

Artículos / Articles

Barcodes, motricity and aesthetics. The embodiment of cashier work / *Códigos de barras, motricidad y estética. La corporeización del trabajo de cajera*

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ABSTRACT

Few empirical studies have analysed the process of formation and/or transformation of dispositions from the perspective of Bourdieu's analytical framework or the closely related one of Lahire. This article helps alleviate this problem by studying the embodiment of work organization by new cashiers in a hypermarket. This question is approached from the dual perspective of Bourdieu's analysis of *body care* and *dispositional dynamics*. The data were obtained from an ethnographic study with participant observation that closely followed Wacquant's *carnal sociology* proposal. The article shows that two processes take place as the cashiers strive to learn: first, the adaptation of generic dispositions to the new situations of the hypermarket; and second, the incorporation of new specific gestural and motor dispositions and the memorization of technical procedures, protocols and barcodes.

Keywords: embodiment, dispositions, carnal sociology, Bourdieu, neo-Taylorism.

RESUMEN

Existen muy pocos estudios empíricos que analicen el proceso de formación y/o transformación de disposiciones desde el marco analítico de Bourdieu o el cercano de Lahire. El artículo contribuye a paliar este problema con un estudio sobre el proceso de corporeización de la organización del trabajo por parte de las nuevas cajeras de un hipermercado. La cuestión se aborda desde la doble dimensión de análisis de Bourdieu del cuidado corporal y las dinámicas disposicionales. Los datos provienen de una etnografía con observación participante que siguió de cerca la propuesta de sociología carnal de Wacquant. El artículo muestra que durante el aprendizaje de las cajeras, que exige de su esfuerzo, tienen lugar dos procesos. Primero, una adaptación de disposiciones genéricas que se tenían a las nuevas situaciones del hipermercado. Segundo, una incorporación de nuevas disposiciones específicas gestuales y motrices y la memorización de procedimientos técnicos, protocolos y códigos de barras.

Palabras clave: corporeización, disposiciones, sociología carnal, Bourdieu, neotaylorismo.

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INTRODUCTION

In late 2005, as part of the ethnographic field work for my PhD thesis, I worked for two months as a cashier in a hypermarket located in the metropolitan area of a large Spanish city. Inspired by Bourdieu's (1972, 1977, 1999, 2008) analysis of the body, furthered by Wacquant through his proposal of *carneal sociology* (1995, 2004, 2005) and Lahire's (2002, 2003, 2012) studies of dispositions, I analysed the learning process followed by the new hypermarket cashiers. The article considers two questions: what dispositions do new cashiers acquire in this process and how do they acquire them?

The article attempts to respond to these questions using Bourdieu's conceptions that we learn "with the body" (2008: 118) and that learning crystallizes in the *incorporation* of social structures in the form of bodily dispositions. *Dispositions* are propensities to perceive, feel, think and behave in a certain way that have been learned in past socializing experiences and have been recorded in the form of body memory. They are propensities because they are only used or activated in situations that require their mobilization. Also following Bourdieu (1977, 2008), the body is investigated from the dual perspective of analysis of *body care* (clothing, aesthetics, diet, etc.) and the *dispositional dynamics*.

The dispositions of the cashiers are studied without considering whether they constitute a *habitus* and analysing only those of the type that Lahire (2002, 2012) calls *dispositions to act* ("dispositions à agir"). These are propensities to act or behave in a certain way and do not include beliefs or moral and ideological convictions, which Lahire calls *dispositions to believe* ("dispositions à croire").

The article shows that cashiers embody work organization in the form of *body aesthetics* when performing the aesthetic component of their work, which consists in adapting their body image to the company regulations. It thus provides a new example of work that involves this type of embodiment, which has been documented for many other jobs dealing with the public in the service sector (e. g. Witz *et al.*, 2003; Wolkowitz, 2006: 86-89). However, the article also shows that new cashiers modify their dispositions as they learn the trade,

which is a second way to embody work organization. These empirical results on the dynamics of dispositional change are an important contribution, because few empirical studies have addressed the issue from the perspective of Bourdieu analytical framework or the closely related one of Lahire. To my knowledge, the only studies that have done so are those dedicated to the formation of habitus in boxers (Wacquant, 1995, 2004) and forest firefighters (Desmond, 2007).

The research carried out applied the line of work opened by these studies to a very different activity. Whereas boxing and firefighting are masculinized, qualified activities with high levels of autonomy in their execution, cashier work is feminized, poorly qualified and organized under neo-Taylorist criteria that leave far less autonomy to do the job.

The article shows that the learning and socialization of new cashiers involve two different processes in relation to dispositions. The first process consists of *adapting generic dispositions* acquired from the socializations prior to hiring (school, family, previous work experience, etc.) to the new situations of the hypermarket. Specifically, the following dispositions to act are adapted: basic skills of reading and writing, body care and personal interaction management and those of obedience, discipline, responsibility and effort. The second process is one of *habituación* (Noble and Watkins, 2003), through which cashiers undergo a *sedimentation* (Wacquant, 1995) of new, specific gestural and motor dispositions and memorize procedures, protocols and barcodes. Both processes are possible thanks to the active role and effort of the new cashiers, who learn quickly under the implicit pressure of having to do so to keep their jobs, which often makes them tense and nervous.

EMBODIMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF BOURDIEU'S ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Body care and the incorporation of dispositions in Bourdieu

Bourdieu analyses the body from the dual perspective of *body care* and the *incorporation of dispositions*. This analysis is linked to his notion

of *habitus* as a “system of durable and transferable dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1972: 17)¹. The dispositions of habitus develop progressively through the socialization experiences that people undergo throughout life, from the first experiences in the family to those in school and adult life. Habitus collects and stores the effect of the institutions in which a person has had socializing experiences (Wacquant, 2016: 68-69). It is formed through socializations according to family origin and the social environment of growth (neighbourhood, school, etc.) and life trajectories marked by class, gender, ethnicity, etc.

Habitus is acquired cumulatively (Cicourel, 1995: 90). The dispositions that people acquire in an institution condition their behaviour and the incorporation and/or transformation of dispositions in later socializing experiences (Bourdieu, 1999: 211). In addition, the general habitus includes *specific habitus* composed of the dispositions obtained through immersion in a specific field of professional or leisure activity. Therefore, there are the specific habitus of miners, farmers, musicians, teachers and entrepreneurs.

Habitus is acquired through the body through a process of practical familiarization and mimesis (Bourdieu, 2008: 120-121). A person apprehends—or remembers and reinforces—the rules and social structures that govern each situation that is experienced. Experiences of composure, verbal codes and behaviours considered correct in given situations involve an “implicit pedagogy” that is unthought and unconscious, through which people *incorporate*, in the form of dispositions, the categories and principles of perception, evaluation and behaviour that organize the situation (Bourdieu, 2008: 112). In this way, social structures are recorded in the mind or body (Barranco, 2003: 196).

The process of incorporating dispositions is not a simple reflection of social structures (Bourdieu, 2008: 119) but depends on the redundancy and homology or discordance and tension between the situations experienced. Organizations and situations

with analogous demands produce a congruent and integrated habitus, while those with divergent demands generate conflicting or tense dispositions that cause irregular patterns of action (Moreno-Pestaña, 2004; Wacquant, 2016: 69).

The acquired dispositions provide a *practical sense* (Bourdieu, 2008: 107; 1999: 242-243), that is, tacit skills and knowledge that allow people to behave “appropriately” (Goffman, 1979), or “as one should” (Bourdieu, 1999: 184) according to the demands of the situation. This is not a mechanical and determined process, but a generative one (Bourdieu, 1999: 89), because habitus is a “grammar” (Alonso, 2004: 220) or a practice-generating *matrix*. It is the matrix of cognitive schemata that people use to interpret the world and behave in it. The capacity to adapt behaviour to the situational requirements depends on dispositions. Therefore, situations that are the same as or similar to others previously experienced are easy to deal with because we have the dispositions to respond to them appropriately (Bourdieu, 2008). By contrast, new situations involve difficulties, and we are sometimes unable to adopt the required behaviour because we do not have the right dispositions.

Developments based on or related to Bourdieu

Bourdieu’s analysis of the body and the concept of habitus are of great value and utility. However, as several authors point out, Bourdieu did not empirically document or sufficiently explain the dynamics of formation and transformation of dispositions (Cicourel, 1995: 111; Lahire, 2001: 129; Noble and Watkins, 2003: 524-525; Frère, 2011: 253). Nevertheless, these issues can be addressed through their own analytical framework (Noble and Watkins, 2003; Frère, 2011), as has been done in a few empirical works.

Some authors have used observational data to reveal interactions-conversations that would contribute to the formation of habitus. Cicourel (2004) studied two mothers who strive to make their respective children behave suitably, and O’Mahoney (2007) studied three discussions of employees about the fairness of their working conditions that would intervene in the formation of the ethical

1 For a review of Bourdieu’s analyses of the body, see Moreno-Pestaña (2004), and for reviews of the concept of habitus, see Martin-Criado (2009), Wacquant (2016) and Martínez-García (2017).

conceptions of their habitus. They are both valuable studies, but they fail to capture the process of formation of dispositions because they are based on data from a single moment.

Other authors have used biographical interview data to analyse the synchronous evolution of dispositions. Moreno-Pestaña (2006a) shows the emergence of the disposition of self-control related to the body and food in people with eating disorders and, subsequently (2006b), the battle of *dehabituación* through therapies. Rabot (2015) identifies an ethos of reading (how to read, advise, etc.) among librarians that is prior to and reinforced by their employment. Finally, Lahire (2002, 2003, 2012) investigates people's dispositions using his own analytical framework, sharing many of Bourdieu's ideas but diverging from the assumptions that all dispositions are permanent and that they can be grouped in a habitus (2012: 40–42). Lahire (2002) proposes and develops more detailed and thorough analyses of dispositions, their formation processes, their dynamics of permanence and change, and their transfers from the contexts of production to those of mobilization.

All these contributions are very valuable, but they also fail to capture the process of formation and/or transformation of dispositions because of the limitations of the interview data. The data are conditioned by being a present reinterpretation of the past, and people have limited memories (Noble and Watkins, 2003) and only partial awareness of their learning processes.

Wacquant (1995; 2004) and Desmond (2007) do manage to capture the process through ethnographic studies with participant observation. Wacquant explains and documents the formation of the boxer's habitus. He dissects the technical, gestural and moral dispositions that compose it and how they are formed in the continuous "pedagogical work" carried out in training. Through the imitation and repetition of the gestures and movements made by experts and the corrections of the coach, a gradual process of incorporation of bodily and mental schemata called *sedimentation* (1995: 72) takes place. The process requires a great effort and sacrifice by novice boxers. Desmond (2007) analyses the transformation of the general habitus of people hired as forest firefighters to the specific

habitus of the profession. He argues that the dispositions that firefighters had prior to their hiring (as a result of their rural, male and working-class socialization) connect with the demands of the profession. Once employed, through formal and informal training and learning they acquire the specific dispositions that make up the firefighter's habitus.

This article investigates the embodiment of work organization by cashiers using Bourdieu's (1972, 1977, 1999, 2008) analytical framework on embodiment, the later work on this framework by Wacquant (1995, 2004, 2005), and Lahire's (2002, 2003, 2012) proposal to thoroughly analyse dispositions without using the concept of habitus. It therefore studies a work process in the service sector in which neo-Taylorist organizational principles are applied (Barranco, 2007). Neo-Taylorism involves the adaptation of the principles of classical industrial Taylorism to current work processes, taking advantage of new technological possibilities. Its principles are to divide and simplify tasks, streamline processes, control performance and automate where possible. These principles have been widely applied since the 1980s in large industrial and service companies (Chennoufi, 2015: 85), including supermarkets and hypermarkets (Barranco, 2007).

METHODOLOGY

The article is based on the ethnographic study carried out by the author for his PhD thesis, which was aimed at studying labour consent and resistance (Barranco, 2010). The study consisted of several field visits from September 2005 to December 2008. From the set of data collected, the article is based on those obtained through the following methods: two and a half months of *participant observation*, which included the selection process and two months working as a part-time cashier; *informal conversations* with co-workers during this period; analysis of *institutional documents* that are given to new cashiers; twelve *semi-structured interviews* with cashiers about their employment trajectory and experience in the hypermarket, carried out after the observation; and ten *informative interviews* with trade unionists about business policies,

working conditions and the characteristics of the workforce.

The participant observation closely followed the type of observation proposed by Wacquant (2005, 2004) for his *carnal sociology*, which aims to study the creation of the dispositions that make up habitus. It is a sociology “not only of the body, in the sense of object, but also *from* the body, that is, deploying the body as a tool of inquiry and vector of knowledge” (Wacquant, 2004: viii). Thus, if ethnographic observation has been considered the most appropriate method for studying habitus (Bourdieu, 1972; Cicourel, 2004; Desmond, 2007; Sánchez-García and Spencer, 2013), the participant observation proposed for carnal sociology has the originality of using the researchers’ bodily experience while they learn an activity as the centre for data collection and analysis. The participant observation must therefore involve a deep and lasting immersion in the practice and in the micro-world in which dispositions are acquired. It consists in observing and analysing experience to convert *carnality* into a “resource for the production of sociological knowledge” (Wacquant, 2013: 197).

Following this orientation, my participant observation focused on collecting data on my own learning process of cashier work and was complemented with data from informal conversations with four fellow workers about their experience. The conversations were held at various times of the working day (before, during and after it) on the first two days, at least once a day on the following four days, and on a regular basis in the subsequent weeks. The data were recorded through daily field notes taken mostly just after the working day and sometimes during breaks. In addition, in the twelve interviews with cashiers I asked about their learning experiences. The four cashiers who had been trained a few months earlier provided relevant data on their personal process. The rest of the interviewees offered less information about their learning experiences because their memories were more distant, but some contributed interesting impressions of the learning process of new cashiers.

Logically, the data of my own experience have a far greater wealth, depth and detail than those obtained through conversations with my four fellow workers and the reconstructed memories of the in-

terviewees. Therefore, the analysis of the data was based on those from my own experience, which were compared and triangulated whenever possible with those from one or both of the other sources. When this was not possible, only data from my personal experience were used. The results indicate the source of the data in each case and the royal “we” is never used.

THE PROCESS AND CONDITIONS OF CASHIER WORK

The cashier department studied is part of a hypermarket with 280 employees, of whom 125 are cashiers. The aim of the cashiers’ work process is to charge customers and contribute to their loyalty. The process has three components: the *physical work*, which consists of passing the products over the barcode scanner or typing their price and swiping the card or receiving cash and returning the change; the work that since Hochschild (1983) has been called *emotional* and that at checkouts consists of controlling one’s emotions and trying to generate good feelings in the customers (Soares, 1998); and, finally, the work that Witz *et al.* (2003) call *aesthetic* and that the cashiers perform by adapting their image to the institutional requirements.

It is an organized work process, as Barranco (2010: 279-289) explains, based on combining neo-Taylorist criteria with the principle that J. P. Durand (2004) calls the *king-client*. The service is organized to make customers feel that the company is offering all possible advantages and facilities. The application of neo-Taylorist criteria has gradually rationalized the work process by dividing and simplifying tasks; applying patterns, protocols and rules to technical procedures, to the aesthetic image and to behaviours; applying computing and automation where possible; and monitoring performance and compliance with the rules.

The introduction of computers, as Prunier-Poulmaire (2000) explains, has allowed the checkouts to be connected to a central computer that records the individual activity of each cashier: items billed per minute, customers served per hour, time between customers, number of mistakes made, etc.

Specialized software is used to calculate the optimum number of cashiers at any given time according to the customer flow forecast for the time of day, day of the week, time of the month, etc.

The work process follows a design of what J. P. Durand (2004: 147-154) called *tight flow*. A work process with this design fights the porosity of work by trying to build a continuous flow of matter, in this case of customers and products (Bernard, 2005). The customers in the queue place pressure on the cashier's pace of work, which is complemented by the context of urgency generated by the calculation of the optimal number of cashiers and the management's requirement of good individual performance in order to achieve job improvements (renewal of temporary contracts, transformation of these into stable ones, better schedules, etc.). The cashiers must thus combine a fast passage of the products with good attention to the customers.

The result is a work with imperfect standardization (Bernard, 2005). While most physical and aesthetic work procedures are highly standardized, emotional work largely resists standardization and is guided by a few detailed protocols (explained below) and the generic precept of "good treatment" of customers.

The management's use of *numerical flexibility* means that the cashiers have different employment statuses. They can be grouped into three segments: cashiers with stable, full-time or almost full-time contracts (40 or 36 hours per week), who account for 9 %; those with stable contracts working part-time (20 h per week) and those contracted for the weekend, who account for 32 % and 5.5 %, respectively; those with temporary contracts working part-time or weekends, who account for 45 % and 1.5 %, respectively; and finally 7 % of the cashiers who are on training contracts².

The working conditions of the cashiers can be characterized as poor: low salary, poorly qualified work with low recognition and social prestige, little training and limited possibilities for promotion and career development. Most cashiers have afternoon-evening schedules ending after 10 pm and many temporary workers have variable schedules and working days. The workers of the hypermarket also

suffer an anti-union management policy based on the setting up and promotion of a "yellow" or pro-management union that hinders the development of class unions (Barranco, 2010: 465-472; 2011: 32-33)³.

THE EMBODIMENT OF CASHIER WORK

This section reconstructs the learning process of new cashiers and their embodiment of work organization. The process is not explained on a daily basis but in stages, in each of which the moments and elements analytically found to be key are documented. Four chronologically ordered stages are presented: staff selection, training, the first days of work and, finally, the stage when the work has been mastered sufficiently.

The preliminary stage. The selection of generically "willing" and competent people to work as cashiers

After presenting the CV, I was summoned, together with nine other men and ten women, to the first group interview for staff selection, which lasted about an hour. The meeting began with a promotional explanation of the benefits of the company's jobs. Next, we were told that no specific prior training was required to be employed in the company and we were required to state in public our level of education, work experience, motivation to work in the company, time availability and preferred job position and branch. From the answers, it was clear that all the women were applying for the cashier position and I was the only man. A "self-pre-selection selection" based on sex is found, as Bouffartigue and Pendariès (1994: 344-345) found for this job in France.

Most interview attendees behaved "appropriately" (Goffman, 1979), or "as one should" (Bourdieu, 1999: 89). We arrived early to show punctuality, dressed in formal clothes and "well-groomed" (the women wearing makeup and the men shaved),

2 Data from 01/31/2007.

3 On this policy in the sector, see Barranco (2007) and, especially, Martín-Criado and Carvajal-Soria (2016).

and during the interview we followed the instructions at all times. A few applicants, however, showed an “inappropriate” behaviour that may have conditioned their chances of being recruited. Two attendees arrived twenty minutes late and three wore sportswear.

The workers chosen were asked a few days later to attend a personal interview. The bulk of my interview focused on checking whether I would endure the cashier work and whether I would know how to correctly manage interactions with customers⁴. Nothing was asked about other skills, probably because they were taken for granted from the CV.

Through this process, the management tries to hire people for the cashier’s job who apparently have four characteristics: first, basic generic literacy skills and abilities, management of personal interactions with strangers and aesthetic care; second, the dispositions of obedience, discipline, responsibility and effort; third, acceptance of the contractual conditions; and fourth, ability to endure the routine and monotonous work of checkouts. If the selection process has worked, the hired people have the generic dispositions that will allow them to learn quickly from the work and have a behaviour that is “appropriate” to their position as employees who do the work designed by others under a hierarchy of authority.

The management’s search for people with these qualities, together with the type of candidates who apply for the cashier position, had formed between September 2005 and December 2008 a highly feminized cashier staff (between 95 % and 100 % women, depending on the time), with a majority of female workers with medium and low levels of education and a significant number of young students undertaking secondary and higher education. In addition, most of the workforce had a lower- or working-class social origin; in 2007 and 2008 the presence of immigrants, most of them of Latin American origin, increased to almost 40 %. In early 2007, the age composition of the cashier staff was 1 % under 20, 31 % between 21 and 30, 40 % between 31 and 40, and the remaining 28 % over 40 years.

Stage 1. The trainee who strives to learn the fundamentals urgently in the welcoming sessions

The welcoming sessions for recently hired workers last only two days and consist in teaching them the minimum necessary for them to start working. The sessions on behaviour and technical procedures must be characterized more as “basic instructions” than “training”, as reported by Martín-Artiles and Lope (1999) regarding another hypermarket. In addition, the sessions did not indicate the necessary obedience behaviour of workers, literacy and numeracy skills, management of interactions with clients or care of the body image. It can be deduced that this is because it was not necessary because the vast majority of new workers will normally behave “appropriately” or “as one should”, which necessarily implies having the dispositions for doing so. This is also the case, as will be seen below, with the behaviour of the observed workers.

The welcoming sessions consisted of the following three moments.

Moment 1: first transmission of discipline rules

At a meeting to which I was summoned to sign the employment contract, also attended by four women and three other men, we were given two documents: one of general regulations for all hypermarket workers (*e. g.* how to clock in and out) and one of rules, tips and some checkout protocols, all repeated orally the next day. At the end of the meeting, we were provided with work uniforms and the aesthetic care rules were explained to the cashiers. The uniform had to be always clean and ironed, and these tasks had to be performed by us outside the working day. The shoes, to be provided by us, had to be black and “smart”. Finally, we must be “well-groomed”, which meant wearing clean hair with a ponytail or bun if it was long, women wearing “discreet” make-up and men being clean-shaven. In addition, wearing piercings, earrings, necklaces or ostentatious rings was prohibited.

The company exercised its power through these rules and the newcomers behaved appropriately by being attentive and listening to the instructors,

4 See the main questions in Barranco (2010: 330-331).

showing obedient behaviour and recognition of authority.

Moment 2: the “theoretical” training

The next day I began the training, which I followed along with four female workers, two around 20 years of age and two between 25 and 30. The training was divided into two parts, the first “theoretical” and the second on-the-job.

The training began with the instructor, a head of cashiers, reviewing the body image of the five trainees⁵. After checking our scrupulous compliance with the regulations, she gave us her approval: “You look perfect: very good-looking and smart”. With this adaptation of our image we carried out the *aesthetic* component of the work and thus embodied the rules in the form of a body image.

Undoubtedly, this behaviour came from our willingness and effort to offer an image of “compliance”, presumably motivated by our desire to keep our jobs. We knew it was in our best interest to convey this image to the head/trainer, as evidenced by the fact that before the training all five of us had spontaneously checked each other for compliance with the rules.

We were able to adopt this behaviour because we had the dispositions to do so, including obedience and the skills of body care. We had to have both skills prior to our recruitment, as we were applying them before starting the training. Therefore, we necessarily had to have learned them in previous work and/or situations or experiences outside work. This is logical because, as stated above, people with these dispositions are sought in the staff selection.

Then we began the theoretical training, which consisted of two parts. In the first, the instructor showed us the hypermarket in a ten-minute walk and the checkout line in ten more minutes. She explained the types of checkout (normal, home delivery, fewer than ten items, etc.) and the parts and instruments of the checkout counter: the cash register, the barcode scanner (horizontal and verti-

cal), the conveyor belt at the front and back of the scanner, the telephone to communicate with the checkout supervisor, the security tag remover, and products for keeping the counter clean (see Figure 1).

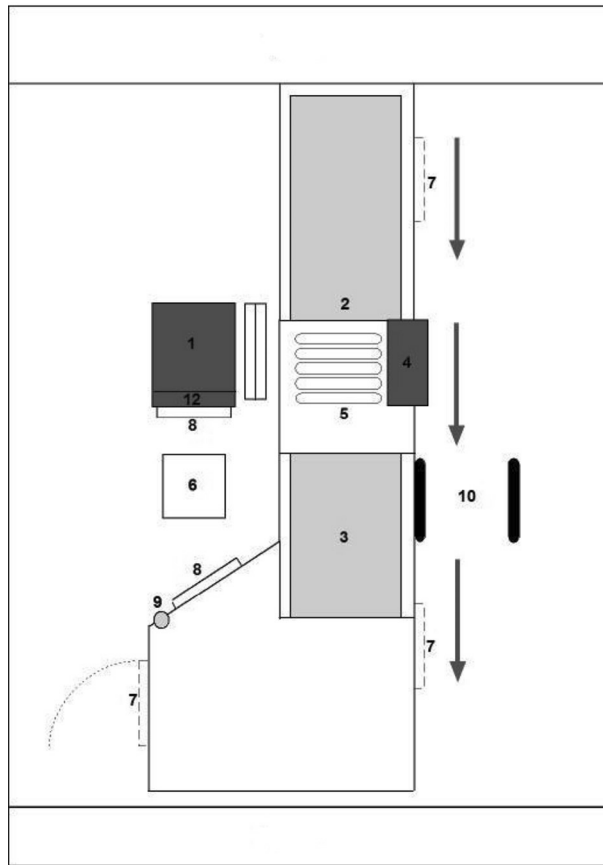
At all times the five trainees showed interest in the instructor’s explanations and willingness to make an effort. This is suggested by the fact that, without anyone having told us to do so, we had all brought a notebook and pen in case we had to take notes, and by the comments and questions of the trainees: “How interesting!”, “That’s really well set up!” and “How should we do this?” I had the impression that these expressions showed interest in a somewhat exaggerated way, thus being a particular type of practice that Venceslao and Delgado (2017: 200) call *exhibitionist*, consisting of appropriate but premeditatedly exaggerated behaviours. In this case the exaggerations were produced by the desire to project an image of interest and capacity for effort.

In the second part of the theoretical training, for 1:40 minutes the instructor used a video to present the tasks to be performed and some instructions. We were told that throughout the day we would be at the checkout counter and would perform four tasks: charging, informing customers of any offers or promotions of which we had been notified, making sure that customers paid for all products purchased, and keeping the checkout counter tidy and clean.

In addition, we were taught the technical procedures for operating the conveyor belt, the barcode scanner, the cash register, the security tag remover, etc. We were also informed of the protocols for charging, bagging (*e. g.* fish and frozen food have to be bagged) and hidden surveillance. The instructor explained the protocol of interaction with customers, which is an adaptation of the usual SBAG (the Spanish acronym for “Smile, Good morning, Goodbye, Thank you” - *Sonreír, Buenos días, Adiós, Gracias*): in each interaction the cashiers must start by looking into the eyes, smiling and greeting the customer; throughout the interaction they must avoid showing signs of fatigue and/or apathy and always be friendly, pleasant, cheerful, patient and available to the demands, complaints and claims of customers; the interaction must end

5 From that moment on, the feminine pronouns were used to refer to the cashiers, including myself.

Figure 1. Checkout counter.



- | | | |
|--------------------|------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Cash register | 5. Rollers | 9. Security tag remover |
| 2. Conveyor belt 1 | 6. Chair | 10. Security tag detector |
| 3. Conveyor belt 2 | 7. Gate | 11. Conveyor belt control panel |
| 4. Scanner | 8. Drawers | |

with the mandatory farewell and/or thanks; and the cashiers must always address customers using the formal *usted* pronoun⁶.

With these rules and protocols the management tries to control and standardize the *physical* and *emotional* components of the work. Regarding the latter, we were not told how to deal with any problems that might arise in the interaction with customers. It can thus be deduced that the man-

agement trusts the people hired to have the skills to make the right decisions or, at least, not very wrong ones, and to polish their responses on the basis of poorly resolved interactions. Several of the cashiers interviewed appeared to be skilled in dealing with customers before being hired by the hypermarket. In several cases, moreover, prior to their current employment as cashiers they had done work requiring these skills (see table 1). Antonia, for example, had previously worked as a waitress and, when asked about how she learned to combine the many tasks of cashiers, she told me: “being nice [to customers] was already natural to me”.

6 *Usted* in Spanish is the polite form for “you” that is used for addressing strangers and more distinguished people.

The behaviour of the trainees continued as attentive listening and we tried to memorize and write down what each of us thought was important, thus applying simple writing skills. This was an appropriately disciplined and responsible behaviour that was linked to our need to learn the instructions of the work and to continue giving an image of good workers to the supervisor/instructor.

Moment 3: on-the-job training

Without interruption, we began the on-the-job training, which lasted two days: three hours in the same morning, the afternoon of the same day, and the morning and afternoon of the following day.

Watching carefully and memorizing as much as possible

The method consisted of placing each trainee at a checkout counter next to a fellow cashier who, while doing her job, acted as an instructor. The content of the training was not formalized and the learning was done informally. Each worker showed us the job and commented on what she considered appropriate. The trainees observed, asked questions and tried to memorize as much as they could of what they thought was necessary. Each trainee repeated this process with four or five different fellow workers. Basically, all the cashiers/instructors offered the same content but each one emphasized different things. Most of the fellow cashiers/instructors showed helpful behaviour towards the trainees, which greatly facilitated our adaptation to the job. According to the interviews, this behaviour was shown to all new cashiers.

The first observations already showed the distance between the job description and the actual work, which was confirmed by subsequent observations. Cashiers clearly develop working methods different from the official ones to make work easier and/or less tiring. Some of these methods are *tricks* (Coller, 1997) that do not violate the rules, while others are *fiddles* (edwards, 1990) that do violate them. For example, cashiers sometimes do not bag everything indicated by the rules or do not always

give customers all the information about promotions. In addition, I was surprised to see that cashiers knew various barcodes by heart, which is a form of embedding work organization into their memory. Later I saw that many of them were proud and satisfied with this memorization, as it allowed them to charge faster. Furthermore, many cashiers had turned this memorization into a *game* or challenge in the sense of Roy (1953) and Burawoy (1979). It was about seeing who knew more codes by heart.

The first practical trials

On the same afternoon and the next morning, the trainees began to try out the work on a practical level for short periods under the supervision of the fellow cashiers/instructors, who were behind each of us. The five trainees then found that we did not have the gestural and perceptual body mechanics to perform the procedures correctly and quickly, and that we had not memorized all the protocols and procedures we had to follow. We therefore went extremely slowly, always making mistakes or forgetting some aspect of the sequence to follow in each interaction.

We felt clumsy and unable to perform the necessary sequence of actions and movements at the required speed. This was confirmed in a conversation in which my four fellow trainees mentioned the same problems. However, we received the valuable encouragement of three veteran cashiers who told us they had also gone through the same initial problems, even imagining that they would not be able to do the work, but that later, like the rest of the cashiers, they soon developed the right skills. The same feelings of initial clumsiness and incapacity were also noted by the interviewed cashiers (see Table 1). Personally, I noticed difficulty in the following:

— The technique of checking out the products: they often went too fast or too far and the scanner did not read them, and they sometimes went too slowly or in the wrong position and were scanned twice; I also had problems finding many of the barcodes.

Table 1. Summary of experiences of the interviewed cashiers.

Data		Feelings							
		Time in the job	Previous jobs	Stages 1-2		Stage 3			
				Difficulty/inability	Tension on the first few days	Somatic symptoms	Help from fellow workers	Automation of mechanical tasks	Days to first technical mastery
Lucia, 20, working class, primary; Latin American immigrant	Department store, factory	7 months	Yes	High	Fatigue, stomach pain	Yes	Yes	Yes	10-12
Vanessa, 24, working class, HVT	Call centre operator, waitress	8 months	Yes	High	Fatigue	Yes	Yes	Yes	12
Maria, 25, working class studying UD	Shop assistant, cashier, shop assistant	6 months	*Yes	*High	*Fatigue	Yes	Yes	Yes	DR
Manu, 28 years, working class, studying UD	Cashier, shelf stocker	6 months	*Yes	*Low	*Some stress	Yes	Yes	Yes	DR
Susi, 19, working class, studying HVT	None	11 months	Yes	High	Fatigue, stomach ache, loss of appetite	Yes	Yes	Yes	12-15
Sonia, 32, working class, primary	Administrative assistant	2 years	Yes	High	Fatigue, stress	Yes	Yes	Yes	DR
Juan, 20, middle class, studying HVT	Warehouse	15 years; weekend	Little	*Low	no	Yes	Yes	Yes	Quickly
Angels, 39, middle class, secondary; Latin American immigrant	Own workshop, sales, manual worker	2.5 years	Yes	High	Fatigue, loss of appetite	Yes	Yes	Yes	6-12
Silvia, 29, working class, UD	Instructor, shop assistant	6 years	Yes	High	Fatigue	Yes	Yes	Yes	6 (full-time)
Antonia, 23, working class, secondary	Waitress	3 years	**In new cashiers	**In many new cashiers	**In new cashiers	Yes	Yes	Yes	10 (full-time)
Angels, 44, middle class, middle class, secondary	Department store, cashier	5 years	**In new cashiers	DR	DR	Yes	Yes	Yes	DR
Conchi, 54, working class, primary	Farm work, house cleaning	35 years	**In new cashiers	**In many new cashiers	DR	Yes	Yes	Yes	DR

HVT, higher vocational training; GU, university degree; DR, Don't remember.
 * Refers to experience in another hypermarket; **Refers to the experience of fellow cashiers.

— Combining attention to the scanner and the product flow while greeting customers and making sure that no theft occurred.

— Mastering the conveyor belt. It set the pace for me rather than the other way round, and I often reached for the products by hand rather than using it.

In short, my lack of mastery of the actions meant that in order to do them, I had to think and pay close attention, which prevented me from carrying them out simultaneously in the right way. For example, if I focused on products, I could not look at, greet and interact with customers and vice versa. In cashier work, if you have to think about all the actions, you cannot achieve a pace of work acceptable to the management and the customers.

At the end of the first day of training my colleagues and I had the feeling of being faced with a difficult, hard and repetitive job that reminded us of an assembly line. Several of the interviewed cashiers made the same comment.

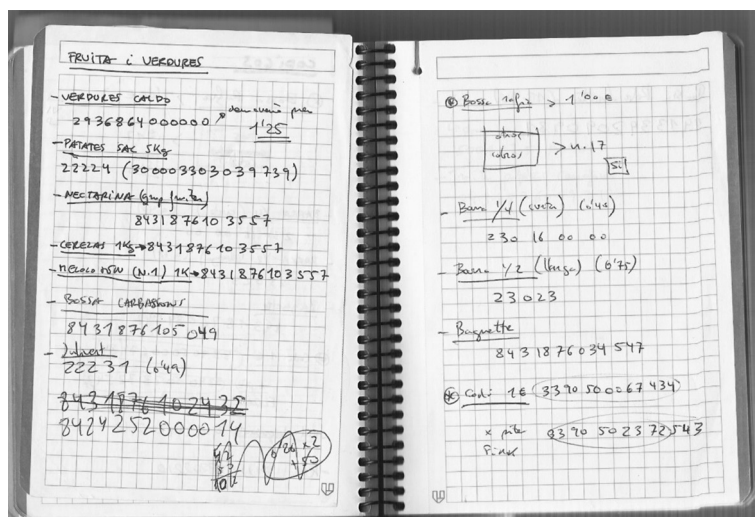
Alone under supervision

On the second day of training, we started with the same methodology, but at the end of the morning in some cases and in the afternoon in others, the trainees changed to working alone for the rest

of the day under the supervision of a fellow cashier/instructor. We had five consecutive hours of practice on a Saturday, the day of the week with the largest customer flow. At the end of the day, we closed the checkout and our instructors taught us to cash up the tills, which involves making simple additions and subtractions and therefore using basic calculation skills. The teaching method of my fellow cashier/instructor was always to make me watch what she did and how she did it.

Thus, a fundamental part of cashier work is learned through informal, oral, gestural, visual and mimetic teaching, which experienced cashiers use to transmit a good way of doing the work to the new ones. It is the “real” mode that includes part of what is laid down in the rules, in addition to the practical knowledge that cashiers have acquired. For example, the fellow cashiers/instructors advised us and allowed us to copy the “cribs” they had in their notebooks, which included instructions for infrequently used cash register procedures or barcodes of products that are often typed, because they often lose their labels (e. g. some bags of vegetables or loaves of bread), because it is easier to type them than to scan them (e. g. water jugs are heavy and difficult to handle) or because the scanner does not usually read them (e. g. frozen foods and fish, whose barcodes can get wet) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. “Cribs” on barcodes from author’s notebook.



Stage 2. The novice who strives to improve quickly

After only two days, the trainees faced the real work situation. We started working alone and entering our personal identity number in the till, which mean that the computer would record our activities. We were also visually monitored occasionally by the supervisors, and the more experienced cashiers told us that customers can make a complaint if they do not feel well treated and that, from time to time, we might have to deal with the *mystery shopper* (an inspector posing as a customer), who would assess the treatment they received.

Of course, after the first few days we had not yet mastered the work: we were still clumsy and gesturally awkward, we had not memorized the procedures we had to follow, we were unable to resolve many mistakes on our own, and we did not know many tricks and fiddles that speed up the work. We therefore often had to consult our notes and call the supervisor to answer questions. As a result, we worked more slowly than the more experienced workers and had to work harder and pay more attention than they did.

Keeping our jobs made us strive to improve rapidly. We had to pay close attention to our actions to minimize the number of mistakes and to resolve and learn from all the new and/or unusual situations that arose both at the technical level and in the management of interactions with customers (including chatters who blocked the queue and customers who were disrespectful). We also had to deal with the demanding technical features of working at the various “special checkouts” and the more intense work on Friday afternoons and Saturdays.

In addition, my five fellow trainees and I tried to improve by talking to our colleagues in breaks and in the changing rooms. We asked for advice, resolved doubts, found out tricks, fiddles and the margins of autonomy left by management monitoring mechanisms, and then shared the information with each other.

The lack of mastery of the work during the first few days led us to feel insecure, so we were tense and nervous at work. As a result, we were extremely

tired at the end of the day, and both I and some of the workers interviewed sometimes had somatic symptoms such as stomach ache and/or loss of appetite (Table 1):

Do you remember having trouble coping in the first few days?

Oh, yes, yes, the first few weeks were very hard. Really hard... I remember coming home with a stomach ache from my nerves (Marta, 24 years old).

[Same question]

The first week was horrible... Especially on the first three days of training I had a terrible time. I had such a hard time, I couldn't even eat because of the stomach ache. And I had the feeling that I wouldn't be able to do the job... (Susana, 19 years old).

Stage 3. The beginner who will perfect her craft

Of course, little by little, day by day, and with some exceptions, the cashiers' effort was rewarded by gradual improvement and progressive acquisition of the know-how corresponding to the job. The constant repetition of body movements and mental operations with each customer made us improve and memorize without realizing it. After six to twelve days the new cashiers seemed to feel they had mastered the mechanics of checking out products (see Table 1).

In addition, the repetition of the diverse work situations and procedures, including the less common ones, allowed us to learn how to perform them. However, this takes longer. In my case, after a month I knew most situations and procedures and had the impression of having sufficient mastery to do the job with acceptable quality. However, I did not yet know all the technical procedures, as I learned a new one about the till fifteen days later. In an informal conversation, two veteran cashiers said you needed six months to gain good control of all the procedures.

This learning takes place through the process that Noble and Watkins (2003: 535) call *habituation*, which allows a progressive *sedimentation* (Wacquant, 1995) of specific gestural and mental dispositions to do the job correctly. Bernard (2005) considers that as they learn, cashiers ac-

quire what Leplat (1997) calls *incorporated skills* (“*compétences incorporées*”). These, inspired by Bourdieu’s habitus, are skills learned primarily through practice and experience and related to automatism. I personally noticed that I had acquired or incorporated learning in the form of mental and motor dispositions to perform the following tasks:

- Use the conveyor belt without thinking.
- Find the location of item barcodes quickly and easily.
- Know the products for which it was better to type in the codes than scan them.
- Type in codes memorized from frequent use.
- Automatically look at, greet and smile at each new customer.
- Pass the products over the scanner at the required speed and distance without thinking.
- Respond without thinking to till sounds: *e. g.* stopping if the beep didn’t sound or if I did not hear the printing of the price on the receipt, which meant that the product had not been registered.

My personal experience showed that as you acquire these specific dispositions, you become able to do the work correctly, quickly and easily, simultaneously carrying out the various tasks that are required. There comes a time when, without realizing it, you scan the products almost without looking and without thinking while chatting with the customer or reaching out automatically for the ticket because you have heard that the printing has ended. Thus, the acquisition of the gestural and perceptual dispositions necessary to perform the most mechanical part of the work allows the cashiers to perform it automatically. Paraphrasing Wacquant (2004) when he explains the result of acquiring the boxer’s dispositions, it can be said that acquiring perceptual and motor dispositions allows the cashier to become a kind of “automaton” that adapts almost perfectly to the demands of the routine part of the work⁷. Obviously, it is an intelligent machine that is able to self-regulate and to

think, reflect and make decisions when problems or unforeseen events arise. The stories of the interviewed cashiers also show the importance of these automatisms:

When I’m at the checkout, it’s something routine that I do... [...] There came a time when I started taking it as a routine, and now I bag without thinking about what I’m bagging, because if I have to be thinking, with a long queue... it’s a bit of a drag (Marta, 23 years old).

Checkout work is mechanical. I scan the products mechanically. I don’t think. At first you have to think, but then you get the hang of it and you scan without thinking... (Manu, 28 years old).

When the mechanical part of the job is done automatically, the cashier can focus on customer service: she can chat with customers and improve her attention. Each cashier finds a way to combine the demands of fast charging and good customer service.

Thanks to the tricks and fiddles learned, together with knowledge of the margins left by corporate surveillance and the tolerance of immediate supervisors to the violation of some rules, the work became less demanding because it was easier and less tiring. This, and the mastery acquired, reduced the high levels of tension of the first few days and allowed us to be more relaxed at work.

In addition, cashiers develop, individually and without organization, *hidden resistances* or, in Scott’s terms (1985), “everyday forms of resistance”, that is, acts of resistance that are not publicly declared and are voluntarily concealed. Some of these acts are addressed to the management. For example, the cashiers can slow down the pace of checking out products or not clean the checkout counter on purpose because they are unhappy with the working conditions. They can also show behaviour to customers that is considered incorrect. Typical actions of this type are returning the change in small coins when banknotes are available, not helping to bag, and speeding up or slowing down the pace of checking out to annoy the customer (see Barranco, 2010: 333-397).

⁷ The analogy of the “automaton” is also pointed out by the cashiers of a study by the INRS (1994).

Figure 3. The author checking out.

CONCLUSIONS

In order to determine the dispositions that are acquired in cashier work and the ways in which they are obtained, this article has studied the embodiment of work organization of cashiers in a hypermarket. This has helped alleviate the shortage of empirical studies on the formation and/or transformation of dispositions from the perspective of Bourdieu's analytical framework or the closely related one of Lahire.

The analysis carried out shows that the learning and socialization of new cashiers involves an embodiment of work organization that affects their *bodily aesthetics* and *dispositions*. The cashiers embody work organization in the form of bodily aesthetics when they perform the aesthetic component of their work, which consists in daily adjusting their aesthetics to the institutional rules. This type

of embodiment is evidenced in many other jobs that deal with the public in the service sector (see Witz *et al.* 2003; Wolkowitz, 2006: 86-89).

Two different processes were detected in relation to dispositions. The first process consists of *adapting generic dispositions* acquired from the socializations prior to hiring (school, family, previous work experience, etc.) to the situations of the hypermarket. Specifically, four types of generic dispositions to act are adapted: basic literacy and numeracy skills are used to learn the working rules and protocols and to perform some tasks; body-care skills enable the workers to adapt to the institutional rules; personal interaction management skills are applied in dealing with customers; and the dispositions of obedience, discipline, responsibility and effort enable the workers to behave "appropriately" (Goffman, 1979) or "as one should" (Bourdieu, 1999: 184) by complying with the rules,

being obedient to supervisors, showing interest and making an effort at work.

In all four cases these are simple adaptations consisting of transferring and adapting dispositions acquired in previous experiences of similar situations to the new situations encountered in the hypermarket. Therefore, they only require the cashiers to perform a similar simple reasoning. These are the type of adaptations that Bourdieu (2008: 104) considered to be based on the homology between (past) situations of production of dispositions and (present) mobilizations of them. In short, we find the phenomenon pointed out by Bourdieu (1999: 217-218) and documented by Desmond (2007) in firefighters and by Rabot (2015) in librarians: certain previously constituted dispositions largely conform to the demands of the institution that the workers are joining. In addition, the re-activation of the four aforementioned dispositions by cashiers in the hypermarket is presumed to function as a “memory” that reinforces them.

The second process is one of *habitation* (Noble and Watkins, 2003), through which new, specific dispositions are *sedimented* (Wacquant, 1995) in the cashiers. The constant repetition of body movements and mental operations crystallizes into motor dispositions and the memorization of technical procedures, protocols and barcodes. The incorporation of these dispositions allows the cashiers to carry out the routine part of the work mechanically without even thinking about it, which, in turn, is a necessary condition for carrying out the work as quickly as is required.

The embodiment of the work that has been explained is only possible thanks to the active role of the new cashiers, who make a great effort to incorporate new dispositions. Thus, in a low-skilled and seemingly simple job such as checking out, the acquisition of these dispositions also requires a great and constant effort of attention, correction and repetition until the tasks have been mastered sufficiently, as has been documented for more complex activities such as forest firefighting (Desmond, 2007) or boxing (Wacquant, 1995, 2004).

The new cashiers' lack of mastery during their learning causes many of them to work tensely and nervously, especially on the first few days, leading to fatigue and in some cases other somatic symp-

toms. Similar feelings are common in trainees of many activities, such as boxing Wacquant (2004), but in the case of new cashiers it is also due to the accelerated training system, which puts them to work quickly before they have attained sufficient mastery of the activity, under the pressure of knowing that they have to learn and adapt quickly in order to keep their jobs.

The new cashiers learn the job in a short time thanks to the relatively low complexity of the work and the generic dispositions that the persons hired bring with them. They are largely prepared and qualified for the work before recruitment, as is customary in many low-skilled feminized jobs (Kergoat, 1982).

Finally, fellow workers play a crucial role in the learning of the trade by the new cashiers. First, the experienced cashiers act as on-the-job instructors in the period of formal training and tell the trainees the real way in which the work is carried out, over and above the institutional rules and protocols. Second, mutual help and daily solidarity between fellow workers facilitate and simplify the learning and adaptation to the job.

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