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New imaginaries of gender in Turkey's service economy: Women workers and identity making on the sales floor



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ABSTRACT

Research on the regulation of women's identities at work has shown that the production of feminine selves on the service floor depends on women workers' identification with certain versions of femininities. Drawing on ethnographic data collected in retail settings in urban Turkey, this study highlights an alternative route to identity making on the service floor. I found that saleswomen strategically distance themselves from particular versions of working class femininities when building workplace identities for themselves. To explain why women workers use this distancing strategy, I argue that the gender discourse on women's work in Turkey and the minimalist managerial control of workers shape women's strategies to self-constitute. The discourse on women's work, which discourages women from working unless they pursue professional careers, puts women's respectability at risk. Women workers lacking access to the necessary resources to constitute themselves as properly middle-class, therefore employ a strategy of distancing rather than identification to preserve their sense of respectability.

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On a hot July evening in 2011, I met Esma, a thirty-three-year-old unmarried saleswoman, employed at MajorMarket for almost sixteen years. I picked her up from work when her shift was over. She changed out of her work uniform, a company-issued red polo shirt and gray unisex trousers, into a dark t-shirt and jeans, then we walked to the nearest open-air café to drink Turkish tea. On our way, I asked her why she prefers working at MajorMarket and she quickly responded: 'I like working here because there is no *bacı* (sister) talk here. We call each other by our names; it is not like working at a factory. Nobody treats me like a *bacı* on the sales floor. What I say might sound a bit rude, but I must say that the guys working here are not like those bearded, tough guys who don't know any manners. A factory is such a domineering environment.'

Throughout my research, the contrasts between the sales floor and the shop floor as well as the differences between the sales workers and factory workers came up repeatedly during the interviews with saleswomen, even though my questions did not make any reference to the industrial workplaces or industrial workers. It was often in response to my enquiries about the reasons why they prefer working at a retail store or

about the pros of cons of working on the sales floor, women pointed out the differences between themselves and factory workers as well as the dissimilarities between the sales floor and shop floor. For instance, when talking about the sales floor, many of the women expressed discomfort with the term *bacı*, which denotes a low-status kin position in Turkish, and cited the non-familial language as a positive aspect of their work environment, weighing the sales floor against the shop floor.

Focusing on saleswomen in Istanbul, Turkey, this article examines the making of gendered subjectivities on the service floor to highlight alternative strategies of identity construction at work. Scholars investigating the gendered organization of service work have demonstrated that the production of feminine selves on the service floor depends on women workers' association with particular versions of femininities, especially Western, middle-class femininities. However, unlike these studies, I found that saleswomen in Istanbul do not identify with middle-class femininity. Instead, they adopt a strategy of distancing. In establishing their identities, saleswomen widen the symbolic distance between themselves and other working class women, such as women factory workers and housewives. In other words, they construct their own

workplace identities by rejecting the local repertoire of working class femininity in Turkey. Why do saleswomen in Istanbul make use of the strategy of distancing instead of identification? This article demonstrates the importance of a national gender discourse surrounding women's work as well as managerial strategies in the corporate retail sector to explain why women pursue alternate routes to self-constitution on the sales floor.

By integrating gender and service work scholarship and the literature on symbolic boundaries, this article moves beyond considering identification as the sole strategy through which women workers' identities are regulated on the service floor. Here, I show that the strategy of distancing utilized by saleswomen in Istanbul is a particular instance of boundary-work. The latter refers to the mobilization of interpretive strategies by social actors with the aim of accentuating differences between groups (Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Pachucki, Pendergrass, & Lamont, 2007). By separating people into groups via conceptual distinctions, social actors not only draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and others but also are able to define who they are and who they are not (see Lamont, 1992; McDermott, 2006; Sherman, 2007). Saleswomen in Istanbul, who distance themselves from factory workers and housewives, thus construct their own identities on the basis of symbolic boundaries, distinguishing themselves from other working class women in Turkey. This strategy operates differently for unmarried and married women workers. Unmarried women emphasize dissimilarities between themselves and unmarried women factory workers, whereas married workers create and maintain boundaries between themselves and housewives. By documenting and explaining variations in these women's boundary-work strategies, this article extends the scholarly literature on boundary-work.

Service work and gendered subjectivities

The scholarly literature in the area of interactive service work, where workers and customers engage in direct interactions, has blossomed in recent decades. One important strand in this literature draws attention to the fact that workers' selves and identities are particularly prominent in service settings (Sherman, 2007). In contrast to manufacturing jobs, in which workers produce tangible products without encountering the people who buy them, interactive service jobs are defined by the interaction between workers and customers, bringing the worker's self-presentation and interactive competences to the core of the service product. Thus, for service managers who aim at effectively controlling the service product, the regulation of workers' sexual identities (Gatta, 2011), personal traits (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007), and esthetic capacity (Lan, 2003; Pettinger, 2004; Williams & Connell, 2010) becomes preconditions for achieving the desired service encounter. A burgeoning ethnographic literature has revealed that, in various service settings, management, through a variety of managerial practices and rhetoric, regulates women workers' feminine selves so as to successfully control the labor process and to appeal to the cultural tastes of their target consumers (Freeman, 2000; Hanser, 2005; Hochschild, 1983; Kang, 2003; Lan, 2003; Pettinger, 2004). At a high-end clothing shop in New Jersey, for instance, women workers are expected to display an image of affluent, attractive femininity to look and sound like

the target customers of the shop's brand (Gatta, 2011), while at a luxury department store in China, managers train the local staff to adopt deferential behavior and attractive demeanor, creating a corps of sales worker who embody the youthful and obedient woman (Hanser, 2005).

The managerial strategy, however, is not the only factor in the regulation of workers' selves because workers themselves may direct their efforts towards building their own identities by adopting class-coded forms of femininity. For instance, Barbadian pink-collar workers at informatics sector make use of the dress codes and the features of office work as resources to emulate middle-class, career women on the service floor (Freeman, 2000). Ethnographic studies suggest that women's adoption of Western, middle-class feminine norms is closely tied to their efforts to maintain respectability. During their interactions with customers, race and class differences between customers and workers can threaten the workers' dignity (Sherman, 2007; Williams, 2006), while mistreatment, verbal abuse and sexual harassment by customers both exasperate the workers and put their respectability at risk (Newman, 2000; Paules, 1991; Williams, 2006). To the extent that middle-class norms of femininity become practical resources to restore their dignity as workers, women strategically adopt class-coded feminine identities. For example, Otis' study (Otis, 2011) on gendered managerial regimes in hotels in China showed that women workers employed at a hotel in Kunming, a city reputed to be China's sex-tourism capital, refashioned themselves in a specific style of professionalism that downplays their sexuality to prevent harassment by customers and being labeled as 'immoral' sex workers on the service floor.

The research on interactive service work seeking to understand the regulation of feminine selves on the service floor tends to focus on instances where women workers identify with or aspire to certain versions of femininity, especially Western, middle-class femininity. However, different patterns of constructing gendered subjectivities at work have been neglected in the literature.¹ By proposing the concept of the strategy of distancing, this study illuminates an alternative mechanism of identity construction at work. In Turkey, the gender discourse surrounding women's work stigmatizes particular versions of working class femininities, such as factory girls, while valorizing middle-class femininities, such as professional women, along with the domestic femininities, such as housewives. This puts working class women's respectability at risk. Unlike service workers who are able to utilize dress codes, such as tailored suits (Freeman, 2000), forms of comportment and expression they adopted through training programs such as professionalism (Otis, 2011), and the class privilege of customers whom they serve (Sherman, 2007), while constructing middle-class identities for themselves at the workplace, saleswoman in Istanbul do not have access to material and symbolic resources necessary for the construction of middle-class femininity on the sales floor. Under these conditions, they concentrate their efforts on widening the symbolic distance between themselves and other groups of working class women as a way to fend off potential stigmatizations. They make use of conceptual distinctions in the gender discourse on women's work in Turkey to draw the symbolic boundaries between themselves and other working class femininities which, to a large extent, shapes their gendered self-understandings, enabling them to define who they are *not*.

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