understand the forces that shaped her life. And those orientations to social research that attempt to access individual lived experience (e.g., Bertaux, 1981, Lummis, 1987, Van Manen, 1990) provide a justification and method—primarily the life story interview—for eliciting people's sense of their own lives: in this case my mother's perception of the time she lived in, why she did the work she did, and how she did it.

Finally, I draw on a cluster of social psychological research on restaurant tipping (e.g., Butler & Snizek, 1976; Lynn & Grassman, 1990) and sociological research on emotion and the role of gender in the workplace (e.g., Hall, 1993; Leidner, 1991), particularly the notion of "emotional labor" (e.g., Hochschild, 1983; Tolich, 1993; Wharton, 1993), that is, the commercial use of feeling, particularly in service industries—the calling forth or suppressing of emotion as part of one's work. As my mother waited on tables, there was a fluid integration of cognition and social display, and this social-psychological and sociological literature will help me consider that display.

Let me close this section with an additional comment on method.

This article is primarily synthetic and interpretive. As mentioned earlier, it attempts a blending of research traditions not typically brought together to enable a somewhat different kind of analysis, analysis that integrates the disciplinary and the commonplace and the cognitive and the social. And, for the writer, it becomes both an act of the intellect and an expression of feeling.

In attempting such integration, I run several risks. First, there are conceptual tensions among some of the foregoing research traditions. The cognitive research on memory, for example, assumes internal mental processes—such as mental imagery—while many writers on practice theory and activity theory seek to challenge the notion of the individual information-processing self. (They would probably question the sense of subjectivity that emerges in life history research, as well.) Helpful here has been Greeno's (1998) attempt to create a synthetic situated cognition framework that subsumes cognitive and behaviorist analyses: "We propose that the situative perspective provides functional analyses of *intact activity systems* and that cognitive and behaviorist analyses characterize mechanisms that support the achievement of these functions" (p. 5). Such integrative attempts will leave some readers unsatisfied, but given the partial nature of the research on service work such as waitressing, any single approach will be inadequate to tease out the layers of complexity of that work. Yet bringing disparate approaches together may well result in the kinds of tensions just mentioned. I have tried to make these tensions explicit, and my hope is that they can be generative. Discussions of memory in cognitive science, for example, tend to be devoid of purpose and motive,⁵ issues that activity theory or life history research can illuminate. Activity theory, at times, can be pretty abstract about the role of individual agency (see Engeström & Middleton, 1996; Wertsch, Tulviste, & Hagstrom, 1993) and could better conceptualize the role

⁵ There are exceptions. See, for example, the symposium "Memory Metaphors and the Real-Life/Laboratory Controversy" (Koriat & Goldsmith, 1996), particularly the contributions by Alterman (pp. 189–190), Anderson (pp. 190–191), Conway (pp. 195–196), Karn and Zelinsky (p. 198), and Neisser (pp. 203–204).

of feeling and emotion in activity systems. And life history research tends to underarticulate, to not detail, the role of cognitive processes in lived experience.⁶

Second, I risk violating the norms of evidence and method of particular research traditions. For example, the findings on memory in cognitive science usually issue from controlled laboratory experiments. (Though increasingly there are more descriptive attempts to render cognition in natural settings.) In the case of my mother, I rely primarily on her recollection of the memory strategies she used many years before. Although I do believe that the consonance between her recollection and the research on memory provides some support for the accuracy of her recall, I surely do not claim that interview data of this kind meet the same validity criteria as experimental findings—yet they possess validity of a different kind, as I hope becomes clear as we move through the article. I also think there can be and ought to be ways to bring data like these together analytically—the laboratory finding on memory and a person’s account of memory strategies used over a long period of actual practice. To put this differently, if the research findings on memory reflect real, not artifactual, processes, then they should have value in explicating and understanding phenomena beyond the laboratory. If, to borrow Sandra Harding’s (1996) phrase, “science is good to think with”⁷ (p. 16), then these constructs from psychological science should be of use in helping us unpack and appreciate everyday behavior, in this case, the skill of a common working life.

Let me now consider in more detail the nature of the environments in which Rose Emily Rose demonstrated her skill.

THE RESTAURANT

In some ways, a restaurant is a structured and predictable environment.⁸ The physical layout guides movement and behavior, and the various conventions associated with dining out are well known, to customer and waitress alike. But when analyzed in terms of the interrelated physical and cognitive demands of the work itself, the environment, particularly at peak hours, becomes more complex, with a variable and ill-structured quality (see Engeström’s, 1993, discussion of the inevitable tensions among the elements of workplace activity systems).

Consider the restaurant in terms of multiple streams of time and motion. Customers enter with temporal expectations: They will be seated without much delay and, once seated, a series of events will unfold along a familiar timeline, from ordering through salad, entrée, dessert, delivery of the check. Their satisfaction—physical and symbolic—is affected by the manner in which these expectations are met. But, of course, customers are entering the restaurant at different times, each with his or her own schedule, so tables (or places at the counter) proceed through meals at a different pace. This staggering of customers facilitates the flow of trade, but also increases the cognitive demands on the waitress: what she must attend to, keep in mind, prioritize, etc. This situation intensifies during peak hours, for the number of customers expected can be estimated, but not known—family-style restaurants do not take reservations—and if the numbers swell beyond capacity or an

⁶ I thank Deborah Brandt for this observation.

⁷ Harding (1996) rephrased Levi-Strauss, “sex is good to think with.”

⁸ A cognitive science treatment of the “restaurant script” is presented in Schank and Abelson (1977).

employee calls in sick, is late or quits, then, as the younger waitresses I interviewed vividly put it, you're "slammed," abruptly pushed to the limits of physical and mental performance.

Another timetable kicks in as soon as an order is placed with the cook. Different items have different prep times, and once the item is prepared, there is a limited amount of time—quite restricted for hot items—during which it can be served. As well, the serving area needs to be cleared quickly so that the cook can deliver further items. The waitress, therefore, is aware of the kitchen as she moves among her customers.

Finally, both the waitress and the management work by the clock. Profit is related to time; the quicker the turnover, the more revenue for the company, and the greater the number of tips. There can be exceptions to this principle for the waitress (but not the management); for example, the regulars who may hold a table or stool longer but tip more. Still, generally, the waitress—like her manager—is ever mindful of clearing a plate, closing out a tab, moving the process along.

Imagine these streams of time and motion as co-occurring and related but not synchronous. Any given customer may hem and haw over an order, or want a refill while the waitress is occupied, or send an item back. The cook may deliver a waitress's hot dish while she is in the middle of taking an order and is being summoned by two other customers. Tables may be full with variously contented customers while the manager feels the press of new customers gathering inside the door.

One more observation about this environment. No matter how efficiently designed the physical layout of the restaurant—for example, coffee pots, water, soft drinks, cups, glasses, and ice are all located in the same area—the waitress's motion will be punctuated by the continual but irregular demands made of her. For example, all requests for coffee do not come at the same time or in regular intervals. So one request comes during an order, and another as she's rushing back to get extra mayonnaise, and another as she's clearing a table. The waitress must learn how to move efficiently through a vibrant environment that, for all its structural regularities, is dynamically irregular. A basic goal, then, is to manage irregularity and create an economy of movement. She does this through effective use of body and mind. The work calls for strength and stamina, for memory capacity and strategy, for heightened attention, both to overall configuration and specific areas and items, for the ability to take stock, prioritize tasks, cluster them, and make decisions on the fly.

USING THE BODY

What does a waitress need to know how to do with her body? She must be able to balance and carry multiple items, using the hand, forearm, and bicep, creating stability by locking arms to torso and positioning the back. Then she moves, fast, in bursts, navigating tables, customers, other help. And since this occurs in a public space, it must be done with a certain poise. As waitress and writer Lin Rolens nicely puts it: "You learn a walk that gets you places quickly without looking like you are running This requires developing a walk that is all business from the waist down, but looks fairly relaxed from the waist up" (Elder & Rolens, 1985, pp. 19–20). With time and practice, all this becomes routine, automatic. But early in a career, the waitress will undoubtedly be conscious of various aspects of this physical performance, have to think about it, monitor herself.

My mother gets up slowly from the kitchen table where we're conducting an interview and walks over to the sink where plates are drying in a rack. She demonstrates. She turns her right hand palm up, creating a wider surface on her forearm, and begins placing plates, large and small, from

biceps to fingertips, staggering, layering them so that the bottom of one plate rests on the edge of another. “You don’t dare let a plate touch the food,” she explains, “and it’s got to be balanced, steady.” Then with her left hand, she lays out two coffee cups and two saucers. She kind of pinches the saucers between her fingers and slips her index finger through the handles of the two cups. “The coffee splashes from one side to another if you’re not careful. It takes practice. You just can’t do it all at one time.”

I ask her, then, how she learned to do it. Beginning with her own restaurant, “You watch the other waitresses, what they do.” She was “cautious” at first, starting with two plates, being deliberate. Then she began adding plates, driven by the demands of the faster pace of the restaurants in Los Angeles. “Norm’s was much busier. So you had to stack as many plates as you possibly could.” And, with continued practice in these busy settings, you get to where “You don’t even have to think about it.” In a manner described in the literature on cognition and motor skill (e.g., Starkes & Allard, 1993), my mother mixed observation and practice, got some pointers from coworkers, tricks of the trade, monitored her performance, and developed competence. With mastery, her mind was cleared for other tasks.

SKILLED MEMORY

To be a good waitress, my mother says emphatically, “You have to have one hell of a good memory.” Her observation is supported by a small body of laboratory and naturalistic research, and one of the things that research demonstrates is that the competent waiter and waitress have techniques that enable them to override the normal limits on human “short-term” or “working” memory. Through working memory we are able to briefly store and perform a variety of cognitive operations on both immediate sensory information and on material drawn from more durable and extensive long-term memory. Thus we are able to quickly keep track of things, to make decisions and solve problems on the fly, to make our way through the world emerging before us (Baddeley, 1986; Jonides, 1995). This conceptualization, as we see, seems nicely suited to a consideration of the cognition involved in waitressing.

Research on expert or exceptional memory—for example, of the master chess player or the mnemonist—has led to an understanding of the ways we can bypass the familiar limits on working memory, and this understanding has led some to posit the notion of “skilled memory” (Chase & Ericsson, 1981). Mnemonists use a range of techniques to give structure to an overwhelming number of items, thus reducing the load on memory. And experts in particular domains are able to draw quickly on rich stores of knowledge—a carpenter about tool use, wood, and structure, an internist about human physiology and disease—to make sense of and process new information related to their expertise.

Let me elaborate on this notion of skilled memory and relate it to my mother’s work by summarizing the findings of three pertinent studies in the cognitive literature: the memory skill of a head waiter (Ericsson & Polson, 1988), of waitresses at a lunch counter (J. Stevens, 1993), and of cocktail waitresses (Bennett, 1983). Although there is variation in the results, they point to four commonalities:

1. The waiter and waitress know things about food and drink—ingredients, appearance, typical combinations—and this knowledge from long-term memory plays continually into their ability to remember orders.

2. They have developed various visual, spatial, and/or linguistic mnemonic techniques to aid memory: abbreviating items, grouping items in categories, repeating orders, utilizing customer appearance and location.
3. The routines and physical layout of the restaurant or bar contribute to remembering orders.
4. Although not strictly a characteristic of memory—as defined and studied in the psychologist’s laboratory—the waiter’s and waitress’s memory is profoundly goal-directed: to make their work efficient and to enhance their tips.

My mother’s interview exhibits each of these.

As she stood before a table, taking orders, sometimes repeating them back while writing them out, sometimes not, making small talk, my mother would “more or less make a picture in [her] mind” of the person giving her the order, what that person ordered, and where around a table (or at a counter) he or she was located. Forming mental images is a mnemonic device that goes back to the ancients (Yates, 1966), and, as we saw, is reported in the cognitive research on waiters and waitresses. Although, of course, there was undoubtedly variation in the way my mother did this, and in the different representations she formed on any given day, her picture could include dress and physical appearance: items of clothing—a red blouse, a splashy tie—and physical features like a birthmark or an unusually shaped nose. As well, there are general characteristics, broad social markers: gender, race, age, body type and weight. (My mother laughingly notes, “of course, a child’s plate, you can always tell” where that will go.) My mother’s beliefs and biases about these markers could play into the construction of the picture, a point I return to momentarily.

The layout of the tables (or the stools at the counter) and people’s location at them enabled my mother to store and recall information about orders in a number of ways. A customer’s specific position (by the window or closest to her) mattered, especially if it were somehow unusual—for example, a woman pulls a fifth chair to the edge of a four-top. Relative location also figures in, aided by other characteristics of the person or the order. My mother and I are sitting at the kitchen table, which she uses to illustrate: “The one sitting at the chair, she ordered this, *this* is what she ordered, and the next person over (my mother points to the next chair clockwise), that’s [another] lady, and *that’s* what she wants.” Notice that my mother seems to perform some basic operations on the spatial information, something noted in the studies of waiters and waitresses. She mentions deviation, sequence, similarity—and another time-honored mnemonic device, contrast. Again, my mother points to an imaginary customer at our table: “I remember, he ordered the hamburger (she moves her gaze to the next chair), but she didn’t want a hamburger, she wanted something else.” So specific location as well as overall configuration matters—and other kinds of knowledge and social patterns play in.

Sometimes, it’s the social expectation itself that is salient and an aid to memory. For example, cocktail waitresses make distinctions between the drinks men and women typically order (Bennett, 1983), and other waitresses I interviewed spoke of these gender distinctions as well. My mother describes a couple ordering. The man orders a T-bone steak, and the woman “would order something smaller, so naturally you’re gonna remember that.” And if an order violates expectation—the woman orders the steak, the man the chef’s salad—that will stand out, the memorable deviation.

Some items and the routines associated with them enable the use of external memory aids. My mother describes a six-top at breakfast with orders of ham and eggs, steak and eggs, and hotcakes. As soon as she takes the order she, as a part of her route to the kitchen and back to other tables, sets

a little container of syrup in front of the customer who ordered hotcakes. The aid is particularly helpful in a situation like this because “a six-top is especially hard, and sometimes you have to ask the customers who gets what.” The container of syrup lightens the load by one item.

Finally, and this is not reported in the research literature, a customer’s attitude, the way he or she interacts with my mother, contributes to her recall of the order. My mother comments on “how [a customer] would say something—you remember this dish is on the second table because so and so acted this way”. She especially notes if “somebody [is] giving me a rough time.” Of course, a particularly abrasive customer would stick in one’s mind, but this raises an interesting broader issue: the way one’s personal history and social position, the *feelings* related to these, play into cognition on the job.

One of the things that strikes me about my mother’s report is the number of techniques it contains, the mix of strategies and processes: imagistic, spatial, verbal-propositional, affective. The research studies on waiters and waitresses report the use of multiple techniques as well, although not as many. Laboratory studies, of course, could restrict the expression of the full range—particularly the affective, which would emerge in real work situations. And my mother’s recollection could compress together strategies used rarely with those used frequently. But her interviews do raise the possibility that controlled studies do not give us a full picture of the complexity of the way memory works in a setting like a busy restaurant. Such complexity might be necessary when one is hurriedly tending to seven to nine tables, with two to six people at each. As my mother put it: “Even though you’re very busy, you’re *extremely* busy ... you’re still, in your mind, you have a picture ... you use all these [strategies], and one thing triggers something else.” The strategies are interactive and complementary (see John-Steiner, 1995), and they enable us to get a sense of how much and what kind of work is going on in the working memory of a waitress during peak hours in a family-style restaurant.

ATTENDING TO AND REGULATING THE FLOW OF WORK.

Remembering an array of orders does not, then, take place in isolation, but in a rush of activity that demands an attending to the environment, organizing and sequencing tasks that emerge in the stream of that activity, and occasional problem-solving on the fly. This context, as J. Stevens (1993) remarked in her study of the lunch counter, distinguishes waitressing from laboratory experiments on memory where material is usually “presented in uninterrupted linear sequence at controlled rates of speed,” and recall “is often at the subject’s pace, and is also linear and uninterrupted” (pp. 208–209). Using experimental terms to describe working memory in a restaurant, one could say that the items come in irregular sequence amid a number of distractors.

My mother’s interviews contain more than 10 references to the pace and conflicting demands of waitressing. She describes a setting where an obnoxious regular is tapping the side of his coffee cup with a spoon while she is taking an order, where the cook rings her bell indicating another order is ready, where the manager has just seated two new parties at two of her tables that have just cleared, where, a moment ago, en route to the table now ordering, one customer asked to modify an order, another signaled for more coffee, and a third requested a new fork to replace one dropped on the floor. “Your mind is going so fast,” she says, “thinking what to do first, where to go first ... which is the best thing to do ... which is the quickest.” She is describing multiple demands on cognition—and it is important to remember that the challenge is not a purely cognitive one.

There is a powerful affective component to all this, one with economic consequences. The requests made of the waitress have emotional valence. Customers get grumpy, dissatisfied if they have to wait too long or if their request is muddled. The relationship with the cook is fraught with tension—orders need to be picked up quickly and returns handled diplomatically—and the manager is continually urging the movement of customers through a waitress's station. As my mother put it, you attend to your orders or "the cook will yell at you;" you try to get customers their checks quickly, "because you'll get hell from the manager." The waitress's assessment of the emotional (blended with economic) consequences of her decisions and actions plays back into the way she thinks her way through the demands of the moment.

What do we know about the cognitive processes the waitress uses to bring some control to these multiple and conflicting demands?

There is no experimental cognitive science literature on this dynamic mix of attending and immediate decision making that maps directly onto waitressing. This dimension of the work would be, I imagine, hard to simulate and study in the laboratory with any marked ecological validity. There is, however, a range of cognitive literature that applies indirectly: on attention, on motor expertise, on opportunistic planning (i.e., planning that takes "advantage of unanticipated circumstances to satisfy one's goals." (Seifert, Patalano, Hammond, & Converse, 1997, p. 102), and on expert behavior in real-world physical task environments (e.g., Shalin et al., 1997). There is, as well, a small body of research within the newer situated cognition and activity theory frameworks that examines real-world work settings, and although none of it—other than J. Stevens (1993)—deals with waitressing, some of it is pertinent here (e.g., Laufer & Glick, 1996; Scribner, 1986). Let me begin with the research on attention, much of which concerns visual information processing, for the characterization of attention drawn from that research can be applied to work like my mother's.

Attention is described in terms of its selectivity, a focusing on particular aspects of the environment; of the sustaining of that selective focus, a concentration as well as a vigilance for similar anticipated events or objects; and of the ability to control and coordinate this selective focus (e.g., LaBerge, 1995; Parasuraman, 1998). In expert performance, these processes may become more refined and automatic. Thus described, attention serves "the purpose of allowing for and maintaining goal-directed behavior in the face of multiple, competing distractions" (Parasuraman, 1998, p.6).

There are, of course, periods in the waitress's day, lulls in activity, when she can stop and survey her station. My mother talks about a pause, standing back where she can "keep an eye on the (cash) register and all the way down (the counter)." But often the waitress is attending to things while on the move. Every waitress I interviewed commented on the necessity of attending in transit to requests, empty cups, plates moved to the edge of the table. As one waitress explained: "As you walk, every time you cross the restaurant, you're never doing just a single task. You're always looking at the big picture and picking up things along the way." This calls for a certain combination of motor skill and vigilance, captured in this passage where my mother describes her peripheral attention as she's delivering an order:

You look straight ahead to where you're going to take your food. You can't just look completely to the side, carrying all those plates—you could lose your sense of balance. As you're going out of the kitchen, you more or less take little glances to the side.

This vigilance—from a stationary point or while in motion—is not only a matter of perceptual acuity, but also involves working memory and knowledge of the domain, knowledge of food prep-

eration, restaurant routines, and so on. (For parallel findings in the study of motor expertise, particularly in sports, see Chamberlain & Coelho, 1993; McPherson, 1993.) My mother reveals this mix of memory, domain knowledge, and attending in her monitoring of the status of her customers' orders: "You're keeping an eye on who is not served yet. If it's (been) too long, you go check on the kitchen yourself." She recalls who ordered what and when and knows roughly how long a specific item should take to prepare, given the time of day. As she quickly checks her tables, she's attuned to a possible error in preparation.

Cognitive scientist David LaBerge (1995) used *mindfulness* as a synonym for *attention*, and although the dictionary defines mindfulness somewhat sparsely as being aware or heedful, the word connotes something more, something that, I think, suits the foregoing discussion of waitressing and attention. Mindfulness, first of all, implies intelligence, a mind knowledgeable and alert. The word also connotes a heightened state and a comprehensiveness, an apprehension of the "big picture," mentioned earlier, and, as well, a cueing toward particulars, and a vigilance for aberration, as when my mother monitors those orders.

Let's return to that harried moment my mother describes where the regular is tapping his coffee cup, the cook is ringing the bell, etc. A waitress could attend to all these stimuli, and know what they mean, and yet not know what to do next. How does she decide what her next move should be?

I begin by summarizing and focusing some points made earlier. First, the waitress's response will be driven by several interrelated high-level goals: to satisfy customers (and thus boost income), to maximize efficiency and minimize effort, to manage conflict. All the waitresses I interviewed referred in some way to this cluster of goals. My mother speaks of "making every move count" and how "You think quick what you have to do first ... in order to please people." Another waitress asks "How can I maximize my effort in that moment?" Yet another emphasizes the value of controlling fatigue by "working smart." These goals will serve to organize the waitresses' activity, providing a criterion—as Scribner (1986) found in her study of dairy warehouse workers—to accomplish the most "with the fewest steps or the least complex procedures" (p. 25).

Second, the waitress's response is shaped by various kinds of knowledge (declarative, procedural, spatial) of the domain: knowledge of the menu, of preparation times, of the layout of the restaurant, and so on. Included here is a kind of knowledge not typically mentioned in the literature on workplace cognition, but mentioned by all the waitresses I interviewed: a knowledge of emotional dynamics, both a folk psychology about dining out and the characteristics of particular customers. My mother, 20 years after retirement, can recount the quirks and traits of her regulars. As one veteran waitress puts it: "Everybody has their own personality. That's another level of learning ... you've got to learn this way of working with people."

Third, the high-level goals and knowledge of the domain give rise to more specific action rules—waitressing rules of thumb—that, depending on the context, could aid in sequencing one's response. All the waitresses I interviewed, for example, mention the importance of attending to—even if just to acknowledge—newly-seated customers. ("The big part of this business is not to ignore anybody.") They also stress the importance of picking up orders—especially hot ones—quickly. Another rule of thumb (applicable during rush hour) is to tally and deliver checks in a timely manner. And yet another is to consider the emotional consequences of action, which calls for an ongoing assessment of character and feeling. Is the cook especially touchy today? Do you have a particularly demanding customer? My mother expresses this emotional calculus when

she advises “Use your own mind and ask [of yourself] which customer will complain and which won’t.” Given an environment of multiple demands, these rules of thumb could guide one, for example, to attend to a new customer and serve a hot order—and forestall the circuit through the station to refill coffee. Refills would, in the moment, move lower in priority.

What is striking, however, is the degree to which the expert waitress relies on a broad strategy that makes many either-or decisions moot. And this brings us to the fourth element in the waitress’s response to multiple demands. She organizes tasks by type or location. She combines and interweaves tasks in a way that greatly economizes movement, that makes activity, in my mother’s words, “smooth.” As one waitress put it, she is always asking “Which pieces of what I need to do fit together best?” (Again, this is reminiscent of Scribner’s (1986) warehouse workers.) Although some prioritizing of tasks—guided by rules of thumb—does occur, the more common move (noted as a mark of skill by several of the waitresses) is to quickly see what tasks can be grouped and executed with least effort.

This leads to a fifth characteristic: the way restaurant routines aid in this organizing of tasks. My mother and the other waitresses I interviewed all refer in some way to a circuit through one’s station that is watchful and that takes advantage of the restaurant’s physical layout. As one waitress explains it:

I always think of it as kind of a circle, because there’s the tables, there’s the bar, there’s the coffee station, and it kind of becomes a flow of organizing what can be in one full circle, how many tasks can be accomplished, as opposed to back and forth, back and forth. I think the [waitresses] who get going back and forth are the ones who get crazy with four tables.

This description calls forth the earlier discussion of attention—the blend of anticipation, vigilance, and motor skill—but in a way that underscores the dynamic interaction of the waitress’s skill and the structure and conventions of the environment.

A fascinating finding—one that emerged in all the interviews—is the observation that the expert waitress works best when the restaurant is busy. In some ways, this is counterintuitive. I would imagine that one could remember three or four orders with more accuracy than six or seven, that one could handle refills easier with a half-full station. These numbers would result in a more relaxed pace but, the waitresses claim, not in more skillful performance. (Their claim finds support in the aforementioned research literature on restaurant work and memory.) In fact, my mother insists she could never have developed her level of skill in slower restaurants. “You’re not as alert ... not thinking that quick”; you’re not anticipating orders; “You’re making a couple of trips” rather than a single efficient one. “In a slow place, you think slower.” One waitress notes the feeling of being “like a well-oiled machine” during rush hour. Another says that “When it gets the craziest, that’s when I turn on. I’m even better than when it’s dead.”

Of course, increased volume of trade can lead to disaster as well—if, for example, a waitress calls in sick or a critical piece of equipment fails. Every waitress tells those horror stories. But it seems that, barring the unusual mishap, the busy restaurant can lead to maximum performance. One’s physiology responds—my mother talks about her “adrenaline going faster”—and there is a heightened readiness and reaction. And the increased flow of trade itself provides arrays of demands that call forth, that require the skillful response, the necessary fluid integration of attending, memory, organization of tasks, and strategic use of routine. This is not to deny the exhaustion, even the punishment, of the work, but it is telling how my mother and the other waitresses all com-

ment on the satisfaction that they feel when they perform well under stress. Several use language similar to that of the “flow” experience “which tends to occur when confronting the highest environmental challenge with the fullest use of personal skills” (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 1999, p. 113; see Astin (1984) on the “pleasure needs” fulfilled by work). “There’s a sense of accomplishment in just the mechanics of it,” says one waitress, “just knowing that...I’m handling it all.”

One traditional distinction in the literature on cognition is between information processing that is automatic versus processing that requires conscious attention and control. Although the value of automaticity is undisputed—complex behavior, from reading to baseball, would be impossible without it—there is sometimes the implication that once processing and response become automatic (in the physical task and motor skill domain especially) they hold less cognitive status. Another distinction contrasts human behavior as knowledge-driven and strategic versus behavior as shaped by properties and protocols of the environment. And, again, the resulting depiction, depending on one’s philosophical outlook, can have consequences for the status granted to particular kinds of activity. Distinctions like these shape many discussions of cognition and occupation, but what strikes me as I consider the foregoing analysis of waitressing is the way they blur in practice.

When one shifts perspective to the busy floor of the restaurant itself, the basic question one asks is: What makes this work possible? The answer lies in the dynamic coherence of the automatic response and the quick thought; of a keen memory, but a memory keen in the physical moment; of the way routine contains within it multiple instantaneous decisions; of strategy and environment, each shaping the other. The key concepts here are not dichotomous but more related to coherence and rhythm, synchronicity, integration.

THE SOCIAL-ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF THOUGHT

Evident throughout this article is the fact that the waitress’s thinking is situated in a complex, interlayered physical-social-economic field of activity. Her memory skill and other cognitive processes—attending, sequencing and clustering of tasks, etc.—are functional and purposive, both emerging from and structuring her work, which, in turn, is driven by and given meaning by economic incentives and, depending on personal history and psychological makeup, a host of other motives as well.

The social-emotional dynamics—and the place of economics in them—are so salient in waitressing that, of all aspects of the work, they have received the most popular and scholarly attention. I’ve noted them as well—the tension between cook and waitress, the potential competition among waitresses, the waitress’s reading of and interaction with customers—but here I would like to discuss them a bit more fully, in order to elaborate the social and cultural context of the waitress’s thinking. For purposes of space and to provide analytic focus, I concentrate on the encounter between the waitress and customer, for that is both the social and economic core of activity.⁹ And it is a complex encounter indeed.

First of all, the encounter calls forth historically shaped conventions for the serving of food, associated with the house servant. In Frances Donovan’s (1920) account of waitressing, *The Woman Who Waits*, published during the first stage of the feminization of food service, there is explicit

⁹For a classic treatment of the tension between cook and waitress, see Whyte (1948); for illustration of the competition among waitresses, see Paules (1991).

treatment of the association of maid and waitress—and of the waitress’s desire to distinguish her work from that of housemaid. But the association remained in waitressing (my mother’s uniforms, down to the modified caps, resembled stereotyped maid’s apparel), and is reflected in a number of routines of service: from modes of address, to sequence of queries about the order, to customs for serving and clearing food. (“[D]ishes are placed on the table without noise,” notes a 1932 educational tract on waitressing, “. . . the hand must be trained to slip dishes into place very close to the table rather than bring them down directly from a height”; Salisch & Palmer, 1932, pp. 47–48.) Conventions and the intensity of symbolism change over time, and vary by the type of restaurant, but waitressing continues to involve the acquisition of customs of service—and one’s accommodation to them. The residue of the servant’s role rankles, and recent studies of waitressing reveal the number of ways waitresses resist it: from covert criticism and ridicule of haughty behavior (my mother’s typical response) to direct rebuke and declaration of status. “[T]he waitress rejects the role of servant in favor of images of self,” writes Greta Foff Paules (1991) in her ethnography of a family-style chain restaurant, “in which she is an active and controlling force in the service encounter” (p. 132). And one means by which the waitress expresses agency is through her use of skill and strategy to regulate the pacing and flow of work. “The customer has the illusion that they’re in charge,” observes one of the waitresses I interviewed, “but they’re not.” It’s the waitress who must “get command of her tables,” who is “the commander-in-chief of [her] section.” This waitress still performs the customs of service, but within routines of practice that she controls.

The encounter between customer and waitress also gives rise, potentially, to a further range of emotions and social scripts, in addition to that of server and served. “Eating is the most intimate act,” writes waitress Lin Rolens, “we are encouraged to perform in public” (Elder & Rolens, 1985, p. 16), and labor historian Dorothy Sue Cobble (1991) observed that waitresses “are responding to hungers of many kinds” (p. 2). On any given shift, a stream of customers enters with needs that vary from the physiological—and the emotions that attend hunger—to the desire for public intimacy. And the waitress, depending on the type of restaurant, her reading of the situation, and her own history and motives may fulfill, modulate, or limit those needs and desires. Analysis of this social–emotional dimension of waitressing, and similar occupations, has been fairly extensive over the past 2 decades, and tends toward two broad-scale findings.

First, providing service requires a good deal of “emotion management” or “emotional labor” (Hochschild, 1983). Regardless of what one actually feels, the interaction with the customer requires that the waitress display emotion that is dictated by the social and economic demands of the service encounter. My mother provides an illustration through her account of a churlish regular, a man who was always sending his steak back to the cook. “You’ve got to make an effort to try and please him, even though you can just kill him.” Generalizing to all difficult customers, she advises: “Just try the best you can to be nice to them. Even if they’re rude to you, you still smile and just go on, because that’s your living.”

The second finding is that the roles afforded to the waitress in the encounter with the customer play out within stereotypic gendered scripts: The waitress becomes servant, mother, daughter, friend, or sexual object. The house uniform and policy, customs of service, and other restaurant traditions contribute to this construction of gender-in-the-moment, as do broader social expectations and modes of behavior from the culture at large (Creighton, 1982; Hall, 1993; Leidner, 1991). Although I surely wouldn’t have understood her behavior in these terms, I recall the clear sense I had watching my mother work that she was somehow more smiley and laughed more than when at home, a quick, not-quite-true laugh, flirtatious, with a touch on the arm or shoulder, a focused vivacity.

Good service, then, gets defined not only in terms of the skills and customs of being served, but, as well, by “smiling, deferring, and flirting” (Hall, 1993), by the enactment of various gender-specific social scripts. My mother sums it up simply but firmly: “You’ve got to be damned good, damned fast, and you’ve got to make people like you.”

The social dynamics of this encounter affect the tip, a critical economic consideration, given that the base pay in most restaurants is close to minimum wage—the wage structure forces a reliance on gratuity. So the successful waitress soon learns how to play the dynamics to maximize her income. There is a fair-sized social-psychological literature on the factors that influence tipping. The shrewd waitress, for example, suggests items—appetizers, desserts, more drinks—that will increase the bill, and thus the size of her potential tip (Butler & Snizek, 1976). She can also increase her tip by smiling (Tidd & Lockard, 1978), by touching the customer on the hand or shoulder (Crusco & Wetzel, 1984; Stephen & Zweigenhaft, 1985), or by squatting or kneeling to get closer to eye level (Lynn & Mynier, 1993; Davis, Schrader, Richardson, Kring, & Kieffer, 1998). One could read this literature as an unpacking of the social skills and gestures learned in the context of restaurant work. And one can also read it, as Butler and Snizek (1976), following Goffman, suggested, as devices to control the reward structure of the service encounter.

The reward is an economic one, and is therefore affected by various economic exchange principles (see Lynn & Grassman, 1990). But it is also one fraught with symbolism—at the least, a reminder of servant status—so the reward structure includes secondary emotional elements as well. Customers, Lin Rolens observed, “tip in every spirit imaginable” (Elder & Rolens, 1985, p.19), from a display of status, to an expression of gratitude, to an overture of friendship, to a sexualized gesture. And my mother and the waitresses I interviewed and read about express a wide range of feeling as well: from eager anticipation (“You’re thinking, ‘Oh boy, I’m gonna hurry up and clear that table off . . . because that’s a good tipper.’”) and satisfaction (“It’s fun to have a good night . . . all that cash in your pocket . . . it’s very immediate reward.”); to anger (“Something that really pisses me off is when people stiff the waitress because something happened in the kitchen”) and shame (“I failed today. After all I did for them, they didn’t like me.” from Whyte, 1948, p. 98); to a sense of injustice leading to action—Paules (1991, p. 37) wrote of a waitress who “followed two male customers out of a restaurant calling, ‘Excuse me! You forgot this!’ and holding up the coins they had left as a tip.”

Although this field of customer–waitress emotion is, as I have discussed, shaped by the historical residue of servitude and by stereotyped gender roles, the waitress attempts to control it to her economic and emotional advantage by the way she defines this aspect of her work, by her manipulation of role and routine (“Play the people and the tips will follow,” said one waitress in Elder & Rolens, 1985, p. 64), and by various mechanisms of classification that enable her to attribute a low tip to a customer’s personal situation, character, or ignorance—all a part of the restaurant’s folk wisdom.

The service encounter provides the tips that enable the waitress to make a living, but in addition to—or, more precisely, in concert with—the financial need, other needs of hers, depending on the waitress, can be met as well. Some waitresses gain satisfaction from contributing to a customer’s enjoyment (“You supply nurturing and sustenance, the things that make life pleasurable”). Some respond to the hustle and stimulation of a busy restaurant, the sense of being in the middle of things (a big one for my mother). Some like the attention (“the spotlight’s on you”) and the safe flirtation. Some comment on the pleasure of the attenuated human interaction: “Though we’ll never get to know each other, there’s a really nice feeling that goes back and forth,” notes one

waitress I interviewed; another in Elder and Rolens (1985, p. 55) said "I love taking care of people as long as I don't have to take them home with me." Some waitresses comment on the feeling of independence the job affords; Paules (1991) characterized the waitress as a private entrepreneur. And some gain satisfaction from the display of their skill ("I get to show off my memory") and, as was noted earlier, gain a feeling of competence by performing the job well.

Although perhaps obvious, it is worth stating that this array of feeling—like the cognitive processes detailed earlier—is situated in the restaurant; the various feelings are legitimized and shaped by the waitress–diner relationship. My mother developed a number of friendly relations with her regular clientele. When I asked her to perform a thought experiment and imagine how those relationships might have changed if tipping were outlawed, she gave sharp expression to the contextual nature of the restaurant friendship. "If you know they're gonna tip you, well, then you talk about your flowers, or you have a son, or you have a daughter, or whatever. But if you know they're not gonna tip, you'd be disinterested." My mother got to know some of her regulars pretty well, would talk about their problems at home, worry over them, yet, at heart, the connection to their lives was restaurant-based, for everyone involved.

In summary, the waitress–customer encounter is shaped by the historical residue of the servant role and by various cultural expectations regarding gender. It involves a good deal of economically motivated emotion management and interpersonal manipulation, all centered on the tip, which, itself, is laden with symbolism and feeling. The waitress–customer encounter also provides the occasion for the fulfillment of other needs that are not directly economic, although that fulfillment is embedded in an economic context and defined and bounded by life in the restaurant.

I'm struck by how many of our representations of a waitress's work tend to segment it. Popular accounts stress the nurturing qualities or the hardship of the work. Scholarly accounts in a few cases focus on memory skill or, more commonly, on the emotional sociology and/or gendered nature of waitressing. (This segmentation, of course, is partly determined by disciplinary orientation and partly by the space limits of scholarly journals. More comprehensive treatments can be found in Paules', 1991, book-length ethnography and Cobble's, 1991, history of waitress unions.) Yet, as I hope the foregoing demonstrates, in the complex activity system that is the restaurant, multiple cognitive processes and layers of emotion are interwoven. Memory, for example, draws on emotional material to aid in storage and recall. And customs of service and social display incorporate the cognitive, certainly in one's reading of people, one's social savvy, and one's folk knowledge of the ways of the restaurant, but also in the very particulars of routine that create the experience of service. One waitress comments on her ability to recall little details about her regulars' typical orders—that they don't like pepper or they like extra horse radish—and, as well, comments on her vigilance: "attention to detail ... keeping water glasses full, keeping extra stuff off the table, just the little things that make it a more pleasant sensory experience ... that's why I like it so much ... that I'm a contributing factor in somebody having a good meal." Memory, attention, the creation of service, and a waitress's personal satisfaction are all of a piece in the busy restaurant.

Although I've just argued for a more integrated view of a waitress's work, let me now engage momentarily in my own narrowing of focus to make a further point. I think that the social and emotional aspects of being a waitress have overwhelmed our understanding of the work. And, interestingly, as waitress unions developed through this century and sought to define their occupation, they did so in terms of its social abilities, nurturing and caring (Cobble, 1991). Yet I hope the earlier sections on skilled memory and regulating the flow of work demonstrate the significant

cognitive dimension of waitressing. This seems especially important, given the perception both in policy circles and in the popular mind that waitressing is among “the least skilled lower class occupations” (Montagna, 1977, p. 372) and involves little intelligence (Kwon & Farber, 1992). Skill, like intelligence, is a socially constructed notion, and one important strand of labor history and the social history of technology deals with the ways various trades and occupations have attempted to define for political and economic purposes the abilities it takes to do their work (e.g., Montgomery, 1987; E. Stevens, 1995). This is not the place to explore these dynamics in the evolution of waitressing versus other jobs in the restaurant or other blue- and pink-collar occupations. But what can be pondered is the degree to which the cognitive dimension of waitressing—and possibly other service jobs—can be lost in the more vibrant sociological story of the work. The intelligence of the work is so embedded in routines of service and social display that it largely goes undetected. Yet without the cognitive dimension, the service provided by the waitress would be impossible.

CONCLUSION: A WORKING LIFE

The interview for the day is completed; I turn off the tape recorder and gather up my notes. My mother rearranges a few things—paper napkins, some pill bottles—on the cluttered table. “You know,” she muses, folding the napkins, “you learn a lot as a waitress. You work like hell. But you learn a lot.” There’s a small television set to the side, by the wall, propped up for her by my stepfather. She reaches over and turns it on, clicking through the channels: a rerun of “The Beverly Hillbillies”, a basketball game (“blah”), a bass-thumping Ironman competition (“Boy, I couldn’t do that.”), a PBS documentary on the building of some huge suspension bridge ... the Brooklyn Bridge. She stops at this. There are historical photographs of workers—excavating, welding, a remarkable shot of four men sitting in a net of cables high in the air. The men look Southern European, possibly Greek or Italian, look like so many of the men in the old photographs I have of Altoona. “This is interesting,” she says, “they should show more things like this.” She keeps watching, and we talk over the images about work and those immigrants of my grandfather’s generation.

Her work in the restaurant business—and physical work in general—meant many things to my mother, and although she is now infirm, increasingly limited in what she can do with body and hand, work continues to shape her memory and desire, determine her values and identity. Many of our depictions of physical and service work—popular accounts but more than a few scholarly treatments as well—tend toward the one-dimensional. Work is ennobling or dehumanizing; work as the occasion for opportunity or exploitation; work as an arena for class consciousness and identity formation; work considered in terms of organizational structure or production systems; or of statistical indicators of occupational status, or income, or productivity, or employment trends. To be sure, each focus can have its rhetorical or analytic benefit. But one of the things this project has made clear to me is how difficult it is, given our standard “story lines” for work and the constraints of our disciplinary lenses, to create a multidimensional representation of work and the complex meaning it has in the lives of people who do it every day.¹⁰ Let me try to tease out the layers of significance restaurant work had for my mother. They are interrelated, at times contradictory, of a piece in her experience of waitressing.

¹⁰An exception is Astin’s (1984) sociopsychological model of career choice and work behavior.

Through waitressing, my mother generated income, supported a family, kept poverty at bay. The income was low and variable, but, as she saw it, given her limited education and her early work history, she couldn't make better money elsewhere. Also, her income was somewhat under her control: By the hours she was willing to work and the effort she put forth, she could increase her tips. Although economically dependent on the generosity of others, she had developed, and could continue to develop, the physical, mental, and social skills to influence that generosity.

My mother's work was physically punishing, particularly over the long haul. She pushed herself to exhaustion; her feet were a wreck; her legs increasingly varicose; her fingers and spine, in later years, arthritic.

The work required that she tolerate rude behavior and insult, smile when hurt or angry. Although she did not see herself as a servant, she was economically beholden to others, and, in some ways—particularly in public display—had to be emotionally subservient. Yet, although she certainly could feel the sting of insult, my mother also saw “meanness” and “ignorance” as part of the work, and that provided her a degree of emotional distance. The rude or demanding customer could be observed, interpreted, described to peers, quietly cursed—and could be manipulated to financial advantage. Explaining how she would be nice to a troublesome customer, she adds: “And, then, what happens is he becomes *your* customer! Even though there are other tables that are empty, he'll wait for your booth.”

Work for my mother was a highly individualistic enterprise, to be coveted and protected. She made several good friends at work, and they would visit our house, but much of my mother's interaction with other waitresses—both by my recollection and her interviews—was competitive. (Paules, 1991, depicted such competition well.) Although she considered Norm's “a good restaurant”, I can't recall any expression of attachment to the company; and although much of the time she worked in Los Angeles was a period of considerable union activity, my mother was barely involved in her local. I realize now how isolated my mother must have felt: thousands of miles from family; responsible for a sick husband and a child; vigilant for incursions, even treachery, from coworkers; not connected to a union or to any civic, social, or church group; and, given her coming-of-age in the Depression and the later waning of the Pennsylvania Railroad, she was always worried about the security of her employment. A strong, even desperate, sense of self-reliance and in-her-bones belief in the value of hard work mixed inextricably with a fear that work would disappear.

An owner I know told me that the restaurant business “attracts people who want to step outside of their own lives. There aren't many professions that require you to stay so focused. You don't have time to think about anything else, and that gives you a rush, and you make money.” Who knows to what degree this observation holds true across the restaurant population, but it resonates with a theme in my mother's interviews. I asked her, for example, if there was any reason, beyond the economic one, to want a full house. “When we're busy,” she answered, “the time goes so fast. You're so tired, but it's better to be real busy than not busy, because then you'll have time on your hands, you'll have an idle mind.” This is a somewhat different expression of the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 1999) mentioned earlier. I suspect that the strongest protection my mother had against her pressing fear of destitution was to be consumed on the restaurant floor, attentive to cues from the environment, executing routines, her mind filled with orders, working at peak performance, the tips appearing and appearing by the empty plates, folded under cups and glasses.

Waitressing enabled my mother “to be among the public.” This phrase carried a certain pride for her, as it reflected a social skill that the once-shy girl had to develop.¹¹ The work provided the opportunity for a low-responsibility social exchange—“I like that part. I like to be with people, associated with people.”—that must have been pleasant for someone with so many cares at home. (This casual sociability has traditionally been more afforded male occupational roles.) To be among the public carried as well for my mother a sign of attainment: It was not the kind of solitary labor she had known as a girl, and it brought her into contact with a range of people whose occupations she admired.

There’s a paradox here, but the logic goes like this: Yes, you are serving the doctor or the businessman, but it’s *your* ability that makes everything work right; you are instrumental in creating their satisfaction. As she is fond of saying, not everyone can do that.

The restaurant, then, provided the setting for her to display a well-developed set of physical, social, and cognitive skills. It was my mother’s arena of competence. Balancing all those plates on your right arm and carrying two cups of coffee in you left hand “is damned hard to do.” Remembering your orders during rush hour and getting them served “gives you a feeling of satisfaction.”

My mother learned everything she knew about the restaurant business through work, so there is an intimate connection between the activity of the restaurant and my mother’s knowledge of it. (This kind of connection is well-documented in other studies of work, e.g., Laufer & Glick, 1996; Saxe, 1991; Scribner, 1986.) But the restaurant provided, as well, a context for other kinds of learning. Educational researchers are increasingly studying learning in non-school settings—workplace programs, social and civic clubs, etc.—but still very much unexplored is the learning that occurs in everyday, informal social exchange. Given the restrictions of my mother’s formal education, her personal predilections (e.g., she did not read for pleasure), and all the demands on her life, she had limited time and means to gain information and learn new things. Yet, to this day, she possesses an alert curiosity. The educational medium available to her was the exchange with her customers, regulars particularly. Through the waitress–customer interaction, she acquired knowledge about a range of everyday activities—gardening, cooking, home remedies—and, as well, fed a curiosity that she had for as long as I can remember for topics related to medicine, psychology, and human relations. “There isn’t a day that goes by [in a restaurant] that you don’t learn something.” Some of what she learned was a fact or a procedure (e.g., on planting roses), and some was more experiential and relational—the restaurant became a kind of informal laboratory for her to observe behavior and think through questions of psychodynamics and motivation. This aspect of waitressing engaged her; “You learn a lot, and it interests me.”

Waitressing for my mother was a site of identity formation. Frances Donovan, writing in 1920, bears witness to the social transformations involving young women from the farm and from urban working-class and immigrant backgrounds, women seeking pathways out of “the restraints put upon [them] by the members of the group from which [they] came” (p. 145). Given the recent studies of waitressing, cited earlier, as an occupation embodying stereotyped gender roles, it’s interesting to note that historically the work provided the occasion for a certain liberation from con-

¹¹Writing just after World War II, Whyte (1948) quoted a young woman: “I used to be very shy, especially coming to a big city like this. I don’t know what I would have done if it wasn’t for this job.” He then commented: “Especially for employees who meet the public this is a very common story. The shy girl from the country comes to the city and, through her work, learns how to get along with people, makes friends, and finds her place in the city. Restaurants play an important role in adjusting rural migrants to city life” (p. 13).

straint and an opportunity for a working-class woman “to set up new standards for herself” (Donovan, 1920, p. 145). Approximately two decades later, my mother would enter the restaurant business, and, for all its hardships, it enabled her to begin to think of herself in a different way, to become relatively independent, to develop a set of skills, and to engage a wider social field than would have been possible in her mother’s house or in the surrounding immigrant Italian community.

I have tried in this article to depict a commonplace working life in its complexity, to consider the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of it, and to consider its many layers of personal meaning. And along the way, in considering such work closely, a number of broader issues were raised. The purposiveness of cognition, its embeddedness in a life world. The interaction of cognitive processes in work environments, and the way those environments both structure and are structured by cognition. The interrelation of the cognitive, social, and emotional in such environments. The possibility that the intelligence of certain kinds of work is masked by the work’s social dimension. The way a work environment can be structured and routine, yet dynamic and variable. The need for a vocabulary to describe dynamic work environments that takes us beyond linearity and dichotomy and toward embeddedness, synchronicity, and complementarity. The need for layered, even contradictory, representations of the meaning of work. The role different kinds of knowledge can play in our understanding of work. The demands the study of work make on disciplinary knowledge, and the intra- and interdisciplinary tensions those demands create. The need for principled ways to address and utilize those tensions.

And, personally, the writing of this article provided an opportunity to think analytically about a kind of work that, for as long as I can remember, has been part of my life’s texture, and the opportunity to more fully appreciate the hard but meaningful working life my mother created out of terrible constraint. The fact that I could pursue this analysis in concert with her, at this stage of her life, has brought me, tinged with sadness, personal and conceptual rewards—and has provided a powerful occasion for the integration of my own ways of knowing things. My hope is that the article both honors Rose Emily Rose and helps us understand a bit more about how a certain kind of work gets done.

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