

Tales from Target: An Ethnography of Retail Workers

Abstract

This study examined the workplace of retail workers at a local Target in Chicago. Specifically, I wanted to find out the positive and negative aspects of the workplace and how retail workers reacted to them by working at Target for three months on both sides of the sales floor. As part of this research, I had several unstructured interviews with 38 employees and analyzed documents relevant to my study. Scholarly literature and peers have often noted the negative aspects of working in big box stores. Still, I wanted to explore the possibility that working in a big box store could actually be very enjoyable because I think this topic has not received enough scholarly attention. The study revealed that employees were overworked in three ways: (1) due to being put in high stress situations due to understaffing or management decisions, (2) endured unrealistic labor expectations from demanding superiors and (3) worked much later than scheduled. In reaction employees developed several adaptations, some quite distributing. Another area of tension was upper management constantly withholding important information about store policies. Surprisingly, problems frequently came from verbally abusive customers. Nevertheless, my findings revealed employees regarded their job with much pride. Reasons include the very warm environment among employees, the constant freedom to move around and work at a relaxing pace, and the bonds employees form as they help each other learn the ropes and deal with very difficult customers.