Serving Up Stress: Perceived Stressors and Coping Mechanisms of Front of House Restaurant Employees

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Abstract
This qualitative study explored the perceived stressors and coping mechanisms of front of house restaurant staff, with an additional focus on potential health consequences resulting from these variables. Data from a snowball sample of male (n=5) and female (n=9) wait staff from various Peterborough, Ontario restaurants was collected through in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews. An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of the data revealed that while wait staff identified emotional, physical, and organizational stressors, most normalized these stressors with internalized feelings of helplessness. The analysis also showed that wait staff spoke about health mainly in emotional terms, and minimized the physical demands of their work. Furthermore, owing to intrusive and inconsistent schedules wait staff appeared to have difficulty maintaining and engaging in meaningful relationships. As a result, wait staff’s emotional health needs were not met and culminated in further stress. This research shows that future studies should be encouraged to further the understanding of the perceived stressors and coping mechanisms of front of house restaurant staff, and the influence of those variables on this population’s health outcomes.

Keywords
Psychology — Labour Studies — Stress Research

1. Introduction

Scholars have long noted the importance of understanding stress and its effects, and more recently occupational stress has become a topic of interest. While a variety of research areas exist within occupational stress literature, the field of hospitality is often cited as exhibiting unique stressors (Erickson, 2004; Hochschild, 2003; Johanson & Woods, 2008; Pienaar & Willemse, 2008; Shani, Uriely, Reichel, & Ginsburg, 2014; Tsaur & Tang, 2013). Past and current research shows that hospitality workers experience emotional stress (Erickson, 2004; Hochschild, 2003; Hunter & Penney, 2014, Pienaar & Willemse, 2008; Shani et al., 2014), esthetic stress (Tsaur & Tang, 2013), physical stress (Corsun & Young, 1998; Erickson, 2004; Hayes & Weathington, 2007; Kjaerheim, Halldorson, Andersen, Mykleun, & Aasland, 1997; Smith, Rasmussen, Mills, Wefald, & Downey, 2012), and situational stress (Chiang, Birtch, & Kwan, 2010; Cleveland, O’Neill, Himelright, Harrosin, Crouter, & Drago, 2007; Esnard & Roques, 2014; Hunter & Penney, 2014; Kim & Argusa, 2011; McNamara, Bohle, & Quinlan, 2011; Tsaur & Tong, 2013). These stressors include, but are not limited to: expectation of weekend availability and unusually long shifts (Corsun & Young, 1998), length of time spent at work combined with its unpredictability and time spent interacting with guests (Cleveland, 2007), having to accommodate rude and/or unhappy customers (Erickson, 2004; Hayes & Weathington, 2007; Hunter & Penney, 2014; Jonsson, Ekstrom, & Nygren, 2008), a lack of empathy from managerial staff (Shani et al., 2014), high employee turnover (Huang, 2006), and an expectation to follow guidelines thus minimizing server autonomy (Erickson, 2004).

While occupational stress research in the hospitality industry is evident, its purpose is organizationally, not individually, beneficial. Most of the abovementioned research is aimed merely at changing stress perception (rather than eliminating or reducing the experience) with the goal of improving job performance. This is surprising given that research on stress has identified it as an immune system suppressor with serious deleterious effects on individual and societal health status (Herbert, Cohen, Marsland, Bachen, Rabin, Muldoon, & Manuck, 1994; Phillips, Carroll, Evans, Bosch, Clow, Hucklebridge, & Der, 2006; Reiche, Morimoto, & Nunes, 2005).

Furthermore, the field of hospitality lacks studies pertaining to coping mechanisms used by hospitality workers. What does exist is mainly theoretical in nature, providing insight into coping mechanisms through the use of psychological models of Emotional Intelligence (Endler & Parker, 1994; Kim & Argusa, 2011) and efficacy (Esnard & Roques, 2014; Bandura, 1977; Homburg & Stolberg, 2006). While these models offer a starting point, they fail to express the lived
experiences of hospitality workers. On the other hand, qualitative research concerned with such experiences is sparse (Erickson, 2004), preventing a thorough analysis of the impacts of occupational stress and coping on the health outcomes of service industry workers.

Through my research I explored the abovementioned gaps in hospitality industry literature. I examined perceived stressors of service industry workers in order to critically assess their effects on hospitality staff’s health outcomes. In addition, I focused my research on specific stress coping mechanisms used by wait staff in hopes of broadening the current body of research. This was done by providing personalized accounts of their lived experiences. Given the limited amount of research on coping mechanisms within the hospitality industry, this work should be considered exploratory in nature.

2. Perceived Stressors

2.1 Emotional Labor

Stemming from a qualitative analysis of service industry workers, Hochschild (2003) defined emotional labor as an act which involves the management of one’s emotional expression. This management is done for the purpose of presenting one’s emotions as congruent with employer and customer expectations. Emotional labor encompasses the use of overt tactics, such as: agreeable facial expressions, smiling, enthusiasm, as well as friendly and welcoming body language (Jonsson et al., 2008; Pienaar & Willemse, 2008; Tsaur & Tang, 2013; Shani et al., 2014). In addition, emotional labor spans over the psychological domain of work. In this form, emotional labor requires that one inhibits his or her negative emotions while simultaneously invoking positive ones (Pienaar & Willemse, 2008). This is achieved through what Hochschild (2003) described as surface acting, in which the employee performs the required emotions in order to ensure that they are consistent with expectations. Furthermore, Hochschild (2003) also identified deep acting which she described as emotional consonance between the employee and his or her environment. Emotional consonance is typically experienced when one’s external behaviour is consistent with one’s internal beliefs.

When assessing the two types of acting, Zapf (2002) in Hunter and Penney (2014), referred to surface acting as evoking emotional dissonance resulting from the differences between one’s internal emotional state and the externally performed emotions. This was further identified by Abraham (1998) in Hunter and Penney (2014) as having the potential to exhaust an individual’s emotional resources, thus leading to stress (Corsun & Young, 1998). To test this assertion Hunter and Penney (2014) examined restaurant workers’ reactions to their guests and found that employees who experienced emotional dissonance as a result of surface acting were more likely to engage in negative appraisals of their workplace and the customer, and also exhibited a decreased level of emotional resources.

2.2 Job Demand-Control Model

In addition to emotional labor, sources of occupational stress can also be traced to work demands and employee discretion levels. Karasek (1979) showed that employees in highly demanding work environments who have little control over their actions and reactions were found to experience high levels of occupational stress. In addition, Karasek (1979) found that high levels of employee decision making were positively correlated with employee psychological wellbeing.

Echoing Karasek’s work, Cleveland et al. (2007) found that high work demands and low levels of control were predictive of occupational stress within the hospitality industry. More specifically, the researchers reported that high work demands included long and unpredictable work hours, while low levels of control were associated with the workers’ inability to escape these demands. Similar to Cleveland et al. (2007), Chiang et al. (2010) performed a mixed methods study of restaurant and hotel employees and found that servers who did not experience job autonomy and therefore were not allowed to make decisions without a supervisor’s guidance reported feelings of job dissatisfaction and occupational stress.

2.3 Burnout

While occupational stress is affected by job demands, job autonomy, and emotional labor, it itself can lead to employee burnout. According to Maslach (1982) in Hunter and Penney (2014), burnout is influenced by emotional exhaustion. As previously identified, emotional exhaustion is linked with emotional labor, and more specifically, surface acting. In addition to emotional exhaustion, Zelars, Perrewe, and Hochwarter (2000) in Hayes and Weathington (2007) identify depersonalization (negative perception of others in the workplace) and diminished personal achievements (lack of pride in one’s accomplishments) as additional tenets of burnout.

3. Coping Mechanisms

3.1 Efficacy

Bandura (1977) defined efficacy as believing in one’s capacity to successfully act in a necessary and appropriate manner in response to a given situation. He described efficacy as stemming from a feeling of accomplishment in one’s work, the ability to observe the success of others, the experience of suggestion or self-instruction, and the creation of an emotional connection between the self and the situation (Bandura, 1977). Efficacy, therefore, intercepts with stress perception and coping ability. If an individual feels competent and capable of successfully completing a task, his or her stress level should remain low, while the cognitive process of coping and mastering the situation remains high.

3.2 Social Behaviour

In a qualitative study, Erickson (2004) found that serving staff support one another. This is not surprising given that a
restaurant is an environment where serving, kitchen, and managerial staff often assume different roles. Erickson’s (2004) observations and interviews led her to conclude that servers take an active role in providing one another with feedback about the performance of emotional labour, thus resulting in a process of mentorship. However, a qualitative study of restaurant workers by Jonsson et al. (2008) recognized that the irregular schedules of hospitality staff contribute to a lack of relationships outside of the hospitality sector.

4. Methods

4.1 Research Design
This study was qualitative in nature utilizing semi-structured face-to-face interviews for the purpose of data collection. The interviews were conducted following the method of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is an interpretation of the participant’s experience, and focuses on meta-themes which consist of micro-themes found in the data.

4.2 Population and Data Gathering
This study included a snowball sample of 14 male and female serving staff from various restaurants in the city of Peterborough, Ontario. Nine of the participants were female and five male. The participants varied in age from 19 to 45, amount of serving experience from seven months to 24 years, and type of restaurant in which they were employed (from casual to fine dining). Interviews were expected to last approximately 45-60 minutes, but were not excluded from the study if they were shorter or longer than expected. The interviews were audio recorded and contents were transcribed verbatim. A copy of the interview protocol and transcripts can be made available upon request.

5. Results

5.1 Work Stressors Are Emotional, Physical and Organizational
Wait staff expressed perceived stressors in emotional terms.

Of the 14 participants, all interviewees identified perceived work stressors as emotional in nature. The predominant theme was that of feelings of guilt. Participant 2 described it in the following way:

Really tough, really tough service...pulling off the impossible, you know, like flipping how many tables, and difficult customers, and the kitchen is backed up for days, and like, I would really like to top up that glass of wine, but man, that is at the bottom of my priority list...I mean, absolute chaos in trying to, trying to pull it together. (2: 350-358)

Another area of perceived emotional stress for wait staff was a discrepancy between the ideal self and current work situation. Participant 4 who identified wanting to leave serving said:

“It’s not an ideal position to be in... But I’ve got a pretty setup in terms of... seniority and the days of the week that I work are very accommodating to my schedule. So that’s why I have not left” (4: 213-216).

Related to the stress stemming from the discrepancy between one’s ideal self and current work situation, wait staff also identified emotional labor as a major work stressor. All but two interviewees described their guest interactions as involving surface acting. For example, Participant 12 said:

“If you think that you have been rushed with a table, you make sure when you go back that you are- that you make a joke, extra smiley...” (12: 1028-1030).

Some wait staff expressed perceived stressors in physical terms.

Like many others, Participant 11 identified:

“I don’t take breaks. Like, I honestly, it seems the way that it goes, right? In the service industry. Which is a bummer, because we’re entitled to it” (11: 326-327).

Some wait staff expressed perceived stressors in organizational terms
10 Participants commented on inconsistent and unpredictable work schedules. Participant 4 stated:

“I think too, like with this, with the serving lifestyle too, maybe this is an excuse, I don’t know, but I find it hard to, like, be on a schedule of any sort” (4: 918-919).

5.2 Coping is a Feeling of Emotional Control and a Way of Normalizing Work Stressors
Coping at work was defined as a feeling of being in control.

When asked to define coping at work the majority of participants stated that this involved feeling in control of a given situation. Participants who felt they could cope with work stress placed the locus of control upon themselves during events with positive outcomes. Participant 4 shared:

“If someone does say something nice, that does feel good” (4: 338-339).

Wait staff who feel positively challenged report a greater array of coping strategies
Feeling positively challenged included learning about food, wine and the technical aspects of waiting tables, and having the ability to enrich social skills. Four Participants reported these experiences. Participant 3 stated enjoying
“learning different drinks, different wines, like, food, and bringing it home and being able to try cooking it” (3: 275-276).

Wait staff expressed difficulty in identifying specific coping strategies for emotional stressors

When describing how they cope with their perceived emotional stressors the majority of interviewees were either unable to describe this process or stated emotional detachment as a coping strategy. Participant 12 said

“I don’t even know how to cope with it other than just...hang out ‘til the end of your shift. You know, that’s all you really can do sometimes” (12: 776-778).

Participant 3 stated

“deal with it. Deal with your tables, like, in one ear, out the other kind of thing, and make some money” (3: 468-470).

Coping with work-related stress appears to take place predominantly after work

Participants identified a list of coping strategies used after work including: drinking alcohol, using drugs in moderation, smoking cigarettes, watching television, going for walks, reading, talking and/or going out with other staff members, going to the gym, reflecting on their work day, thinking about future goals, prayer, applying for other work, identifying what is and isn’t in the individual’s control, treating self to a massage or a trip, practicing yoga, and spending time with loved ones. Many participants indicated that spending time with other wait staff was a way of coping with perceived work stressors. Participant 2 stated that

“there’s the camaraderie of, you know, it was like we’d just been through a war together. Wow, I feel really close to you guys. [laugh] It’s like we bonded...let’s have some whiskey, we deserve it” (2: 343-346).

5.3 Wait Staff Speak About Health Predominantly in Emotional Terms

Health is emotional well-being

When asked to define health all participants immediately focused on emotional or mental health. Participant 6 stated

“I think health, as much as... as much as it is important to-to be physically healthy, I think being mentally healthy is a hundred times more” (6: 1066-1068).

Health is physical ability

For those who mentioned physical health they did so in terms of being able-bodied, and continuing to feel good emotionally. Participant 14 said

“I think being physical is good for my mental health- for anybody’s mental health” (14: 768-769).

5.4 Wait Staff Internalize Feelings of Helplessness

Wait staff express feeling trapped by their work

Many of the interviewees identified feeling stuck in their work and life styles. Participant 1 reported

“I was already stuck in a lifestyle of partying and everything and I never...uhh...the service industry just sucks you in” (1: 144-145).

Wait staff imply feeling helpless in their positions

Those who did not explicitly state wanting to leave the restaurant industry expressed the idea of feeling trapped by being unable to change the stressors they experience. Participant 2 spoke about a restaurant owner who explicitly discussed the need for loyalty with his staff, but who was also perceived as disloyal by his employees:

“once you’re out the door, it doesn’t matter, you left him anyway. So stay forever and grind yourself into the dirt, or walk away and have him feel that you’ve betrayed him in some way” (2: 445-447).

Wait staff have limited social lives

Many participants identified spending the majority of their time at work owing to long working hours. Participant 2 stated

“working opposite hours of the majority of society...feels kind of outside of what you think of as being regular society. Like I’m sleeping during the day” (2: 251-254).

Participant 9 identified difficulty making new relationships and reported that other wait staff are easy to befriend,

“they are understanding, they are helpful, um, they’re funny, they’re, I think, kind of more my lifestyle. We probably all have similar lifestyles” (9: 453-454).

Wait staff had difficulty identifying what changes they would like to see in the hospitality industry

Participant 4 stated

“I think just a lot of things in the service industry aren’t going to change” (4: 1103-1104),

and Participant 13 identified that

“you know, most businesses work in the same kind of hierarchical structures” (13: 1153-1154).
When encouraged to be more creative participants eventually provided answers which would benefit them as individuals or the industry as a whole. Participant 1 identified “benefits...no-nobody offers benefits” (1: 1056). Participant 2 also mentioned health benefits then added that

“more set schedules would be helpful for people to kind of map out the rest of their lives” (2: 1168-1169).

6. Discussion

Data gathered from interviews with 14 participants provided a rich perspective into the lives of wait staff in Peterborough, Ontario. The aim of this research was to explore servers’ lives from a bottom up perspective and to provide a voice to wait staff in order to expose organizational inequalities within the hospitality industry. As with all qualitative data, multiple understandings of lived experience are possible.

6.1 Metatheme 1: Work Stressors are Emotional, Physical and Organizational

While physical and organizational stressors played a large role in the lives of wait staff, it was the perceived emotional stressors that were experienced with greatest intensity by all participants. Of these perceived stressors the predominant theme was that of feelings of guilt resulting from letting down guests during very busy services. Participants identified that points of service were impossible to maintain at a high standard when aggregated guest demands exceeded the amount of time wait staff had to execute them. While the interviewees were able to identify that this barrier was not of their own making (typically resulting from understaffing, excessive guest demands, miscommunication with kitchen or other staff), and were quick to state that they attempted to detach emotionally from the overwhelming feelings experienced during these stressful events, the participants continued to internalize a feeling of guilt regarding their perceived inability to please those whom they were serving.

Restrictive action potential focuses on limiting an individual within a collective, and it shows class inequalities by identifying the fact that in society it is mainly the privileged that gain benefit at the expense of others (Tolman, 1994). Hospitality is an excellent example of hierarchical social structures. The guests are there to receive a flawless service; in theory guests expect to be catered to, have their needs met in a timely fashion, and to not be left wanting or waiting. This responsibility is shouldered by wait staff who themselves engage the role of the provider, caretaker, and problem-solver. Within this relationship, the roles of the social actors become paramount. Thus, when one party in unable to fulfill their responsibility, the other is perceived as experiencing a deficit. Owing to the nature of restaurant service it is more often the wait staff who are in the failing position, therefore only intensifying the structural divide between guest and server and promoting feelings of guilt on the part of wait staff. Interestingly, according to Holzkamp, restrictive action potential also encourages feelings of personal responsibility, thus again providing further support for the limiting and unequal quality of service work, and aiding in the explanation of guilt as a dominant emotional stressor (Tolman, 1994).

Another theme within the emotional stress category was that of difficult guests. These individuals were identified as regular guests (commonly known as regulars) with whom wait staff have developed working relationships. While most participants enjoyed having regulars they also identified that this group of customers believed that they deserved special service. This type of service was described as immediate and, at times, breached the customary guest-server relationship. When a regular demands timely service, wait staff appear to be reminded of the hierarchy involved in the guest-server interaction.

Social Identity Theory argues that an individual’s sense of self is deeply rooted in the group to which they belong (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Participants expressed a strong sense of group membership within the hospitality industry. It appears that wait staff accept regulars into their group. However, according to Tajfel and Turner (2004) group membership is based not only on similarity, but more specifically on an “us” versus “them” worldview, and that the in-group engages in differentiating practices of out-group discrimination to augment their own self-image. Therefore, when regulars act in ways which do not conform to in-group membership, wait staff experience emotional stress resulting from the realization that regulars are part of an out-group.

An additional perceived emotional stressor was that of wait staff’s discrepancy between an ideal-self and current work situation. Nine of the 14 participants reported a drive to move on from service work, with most identifying feeling stuck. Moretti and Higgins (1990) found that individuals whose abilities for improving their social status are limited experience lowered self-esteem as a result of being more susceptible to negative social feedback. What is important to note is that these limitations are often the result of societal constraints. Participants indicated feeling capable of performing work other than serving, however were disenfranchised by the idea that others may not perceive them that way.

Related to stress stemming from the discrepancy between one’s ideal self and current work situation, wait staff also identified emotional labor as a perceived work stressor. Of the 14 participants only two presented information consistent with deep acting; these interviewees reported being satisfied with their current occupation. This finding echoes the research of Ashforth and Humphrey (1993), Callaghan and Thompson (2002), Fineman (1993), and Price (2001) in Pienaar and Willemse (2008) who believe that consonant emotional labor can be beneficial.

The remainder of interviewees described their guest interactions as involving surface acting. These participants shared...
feeling emotionally drained as a result of their acting work, however they also identified that engagement in this type of behavior was protective. Participant 2 stated:

“you’re keeping a little piece of yourself for yourself when it feels like everybody gets everything of you” (2: 493-494).

While participants identified surface acting as contradictory (both exhausting and protective) this finding is consistent with mixed research results on the subject. On the one hand, Abraham (1998) in Hunter and Penney (2014), as well as Corsun and Young (1998), found that surface acting has the potential to exhaust an individual’s emotional resources, thus leading to stress. On the other hand, in a recent qualitative study Shani et al. (2014) found examples in which service industry workers identified as being proud of their capacity to perform emotional acting, both surface and deep; from their perspective, service labor is unique and thus one which requires a specialized skill set. It is worth mentioning that participants who employed deep acting have spent relatively little time in the hospitality industry when compared to those who engage in surface acting. Therefore, it is possible that the emotional demands of serving culminate over time, and in order to protect their well-being wait staff change their approach to their work from deep to surface acting.

While guests and role discrepancy were key themes in the perceived emotional stressors experienced by wait staff, another area of emotional stress was that of staff relationships. While as a whole the hospitality industry includes various roles, it appears that at a certain point these roles begin to differentiate themselves even further. Wait staff in this study identified this breaking point as a time when guest needs and time constraints are high. Participants reported that during these events kitchen staff appear aggressive and at times abusive. It appears that during times of high stress group identities become more specific and solidified, illuminating the organizational role differences between wait and kitchen staff. According to Tajfel and Turner (2004), prejudice exists when groups compete for a distinct social identity with the goal of identifying in and out-groups. Therefore the division of wait and kitchen staff can be explained by each group wanting to increase their level of belonging to their in-group, resulting in an increased level of hostility towards the out-group.

Other participants reflected on the fact that the hospitality field is marked by a transient lifestyle where making strong friendships is not always beneficial. It appears that wait staff have difficulty engaging in lasting relationships at work, and the relationships they do have are often a source of emotional stress instead of emotional support. However, research by Baron, Cutrona, Hicklin, Russell and Lubaroff (1990) found that higher levels of perceived social support correlate positively with immune system functioning. Therefore, wait staff who report difficulty with creating supportive relationships are not only perceiving higher levels of stress, but also appear to be at risk for health issues.

While emotional stressors played a large role in the lives of wait staff, some wait staff expressed perceived stressors in physical terms. Of these perceived stressors the predominant theme was one of physical demands inherent in the service industry. More specifically, wait staff reported an unmet need for washroom breaks and lunch or dinner breaks. For many, this type of stress was rooted in a lack of personal control over the most basic of bodily functions. This limitation appears to have a dehumanizing effect, as it transforms corporeal needs into regulated behaviours. This echoes the findings of Cleveland et al. (2007) who found that high work demands and low levels of control were predicative of occupational stress. In addition to emotional and physical stressors, some wait staff expressed perceived stressors in organizational terms. Of those who identified organizational stressors, all were unanimous about the negative effects of inconsistent and unpredictable work schedules. Participants reported that these limited their ability to engage with friends and family; they also stated that their free-time was centered around night life and typically engaged in with others from the hospitality industry. Therefore, not only does an inconsistent and unpredictable work schedule further the social isolation and lack of support felt by many of the participants, it also discourages time away from hospitality-related matters. As reported by Presser (2004) and Almeida (2004) in Cleveland et al. (2007) shift work and weekend work commitments contribute to family difficulties, thus increasing the level of stress experienced by the individual. In addition, participants reported struggling with making doctor’s appointments and business engagements of any kind.

While the theme of schedules was the predominant organizational stressor, concerns about understaffing were a close second. Participants reported that often there were not enough wait staff present to shoulder guest demands. As a result, participants indicated that this particular stressor was correled to the emotional stressor of letting down guests, as well as the physical stressor of a lack of breaks to satisfy basic bodily needs. It is important to note that, within their individual categories, both of these stressors were identified as most troubling.

6.2 Metatheme 2: Coping is a Feeling of Emotional Control and a Way of Normalizing Work Stressors

The interviews showed that wait staff perceived coping as a challenging topic. When asked to define coping, the majority of participants stated that coping at work is a feeling of being in emotional control. Typically, wait staff placed the locus of control upon themselves during events with positive outcomes, and relinquished this control during times of emotional stress. Many of the participants took ownership for their work when they perceived it as successful. Events such as solving organizational problems or feeling accomplished in their work sparked positive emotions. However, when experiencing negative events such as interacting with difficult guests, wait staff were quick to relinquish their control over the events,
stating that this occurred was the result of reasons beyond their control. Owing to the inconsistent nature of their work, many wait staff reported a lack of feeling in control. This finding is concerning especially when viewed next to The Whitehall studies (University College London, 2004). These studies found that occupational stress, the feeling of being unrewarded at work, and experiencing low job control are all positively correlated with disease. Therefore, wait staff’s desire for emotionally balanced work coupled with the reality of a lack of emotional and occupational control appears to lead to a devaluing of one’s coping self-efficacy. This trajectory further points to impairments in health, and therefore negative outcomes for wait staff.

On the other hand, of those who reported coping well with perceived work stressors, the majority were participants who felt positively challenged in their positions. This finding echoes that of Pienaar and Willemse (2008) who reported that servers who took pride in their work experienced less burnout. It appears that wait staff who continue to actively learn about their job experience less burnout and, therefore, exhibit a higher capacity for coping self-efficacy.

Although some wait staff reported high capacity for coping self-efficacy, most participants expressed difficulty with identifying specific coping strategies for emotional stressors. When describing how they cope with their perceived emotional stressors, the majority of interviewees were unable to describe this process. This finding is consistent with the Repression-Sensitization construct discussed by Byrne (1964) and Eriksen (1966) in Krohne (2001) who stated that coping can be viewed on a dimensional scale from repression to sensitization. According to Krohne (2001), when faced with a stressful event, those who repress were found to reject or be unable to identify their feelings of stress, and chose not to consider the results of their predicament; those who sensitize became preoccupied with the stressor. It appears that wait staff who become overwhelmed by emotional stressors act as repressors and become unable to verbalize the process. This is obviously a concern, especially since the primary stressors perceived by wait staff are emotional in nature. Therefore, if wait staff are unable to identify how they process these stressors, they will also be unable to engage in growth towards well-being.

Congruent to most participants being unable to verbalize their coping strategies, many wait staff also decided to endure the perceived stressors they experienced and accepted them as part of the wait staff role. Most participants stated that feeling overwhelmed while at work “is just the nature of the beast” (3: 448), and that not much can be done to change this. When challenged about this statement wait staff appeared surprised, and upon further reflection indicated that while stress may be high there are also benefits to service which aid with creating a homeostasis. This finding echoes that of Holzkamp’s restricted action potence which appears to create a society that is destructive to itself as it limits potential for growth and those within it stagnate (Tolman, 1994). The hospitality industry can be considered as a unique group, as such, the removal of power from this cluster appears to lead to feelings of helplessness and the normalization of emotional stressors experienced by wait staff. It should be noted that this passivity is not natural and, instead, is constructed at the societal level.

While differences in coping ability and self-efficacy emerged from participant interviews, what was consistent across them was that coping with work related stressors appears to take place primarily after work. The majority of these coping strategies are emotion-focused and attempt to remove negative feelings associated with the stressor, rather than changing the stressor itself. The concern with this type of coping strategy is that the occupational stressors wait staff face will continue to pervade their lives. Among the emotion-focused coping strategies spending time with other wait staff was preferred. This feeling of belonging can be expressed in terms of Tajfel and Turner’s (2004) Social Identity Theory as an attempt to feel socially included. Many wait staff indicated that only other servers understand their unique stressors. Jonsson et al. (2008) found that wait staff’s preferences for encounters with colleagues minimized their social support networks and contributed to the perpetuation of work-related stressors through shared dialogue of negative events.

6.3 Metatheme 3: Wait Staff Speak About Health Predominantly in Emotional Terms

When asked to define health, the majority of participants stated that health equates to emotional well-being. Typically, emotional homeostasis was accomplished through the same means as emotion focused coping. Many participants indicated that the time they spent on their emotional health was done in an environment with minimal stimulation. This is in stark contrast to the emotional and social demands of service work, and shows that while wait staff may experience difficulty coping with the stressors of their immediate work environments, they do recognize their homes as a retreat from their busy life and express a sense of control when spending time there. Unfortunately, owing to their inconsistent and unpredictable work schedules, wait staff are often unable to spend much time in their homes, and have difficulty planning occasions when they can engage in self-focused and calming solitude.

It appears that emotional health is at the apex of well-being for wait staff. Owing to the emotional nature of their work and work-related stressors, this finding is indicative of the negative impact that service work has on the emotional well-being of wait staff. This also raises the question of why server health has not been a more dominant topic in occupational health research.
6.4 Metatheme 4: Wait Staff Internalize Feelings of Helplessness

Many of the interviewees expressed feeling trapped by their work. This was described as wanting to move on from service work but experiencing difficulty with this process. As previously mentioned, wait staff perceived that their skill set was not seen as transferable by employers in other career paths. Others spoke of missed opportunities, such as education and time spent with family, or of service work as a trap with little financial stability. These findings further echo Holzkamp’s work on restrictive action potence (Tolman, 1994). The opportunities available to the working class are limited and dependent on a capitalist system which rewards dominant classes. As found in this study, serving is a stigmatized position within which hierarchical structures of inequality play a large role in order to maintain a systemic status quo.

This construct is so powerful that while expressing feelings of helplessness about their situations, wait staff also identified feeling a sense of loyalty toward the establishment in which they were employed. This search for validation and belonging is a natural human need (Lambert, Stillman, Hicks, Kamble, Baumeister, & Fincham, 2013), however one that is manipulated by those in positions of power. This leaves many wait staff frustrated, and at the same time unwilling to disappoint themselves by sacrificing their work ethic and professional integrity. I want to avoid the possibility of interpreting this statement as punitive, and wish to draw the reader’s attention to the power of social constructs and norms which dictate what is considered to be appropriate human behavior. Therefore, Holzkamp’s individual with restrictive action potence must dream only within the confines of his or her own class because restrictive action potence creates a society of self-interest (Tolman, 1994).

This critical perspective became even clearer when wait staff had difficulty identifying what changes they would like to see in the hospitality industry. Many stated that change was not possible, thus further normalizing the inequalities experienced by servers. Those who did specify changes often did so with the restaurant’s benefit in mind. When encouraged to be more creative, participants eventually provided the following (in descending order): addition of health benefits, stable schedules, communication between staff members and management, a greater amount of staff per shift, a stocked inventory, educating guests about realistic dining expectations, adequate training, legal protection for employees, breaks, a standard wage, and removal of sexism in the workplace. It is of interest to note that the most important change pertaining to health benefits was presented from an emotional health point of view. Wait staff wanted access to mental health medications, counselling, and grounding therapies such as massage. These unmet needs further highlight the inequalities within service work, and help explain why wait staff experience high rates of perceived emotional stressors coupled with low levels of coping self-efficacy.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived stressors and coping mechanisms of front of house hospitality industry workers, with hopes of understanding the health outcomes and consequences of each perceived stressor. The findings of this study point to the intensity of emotional demands expected of wait staff. These manifest themselves through perceived emotional stressors, as well as physical and organizational ones. It is clear that the three intersect, however perceived emotional stressors were found to be the most concerning to interviewees. This also linked with wait staff’s use of coping mechanisms, which were emotionally focused, or perceived to be missing. Furthermore, concerns about health were primarily emotional in nature, and echoed the emotional strain that wait staff find themselves under.

This research suggests that servers experience restrictive action potence which manifests itself in their internalized feelings of helplessness. While some participants enjoyed their work, all identified the emotional strain as draining. Future research would benefit from exploring the coping mechanisms of wait staff. The perceived lack of ability to identify coping mechanisms used in times of high stress within the hospitality field is alarming, especially when considering the negative impact of stress on health. Other sectors, such as manufacturing, are related to service work. These industries boast greater regulatory practices in the form of unions and labor laws. Interestingly, the manufacturing sector is diminishing, while service economy is on the rise along with precarious employment (Kristal, 2013). Hospitality workers and their challenges are representative of a larger economic pattern, demonstrating urgent need for future research.

While exploratory in nature, this study was limited in its scope. The participants were all employees of restaurants in Peterborough, Ontario, therefore limiting the study’s generalizability. Even with this limitation, the study included a varied cross section of wait staff and contained a sufficient sample size for a qualitative analysis. In addition, the researcher was unable to engage in follow-up interviews with participants thus limiting their ability to validate the researcher’s interpretation of the participants’ experiences. With that said, the participants were all provided with the option of obtaining a copy of their interview transcript, as well as a copy of the researcher’s findings. Of those who did request these, none of the participants provided negative feedback.

This research shows that some ways of decreasing perceived server stressors are: the provision of health benefits, stable work schedules, and an increase of wait staff per shift to reduce the guest to server ratio. These strategies would diminish the feelings of guilt experienced by wait staff, the inability to take breaks, as well as the social isolation resulting from inconsistent schedules. When compared to systemically ingrained hierarchies, these issues can be easily altered by restaurant owners and managers, and it is the hope of this researcher that these changes will be implemented in the near
future.

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8. References


