

*ABSTRACT*

PAYNE, JULIANNE CATHERINE. Gendering and Racializing Control: Workplace Surveillance and Resistance at an Electronics Retailer. (Under the direction of Martha Crowley.)

As technological and managerial innovations facilitate data collection, processing and distribution, surveillance in society and particularly in employment contexts continues to expand. Extensive social research has documented employers' monitoring strategies and workers' corresponding resistance techniques, but rarely do scholars investigate variations in the experience of or responses to monitoring. This dissertation explores how gender and race/ethnicity shape surveillance processes using an ethnographic study at a consumer electronics store. I find that workers' gender and racial/ethnic identities fundamentally shape how they engage in and react to organizational monitoring practices. Employers often capitalize on such identities to secure worker consent to surveillance, and ultimately, labor control. I conclude that though workers' actions as members of gender and racial/ethnic groups occasionally provide status, comfort, and dignity in otherwise degrading organizational and macroeconomic contexts – and, occasionally, grounds for resisting exploitation – they likewise help maintain oppressive class, gender, and race relations.

Gendering and Racializing Control: Workplace Surveillance and Resistance  
at an Electronics Retailer

by  
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**DEDICATION**

To the Electromart workers who unwittingly let me into their lives. To Francisco, in particular, who was a very kind person.

**BIOGRAPHY**

Julianne Payne was born on October 15, 1984 in Niagara Falls, New York. She obtained baccalaureate degrees in Sociology and Psychology at Niagara University before moving to Raleigh, North Carolina for graduate school. Julianne completed both her master's thesis and dissertation work in Sociology at North Carolina State University under the advisement of Martha Crowley. Following the completion of her doctorate, Julianne will study public health in Durham, North Carolina at Social and Scientific Systems, Inc.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

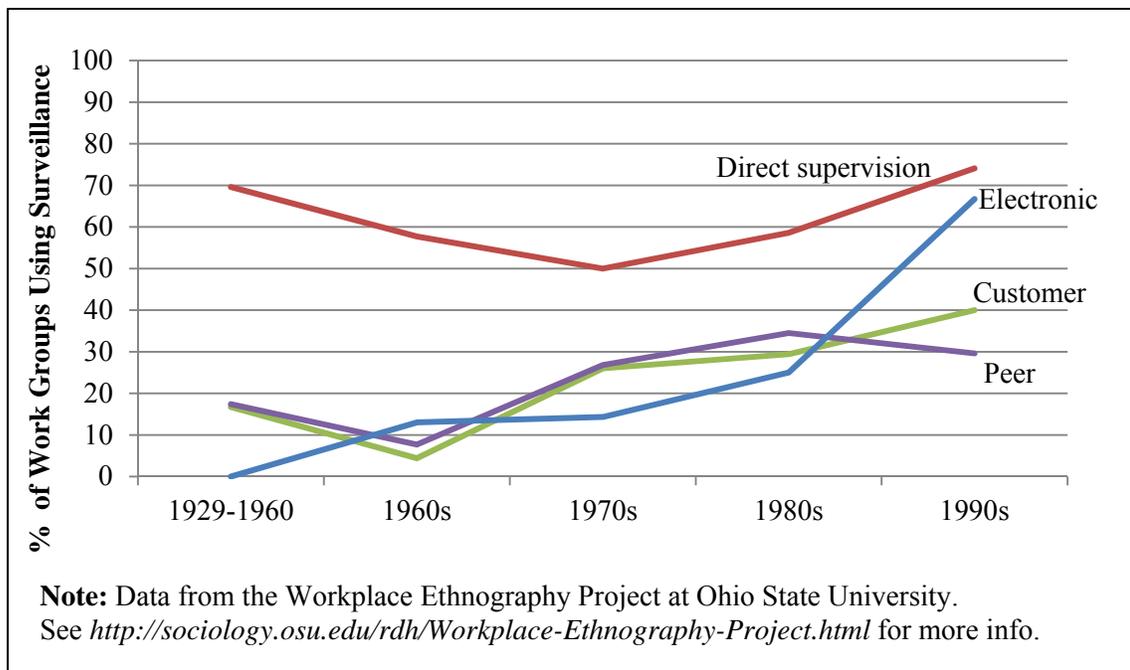
Over fifteen years ago, David Lyon (1994) proclaimed “Precise details of our personal lives are collected, stored, retrieved and processed every day within huge computer databases belonging to big corporations and governmental departments. This is the ‘surveillance society’”(4). Lyon argued that the ascendance of consumerism and computing technologies during modernity facilitates monitoring of greater breadth and intensity than has historically been the case. While the causes and consequences of such monitoring remain complex, surveillance often assuages our collective fears (Monahan 2010), facilitates social control (Staples 2000) and contributes to stratification (Lyon 1994). Powerful persons can use data to politically repress the less powerful and destroy their individual freedoms (Rule 1974). Surveillance potentially undermines our life chances, reputations, and perhaps even our personhood itself (Lyon 1994).

Since the 1960s, workplace surveillance in particular has expanded dramatically, capturing the attention of social researchers. By “surveillance,” I mean the systematic collection of information about others. Workplace surveillance is distinct from other forms of monitoring because it is primarily executed in the context of a capitalist relationship<sup>1</sup>, wherein managers exploit wage workers to create surplus value (Sewell 1996). Surveillance facilitates labor control by exposing individuals who shirk responsibilities or resist management, allowing employers to discipline the non-compliant and/or restructure

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<sup>1</sup> Alternative economic systems such as feudalism or slavery are less dependent on workplace surveillance than capitalism, as political and legal obligations exogenous to the labor process compel laborers to work in non-capitalist contexts (see Burawoy 1979, ch. 2). Surveillance is a particularly compelling part of capitalist workplaces because it facilitates the control of workers.

production to make deviance less likely. Workers' fear of such visibility and retribution may further silence discontent and ensure compliance (Foucault 1977). Current research highlights the myriad tactics managers use to collect data on and thereby control workers, ranging from classic direct supervision, to electronic monitoring and other forms of record keeping, and finally to strategies that enlist coworkers and customers in surveillance. Except for direct supervision, all forms of surveillance have expanded – especially electronic and customer surveillance (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Changes in Workplace Surveillance, 1929-2000**

As macroeconomic changes jeopardize the security of many western firms, employers appear especially apt to surveil employees. Heightened global competition and the declining rate of profit make doing business less lucrative than in the past (Brenner 2001). Managers commonly cope using layoffs and work intensification, maximizing their gains relative to their labor and capital investments (Thompson 2003). Monitoring can help supervisors determine which workers should be kept and let go, reveal where production processes could be streamlined, and identify layoff survivors with an axe to grind.

While the expansion of workplace monitoring has the potential to usher in an era of exceptional exploitation, workers respond to surveillance in ways that allow them to resist control and maintain dignity. Indeed, investigators document reactions to monitoring as diverse as employers' surveillance strategies, problematizing assumptions of worker passivity and powerlessness (Thompson and Ackroyd 1995). Outside the workplace, laborers may collaborate with civil liberties and legal coalitions to define and defend individual privacy. Within organizations, workers evade monitoring, manipulate surveillance data, and reappropriate monitoring processes and technologies to serve their own needs (Marx 2003).

Existing research on workplace surveillance thus reveals a great deal about tactics for establishing worker control and corresponding resistance techniques. Workplace monitoring remains part of a larger global landscape, which politically, economically and culturally supports the legitimacy of surveillance as a strategy to cope with social and financial risks (Monahan 2010). Employers can mobilize new technologies and managerial practices to facilitate monitoring, while workers' own efforts to defend individual freedoms hedge against it.

### *The Study*

Both employers' increasing reliance on surveillance and workers' interest in curbing monitoring appear sensible from a neo-Marxist perspective, as capitalist employment relations compel owners to increase profits through worker exploitation. But strictly class-oriented paradigms for understanding workplace processes can blind us to tremendous variations in workers' employment experiences (Knights and Willmott 2007; Vallas 2007). Scholars studying surveillance in society at-large increasingly call attention to the relationship between monitoring and social inequalities – especially by gender and race/ethnicity – while investigations of workplace surveillance have largely eschewed attention to such variation.

This study challenges the assumption that workers' experiences of and responses to surveillance are singularly driven by their class. Putting differences in monitoring at the foreground of analysis reveals the weaknesses of existing labor process and Foucauldian paradigms dominating sociological understandings of workplace surveillance. I show that gender and racial identities fundamentally shape how workers interpret and react to monitoring regimes, operating independently of, yet connected to processes that maintain class divisions.

Examining variations in workers' experiences of and responses to surveillance potentially improves our understanding of both inequalities and processes of worker exploitation central to more traditional neo-Marxist accounts. The workplace, like other major social institutions, provides a context for the establishment and reproduction of inequalities – by affirming or contesting notions about the capabilities, habits and value of

individuals in different sociodemographic groups. Subjecting certain groups to especially intense scrutiny – and allowing others relative privacy – may reflect or sustain shared notions about what types of people are trustworthy versus untrustworthy, hard-working versus lazy and cooperative versus contentious. Managers' responses to surveillance data can likewise contribute to stratification, as heightened visibility invites greater discipline and/or praise.

Differences in experiences of and responses to workplace surveillance similarly have the potential to influence class-based processes of exploitation and alienation. Workers exposed to group-specific controls may lack solidarity necessary to challenge abusive managerial practices and defend their own privacy. Alternatively, certain segments of workers may develop unique strategies for combatting the subjective and material indignities of surveillance with the potential to improve life for workers more generally.

Ample evidence already suggests that gender and race/ethnicity remain important predictors of whether and how individuals experience paid employment. Work remains extensively segregated by gender and race/ethnicity, across industries and occupations and even within the same job (Maume 1999; Tomaskovic-Devey and Stainback 2007; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2006). Gender and race affect job autonomy and workers' exposure to various control strategies (Crowley 2013; Hossfeld 1990; Petrie and Roman 2004). Research likewise suggests that women and racial/ethnic minorities tend to be more visible than their male and white peers, respectively (Collins 1993; Collins 1997; Kanter 1977).

Gender and race further influence workers' subjective evaluations of and responses to workplace processes. Workers draw on their gender and racial identities when deciding whether to consent to or resist control (Hossfeld 1990; Westwood 1985). The identification

of group-specific obstacles to workplace success – including discrimination and sexual harassment – can encourage women and racial/ethnic minorities to reject managerial initiatives regarded as legitimate by others (Gottfried and Graham 1993; Lamphere 1985; Stanton and Lin 2003). Finally, privileged workers may resist organizational processes with the potential to jeopardize their unearned social advantages (Vallas 2006; Yoder 1991).

Exploring variations in workplace monitoring and workers' responses to surveillance is thus crucial. Keeping an eye on differences not only allows us to address theoretical weaknesses within surveillance studies – especially the assumption of largely similar work experiences across sociodemographic groups – but also contributes to existing literatures on the creation and maintenance of social inequalities. Only by studying differences can we improve our understanding of workplace surveillance, explore new opportunities for empirical investigation into labor processes, and identify ways to make organizations more just.

### *Ethnography*

This dissertation contributes to our understanding of workplace surveillance by examining variations in workers' experiences of and responses to surveillance. I use data culled from a workplace ethnography at “Electromart,” a multinational consumer electronics retailer, to investigate monitoring practices, rhetoric supporting such practices, workers' reactions to surveillance, and how these relate to worker control. By “ethnography,” I mean “a style of social science writing which draws upon the writer's close observation of and involvement with people in a particular social setting and relates the words spoken and the practices

observed or experienced to the overall cultural framework within which they occurred” (Watson 2010: 205-206). Ethnography thus involves not only collecting rich, detailed information about life in an organization – it also requires making sense of that information and communicating findings to others (Van Maanen 2010).

Workplace ethnographies allow social science audiences to learn the practicalities of life in an organization – not a perfect, complete truth of how production unfolds, but an informative account of how people experience employment (Watson 2010). Rather than trying to infer the motives of workers’ behaviors, ethnographers are concerned with crafting nuanced narratives of relational events and allusions to shared values (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995). Via their own employment experiences, workplace ethnographers likewise gain something closer to an “insider’s perspective” on what life is like in a particular social context. Researchers’ own thoughts and feelings can draw attention to important workplace phenomena, thereby enhancing our understanding of work processes (Esterberg 2002).

Ethnographic accounts of organizations provide thorough understandings of behavioral patterns, institutional pressures, and shared values that might be difficult or impossible to glean from surveys or interviews (Esterberg 2002; Watson 2010). The more closely a researcher can approximate experiencing participants’ lives, the more nuanced her or his understandings of a group’s worldviews, feelings, and experiences (Snow, Benford and Anderson 1986). Tope and his colleagues (2005) demonstrate that participant observation exceeds non-participant observation and interviews in generating information about work groups, especially with regards to worker behaviors and attitudes, work processes, group dynamics, and employee-management relations. Experiencing employment alongside those

studied gives participant researchers a strong understanding of local cultures, and also facilitates the development of trust between the researcher and researched (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995; Esterberg 2002; Tope et al. 2005).

Workplace ethnographies have long been an important part of the sociology of work tradition, informing theoretical legacies ranging from classic labor process to newer concerns with worker agency and subjectivity. While studying a single organization may raise questions of generalizability, some of our most revealing insights about work come from rich accounts of life among just a few workers. For instance, Burawoy's (1979) classic study of factory workers allows us to understand why workers consent to degradation of their labor. Kanter's (1977) examination of corporate life reveals how organizational structures create and maintain gender inequalities (see Van Maanen 2010; Watson 2010 for a more complete review).

Ethnography is particularly well-suited for examining worker surveillance and resistance. As Mason (2000) reviews, many researchers contend that over time contemporary monitoring practices have become less invasive than old methods of direct supervision, though more ubiquitous. Computing technologies especially allow managers to gather information on workers' activities in relatively unobtrusive ways (Garson 1988), described by Lyon (1994) as "hazily visible" (219). Though surveillance is a fundamental aspect of contemporary work life, many employees may not be aware of, focused on or reflective regarding its use. Researchers who enter an organization with the specific goal of examining monitoring practices may thus be in a unique position to reflect on the myriad ways managers use surveillance to establish control. Given that workers' responses to monitoring

often draw on local-level knowledge exploiting gaps in the monitoring (see Bain and Taylor 2000; Thompson and Ackroyd 1995), ethnography likewise serves as a useful method for examining subtle forms of resistance. As Tope and his colleagues describe (2005), subversive attitudes and action may be invisible or vague to organizational outsiders, yet nuanced and comprehensible by those embedded in workplace relations.

### *Data*

I worked and collected data at a metropolitan Electromart location in the southeastern United States from October 2009 until October 2010. I was typically in the field between eight and 35 hours per week, with employment especially concentrated during the 2009 Christmas season (as is consistent with retail labor allotments, more generally). I held three different sales positions in the company: in portable electronics, an industry term for products including car audio, GPS navigation, mp3 players, cameras, camcorders, and gaming consoles; in computers; and as a phone sales operator selling products across all store departments. As I explore in chapters five through eight, each job exposed me to unique surveillance experiences and work group dynamics, particularly with regard to gender.

My data include written field notes associated with 124 work shifts and nine hiring or off-site experiences. I collected data covertly, which limited my ability to record events in the store. Instead, I crafted detailed accounts of each work shift following its completion. The bulk of my analysis comes from analytic coding and memoing of these notes. I also draw on publically available company documents, resources accessible to entry-level workers,

industry statistics and external data sources where indicated. Chapter 4 provides more detailed information about my methods and data.

I confirm that workers' gender and race/ethnicity shape how they experience and respond to surveillance. More specifically, my findings suggest that workers contradictorily accept and reject surveillance practices as they conform to culturally-prescribed expectations for their race and especially their gender. More often than not, the organization shapes and is served by such worker behaviors, making gender and race performativity central in employers' processes for manufacturing worker consent. Though workers' enactments provide status and dignity in otherwise degrading organizational and macroeconomic contexts, these enactments likewise sustain oppressive class, gender and race relations.

### *Remaining Chapters*

I begin this dissertation by reviewing theory and research relevant to workplace surveillance, resistance and organizational inequalities. Chapter two provides an in-depth exploration of the workplace surveillance literature, introducing theoretical perspectives central to sociological investigations of monitoring: labor process theory and Foucault's panopticon. I use current empirical evidence to document employers' techniques for surveilling workers, and draw on theory to explain why and how monitoring has changed over time.

Chapter three presents challenges to labor process and Foucauldian accounts for understanding workplace surveillance. First, I review literature suggesting that workers' gender and race/ethnicity affect how and why workplace surveillance takes place – complexities not yet well understood within labor process or Foucauldian paradigms.

Second, I emphasize the importance of agency for understanding how workers respond to monitoring. As employers develop increasingly numerous and sophisticated techniques for collecting data on workers, employees innovate strategies for evading control. Gender and racial/ethnic identities often shape workers' responses to organizational regimes, contributing to group differences in resistance and consent.

Chapter four provides background on the ethnographic project. Specifically, I explain why and how I studied workers at Electromart in particular. I situate my site in several settings: the service sector, retail trade, and the consumer electronics industry. I detail the processes by which I gained access to my site and gathered data, and also provide an overview of how work was organized at Electromart.

Chapter five explores those surveillance strategies and responses to monitoring evidenced at Electromart that appear more or less undifferentiated by worker gender and race/ethnicity. Monitoring generally occurs at Electromart to ensure worker compliance and prevent employee theft. Surveillance begins during the hiring process and extends into formal employment as management uses cultural screening processes and shop floor monitoring to identify consenting workers and weed out those unlikely to comply with company rules. Electromart's distrust of workers creates tension that is partially resolved as workers "other" and control – particularly, racial/ethnic minorities and the poor.

Chapters six and seven provide an in-depth analysis of the relationship between gender and workplace surveillance. Chapter six explores how men in predominantly-male work groups use and respond to surveillance to establish control over women and other men, consistent with dominant expectations of masculinity. Male managers and workers alike

routinely marginalize women as they compete for status and power. Chapter seven serves as an important contrast, revealing that gender-balanced and predominantly-female work groups tend to regard monitoring as a tool they can use to affirm their work group and its members. In mostly-female work groups, especially, workers' engagement with surveillance allows them to demonstrate selflessness compatible with idealized forms of femininity.

Chapter eight places workers' responses to surveillance in the context of an insecure economy. I argue that insecurity puts pressure on managers to deliver profits, surveil workers and manipulate subordinates by stressing workers' economic vulnerability. Men, in particular, were economically dependent on the organization, and struggled to secure opportunities for upward mobility that could help alleviate such dependencies. Men's weak position at Electromart coincided with the dissolution of white men's employment security since World War II, and contributed to a sense of emasculation and loss. I ultimately propose that this context leads men to engage in masculinity-protecting behaviors.

My final chapter concludes by arguing for more attention to the relationship between social inequalities and workplace surveillance. I argue that understanding gender and racial/ethnic variations in workers' experiences of and responses to control reveals a great deal about why labor accepts monitoring and occasionally even embraces it. Consistent with Burawoy's (1979) concept of game playing, organizations use workers' gender and racial/ethnic identities to manufacture consent and silence dissent. Employers can align workers' interests with those of the firm by appealing to their non-work identities and needs. Such practices not only reproduce social inequalities, but also contribute to ongoing class exploitation. Yet workers non-class identities may paradoxically serve as a foundation for

sustained resistance to labor control, providing an avenue for reestablishing dignity and rejecting abusive surveillance regimes.

## **CHAPTER 2: SURVEILLANCE PRACTICES**

Scholarly interest in surveillance grew following the industrial revolution, as the U.S. entered a period of modernity, evidenced by historically-high social anonymity. Prior to the industrial revolution, people established trust on the basis of informal relationships borne of small-scale, community life. Familial, regional and ethnic ties served as an important source of social control (Light 1972). Only individuals perceived as serious threats to the collective's fundamental values or well-being were subject to monitoring (i.e., criminals, the mentally ill; Erikson 1966; Foucault 1977). The modern conceptualization of surveillance – as the systematic collection of data on others – makes little sense in this context; Instead, people used past experiences as the primary foundation for social cohesion.

Contemporary conceptualizations of surveillance first became relevant as industrial capitalism pushed workers into urban contexts divorced from traditional community life. Small-scale production and consumption gave way to large factories and monetary exchange, dramatically expanding the range of individuals' social networks. Formal, bureaucratic institutions began to dominate social interactions, collecting information to mediate exchange between strangers and thereby provide a basis for trust (Dandeker 1990; Nock 1993). Consistent with larger epistemologies associated with this period of modernity, individuals used scientific processes and emerging technologies as tools for amassing data and establishing social control (Staples 2000; Webster and Robins 1993). Surveillance thus allowed individuals to cope with the uncertainty of urban life following the industrial revolution, and tended to be used regardless of sociodemographic characteristics (Foucault 1977).

Surveillance in today's post-modern society continues to expand, as fear about a changing social world – with growing economic complexity, racism, crime, terrorism and anonymity – leads citizens to regard monitoring as necessary and legitimate (Marx 2003; Monahan 2010). Simultaneously, technological advances enable us to implement surveillance of a greater intensity and scale than ever before, pushing us towards ever-greater monitoring (Lyon 2001; Marx 2003; Thompson 2003). Yet contemporary monitoring practices increasingly appear to be more *proactive* than *reactive* – used preemptively to classify individuals into social categories for risk management, rather than to identify persons established as dangerous or untrustworthy (Lyon 1994; Monahan 2010). Racial/ethnic profiling, biological screening of job applicants, and divestment in poor communities exemplify this shift. Surveillance thus continues to diffuse, though its expansion tends to disproportionately benefit state and corporate bureaucracies, and harm persons deemed financial, criminal or cultural threats.

### *Workplace Surveillance*

Workplace surveillance is distinct from monitoring in society at-large because it is overwhelmingly top-down and commonly used for purposes of securing greater worker control (Sewell 1996). While surveillance in non-employment contexts often culminates from efforts to curb abuse, increase coordination and aid consumption (Lyon 1994), the intent behind worker monitoring is often less dynamic and more explicit – to control workers' behavior. Further, while citizens and consumers may volunteer personal information to state or corporate entities in exchange for safety or efficiency, wage

dependency compels workers to release information to their employers (Lyon 2001). Given employers' near monopoly on the means of surveillance (May 1999) and the economic necessity of wage labor, workplace monitoring tends to be more coercive than other forms of contemporary surveillance and warrants special analytic attention.

### *Labor Process Theory*

The theoretical tradition implicitly associated with most sociological investigations of workplace surveillance is labor process theory. According to labor process theory, surveillance, control and ultimately labor degradation result from a larger macroeconomic system of capitalism (Spencer 2000). Capitalism requires ever-increasing profitability, commonly secured by intensifying production and hence worker exploitation. Workers, alienated from the means of production and ownership of the products of their labor, do not cooperate with capitalists. Managers can use insights culled from surveillance to control workers, including by dividing work into increasingly small segments, diminishing skill requirements and hence eroding worker power and heightening the subjective aspects of alienation (Blauner 1964; Braverman 1974). While variation exists across industrial and occupational contexts, evidence spanning industrialized nations largely confirms patterns of degradation predicted by labor process accounts (Tinker 2002). Most relevant to this project, managers adopt monitoring processes to establish increasingly sophisticated and effective techniques for establishing control over workers (Edwards 1979; Sewell and Wilkinson 1992).

*History of Workplace Surveillance*

Marglin (1974) argues that merchants began the nation's first factories between 1790 and 1840 in order to surveil workers more effectively. Prior to factories, most manufacturing took place in workers' homes, as families made what they needed or produced goods on a contractual basis using merchant-supplied materials (commonly known as the "putting-out system"). Yet home-based production allowed workers to determine their own pace, putting restrictions on supply and hence mercantile profits. By centralizing labor in factories, merchants could supervise production and impose discipline on workers in order to increase output (Clawson 1980). Capitalists thus evolved factories to increase their share of wealth at the expense of workers (Marglin 1974).

Though early factories facilitated greater worker monitoring than home-based production, employer control over work effort nonetheless remained limited. Workers possessed detailed trade knowledge about production processes that employers lacked, meaning that even when capitalists could watch workers, they were often unable to assert that some task was taking too long or was perhaps even unnecessary. Consequently, factory owners relied on internal contractors, small cadres of skilled workers, or foremen to organize and monitor production until the 1880s (Clawson 1980; Jacoby 1985). These supervisors enforced work pace consistent with craft tradition or union discretion – signaling their loyalty to fellow workers over their managers.

Managers gradually adopted processes to reveal hidden worker knowledge and thereby establish greater control over the intensity of production. Scientific management, or Taylorism, represents one of the most historically significant innovations in workplace

monitoring. Beginning in the late 1800s, a mechanical engineer named Frederick Winslow Taylor devised a set of techniques to increase production among tradesmen. According to Taylor (1947), skilled workers routinely withhold effort and enforce piece-rate quota restrictions in order to maintain a relaxed work pace consistent with craft quality standards. Employers could not easily detect such shirking, as workers monopolize trade knowledge – their “most valuable possession” (p. 36). Taylor proposed that managers could increase their yield by carefully studying worker actions and subsequently restructuring work processes to be more efficient. Systematic worker monitoring– first, to understand production and establish best practices, and second, to ensure cooperation with standardized procedures – served as the foundation for scientific management.

Fordism, a similar managerial style pioneered by automaker Henry Ford, likewise prioritized surveillance processes. Ford famously increased output and reduced costs through processes of “continuous improvement” – or constant study of and changes to production practices (Williams, Haslam and Williams 1992). He hired foremen to patrol the shop floor, searching for ways to eliminate jobs, find efficiencies and ensure worker compliance with standardized procedures. Workers who failed to follow company instructions or maintain a grueling pace were summarily dismissed. While Taylor (1947) argued that monitoring and associated job restructurings need not come with layoffs, Ford used surveillance to identify opportunities to mechanize manufacturing and aggressively cut labor (Williams, Haslam and Williams 1992).

Both Taylor and Ford realized workers’ stake in avoiding surveillance and incorporated strategies for preventing worker resistance into their managerial regimes. Taylor (1947)

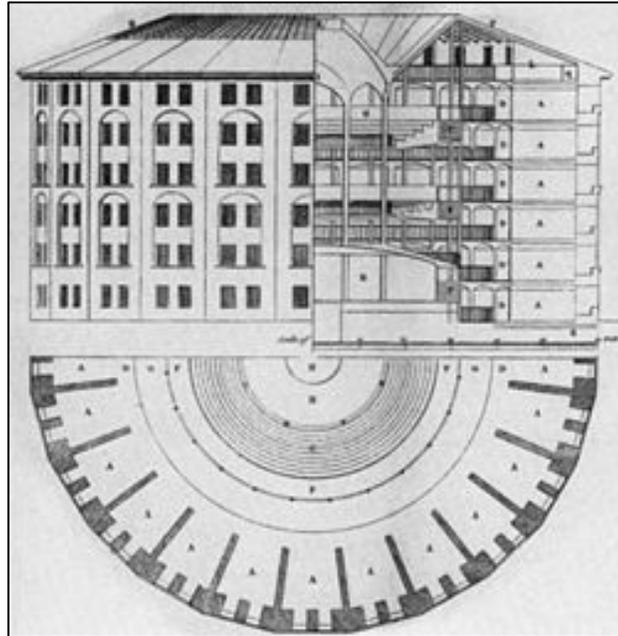
believed that workers would consent to greater scrutiny if they were promised higher wages and received training on how to do their jobs more efficiently. Though he acknowledged that workers traditionally avoided codified records of their behavior – and rightly so, given the potential for abuse by employers – he believed that cooperative industrial relations could assuage workers’ distrust. Ford, on the other hand, appeared to accept that his system of mass production would be boring and alienating, and thus offered premium wages to prevent turnover. Though he quickly fired workers who failed to meet expectations, high wages ensured that replacements could easily be found.

The legacy of Taylor and Ford extended far beyond the factories they personally managed, as many companies adopted Taylorist and Fordist control practices without delivering the high wages, training and feedback opportunities that the pair (though especially Taylor) had promised. Workers could expect monitoring, more careful divisions of labor and intensification, but rarely with empowerment or financial security. Instead, employers expanded their techniques for surveilling workers while avoiding the prohibitive administrative and labor investments associated with traditional Taylorist and Fordist regimes. Surveillance techniques adopted without the benefits promise by Taylor and Ford can generally be described as “hegemonic,” in the sense that managers sought consent through strategies that lead workers to internalize control and accept exploitation out of fear. I elaborate on theoretical and empirical work documenting this shift below.

### *The Panopticon*

Implicit in Taylorist and Fordist philosophies is an understanding that information yields power, a point most famously asserted in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977). This classic text anchors the sociological literature on workplace surveillance. Foucault argues that institutional monitoring practices operate like the panopticon, a prison design initially developed by Jeremy Bentham (1843 [1791]). Bentham's blueprints locate prison guards in a central tower surrounded by a ring of individual cells. One-way backlit windows separating guards from prisoners leave captives uncertain about if and when monitoring occurs (see Figure 2). Because guards have the potential to surveil and subsequently discipline prisoners at will, Foucault expects that captives will come to police their own actions in compliance with prison rules.

Foucault assumes that prisoners are rational actors, sharing an interest in undermining their captors and escaping to freedom. The likelihood that they will engage in deviance is structured by their social context. Traditional prisons rely on the use of brute force and direct confrontation to quell subversion. Yet the limited number of guards for each prisoner renders captive control imperfect – providing windows of unmonitored time between guard observations for prisoners to break the rules without consequence. Foucault regards the power of the panopticon as lying within its capability to mask observation periods, making it irrational for captives to engage in deviance and thereby risk punishment. He assumes that panopticon prisoners, driven by uncertainty and fear, will accordingly internalize prison rules and effectively control themselves.



**Figure 2. Bentham's Panopticon**

Foucault thus specifies that the key to panoptic control is uncertainty. He states:

Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so (Foucault 1977: 201).

An individual enclosed in the prison accurately surmises that observation is always possible, though when it actually happens remains unclear. Facing such uncertainty, a rational captive will consider the likelihood of discipline too great to risk subversion – assuming that punishment will be severe enough to outweigh any anticipated benefits of malfeasance.

Foucault likewise emphasized the fundamental importance of isolation to the functioning of the panopticon:

Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, but never a subject in communication (Foucault 1977: 200).

By separating captives from their peers, guards could *prevent* (rather than *respond to*) collective uprisings that might otherwise jeopardize their monopoly on power.

Individualizing prisoners also facilitates comparisons between them, effectively pitting captives against one another – as in the prisoners dilemma. Risking deviance thus appears especially costly and unlikely in panoptic conditions.

To Foucault, the panopticon's structure itself is an expression of and mechanism for establishing control (see p. 205). It “automatizes and disindividualizes power” (p. 202), obscuring captors' role in making prisoners complicit. Prison wardens do not need to use force or coercion to elicit consent – instead, they effectively “write the rules of the game” and allow captives to reach their own logical conclusions about how to behave. The successful panopticon thus exceeds the traditional prison in its efficiency and effectiveness, by inducing prisoners to internalize their own subjugation.

Foucault views the diffusion of panoptic institutions as dependent on larger historical circumstances promoting social discipline. While ancient societies monitored select citizens to prevent abuses that might otherwise harm the collective, modern surveillance is less about protection and more about widespread control. Monitoring and discipline now enable those in power to better exploit the powerless and make them *more useful* (p. 211) – a political and

economic end. For Foucault, this qualitative change in surveillance practices was inseparable from the growth of industrial capitalism.

### *Contemporary Surveillance*

Social theorists commonly regard contemporary workplace monitoring practices as analogous to Foucault's panopticon. Just as temporal and spatial constraints prevent guards in traditional prisons from establishing consistent control over their captives, workplace supervisors cannot monitor all employees without interruption. This leaves workers with many windows of opportunity for shirking. Further complicating matters, workers rarely receive the autonomy, input and wages that early factories or even Taylorist and Fordist regimes promised – factors that hedge against workplace conflict and resistance (Burawoy 1979; Hodson 2001a). But both the panopticon's structure and new techniques for monitoring – by electronic devices, coworkers and customers – resolve these limitations by increasing workers' visibility as they generate uncertainty about when observation occurs and who is responsible for it, thereby convincing individuals that consent to exploitation is the most rational choice.

### Electronic Surveillance

Explorations of electronic surveillance reveal how managers use innovations in computers, audio/video recording devices and communications to gather information on workers relatively unobtrusively and at a low cost (Button, Mason and Sharrock 2003; Fernie and Metcalf 1997; Garson 1988). Electronic monitoring represents a more efficient form of

surveillance than direct supervision, given that large amounts of data can be collected with little effort (Burris 1998). Occasionally, managers can collect data on workers by integrating monitoring capabilities into technologies already used for production purposes – such as computers or telephones.

Computer systems store information on the frequency and length of work tasks, the quality of worker output, and nonproductive work time (Bain and Taylor 2000; Lankshear et al. 2001). Cameras and audio devices record workers' bodily movements and speech, respectively, and provide evidence of worker adherence to or departure from production routines (Austrin and West 2005). Managers occasionally review electronically culled data to determine worker compliance with company expectations (Bain and Taylor 2000) and pressure those who miss the mark to perform (Ferne and Metcalf 1997).

### Surveillance by Peers

Interest in relatively unobtrusive forms of monitoring, like electronic surveillance, evidences larger shifts in managerial philosophy away from control strategies based on personalized domination and towards those based on hegemony (Edwards 1979). While managers can intensify labor using fear and coercion, research suggests that greater effort gains are possible when workers willingly commit to organizational goals and receive opportunities to exercise some autonomy (Burawoy 1979; Payne, Crowley and Kennedy n.d.). Since the mid-1970s, production teams and worker empowerment programs have surfaced as important strategies for securing worker loyalty and consent.

In order to maintain control over labor while providing greater latitude for individual and group discretion and creativity, managers devolve responsibility for worker monitoring to shop floor production teams. Teams increase coworkers' mutual visibility and investment in group performance (Hodson 2008). Under team management, workers identify weak members and impose peer discipline to maximize work group productivity and thereby escape managerial scrutiny (Ezzamel and Willmott 1998; Graham 1995). Attaching employment, pay and bonuses to output; supporting monitoring using architectural and technological elements; and establishing organizational cultures that emphasize shared accountability allow managers to capitalize on peer surveillance (Casey 1999; Ezzamel and Willmott 1998; Fernie and Metcalf 1997; Graham 1995; Kunda 1992; Sewell and Wilkinson 1992; Van den Broek 2004; Winiecki 2007).

### Surveillance by Customers

As the service industry expands in Western nations, researchers continue to problematize the “service triangle” – or the web of relationships between managers, workers and their customers (Lopez 2010). Though customers often are workers, repelled by coercive forms of direct supervision and bureaucratic control (Gamble 2007), they likewise demand authenticity and quality from the organizations that they patronize (Hochschild 1983). Supervisors may find it difficult to ensure that customer expectations are met, especially when worker-customer interactions unfold in spatially, temporally or socially inaccessible settings (Fuller and Smith 1991; Gamble 2007; Sosteric 1996). Given such limitations, customers can serve as important conduits of information, providing managers with feedback

on worker behavior while pursuing their own desires for quality service (Fuller and Smith 1991).

According to Fuller and Smith (1991), companies use a variety of mechanisms to collect customer feedback on workers. In their study, 80% of employers directly requested information from customers, 86% encouraged customers to voice concerns, and 100% accepted feedback that customers themselves initiated without prompting. Other organizations send undercover corporate “mystery shoppers” to evaluate worker’s efforts (Ogbonna and Harris 2002). Consistent with Hochschild’s (1983) concept of emotional labor, customer surveillants identify and rate workers’ emotional displays, evaluating whether employees have exhibited appropriate cheer and concern. Such feedback can become part of workers’ personnel files, used to determine punishments and raises (Fuller and Smith 1991; Hochschild 1983). Customer monitoring may likewise result in more immediate and symbolic sanctioning; Austrin (1991) describes how bank customers could take a dime from a counter bowl if their teller failed to smile.

### Applying Panoptic Logic

Workplace surveillance procedures can elicit greater worker effort and squelch resistance by causing workers to fear that they are subject to ubiquitous scrutiny. Electronic, peer and customer surveillance operate by generating detailed records of worker activities that can be reviewed by management and used to enforce productivity expectations. Under the threat of managerial review, we would expect workers to actively avoid punishment by displaying their industriousness and commitment – perhaps even imposing self-discipline more

constraining than direct control by management (Barker 1993; Korczynski et al. 2000). Winiecki (2007) describes how workers “shadowbox with data” – or take action to ensure that records of their activities display conformity to organizational expectations. Managers need not examine all possible employee data to encourage such discipline, as their ability to collect, codify and act on information can deter workers from shirking. In some cases, surveillance practices may be so interwoven into the mainstay of production that management’s gaze may seem totalizing and inescapable (Ferne and Metcalf 1997; Garson 1988). Monitoring often yields the greatest results when different monitoring techniques are used in combination (Austrin and West 2005; Ferne and Metcalf 1997; Sallaz 2002; Sewell 1998).

Like the panopticon, electronic, peer and customer surveillance processes muddy organizational hierarchies. In traditional employment settings, workers tend to associate intensification with their embodied bosses. Neo-Taylorist and -Fordist supervisors monitor the production and dole out punishment to those who fail to meet firm expectations. Yet when employers gather data using electronic devices, coworkers or customers, it becomes less apparent what or who drives exploitation (Barker 1993; Grenier 1988; Kraft 1999; Sewell and Wilkinson 1992). Relationships with peers and customers may suffer as workers learn to fear their gaze (Casey 1996; Casey 1999; Townsend 2005), alienated like panopticon captives in divided cells – and hence relatively unlikely to engage in collective action. Workplace surveillance practices may thus mask capitalist control analogous to how the panopticon mystifies captor power.

*Summary*

Theories and empirical studies of workplace surveillance hence point to the use of monitoring to intensify labor and heighten control over workers. Evidence suggests that capitalist managers have largely eschewed the protective purpose of monitoring and developed increasingly complex strategies to scrutinize, evaluate and modify the behavior of their workers. The most sophisticated surveillance techniques obscure capitalist relations and structure the labor process such that workers enforce their own discipline.

### **CHAPTER 3: CHALLENGES TO EXISTING THEORY**

To this point, I have described surveillance processes as though workers experience monitoring in largely uniform ways. Yet substantial empirical and conceptual work has long revealed entrenched patterns of inequality within and across organizations – especially by gender and race/ethnicity – calling such assumptions into question (see Hossfeld 1990; Salzinger 2003; Westwood 1985; Williams 2006). While early work in the labor process tradition largely eschewed analyses of gender and race, newer treatments reject strictly class-based analyses as excessively restrictive, blinding researchers to tremendous variations in worker experiences, subjectivities and behaviors ( but see Adler 2007; Knights and Willmott 2007; Vallas 2007).

An intersectional perspective calls scholarly attention to the relationship between different forms of oppression, helpful for understanding how systems of inequality commonly (but not always) work together to form “matrices of domination” (Collins 2000). Often, processes that create and sustain one form of inequality have consequences for another dimension of stratification (Nash 2008). With regard to surveillance, studying differences in the methods of monitoring can illuminate how workplaces sustain gender and racial hierarchies. Yet an intersectional perspective likewise contributes to labor process theory’s knowledge of worker control by highlighting how gender and racial/ethnic conflicts support and/or undermine exploitation. As Acker (2006) notes, the intersectional approach is generally underutilized for understanding such class processes.

While researchers rarely make variations in workplace surveillance the focus of their studies, they often provide evidence that some workers experience greater scrutiny than

others. Commonly, privileged groups use surveillance to reinforce existing social hierarchies and hence their control over the relatively powerless (Lyon 2001). Though some theoreticians contend that monitoring results in mixed social and political consequences (see especially Sewell and Barker 2006), others increasingly argue that surveillance ultimately helps preserve the status quo (Monahan 2010).

### *Variations in Surveillance*

Variations in workplace monitoring result from a number of interrelated yet distinct factors. The gender and racial/ethnic segregation of workers into different sectors, industries, occupations and jobs remains perhaps the most fundamental reason that monitoring differs across social groups. For instance, women are more likely to work in the service sector than men, resulting in greater exposure to customer surveillance and hence requirements for emotional labor (Hochschild 1983). Essentialist and racist stereotypes suggesting that white women are friendly, non-threatening and accommodating uphold their disproportionate representation in positions that require direct customer contact (Leidner 1991; Taylor and Tyler 2000; Williams 2006). When men *do* hold service sector positions, they tend to work in autonomous jobs “behind the scenes” (Leidner 1993) and/or in supervisory posts (Williams 2006) – largely guarded from customer scrutiny and abuse. Stereotypes of racial/ethnic minorities as incompetent, threatening and/or lacking social skills serve as justification for their exclusion to “backstage” areas of organizations – on cleaning shifts or in stock rooms (Williams 2005; Williams 2006) – which may provide greater autonomy from customers, yet disproportionate exposure to direct supervision or electronic surveillance. Women and

minorities likewise tend to occupy the lowest positions in workplace hierarchies – those most subject to careful evaluation. White men, to contrast, can use their skill and bargaining power – culminating from decades of exclusionary practices – to monopolize positions that offer relatively expansive autonomy as women and workers of color flood low skill jobs subject to abusive supervision and coercive controls (Crowley 2013; Hartmann 1976; Hodson 2001a; Leidner 1991; Petrie and Roman 2004). Often, men dominate occupations responsible for creating and maintaining technologies that employers use to control women and minorities (Cockburn 1988).

Variations in workplace surveillance may likewise appear even when workers occupy similar jobs. As Kanter (1977) classically argues, uncertainty in organizations generates a need for trust. Employers must determine which of their employees will work hard and make decisions that sustain the organization and serve its best interests. Managers and workers generally assume that those like themselves can be trusted – in order to preserve their own identities as worthwhile employees – while those in the outgroup remain suspect. To evaluate the trustworthiness of outgroup members, majority individuals often monitor the efforts of underrepresented groups more closely than those of homophilous peers. Such heightened visibility increases performance pressures, especially since missteps may be falsely attributed to a worker's gender and/or race/ethnicity (see also Floge and Merrill 1986). Though Kanter (1977) believed that numerical minorities would experience greater visibility than those in the majority regardless of the sociodemographic characteristics of each group, subsequent research generally shows that visibility results in greater control of historically disadvantaged groups while culminating in opportunities for the historically privileged (Yoder 1991).

Other organizational attributes and processes may lead employers, coworkers and customers to regard women and minorities as suspect employees. As Acker (1990) classically argues, women do not fit the unspoken worker ideal – that of an unencumbered male. Because men mobilize gender privilege to avoid equitable divisions of household labor and childrearing, employers may expect women to be distracted from their work by family obligations. Though illegal, bosses sometimes administer pregnancy tests to ensure that female applicants and employees will not miss work due to childbirth (Lyon 2001). They also rely on women’s extra-organizational networks – particularly, male relatives and acquaintances – to prevent turnover and curb absenteeism when women become dissatisfied with limited opportunities for advancement or restrictive scheduling policies (Lee 1998). Managers and employees similarly scrutinize minority workers when they perceive them to be affirmative action hires – signaling, in their minds, that workers of color possess less skill and experience than whites. Even when affirmative action played no role in a particular minority’s success, persons of color report that whites monitor them closely, searching for evidence of incompetence (Herring and Collins 1995; St. Jean and Feagin 1998; Wellman and Pinderhughes 1993).

Stereotypes exogenous to the workplace – especially with regard to race – further contribute to organizational beliefs about which workers ought to be trusted. Organizational surveillance practices commonly receive support as a consequence of societal fears of a racialized threat (Monahan 2010). Beliefs about Black men’s dangerousness and criminality, dating back to slavery, suggest that African Americans may endanger workers and established workplace hierarchies (Davis 1997; Harris 1999). Pager (2003) shows that

employers are less willing to consider Black male job applicants than white male applicants – even when white applicants have a criminal record and Blacks do not. Whereas employers inquired about the incarceration records of African American men – suggesting racialized fear and suspicion – they posed no such questions to similarly-qualified whites. Other studies suggest that employers prefer hiring Black women to Black men, as minority women are perceived as more trustworthy than men – in large part, because they appear more physically controllable. Yet race still enacts tolls, as stereotypes of African Americans as lazy and incompetent lead employers and coworkers to monitor the quality of Black women’s work more carefully than that of others (St. Jean and Feagin 1998). Minority workers themselves further doubt the responsibility and reliability of their same-race peers, making them hesitant to vouch for acquaintances seeking employment – especially when friends engage in behaviors stereotypically associated with African Americans, like using drugs, “acting street,” or stealing (Smith 2005).

Beliefs regarding women’s sexuality similarly contribute to the disproportionate surveillance of female workers. This comes across strongly in the sexual harassment literature. For instance, Quinn (2002) describes how men engage in “girl watching” to alleviate boredom and work and build solidarity with other men. Girl watching can affirm men’s social power over women in work contexts that formally designate them as equal, and help men reestablish wounded dignity in otherwise degrading work contexts (Salzinger 2003). Harassment appears especially likely in gender-balanced work groups, which might otherwise indicate that women are making occupational inroads without experiencing segregation and ghettoization (Chamberlain et al. 2008). Because women have historically

combated harassment and other forms of workplace discrimination, employers and peers also monitor and “test” new female employees to ensure that they will accept sexist practices and treatment (Denissen 2009). Avenues for reporting harassment continue to expand, yet women are unwilling to report even extreme forms of objectification and abuse when they believe doing so would effectively undermine their careers and likely change very little in overwhelmingly “macho” contexts (Roth 2006).

### *Worker Responses*

While many theoretical and empirical accounts of new surveillance practices highlight the potential of monitoring techniques to intensify labor and squelch resistance – especially in the context of insecurity, and particularly for minority and female workers – many other studies increasingly reject the panopticon metaphor as simplifying and silencing. Such critiques contend that early surveillance researchers understated the extent to which worker responses to monitoring could undermine surveillance processes (see especially Bain and Taylor 2000; Gabriel 1999; Thompson and Ackroyd 1995). Scholars thus began to view the Foucauldian “electronic sweatshop” and similarly draconian visions as ideal types, not empirical realities (see Attewell 1987; Frenkel et al. 1995).

One of the greatest forces undermining the successful realization of panoptic control is worker resistance. Scholarly interest in worker resistance grew during the 1980s, when overly structural accounts of the workplace – often borne out of the labor process tradition – came under heightened scrutiny (see May 1999). Giddens (1984) and others directed the discipline towards the examination of how micro-level processes, undertaken by social

agents, both reify and contest macro-structural social organization. Within the workplace, this turn led researchers away from encompassing studies of labor degradation (à la Braverman 1974) and toward worker actions.

As Hollander and Einwohner (2004) argue, researchers rarely define resistance or their assumptions about it. I conceptualize resistance as *any action undertaken by workers that intentionally interferes with organizational control practices*, regardless of whether or not their subversion (1) is identified by management as such, or (2) is effective at changing workplace relations. This definition is broad enough to include both traditionally-examined drives for collective action (see Edwards, Collinson and Della Rocca 1995), as well as subtle acts of sabotage typically hidden from management and researchers (see Prasad and Prasad 1998) – both of which may or may not succeed at undercutting control or inspiring further action. My definition is likewise narrow enough to exclude simple expressions of dissatisfaction with management, including disengagement and cynicism, which enable workers to maintain dignity in degrading contexts but ultimately fail to challenge managerial power (Fleming and Sewell 2002).<sup>2</sup>

Labor process theory conceptualizes resistance – including (but certainly not limited to) withholding effort, collective action, sabotage and theft – as a consequence of class conflict and managerial control regimes. As managers developed techniques for intensifying labor, workers have historically responded with corresponding strategies to undermine

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<sup>2</sup> As Fleming and Sewell note, it remains unclear what the relationship is between subtle expressions of worker cynicism and more transformative acts of subversion. It is possible that cynicism may act as a safety valve, precluding behavioral resistance, or that seemingly inconsequential expressions of dissent could serve as a catalyst for more radical action.

control (Edwards 1979). While hegemonic regimes may appear totalizing and inescapable on paper, workers routinely find ways to elide visibility in order to protect their dignity (Hodson 2001a). For instance, workers easily perceive contradictions between managerial rhetoric extolling the advantages of electronic, peer and customer surveillance when these are accompanied by the ongoing use of traditional direct supervision and abuse (Mulholland 2004; Vallas 2006). Legitimacy crises mount when insecurity accompanies hegemonic strategies, underscoring workers' relative powerlessness and eroding their trust, attachment and commitment (Archibald 2009; Fraser 2001; Hodson 2001a; Padavic 2005; Payne, Crowley and Kennedy n.d.; Sennett 1998; Uchitelle 2006). Even managers genuinely interested in pursuing hegemonic monitoring strategies – which can ultimately improve subjective experiences of work – remain constrained by global capitalist processes pushing firms towards labor flexibility and shareholder accountability (Spencer 2000; Thompson 2003).

Workers resist surveillance practices in many different ways. Perhaps the most basic way that workers undermine monitoring is simply by taking action to escape it, in what Marx (2003) refers to as “avoidance” or “blocking” moves. Though a perfect panopticon prison provides few opportunities for escaping the gaze of an unseen observer in the guard tower, workplaces tend to provide comparably many unseen spaces – especially at the “margins” of organizations, including peripheral work locations or on late shifts (Gabriel 1999). For instance, Stanton and Stam (2003) describe how mobile social workers “forgot” to carry, charge or update company cell phones in order to avoid electronic monitoring of their service encounters. Garson (1988) similarly shows how secretaries evaded monitoring of their work

by saving electronic documents under misleading names that managers were unlikely to open, such as “XMASMEMO” (p. 213). Nurses in Timmons’ (2003) study of electronic surveillance successfully avoided or delayed entering electronic records of their activity by playing off management’s belief that they were too busy to do so. Workers may simply abstain from peer monitoring and discipline (Mulholland 2004; Townsend 2005) or avoid wearing nametags to evade customer surveillance.

Rather than eschewing monitoring all together, workers may resist surveillance by manipulating the information it generates. For instance, Bain and Taylor (2000) and Mulholland (2004) describe how electronically-monitored call center workers trick management into believing they are servicing customers by staying on calls when customers have hung up, after an answering machine has picked up, or after the call has been transferred to an automated support system. In doing so, workers artificially improve their productivity statistics while also securing time for informal breaks or to leave work early (Townsend 2005). Winiacki (2007) describes how other call center workers used their knowledge of computerized call queuing to inflate metrics representing how often they were available to take calls – giving managers a misleading portrait of worker consent. Workers may also manipulate data by intentionally entering other workers’ credentials into electronic monitoring systems (Marx 2003), or passing off coworkers’ products as their own (Burawoy 1979).

Workers likewise take collective action to interfere with, undermine or destroy surveillance processes. Prasad and Prasad (2000) describe how workers in an HMO intentionally left open beverage containers next to new computers or cleaned machines with

excessively abrasive chemicals to destroy newly-installed surveillance technology. In addition to ruining expensive computers, workers in their study played dumb when management asked which of their peers was responsible for the damage. Mulholland (2004) similarly shows how peer monitoring processes failed in a call center after workers who felt shortchanged by unfulfilled promises for higher wages protected peers who lied to management about their sales totals – because cheating seemed like vigilante justice (see also Ezzamel and Willmott 1998; Graham 1995; McKinlay and Taylor 1996). Finally, workers and sometimes customers work together to undermine control resulting from customer surveillance. Workers may host “smile strikes” (Fuller and Smith 1991) or reserve quality service for familiar patrons who tip well (Sallaz 2002; Sosteric 1996).

Worker responses to monitoring occasionally appear so complex that it makes little sense to consider their actions as strictly resistant or complaint. As Edwards, Collinson and Della Rocca (1995) argue, “Oppositional practices are likely to be characterized by overlapping and mutually embedded practices of consent, devotion and resistance” (p. 294). Worker/management relations may likewise shift over time, more appropriately characterized as amicable at some points and resistant at others (Iedema, Rhodes and Scheeres 2006). Workers can both accept workplace arrangements in some ways and challenge them in others, thus cooperating and subverting at once.

For instance, workers often co-opt monitoring practices and/or rhetoric supporting surveillance to serve their own ends. On one hand, this signals consent – workers buy into organizational practices and values. On the other, workers use managerial understandings to undermine employer control. For instance, electronics intended for employee surveillance

may be mobilized to expose the abuses and hypocrisies of management (referred to as “sousveillance,” see Mann, Nolan and Wellman 2003). Workers may likewise use electronic records to deflect false allegations of theft or poor service (Austrin and West 2005; Lankshear et al. 2001). Teams engineered to increase peer surveillance and discipline can paradoxically develop cultures celebrating or even demanding resistance (Button, Mason and Sharrock 2003; Graham 1995). Finally, workers can draw on company expectations for quality customer service to demand greater investments in staff and resources (Knights and McCabe 1998).

Workers can alternatively interfere with surveillance procedures in order to fulfill their job responsibilities more effectively or efficiently. While their subversion of surveillance seems indicative of resistance, their ultimate goal of working better or harder suggests consent. For example, Button, Mason and Sharrock (2003) show how printers undermined electronic monitoring of work tasks after determining that new electronic monitoring requirements interfered with informal queuing procedures that had allowed workers to finish jobs more quickly. Though printers undermined surveillance procedures, they did so in order to better serve their customers. Similarly, Brown and Korczynski (2010) and Timmons (2003) show how service workers resist electronic monitoring systems so that they can spend more time delivering high quality, personalized care to their clients. Professionals often internalize their own standards of care, which may or may not be compatible with or measured by surveillance tools.

*Variations in Worker Responses*

As research on resistance demonstrates, workers' thoughts and feelings about employers, organizational practices, labor markets, managers, coworkers and customers all help shape how they will respond to surveillance. Burawoy (1979) was among the first in the labor process tradition to demonstrate that researchers could gain new insights about resistance and consent by paying attention to such matters, broadly conceptualized as "worker subjectivity." Subsequent work – particularly from the postmodern perspective – built on Burawoy's foundation by revealing the centrality of gender and race/ethnicity to subjectivity (see Salzinger 2003 especially). Given that individuals' gender and racial identities tend to have more salience than class (Hechter 1987), the key to gaining a more complex understanding of worker responses to surveillance may lie in investigating their role in shop floor dynamics. Though research on gendered and racialized responses to surveillance in particular remains limited, a more comprehensive body of literature explores whether and how variations in control exist by gender and race/ethnicity.

Researchers rarely contend that women or workers of color resist more or less often than men and whites, respectively. Hodson (2001a; 2004), in particular, finds few variations in the amount of resistance or consent by gender or race/ethnicity – despite tremendous variations in workers' employment experiences across sociodemographic groups. Loscocco (1990) similarly argues that when men and women share common shop floor experiences, their responses to control appear overwhelmingly similar. While some studies suggest that women and workers of color may be less apt to collectively organize than others, differences in union participation rates often result from a legacy of union sexism and racism – not

women's or minorities' disinterest (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Geraldine Healy, Bradley and Mukherjer 2004).

More extensive evidence demonstrates that women and minorities consent and resist as often as men and whites, respectively, but the type and motivations of their response to control may differ; as Hossfeld (1990) states, "class struggle can and does take gender- and race- specific forms (149)." On a fundamental level, since work is often segregated by gender and race/ethnicity and workers engage in different resistance strategies depending on the type of monitoring they experience (Edwards 1979; Payne 2008), we would expect group differences in behavior. For instance, women are more likely to work in the service sector than men, thereby exposing them to greater customer scrutiny. Workers tend to resist customer monitoring and control using techniques that reduce customers' ability to demand quality service – like withholding enthusiasm or withdrawal (Payne 2008; Sosteric 1996).

Yet group variations in responses to worker control may also result from workers' active engagement in gendered and racialized behaviors, commonly explored by researchers in the "doing difference" theoretical tradition (see Fenstermaker and West 2002). According to this approach, individuals share socially created and maintained notions of behavior appropriate for persons in different sociodemographic groups, and draw on these shared expectations when making decisions about how to act or respond to the actions of others. With regards to gender, western nations uphold a cultural ideal for expressing manhood by controlling others, using aggression, violence, homophobia and misogyny – collectively termed "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 1987). Women, on the other hand, ought to be submissive, passive, and self-sacrificing, embodying Connell's concept of "emphasized

femininity.” In relation to race, societal expectations of persons of color include incompetence, laziness and untrustworthiness, while those for whites are the opposite (Fenstermaker and West 2002).

Consistent with the “doing difference” approach, dissimilarities in resistance across sociodemographic groups often result from workers’ manipulation of beliefs regarding how women and minorities ought to act. Westwood (1985) shows how women in factory work planned elaborate wedding and baby showers for their coworkers to escape workplace responsibilities. By emphasizing the importance of family rituals, consistent with expectations of women, workers evaded production and undermined managerial control. Hossfeld (1990) likewise illustrates how factory workers used employers’ prejudices about women of color to subvert control. Women in her study routinely secured informal breaks by appealing to their “hormones” and avoided physically demanding labor by feigning female weakness. Foreign workers played off of employers’ stereotypes of Mexicans as dumb or unable to speak English when managers gave unappealing instructions, and secured preferred shifts by claiming an obligation to participate in ethnic or religious rituals that did not, in fact, exist. Workers’ success using gender and racial/ethnic logics to undermine control was structured, in part, by management’s use of similar gender and racial/ethnic beliefs to justify the workers’ exploitation. Social expectations of various social groups may thus serve as a resource for resisting control.

Other studies reveal that workers’ identities as women and/or persons of color can facilitate resistance when organizational control strategies appear to erect discriminatory obstacles. For example, workplace ethnographies commonly show how caregiving

expectations motivate women to resist worker control. Gottfried and Graham (1993) describe how women working in a Japanese auto plant protested management's policy of mandatory overtime and shift rotation because unusual and long work hours interfered with their roles as primary caregivers. Male workers, on the other hand, welcomed the opportunity for extra pay – presumably because they could rely on their partners to accept the inconvenience of new schedules. Lamphere (1985) similarly describes how women built solidarity necessary for unions and wildcat strikes by appealing to coworkers as wives and mothers – roles they shared, despite differences in age, race/ethnicity and class.

Gendered resistance similarly results from organizational practices perceived as infringing upon women's corporeal autonomy. Tibbals' (2007) examination of gender displays in waitressing shows how women's interest in conforming to traditional beauty rituals led them to resist bureaucracy. Tibbals found that beauty rituals allowed waitresses to construct a gendered self at work, which helped them secure tips from customers. When company policies at one site prohibited certain cosmetic applications, hairstyles or accessories, waitresses resisted class control using gender consent – finding innovative strategies for feminizing their appearance. In Fleming's (2007) study of Sunray, a call center with a highly-sexualized corporate culture, workers dismissed management's strategies for establishing hegemonic control via empowerment rhetoric as disingenuous by noting how the organization encouraged superficial sexual relationships or displays. Peers participating in the sexual culture were labeled as “sluts” and “fags,” both for violating gender and sexual norms and for being duped into accepting the company's practices.

Just as gender identities motivate workers to resist control, racial expectations and beliefs structure how workers of color respond to managerial strategies (Hodson 2001a). Stanton and Lin (2003) find that Black professionals fear that employers using electronic surveillance will be more likely to racially discriminate than those not using surveillance. Minorities report that heightened workplace visibility rarely works to their benefit; instead, their failures are attributed to their race, and their successes result in surprise and declarations of individual exceptionalism (Fenstermaker and West 2002; St. Jean and Feagin 1998; Wellman and Pinderhughes 1993). Stanton and Lin (2003) contend that Black workers' wariness of monitoring reduces the attractiveness of employers who use surveillance, especially if employers have not already demonstrated a commitment to racial equality. Their study raises questions about employers' ability to retain minority workers when new monitoring procedures become implemented.

Gendered and racialized subjectivities may alternatively curb resistance to control and facilitate the manufacture of consent. For instance, women may accept surveillance practices as a consequence of their fear of harassment by men – whether bosses, coworkers or customers. Whitty (2004) finds that women express greater support for electronic monitoring than men because they are more concerned about coworkers' consumption and distribution of explicit or harassing web content. Other studies show that women of color accept exploitation and abuse when resistance would undermine their construction of feminine selves. Hossfeld (1990) describes how Chinese women refused to complain about deleterious working conditions or join a union because their white male supervisor claimed female union members "are a bunch of tough, big-mouthed dykes" (p. 161). The women's desire to present

themselves as attractive by white beauty standards, along with their interest in forming heterosexual relationships with more powerful supervisors, abetted their consent. Salzinger's (2003) study of maquiladora workers in the "Panoptimex" factory likewise shows how exclusively male supervisors surveilled and sexualized female employees for their personal pleasure. Women actively complied with traditional beauty standards in order to be more appealing, in exchange for the "repressive satisfaction" of presenting an acceptably attractive feminine display (Bartky 1990), as well as the circumscribed workplace privileges they enjoyed as the "boss' pet." Larger sexist and misogynist practices can thus compliment employers' control tactics.

White men also resist managerial control in group-specific ways. Commonly, their actions defend unearned privileges and undermine equalizing workplace regimes. For example, Vallas (2003) describes how peer monitoring failed in the context of a paper mill as a result of status differences among workers. Men overrode team plans to rotate job tasks in order to continue monopolizing high status jobs for themselves. Female coworkers tried in vain to cajole men into task rotation and teamwork with little success. Leidner (1993) similarly documents how men refused to work at cash registers in a fast food restaurant by arguing that women's congenial temperaments make them more suitable for customer surveillance and abuse.

Gender and race identities may alternatively contribute to consent among men and whites. Yancey Martin (2001) finds that men conflate their enactment of workplace masculinity – including engagement in competition, exploitation of social networks for one's personal benefit, and mentoring other men – with "doing work." Such conflation allows men

to form coherent identities, while also justifying their monopolization of workplace opportunities; if enacting masculinity is “doing work,” then feminine displays must suggest an unwillingness to work. Acceptance of monitoring strategies, in particular, likewise stems from white workers’ defense of racial privileges. Stereotypes about workers of color as threatening and untrustworthy underlie whites’ support for workplace and societal surveillance (Monahan 2010). Scapegoating minorities as the cause of social and organizational ills helps alleviate scrutiny of whites – even if monitoring procedures occasionally increase the visibility of workers at-large.

### *Summary*

In this chapter, I presented an important challenge to dominant neo-Marxist and Foucauldian approaches for understanding workplace surveillance: not all workers experience monitoring identically. Gender and race/ethnicity determine not only which industries, occupations and jobs workers occupy – and hence their exposure to different forms of surveillance – but also how managers and peers treat workers. These different experiences with monitoring sometimes correspond to group-specific responses to surveillance.

## **CHAPTER 4: SETTING**

As the preceding chapters demonstrate, employers monitor workers in a myriad of ways, and some groups of workers – particularly women and persons of color – may be subject to unique forms of scrutiny. These experiences cannot be understood in any straightforward fashion using neo-Marxist and Foucauldian perspectives on surveillance, particularly in light of research documenting worker agency.

The evidence documenting variations in workers' experiences of and responses to surveillance is heretofore too disjointed and underdeveloped to serve as a basis for theoretical refinement. Often, existing findings appear in studies only marginally integrated in the sociology of work tradition – lacking extended consideration of what variations mean for the labor process more generally. Alternatively, researchers in mainstream organizational studies identify differences in surveillance or resistance in a fleeting fashion – fundamentally concerned with other issues, such as the organization of production, technology or workplace relations. While informative, research in these camps is not well-equipped to spur new explanations and predictions about monitoring.

In light of literature suggesting that workers may experience and respond to surveillance in different ways, I initiated a workplace ethnography focusing on differences and what they mean for investigations of the labor process and worker control more generally. Specifically, I wondered:

- Do gender and/or race/ethnicity shape how and why workers experience surveillance?

If so, in what ways?

- Do gender and/or race/ethnicity shape how and why workers respond to surveillance?  
If so, in what ways?
- Should variations in workers' experiences of and/or responses to surveillance exist, what contextual factors structure these differences?

To answer these questions, I chose a site where I thought surveillance might be especially pervasive, as social scientists who select research sites with exaggerated characteristics can more easily identify and explore patterns of interaction that likely occur more subtly elsewhere (Williams 1991). My previous readings of the literature guided me towards organizations with direct supervision, electronic surveillance, peer monitoring and surveillance by customers. The big-box consumer electronics store, Electromart, presented an ideal setting for the reasons I outline below. Essentially, this chapter provides the context for my study.

### *Service Sector*

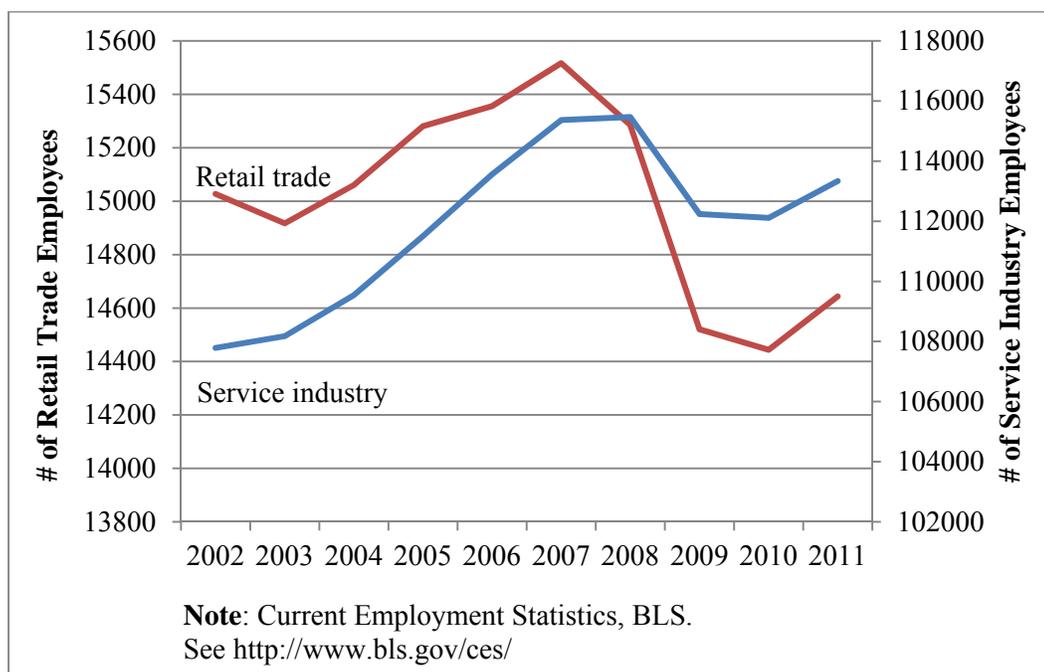
Given the emergence of literature emphasizing the importance of customers to surveillance and worker control more generally (e.g., Fuller and Smith 1991; Gamble 2007; Sallaz 2002), the service sector – or all non-state industries excluding those involved in goods production – is appropriate for an investigation of variations in workplace monitoring. A non-service site would not have allowed me to study monitoring in all its forms and complexity. Customers' role in the workplace can be contradictory; sometimes, customers augment employer power by acting as the eyes and ears of management (e.g., Hochschild 1983). Other times,

customers and workers may unite in their opposition to surveillance (e.g., Sosteric 1996; Villarreal 2010). Managers and workers alternatively can mutually gain by controlling the behavior of customers (e.g., Johnston and Sandberg 2008). Finally, customers may represent some independent power not yet explored. Each possibility suggests that binary understandings of workplace relations inadequately represent lived realities.

Moreover, the service sector is growing. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Sommers and Franklin 2012), the service industry has expanded and will continue to do so into the next decade. Sociological interest in the service sector likewise increases, as evidenced by two special issues in top journal *Work and Occupations* and a surge in published research focusing on service settings (see Lopez 2010; McKammon and Griffin 2000). Given that more and more workers build their careers in the service sector, social scientists must continue to develop and test theories that explore its dynamics.

### *Retail Trade*

Within the service sector, over 14 million workers are employed in retail trade. In 2011, retail sales and cashiers comprised the top two occupations with highest U.S. employment, together representing 6% of the nation's total workforce (BLS 2012). As Figure 3 shows, aside from the recession, both the service industry and retail trade have expanded over time. BLS projections suggest that retail trade will continue to be one of the fastest-growing detailed industries of the next decade. The size and expansion of retail trade warrants its continued investigation.

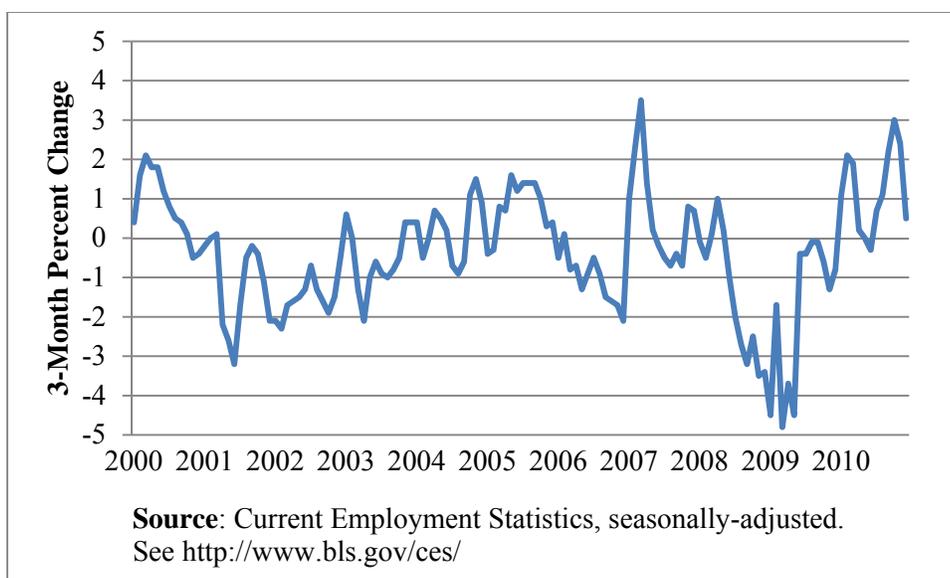


**Figure 3. Employment (in Thousands), 2002-2012**

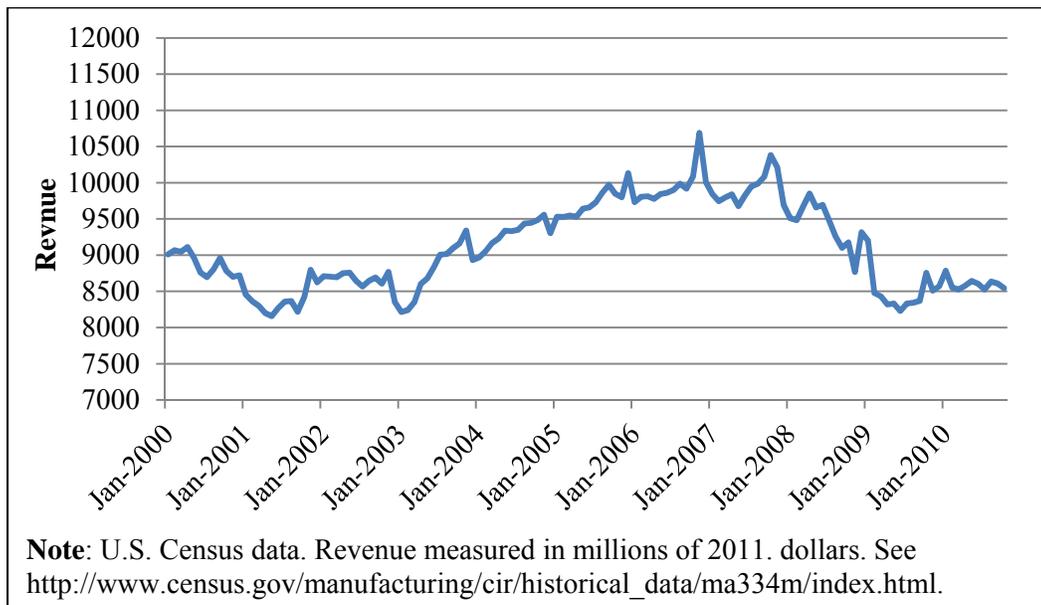
In addition to my theoretical and empirical motives for conducting research in the retail sector, practical realities pushed me towards a retail site. I had past experience working at a big box store, which I assumed would make me a more attractive job candidate to potential employers. I began my fieldwork in early autumn, when retailers hire en masse to prepare for the busy holiday shopping season. Finally, my previous experience in retail led me to believe that I could easily master job tasks and focus my mental attention on collecting data – though as I later suggest, working at Electromart was far more challenging than I anticipated.

### *Consumer Electronics*

Employment in consumer electronics stores has fluctuated more than employment in retail trade more generally (see Figure 4). The 2008 recession generated a great deal of instability at the same time that internet-based electronics retailers were picking up steam. Despite such competition, excluding the recession, the revenue of consumer electronics steadily increased over in the mid-2000s – driven by the widespread consumption of devices such as mobile computers, tablets, and cell phones (see Figure 5).



**Figure 4. Percent Change in Electronics & Appliance Stores Employment, 2000-2012**



**Figure 5. Revenue of the Consumer Electronics Industry, 2000-2011**

Consumer electronics provides an ideal retail context for investigating surveillance for many reasons. First, electronics retailers are aware of the newest electronic monitoring devices, given that they buy and sell audio, video and communication technologies. Secondly, an industry trade group, the Consumer Electronics Association, collects and distributes information to its members on markets, products, and business strategies (see [www.ce.org](http://www.ce.org)). Organizations within the industry thus network with others, heightening specific firms' awareness of managerial innovations, especially surveillance by customers. Finally, as I have already argued, the industry is profitable and organized enough to successfully implement surveillance technologies and complex business practices.

*Research Site*

“Electromart,” a global electronics retailer, stands out from many of its competitors in the consumer electronics industry. It remains one of the few multinational corporations in its field, and is considered to be an industry leader by those within and outside the organization (as the company training videos and business press later revealed to me). During my time at the company, Electromart was considered to be a model for success. Save the global economic recession, the value of company stock had been increasing since the 1980s. While competitors were being bought out or going under, Electromart continued to expand into global markets and develop new, profitable partnerships and service offerings.<sup>3</sup>

Electromart’s business strategy is to deliver a customer-centric experience by focusing on shoppers’ individual needs. Practically, this means that the company trains workers to identify how and why customers want new technologies, and ways to connect different products so that shoppers leave the store ready to easily incorporate purchases into their everyday lives. Electromart guides its employees to offer services and products that will enhance customers’ experience with technology, protect their investments, integrate new items with those they already have, and find associated content (e.g., music, video, software). The company takes pride in their highly-individualized sales solutions, based on customer needs and *not* commission-driven or one-size-fits-all recommendations. Local and corporate managers routinely assert that this specialized customer experience sets Electromart apart from its competitors.

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<sup>3</sup> Since I left the company, Electromart’s success has diminished.

Workers must not only be responsive to customers – they must also be exceptionally knowledgeable about sales offerings, and deliver service in an upbeat fashion. Electromart’s expectations are perhaps best summarized in its stated goal to “have fun while being the best.” Company materials and even everyday rhetoric stress that Electromart’s employees are the backbone of the company. Without an informed, skilled sales staff, the company could not offer personalized service to each shopper. Yet workers must likewise relate to customers, offering easy-to-understand explanations and advice.

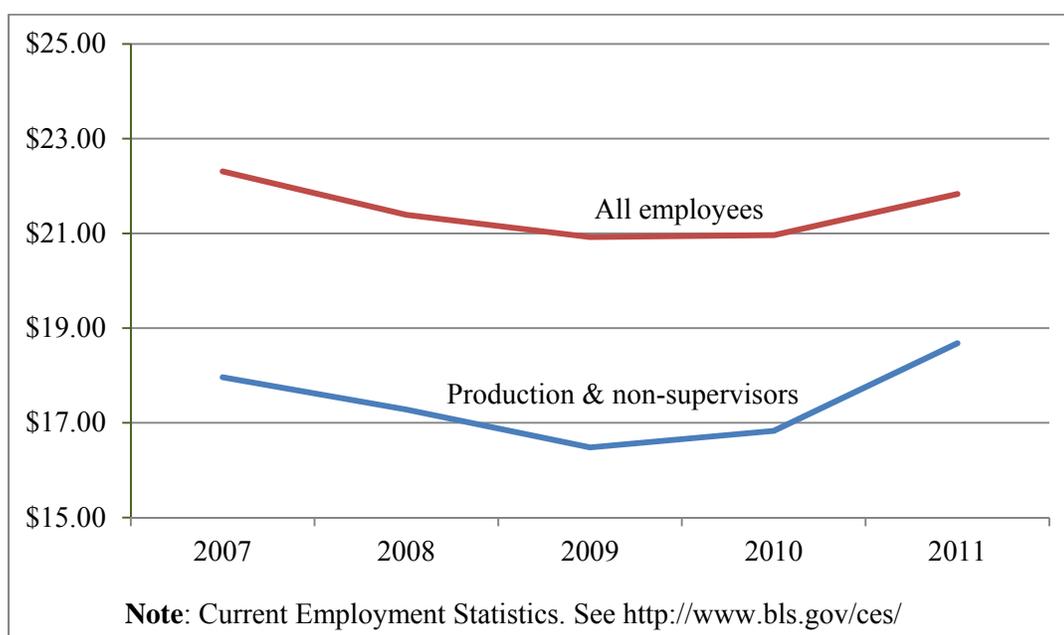
### *Gaining Access*

I worked and covertly collected data at Electromart from September 2009 until October 2010. My interaction with the company began when I submitted an electronic application to an Electromart location in the metropolitan U.S. Southeast during late September of 2009 – just before the busy holiday season, when retailers seek out temporary staff. After not hearing back from the company for several weeks, I applied to a second Electromart location. Within two days – on October 7<sup>th</sup> – this location’s hiring coordinator called me to set up my first face-to-face interview.

During my first interview, a manager asked me about my work history, reasons for applying to Electromart, and experience working with and selling to others. My second job interview contained questions pertaining to workplace relationships, recognition, and theft. Electromart hired me after I agreed to comply with five company expectations, which my interviewer described as “deal breakers”: to help customers, to remain “zoned” in high-traffic store locations, to participate in work teams, to have fun while completing responsibilities,

and to consent to a drug test. I would be selling “portable electronics,” an industry term referring to cameras, MP3 players, car audio, GPS devices, and gaming consoles.

Management offered a starting wage of \$8.50, which is considerably lower than the national average for electronics and appliance store employees, but similar to what other workers at my site would later tell me they earned (see Figure 6).



**Figure 6. Average Hourly Earnings of Electronics & Appliance Store Employees**

Following my job interviews, I attended two orientation sessions on Electomart’s values and policies. A charismatic store manager led both sessions. Each stressed the importance of building customer trust, having fun while excelling, and Electomart’s punitive stance on theft.

My first day of sales followed just four days after the second orientation session – on November 8<sup>th</sup>. I began formal on-the-job training on November 11<sup>th</sup>, and remained as a seasonal employee in portable electronics until January 2010. Following the holidays, my supervisor offered me permanent, part-time employment in the computers department – where I would be the only woman salesperson. I ended my project in October 2010 as a phone sales operator, transferred out of computers in early July for scheduling reasons.

### *Data*

My data for this project are primarily written field notes focusing on company practices, work relations, employee behaviors, expressions of firm culture, customer interactions and workers' stated or suggested perspectives. In the early stages of my project, I tried to record as much of my shift's activity as possible – unsure of what content would eventually help me address my research questions. After I formed initial insights regarding how monitoring operated at my site, my notes focused on narrow topics of interest in greater detail. Although I occasionally jotted or texted ideas and quotes during work hours, I wrote the bulk of my field notes following each shift or work-related event (e.g., orientations, store meetings, major social events). The process of remembering and writing was mentally, physically and emotionally exhausting, especially during the busy holiday months, when I balanced teaching, classes, research and writing with my social life. I suspect that my early notes might have been richer under less stressful circumstances.

In the chapters that follow, I quote directly from my field notes to provide evidence of surveillance processes and how workers experienced monitoring at Electromart. The notes

include direct quotes when I could remember the exact language that research participants used. When I could not recall exact quotes, I describe the scene in as much detail as possible. Occasionally, I draw on situational cues to infer what my participants may have been thinking or feeling. I have tried to highlight differences between exact language, observations and inferences in the subsequent pages.

I attempted to gather data in a very unobtrusive manner. I did not prompt participants to tell me about their experiences of or responses to surveillance, but instead chose to watch processes unfold on the shop floor. Should individual workers volunteer their thoughts about monitoring, I might ask a follow-up question to clarify their perspective – though always within the bounds of what I considered to be normal social interaction. These data thus represent only those processes and interactions initiated by workers and observable by me.

I elected to collect data covertly primarily to (1) protect those who subverted company surveillance, and (2) enhance validity. Workplace ethnographers commonly gain entrée to an organization by negotiating with management, often promising to provide a report of findings in exchange for institutional access. Yet distributing information on worker subversion – especially secretive acts that violate company policy and/or the law (e.g., machine sabotage) – effectively “rats out” those undertaking resistance, violating professional ethical standards. Further, social scientists commonly engender worker suspicion, due to their association with management (Edwards, Collinson and Della Rocca 1995). Even researchers who attempt to demonstrate their political allegiances to workers find it difficult to gain their trust and thus valid data (Milkman 1997). Many workers appear guarded when describing controversial behaviors, including theft and work avoidance, but

appear more open as actions unfold spontaneously (Tope et al. 2005). By positioning myself alongside workers, I thus built rapport and became privy to subtle forms of subversion typically hidden, though politically and theoretically important (Fleming and Sewell 2002; Hollander and Einwohner 2004; Prasad and Prasad 1998).

Deceiving participants has many drawbacks. Perhaps the most serious of these are ethical, as deception violates federal and professional codes of conduct (Allen 1995). While social scientists cannot complete some research studies overtly – especially those that challenge established power relations – deceiving participants infringes upon their individual autonomy and creates morally ambiguous situations (Esterberg 2002). I personally experienced extreme emotional turmoil as I became close to my coworkers and had to omit details about my research that I would have shared under different circumstances. I felt fractured, as though my coworkers could never truly know me, nor I them, as a consequence of my deception.

Further, my secrecy constrained the data I could collect. My accounts of workplace relations are limited to what was observable to me “on the shop floor.” I cannot know for sure how workers would describe their thoughts and feelings about surveillance and resistance, as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) required that I never ask my participants direct questions for research purposes (though workers often offered their opinions without provocation). My relative ignorance regarding “backstage” labor processes likewise results from my inability to observe workers in spatially and temporally inaccessible locations. Finally, I would have a better understanding of the organization, managerial motives and constraints if I were able to interview those at the top of the organization. Revealing my

research intentions would likely have generated worker discomfort and resulted in a misleading portrait of workplace processes, however, my decision to collect data covertly is associated with many shortcomings.

Beyond the choices that I actively made about what data to collect and how to do so, my personal characteristics undoubtedly influenced the processes I witnessed and the observations that I made. My white privilege allowed me to escape racialized scrutiny that workers from other racial and ethnic groups may have experienced, while my feminist ideologies sensitized me to issues of gender. I may not have been included in conversations that revealed racial/ethnic oppression, though my petite female frame likely heightened my awareness of ways that men marginalized, ridiculed and acted condescendingly towards women. I cannot say with certainty that researchers with characteristics different from my own would have reached the same conclusions that I did.

As I worked shifts at Electromart and wrote lengthy field notes, I began preliminary data analysis in the form of (1) analytic memos on themes that seemed relevant to surveillance and resistance, and (2) spontaneous insights embedded directly within my field notes. I simultaneously continued my graduate training and reviewed the sociology of work literature in preparation for a comprehensive exam. My notes thus represent insights borne of field immersion and intellectual engagement with existing research and theory. Early bits of interpretation, coupled with more extensive coding and subsequent analytic memoing, serve as the foundation for my larger analysis (see Charmaz 2009; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995; Esterberg 2002).

I exited the field after about one year, or 124 shifts – when I stopped gaining new insights, or as “saturation” took place (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Determining saturation is often easier said than done, as each day of data collection represents a new opportunity to experience a telling situation or gain an interesting insight. Yet my employment in three very different positions helped me identify important variations in surveillance and resistance, shedding tremendous light on the processes I intended to explore. When I felt confident that I could speak informatively about differences in monitoring and how workers respond to it, I left my site, still without revealing my researcher role. My resignation was not perceived as unusual by management or my peers, given that worker turnover is typically quite high, particularly among students.

#### *Company Organization and Attributes*

Electromart divides its sales floor into departments comprised of similar product types (see Figure 7). Workers tend to share basic knowledge about several departments, yet receive formal training in only one. This division of labor distinguishes Electromart from its competitors, who tend to promote more uniform competencies across technologies.

In addition to positions involving direct sales, the company employs a number of staff in non-sales capacities. Cashiers and customer service representatives process purchases and returns. An inventory team unloads trucks and manages the stock room. Merchandising workers set up sales floor displays and pricing. A security team monitors customers and workers to prevent theft and damages. Finally, technicians service and repair technology products purchased at Electromart or (less commonly) elsewhere.

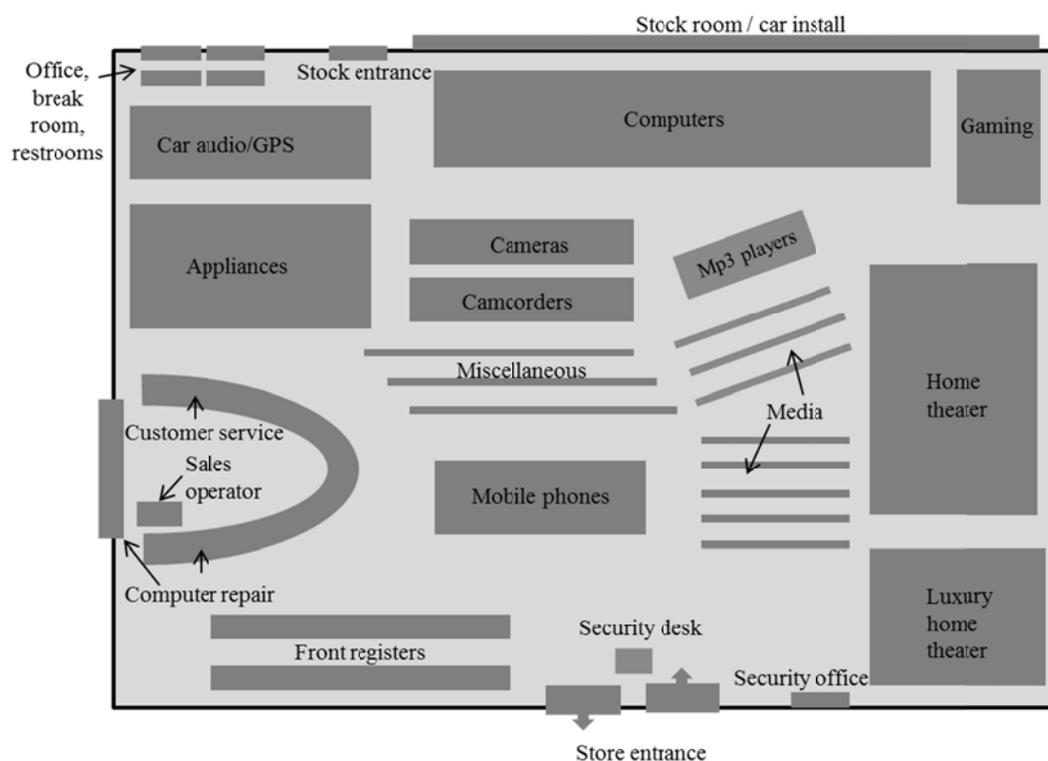
Table 1 summarizes each unit in the store, providing details on what each sells or is responsible for. A number of units involve primarily non-sales responsibilities, yet corporate and local managers routinely implore all staff to promote the company's products and services – particularly, profit-rich service plans, deliveries and installations, credit card applications and accessories.

My different assignments at Electromart – in portable electronics, computers and phone sales – provided valuable contrasts across work groups with very different responsibilities and labor processes. As I explore in chapters five through eight, these unique vantage points underscored differences in how workers experience and respond to monitoring. Yet my three posts ultimately fail to represent the full spectrum of employee experiences, as all three were entry-level and required direct sales. I suspect that managers and workers removed from sales responsibilities experience unique pressures which I am less able to discuss.

### Entry-Level Workers

Table 2 provides data culled from my field notes on the distribution of workers at my site, organized by unit, gender and race/ethnicity. Each count represents a worker occupying a position, such that individuals who changed jobs during the course of my study are represented more than once. As it was impossible for me to identify all workers employed with the company at any given time – given the sheer number of employees, their variable schedules, and endemic turnover – data in Table 2 do not reflect a perfect population of employees at my site throughout my project. Instead, all workers to whom I assigned

pseudonyms – most commonly, anyone who appears as an active participant in my field notes – has been included. While the table is thus limited in important ways, it provides a useful resource for exploring the types of people who comprise an important part of the social fabric at my site.



**Figure 7. Store Layout**

As the table shows, the majority of entry-level staff work in a sales capacity. Portable electronics is the largest sales unit, followed by computers and home theater. Repair technicians comprise most of the non-sales positions, though I suspect that I underestimated

the number of cashiers and merchandisers at my site. It was difficult for me to interact with workers in these units given the layout of the store and dissimilar work hours.

With regards to gender, nearly two-thirds of Electromart's employees are men, despite the prevalence of women in the service sector and retail trade more generally. The distribution of men and women working in various departments varies greatly across the store. Within sales, men are especially overrepresented in home theater and computers – the two departments regarded by employees as most challenging and requiring the most knowledge. Women, on the other hand, are concentrated in appliances and phone sales – units closely associated with essentialist stereotypes of women as domestic and communicative, respectively. Outside sales, men are concentrated in inventory and security positions that require physical strength and intimidation, attributes linked to masculinity. They also dominate in repair positions involving technical expertise, historically monopolized by men (Cockburn 1988). Women are overrepresented in customer service and cashiering especially, perhaps due to stereotypes of women as more friendly, passive and servile than men (see also Williams 2006).

The proportion of workers of color at my site (32.8%) is similar to that of the larger United States (35.5%) and the local region more specifically (local numbers omitted to protect site anonymity; Solis and Galvin 2012). Minorities are evenly split across sales and non-sales units, though there is some evidence of a racial division of labor by position. Persons of color are especially concentrated in home theater and inventory. No minority employees work in security, which is significant given that security personnel commonly racialize suspicious customers (see chapter 5). Visits to other Electromart locations during

and after my study reveal that the racial composition of each store appears to be strongly driven by its location. Stores situated in predominantly white areas – like mine – tend to have relatively whiter workforces, while those in communities of color tend to be staffed mostly by minorities. I suspect that the racial division of labor at my particular site cannot be generalized to all stores, but does offer insights into hiring and staffing practices.<sup>4</sup>

Electromart employees tend to be between twenty and thirty years old. Perhaps due to their age, most workers are unmarried and without children. Those who have spouses and children are just beginning their families.

My fellow coworkers at Electromart were far more educated than I anticipated when I began my research, expecting educational credentials similar to what I observed while working at a big box store during my undergraduate years. Nearly all workers possessed or were in the process of pursuing a college or technical degree. A few workers were enrolled in graduate programs, much like myself. Many of the male employees in particular studied topics related to electronics and technology – including engineering, computer programming or networking. Women appeared more likely to pursue college degrees than men. I observed few differences in education by race/ethnicity.

### Management

Supervisors oversee workers in individual departments or sets of departments, charged with communicating corporate policies to their staff, designing and implementing local sales

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<sup>4</sup> Visiting and communicating with employees at other Electromart locations, in contrast, tended to reveal very similar gender divisions across the company's stores.

strategies, resolving customer issues, and disciplining employees. At my site, several supervisors simultaneously control customer service and the front registers. Single supervisors maintain responsibility for each of the following areas: computers and portable electronics, appliances and home theater, mobile phones, merchandising, security and inventory. Supervisors also assist subordinates with customer sales on an as-needed basis.

Supervisors report to five store managers, who are responsible for store segments largely similar to those of their subordinates. That is, one manages “operations,” including customer service, the front registers, sales operators and human resources. Another monitors home theater and appliances. Another yet evaluates portable electronics and computers. A fourth deals with inventory. The final store manager presides over all others. Each manager routinely represents his or her unit(s) and the store at-large to regional directors and corporate headquarters.

As Table 2 suggests, the demographic characteristics of Electromart’s supervisors and managers are similar to those of entry-level workers. Men dominate all positions of power, with only one in six supervisory or managerial jobs occupied by a woman. Only one of the store’s managers is non-white, even though supervisory positions – just one level down the hierarchy – tend to be integrated. Though managers and supervisors tend to obtain their positions after moving up from entry-level posts, store leaders are not necessarily much older than their subordinates. They tend to be in their late 30s, and most are unmarried or just starting to build families.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The number of managers/supervisors discussed in the text does not match Table 2, as some managers/supervisors left the store during the course of my study.

**Table 1. Electromart's Work Units**


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<b>Sales Unit</b>	<b>Products</b>
Appliances	Refrigerators, washers and dryers, dishwashers, ovens, vacuums, small appliances
Computers	Laptops, desktops, tablets, netbooks, printers, monitors, software, networking, accessories
Home Theater	Televisions, DVD players, blu-ray players, projectors, home audio
Mobile Phones	Cell phones and associated accessories
Phone Sales	Any in-store or online products
Portable Electronics	Gaming consoles, MP3 players, audio, cameras, camcorders, GPS units, media (e.g., CDs, blu-rays)
<b>Non-Sales Unit</b>	<b>Responsibilities</b>
Cash Registers	Checking out customers
Customer Service	Handling returns, exchanges, credit applications and complaints
Inventory	Unloading stock, retrieving large items from stock room for customers
Merchandising	Creating and maintaining in-store displays and signs according to company plans
Security	Preventing theft of and damage to stock, maintaining accurate inventory counts
Technology Repair	Repairing and servicing products, especially computers

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**Table 2. Electromart's Division of Labor by Gender and Race/Ethnicity**

<b>Position/Department</b>	<b>Gender</b>		<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		<b>Total (N)</b>
	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Non-White</i>	<i>White</i>	
♂ Managers	1	6	1	6	7
♂ Supervisors	2	12	6	8	14
<i>Entry-Level Sales</i>					
♀ Appliances	3	1	1	3	4
♂ Computers	3	12	3	12	15
♂ Home Theater	3	8	6	5	11
♂ Mobile Phones	0	3	1	2	3
♀ Phone Sales	8	1	3	6	9
♂ Portable Electronics	7	12	6	13	19
<i>Entry-Level Non-Sales</i>					
♂ Inventory	0	6	4	2	6
♀ Merchandising	4	2	2	4	6
♀ Cash Registers	5	1	3	3	6
♀ Customer Service	8	0	3	5	8
♂ Security	1	5	0	6	6
♂ Technical Repair	2	9	2	9	11
<b>Total (N)</b>	47	78	41	84	125

Note: Totals include all participants assigned pseudonyms, and likely underestimate the number of workers overall, and cashiers and merchandisers especially. Workers who changed positions during the course of my study are represented more than once. Male and female symbols quickly identify the dominant gender of each position/work unit.

### The Customers

Electromart represents its “typical” customers using three model couples, derived from company research. “Buzz” and “Carrie” are twenty-something-year-old professionals who purchase the latest and greatest in consumer electronics regardless of cost. They want the hottest technology available, and represent “early adopters” – an industry term for customers

who will purchase products before they become tried and true. “Ray” and “Maria” reflect “middle America,” and weigh technology purchases as a family. Customers fitting Ray’s profile will come into the store to scope out new technology, but not purchase until Maria approves it as family-friendly. “Barrie” and “Jill” are the oldest shoppers of the bunch, and typically, empty-nesters. This couple commands extensive wealth and comes in knowledgeable about luxury products that they would like to purchase.

As the shopper profiles suggest, the company’s customers – or at least those worth caring about – possess more disposable income than the average American. They tend to be white and middle class or wealthy. When I asked the store manager where poor or working class customers fit into the shopper profiles, he suggested that I need not consider them – such customers could not be influenced to make large, profitable purchases.

Despite the heteronormative shopper profiles, Electromart’s customers likewise tend to be disproportionately male. As I overheard one shopper remark to his son, the store “is like a toy store for daddy.” His comment confirms company research indicating that men enjoy shopping at Electromart more than women do. Part of this likely stems from the centuries-old association between masculinity and technology, buttressed by the industrial revolution (Cockburn 1988). One manager further explained that women prefer to purchase electronics at other big-box department stores where they can buy several types of goods in one place (e.g., home products, food, electronics).

Customer attributes can vary greatly by day of the week and time of year. Weekday shoppers tend to be affluent, white business professionals purchasing electronics for workplace responsibilities. Weekend customers, on the other hand, commonly wander in to

browse from nearby stores in the adjacent shopping complex. They tend to be younger and more diverse. Customers appear most representative of the area and U.S. at-large during the holiday season, when shoppers of different backgrounds flood the store looking for gifts.

### *Summary*

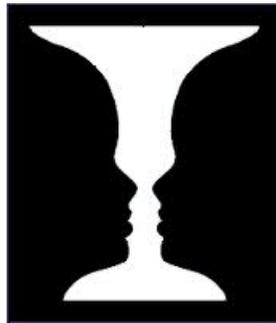
Electromart – as part of the service sector, retail trade and consumer electronics – provides the ideal context for exploring variations in workers’ experiences of and responses to surveillance – particularly, the contemporary monitoring practices that I outlined in chapter two. This workplace likewise comprises an increasingly important part of the American work landscape, warranting sociological interest.

My fieldwork at Electromart exposed me to workers of different genders and races/ethnicities. Working in three very distinct product departments allowed me to observe and contrast the role of surveillance across labor processes and social groups. Ultimately, I find that workers’ gender and racial/ethnic identities shape how they experience and respond to monitoring. Men use surveillance to establish their individual worth and control, consistent with hegemonic masculinity. Women use surveillance in selfless, group-affirming ways – in line with emphasized femininity. Both whites and workers of color tend to accept the legitimacy of monitoring after racially and economically “othering” unsuccessful job applicants and customers. I further explore similarities and differences in the following four analysis chapters.

## **CHAPTER 5: COMMONALITIES IN WORKER EXPERIENCES AND USE OF SURVEILLANCE**

Before exploring variations in workers' experiences of and responses to monitoring, it is important to consider surveillance processes, practices and behaviors that appear relatively similar regardless of worker characteristics. By identifying areas of commonality and overlap that transcend workers' backgrounds, points of difference come into clearer relief.

Ethnographic data can function like Rubin's vase (Rubin 1915), a classic visual illusion that leads viewers to alternate between perceiving two faces nose-to-nose or a vase (see Figure 8). It is impossible to see either the faces or the vase without the other as crucial contextual background.



**Figure 8. Rubin's Vase**

In much the same way, shared experiences with and responses to surveillance – monitoring that appears more or less universal – can help illuminate variations in worker experiences and responses. Variations likewise illuminate the commonalities.

Electromart had two primary purposes for monitoring workers at-large: to ensure worker compliance and to prevent employee theft. Throughout the hiring process, the company screened job applicants in search of “upstanding,” consenting individuals whom they referred to as “the best.” Once on the job, affirming messages about employee worth seemed at odds with company suspicion that workers would defect, either by failing to live up to company expectations, or by stealing. Electromart assuaged its concerns that workers would defect by implementing surveillance systems – particularly, direct supervision and electronic monitoring. Yet these systems functioned poorly and ultimately contributed to workplace disorganization and worker resentment.

Contradictory treatment of workers as exceptionally valuable yet untrustworthy – the latter evidenced in surveillance and disorganization – engendered worker resentment. Workers coped with this contradiction by redirecting their hostility towards customers, particularly, the poor and racial/ethnic minorities. Workers eagerly adopted responsibility for patrolling and controlling shoppers, especially those that the company and especially workers themselves framed as undeserving and threatening. Such “othering” processes allowed workers to maintain dignity in an otherwise degrading and chaotic environment.

### *Hiring Procedures*

Worker surveillance often begins before an employee has her or his first day of work, as existing research documents. Employers routinely require background checks, including information on applicants' criminal charges, credit evaluations, driver histories and drug screenings before offering employment (Scott 1995). Organizations also monitor applicants using personality inventories to filter out those perceived to be a bad cultural fit with the company and selecting those who will effectively police themselves and often others (Willmott 1993) – a process I refer to as “cultural screening.” In many cases, refusal to comply with these expectations immediately disqualifies applicants from consideration.

In the following three sections, I explore how Electromart monitored potential job candidates throughout each stage of its hiring processes. I find that hiring surveillance allows the company to identify applicants who share the organization's values, and that such cultural screening represents a fundamental aspect of employee selection at Electromart.

### Background Checks

Background checks represent the most overt form of surveillance that applicants encountered during Electromart's hiring process. All candidates applied for open positions online, and background testing featured prominently in the application process. Within the first few application screens, job candidates learned that background checks would be a prerequisite for employment at Electromart. The following appears early in the online application process:

As a part of the pre-employment process, we require that a Background Check be performed on all job offered applicants. Before beginning the Employment Application, you will be required to consent to a Background Check. If you do not wish to consent to a Background Check, please exit the system now.

The company became more explicit about what types of information would be collected in subsequent stages of the application:

I hereby authorize Electromart to procure a consumer report and/or investigative consumer report on me, and make any inquiry into my credit history, motor vehicle driving record, criminal and civil records, prior employment (including contacting prior employers), education as well as other public record information. I understand that inquiries may include any incidents of dishonesty, violence or drug related offences...

Applicants who were offered jobs were told that they must also complete a urinalysis drug screening prior to starting work. Refusal to consent to drug testing immediately disqualified applicants from job opportunities. The company made its policy explicit within the application, which stated “If you are asked to submit to a drug/alcohol test and you refuse to be tested, or you do not pass, Electromart will revoke any offer of employment.”

Electromart’s policy of collecting information on job applicants and removing non-consenting individuals from the applicant pool provided detailed data on potential employees while also selecting out of the ranks individuals who object to monitoring – workers who might later resist surveillance on the shop floor. As following evidence will demonstrate, even those workers whom the company vetted resisted surveillance quite often, suggesting that hiring surveillance practices may not have been as effective as the company likely desired.

### Cultural Screening

Although background checks were a prominent feature of Electromart's hiring process, most applicant monitoring occurred more subtly – as the company screened for individuals who embodied a good cultural fit with the organization. This began during the online application, when job seekers completed a personality inventory consisting of nearly 100 statements with which applicants were asked to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Some statements were directly related to workplace behavior, whereas others were less directly related. For instance:

#### Directly related:

Right now, you care more about having fun than being serious at school or work.  
You finish your work no matter what.  
When you go someplace, you are never late.

#### Indirectly related:

It's maddening when courts let guilty criminals go free.  
Any trouble you have is your own fault.  
You have friends, but don't like them to be too close.

The company that developed the inventory, Personified<sup>6</sup>, markets its “pre-employment assessment” as a tool that identifies applicants most likely to be strong performers. Some of the traits it purports to assess, including communication, persuasion, ambition, effectiveness, focus and teamwork, relate directly to the work tasks required of a retail salesperson. Yet Personified's website goes on to state that the inventory isolates applicants who will behave responsibly and ethically and demonstrate self-control.

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<sup>6</sup> Electromart identifies the personality test by contractor name in the application itself. I use a pseudonym here to protect organizational identities. According to Personified's website, fifteen percent of consumer retail workers in the U.S. undergo Personified personality testing.

Personified thus intends not only to help companies identify qualified and able applicants, but also those with moral beliefs and habits considered to be compatible with company values.

After applicants submitted their applications to Electromart, Personified rated them on a three-tiered basis. “Green” signaled that an applicant was ideal for employment. Yellow indicated that an individual was appropriate for employment only when labor needs were extreme. Red suggested that an applicant was unsuitable under any circumstances.

Electromart also cross-checked applications with old records to determine if the applicant had applied to the company before, and if so, whether or not their ratings matched. Job candidates designated as yellow or red were typically removed from consideration without further review. Those given the “green light” remained in the pool, but individuals with disparate scores (i.e., green on their most recent inventory but yellow or red in past submissions) were subject to particular scrutiny by hiring associates.

My own hiring process revealed the importance of the personality inventory in employee selection. I completed the personality inventory assuming that Electromart sought workers who are cheerful and outgoing with conservative views on theft and a strong work ethic. I also assumed that the company preferred relatively apathetic types likely to “agree” or “disagree” over individuals who exhibit strong agreement or disagreement on many issues. After about a week of no contact from Electromart, I called the company to inquire about my standing. An operator confirmed that her location was hiring, but explained that the store does not review applications unless job candidates received a “green light” on the personality inventory. Surmising that I might have failed the inventory, I typed “Personified” into a web

search engine and quickly discovered numerous “cheat sheets” developed by applicants to beat the test. All suggested that successful candidates strongly agreed or strongly disagreed with every Personified statement. Recognizing why I likely scored low on my first application, I applied for a job at another Electromart site, this time following the recommendations I found on the internet. Within 72 hours of submitting the revised application, I received a call to schedule an interview.

I could not observe the application process of other candidates, but I later learned that at least some applicants similarly anticipated employer preferences and responded as desired. After I was hired, I discussed the application process with Jeff<sup>7</sup>, a white salesperson in his mid-20s interviewed at the same time I was. He confessed to marking down responses that he thought the company wanted to hear. He assumed that inventory questions screened for happy, outgoing people, who constantly seek interaction with others. Jeff does not like crowds, but reported that he did when prompted by the company. In his mind, admitting that he might not enjoy being surrounded by a crowd potentially signaled to the company that he would be overwhelmed by customers.

Applicants’ ability to cheat the personality inventory suggests its limited value, as does the inventory’s assumption that a single type of person is best for business. Soon after being hired, Jeff and I sat chatting in a coffee shop, and I told him I had met a very fun customer the day before, Kate, who confessed to me that she loves to swear. I laughed and revealed to her that I similarly enjoy cursing. The next day, Jeff complained to me that the personality inventory questions likely standardized the company workforce; Electromart

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<sup>7</sup> I have assigned all participants pseudonyms in order to protect their identity.

attempts to recruit similar types of people for sales positions, potentially excluding dissimilar others who might do a good job. He reminded me of my discussion with Kate the day before. Although our job applications asked candidates if they swore when angry, presumably to screen out hostile personalities, I quickly built a relationship with a customer based on our mutual interest in cursing.

Cultural screening likewise surfaced as an important part of the company's face-to-face interviews. After Electromart vetted applicants "on paper," those individuals deemed employable were invited to an in-person interview with a local manager. Should this interview go well, candidates typically had a second interview with the store manager. The company standardized interview questions across both interviews, and each went beyond a discussion of qualifications and work preferences to include questions tapping into workers' worldviews:

What's the best way to recognize someone's accomplishments?  
Are you one to direct your own work or do you prefer to listen to orders from others?  
What do you think the consequences should be if someone is caught stealing?  
...What if it's your good friend Bob stuffing a CD into his pants around the corner?

Interview questions not only helped managers pick ideal workers, but also communicated company values to applicants. As Rick, a white manager in his mid-30s, would tell new hires in a subsequent orientation session, applicants who provided the "wrong" answers to these questions were immediately disqualified from employment. All applicants should be strongly opposed to theft without reservation. They should also be willing to offer new ideas to management and work well with others, but also humble enough to know that their knowledge about products and selling is always incomplete.

### Orientation

Once applicants were vetted as appropriate for employment, Electromart's surveillance practices became more complex. Management used employee orientation sessions to imbue workers with pride, celebrating their potential for achievement and congenial personalities. Alongside this affirmation existed a parallel effort to instill fear in workers – convincing them that deviation from company practices and theft, in particular, would result in job loss. Managers emphasized that workers would be subject to ongoing monitoring to ensure that they lived up to expectations and did not steal.

During the first orientation session, films and booklets constructed the company as a fun place to work with a strong emphasis on customer service. Rod, a white man in his 40s and the store manager, showed videos describing company history and communicating core organizational values. My field notes convey that of these, the most important seemed to be “have fun while being the best”:

Rod turned on a few different “welcome to the company” type videos... We watched a brief history of the company describing the founder, ups and downs in profitability, associated partners, and directions for the future. The videos were quirky, and clearly part of the “have fun” company image... Apparently fun work translates into better service for the customers, although it was not clear exactly how. It was not clear exactly how retail electronics could be fun for the workers either, although the videos showed goofy jokes and themes. Rod himself seemed to adopt a causal “have fun” attitude – he kept saying “that’s how we/I roll” and referring to Casey as “brother.” Once he casually bopped Casey on the shoulder with his fist as he said “brother.” Positive things about the company were “strong.” After each booklet/film segment, he would ask “Questions? Comments? Snide remarks?”...

At the core of company values/philosophy is providing individualized customer service. Our goal, as sales reps, is to determine customer needs and sell to them end-to-end: all components and accessories needed to take technology home and use it immediately. Although many videos tried to place equal emphasis on workers being

valued – the “best people” – it was obvious that service to workers was second to serving customers.

During the second orientation session, new hires learned detailed sales techniques designed to establish long-term customer relationships. As the session wrapped up, Rick, a store manager, told us we were hired for our friendly, outgoing personalities, and that he personally vouched for candidates whom he could easily talk to. Workers were thus affirmed as being good people with tremendous potential to achieve within the organization.

The cultural screening practices adopted by the company appeared, on the face of it, successful: Casey, a black male in his early 20s and one of my fellow recruits, was so chatty and outgoing during our first orientation session that I initially thought he was already employed by the company. Cheesy jokes about Halloween costumes, candies and local sports teams filled the evening. Casual conversations with my new peers were fluid and effortless.

Alongside declarations of worker value and efforts to engender worker pride existed a threat to new hires: deviations from company expectations would result in firings. In nearly the same breath that Rick complimented new hires’ personalities, he warned us that if we felt unable to deliver customer service in the manner demonstrated in training videos, we should walk out the door. His demeanor was somber and cold; he paused to look each of us in the eye and wait for exiting applicants before moving on, glaring in a way that was almost accusatory. I got the sense that Electromart would ensure our compliance.

Rod similarly adopted an intimidating demeanor when discussing “loss,” or company theft. His remarks emphasized that although the company valued new employees, they would be subject to intense surveillance and potentially discipline:

Rod warned us that... If he found we were stealing, whether products or time, ... he would not only fire us but also push for our incarceration. Because company profits benefit him and the company has profit-sharing, Rod viewed employee theft as analogous to stealing from his home or coworkers. He was clearly strict about this and quite serious... Rod showed us the security office and explained that... We would each have purses searched and coats patted down upon leaving each shift. Rod said something to the effect of “that’s just how it is.”

Just as efforts to instill pride in workers seemed efficacious, management appeared to successfully create fear among new hires. Andrea, a gregarious white female in her early 30s, looked anxious as she asked whether she was able to use gift cards received from family members within the store. Jeff was similarly alarmed as he described receiving a gift card for helping a stranger – would he be fired? New hires seemed to be defending their innocence before their surveillants identified potentially suspicious activities. Rod reassured us that gifts were entirely legitimate, but that we would be watched, identified and prosecuted if there was any evidence of misuse.

Job loss represented a very serious threat to new workers. Of the nine of us in my hiring group, three had moved to the area within the preceding six months after having been unable to locate jobs in their home communities. Kelly, an attractive blond in her early 30s, said she had been looking for work for over a year. Darnell, a black male in his late 20s or early 30s, commented that he left his home state of California for cheaper housing costs. If his position did not work out at Electromart or his wife remained unemployed, the family would be forced to return to the west coast. In an earlier discussion with Jeff, I discovered that he had been seeking work for over nine months. Notably, these candidates were far from unskilled; at least seven had college degrees, and at least one had military experience.

Workers responded to management's threats by displaying an attitudinal disposition agreeable to achievement and hiding disengagement. After Casey described some upcoming travel plans to the new hires, Greg, another new employee, asked how Casey would balance his work responsibilities at Electromart with his trips:

Greg asked Casey where he would get the time for all those [travel] plans, and Casey sarcastically remarked that work was his priority and cast a joking glance toward the managers at the door. The managers could not hear our discussion, and Casey followed up with a comment like "Work comes first, at least that's what they [managers] want." He reiterated again that work was very important, though, specifically to fund his ventures.

Casey therefore acknowledged that although workers may have different priorities than management, he knew that he should *act* as though work was his top concern. Those who heard his comments laughed and nodded in agreement with his assessment.

Electromart's managers thus organized hiring practices to culturally surveil applicants and also acculturate them. Supervisors selected applicants who fit, or feigned fit, with the fun, outgoing company image, while also building pride and confidence in new hires using inspiring videos and verbal praise. Yet supportive introductions coexisted alongside "take it or leave it" type messages about job expectations, emphasizing that Electromart surveilled and disciplined its workers to ensure compliance. Jeff would later label these confusing messages as "contradictory." Workers acknowledged cultural screening as flawed, but played along – seemingly due to their vulnerable economic position. Ultimately, this results in a workforce primed to consent to control.

### *Shop Floor Surveillance*

Simon (2005) argues that social research tends to investigate the subjects of surveillance, rather than “the guards” – those individuals charged with administering and evaluating captives. In the context of the workplace, shop floor managers maintain responsibility for implementing monitoring techniques and responding to surveillance data as formally prescribed by upper management. These local actors may or may not use monitoring processes as higher authorities would like – revealing distinctions among managers commonly ignored by labor process scholars (see Rowlinson and Hassard 2001). What’s more, formal organizational rules, policies and procedures can provide ambiguous guidance on how surveillance practices ought to inform worker control. Such uncertainty opens the door for supervisory discretion and thus abuse (Hodson 2001a; Hodson 2001b).

Electromart’s corporate-level culture encouraged managers to construct workers as charismatic, intelligent and highly skilled, yet store management’s suspicion that workers would not live up to company ideals commonly resulted in obtrusive surveillance, and often, abuse. This contradiction in values led managers to respond to workers in highly erratic and unpredictable ways. The shop floor suffered from disorganization and anomie – characterized by poor communication, disjointed organization of production, weak leadership, unclear social obligations, a lack of training and job insecurity (Cohen, March and Olsen 1972; Hodson 1999; Hodson 2001b).

As new hires transitioned into employment on the shop floor, monitoring became a major component of the training process. Corporate headquarters required that all new employees complete certification assessments demonstrating their knowledge of products

and more general company policies. All trainings were web-based, allowing Electromart to collect electronic information on who completed (or failed to complete) each test and when. Local managers were charged with ensuring that workers finished assessments in a timely fashion and received notification when new tests were required. Managers themselves could be admonished by district or corporate authorities if surveillance data showed that their employees had not started or passed certifications according to company timelines, and managers thus aggressively policed workers to ensure that deadlines were met:

During the lulls between calls and conversation, I noticed a list of trainings posted above the computer with my name and Tonya's, Jodi's and Corrine's. The list included new, required trainings as well as certification tests for the sales operator position. Times and dates of completion were listed for those we had already done, and handwritten above the top was a message: "All must be completed by 10/17 or written up! No exceptions." There was no name signed [though the note was undoubtedly from our manager, Jess] – just the looming threat...

Just as Electromart used electronic surveillance to gauge worker compliance with training expectations, managers used electronic monitoring to assess whether and how workers met sales goals. Tracking sales figures on the computer consumed managers in a nearly obsessive way. Local leaders occasionally used electronic data to affirm worker value, compatible with corporate messages about workers being "the best":

Rod briefly shared some sales totals for the store this morning. Notably, he announced that our computers department is fifth in the company for our close rate on accessories. Although this seemed like a pretty huge accomplishment..., the response from Rod and others at the meeting was analogous to a "Dang!" before moving on.

More commonly, however, managers used electronic data to scrutinize workers for failing to live up to company expectations:

I grabbed paperwork for computers as other sales and inventory staff gathered around customer service... Rod began [the meeting] by throwing lots of [electronically-culled

sales] numbers at us. He demonstrated that although we hit most of our sales targets, we lost money in supplies, labor, theft, etc. that prevented us from receiving bonuses... Rod acted as though overages in supplies, labor and theft were our fault, although I did not see how. Sales workers certainly did not decide much about what supplies are available; in fact, we typically lacked adequate tools to do our jobs. Our computers run painstakingly slow (something I joke about with customers), we lack appropriate sign holders, and even things as basic as signage or stick-on hang tags are difficult to find. Regarding labor, management schedules us and dictates when we leave. Although we could help prevent theft by remaining alert on the floor, our security team is smaller than [the one] at our other locations.

Management's appraisals of sales data commonly questioned workers' dedication.

When surveillance showed that sales figures did not meet corporate-established targets, managers insinuated that workers had intentionally withheld effort:

Rod led us through the packet [of sales data], which contrasted our close rates [or the number of customers who made purchases relative to those who entered the store] at various times of day across recent Saturdays. We averaged between 32% and 34%, with some of the lowest close rates during our busiest traffic times. Rod shared this information to imply that although plenty of customers were coming in, we were not making the sales. The implication was that we must try harder to close the sales, although little insight was given on how to do so.

Similarly:

As we assisted some folks (all unsuccessful sales on my end!), David [a black male manager in his 40s] came over the walkie. He asked that someone give him a hand with something he could not figure out. An hour earlier, we had some amount in the tens of thousands of dollars in sales. Yet our current hourly figures indicated that we had somehow *lost* over \$200 in sales. This meant that we had to have returned more merchandise than we sold in that time frame... Looking around, I mentally noted that rain had been pouring down for most of the hour [limiting customer traffic], so it may have been possible that we had received a TV return and it set us back. David was incredulous as he asked "Can someone *please* explain how this is possible to me?!"

Occasionally, local managers used electronic surveillance not because they were unsure of how productive workers had been, but because they sought evidence for their preexisting beliefs that workers were lazy and thus untrustworthy. On a busy afternoon in

computers, Curtis, a black male in his 30s and supervisor of the computers department, elected to cross-check employee paperwork with electronic sales data to demonstrate what he already knew to be true: workers had not filled out sales paperwork as company guidelines required:

... Malcolm [my coworker, a white male in his 20s] called me on the walkie and requested that I call a phone extension. I had stepped out of the department momentarily, and on my way back, I responded that I would be there soon. Upon my arrival, Malcolm again reasserted that I should call an extension; Curtis wanted to talk to me. I scrunched my brow and dialed the digits. When Curtis picked up, he asked what my employee number was. I reported it back to him, wondering if he was trying to give me credit for some sale on the register. After we hung up without any further exchange, Malcolm announced that he wanted my number because he was planning to write everyone up. I rolled my eyes; "For what?!" Malcolm matter-of-factly responded that we had not filled out set-up sheets for every computer we had sold...

Once I returned [from lunch], Paul and Conrad [two of my coworkers, white men in their late 20s] were standing around the central employee computer where I clocked in. Conrad greeted me and asked how my day was going. I said it was alright before sharing the news that everyone would be getting written up. "For what?" Conrad asked. I explained that folks had been inconsistent in filling out the new computer set up forms. Conrad had already been written up for this violation last Sunday, and jokingly asked whether he had be written up again. "Probably," I cynically replied. Paul's face tightened with anger as I spoke. He began swinging his fists by his sides, and punching them together in front of his torso. Despite his small frame and typical mild-manneredness, he looked downright intimidating. I tried to cut the tension by noting "You're doing a lot of this," and demonstrating his fist bumping. Paul noted that he was "revved up" after learning about the write ups. "My wife told me I'm going to get fired soon," he noted, stating that he wanted to hit Curtis in the face. I didn't really know how to respond to his anger; I told him there would be no way that he would get fired. I asked whether Curtis had requested Paul's employee number yet, and he denied that he had. I hopefully offered that this might mean he would not be written up.

I was wrong. A few minutes later, amidst a dead sales floor, Curtis approached the team and asked Paul if he could speak to him. Paul and I exchanged serious looks as he stepped up towards the front [of the store]. Unsure of what to do, I began stuffing dossiers while waiting to see what happened. In the midst of doing so, I ran out of sheets outlining our service plans, and went up front to copy more.

When I arrived at customer service, Paul was leaning against the counter looking angry. Curtis was moving between machines with another computer repair technician. I caught Paul's eyes and lifted my brows, and he gave me a knowing look in response. It seemed certain that he had been written up.

Using electronic surveillance to enforce established rules allowed Curtis to discipline workers who failed to live up to company standards. Ironically, Paul later showed Curtis that the discrepancy between his electronic data and sales sheets could be explained by a few pieces of unfiled paperwork that he had forgotten to write his name on.

The most obtrusive forms of monitoring that Electromart's management adopted aimed to prevent employee theft – going beyond a questioning of workers' industriousness and challenging their very morality. Workers went through theft sensors upon starting and ending each shift and were searched by a security officer on their way out of the building. Corporate staff monitored employee sales and purchases for indications of theft, and particularly, misuse of employee discounts. Local supervisors and managers reminded workers that they were being watched, and publicly announced when they suspected employee theft in an intimidating fashion. In the following text from my field notes, Cici, a black salesperson in her late 30s from portable electronics brought Jeff, Erin and me to the stock room to retrieve products and place them in anti-theft devices. Once there, we were greeted by Damian, an African American in his mid-20s employed on the inventory team:

Damian told Cici that Joe [a supervisor] accused "them" of stealing items, and Cici asked who Joe had accused, specifically. Damian replied "us," or no one in particular. Cici joked "Did he say 'you people'?" [suggesting Joe was being racist] Damian and Cici laughed heartily in response, while Jeff, Erin and I [all white] also laughed, though a little uncomfortably...

Damian's tone belied some resentment; he scowled and seemed indignant. Cici's use of humor left it unclear whether she genuinely thought that management scrutinized workers of color to a greater extent than their white peers, or whether she was simply diffusing tension.

After this exchange, Cici returned to the sales floor. In her absence, Damian approached Jeff, Erin and me – all new hires – and casually remarked “just so y'all know, there aren't any cameras back here.” I was uncertain whether he meant that we could be comfortable discussing Joe's accusation of theft, or whether he was tipping us off that the stock room would be an ideal place to steal. His reassuring tone indicated to me that he likely intended to ease our anxieties about the tense exchange. A few minutes later, Joe himself came to check on Jeff, Erin and me, and snidely remarked:

I love how our most expensive/in demand item [an ipod Touch] is just sitting here in this open box. If you wanted to, you could just remove the sensor and drop this in your pocket.

Joe's statement was clearly intended to antagonize Damian, whom he suspected of theft and whose job required him to safely store products. By criticizing the storage of expensive items after making his accusation, Joe could indict Damian for failing to safeguard against theft by other employees even if Damian himself had not stolen. Perhaps Joe also hoped to instill fear in both Damian and the new hires – if we could spot opportunities to steal, so could management, and store leaders would monitor those with access to valuable products.

Even staff who worked hard to achieve sales goals and deliver quality customer service – seemingly embodying “the best” – found that managers subjected them to abusive monitoring and discipline that engendered resentment among workers (see also Burawoy 1979; Juravich 1985). During an informal training meeting, Nate, a white home theater

salesperson in his early 20s, and Eric, a white supervisor in his 30s, responded to admonitions from upper management in response to surveillance reports demonstrating that they sold televisions over the phone – a practice that was formally forbidden at Electromart.

Monitoring revealed that they had broken formal policies, but not why:

Nate interjected “So what’s this new thing about no phone sales?” Nate routinely sold items over the phone, and could not figure out why managers have stressed that phone orders are not allowed during recent shifts. Eric acknowledged that there have been some scams involving phone orders, but typically only when employees ordered customer items for pick-up without knowing the shopper and sending the product to another store. Nate scoffed that if home theater stopped completing phone sales, they would never meet their budget. Eric nodded and said he agreed. Nate notified Eric that he would continue to accept phone orders, as he was not realistically going to ask customers he knows in Greenville to travel to our store and thus potentially lose a sale over the policy. Eric agreed that he would also continue phone sales until he was seriously reprimanded by upper management. It was not a realistic policy for home theater in his mind.

Electromart expected workers to meet challenging sales goals, but also monitored workers to ensure compliance with policies which made it difficult or impossible to secure sales. Eric and Nate eschewed formal procedures, but did so in the name of preserving their store’s reputation and productivity (see also Bain and Taylor 2000; Lankshear et al. 2001; Timmons 2003). Their good intentions were lost in electronic data, breeding frustration and resentment.

### *Othering Customers*

As the previous sections explore, Electromart surveilled workers and regarded them with suspicion even as they espoused the view that their employees were “the best.” The company’s use of monitoring and conflicting treatment of employees engendered worker resentment, especially when workers were scrutinized after having tried to do a good job.

Worker resentment might have erupted in widespread disengagement or resistance, had workers been unable to dampen this contradiction.

“Othering” customers helped workers resolve the company’s conflicting messages about employees’ value and cope with experiences of surveillance and abuse. “Othering” is a process whereby groups draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and outsider groups, whether consciously or unconsciously, by vilifying outsiders as deficient or unworthy in some way (see Lévi-Strauss 1973 [1955]). At Electromart, workers established their relative value by constructing customers, particularly those who were impoverished or persons of color, as unworthy of respect and/or threatening. Company and managerial narratives portraying poor and minority customers as a threat to the organization’s profits often provided a foundation, albeit weak, for such othering.

Electromart first conveyed that workers should not care about the poor during new worker orientation. Rod, the store manager, had just described three common customer groups to us: Jill and Barry, a wealthy older couple interested in purchasing high-end electronics for their empty nest; Ray and Maria, middle class shoppers searching for technologies capable of uniting their family; and Buzz and Carrie, young professionals buying the latest and greatest products. Company videos detailed selling strategies corresponding to each group’s preferences and needs. As we watched, I noticed that each customer set seemed to possess considerably more discretionary income than the typical American. Even Buzz and Carrie – represented as spending more than they ought to – never appeared to encounter negative consequences of their extravagant lifestyle. Surely, however, we would encounter customers on a limited budget who wanted or needed technology:

I later asked Rod “What about people who are flat broke?” A black male in his late 20s [another new hire] replied “They rob you!” The group erupted with laughter. Rod said that his goal at the company is to change shoppers’ behaviors. He could not change the behaviors of poor people, so he did not think about them. He also decided whether or not to offer price-matching discounts to shoppers based on their history of profitability. [Essentially, those customers with electronic records demonstrating that they had made large purchases in the past were poised to receive discounts on future purchases.] The condemnation of the poor was explicit and disturbing.

Rod’s comments affirmed the anti-poor sentiments expressed by the new hire –poor persons are criminal and cannot be trusted. Rod advised employees to do more to help wealthy customers than those with fewer resources.

Given that Electromart offered its workers meager wages – even by retail standards (see ch. 4) – it would seem that workers would be more sympathetic to the plight of the poor. Instead, I found that workers tended to position themselves as superior to those in poverty, who they assumed to be jobless and lazy. In workers’ minds, employment at Electromart proved their own industriousness, worth and value vis-à-vis the poor. As Newman (1999) illustrates, employment status is perhaps one of the most important parts of identity in the U.S. Even unskilled and abusive jobs provide individuals with a sense of worth and pride, particularly in destitute local labor markets. Constructing the poor as beneath themselves allows workers to establish dignity in an otherwise degrading situation: employed in an unpredictable, disorganized and low-paying organization.

At a restless storewide meeting on a Sunday morning, a woman representing the United Way conducted an exercise to solicit monthly donations from Electromart’s workers. She invited a small number of employees up to a poster board with images representing different groups in need: a sexually-abused child, someone trying to find work, a single

mom, a homeless man, an elderly woman unable to afford her medications, and a few others. It was our job to weigh the needs of depicted groups in order to determine who we would help if we had only limited resources, signified by sliding a torn piece of monopoly money under the group's photo:

We each went up, and for the most part, nearly every client received money from someone. Athena [a white woman in her early 20s] quietly commented that she certainly was not giving her money to the homeless person, which made me angry. I replied that I would, as no one else was likely to...

The female coordinator stared at the board a moment, and then announced that we were an unusual group. Typically when the organization runs this activity, some groups get nothing, whereas others get lots [commonly, reflecting challenges participants had faced in their own lives]. She scanned the participating workers and stopped on Curtis. "Who did you give your money to, and why?" she asked. Curtis replied that he had given his money to the single mom, as he "lived through that" and knew from personal experience how difficult it was. She turned to Athena next, who had given her money to someone with a health problem, because it was not an individual's fault for getting sick.

Perceptions of worth and need implicitly appeared in the comments of participants. First, Curtis explained his willingness to help single mothers as resulting from his personal experiences growing up in a single-parent household. He was most willing to help other individuals who he perceived of as similar to himself – a theme echoed by other participants. Second, Athena's response to the exercise reveals that workers regarded some needy groups as at fault for their hardships and thus less deserving of assistance than others. Both Athena's comments and side conversations suggested that workers had least sympathy for the homeless and jobless, whom they considered to be indolent *non*-workers and thus fundamentally different from themselves. Workers thus erected symbolic boundaries between themselves – worthy, deserving persons – and others – unworthy and undeserving.

In addition to class-based processes, supervisors and managers routinely racialized shoplifters, creating a local culture that encouraged workers to draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and customers of color – a process of racial “othering.” This type of othering often occurred at daily morning meetings, during which management encouraged workers to be vigilant with regards to theft and acknowledged employees who had successfully prevented a loss. At the following meeting, Joe told us how two men successfully coordinated a major theft:

... Joe said that we would focus [the store meeting] on some hot news. Two photos of male shoppers made their way around the group. [Joe explained] Yesterday, these two customers walked out with [stolen] computers. I immediately recognized one, a professionally-dressed black male, as an impatient customer looking to check out in computers the day before. The other appeared to be a Hispanic male in his 30s. Rae explained to the group with an accusatory glare that the two used stolen credit cards. If we would have checked signatures as we are supposed to, the thefts never would have occurred.

By presenting the group with photos of shoplifters, managers embodied thieves as customers of color. When photos were unavailable, shoplifters were principally identified in terms of race or ethnicity, though I routinely witnessed the security team apprehending white shoplifters. I never once heard anyone on staff allude to a thief as being Caucasian, though customers of color were always referred to by racial group or as “dark-skinned.”

Workers accordingly used customers’ race/ethnicity to communicate that shoppers were a threat and ought to be controlled. While eating lunch in the break room during a particularly harried shift on the sales floor, I chatted with Jessica, a white customer service employee in her 30s, who told me about her history working for Electromart. Jessica had been employed by the company for several years, but transferred to our location relatively

recently following a change in her husband's career. She claimed to prefer our store to other units, as ours appeared safer – in large part, due to fewer customers of color.

[Jessica had] once been grabbed by a “large black man,” caught stealing by the police. [The police] flooded the store, and the offender grabbed her to use as a bargaining chip. He was not particularly effective, as the police drew guns and he was unarmed. She described the scenario as very frightening, but seemed a bit smugly satisfied [smiling] as she noted that the police slammed the guy's face down on the counter after apprehending him.

Jessica's described her captor as a “large black man” to communicate her fear of customers of color. Her response to police brutality demonstrated that she approved when such customers were controlled.

Supervisors and managers likewise othered international customers by constructing them as less profitable and therefore potentially less deserving of employee attention than U.S. shoppers. During a Sunday morning in mid-March, my supervisor Joe stopped to ask me whether I had seen the newest computers business plan. Managers of each department developed business plans to increase quarterly profits. Joe stressed that our top priority in computers should be to increase service attachments, protection plans, and accessories. Joe explained that although our sales in these areas had been phenomenal in February, they had declined ever since, likely due to a “shift in customer profiles.”

I asked [Joe] what this shift might be, and he said that there had been a lot of international shoppers lately – especially people from Brazil. Such customers are unlikely to purchase services and service plans because they do not live near Electromart stores. Joe said that he had never personally sold a plan to an international shopper.

Joe explained international customers' behavior in logical terms; international shoppers did not purchase services or product protection plans because they could not easily return to our

physical stores for services or support. Given that his remarks occurred in a larger conversation encouraging me to sell such services and protection plans, however, he implicitly suggested that my time might be better spent assisting U.S. shoppers.

Workers similarly othered international customers for jeopardizing store profits. Many salespersons perceived Indian shoppers, in particular, as more pushy and apt to haggle prices than customers in other racial or ethnic groups. Malcolm, a white computer salesperson in his early 20s, was very open about his hostility towards Indian shoppers during one of my first days of training in the computers department:

[Malcolm] asked if I was going to be offended easily, as he explained that he regularly says offensive things. The question was not as much an inquiry as a notification that I ought to expect offensive commentary. I thought a moment and said that very racist remarks would upset me, as well as comments that were very degrading towards women. Before I could continue, Malcolm replied “Ok, I’ll lay off the misogyny,” but went on to say that he gets pissed off when people waste his time trying to haggle prices over “cultural differences.” I stated that I did not believe in cultural differences across racial groups, and he insisted that they existed. He asked Edward [a white vendor salesperson in his late teens] to back him up, and Edward nodded in agreement. I asked what group they were talking about, and Edward stated “Indians.”

Workers’ beliefs that international customers wasted their time and haggled excessively led many to actively avoid helping international shoppers. On a tense afternoon in computers, two white salespersons in their early 20s, Ben and Brendan, fought to avoid helping an Indian customer who had waited a very long time to be assisted with a simple request:

When I returned from lunch, the department had slowed down a bit, and Ben immediately approached me, furious with Brendan. I asked what had happened, and Ben explained that Brendan passed off a “rude Indian” customer to him although Ben was helping someone else at the time. Brendan began helping a new customer before finishing with his Indian shopper, and when the Indian shopper was ready to go,

Brendan told him that Ben would be able to cash him out. Ben was already in the middle of helping a young white female customer when the Indian shopper approached him and demanded to be checked out. When Ben said it would be a minute, the customer repeatedly [and physically] nudged Ben with the computer box and insisted that Brendan said Ben would help him. Furious, Ben asked his original customer to wait a moment. He interrupted Brendan's sale with his second set of customers, telling him he needed to "fix this." Brendan protested, but Ben was unwavering. When Ben finally convinced Brendan to close his own sale, Ben's original customer was gone. Brendan stood about ten feet away as Ben explained the situation to me, helping another shopper...

[Awhile later] I approached Ben... and asked if they resolved the conflict. Ben rolled his eyes, stating that Brendan initially insisted that he had not sent anyone over to Ben. Ben kept at him – "that's not what he [the customer] said"... Malcolm, who had walked up during our conversation, blamed the entire situation on the customer's Indian ancestry. He looked at me, and said in an "I told you so" tone "This is why I don't like Indians."

Workers thus responded to their conflict, which ultimately resulted from their unwillingness to assist the Indian customer, by stereotyping Indian shoppers at-large as unreasonable.

### *Controlling Customers*

"Othering" customers, coupled with management's strong emphasis on theft prevention and securing profit, encouraged workers to assume responsibility for customer surveillance and control. Worker participation in monitoring and disciplining shoppers was most enthusiastic when customers were poor and/or racial/ethnic minorities, but also extended to customers they regarded as burdensome more generally.

Workers' interest in evaluating and controlling shoppers was especially noticeable with regards to theft. In fact, their excitement when apprehending thieves struck me as unusual and disturbing. In my previous retail experience, workers rarely cared when local staff prevented customer thefts. In fact, workers often *enjoyed* knowing that shoppers stole

from the corporation, as it seemed to represent some sort of karmic justice for how terribly the company treated salespersons. Yet at Electromart, theft prevention was like a game (Burawoy 1979) that allowed workers to alleviate boredom and was detached from real-life consequences. Men, in particular, seemed to enjoy dominating and out-smarting customers, consistent with masculine behavior I explore more fully in chapter 6.

I first witnessed workers' enthusiasm for surveilling and controlling customers on one of my first days on the sales floor. My supervisor, Joe, was haphazardly showing another new hire and me where we could find various products in the store when a worker identified a potential theft over the walkie talkie:

Joe... was chatting as he walked, until something seemingly important came over his headset and he sprinted back over to gaming. Joshua and I tried to follow [practically running], with no idea what was happening. I noticed that several other workers, including Jess, also flooded the area. After a few minutes standing there with no explanation, Joe walked off again. I later found out that a child had stolen something... When I entered the break room, there were four people inside. There was Mario, a Hispanic male in his early 20s who works on the registers up front... He ate a snack on the black couch and fiddled with his cell phone, stopping to laugh about how the child caught stealing was literally shaking when the security supervisor forced the child to tell his mother [about his transgression]. Other workers laughed along with him.

Mario and the other workers' laughter in response to the child's apprehension and fear demonstrates that workers have little sympathy for shoplifters – even children too young to understand the magnitude of their actions.

Workers' willingness to go above and beyond company expectations for apprehending thieves provided further evidence of othering translating into action. In the following scene, Mick, a white male in his early 20s and a salesperson in portable electronics, and I were setting up a display when Mick quickly left to chase a thief:

... Mick dropped some hooks for our items and suddenly ran out the front door. Sam [the security officer on duty, also a white male in his early 20s] quickly followed. Mick ran to the right, but Sam remained right outside the exit in my vision. Although they were only a few steps ahead of me, I did not see what they had seen: a shopper exiting the store, caught stealing by metal detectors, and running to avoid being apprehended. Mick was outside for several minutes, as was Sam, who looked off to the right...

[When Mick returned inside] I asked what had happened, and Mick said he did not see where the shopper had gone. [The customer] either ran quickly or hopped in a car waiting outside. Although he looked for both, he found no leads. Sam said the shopper probably fled across the street and off of store property; to the right was the quickest way out of his jurisdiction. I asked (knowing the answer) if we could apprehend the customer if caught, and Sam said they were not legally supposed to go out the front door...

Sam and Mick thus *risked legal punishment* in their eagerness to capture the shoplifter.

Given that they could be formally sanctioned for pursuing the thief outside the store, their actions suggest a strong internal desire to control customers.

Workers also controlled customers by refusing to help those they stereotyped as unreasonable or problematic – typically, Indian shoppers, whom workers identified as having a demanding and haggle-intensive shopping culture. Hagglers frustrated workers, as employees had very little control over product prices. Workers rarely distinguished between customers who simply appeared Asian and those who fit their stereotypes. Should Asian customers ask for advice, workers would often criticize them as ignorant or irresponsible:

I approached an Indian man in his 20s, who was looking for a computer that could handle a sophisticated video surveillance system used in his workplace. I was not sure what type of processor to recommend, and when I asked Malcolm, he said that he did not know what to offer as a result of his unfamiliarity with the surveillance software. He suggested that the shopper leave and contact the manufacturer of the software before making a purchase. His attitude was gruff and abrupt. The customer looked stiff and clearly felt uncomfortable, as did I. Normally, Malcolm is full of suggestions and offers shoppers alternative possibilities. On this occasion, he offered no advice other than to leave. Accordingly, the customer left.

Whereas I routinely witnessed Malcolm searching the internet to learn about unfamiliar software for white customers, he withheld effort when approached by an Indian customer. I only identified this type of behavior in response to Asian shoppers. Sometimes, worker withdrawal was so extreme that employees would refuse to talk to customers of Asian descent.

Workers especially sought opportunities to surveil and control shoppers who disrespected or challenged them. This process proceeded regardless of whether or not customers belonged to othered groups. In the following, Jorge, a Hispanic salesperson in portable electronics charged with training me for the day, condemned a customer for shoplifting after he was unable to definitively answer the shopper's product questions:

... I spotted a white middle-aged customer opening an expensive box of speakers. I asked Jorge if he was allowed to do that (figuring he was not), and Jorge approached him as [the customer] put the speakers back into the box... [The customer said that he] was checking to see if he could plug his ipod into the speaker set, and could not see which ports were available on the in-store display (which was screwed into place, obscuring the back of the unit). Jorge said the box should state whether it was compatible or not, and the man replied "it didn't" rather flatly. Jorge told the customer that he could not open boxes, and the customer said he needed to do so to check compatibility. Jorge said that usually a green plug opening indicated that you could connect the devices, but there was only a black plug on this unit. This typically indicates output only. The guest needed an input port, and Jorge stated that the ports often did double duty. The customer suddenly became rather irate and said he did not want to buy something that *might* work. He said something like "I thought they could help me at Electromart, but I guess not!" and stormed towards the front of the store empty-handed. Jorge kept calm and repackaged the item as he left. I looked down at him with some discomfort, and Jorge explained that he did not even care that the man had gotten angry because the open package meant a repackaging loss (discounted item). He explained that he wanted to move into a different position in the store (perhaps merchandising) because people like the male customer bothered him. He said he was a "social butterfly," but he does not like to deal with "that."

As we walked the box up to security, [Jorge] argued that the man was probably so angry because he was doing something wrong. Usually, when people get angry, he explained, it is because you caught them doing something they should not be doing. I was surprised by his explanation, because there was no evidence whatsoever that the customer had been stealing; the situation escalated between Jorge and the shopper only *after* Jorge repeatedly failed to provide information on the speaker set. It seemed to me that between the incident in back and our walk to the front, Jorge had reconstructed the exchange from a frustrated customer embarrassed to have been caught with a box open to a thief caught red-handed. Jorge told the security worker that he thought the man had perhaps been sticking items in the bottom of the box, but they found nothing when they checked. The security staff confirmed Jorge's account that customers get nasty when doing something wrong. [Security] said we should let him know if we spot [the customer] in the store again.

After Jorge found himself unable to answer the shopper's product questions, he convinced himself *and others* that his customer became irate after being caught stealing – not because Jorge provided lackluster service. This reinterpretation of the situation allowed Jorge to continue thinking of himself as a skilled worker, while constructing the shopper as threatening and criminal.

Workers thus coped with contradictory messages from Electromart about their trustworthiness and value by othering and controlling customers. While workers rarely received the respect that they believed they deserved from management, they took symbolic and literal action to position themselves as superior to their customers. An unintended consequence of workers' eagerness to surveil and control workers was the legitimization of workers' own monitoring and discipline.

## **CHAPTER 6: MONITORING FOR MASCULINITY**

Chapter 5 focused primarily on commonality in workers' experiences with and responses to surveillance. The next three chapters move to an examination of variations in workers' experiences with monitoring. In this chapter, I focus primarily on surveillance in male-dominated parts of the store. I argue that Electromart's masculine company culture encouraged its male managers, supervisors and workers to engage monitoring in fundamentally gendered terms, using surveillance and resulting data as tools to enact hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987). Organizational culture legitimated male workers' participation in masculine contests, facilitated by peer monitoring, as well as management's use of direct supervision to bully subordinates. This adoption of surveillance to enact hegemonic masculinity represents a starkly different reality than that in gender-balanced and predominantly-female departments – explored more fully in chapter 7.

The power of using (or not using) surveillance to establish social control comes across most strongly in the final sections of this chapter, which demonstrate how men actively marginalized women from peer monitoring and masculine contests by assuming a-priori that women could not “hack it” at Electromart, devaluing women's work, and undermining women's accomplishments.

### *Hegemonic Masculinity*

As I reviewed in chapter 3, existing research documents how variations in workers' responses to employer control regimes occasionally result from their enactment of gender and race/ethnicity. The “doing difference” theoretical tradition explores how social identities

and inequalities result from individuals' adherence to or rejection of behaviors perceived of as desirable for members of their social group (see Fenstermaker and West 2002). In any given context, individuals may be expected to act a certain way as a result of their sociodemographic characteristics, and may be held accountable – or sanctioned – for how well they conform to such expectations. For instance, young boys who play with dolls may be mocked by their classmates, as playing with dolls is commonly regarded as violating collective notions about how boys ought to act. The young boy found playing with dolls may have to defend his masculinity – perhaps legitimating his choice in toys, or fighting classmates – in order to escape further ridicule. In many cases, the threat of sanctioning alone prevents individuals from violating group norms.

“Hegemonic masculinity” represents behaviors institutionalized as the cultural ideal for establishing manhood in a specified context. Generally speaking, individuals enact masculinity by taking action, whether individually or collectively, to claim privilege, elicit deference, and resist exploitation (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). In current U.S. culture, hegemonic masculinity is expressed as *a willingness to control others* using competition, aggression, emotional detachment, homophobia and misogyny (Bird 1996; Connell 1987; Donaldson 1993; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Given that women are devalued and stereotypically associated with weakness, men receive the most status when they successfully assert their dominance over other men. Stated differently, men who conform to masculine expectations establish their power over other men and women and also resist being disempowered themselves.

### *Organizational Culture*

Electromart established a local company culture that reinforced expectations commonly associated with national conceptions of hegemonic masculinity. Corporate directors and local leaders actively constructed masculine company values, emphasizing competition and ends justifying the means, most succinctly captured in the organizational goal to “be the best”. Valuing success at the expense of others is consistent with the hegemonic masculine ideal, which suggests that men must establish control over other men and women. The existence of a “best” suggests that competitors are inferior, reinforcing a system of winners and losers that pits individuals against one another. This individualistic ethos is likewise associated with the capitalist economic context – an issue I explore further in chapter 8.

Upon being hired to the company, all new hires attended orientation sessions featuring videos on Electromart’s company history. The films portray the organization as fitting an idealized American success story – using individual ingenuity and drive to overhaul failed strategies in unstable markets and become a leading electronics retailer. Such content suggests that nearly any obstacle can be overcome using sheer determination and hard work. Rod, our store manager, a white man in his 40s, echoed this message when reflecting on his own history with the organization:

[Rod] explained that he had been part of a customer service team in the past, but that corporate dissolved that team and he moved to another part of the company. This new post was a bad fit for him, because he wanted to be more “involved”... and he knew that the position would likely be eliminated. As a result, he pursued a position as a store leader – a job he knew would always exist. He described this as a very rational pursuit. He did not seem to take issue with the downsizing of the company; in fact, he described such moves as based on company needs, as though this somehow legitimated the job losses. The take-away point was that we just needed to adapt to change...

I remember thinking that Rod's anecdote sounded almost delusional; he appeared to reconstruct a desperate attempt to dodge a mass layoff as a victory. Implicit in his story is a message to new hires: assume individual responsibility for your own lives, and do not use structural explanations to explain personal challenges.

Electromart impressed that such individualism ought to extend onto the sales floor, and thus set the stage for gendered engagement with organizational monitoring practices. With limited labor expenditures set by corporate headquarters, not all employees could expect stable employment or to maintain their positions at all. Workers could improve their chances of permanent employment and/or hours only by outperforming their peers. In the following excerpt from my notes, I asked my manager, Tony, a white man in his 40s, about my prospects for permanent employment as the holiday season (and my temporary employment offer) ended:

I asked [Tony] if he knew when we would hear back about whether we would remain with the company... he explained that the managers would be meeting tomorrow to discuss who would be staying and leaving. These determinations would depend on labor budgets and employee performance. Tony said something like "No offense..., but we're going to see who's best." This sounded rather ominous, and I felt insecure. If we were rated against other new hires, my sole remaining competition would be Erin [the only other remaining seasonal hire], and I am fairly certain she is better with sales than I am.

Electromart further promoted competition by celebrating individual accomplishments using analogies to men's athletics – particularly those sports that require violence (e.g., football, boxing, advanced martial arts [AMA]). Borrowing a sports acronym, top salespersons were referred to and adorned in uniforms stitched with the letters "MVP," or "most valuable player." Management also posted the names of top sellers in the employee

break room, which workers frequently bragged about, contested and/or begged supervisors to update. In some cases, employees' status was symbolically represented using actual athletes. In the subsequent photo<sup>8</sup>, the top salesperson's name is posted alongside a photo of the boxer considered to be the world's best at the time (see far right). The second best salesperson's name corresponds to the second best boxer, and so on.



**Figure 9. Athletic Analogies in the Employee Break Room**

Even daily sales meetings would conclude with a loud store chant, reminiscent of how sports teams conclude a team huddle, and almost invariably led by a man.

### *Masculine Contests*

Electromart's emphasis on achievement and athleticism *could have been* used to reinforce notions of cooperation and teamwork more closely associated with femininity than hegemonic masculinity. A feminine metaphor might underscore the importance of the team

<sup>8</sup> In order to mask employee identities, I pixelated part of the image. The original showed photographs of those workers chosen to be "Monthly MVPs."

over any single individual's accomplishments. In practice, however, any language associated with teamwork was rarely and superficially employed – overlaid on larger discussions reinforcing top-down workplace relations and individual accountability.<sup>9</sup> Support for hierarchy and individualism primed workers to experience the workplace and form social relationships at work in fundamentally masculine terms.

Electromart's male workers accepted masculine organizational values and enthusiastically used peer, electronic and customer monitoring to establish their product and sales expertise as greater than that of fellow associates – especially other men. While status competitions undoubtedly benefitted Electromart, resulting in more knowledgeable and savvy salespeople, an interest in self-promotion – *not* organizational commitment – motivated workers to participate. I refer to such status competitions as “masculine contests,” given that men commonly excluded women from participating (see the following section), and that workers' actions can be understood in terms of accountability to the hegemonic masculine ideal. Status and social power appeared especially important within the company, as workers rarely had the opportunity to distinguish themselves in other ways (i.e., opportunities for differential pay and promotion were limited).

Electromart's male sales staff enjoyed passing time at work by constructing themselves as more intelligent and knowledgeable than their peers – consistent with hegemonic masculinity's emphasis on competition. Individuals commonly regarded

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<sup>9</sup> Other writers have noted that workers easily identify the meaninglessness of empty team rhetoric and understand that they are evaluated individually, and often, in comparison with their peers (Casey 1996; 1999; Vallas 1999; Van den Broek, Callaghan and Thompson 2004).

coworker monitoring as entertaining, light-hearted and/or fun, facilitating “game-playing” (Roy 1959) that alleviated boredom and disillusionment. Malcolm, a white computers associate in his early 20s, was notorious for sizing up his peers in an effort to demonstrate his own value and expertise:

... Today, Malcolm again asserted that he does not mind sharing [training] information with coworkers a few times, but after that, he expects that people will have learned [job content]. Malcolm said he has no patience for “stupid people.” He referred back to a former computers employee, who was so dumb that “He thought wi-fi was a question!” ... [hearing this, coworker] Farid... heartily laughed in response.

Malcolm’s statements suggest both that he was skilled and gracious enough to help new hires, but also that he was unwilling to be taken advantage of by workers who ought to be his equal. In other words, Malcolm will not be controlled, consistent with the hegemonic ideal.

It was not enough for men to construct themselves as knowledgeable; workers vied for *others* to recognize their expertise as *greater than* that of other men – whether informally, by deferring to others’ knowledge, or formally, in surveillance data. Outperforming peers imbued men with authority and status, consistent with expectations associated with hegemonic masculinity (see also McGuffey and Rich 1999). Late one afternoon, I was lazily avoiding customers before my shift ended by filling in a training binder that required me to identify fellow salespeople in computers that I could turn to, as a new associate, for product information and sales guidance. While doing so, two of my coworkers, Jim and Malcolm, both white men in their early 20s, made competing claims about who had worked in the department longest and could thus be considered the local expert on computers:

... I filled in some pages in my training binder as Jim stood nearby. I was filling in computer experts when Jim said he had been in the department over five years. I said

I was confused – I thought Malcolm was the most senior computer staff person? Jim smirked and said that Malcolm regularly exaggerates (confirming my own experiences with Malcolm). Jim worked in computers for two years before Malcolm was hired, then shifted to an expert position in which he received training for all store departments. During his tenure in this spot, Malcolm was hired to computers. One year after this position began, the company eliminated it, and Jim returned to computers. Malcolm says he is the most senior member of the department, but this is only true because he considers Jim's return to be his computer start-date. Jim admitted that Malcolm is very knowledgeable, but that he, Jim, studies computer science at school and knows much more technical information than Malcolm. The two fight over who knows more; occasionally, Malcolm challenges Jim, which seems to amuse Jim. He rolls his eyes and smirks, dismissing Malcolm's challenges as foolish given his education.

In some circumstances, male workers leveraged their claims of competence by adopting management's abusive monitoring and evaluation practices. In the following excerpt, Nate, a white home theater salesperson in his early 20s, joined Eric, his white supervisor in his mid-30s, in a critique of Trent, a white home theater salesperson in his late 20s:

Eric was interrupted by a sales associate in home theater – perhaps Trent – calling for him over the headset. He was looking for a [television] display remote, but was unable to find it. Did Eric have any idea where it might be? Eric asked him to call the phone extension in the manager's office, and suggested a few possible spots. He shook his head in disbelief [that his subordinate could not find the remote himself] as he hung up. Nate called Trent a “fucking idiot” and rhetorically asked “You really couldn't handle that yourself?” Eric rolled his eyes.

Nate's criticism of Trent not only diminished his coworkers' status in the department – it also implicitly suggested that Nate himself was different than Trent (i.e., capable of solving problems without turning to management).

Participating in masculine contests required that men defend their egos against allegations or data suggesting their stupidity, incompetence and inability that would threaten their enactments of hegemonic masculinity. Workers could reestablish status after being

judged inferior by feigning disengagement, consistent with larger masculine tendencies to appear unemotional and detached (Bird 1996). Workers who openly cared about their jobs could be considered foolish; after all, their positions paid very little, offered no security, and exposed them to supervisory and customer abuse. Framing oneself as disaffected and lazy allowed workers to maintain that they were intelligent and in control of their lives – not inept or incapable – while also supportive of a “laidback” and “easygoing” masculine enactment (see also Collinson 1988). On a slow morning in computers, Malcolm and Eli, a biracial inventory worker in his early 20s, simultaneously tried to out-smart and out-lazy each other:

Malcolm joked that Eli was illiterate, as he had once come looking for an item that was immediately next to him. Eli replied that he was simply lazy – he would let the guys in computers find the items he was looking for. Eli, in turn, questioned Malcolm’s intelligence, and Malcolm shot back that he has an IQ of 184. Eli laughed and doubted him; if he is so smart, why is he working at Electromart? Malcolm replied, “Because I’m lazy as fuck.” I joked that the two should have a test-off to see who was smarter. Neither guy bit. As we walked off, Malcolm insisted that it had been a few years since he was tested, but that he was confident his IQ is 184, far above average...

Workers also defended their manhood in the context of masculine contests by refusing to acknowledge peers’ accomplishments. Men aggressively observed and evaluated their peers, often in more damning ways than management. Suggesting that another man’s superiority was somehow illegitimate helped men reaffirm their own status and overcome emasculation. In the following example, three computers associates argued that their coworker, Conrad, a white man in his late 20s, did not deserve to be in a newly-created specialist position:

Patrick, Robbie and Malcolm... scoffed when Conrad's appointment to connections specialist came up, questioning his product knowledge and why he was chosen, despite his relatively brief tenure with the department. Ironically, it seemed as though

they might be jealous of the appointment, even though it did not carry any extra pay. Malcolm claimed that Conrad only got the spot because he is a "man's man," and Joe and Tony respond to his masculine demeanor.

Patrick, Robbie and Malcolm resisted the notion that Conrad was somehow deserving of his new position, as he had not been in the department as long as they had. In defense of their own self-perceived expertise and worth, they remarked that Conrad's personal attributes landed him the job – not his work ethic or contributions to the team. Although Conrad routinely accepted extra work, maintained a positive attitude and was more knowledgeable than the others about content associated with the new position, they reconstructed him as a managerial favorite.

In some cases, men not only questioned status bestowed on their peers, but actively took action to undermine coworkers' accomplishments by manipulating surveillance data. Workers routinely vied to be the top-performing salesperson in their unit and the store at-large. Sales leaders routinely denigrated coworkers who just barely fell short of the number one spot. Malcolm, a computers associate, was the top-performing salesperson in the store for weeks, and his boasting became downright intolerable. Conrad and Chad, his peers in computers, got sick of hearing Malcolm run his mouth and schemed to topple him from the number one rank. The pair decided to credit each other electronically for every one of their individual sales, such that it would appear that they had team-sold everything. In doing so, they effectively doubled their individual revenue and profit statistics and ousted Malcolm from his sales leader position. Conrad and Chad delighted in watching a flustered Malcolm struggle to understand how he could have been out-sold.

Workers also monitored and policed peers by pushing back against coworkers whom they perceived as trying to establish informal authority at odds with the company's team rhetoric. Quelling coworkers' informal status prevented men from feeling emasculated by being subject to another man's control:

... Jim, Ben and Conrad [and I] stood around the computers desk during a slow moment. I was relieved for the break. Conrad asked the rest of us whether we had sold much throughout the course of the day. By the tone of his voice, it seemed as though he had not been very successful. Jim chimed in with the number of service plans and data management he sold, followed by Ben, and concluding with me. [We all reported strong sales.] Conrad sighed and smiled, stating "I love my team." Ben shot back, half-joking, half-serious, that Conrad ought to stop acting like a supervisor, because we were not "his" team. Conrad immediately became defensive and flustered, arguing that he never meant to imply any authority. He used the word "my" to imply that he was part of the team. Ben said ok and dropped the issue...

Men's responses to masculine contests can perhaps best be summarized as a refusal to submit to another man's control. In the following example, Nate, a home theater associate, complained to me about Ben, a white man in his early 20s, newly transferred to home theater from computers:

Seemingly out of nowhere, Nate boldly announced that he was not sure how well I knew Ben, but "he's an idiot." "Ok," I hesitantly said; I noted that I had caught wind of some problems between Ben and the other home theater workers... What was happening? "All he does is clean!" Nate exclaimed. He went on to recall how Ben began processing a report, stopped in the middle, and asked Nate to teach a new hire how to finish the report. "Why can't you do it?" Nate had responded, busy with other work. Ben insisted that Nate needed to complete the report, and it would only take Nate thirty seconds to train the new guy. Irate, Nate pursued that if it would only take thirty seconds, it would not be a big deal for Ben to train the hire. Ben became annoyed that Nate would not do as he asked, and Nate yelled in his face "You're not my fucking supervisor, mother fucker!" He stepped towards Ben, and nearby Eric [their supervisor] stepped between them, as Nate was poised to hit Ben. He continued yelling and cussing at Ben, although Eric diffused the situation by instructing Ben to walk off. Nate claimed that he would have pushed things further, but there were customers around.

Electromart reinforced cultural values associated with hegemonic masculinity that encouraged managers, supervisors and workers to establish their dominance over others. Individuals perceived that being beneath their peers – whether in terms of knowledge, sales prowess or authority – challenged their manhood, warranting an aggressive and perhaps even violent response.

In summary, male workers accepted Electromart's masculine company values and used surveillance to inform competitions for status and power. Workers monitored their coworkers to gauge the knowledge and salesmanship of their peers, and buttress their own claims of superiority. Men's gender displays suggested that they refused to be controlled by others, especially other men. Ironically, however, the ways that men established and protected their manhood often benefitted Electromart by enhancing worker skill and increasing profits (Burawoy 1979).

### *Pressure on Management*

Electromart's emphasis on competition also extended into the ranks of management. Masculine values, practices and imagery permeating the company provided a foundation for local leaders to use and respond to surveillance in ways that affirmed their own hegemonic masculine displays. Predominantly-male corporate and district leaders closely monitored each store's performance using computer-collected sales data and distributed metrics for local review. In order to avoid scrutiny from headquarters, supervisors and managers needed to demonstrate continuous improvement, and those who failed experienced a very public fall from grace – typically in the form of reassignment or demotion. Given the intensity of this

pressure, managers implored supervisors to increase the profitability of their employees using ever-changing sales strategies, directing workers on which products would enhance the bottom line and impress higher-ups. Managers particularly encouraged worker control through the use of threats, punishment, and aggressive displays of power consistent with hegemonic masculinity.

The likelihood that managers and supervisors who failed to improve profits would lose their jobs created systemic uncertainty and fear. Consistent with Rod's anecdote about finding opportunities in job elimination (see "Organizational Culture" section), I almost never witnessed local leaders questioning sales expectations set from above – even during the economic recession that coincided with my study. Managers and supervisors adopted the company's hyper-masculine sink or swim ethos, attributing poor sales to others' inability to establish control over their subordinates.

Supervisors and managers identified as having failed to meet sales goals experienced ridicule, social isolation and emasculation. Joe, my supervisor in portable electronics, felt so overwhelmed by this pressure – responsible for nearly half of the sales floor, and also supervising half the sales teams – that he suffered a panic attack. Fellow managers routinely criticized Joe for not demanding enough of his subordinates. His breakdown only confirmed to peers that he was weak, as they subsequently conveyed by alluding to his failures to establish authority over workers and meet sales targets. As I approached Joe to angrily complain about how much I hated another manager, Rick, Joe described to me how alone he felt when Rick failed to support him:

Joe noted that he did not care much for Rick... When [Joe] went into the hospital a few weeks ago following [his breakdown], Rick never called him to see if he was ok. Rod [the store manager and Joe's boss] took [Joe] out of the store and called him to see if he needed company or to be picked up, but there was nary a word from Rick. Joe bitterly noted that he had gotten drinks with Rick after work, and they had gone golfing together on the weekends. He had never been close with Rod, but Rod surprised him by reaching out while Rick remained silent. "That's crappy" I replied, with sympathy. Joe simply nodded, tight-lipped, and seemingly disappointed.

Joe's inability to cope with the demands of his job estranged him from Rick, otherwise a close friend with whom Joe had shared masculine hobbies. Joe's breakdown suggested weakness in Electromart's sink-or-swim environment – a departure from preceding months, during which time Joe's departments consistently exceeded company sales expectations. Rick and other managers subsequently framed Joe as a pushover, critiquing his laidback managerial style until he eventually left the company.

### *Bully Monitoring*

In response to pressures from above, male managers (N=6 of 7) and supervisors (N=12 of 14) closely monitored and disciplined front-line sales workers. Though the company surveilled workers with "secret shoppers" and electronic satisfaction surveys, managers more commonly used direct supervision to keep workers on task and affirm their own authority. Management monitored sales workers in largely demeaning, insulting and shaming ways, thus reaffirming their status and expertise over subordinates (see also Hodson, Roscigno and Lopez 2006). In a process I refer to as "bully monitoring," supervisors and managers targeted high-status front-line employees for especially intense scrutiny of current whereabouts and work tasks, the content of sales paperwork, and knowledge of company policies and

procedures. Managers quickly silenced protest by forcefully asserting their company-given right to implement surveillance practices and improve the “bottom line.”

Managers commonly used shaming strategies as part of their surveillance efforts, ridiculing workers’ sales as underwhelming or unimpressive in an effort to increase subordinates’ industriousness and remind them of their inferior status. On a lazy morning before the store opened, a very disengaged and sleepy-looking group of workers including Ben, a computers associate, followed Rick, a manager, around the store when Rick announced that Ben was lacking in sales:

Rick teased [Ben] that he had been “sucking” at selling service plans the last week. The week before, Ben’s revenue was comprised of 30% service plans [which generate 100% profit for the company]. Rick argued that if Ben was going to brag about his performance (as he commonly did), he needed to be consistent. Ben (scowling) was visibly irritated that Rick was calling him out – indeed, it seemed like a jerk move. If Ben had an awesome week selling plans, he was expected to match or better his performance every week thereafter.

Although Rick acknowledged that Ben generated tremendous profit for the company during his successful week – far beyond company norms and expectations – he continued to denigrate him in front of his peers for not being able to maintain his record. Ben’s angry expression suggests that he interpreted Rick’s behavior as excessively aggressive.

Management occasionally shamed workers by bragging about their own sales performance in an effort to mock subordinates and establish superiority. In the following excerpt from my notes, Rod, the store manager, explained to Tonya, an appliance salesperson, and me that outstanding customer reviews can earn workers appreciation pins. He proudly read aloud a shining review of his own sales efforts when Joe, a supervisor, approached.

Joe appeared at the tail end of this speech, rounding the corner with “I heard you talking over here and thought you were selling!,” directed at Rod. Tonya took this opportunity to leave the department. Joe looked at me, pointed towards Rod, smiled, and said “I *hate it* when this guy sells!” He implied that Rod was going beyond his responsibilities when he sold items, much like Joe routinely did himself... Rod laughed as he showed Joe [paperwork containing feedback from his customer]. Joe joined him in laughter over how he earned a pin without working in sales...

The underlying message of Rod’s anecdote was not lost on me: "I'm not even in sales, and look what I did!" The unspoken implication was that workers had no excuse for not earning pins.

Often, management bullied workers and silenced dissent regarding job intensification by monitoring and disciplining workers who did not comply with their rules to the letter of the law. Strict enforcement of rules was often less about realizing the profit-making potential of each practice, and more about communicating an ability to control others (see also Garson 1975) – in line with hegemonic masculine imperatives. In the excerpt that follows, Curtis, a new computers supervisor, pulled several associates aside at the end of a long Sunday shift to address lackluster sales performance. He drew on his direct supervision of workers, especially a male worker, Conrad, to assert that we have not done our jobs and he must therefore control us:

The three of us entered the office together, somberly taking a seat... We lined up on the same side of the table, Curtis looking down at us... [he] announced that we had done about \$17k in sales on a \$29k budget [goal]. He asked how many machines we had each sold ... Taylor tried to interject and ask how our sales compared to those of last Sunday, when [business] had also been slow. Curtis practically jumped down her throat, saying, “The past doesn’t matter. This is today.” ...

Curtis noted that we had not performed to expectations, and this would not be acceptable in the future. Throughout the day, he observed that we were “not being aggressive” with customers, and “leaving money on the table.” Our sales fell behind those of the peer group because we were not complying with company sales

initiatives – behaviors that have been proven to work. After Curtis explained a new practice of using sales collateral [paperwork enclosed in a company folder] to us, he noticed that not everyone was distributing it as he requested. I felt anger rise up in my chest; I knew that I had done exactly what he requested. I scrunched up my face in confusion, and Taylor must have similarly responded, because he clarified that a few folks had used it. He noted that he had seen Taylor and me use the materials, but he watched Conrad and he had not. “Where’s your collateral?” he grunted. Conrad flipped in on his clipboard, and he revealed a folder: “I’ve got it right here...” Curtis cut him off and said that he might have it, but he had not been using it. Conrad meekly nodded...

This meeting inaugurated Curtis as the supervisor of computers. He argued that he was chosen to replace Joe (following his mental breakdown) because higher ups believed that he could wrangle in a sales team widely regarded as excessively autonomous and contrary. He believed that he held responsibility both for ensuring compliance with company practices and putting workers in their place – particularly Conrad, who was openly acknowledged as an informal leader with prospects of moving up the company hierarchy. Curtis asserted that he had a proven record of “changing behaviors,” signaling his own power over others and thus manhood.

Rick, a store manager, similarly established his status over workers by following company protocol to the letter – in defiance of local norms and labor budgets. Rick was widely hated by staff for his arrogance and disrespectful attitude. As my supervisor Joe told me, so many workers filed formal complaints about how he had treated employees that the company intervened and requested that he work on being “nicer.” Rick routinely required subordinates to complete extra tasks following each shift before he would let them leave the building. As Karl, a salesman in portable electronics would later say, Rick was very good at “finding” (or creating) work. Following a grueling shift throughout which departments had

been woefully understaffed and ill-equipped to handle constant customer flow, Rick required workers to stay far beyond their scheduled shifts. He slowly completed his own responsibilities and made nitpicky, highly unusual requests of workers before allowing them to exit the store:

At about 9:45pm, when the final of the sales staff were scheduled to leave, we finished our closing responsibilities in computers. Yet Rick demanded to walk the departments with each team, and Corrine shared that he was in the cash office counting money. We would all have to wait on him...

By the time Rick was ready to walk with the three of us, we had been waiting over half an hour. I could not believe it when he went item by item, scanning each empty product labels. I was so furious I could not even stand to walk near him or look him in the eye. He called out missing items, with Farid and Elton steps behind. Farid was tight lipped and his arms hung stiffer at his sides with each new request. Elton just rolled his eyes. While scanning through computers displays, Rick noted that we had two purple machines in a tri-color laptop, but we did not seem to sell the purple color very often. He suggested we grab one of each color, and I fumed. How the hell did he know how often we sold each color? I threw out a hand for his keys, as our own had been locked up long ago. I pulled out the missing blue color, and returned to lock up a second purple machine... I practically threw his keys back at him, and he responded with a very sincere thank you – obviously sensing the awful tension...

When Rick was finally satisfied with the department, I asked if we were able to leave. He said that we could clock out; he would meet us up front after putting some information into the computer...

After another 10 minutes, we finally spotted Rick on his way up front. We went to clock out, passing Corrine [and] Cici... on the way. They clocked off long ago, but were unable to leave the store as there was no one to search their bags [something only Rick could do]. In other words, they remained trapped without pay for about half an hour.

Workers often understood managers' use of bully monitoring to be about gaining status and protecting their own egos, as their actions to monitor and control workers often appeared to undermine successful functioning of the company. On a slow and sunny afternoon, Conrad, a computers associate, was studying a new computer interface in the stock

room at the behest of store managers when Curtis, his new supervisor, approached me and asked about Conrad's whereabouts. I explained that higher-ups had requested that Conrad read a training manual to prepare for the change in procedures. Curtis appeared visibly agitated upon hearing that Conrad had assumed this task without confirming with him first.

In response, Curtis hurried back to the stock room and asked Conrad to resume sales:

When I returned to computers, Conrad was back, facing the front of the store, without a customer in sight. He looked visibly irritated, a scowl on his face and hands on his hips. I asked what he was up to, and he angrily noted that Curtis told him he was needed on the floor. The two of us looked around to an empty department. Conrad spun, hands up, and said he had no idea what Curtis was talking about. He interrupted his training to say that Conrad was needed, as there were "buying groups" in the store. Conrad waited a few more minutes with nothing to do before he returned to the stock room.

Curtis' desire to monitor and dominate Conrad thus interfered with training practices and wasted company time. Conrad himself captured the gendered nature of their conflict by referring to their interactions as a series of "pissing contests."

Male supervisors and managers thus used direct supervision to assert authority and enact hegemonic masculinity, much like male workers in predominantly-male units used peer monitoring to demonstrate their relative knowledge and skill in masculine contests. Male managers surveilled workers to reinforce their a-priori assumption that workers withheld effort, justify the discipline of workers representing the greatest challenge to their authority, and as an expression of power in and of itself. Managers likewise drew on electronic and customer surveillance data to support their claims that workers' sales performances were underwhelming. Men thus treated surveillance and associated data as tools to establish control over other men and avoid being controlled themselves.

### *Marginalizing Women*

The previous sections demonstrate that surveillance played an important role in men's enactment of hegemonic masculinity. Men used surveillance and consequent data to control other men, and resisted monitoring that might culminate in their own subordination.

Experiencing peer or bully monitoring typically implied that a worker maintained some status that represented a threat to other men.

Women working in predominantly-male departments rarely experienced peer or bully monitoring to the extent that men did, as male managers and workers explicitly and implicitly communicated that women were illegitimate competitors in men's contests for status and power. By claiming women could not "hack it," devaluing women's work, and undercutting women's accomplishments, men excluded women from the light-hearted and fun aspects of embodying competitive masculinity and playing games (Roy 1959). Women's marginalization from top-down and lateral surveillance processes therefore reinforced their relative powerlessness. Men's marginalization of women is consistent with larger patriarchal social relations.

### Claiming Women Can't Hack It

Men marginalized women by creating a work environment hostile to women's participation, and then blamed women for their presumed inability to function in symbolically or materially male-dominated spaces. The store at-large already alienated many women, given the centuries-old association between masculinity and technology. As Cockburn (1988) explains, men have monopolized access to technical knowledge throughout the development of

industrial capitalism. Men overwhelmingly create and maintain technological devices, and have excluded women from opportunities to develop sophisticated understandings of how technologies operate. Women's alienation from technology comes across strongly in the following excerpt from my field notes, in which Erin, a white woman in her mid-20s, described how she felt about the technologies Electromart sold:

Erin asked if we were gamers. I said no, and Jeff said yes – he can only connect to his younger brother through gaming, football and YouTube clips. [Erin] does not like technology, and did not seem interested in knowing about it, as she is “a girly girl.” Instead, she collects [high-heeled] shoes; she explained that she needs lots because she is only 5’2”.

Erin regarded technologies as interesting to men and antithetical to traditional femininity (see also Connell 1987). A customer communicated something similar when shopping with his son. The child, quite young, asked “Daddy, what *is* this place?” The father replied “a toy store for Daddy.”

Erin went on to comment that her disinterest in technology and identification with more “girly” pursuits affected how she felt about her job at Electromart:

[Erin said that when applying] she wanted to work as a cashier, but they [management] sent her to floor.

Erin constructed sales as a masculine job, associated with an enjoyment of technology. Unlike men in the store, Erin was not impressed by our products, and professed to apply to the company simply because she needed work while searching for alternative careers.

Men in managerial, employee and customer roles buttressed notions of women's outsider status by communicating that women did not belong at Electromart, and particularly, in departments dominated by men. In the following excerpt from my notes, Malcolm

introduced me to the computers department – where I had been moved, explicitly, to increase the representation of saleswomen:

Malcolm noted... that there have been four or five women in computers since he started with the company. He mentioned one woman in particular being “forced out.” I asked who forced her out – workers? Managers? He said that she technically quit, but [laughing] she did not like the “atmosphere” in computers...

Malcolm has warned me that he (and other workers) say offensive comments on a regular basis, not in apology, but in a FYI-kind of way. I am left with the impression that women who feel uncomfortable in computers must simply accept coworkers’ behavior.

Malcolm constructed the department as unwelcoming to women, using the same “take it or leave it” tone that Rod used when telling new hires that they would be searched upon leaving each shift. His description of the masculine atmosphere sounded a bit proud, as though he personally took responsibility for creating it.

Malcolm’s depiction of computers turned out to be quite accurate. On any given day during the six months I worked in the department, male workers made sexist remarks that conveyed their disrespect for women. Men very rarely problematized their behavior, although they agreed that it was offensive:

Ben joined the computers team a few hours after everyone else arrived. He said hello, and then announced to Robbie and I that his boxers were “riding up his ass crack.” I joked, “Whoa, TMI!” He followed this up with several degrading comments about women... Robbie turned to me [laughing] and replied, “Welcome to computers.”

Robbie’s response suggested that he acknowledged the hostile computers environment, but did little to challenge Ben’s behavior.

Men appeared to enjoy their dominance of sales units and ability to create misogynistic work environments. In fact, marginalizing women itself became a source of entertainment and fun:

Trent [a salesperson in home theater] came through the department and mockingly called me “Princess” as he requested a VGA cable, which... led me to abstain from helping him. He reveled in the fact that an unimpressed look scrawled across my face, sarcastically commenting that he *knew* I would love being called “Princess.”

Similarly:

I arrived at Electromart on a rather cloudy Sunday day, my first back from some time off following a research conference... As I punched in, Malcolm approached to tease me about having been gone so long. He joked that he thought I had quit. Since Taylor [the only other female salesperson] had not shown up for her last two shifts, he figured that he had succeeded in driving all women out of the department. Concerned, I asked in some seriousness if she was still with the company. Malcolm stated that she technically is, but he does not foresee her lasting very long. He quickly returned to his teasing routine, announcing to Conrad that it would be all “XY” again if I left. Noting that I would soon be the sole “XX” again, Malcolm shouted “Dos Equis!” He proudly declared that this would be my new nickname. I promptly stated that I did not like it. Malcolm and Conrad shared some laughs at my expense.

Notice that Malcolm claims to drive women out of his unit intentionally, seemingly preferring a work environment entirely comprised of men, or with only token female representation. This was further communicated when Taylor, a new associate, joined me as the only other woman working in the computers department. Male coworkers began a long-running joke in which they suggested that Taylor and I must fight to establish our place as the token woman in charge:

Malcolm, Conrad and Ben jokingly asked how things were going between Taylor and me, as though there was likely to be conflict. Ben asked when I was going to “beat her ass.” I told them they were being ridiculous – why would we not get along? Conrad joked that there is only room for one woman in computers, and Taylor needs to learn that I am the alpha female.

Men laughed thinking about Taylor and me competing for status and power, although they themselves routinely participated in masculine contests to demonstrate their superiority over male coworkers. Their joke communicated that we were external to their own competitions and were not taken seriously.

Given that men acknowledged their behavior as offensive, they needed to devise strategies for dealing with the possibility that women would object to their sexist statements and actions. Men thus created tests to assess whether individual women could be trusted to tolerate men's inappropriate conduct without complaint (see also Denissen 2009). Women who refused to accept masculine displays were commonly subject to social exclusion. In the following excerpt from my notes, Nate, a salesman in home theater, implicitly gave me an ultimatum: either accept offensive sexual dialogue and continue being his friend, or else object and jeopardize our friendship:

... Karl and Nate continued making inappropriate comments of a sexual nature regarding Nate's mother [who was not present, but whose address they had used to learn a new delivery interface. Nate did not object to the sexualization of his mother, which seemed extremely bizarre to me.]. Eric jokingly commented that I was going to call human resources, and Nate confidently replied "No, she won't call HR on me. She likes me, I think." It seemed like he was fishing for praise. Irritated, I feigned a smile and said no, I would not be calling. The men seemed satisfied and [continued the meeting].

In some cases, men intentionally pushed women's buttons to get a response. Should women play along (i.e., express dissatisfaction with men's behavior), men could reaffirm their belief that women were excessively sensitive and thus unable to hack it at Electromart. Men were especially apt to target women who openly identified as having egalitarian gender

beliefs. Men ridiculed women's feminist views by reconstructing feminists as masculine

("strong," as in the example below) and man-haters:

We talked about many things, mostly teasing each other. I was a prime target as a result of my feminist beliefs. Malcolm found ways to insert gendered nouns into conversation. Sometimes I noticed his joking, sometimes I did not...

Conrad teased me..., continuing the ongoing theme of me being a man-hater. At one point, he asked me whether I could work a crick out of his neck. I said that I was pretty sure that was not part of my job description. Conrad laughed and said it would be more of a friendly favor. I asked why he had not asked Chad, who was standing immediately to my left. Conrad joked that he knew I was very strong, so I would likely be able to take care of the problem immediately. I warned that I did not want to hurt him [with my strong hands], and he assured me I would not. I rolled my eyes, and Conrad said [in a lowered tone] to Chad that I was overly sensitive. "How?!" I demanded. Conrad laughed and replied, "Uh oh, I shouldn't have said that!"

Similarly, as I sleepily punched in one morning:

I returned to computers to find Taylor punching in. She asked how I was doing, looking rather sleepy herself. Conrad approached us from behind and loudly announced "Whoaaa! Girls night out!" in a high-pitched voice. I cynically suggested that he "turn the fuck around and try the entry again, since the first one went so poorly for him." He chuckled as he punched in, tickled that he got the angry reaction he likely expected from me.

Men's allegation that women were overly sensitive and unable to hack it forced women who wanted to be included to argue that they were different from other (easily offended) women. After the store closed one evening, Joe asked Conrad to retrieve two helium-filled balloons from far up near the store's ceiling. Two young children mistakenly let them go while shopping earlier in the day. As Conrad wheeled out onto the sales floor operating an electric lift, I watched with Joe and Sarah, a white customer service representative in her late 20s:

... I stood as Conrad retrieved two helium-filled Valentine's balloons from the ceiling... After he came down, Joe showed him a message from his cell phone... As

Joe showed Conrad the message, both shared a laugh, and Anna pouted that she wanted to see. Joe said no, it was too offensive. She protested that she would not call HR on him. Joe said someone already called HR; Rod told him that he said something offensive over the walkie... Anna said that nothing in the store offended her...

Anna enacted behaviors consistent with emphasized femininity, or compliance with subordination, in an effort to gain favor among men (see Connell 1987).

Sometimes men took a different approach to dealing with the possibility that women would object to masculine culture: by buffering women from offensive statements or actions. This strategy, like testing, assumed that women were hyper-sensitive. Unlike testing, however, buffering required men to take responsibility for addressing the sexist culture – by protecting women, though in a condescending way. In the following excerpt from my notes, managers and workers filled out superlative sheets (e.g., “Best dressed,” “Best smile,” etc.) introduced by an Electromart committee to improve worker satisfaction. Tony, a manager, and his subordinate, Ben, argued about which awards they felt they deserved:

... Ben mocked Tony for having a unibrow after Tony mocked Ben’s hair as looking cartoonish... Ben... thought he should win the best hair superlative. Tony responded by telling Ben he had a “huge fucking nose,” which Ben is very insecure about. The two kept going back and forth, and I stood nearby laughing... Whenever Ben swore, Tony scolded him for using bad language in a “lady’s presence.” I thought this was ridiculous, as Tony regularly curses in front of me (although often with apology). Ben protested that I swear all the time, but Tony did not care.

Note that my actions contradicted Tony’s notion that I would be offended by swearing; I routinely swore myself and laughed at their exchange. Yet Tony considered me a “lady,” requiring shielding from their dialogue. Routine exchanges such as these served to isolate me from my peers.

Men commonly regarded their female peers as requiring protection from other men. On a sleepy morning with little customer flow, I sat chatting with Patrick, a computer repair technician, when Francisco, supervisor of mobile phones, approached. Francisco argued that I needed to be protected from the teasing of my peers, thus constructing me as an inappropriate participant in the masculine contests that my male coworkers used as an outlet for entertainment and fun:

... Patrick casually sat down next to me and asked how I was doing. We chit-chatted for a while before Francisco approached... “Is he bothering you?,” he jokingly asked me, in a feigned aggressive tone. “Always,” I cracked back with an enthusiastic nod. “Man, don’t mess with her!” Francisco warned Patrick. Patrick threw up his hands as if to say “Are you kidding me?! I didn’t do a thing!” Francisco continued, “She’s our little doll. We have to protect her.” Patrick’s defensive response coupled with Francisco’s patronizing comments sent me into a peal of laughter. I slapped my thigh and laughed appreciatively. Francisco went on “She’s like... she’s like the sweetest girl in all of the store.” I continued cracking up as Patrick said “Riiiiight,” with some doubt.

I frequently found myself inadvertently enacting emphasized femininity, which ultimately reinforced notions that women needed to be buffered from men’s offensive banter. After my peers routinely mocked my feminist views and tried to provoke me, I felt comforted by the tendency of other men (typically, the older men) to shield me from coworkers’ sexist statements and behaviors. Protective men could be condescending and reinforce my outsider status, but they made me feel more respected than my other peers.

Just as men conveyed that women were too emotionally sensitive to cut it at Electromart, men communicated that women – especially petite women – were physically incapable of doing their jobs. Though day-to-day work tasks required almost no physical labor, men constructed their work as requiring strength beyond the capacities of women (see

also Crawley 1998). When I was just beginning training in the department, a customer requested that we retrieve a desktop computer on her behalf. Joe, my supervisor, spotted the machine on a high shelf and instructed me to get it down using a nearby ladder. I had never used the ladder before, and when I tried to move it into place, it would not budge. Joe smirked as I tugged at the ladder, constructing me as too weak to move it:

I walked over to [the ladder] and tried to pull it over, and [Joe] watched with some amusement before he said “Jules, you don’t have enough ass on you to do that.”

Unbeknownst to me at the time, store ladders could be locked in place using safety latches designed to prevent them from moving. The ladder I tried to use had been unmovable simply because I did not know to disengage the latch. Had Joe merely provided minimal instruction on how to use the ladder, I would have been able to retrieve the machine easily.

Malcolm commonly ridiculed women as weak by criticizing how loosely female workers attached anti-theft security wraps to products. Electromart required that expensive items be stored in the security wraps, consisting of an electronic sensor attached to crisscrossing metal wires. Workers controlled how tightly the wires clung to items by using a cranking mechanism to pull the wires up against product packaging and then snapping plastic pieces together to lock the wrap. Malcolm routinely demonstrated his strength by pulling the wires so tightly against packaging that items were damaged. When he learned that the security manager wanted us to attach the wraps more loosely, he continued to insist that his way was better.

... When the laptops were all pulled and awaiting [security] wraps, Malcolm stood behind the counter and watched me begin the process... [before] he decided to test the wraps that I had completed for security. This is one of his favorite games. The tightness of the wraps is more difficult for me to achieve than some of the men, as a

tight grip requires cranking a wheel down to the box and then snapping two locking jigsaw-like pieces into place. Without large or strong hands, the snapping step can be difficult or impossible. Throughout my tenure in the department, I have struggled to get the wraps as tight as I can without making them impossible for me to close on my own. One of Malcolm's favorite ways to tease me is to tear the wraps off products I have secured by inching the steel cable along the edge of the box, frequently resulting in serious damage to product packaging. Today, he went to such lengths to demonstrate that my wrap was not tight enough that he tore a large hole in a laptop box. My expression went from one of relative contentment to one of irritation as he undid my work. He laughed in triumph, holding the removed wrap in the air. I noted that I could not get the wrap any tighter, and Rae [the security supervisor] actually told me that we secure the wraps too tightly most of the time. This makes them difficult to remove after purchase. "Really?" Malcolm seriously asked. He justified his actions: "Well, better to be too tight than too loose."

Men further marginalized women by failing to address female peers' sexist treatment by customers – a major problem at the store, so much so that even company training videos claimed "harassment by customers is an everyday part of the job."

As I finished wrapping items with security devices, an elderly white male shopper approached Malcolm and me. I greeted him, "Thanks for coming in. Can we give you a hand?" The shopper looked at me a moment, scoffed, and physically turned towards Malcolm with his questions. The sexism was obvious and somewhat shocking. I was very offended that the customer assumed I lacked knowledge due to my gender. I continued wrapping items and stepped away to approach other shoppers. After Malcolm finished answering the customer's questions and the man left, he walked up to me and commented that he knew that I noticed what just happened. He too picked up on the sexism. Malcolm remarked that he wished I would have stayed to listen to the content of the information he shared, and I apologized that I was too angry to stick around for too long.

Malcolm acknowledged the shoppers' inappropriate behavior, but his only response was to admonish *me* for not taking advantage of an opportunity to learn product information. His reply suggested that in order for me to succeed, I must accept discrimination – echoing the company training videos.

### Devaluing Women's Work

Men also marginalized women by devaluing their work – whether formal positions dominated by women, or work tasks that women took primary responsibility for. Ridiculing women's work conveyed that men did not take women seriously, and helped establish men's own work (and thus men, themselves) as more valuable, affirming their masculinity.

As I described in chapter four, positions at Electromart tend to be segregated by gender. Workers openly acknowledged the gendered division of labor, and criticized it – at least in the abstract:

... I was looking through the ad to see what was on sale as [Andre] walked up and asked if I noticed that there were not many female managers at Electromart. I said that yes, I noticed – there was really only Jess. I wondered aloud if that is because there were not really many female workers; most of the women in portable electronics were new hires. There was not a single female worker in computers. Andre said he had not really noticed about portable electronics, but confirmed that there were no women in computers. He said he thought they [management] should try to make it equal.

Karl similarly lamented that things had once been a bit more egalitarian:

[Karl] remarked that they should move some of the [female] cashiers back to portable electronics. Karl recalled that he started his employment at Electromart as a cashier, and at that time, there was an even split of men and women up front. Now, it is entirely female cashiers and three men in leadership positions.

Workers and managers simultaneously believed that bully monitoring made male-dominated departments less hospitable to women than men. Women were perceived of as less able to cope with bullying behaviors than their male peers. On an afternoon so slow at Electromart that I felt like I was “crawling the walls,” Tony, manager of computers, came through the department to quiz workers on the details of our service plans:

Tony was [aggressively] asking Paul the terms of our service plans, seemingly quizzing his knowledge. [Paul recited the terms, unfazed.] After he finished with Paul, he turned and asked me to do the same. He pointed to a new machine, and asked me to tell him about the service plan as Joe looked on. I asked if he simply wanted me to outline the terms, or did he want me to pretend to sell it? I was a bit confused and uncomfortable with being put on the spot. I explained that I would likely highlight the battery replacement for customers, and I shared that we also had a no-lemon policy. Tony asked me what that meant, as I said that we would fix any issues with the machine in-house rather than having a customer go through the manufacturer. Moments earlier, I heard Paul say something about a 3-repair limit of some sort, and I confessed that I did not know what this was. Tony sensed that I was uncomfortable and explained that he was trying to determine whether or not workers knew about the plans, not embarrass anyone or make them feel bad ...

Joe and Tony stepped off for a moment, and Conrad assured me that [Tony] was only asking [about the plans] because Joe and Tony had been getting a lot of crap for our drop in sales. Paul stood nearby and nodded. [They explained that Joe and Tony] were not trying to make me feel bad. I determined that I had come off as extremely uncomfortable during this test, and the guys were trying to make me feel better...

Men generally responded more confidently to managerial challenges than women, and I suspect that men would not have reassured a stuttering male colleague as they supported me in the instance above.

Women themselves acknowledged that men's use of bully monitoring made them feel intimidated to approach their bosses in male-dominated departments. On a slow afternoon in computers, Taylor complained to me that she was not getting enough hours. I suggested that she ask Tony, our manager, but she hesitated:

As we stood, [Taylor] asked if I knew how hours were determined. I said I was not sure. She complained that she had only received four on the current schedule, and she did not understand why she had gotten so few when other part-timers (like me) received over 30... Although she was angry about her hours and wanted to know why she had been denied hours, she felt "intimidated" to talk to Tony.

Taylor left the department a few weeks later.

Workers shared an understanding that the gendered division of labor resulted, in part, from women's attempts to leave departments led by masculine, bullying supervisors who made them feel uncomfortable:

As Rae [the security supervisor] searched my bag, she asked whether Jodi had moved up front [to work as a sales operator] permanently. I agreed that she had, and commented that there were no more women in computers. This seemed to be what Rae was getting at... Rae commented "That's too bad. What's up with that?" ... I suggested that many folks did not like working for Curtis, and she rolled her eyes and noted, "Yeah, I've heard some of that."

Despite workers' acknowledgement that the masculine company culture contributed to a gendered division of labor, men criticized women for electing to work in predominantly female jobs that they perceived as easier than those of men. This informal job hierarchy appeared most strongly to me when I left the male-dominated computers department to begin a position in phone sales – a job commonly occupied by women:

At one point, I asked computers to take a call to check on a price... Conrad responded immediately, already up front at computer repair. He teased and asked why I could not take the call – one of his favorite games since I transferred up front from computers. I announced that I did not have time for his crap at the moment, smiling and half-joking. He answered the call, and when he was finished, he asked why I had not just answered the question. He said, "You knew the answer." "Because 85 calls came in at once!" I protested, throwing my arms in the air. "Can't you just help me out?!" I asked, again half-joking. He joked that all I do up front is answer the phone, insinuating that my job is easy and I have little to do.

Conrad's sentiments were echoed by Malcolm:

... I overheard Malcolm talking to Farid at computer repair, telling him to install something. I called over my divider to Malcolm "Don't boss him!" He smirked and shot back "Don't you have calls to answer or something?"

Both Conrad and Malcolm's statements conveyed that they regarded the phone sales position as trivial. While the operator position required sales much like their own jobs, they described

it as simply “talking on the phone” – seemingly drawing on stereotypes of women as chatty, and diminishing women’s work.

When men devalued women’s positions, women felt marginalized and estranged from their peers:

Conrad... thanked me for “bloodying his ears earlier.” I turned around and asked what he was talking about, as Elton agreed that I had been loud. He recollected that I called for computers [on the walkie talkie] about three times, and when I seemingly missed their response..., I grew increasingly loud on my subsequent calls. I explained that my walkie had been malfunctioning; I had not heard anyone reply [and thus tried to turn up the volume]. “So your walkie was broken and you decided to yell into it?” Conrad quipped, obviously thinking this was a stupid thing to do. Elton cracked up, and was about to join in on further criticism when I just walked off.

I subsequently reflected:

I’ve been getting relentlessly teased by the computers guys since I became a sales operator. They ridicule me for “answering the phones,” obviously with the impression that what I do is not “real work” – despite the fact that... when I am the operator, far fewer calls come back [to the computers department] than when other [sales operators] are on duty. They criticize me when I pass off calls that are time-consuming or ill-timed, and rarely respond when I call them asking for help. When I come back to the department, they harangue me and demand to know what I am doing. At first I thought they were playfully teasing; Chad, Elton, Jodi [when still in back], Malcolm and Conrad all admit that they miss me. Yet lately, my patience is running thin, and I cannot help but feel a bit slighted and disrespected by their ongoing criticism.

Men likewise marginalized women by mocking those who completed gendered work tasks – tasks most closely associated with domestic responsibilities. Though all salespersons were formally required to dust and vacuum the store, in practice, these tasks were most often completed by women:

... I straightened and blocked [organized media], picking up and putting back returns. Gary and I blocked in CDs a few minutes and shared our New Year’s plans with each other. The store closed without much incident, and Gary left at 10pm. Like my previous shift, Erin was scheduled until 10:30pm, and I to 10:45pm. I vacuumed and

she blocked, and then we both vacuumed. This took us until when she clocked out. She commented that no one had ever vacuumed like we did. The boys blew through it.

Men ridiculed women for completing work tasks associated with domesticity, and obviously dismissed such tasks as unimportant:

When I returned to the floor, business picked up again, but not so much that all of us were busy at any given point in time. I used this opportunity to finish one of the tasks on the [daily to-do] list – cleaning up the employee desk area. I was busy dusting when Malcolm smirked and said that he had never seen *anyone* dust the desk area. His implication was that my dusting was gendered, despite the fact that it was listed on our departmental task list. I dusted a second more before I stopped, told him I was disturbed, and threw the duster away. He laughed and said he would finish in order to be more gender-equitable. His dusting skills entailed wiping a small vertical divider in circular motion for about two minutes.

Women's willingness to adopt all responsibility for such domestic tasks further allowed men to avoid completing them.

Finally, men devalued women's work by excluding female peers from conversations in which entry-level workers collaborated to solve departmental problems. By keeping women out of such conversations, men conveyed women's unimportance to the successful functioning of male-dominated units:

As Taylor and I spoke and greeted customers, Chad, Elton and Conrad congregated behind the computers desk. They discussed our theft figures... Conrad was seemingly training Elton until Joe appeared and the three remained. Taylor cynically noted that the boys were having a meeting and "didn't invite us, yet again." After she mentioned it, I had to agree that men typically meet in the store without inviting female coworkers to join.

### Undermining Women's Accomplishments

Despite the masculine work environment and men's disrespect of women's work, many women nonetheless became excellent salespeople. When women's success made it difficult for men to claim that women could not cut it or that they were valueless, men found various ways to undermine women's accomplishments. Diminishing women's success allowed men to reassert their comparative value and maintain gender privilege.

One way that men undermine women's accomplishments was responding to women's achievements in condescending ways. When men secured a large sale or got a high score on a customer secret shop, they were acknowledged on an individual basis for their value and expertise. Women's successes, on the other hand, were attributed to their gender – thus preventing any particular woman from being acknowledged as a legitimate salesperson:

As Farid and I stood by the desk, waiting for shoppers, Rod approached me with an email print-out. He proudly announced that he just emailed everyone in the store with the results of my recent mystery shop. I scored a 95/100... Rod boasted that he had just hired seven new hires, and five of them were female. He reported back mystery shop scores to Mac – all over 85 – and argued that the secret to sales success was women. I laughed and shrugged, simply responding “We're good.”

Although Rod applauded women's performance, he did so in a diminishing way. A larger “atta girl” discourse overshadowed the accomplishments of specific women, subsuming individual achievements in a façade of women's growing stature and power. As Douglas (2011) argues, such discourse ignores larger organizational and societal contexts, wherein patriarchal power relations continue. It also treats progress towards equality as something that is more cute and endearing than political.

Peers similarly diminished women's accomplishments, often by communicating surprise when women could do the same work as men.

Towards the end of my shift, two Asian shoppers in their mid-20s came in. The male was looking for a computer with a large screen appropriate for gaming... I stopped Conrad to ask him a question about RAM. The customer wanted to increase his RAM from 4GB to 6GB, but I was fairly confident that we did not have the right memory and that he could not have imbalanced cards in his memory slots. When I double checked with Conrad on this, he confirmed that we did not have the right memory. The slot issue was no longer important. "How did you know that?" he asked [alluding to the RAM balance]. I mentioned that I read it on the internet. "You been studying?" he inquired. I confirmed that I had, and he looked intrigued and impressed.

Many of Electromart's employees spent their free [unpaid] time learning more about electronics, both to improve their knowledge for work and to explore personal interests.

Conrad's surprise in response to my understanding and studying suggests that he held me to a lower standard than my peers, or else simply expected less of me.

Conrad adopted a similarly condescending tone when responding to women's sales success:

Back in computers, Conrad was punching in and checking his email... I began stuffing dossier folders and gathering work materials as he stared at the [computer] screen. "Come here, I've gotta show you something," he said. "What is it?" I impatiently asked. "Just come here!" he pleaded. When I rounded the desk, he pointed to a number on the screen: one. This was his sales tracker rating: he had surpassed the other employees to become the top-performing salesman in the store. He boasted about being the best, and I rolled my eyes while laughing. He suggested that I look up my score, and I joked that I was probably #68 or something. He insisted that he could show me how to look up my ranking. "Ok, ok," I conceded, and he guided me through the employee portal until I was at the correct screen. Staring at the figures, I was not exactly sure where to look. Conrad had looked away so I would have some privacy, but I asked him to turn back and show me where to look. When he did, we discovered that I was #8. "Whoa!" he exclaimed... "I'm proud of you," he said, a bit condescendingly, but intending to be sweet.

Workers typically competed to be the best salesperson in the store. If I were a male colleague, and Conrad and I received our same scores, he likely would have belittled me, consistent with masculine contests. Instead, Conrad affirmed my ranking – suggesting he did not take me seriously as a sales competitor.

In lieu of responding to women’s accomplishments with condescending praise, men occasionally explained women’s success as attributable to men. In the following passage from my field notes, Malcolm asserted that I would not have closed a major sale if not for his own efforts:

Malcolm called up front from computers, asking where I was after some request was made of him. Nearby Evan responded [via walkie talkie] that I was selling an in-home install, so Malcolm should take care of the request. “Ok, but I’m the one who told her to sell those services,” Malcolm matter-of-factly replied. I became furious. I closed the sale on the services, and Malcolm was trying to take credit for our entire exchange. Furthermore, I knew that Ed [the customer] had been in before, and other folks – including myself – had offered services to him at that time. I did not reply, however. Evan later jokingly asked “Did you hear Malcolm giving you crap over the walkie?” “Yes,” I sternly replied. “I guess he’s the only one who does any work around here.”

I eventually confronted Malcolm and argued that it was inappropriate for him to take credit for the sale, after which he relented. I suspect, however, that if I had been a man, I would have objected immediately over the walkie.

Finally, men undercut women’s accomplishments by refusing to help them. Work at Electromart frequently required worker cooperation, and by withholding effort – particularly with regards to tasks they deemed below them – men could make women’s lives very difficult on the sales floor:

Despite my announcement that I was heading out on the town tonight, Farid and Malcolm did very little to prepare the department for closing... [Yet Megan] began

the downstocking report. She asserted that if she knocked this out, there would not be much left for me to do before leaving. Malcolm trailed her down a few aisles as she worked, doing a bunch of nothing on his own. Farid, on the other hand, openly announced that he did not care about the closing tasks...

As Megan completed the downstocking report, I made a list of computers to be understocked and pulled them from the cages. Malcolm watched and occasionally came over to make a snarky comment. Farid simply stared towards the front of the store. I began getting angry that the two were blowing off closing responsibilities.

### *Silencing Dissent*

Not all men in male-dominated units adhered to expectations associated with hegemonic masculinity at all times. In rare cases, workers objected to the marginalization of women and their department culture more generally. In such situations, dissent tended to be expressed in quiet – where it could not be critiqued by the group at large – or else resulted in social push-back.

Men occasionally acknowledged that the macho environment they cultivated could offend women, and worried about how their female coworkers felt. Ironically, however, men seemingly felt unable to oppose misogyny in front of their male peers without risking emasculation. Peer monitoring created a net of accountability that enacted a powerful source of social control (Fenstermaker and West 2002). In the excerpt below, Farid seemingly felt cajoled into ridiculing women in the context of a larger department that routinely supported misogyny – suggesting that alternative strategies for enacting manhood were socially repressed (see Connell 1987):

As I showed Chad how to [security] wrap items, Malcolm and Conrad took turns teasing me and mocking women. An unsightly gold-trimmed women's computer bag

lay on the table, and Farid and Malcolm laughed about how crappy it was – seemingly suggesting that this implied something about women being superficial... About half an hour [later], Farid approached me and quietly whispered “I’m sorry if I offended you.” He was quite serious, looking directly into my eyes. I assured him that he had not – all he really said was that the bag was ugly, and that was not really debatable. I patted his arm in reassurance. Did he feel compelled to be a part of the gender teasing after seeing Malcolm and Conrad? It is difficult to say.

When workers publically criticized some aspect of the social dynamics in male-dominated units, peers tended to silence and dismiss them. Early one morning, the computers team met before the store opened to undergo video-based training mandated by corporate. We watched a film stating that 30 percent of Electromart’s shoppers paid for their items at the front registers (as opposed to within sales departments). Joe, our supervisor, asked whether or not we felt that figure was accurate at our location, which laid the ground work for coworker conflict:

Joe asked if we think 30% of our customers cash out up front. Ben quickly replied “only foreign [customers].” Farid considered this as an inappropriate, racist remark, and angrily announced that “we need to help *all* customers, even those who don’t speak English.” Brendan [Farid’s coworker] tried to back Farid up; he noted that there is a translation line that employees can call to facilitate communication with shoppers who cannot speak English. As Brendan spoke, Farid watched Ben, who was talking to someone else. Joe asked that all workers pay attention, and Farid called Ben out for not listening. The two began raising their voices with each other, with Ben cussing at Farid and defending himself as not having said or done anything offensive. Tony [our manager] stepped in and physically pulled Ben away from the group and behind the computers desk. I looked on as Tony wagged his finger at Ben – as though Ben was a child being disciplined. Though I could not hear their conversation, Ben swung his arms and was clearly defending himself, visibly angry to be in trouble...

When I clocked in for my shift in the hours following the meeting, workers had regrouped to discuss the morning’s events:

... I walked past Conrad and Ben discussing Farid’s call-out on international customers during our group meeting. Ben said that he could not understand why Farid became so angry, and Conrad quietly noted that Farid had overreacted.

Conrad and Ben paint Farid's concern with the treatment of international shoppers as an "overreaction," not a serious problem to be addressed. In the months that followed the meeting, Farid disengaged from most of his coworkers, and would not speak to Ben.

### *Summary*

I conclude that gendered values, expectations and identities shaped how managers, supervisors and workers in male-dominated departments experienced and responded to workplace surveillance. The "doing gender" theoretical approach buttresses labor process and Foucauldian understandings of workplace monitoring by explaining variation in who experiences workplace surveillance, the form surveillance takes, and in what ways individuals respond. Men's participation in masculine contests, supported by peer surveillance, and marginalization of female peers resulted from efforts to defend both their workplace autonomy and their masculinity. Male supervisors and managers bully monitored their workers not only to intensify labor, but also to establish status and manhood in a degrading, uncertain work environment that emphasized competition and control. Social control quelled dissent to masculine group dynamics. The association between surveillance and hegemonic masculinity was striking.

Women's *exclusion* from masculine surveillance processes reflected women's relative powerlessness at Electromart. Men did not monitor and compete with female coworkers as they did with male peers, because women (1) were presumed, a-priori, to be incapable of cutting it, (2) completed devalued work tasks or moved to devalued positions, and (3) could

otherwise be disregarded when successful. Women's acquiescence to men's marginalizing actions – in large part, resulting from their own desire to maintain good relationships with men, consistent with emphasized femininity (Connell 87) – only solidified women's exclusion.

In the following chapter, I contrast men's use of surveillance to enact hegemonic masculinity and marginalization of women throughout predominantly male-departments with the relatively cooperative role of monitoring in gender-balanced and predominantly-female units. I argue that gender-balanced and predominantly-female departments maintain distinct subcultures that allow workers to use and respond to surveillance in less threatening ways.

## **CHAPTER 7: COOPERATIVE SURVEILLANCE**

In chapter six, I explored how Electromart's masculine company culture and men's use of surveillance as a tool to establish masculinity shaped workers' experiences of and responses to monitoring in male-dominated work groups. In this chapter, I explore surveillance outside the context of predominantly male units – in portable electronics, which was the most gender-integrated department in the store, and in operations, which was the only part of Electromart comprised mostly of women. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue, masculinity and femininity are best understood in relation to each other. Masculinity represents control, while femininity represents being controlled. The gendered nature of individuals' actions becomes most evident when researchers explore masculinity and femininity side-by-side.

I find that Electromart's gender-balanced and predominantly female units engaged surveillance in different ways than did male-dominated units – using monitoring to improve the collective and the store's bottom line, rather than establish any single individual's status or power. I refer to this process as “cooperative surveillance,” and note its congruence with gender displays associated with emphasized femininity (see Connell 1987). Though men occasionally worked in gender-balanced and mostly-female units, they rarely acted like the men I described in the previous chapter because their female coworkers established alternative subcultures in which men were held less accountable to expectations associated with hegemonic masculinity than elsewhere in the store. The physical and social distinctiveness of the store's departments supported such gender differentiation.

Differences between monitoring for masculinity and cooperative surveillance were most stark in operations, where leaders encouraged their subordinates to surveil one another with empathy and understanding. I refer to this process as “supportive supervision,” and argue that operations’ affirming subculture encouraged workers to act selflessly on behalf of the group. Workers’ behavior in the predominantly-female units came closest to embodying emphasized femininity, or submission.

### *Emphasized Femininity*

Much like individuals in a given social context idealize certain behaviors as embodying a masculine ideal, people share notions for how women ought to express their womanhood – best captured in Connell’s (1987) concept of “emphasized femininity.” Across social settings, emphasized femininity appears as *compliance with subordination*. The title “emphasized” is used in lieu of “hegemonic” to describe idealized feminine displays because “hegemonic” implies power and authority whereas femininity commonly reflects powerlessness and oppression (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Connell 1987).

Characteristics representing emphasized femininity tend to vary across social contexts much like those associated with hegemonic masculinity. Western women have historically been expected to prioritize “the display of sociability rather than technical competence” (Connell 1987:187) – demonstrating their value in creating and maintaining social relationships, *not* developing their intellect. As Cockburn (1988) explains, men have monopolized access to technical knowledge throughout industrial capitalism. Men overwhelmingly create and maintain technological devices, leading women to develop less

sophisticated understandings of how technologies operate. Embodying “nurturance and empathy as womanly values” (Connell 1987:188) in lieu of technical expertise allows women to signal compliance with men’s exclusionary practices, thereby escaping ridicule, facilitating heterosexual relationships with men and perhaps even avoiding violence.

### *Cooperative Peer Monitoring*

At Electromart, women embodied emphasized femininity by deemphasizing their individual knowledge and achievements and framing success in group-oriented terms. In portable electronics and operations, workers assumed responsibility for monitoring and disciplining peers’ behavior, but rarely as a means to demonstrate an individual’s personal value or skill. Instead, coworker surveillance enabled informal peer training, facilitated collaboration, and helped workers evade discipline – thus benefitting the collective. Women’s stake in enacting prosocial feminine behaviors contributed to cooperative subcultures in predominantly-female and gender-balanced units that ultimately led *both men and women* to affirm and assist their peers. The contrast with mostly-male departments was most stark in “operations,” wherein supportive supervision led by the store’s only female manager encouraged the mostly female staff to act in a distinctly selfless, feminine way.

### Informal Peer Training

Cooperative surveillance at Electromart first became evident to me as I began on-the-job training in portable electronics. I quickly discovered that experienced workers in gender-balanced and predominantly-female work groups monitored the progress of new hires and

offered them guidance and knowledge crucial to becoming well-functioning employees. While workers in male-dominated work groups also helped train their coworkers, their training often focused as much on establishing the expertise of the trainer as it did on helping new hires, and was rarely delivered in the supportive tone common in portable electronics and operations.

In the gender-balanced portable electronics unit, established employees monitored new hires in an effort to identify opportunities to share information about company practices. Without their extra effort, new workers would struggle to figure out even the most basic procedures:

Wayne [a black male in his 40s and senior employee in portable electronics] asked if he could help me, and I told him I was a new hire and waiting to log in. He introduced himself. He logged onto the computer system and walked through the log-in with me, step by step. I had several errors in my hourly allotment recordings, and Wayne showed me exactly where to click to edit my times appropriately. It was a huge relief; the timing system had been giving me problems from the start... Wayne was very particular about making sure everything was exactly right before I left the terminal; I felt very comfortable asking him questions.

Similar practices were common in operations, the store's only predominantly female unit:

I did not have to ask many questions, except what qualified for recycling (I asked Athena, a white customer service representative in her early 20s) and whether or not we could repair standard cell phones (I asked Ivan, a white computer repair tech in his 50s). Both were helpful, especially Athena. When I asked whether we accepted remote controls, she came up to me after my call was complete to ask whether I had learned about our recycling qualifications. I said no, I had not, and she gave me a quick run-down of the program.

Senior workers adopted responsibility for monitoring and training new hires with little input from management. Long-term employees drew on their own experiences with the

company to determine what new hires should know and when they ought to learn it. Often, this required coordination with other staff:

Mick [a white male in his early 20s and salesperson in portable electronics] asked if I had been register-trained yet, and suggested that I could do this for the last hour... of my shift... He set something in back before returning up front with me and asking Mario, a cashier supervisor, if I could train with Mona. Mario replied that this was not a problem.

Established workers also took action to protect new hires from becoming overwhelmed amidst organizational anomie. They reviewed departmental schedules and went out of their way to ensure that new employees had peer support while they acquired job skills and product knowledge:

In the middle of my demo with Rod, Wayne came up looking frantic and asked to see me when I was done... I found him a few minutes later wrapping up with a customer. He told me that I was the only person assigned to close [the store] that night. I was immediately stressed; I have never closed alone, and my camera/camcorder knowledge is very limited. I have no car stereo knowledge, and I would be alone after 8:30pm until almost 11pm! I looked stressed and asked whom I could call on for help. Wayne said that Rick would be in as he walked up. Joe would be too, and he similarly approached at this time. Jeff came up too. Rod accompanied him. Everyone could see a bit of our anxiety... Wayne asked Rod if anyone could stay late, and he said yes and immediately asked Jeff.

In addition to helping hires acclimate to job tasks, senior staff in gender-balanced and female-dominated units helped new employees by providing guidance on social aspects of work. Commonly, established workers helped new hires learn the quirks of specific managers – allowing them to meet company expectations and finish their shifts on time:

Angelica [a white woman in her early 20s and salesperson in portable electronics] told me to fill in new releases, as this is something Mac likes when he closes. In other words, workers adopt closing behaviors in accordance with managerial preferences and personalities... Sure enough, Mac spotted empty [product] locations and made Angelica, Jorge, and others from customer service fill these in.

Experienced workers further helped new staff build cooperative relationships with peers both within and outside their immediate work groups. By sharing informal work rules, established workers helped prevent coworker conflict and improved efficiency:

Allie [a white customer service representative in her early 20s]... was in and out of the desk area, and she and Stacy [a white phone sales operator in her mid-20s] explained that we try to avoid passing calls to departments whenever possible. Folks do not like to respond to the phone, so if there is a question regarding a specific product, we try to answer it. The weekday folks from mobile would be more helpful than those on the weekend. Certain people in each department would reliably be more useful than others. I would learn who those people were rather quickly.

Tenured workers similarly helped new hires prepare for abuse from customers. As I began sales operator training during a slow computers shift, Stacy, a white woman in her mid-20s, instructed that I ought to expect nasty shoppers to call in. Preparing peers for customer abuse helped prevent new workers from taking shoppers' hostilities personally and internalizing negative feedback:

[Stacy] paused to accept calls, one from a caller who refused to believe her when she explained that our location does not sell ipad cases. "I'm in an Electromart *right now*, and you definitely have cases," he angrily replied. "Yes sir, we have them at some locations, but not all," she patiently explained. He hung up on her, and she rolled her eyes before calling him a dick. She warned that there would be many rude callers.

Finally, established workers helped new hires determine when they could afford to cut corners when completing job responsibilities without engendering supervisory scrutiny. This information would prove invaluable, as the company was notorious for changing existing procedures and adding new ones (e.g., offering company credit cards to every shopper) in an effort to increase profits. By instructing new employees on which of their job requirements were less important than others, more experienced workers helped those in training learn to manage their workload:

Wayne took care of [of our electronic closing check list], noting that many of the tasks that had been assigned to different people had not been completed during previous shifts. He went into the system and checked them off. I asked if he was actually going to complete the work, and he said no. I certainly had no problem with this. As Erin said earlier, we would likely get out early with 3 people.

Similarly:

Jorge [a Hispanic salesperson in his early 20s in portable electronics] worked in mp3 players and helped me throughout the night. He told me that... he dislikes closing with Rick and Jess, especially because Jess is never happy with vacuuming. “Just vacuum poorly first time because she’ll have you do it again anyway,” he instructed.

All vacuums seem to be broken; there is only one operational vacuum for the entire sales team... [When I asked about it,] Jorge told me not to vacuum my area (contrary to procedures), and to fix items that were only obviously messed up.

True to Jorge’s word, I found that no matter how long I spent trying to vacuum the sales floor, managers never seemed to be satisfied that I had done a good job. The vacuums were so old that they picked up almost nothing. By spending less time on vacuuming, I could focus on a litany of other closing tasks that management would be more concerned with and evaluate me more positively for completing (e.g., putting away returns, straightening shelves, putting out stock).

### Collaboration

In gender-balanced and female-dominated work units, peer monitoring tended to facilitate collaboration. Workers assessed their efforts and challenges alongside those of others to divide work into manageable parts and achieve goals in concert with one another. Like informal peer training, collaboration occurred in male dominated units, yet much less often than in work groups containing higher proportions of women.

Staff in gender-balanced and female-dominated work groups frequently worked together to fulfill job responsibilities. While men<sup>10</sup> in male-dominated departments commonly avoided work even when it meant burdening their peers, individuals in other units shared accountability for completing work tasks:

Very early in my shift, Erin [a white portable electronics salesperson in her mid-20s] said she would float between departments and work on putting items away. This way, we would all get out on time... I liked the prospect of staying up on restocks so we could get out early. I told her to go for it; my exact words were "I support you." We had a joking theme running through the night where I told Erin I supported her every time she came to update me on her whereabouts.

This prosocial orientation extended beyond the immediate work group to others in the store. Individuals in gender-balanced and female-dominated groups helped those in other units – even male-dominated units, which almost never returned the favor.

When workers in gender-balanced or predominantly-female units identified each other as having free time, they negotiated workloads based on perceptions of need. Workers respected demands on their peers and cooperated to ensure that those with the most pressing obligations could meet their goals.

Looking at the schedule prior to my shift, I knew that Corrine [a white sales operator in her early 20s] and I had overlapping schedules for the day. This is very unusual at the sales operator desk... Corrine arrived right at 12, her scheduled start time, and likewise appeared surprised to see double coverage. I asked whether she had certifications to do, and she admitted that she had many remaining. She was careful to assure me that she would help me, however, and that she was willing to take the phones if I would like. She also commented that she had lots of hiring work to do, as she is taking over Stacy's role of hiring coordinator. I suggested that she complete some hiring work, and I would take full responsibility for our normal tasks.

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<sup>10</sup> Women in male-dominated work groups tended to behave more like those in gender-balanced or female-dominated work groups in these situations, as they were marginalized by their male peers regardless of whether or not they tried to conform to masculine group norms.

Even workers not immediately benefitting from collaborative accomplishments monitored their peers and chipped in as needed. In the following excerpt from my notes, Jodi, a new phone sales operator, received a customer call requesting a large television purchase right as she was overwhelmed with a huge influx of other calls. Jaclyn, a white customer service supervisor in her late 20s, stepped in to help the sales operator team secure the sale:

A caller contacted us to request that we reinstate a cancelled TV order and delivery. The TV sold for over \$1000, and this would be a tremendous phone sale for us to secure. As I was called away for other calls and by coworkers, Jodi got slammed on the phone, and Jaclyn looked up the customers' information. Jaclyn handed me the cancellation receipt, and urged me to complete the sale on the phone by eagerly pointing to the dollar amount. Truth be told, I felt very excited, but there was no reason for Jaclyn to be [excited] ...

When issues arose in gender-balanced and predominantly female work groups, individual staff persons solved problems to benefit the collective – not merely to enhance their individual status, as was common in male-dominated units. In the following example, Tonya, a black phone sales operator in her early 30s, offered constructive criticism of sales operator practices to improve statistics collected on sales operators as well as the work flow for customer service representatives:

Tonya announced [to the group] that... operator sales have been dropping, and our abandon rate (the number of calls we do not pick up relative to those coming in) has been steadily increasing... So “We need to pick up our phones.” Each time our unanswered calls are forwarded to customer service, this likewise hurts our abandon rate. More pointedly, Tonya began talking to the sales operators – only Corrine and I at the moment – and shared that customer service reps have been telling her that it is difficult for them to pick up the calls we do not answer. Her solution to the situation is putting callers on hold until she can get to each, and limiting all calls to less than five minutes – preferably far less – in length.

Workers in gender-balanced and female-dominated work groups appeared to genuinely enjoy making their peers' lives easier. This finding is at odds with previous

research explaining work group collaboration as resulting from the disciplinary aspects of peer monitoring; that is, coworker surveillance leads to policing, subjectively experienced as increasing performance pressures and estranging workers from one another (Barker 1999; Sewell and Wilkinson 1992). While I occasionally spotted instances of such coworker discipline, it was far more common for workers in gender-balanced and female-dominated work groups to express happiness that they had been able to help coworkers accomplish goals:

... most of our meeting was spent sharing the results of a mystery shop. As Ben would later tell me, mystery shoppers come into our store and rate employee performance once per month. This month, the cashier team scored a perfect 100%. The young black male cashier who had “been shopped” was present at the meeting, and received big smiles and high fives from his coworkers and Rod. He looked genuinely thrilled that he had done so well representing his unit.

Similarly:

... I was asked to process two phone sales today, nearly back-to-back, for products available at [discounted] bundle pricing online, but not packaging out as such in store. Although this created some strain as I hurried to answer phone calls, it likewise generated tons of revenue for the sales operator position. I even managed to sell a protection plan on a camcorder – pure profit for us. I was thrilled to see we had practically hit our budget by the time I left at 3pm, creating little remaining work for Tonya. All she would have to do is sell an ipad that I put on hold last minute in order for us to exceed expectations.

My use of the words “us” and “we” suggests a group orientation in operations. I construct success in terms of unit accomplishments, not my achievements as an individual salesperson.

### Evading Discipline

In all areas of the store, workers covered for one another when confronted by management.

Workers in male-dominated departments tended to be selective in whom they defended, but

those in gender-balanced and predominantly-female units tended to help peers regardless of personal allegiances. A great deal of the peer surveillance that occurred in gender-balanced and predominantly-female work groups centered on helping coworkers evade formal discipline, which seemed imminent given management's widespread use of bully monitoring. Whereas men in male-dominated departments resisted bully monitoring in defense of their masculinity, workers in portable electronics and operations coped using avoidance.

Workers in portable electronics often monitored their peers' whereabouts in an effort to keep peers from being admonished by the security team or management for leaving departments uncovered. One way that Electromart ensured that customers got help and could not steal was by encouraging workers to remain "zoned," or isolated to certain segments of the store. Workers commonly surveilled their peers to ensure that each part of their department was covered. Management occasionally tolerated workers not being zoned (e.g., very busy days, leading workers to be pulled out of their units by shoppers; or days with very limited staffing). Sharing information about when management enforced zoning rules allowed peers to escape supervisory ridicule that may have otherwise been difficult to predict:

Jorge [a salesperson in portable electronics] came up and gave me an enthusiastic "Hey Jules!" He always greets me with enthusiasm; yesterday, it was a hug. Today he seemed a little more business-like. He told me that Rae [the security supervisor] wanted us to stay zoned (isolated to one store area), and he wanted me to stay in cameras.

By dividing workers into different units, Jorge ensured that he and his coworkers would be less likely to engender scrutiny.

Workers in gender-balanced and female-dominated units similarly monitored peers' adherence to various policies geared towards preventing customer theft, as deviation from protocol commonly invited scrutiny from the store's security team. Preceding the scene that follows, I removed a camera from a locked storage case so that a customer could physically handle the device before agreeing to make a purchase. Electromart generally disallowed customers from handling items stored in locked cases, however, as products stored therein tended to be relatively expensive and hence costly to replace if damaged or stolen. Sara, my coworker, knew that if I continued to let customers handle unpurchased items from our locked cases that a security officer might spot my transgression on camera and publically chastise me over the walkie talkie system. Sara tried to preemptively correct my behavior – not in an effort to establish her own status or power, but to help me avoid embarrassment and punishment:

As I finished a sale with a customer, [Sara, a white salesperson in her 30s] told me that customers were not allowed to hold the camera boxes... The shopper [I just finished helping] was in fact holding his camera for a few minutes, but he stood right next to me the entire time... Sara [reassuringly] admitted that it can be hard, as she herself sometimes allows shoppers to handle items, but we must hold unpurchased products ourselves.

Notice that Sara tried to empathize with me as she evaluates my behavior – she is trying to help, not control or one-up me. Her tone was supportive and instructive, not domineering or disciplinary.

Coworkers also monitored their peers in an effort to prevent formal discipline, or being “written up.” Write-ups (and subsequent firings) were extremely common at the store, so much so that Anna, a customer service representative, actually boasted about never having

received one. An excess of three write-ups immediately resulted in being fired. By alerting workers to common disciplinary traps, peers helped their coworkers maintain employment:

I was helping some customers in gaming when Sara [a salesperson in portable electronics] approached me and told me I could be written up if my shirt was not tucked in. I looked towards my back, not having realized that it had come un-tucked as I worked. I told her I had not realized it was un-tucked, and she reassured me that she was only telling me so I did not get in trouble – not because she herself cared. I thanked her for the heads-up.

Workers proactively prevented discipline of their peers by convincing management that coworkers identified as being delinquent in their responsibilities should not be held accountable. By doing so, they gave peers who may have otherwise been punished an “out”:

Rick [a manager] asked if we had completed [an electronic list of closing responsibilities], and Wayne confirmed that we had. Rick logged into the system, noting all kinds of uncompleted tasks, although none in portable electronics [Wayne’s department]. Wayne explained that many people did not know how to log into the system, and because many never had (e.g., Cici, who has been with the company for several years), new tasks could not be assigned to them.

Wayne’s comments helped absolve his peers of responsibility for incomplete tasks. Rick could see that many items remained unchecked, but could not be sure that his staff knew that the items were unchecked or that they were responsible for the tasks at all. Wayne’s statements suggest a structural problem (workers’ inability to log into the computer system) when Rick was likely to assume as individual problem (delinquent, lazy workers).

In male-dominated units, workers rarely covered for peers they disliked. In fact, they often looked for ways to get disfavored coworkers punished. In female-dominated units, workers were less discriminating when deciding who to help. For example, when my coworker Tonya was late to her sales operator shift, I felt irritated that I had to remain late – especially since I did not particularly care for Tonya. Yet I lied to my manager, Jess, when

she asked if Tonya was tardy, knowing that this was an ongoing point of contention between

Jess and Tonya:

I continued to take calls until the clock read 3:02pm. Rain was starting to come down outside as I received a call from Tonya. She was outside at the [traffic] light, but she asserted that she would be right in [to relieve me]. Her tone was not very apologetic, and I was offended a moment before I considered that she was thoughtful enough to call. "It's cool," I casually replied. "I don't have anywhere to be, so take your time."

Tonya arrived about five minutes later as I continued wrapping up a call. She hurried to the desk and set her things down, but seemed impatient that I was still on the phone. I did not know how to please her; I could not just hang up [on a customer]! She stood behind me a moment with a sour look on her face before dashing off again. I was off the phone a second later, but she was not there to assume responsibilities yet. Jess happened to be passing by and noticed. "Is she late?" Jess demanded, sounding impatient. "No, no," I covered – she was here a moment ago, but I was finishing with a customer, so I suspect she ran to the ladies room. "Ok," Jess replied, seemingly satisfied. She walked off, and Tonya returned two minutes later.

In a male-dominated unit, men would have likely "outed" a peer in the situation described above. Expectations associated with emphasized femininity in gender-balanced and predominantly-female departments help silence complaints about coworkers.

### *Supportive Supervision*

Supervision in female-dominated work groups differed dramatically from the bully monitoring initiated by male managers on the sales floor. Whereas male managers and supervisors used surveillance to dominate, women managed their work groups in ways that felt affirming and supportive. Even male supervisors in female-dominated units tended to be more congenial towards their employees than male supervisors on the sales floor. This concern with workers' feelings and experiences was consistent with expectations of

sociability, emotionality and empathy associated with emphasized femininity, and contradicted the masculine logic of the company at-large.

Jess was the only female manager employed at my site, and she cultivated a very different atmosphere among workers than male managers did. Whereas men adopted bullying strategies to elicit worker consent, Jess focused on improving employees' work experience – particularly in “operations,” or among the cashiers, customer service representatives and sales operators she directly managed. Her behavior is consistent with larger expectations that women be nurturing and emotionally affirming:

Jess [a white woman in her late 30s] argued that we were #1 in our department satisfaction scores, and she wanted to remain there. If anyone was not happy with their job, they ought to let her know, so we could change things to increase satisfaction. For instance, she protested that the cashier supervisors were not spending enough time with the cashiers, and this is unacceptable... Jess empathetically described how being alone in a register cube all day long could get extremely boring and repetitive, making cashiering the most difficult job in the store. Sharing time and conversation with someone else could make the time pass much more quickly, and prevent folks from dreading their shifts. A few cashiers, all very young, agreed that it was difficult to be alone all day.

Unlike other managers at the store, Jess seemed genuinely invested in eliciting worker consent by creating the fun company atmosphere described in orientation videos. Her upbeat approach had a noticeable effect on worker attitudes and participation:

I went back and turned things on until Jess announced [the morning meeting] over the loudspeaker. I made my way up front to find a small group of openers huddled around the computer repair register. Typically, a chalk talk group is a bit more sprawling; folks wearily slump in, either tired or hung-over from the evening before. It was a bit unusual to see people smiling and standing within four feet of Jess. Folks chit-chatted with her as she waited for others to appear. “Ok, I guess this is it,” she said, a few minutes later. She reported back our [sales] figures from Friday, which had been a good day. We closed more sales than normal for a Friday, and we had hit revenue. Jess quizzed us: why is it important to hit revenue? Pete from home theater and Bob from appliances both replied “So we can grow the business” in unison. It was a

rehearsed response to a classic company question. Corrine chimed in that we could make bonuses if we consistently hit budget. “Yes!” Jess replied. She restated that hitting revenue allows us to develop the business and also earn extra money for ourselves. Her tone was casual and light; I felt comfortable at this meeting. As she spoke, she asked a new customer service supervisor to go grab a ball and bat from the manager’s office... Jess... said we would be playing a game before the store opened. She accepted a large child’s ball and whiffle bat from the new supervisor, and ushered everyone from the meeting over to the center of the store. She asked what we could use as bases, and Corrine, Pete and others began moving displays in place. The “field” was extremely small, but there were too many shelves and displays on the floor to have much more room anywhere else. Marcus, Corrine and Pete took turns at bat, with Sam acting as pitcher... everyone cracked up as folks hit the large ball, often high up towards the ceiling, and bee-lined around the “bases.” Jess herself laughed appreciatively. After each batter was through (commonly with a home run victory lap), she would ask “Who’s next?”

In addition to Jess’ actions to improve workers’ lives at Electromart, Jess directed the store’s volunteer team. Each Electromart location established a volunteer group for organizing community service events and devising local initiatives to improve workers’ well-being. Before Jess led it, our store’s team was totally inactive and stagnant. After she took over, our location sponsored a community service event at least once per month, and activities to increase worker engagement became routine. An overwhelming number of workers participated in unpaid community service events, and those who were on the volunteer team frequently came in for hours on their days off. Workers did not seem to feel pressured into participation.

Jess’ supportive managerial style enabled operations supervisors to develop congenial relationships with their employees. Whereas bullying managers created conditions that encouraged their supervisors to mistreat workers, Jess’ pro-worker sentiments set the stage for her supervisors to establish a relatively harmonious work atmosphere. In the following

quote, Mario, a cash supervisor, acknowledged that operations created a less hostile work atmosphere than that of sales:

... Cashiers jumped on the machine next to me... to finish trainings of their own. Mario and the new cashier supervisor, Nicky, would occasionally stop over and tease the cashiers for their speed or knowledge. Everyone was all laughs, and Mario commented that he did not deal with all the anger on the sales floor... He seemed genuinely casual, and has always appeared laidback with his staff. He cracks corny jokes on a regular basis, and speaks to people like they are his equal rather than inferiors.

Supervisors on the sales floor commonly shared Mario's preference for a more light-hearted work environment, but bullying managers pressured their supervisors into adopting an aggressive, punitive approach towards subordinates (recall Joe's story from "Pressure on Management" in chapter 6). Jess, on the other hand, never encouraged a "get tough" managerial style.

Whereas performance pressures heightened bullying on the sales floor, operations management almost never directed their stress downward:

Today was a rather unusual Tuesday, as there was no one scheduled to work customer service. This left all customer returns and exchanges largely for Mario [the cash supervisor] to complete. He simultaneously adopted these responsibilities in addition to the typical cash supervisor tasks – counting money, doing price overrides, answering phone calls, and resolving customer issues... This did not seem to faze Mario at all; in fact, he was more energized than I have ever seen him... He raced around the store to complete employee requests and answer questions as though he was doing half his job, not two jobs at once...

All I could do was laugh and try not to bring him down. "I don't want any [customer] complaints today!" he loudly announced – not because he did not feel like dealing with difficult customer issues, but because he seemed to be on a positive-energy kick. "No complaints today, Jules!" he reasserted as he sped by, and I laughed, shrugged, and agreed. Later, as I processed a customer pick-up, I asked him a procedural question, completed the task, and wondered whether the shopper was good-to-go. "Naw!" Mario loudly replied, arm tossed through the air. "She can stay and chill wit'

us! We're having fun today at customer service!" ... the customer responded with laughter...

Mario went out of his way to convince me and perhaps himself that a stressful day could be fun.

Operations management also took proactive steps to help their staff succeed – by chipping in to complete tasks for workers, or finding ways to improve their work processes. On the sales floor, however, such interventions were extremely rare. In the following example from my notes, Jaclyn, a white supervisor at customer service in her late 20s, enthusiastically showed me an electronic tool that would streamline sales operator responsibilities. No one at corporate required that we use this tool or that she tell workers about it; she simply thought it could make my life easier:

... Jaclyn... explained that the sales operator tool would help us organize calls, schedule outgoing calls, add sales, and determine our personal budgets. It automatically output reports on existing holds towards the end of each shift. She spoke excitedly about the tool, waving her hands in the air as she described its features. I could not believe how geeked out she was.

Operations management communicated to workers that they regarded everyone in operations as part of a team. Even though different operations units were assessed independently of one another (e.g., customer service as separate from phone sales), managements' concern with staff outside their immediate group cultivated a sense of unity:

When I took the desk, I noticed a receipt for a product hold. Someone sold an ipad, which generated a good chunk of revenue. I knew it had not been me, and when I later asked Jodi, she denied it was her. Jaclyn had [made the sale], crediting the sales operator team ... there was no reason to credit the sale to us, but she had done so, despite our general failure to help her that morning [when she was busy]. I felt torn between guilt for accepting sale credit and admiration.

Jacyln's actions encourage me to adopt a similarly selfless orientation towards customer service in the future.

Operations management went beyond simply working hard themselves; they acknowledged employees who went above and beyond work responsibilities:

In my employee email, I received a message from Jess. Last time I worked, I provided instructions on completing opening and closing task lists ... to all sale operators. I noticed that we had not been completing the tasks as we are supposed to, and figured that Corrine or Jodi might not be familiar with what to do or how to do it. Completing the tasks requires almost no effort, and I am fairly certain that it is a metric we are judged on. By simply hitting "complete" in a timely fashion, we likely improve some score and make Jess look good... [Jess] thanked me for "keeping others accountable" and said "I love it!"

Unlike managers and supervisors in male-dominated departments, operations management treated workers with respect even when they made mistakes. In the excerpt below from my field notes, I was nervous to tell Mario and Jess that I had processed phone sales using our internet sales interface after being unable to locate the phone sales program in its normal spot on the computer. My experiences on the sales floor led me to believe that I would be disciplined for my error. Instead, Mario and Jess affirmed me and helped me avoid the mistake in future sales:

After I got off the phone with my customer, I felt some anxiety about notifying Mario or Jess about my decision... During a lull, I anxiously explained to Mario that I could not find phone sales in our menus any longer, so I had processed the [phone] sales as web because "I didn't want to lose the sales." ... he seemed to agree that I had made the right decision; he did not know anything about the missing program, but suggested I ask Jess about it.

Jess was counting cash in the cash office, and was similarly confused by the absence of the program in the menus. I held my breath as she read through, nervous again that I might have missed something. She... quickly located it using an employee search widget. She did not seem upset that I missed it, and like Mario, confirmed that it was

good I ordered via the web to keep the sales. She gave me instructions on how to list the phone sales link as a favorite under the employee portal, and I felt relieved...

Mario and Jess' responses to my error made me feel more comfortable coming to them with mistakes. As a consequence, I was more apt to admit errors or shortcomings in future encounters. This allowed operations leadership to stay abreast of potential problems in the unit and perhaps even proactively resolve them.

### *Worker Selflessness*

Workers responded very positively to supportive supervision, evidenced in part by their willingness to use surveillance in the cooperative ways I have already described. Workers in predominantly-female units exceeded this level of workplace citizenship, however, by engaging in compliant, selfless behaviors consistent with emphasized femininity.

Women in predominantly-female units were distinct from those who worked elsewhere in the store in the sense that they seemed personally and emotionally invested in their unit's success. Though workers in other parts of Electromart undoubtedly wanted to perform well as individuals (male-dominated units) or support their peers (portable electronics), women's concern with the performance of operations as a whole was distinctive:

After Jess left, Corrine and I spent free moments between phone calls chatting about working as a sales operator... Corrine asked me how I like working as a sales operator, and I cheerfully replied that although there are tons of new trainings and I miss the folks in computers, I like the work. Corrine confirmed that working as a sales operator is far better than "out there" (on the sales floor) in her mind. She likes having her own space, and she feels happy when she leaves work each day. I know from our previous conversations that Corrine had not felt that way in portable electronics; in fact, I often found her smoking after work with a look of exasperation,

complaining about the psycho customers she had encountered. Despite the lower stress levels, however, Corrine confessed that she feels very anxious coming to work as a sales operator. She feels that she is going to mess something up, as she is not as confident in her job duties as she had been on the floor. I reassured her that she would probably feel more comfortable with time; changing positions is difficult.

Corrine later aptly summarized that she “just wants to do a good job.”

Women employed in operations considered their individual actions as representing the collective, and felt personally accountable for ensuring that they portrayed their unit and the store at-large in a positive light. Workers internalized company expectations, consistent with compliance associated emphasized femininity. Their response also suggests panoptic control – workers internalizing managerial expectations and policing themselves:

Around 1pm, the phones began ringing off the hook, at the same time that everyone in the store seemingly became preoccupied with customers. I called on the walkie for anyone in computers or inventory to answer calls, but few responded, and those who did had customers. As I considered running to the floor for items myself, a string of new calls came in for the same departments that were already slammed with folks in-store and on-hold. As is now usual for me in these situations, I was totally unable to tell which call was bouncing back in at what time. As a result, I felt like an idiot when picking up the phone and either assuming the wrong customer or asking again what the shopper needed. In several of these cases, I was especially embarrassed, as the folks on the other line were workers at different locations. I hate seeming out-of-control when other workers call, as it reflects poorly on our entire location.

When women in operations felt as though they had failed their unit in some way, they commonly engaged in self-effacing behavior – consistent with expectations that women be selfless. Whereas women in the store at-large were generally more likely to admit wrongdoing than men, those who worked in female-dominated departments were distinctly and sincerely apologetic:

... My limited sales in the morning can prevent Tonya or Corrine from meeting our daily sales budget in their own totals. This seems to motivate both Tonya and Corrine

to sell; Corrine apologized for meager sales in an earlier email after she assisted at customer service for half her shift.

Women's self-effacing behaviors could not be understood as a rational reaction to failing to meet supervisors' expectations, as individual workers were rarely punished for their underwhelming performance. This suggests that apologizing had more to do with internalized control and gender than top-down discipline:

At 2pm, Corrine approached the [sales operator] desk to replace me. I was still finalizing my sales email [documenting how much I had sold]... I noted that many items had been held, but we were far below our intended sales budget. Corrine did not look surprised or upset... I asked whether she thought we would get in trouble for these routinely poor sales, and she said "Nooo," with a skeptical look. "The store never makes revenue either," she flippantly remarked.

In any organization, employees are bound occasionally to make mistakes. This was particularly true at Electromart, where ever-changing work routines and weak organization made workers' lives extremely anomic. Particularly in sales, conflicts with peers arose when one worker had to resolve problems created by another's mistakes. In female-dominated units, however, coworkers tended to treat offending peers with forgiveness and understanding – consistent with social expectations that women be empathetic and emotionally supportive. In the following excerpt from my notes, notice how differently Conrad, a salesman in male-dominated computers, responded to a mistake I made compared to Anna and Allie, customer service associates:

A customer from in back wanted to purchase a laptop using his father's credit card, and we could do this in the phone sales module more securely than in-store. After waiting an eternity for the machine to boot and the customer to solicit his father's [credit] information, I placed the order and asked the shopper to wait... [After the order went through, I realized that] I had ordered the wrong machine. Conrad [a salesperson in computers] came up to tell me that the shopper wanted a slightly better model than what I had sold him, and the customer [standing nearby] appeared

stressed. His face showed deep anxiety lines as he asked Conrad whether the machine he had been interested in was significantly better than what he had received, and Conrad honestly confirmed that it was. [Conrad] looked beaten back and annoyed with the error. I felt like an idiot; the shopper asked me about the machine for \$430, and the price on the model he wanted had been slightly higher online. We had miscommunicated. My error meant extra work for Anna [a customer service associate]. She needed to return the machine in a round-a-bout way, and then sell the new one...

Anna resolved the issue pretty quickly, while Allie [another customer service associate] identified another error: I had told a customer we could hold things overnight. She said it would be ok this time, [sympathetically] addressing me as “sweetheart.”

I asked what [Allie] needed help with after my mistakes, commenting that I had been “a pain in her ass” all day. She assured me that it was cool, and said I was essentially done for the day [dismissing me to go home]. She assured me that she was clocking out herself.

Even when workers’ mistakes led their peers to experience customer abuse, women remained empathetic and supportive, consistent with emphasized femininity:

I finished some trainings and calls as Corrine helped back up at the front registers and deal with customer concerns at customer service. When she returned, she asked if I had helped anyone [via phone] with deep fryers. I confirmed that I had, and she revealed in a low tone that Caroline had approached her after encountering a rather angry shopper. He called to ask whether we carried deep fryers in our stores, and looking quickly online, I found a few that were not listed as “online only.” Carelessly, however, I never thought to check if they were present in our physical location. The thought honestly never crossed my mind. The customer had come in looking for them, and was logically perturbed to find nothing in-stock.

“Oh my gosh... I’m an idiot,” I continued to repeat, shaking my head at my error. “Was he mad?” I asked Corrine, eyes large. “I don’t think so,” she responded, not very convincingly. She tried to reassure me that people make mistakes like that all the time, and it was no big deal.

The prevalence of forgiveness in operations did not imply that workers never became frustrated with one another; it simply meant that peers actively withheld irritation and tried to offer others support. In the instance below, I forgave Athena, a customer service

representative, for failing to credit the sales operator team with a major purchase. When sales operators sold items – commonly, by putting products on hold until a customer could physically come into the store – customer service representatives scanned a barcode indicating to management that a sales operator was responsible for the revenue associated with the transaction. If associates forgot to scan the barcode, the sales operator team would not be credited for the sale. Athena and I had been stressed all morning by overwhelming customer flow, which tended to bring out the worst in workers across the store. Athena's error contributed to my frustration, but I quickly offered her reassurance and forgiveness:

Athena... approached to tell me that she had forgotten to scan my barcode [when cashing out a customer]... I found myself upset with the poor apologetic Athena, [who was] already visibly stressed with a wrinkled face and frown. Regardless, I assured her that it was ok and she should not worry about it.

I engaged in emotional labor, actively displaying one set of emotions to elicit an emotional response in Athena, in order to maintain a supportive atmosphere (see Hochschild 1983).

Women's selflessness served Electromart by reducing conflicts between peers that might have resulted from anomic company policies (like the barcode scanning) or understaffing. Coworker infighting was much more common in male-dominated departments, and often, required managerial intervention. Women's compliance with emphasized femininity likewise alleviated the need for managerial oversight, as women effectively policed their own behavior.

*Surveillance and Estrangement*

Much like men sometimes rebuked the masculine displays that defined male-dominated departments (see chapter 6), workers in gender-balanced and predominantly-female units occasionally deviated from their own group norms of cooperative surveillance and selflessness. At times, workers aggressively surveilled peers and engaged in coworker infighting that contributed to peer estrangement. Such instances tended to occur during particularly stressful shifts – when workers were flooded with customers and/or understaffed.

Workers in gender-balanced and predominantly-female units openly acknowledged that busy periods at work led them to evaluate peers more aggressively than normal. In the example below, Karl, my coworker in portable electronics, publicly shamed me over the walkie talkie system for taking my lunch before my coworkers. Since only one worker was allowed to take a lunch break at a time, my decision to take an early lunch meant that others would have to wait:

[After punching back in from my lunch,] I returned to cameras and immediately began helping customers. Shortly thereafter, Karl came over the walkie talkie headset and asked “Now that Jules is back from her *premature* lunch, Mick is going to go [on lunch] and then me.” I was stunned. I had never encountered hostility from a portable electronics colleague over the walkies before... I was devastated by this remark from Karl. What had I done wrong? ... Maybe I had asked him too many questions? [Though I wanted to talk to Karl,] there was no stopping [customer flow] for either of us... both areas [we were working in] continued to be overrun with shoppers...

Karl’s response to my lunch left me humiliated and baffled, given that I had been working at the store for several weeks and never learned any rules about who could take lunches when. I confronted Karl about his response later in my shift, and he explained why he had been so passive aggressive:

After Karl and Colin finished with a customer in computers, I approached Karl in car audio and asked if he had a moment. I told him I was sorry if I had done something wrong earlier if I cut someone in line on the lunches. If there was an informal system, I did not know about it, and I never meant to step on anyone's toes. Karl almost interrupted saying "No, no, no, I'm cool now." He explained that he had been waiting to take his break [when I went on lunch], and car audio had been mobbed all morning... he hit his "breaking point." He joked that last year he had hit it the day before Black Friday, so he lasted a bit longer this go-around. I asked if there was an informal rule on how we should take breaks, and he said yes, whoever comes in first goes first. According to this rule, I should have gone last. I thanked him for telling me, and he said something like "it's all good" and gave me a high five... He was very genuine, and I felt relieved.

Karl not only apologized for his earlier remarks, but taught me the informal lunch rules and went on to commend me for being a good coworker – though, perhaps, only because I approached him and directly raised the issue.

Workers often took frustrations out on one another instead of management, as they tended to perceive workplace conflicts as resulting from peers' actions instead of company procedures. In the scene below, Electromart's key policy contributed to aggressive peer surveillance. The company required that only one worker be responsible for a department's keys at one time, which often led keyholders to become overwhelmed with requests to unlock items when the store became busy:

When Wayne took his lunch, he asked me to take over [working] in mp3s. I took the keys and began helping a customer looking at ipod nanos and docking stations when suddenly everyone in the store [came over the walkie talkies and] seemed to need something unlocked. Computer salespeople called wildly for ipods, inventory called for unlocked cases, and Monique needed items for telephone sales. The walkie talkie airwaves were filled with the question "Who has the mp3 keys?," and though I tried to respond, my walkie stopped working. I was in the middle of helping a customer, so I could not run over to the person calling for help. As the third or fourth person called, Rae came over the walkie talkies stating that Jules had the mp3 keys, and she wishes someone would find me. I was irritated beyond belief; any of the other workers could have turned down the very next aisle next to the mp3 register and easily found me.

Allowing duplicate sets of keys on the floor during busy shopping seasons might have limited conflict, yet workers tended to blame infighting over keys on specific workers rather than company policy:

I left at the same time as Gary today. He was visibly irritated after his exchange with Rae, which was unusual for him – he is typically eternally happy and laidback. We waited for the holiday shuttle together, and I tried to empathize. I said the whole key gig was unrealistic, and he said he agreed ... Gary seemed to blame the conflict more so on Rae than anything, though. He recognized the shopper constraints, but attributed the conflict to Rae being a “hardass.”

Electromart might have also reduced conflict between workers by proactively increasing staffing during busy shopping periods. Often, however, any adjustments in labor failed to keep pace with customer flow, resulting in work intensification. Workers who could not manage the extra load within their scheduled hours feared peer scrutiny. In the example from my notes below, Anna, a white customer service representative in her late 20s, and Eli, a biracial inventory worker in his early 20s, complained about being unable to finish their work tasks within their scheduled shifts during the Christmas shopping season. Though Eli, who worked in relative solitude back in the stock room, could leave regardless of whether or not he finished his job, Anna lamented that her peers would hold her accountable for incomplete tasks if she left when her scheduled hours were over:

In a free moment, I went up to customer service to check on a customer order... Anna and Eli were talking. Anna was complaining about... being at work late into the night (11:30pm last night) before working the opening shift the next morning. She was supposed to leave at 10pm, but could not complete her duties by that time due to shoppers staying late. Eli said that he has been with the company too long to care about staying late; when he does not finish [his job], he tells Tony “he’s out” [leaving] regardless. If his work does not get done, then it does not get done. Anna complained that if she were to do that, then everyone [who works at customer service] would know it was her the next morning.

Anna constructed her peers' surveillance as controlling and unwanted. Though she would prefer to leave work on-time, she feels unable to do so without engendering peer discipline and violating social expectations consistent with emphasized femininity.

### *Summary*

Cooperative surveillance, supportive supervision and worker selflessness stand in stark contrast to monitoring for masculinity. In male-dominated departments, individual workers used surveillance to establish personal status and power over other men and women. In gender-balanced and female-dominated units, workers monitored one another in cooperative ways focused on improving the collective. Surveillance adopted a particularly feminine tone in operations, where individual workers self-scrutinized and evaluated peers in selfless ways – structured, in part, by the supportive tone of their supervisors. Workers in gender-balanced and predominantly-female units occasionally came into conflict, but typically only during especially stressful periods at work.

Workers' gendered engagement with monitoring became most evident when I contrasted masculine and feminine engagement with surveillance. Examining male-dominated or gender-balanced and female-dominated units in isolation could lead researchers to see monitoring in non-gendered terms – as sustained by company culture, peer control, or panopticism. Gender contrasts reveal that all three explanations valuably frame surveillance at Electromart, while also clarifying that workers' individual and collective efforts to establish masculinity and femininity shape how monitoring culminates in worker control.

## **CHAPTER 8: SURVEILLANCE AND INSECURITY**

As I explored in chapter five, Electromart used direct supervision, electronic monitoring and customer surveillance across the store to ensure worker compliance and guard against employee theft. Surveillance and distrust engendered worker resentment, which was partly diffused as workers “othered” and controlled customers. Chapters six and seven showed how gender dynamics shaped workers’ experiences with monitoring. In male-dominated work groups, Electromart’s emphasis on competition and individualism encouraged men to surveil and emasculate other men, consistent with expectations associated with hegemonic masculinity. Men resisted monitoring in defense of their manhood. In gender-balanced and predominantly-female departments, managers, supervisors and workers used monitoring in more cooperative ways – to improve training, facilitate collaboration and evade discipline. Particularly in mostly-female units, supportive supervision encouraged women workers to act selflessly, reflective of emphasized femininity.

In this chapter, I contextualize shop floor practices in the macroeconomic setting of insecurity. First, I explore how a rise in insecurity since the mid-1970s threatens the objective and subjective well-being of all employees. Combined with the expansion of surveillance techniques, insecurity contributes to an employment landscape that cultivates fear. Worker anxiety about insecurity appears especially intense among white men, who uniquely experience changing economic conditions as threatening their unearned racial and gender advantages. I contend that Electromart’s male workers’ relatively weak educational attainment and labor market positions – exploited by the company – coupled with a larger macroeconomic context that jeopardizes the working class’ power serve to emasculate and

threaten men. Male workers tried to cope with their economic exploitation and protect their pride by seeking opportunities for upward mobility, yet rarely succeeded in changing their objective level of security.

### *Macroeconomic Insecurity*

Beginning in the 2000s, scholars renewed their concern with the contexts of work (Thompson and Van den Broek 2010) – examining shop floor practices as related to global cultural and economic processes. Labor process contexts have not always been central to scholarly examinations of work, though some researchers have noted their significance more than others. For instance, Braverman (1974) and Burawoy (1979) situated the labor process in capitalist employment relations and competitive markets, while many sociology of work scholars thereafter studied worker subjectivity and managerial intent with little attention to macroeconomic phenomena (Rowlinson and Hassard 2001; Thompson 2003; Tinker 2002). Foucault (1977) similarly regarded industrial capitalism as driving the diffusion of discipline and panopticism, though his postmodern adherents largely sidestep such issues. Renewed attention to the contexts of work allows scholars to gain rich insights about worker behaviors that might be difficult to glean when focusing on intra-organizational processes alone.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of macroeconomic relations extending from the mid-1970s to present has been the rise of insecurity or “precarity” (Kalleberg 2011). Crises of overproduction borne of heightened global competition coupled with volatile consumer demand have made increasingly challenging shareholder expectations difficult to meet (Brenner 2001; Krippner 2011). In nations like Japan and Germany, cultural tradition dictates

that workers and shareholders share the burden of these shifting economic relations. Anglo nations, in contrast, tend to demand flexibility primarily from labor (Dore 1997) – often, while continuing to reward individuals high in the corporate pyramid. Since the 1990s, employers have increasingly promoted the “free movement of capital, complete deregulation of all investment, permanent entronement of sound money financial policies, the dismantling of burdensome welfare systems and labor market flexibility” as strategies to cope with economic change (Elliott and Atkinson 1998:4).

Insecurity and surveillance represent mutually reinforcing processes (Monahan 2010). On one hand, surveillance helps employers cope with insecurity by identifying workers who pose a threat to company survival – either by withholding effort or resisting control. On the other hand, the mere presence of surveillance can reinforce the belief that workers cannot be trusted. Monitoring would not be necessary if all social actors upheld their obligations and played by the rules. A sociopolitical context replete with both insecurity and surveillance cultivates suspicion and fear.

For workers throughout the industrialized world, insecurity results in an increasingly bleak employment landscape. Involuntary job loss has increased over time (Boisjoly, Duncan and Smeeding 1998), and job tenure has declined 25-30 percent (Fligstein and Shin 2004). In the U.S., long-term unemployment spells average 30 weeks in length – the longest on record following World War II (Aaronson, Mazumder and Schechter 2010). Due to both economic desperation and monitoring, people are unwillingly working longer and harder than ever before (Fraser 2001; Schor 1991), despite a declining share of national income, reduced benefits, and decreased provisions for worker safety (Fligstein and Shin 2004; Kristal 2010).

Workers today feel more anxious about the economy than ever before, and even those who regard their immediate positions as relatively secure often acknowledge that processes of privatization, market competition, globalization, and declining state support limit their prospects of finding alternative employment and stability in the event of a job loss (Doogan 2001; Mandel 1996).

Macroeconomic insecurity appears at the organizational level as employers use layoffs, outsourcing, hourly cuts and temporary employment to maintain profitability (Cappelli 1999; Leicht and Fitzgerald 2007). Eliminating or reducing labor costs allows firms to net greater value for the goods and services that workers generate. Front-line managers maintain responsibility for delivering profits to shareholders despite corporate divestment. Managers today must essentially “do more with less,” or create ever-increasing value regardless of shrinking labor allotments. Those who fail risk losing their own positions.

Insecure employment tends to wreak financial havoc on workers. Those who are laid off may lose homes, deplete savings, and become dependent on increasingly limited state support. Insecurity also leaves workers less able to cope with unforeseen job losses. Stagnant earnings resulting from a smaller share of national productivity (Kristal 2010) leave many workers with few resources to stave off financial disasters. According to the American Bankruptcy Institute (2013), personal bankruptcy rates have generally trended upward since the 1980s.

Insecurity can likewise be psychologically devastating. Layoffs often destroy self-esteem and identity, as many individuals gain pride and purpose from employment and associated feelings of indispensability (Uchitelle 2006) – even when working in relatively

undesirable, low-skill positions (Newman 1999). Sennett (1998) argues that employer drives for flexibility “corrode character,” as attributes once regarded as virtuous – including loyalty and dedication – now suggest stagnation and personal failure. Social support falters as diminishing resources contribute to family conflict (Uchitelle 2006) and individualism erodes cohesion (Beck 1992).

### *Responding to Insecurity*

Researchers explain workers’ negative responses to insecurity in terms of a changing social contract, which specifies workplace actors’ rights and obligations (Rubin and Brody 2005). The contract that dominated Western labor relations following World War II dictated that worker loyalty and commitment to employers could be exchanged for lifelong employment and financial security for oneself and one’s family. Organizations shared surpluses from productivity improvements with workers and their families, due in large part to the power of labor unions. When employers emphasize worker vulnerability and manipulate employees using insecurity, they undermine the contract and thus employee loyalty by denying workers the rewards they have come to expect.

Many workers today consider the social contract an important historical referent for the way that labor relations used to operate, and yet the contract is more of an exception than the rule. Prior to World War II, work was considerably less stable than in the post-war period, and workers rarely enjoyed many protections or benefits from employers (Kalleberg 2011). Furthermore, relatively few workers had positions governed by the social contract. White men monopolized “good jobs” offering financial and psychological security (Hartmann 1976;

Reskin 1993; Weeden 2002). Dominating good jobs and serving as their household's breadwinner allowed such men to establish themselves as valuable people and worthwhile men (Sennett 1998; Sennett and Cobb 1972). Loyalty to employers signaled submission to a larger system of capitalist exploitation, but workers developed an "investment in subordination" in the sense that they felt valued as workers and also as men (see Della Fave 1986).

Macroeconomic insecurity represents greater continuity rather than change in the labor market experiences of women and racial/ethnic minorities. Positions occupied by women and racial/ethnic minorities have long been "bad jobs" offering limited stability and few opportunities for advancement (Kalleberg 2011). Men's exclusionary practices have restricted women's employment to the economic periphery – segregated from access to positions offering good pay, security or autonomy (Cockburn 1988; Hartmann 1976; Reskin 1993; Reskin 1991; Snyder, Hayward and Hudis 1978; Weeden 2002). Whites similarly discriminated against workers of color, preventing racial/ethnic minorities from high-wage careers with opportunities for upward mobility or lifetime employment (Bergmann 2011; Bonacich 1972; Collins 1993; Collins 1997; Gordon 1972; Hodson and Kaufman 1982). The end of the social contract dominating post-World War employment thus represents greater change to the work experiences of white men than to those of other groups; that is, low skilled white men have been affected most dramatically (Kalleberg 2011).

Men, and white men in particular, experience a unique sense of loss and change in response to the breakdown of the social contract. In ethnographic studies, both men and women state that women today can find jobs more easily than men, that lost jobs create more

destructive assaults on the identity of men than women, and that men's jobs are primary over women's (Charles and James 2003; Hossfeld 1990; Pyke 1996). Men likewise regard women as more "adaptable" to employment changes than men (Charles and James 2003), seemingly an acknowledgement that women are more compliant in response to the degradation of their paid work. Further, white men often blame women and racial/ethnic minorities for employment precarity (Fine et al. 1997) – as women and minorities have gained greater access to certain jobs, while work has generally become less secure among workers at-large (Kalleberg 2011).

Historical evidence suggests that white men undertake "manhood acts" to preserve social advantages and resist control when they feel threatened (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). If white men perceive that outgroup members jeopardize their opportunities, they tend to practice social closure and reduce coworkers' options (Cockburn 1988; Reskin 1991). For instance, white men may sabotage job rotation procedures that would distribute skilled tasks more equally (Vallas 2003), or erect new workplace hierarchies that place them in preferred positions (Leidner 1991). Should managerial practices undermine men's sense of control, men defend themselves by trying to reclaim their power and pride (Collinson 1992).

White men's resistance to the erosion of their economic power could suggest the delegitimation of a larger normative order in which the affluent and powerful convince themselves and others that success is based on merit (see Della Fave 1986). White men rarely criticize the capitalist status quo, however – instead, they tend to experience their subordination as resulting from the actions of women and racial/ethnic minorities. Electromart's male workers sought solutions to their economic oppression within the

confines of a macroeconomic system that is increasingly hostile to laborers, especially those lacking higher education.

### *Insecurity at Electromart*

Many of Electromart's workers, especially men, found themselves in insecure labor market positions and lacking alternative employment options. Consistent with previous research, I found that men had lower levels of educational attainment (Aud et al. 2013), and their limited education became a liability in the changing labor market – leaving them economically dependent on the company, simultaneously fearing job loss and feeling trapped. Such dependencies contributed to workers' decision to remain employed by Electromart long after they wanted to leave, but also primed men to feel angry with their stunted mobility.

Workers at Electromart generally wanted white collar or professional positions outside the organization, offering living wages, autonomy, prestige and stability. Yet many individuals – and men, in particular – were dependent on their jobs, often as a result of their limited educational attainment. Workers who lacked college degrees took threats to their job security very seriously, as they doubted their ability to identify new positions in the event that they lost their jobs at Electromart:

... I stood with Ben, Conrad, and Malcolm. Malcolm [a white male in his early 20s] addressed an ongoing conflict between Ben and him that Conrad had explained to me during a preceding shift. Ben had been joking for weeks that he was trying to get Malcolm fired in order to secure his full-time computers position. Because Ben rarely says anything sincere, everyone else took this as his usual garbage chatter. To Malcolm, however, this was a very serious matter... Malcolm clarified that although Ben is full of it, Malcolm feels like he has fewer opportunities for success than the rest of us. I was getting a Ph.D., Jim was getting a computers degree, and Chad was finishing up a bachelor's. Although Malcolm may have been successful in computers

[the department], he never got the education he feels he needs in order to put his Electromart skills to work.

Malcolm's tone was somber and depressed. I found it heartbreaking, as he was typically a very confident person.

Workers who were not enrolled in school – most often, men – felt embarrassed about their limited education and regarded their futures as bleak:

During moments when the store was relatively slow... Mario [a Hispanic supervisor in his early 20s] came by and asked why I was working less than I had been in the summer. I replied [truthfully] that I currently work three jobs on top of school... "That's cool," Mario said, looking down... He thought a moment, looking towards the ceiling, and commented "Everyone around me is in school." He identified a few guys in install and computer repair that he hangs out with, most in school for engineering or computers. "I feel like I'm the only one not in school," he said, eyes downcast. He seemed to be a bit embarrassed about it...

Workers appeared to equate attaining a college degree with success. Not having a degree could indicate personal failure or stagnation.

Workers lacking college degrees often wanted undergraduate training, but could not afford school without working their jobs at Electromart. Their unpredictable work hours made it difficult to attend college, and their low wages were not enough to finance an education:

Mario is returning to college after having failed to meet academic standards [his first time in school] a few years back. He confessed to me some anxiety about not being in school about a month ago, so I was happy to hear that he decided to try again. This meant that he would likely give up his supervisory position, but could not do so until the fall semester, as he needed to save up money this spring to afford tuition, books and living expenses. Allie [a customer service associate]... advised him to take advantage of the substantial tuition benefits offered to all full-time Electromart employees. These would help cover tuition, books, fees and whatever other costs Mario would incur... Allie mentioned that she would also like to go back to school eventually, but she spends so much time watching children in her family and working

that it is “just not the right time.” She is actually looking for a second job to make ends meet.

Even with tuition support from the company, compensation at Electromart was so low that affording basic educational needs represented a real challenge for employees. Workers depended on the organization not only for tuition and wages, but also computer access, since some employees could not afford computers of their own:

When I entered the break room, Mario was lying on the couch. I asked what he was up to, as he was not wearing his company uniform yet. He explained that he had come in early to use the store computer, as he tried to register for college classes today and they told him the entire process was now online. Since he does not own a personal computer, he had to rely on the store. I found it shocking that he did not own any sort of machine [especially considering he works at an electronics store]; yet as he said, he is not paid very much, despite his full-time and supervisory status.

Occasionally, even workers who successfully obtained college degrees fell on difficult times and found themselves reliant on Electromart. Several college-educated men at the store held multiple jobs when working a single position did not generate enough money for their families. One such individual, Paul, worked as a salesperson in computers and as a bartender at a local restaurant:

I headed into the break room, where Paul was finishing his meal... I asked him whether he was a student, and he replied that he graduated years ago. He is 28 years old... I asked how long he had worked [at Electromart], and he said that he had been with the company since September... He shared that he was only working at Electromart for some extra money, almost as though he was embarrassed to be so old and working [there.]

...[Paul's] wife is an event planner at a local country club. She handles their finances, as Paul is easily stressed about money. He often works an eight-hour shift at Electromart before resting two hours and beginning a bartending shift extending into the early morning. Sometimes, he cannot leave his bartending job until 4am or 5am and then returns to Electromart at 9:15am.

Paul's two jobs exhausted him, but he felt financially obligated to maintain his grueling schedule. Bartending paid better than working at Electromart, but he could not get enough shifts at the bar to pay his bills:

Paul was very tired, as he closed at his second job [at the bar] the evening before, and he was due to go back later today after his shift at Electromart. He explained that he needed more hours in order to pay his bills, but he was exhausted from working all the time. Although he wants to cut back his hours, he does not believe that it is financially feasible. The days he is most commonly scheduled at Electromart are weekends [10am-7pm], but these are also high-traffic days at the bar [evenings extending until 4am]... He is considering opening his availability further to include more morning shifts at Electromart, but this will cut into his sleep.

On one occasion, Paul was so desperate for money that he continued working a bartending shift into the early hours of the morning while vomiting from food poisoning, and then began a full shift at Electromart starting at 9am the next day. He confessed to me that he had never taken a sick day in his entire life. Paul's economic dependency on his two positions motivated him to work hard even when terribly ill.

### *Exploiting Insecurity*

Existing research documents that employers often use worker insecurity to their advantage, increasing performance pressures by emphasizing employees' financial dependency (Crowley et al. 2010; DiTomaso 2001; Fraser 2001; Kalleberg 2009; Payne, Crowley and Kennedy n.d.). As a manager in Fraser's (2001) research states, "The workplace is never free of fear – and it shouldn't be. Indeed, fear can be a powerful management tool" (32). A manager in Kunda's (1992) study similarly advises "Get them [workers] in survival mode...They'll kill themselves" (172). The very conditions which threaten firms provide

justification for reaffirming coercive control techniques underscoring worker vulnerability – perhaps once considered to be outdated managerial practices of yesteryear (see Edwards 1979) – alongside hegemonic logics involving the use of electronic, peer and customer surveillance.

On one hand, managers at Electromart empathized with workers' precarious economic positions and tried to help workers maintain stable employment. Managers acknowledged that Electromart offered unstable jobs and low wages and often that workers lacked alternative employment options. During an employee review session, Tony, the manager of computers, advised me to complete as much training as possible so I would be less expendable to Electromart:

[Tony] encouraged me to do certifications in... home theater, appliances, whatever. He said that he needed to support me by giving me time to complete these certifications on the floor, and he would do so whenever the store was slow. He would rarely say no to training requests. He said, "I don't mean to be crass, but the more training you have, the more valuable you are to the company, and the less disposable."

The supportive tone of our conversation suggested that Tony genuinely wanted to help me.

Corporate funding structures prevented managers from doing much to help insecure employees whom they regarded as worthy of opportunities:

I asked Joe if the managers had met to determine which seasonal employees will be kept on [staff following the holidays]. He said "Yes, the meeting was this morning." [Joe continued that he] still needed to sit down and talk to Tony [his boss] in order to determine how many seasonal workers could be kept on. Joe has a few people he wants to keep, but he does not know what will be possible with the corporate labor budget. As Joe explained, he sounded genuinely regretful. As he said, seasonal folks could remain formally employed, but less than 15-20 hours per week "is not going to pay the bills for most people"... Joe resumed "Honestly, between me and you, I'd like to keep you on." He just did not know whether the hours would be there.

Managers thus had limited power over their workers and scheduling, consistent with larger shifts of power away from local workplace actors and towards corporate shareholders (Arrighi 1994; Krippner 2011).

Despite occasional managerial sympathy for workers' dependency and insecurity, however, managers routinely exploited worker vulnerabilities to elicit extra effort. Supervisors and managers regarded their own positions as insecure, and believed that employees at-large could have stable employment and work hours only when workers increased sales and thus company profits:

Don [a manager] was about to break [up the morning meeting] when he asked if anyone else had anything [to discuss]. Rae [the security supervisor] jumped in, as she often does, to ridicule us. Rae argued that we needed to be passing out "Why Electromart?" worksheets explaining the benefits of our company to all customers. This is something managers would be looking for, and we need to recoup lost sales. Rae argued that we have not been making budget, and if we continued down this path, hours would be cut and jobs would be lost. She gestured around the circle and commented "Look around, it's already happening. I need my job, and I need my hours. That's why I'm passing out these forms." Her tone was accusatory: don't we need hours too?

Tony likewise argued that if we failed to start selling profit-rich products, we [the company] "won't be here next year."

District leaders advised local managers that workers were the key to company success or the cause of its undoing. Much like workers experienced contradictory messages about being "the best" while accused of theft (see ch. 5), workers were affirmed as essential to company success yet expendable in the event of failure:

Joe emphasized that the holiday season could be stressful, that he himself was stressed, but that it was his goal to have fun this year. He explained that his brother was having a baby up north, that his extended family would be gone, and that we were his family this year. As he made this sentimental comment, seemingly on the

verge of tears, he reprimanded us for standing around and talking to each other too much. He said there was a lot to do before the holiday – there were bags to be pulled down, stock to fill, and holiday bundles to build. He needed us to give 110% and “help” [or else leave]. This contradictory message was a good representation of how the entire day went: we need you and you will make us successful, but do not slack off or call in sick... [Coworkers also saw this.] Jeff said something like “There’s another one – do this, or we will fire you.” He seemed very jaded by it today.

In an operations meeting on a sunny Sunday morning, Jess conveyed something similar:

Jess asserted that the company website sells [service] plans 30% of the time, with no opportunity to explain plan features and make them relevant to the customer. The key to web success is offering the plans during each transaction. If we all offered plans each time, there is no reason why we should not be able to sell them at the same rate. Jess followed this up with a bit of a threat; she asked if we knew who Tom Walsh is, and about half the group agreed that they did. Jess explained to the others that he is our district manager, and he recently commented to Jess that if our people were not willing to offer plans to each customer, they would be replaced with others who would. The group grew silent a moment. Jess assured us that she was not trying to scare or threaten anyone – that is simply “how it goes.” It was difficult to accept that the tactic was not coercive...

Managers’ threats were not idle; well-respected workers were routinely fired. During a raucous house party attended by dozens of current and former Electromart employees, a group of workers discussed the firing of Mick, a white male sales operator in his early 20s:

Conrad interjected that Mick [a white male sales operator in his early 20s] had been let go recently, or as Mac [a manager] told him, Mick was “pursuing other employment options.” Patrick, Malcolm and I expressed some outrage at Mick being let go before knowing anything about why. Conrad reluctantly noted that he did not know much about his firing, except that he had been habitually late and was told on numerous occasions to arrive on time or else lose his job. Jess had apparently been quite serious about this. Patrick noted that people are regularly late without reprimand; Megan laughed and said she was 15 minutes late earlier in the day.

Mick’s firing coincided with the firing of Pete, an African American home theater salesperson in his early 20s, who violated company rules by giving his mother the employee

discount on a television. Both workers were considered strong salespeople and managerial favorites until their termination. Management fired such employees to reaffirm the importance of company rules among those who remained.

Workers also knew many former employees who struggled to find work after being fired by Electromart, driving home the very real costs associated with job loss. Though these individuals openly hated the company and their former positions, their inability to find alternative work made them desperate to renew ties with the organization. At another house party, two former employees, both white men in their mid-20s, begged current workers to help them get their jobs back at Electromart. They were unemployed after having been fired over a year ago:

Two previous employees of Electromart stood complaining about the company, as both had been fired for attendance issues. Although they were annoyed with Jess' decision to let them go, both desperately sought reemployment with Electromart. One had begged Malcolm and Conrad to get him a job at Malcolm's last party, and the other seemed to remain unemployed after begging [Jess] for his computer repair job back.

The desperation of former employees served as a powerful reminder that job loss represented a very real threat to workers.

### *Coping Strategies*

Many male employees felt frustrated with and embarrassed by their stunted careers – whether due to limited educational attainment or falling on hard times. Electromart amplified their anxiety by underscoring workers' economic vulnerability and treating employees as expendable. In an effort to reduce dependencies on the company and alleviate fear, men

sought promotions and raises. These attempts to cope with insecurity can be understood as “manhood acts,” given that men sought new opportunities in an effort to overcome their precarity, but only in ways that affirmed the ego and left the legitimacy of an exploitative class order unchallenged. When opportunities for upward mobility failed to pan out, men felt disappointed and angry.

I was struck by how often men, in particular, sought promotion at Electromart. During my time with the company, Malcolm sought three promotions: to supervisor of computers, supervisor of computer repair, and to an Apple specialist position. Conrad, another computers associate, applied for six promotions spanning several store locations. Other workers I was less close with – including Ben, a home theater salesperson; Dylan, a repair technician; and Karl, an associate from portable electronics – applied for several promotions, and to my knowledge, have not yet received any. Previous research confirms that promotion seeking is an exercise of male privilege. Men are more likely to seek promotion and raises than women, in large part because women accurately surmise that they will be evaluated for negotiating more harshly than men (Babcock 2003; Bowles, Babcock and Lai 2007).

Men responded with rage and depression when their bids for promotion failed. Workers considered themselves as hardworking and underpaid, and each time managers denied them opportunities to advance, they took rejection as a personal affront:

As we worked, Karl complained that he had been passed over for some sort of promotion that he had applied for. He was angry, as he had “trained his last four supervisors.” He could not understand why less experienced, less knowledgeable people continued to receive promotions before him.

Karl's rejection left him cynical about his job and bosses, possibly contributing to a cycle of disappointment.

I often found men's disappointment with failed promotions difficult to watch. After managers rejected the same desperate workers time and time again – even individuals identified as having strong management potential – it was difficult to reassure my coworkers that they would eventually be successful. Conrad and Malcolm would excitedly call me to talk about an opening, only to call again several weeks later with news that things had not worked out. Workers' initial enthusiasm and subsequent frustration powerfully communicated how unhappy they were in their existing positions, and how stunted opportunities hurt their pride.

Electromart may have quelled men's dissatisfaction had they rewarded their most experienced employees with raises, but pay increases were, like promotions, difficult to obtain. Long-term employees tended to make about the same wages as new hires:

Martin [a Hispanic computers associate in his 20s] said that he had gotten a new job with Apple. I "oohed" and asked if he would be a genius (Apple's term for computer function and repair experts). He said no, but he eventually hoped to become one. He would be a specialist just like he is at Electromart, except that he will make \$10 per hour instead of the \$8.50 he currently makes. He went on to say that he makes even more than two other workers in computers. I was shocked to learn his pay, as I had *started* at \$8.50 and I get the sense that Martin has been with Electromart for several years. Malcolm said that he makes \$9.25, but he had to threaten to leave in order to secure the raises he has. He has been with the company over four years.

When workers proposed that management consider monetary rewards for performance, managers perceived them as unreasonable. In the following example from my notes, Conrad proposed to Jess that top salespersons be acknowledged with a modest raise. She claimed that doing so would be *against state law*:

Conrad [a white computers associate in his late 20s] said that in a recent employee meeting he had suggested that we create an employee of the month award of twenty cents per hour, but Jess shot him down. She argued that state labor laws prohibited employers from giving raises without strong justification.

Conrad's frustration with company policy was palpable. He angrily wondered aloud why anyone would be motivated to sell without any incentives.

Men responded to their disillusionment with immobility and frozen wages by making lateral moves. While lateral moves came without any increase in pay or prestige, they helped alleviate the monotony and depression that men felt in response to their stunted mobility.

Conrad had his quarterly review with Curtis [his supervisor, a black man in his 30s], and Curtis noted that Conrad seems bored. Conrad confirmed that he feels "done" with computers, having worked there long enough that it no longer provides a challenge to him. Curtis argued that this was not good for anyone, as Conrad has the type of personality that requires engagement and interest. Without these, Curtis predicted that his sales would suffer. Curtis asked if there was somewhere else Conrad might like to work. Conrad noted that Tony suggested home theater, but what he would truly enjoy is a mobile position. [Note: Conrad has worked at nearly every position in the store except mobile and sales operations.] Curtis offered to call the district mobile manager on his behalf, and determine whether any openings might be available. Seemingly touched, Conrad asked "You'd do that for me?" "Yeah, man," Curtis replied.

Curtis and Conrad always had a strained relationship, yet both acknowledged the toll of stagnation at Electromart. Any movement was perceived as preferable to none.

Electromart's employees, and especially men, thus found themselves economically dependent on Electromart. Men tended to have lower levels of education, which afforded them limited career opportunities outside the organization. Such workers could not attend college or pay family bills without the company's meager wages and benefits. In response to their weak labor market position and consistent with a manhood acts perspective, men coped by seeking upward mobility within Electromart. Ultimately, however, upward-looking men

faced dismal prospects for promotion and few opportunities for raises. Many workers made lateral moves to alleviate feelings of stagnation.

### *Summary*

A macroeconomic context of insecurity structured how managers surveilled and controlled workers at Electromart, as well as workers' responses to monitoring. I find that workers at Electromart, and especially men, were economically dependent on the company, and that managers tried to exploit workers' vulnerability as a way to elicit effort. Men coped with their weak economic position by seeking advancement in the company.

The dissolution of the social contract that provided white men with unique labor market advantages in the decades immediately following World War II primed men to experience insecurity, borne of class exploitation, as an assault on their dignity as men. I propose that men's greater tendency to seek promotion and raises can be understood as a series of manhood acts, considering that men rarely critiqued the legitimacy of the class structure and seemingly sought promotion not only to advance economically, but also protect their pride. As I explore in the conclusion, men's greater propensity to resist surveillance can be understood using similar logic.

## **CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION**

Workplace surveillance continues to expand, and existing research in the labor process and Foucauldian traditions valuably explores this expansion as culminating from efforts to intensify labor and prevent worker resistance. These perspectives have proven less useful for exploring whether variations in surveillance exist, how variants may be experienced, and if workers' responses to employer control regimes are shaped by their gender and/or race/ethnicity.

I adopted an intersectional lens and conducted a workplace ethnography placing variations in workers' experiences of and responses to monitoring at the center of analysis. I asked:

- Do gender and/or race/ethnicity shape how and why workers experience surveillance?  
If so, in what ways?
- Do gender and/or race/ethnicity shape how and why workers respond to surveillance?  
If so, in what ways?
- Should variations in workers' experiences of and/or responses to surveillance exist, what contextual factors structure these differences?

This final chapter explicitly addresses each of these questions in turn, and attempts to make sense of empirical findings in light of extant literature and theory. I propose ways to improve our understanding of workplace surveillance and efforts to enhance social justice.

### *Experiencing Surveillance*

Existing theories on workplace surveillance rarely examine how workers' gender and/or racial/ethnicity shape monitoring experiences. As I reviewed in chapter three, however, previous research hints at the possibility of variations in surveillance, due to factors including workplace segregation, tokenism, stereotypes, trust and sexuality. My own project stresses that workers' enactment of gendered behaviors – often consistent with hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity – shaped how they engaged workplace monitoring practices (Fenstermaker and West 2002).

Electromart established an organizational culture stressing values of individualism and competition, consistent with hegemonic masculine behaviors idealized in the U.S. more generally. The company's goal to "be the best" created a pressure-intensive work environment that encouraged managers to one-up each other and bully monitor their subordinates. Company values and managers' responses to those values appeared consistent with the larger capitalist setting, which has increasingly put pressure on managers to deliver ever-increasing profits to demanding shareholders (Krippner 2011). Though the more cooperative feminine subcultures I describe in chapter seven clearly contributed to Electromart's profits, masculine and capitalist values appear, on the surface, to be more ideologically compatible than feminine and capitalist values.

Local leaders *experienced and engaged* organizational culture in fundamentally gendered terms. Male managers' stake in increasing sales was about more than economics to them – it was about demonstrating control over workers, establishing oneself as skilled, and avoiding emasculation. Two key insights support this proposition: (1) male supervisors and

managers bully monitored their workers even when conquests for power and status interfered with profit making, and (2) women in supervisory and managerial positions almost never bully monitored their staff, suggesting gendered motivations for their behavior.

Gender dynamics likewise shaped how workers experienced monitoring. In predominantly male work groups, men embraced Electromart's masculine culture and participated in masculine contests to establish their knowledge and skill vis-à-vis other men. Men actively excluded women from participating in such contests by claiming that women could not "hack it" on the sales floor, devaluing women's work and undercutting women's accomplishments. Whereas men's surveillance of one another often served as a source of entertainment and fun, similar to the game-playing observed by Roy (1959) and Burawoy (1979), women in male-dominated groups experienced peer monitoring as demeaning.

Consistent with previous research (Floge and Merrill 1986; Kanter 1977; Yoder 1991) I found that women in predominantly-male groups were subject to especially severe scrutiny as a consequence of their token status – by managers, other workers and customers. Men drew on popular stereotypes to construct women as hypersensitive, emotionally weak, physically weak, and generally less competent than men (Ridgeway 1997). When women in male-dominated units contradicted men's expectations, men either responded with an "atta girl" – condescendingly attributing women's success to "girl power" (Douglas 2011) – or even stealing credit for women's achievements. Marginalizing women allowed men to construct themselves as deserving of deference and workplace advantages (consistent with Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

Surveillance took on a more cooperative tone in gender-balanced and predominantly-female work groups. Peers monitored and evaluated one another in ways that facilitated informal peer training and collaboration while also reducing the likelihood of formal discipline. Surveillance served to enhance *group* outcomes rather than *individual* outcomes (as was the case in male-dominated departments), particularly in mostly-female units – wherein supportive supervision encouraged women to behave selflessly and on behalf of their team. Workers' actions largely adhered to expectations associated with emphasized femininity – acts that suggest submission to control (Connell 1987).

One puzzling finding is that Electromart's masculine culture appeared to successfully structure peer monitoring in male-dominated departments, while being less influential in gender-balanced and female-dominated units. The contrast between computers, a mostly-male group, and portable electronics, the relatively gender-balanced group, is most surprising, considering the *exact same* supervisors and managers oversaw both sections for the majority of my study. Differences between the units points to the agency of workers themselves to shape shop floor dynamics in ways that affirm and/or reject values and practices established by management (Bain and Taylor 2000; Gabriel 1999; Thompson and Ackroyd 1995).

Earlier research underscores the importance of worker agency for understanding how individuals interpret and experience organizational control regimes (e.g., Edwards 1979; Hodson 1996; Schwalbe 1986). Burawoy (1979), especially, highlighted the importance of worker subjectivity in manufacturing consent. My study builds on his work by offering an explanatory framework for understanding where worker subjectivities come from. On one

hand, Electromart's employees operate in an insecure economy offering fewer rewards for worker commitment than has historically been the case – especially to workers who lack higher education. Such conditions often encourage workers to internalize failure (Sennett 1998). On the other hand, “the day-to-day activities of members of subordinate classes are filled with strategic efforts to cope with the exigencies of their subordinate roles” (Della Fave 1986:481-482). Social expectations relating to workers' non-class identities can provide a basis for responding to class antagonisms in complex and unexpected ways (Ridgeway 1997; Tilly 1998). Stated simply, workers' experiences with and responses to class exploitations may take on gendered and racialized forms.

At my site, Electromart stressed masculine values at odds with shared societal notions regarding how women ought to act. Rather than blindly adhering to organizational expectations, women in supervisory and entry-level positions engaged monitoring processes in ways that allowed them to accomplish work tasks while also enacting prosocial and selfless behaviors consistent with emphasized femininity. Their behaviors powerfully defined departmental subcultures that looked and felt entirely different than those created by men. At least in operations, women's position outside of the mainstay of profit-making activities may have provided greater latitude to avoid the most intense monitoring by corporate leaders and develop other-serving cultures (Perrow 1986). Gender-balanced and predominantly-female units did not eschew the company's goal to “be the best” – they simply approached the goal in group-oriented terms.

The gender segregation of work units at Electromart led to important differences in how workers experienced monitoring, yet it is difficult to tell where gendered divisions came

from in the first place, given the cross-sectional nature of my project. I suspect that workers' own actions to define themselves as gendered subjects likely contributed. Men overran departments that brought in most revenue, cultivated managerial respect and offered the greatest autonomy, and communicated to women that they were outsiders unable to "hack it" in such settings. Such behavior allowed men to claim power and elicit deference, establishing their masculinity (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Women tended to work in departments that allowed them to display sociability and empathy towards customers and required less technical knowledge, consistent with emphasized femininity (Connell 1987). Even if they did not want to work in such settings initially, men's marginalization of women tended to push them into female-dominated departments or out of the store altogether.

### *Responding to Surveillance*

#### Gender Processes

Gender dynamics similarly shaped how workers responded to organizational monitoring practices. I demonstrated that men surveilled peers to inform claims of their superiority over coworkers and resisted monitoring when they regarded their own manhood as jeopardized, both consistent with hegemonic masculinity. If scrutinizing peers was a strategy that men used to establish their power and status over other men, it logically follows that being *subject to* scrutiny suggests a loss of control and hence emasculation.

Men resisted bully monitoring more strongly than peer surveillance, as supervisors and managers represented a greater threat to workers' manhood than coworkers. Supervisors and managers controlled access to jobs and work hours in the context of a labor market in

which individuals lacking college degrees increasingly have fewer opportunities than ever before (Kalleberg 2011). Whereas men tended to respond to peer monitoring with lighthearted and reciprocal teasing, bully monitoring often elicited resistance with the potential to pose a serious threat to profit-making and/or managerial legitimacy – like challenging managerial conclusions, manipulating data, withholding effort, and launching personal attacks.

I found that women employed by Electromart resisted surveillance less often than men, but not because women themselves had been duped or were inherently more passive. It is likely that class- and gender-based processes worked in consort to curb the tendency to resist among women. In terms of class-based processes, the gender segregation of labor at my site often led men and women to experience different labor processes (Crowley 2013). Gender-balanced and predominantly-female work groups used surveillance in relatively cooperative ways, meaning that being subject to monitoring was subjectively less demeaning than in mostly-male units. Hegemonic, non-coercive surveillance analogous to Foucault's (1977) panopticon successfully diffused tensions associated with labor discipline in female work groups. Women also had greater power to leave the organization as a result of their relatively high levels of education, meaning that they had less of a stake in remaining at Electromart and combatting managerial control and abuse.

In terms of gender processes, women did not feel the need to defend themselves against one-upmanship and emasculation because no one was trying to one-up or emasculate them. Even when women seemed interested in competing, male managers and workers alike actively excluded women from masculine contests and the peer monitoring that participation

in contests entailed. Rather than address the complex material and symbolic ways that men excluded women in male-dominated units, women commonly responded by making lateral moves to more welcoming (i.e., female-dominated) departments or leaving the company altogether for better opportunities.

### Racial/Ethnic Processes

Racial/ethnic processes likewise shaped how Electromart's workers responded to workplace surveillance, and particularly electronic monitoring. The organization constructed the poor and racial ethnic minorities (often conflated) as undeserving, criminal and dangerous, thereby helping to deflect worker resentment culminating from distrust and scrutiny of employees. Workers readily participated in "othering" processes in order to establish their superiority over shoppers. By enlisting workers in customer control, Electromart allowed workers to feel valuable in a work context that eroded their dignity.

My findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that stereotypes of racial/ethnic minorities as dangerous and untrustworthy underlie whites' support for workplace and societal surveillance. Even as whites are themselves inconvenienced and controlled by monitoring, they often continue to support surveillance in response to their perception of a racialized threat (Monahan 2010). Constructing customers as morally bankrupt and irresponsible allows whites to frame themselves as comparably trustworthy and responsible – particularly in the context of Electromart, where managers routinely questioned workers' value.

Racial/ethnic minorities at my site also participated in “othering” processes, as workers of color, like whites, gained status and respect from differentiating themselves from minority customers. The psychosocial benefits of doing so may have been especially promising, given that workers of color tended to come from poor backgrounds criticized by the company. Yet racial/ethnic minorities “othered” less enthusiastically than whites, and there appeared to be a shared acknowledgment among workers of color that Electromart was a racially-antagonistic place. On several occasions, I heard workers of color joke about the racism of their bosses and laughingly bemoan their token status. Though I was a racial “outsider,” I suspect that workers used humor to voice serious concerns.

### *Surveillance in Context*

Placing Electromart’s labor processes in the content of insecurity further illuminated variation in workers’ experiences with surveillance. Macroeconomic insecurity, like monitoring itself, engendered suspicion and fear. The company worried that workers would withhold effort or resist, thus placing profits and organizational survival in jeopardy. Despite the record profits for corporations at-large, organizations selling consumer electronics observed falling profit margins for many historically lucrative products, and leaders appeared to consider future profitability as incredibly uncertain (see Beck 1992). Workers – particularly uneducated men – expressed parallel anxiety over their precarious position in the labor market. Whereas Electromart could use surveillance to alleviate concerns over profits, workers had little power to reduce their dependency on the company or change their position in the labor market. In fact, Electromart took action to underscore workers’ economic

vulnerabilities to elicit effort and provided few opportunities for upward mobility within the organization.

Men's weak position at Electromart was consistent with larger macroeconomic changes that have resulted in diminishing returns on uneducated white men's labor. Insecurity has replaced the social contract that dominated post-World War industrial relations, which dictated that men's hard work and loyalty could be exchanged for relatively high wages and stable, lifelong employment. This contract likely would have been impossible without the historic oppression of women and racial/ethnic minorities. The dissolution of the social contract simultaneously reflects the increasing precarity of the laboring class at-large and a loss of working class white men's unearned gender and racial/ethnic advantages in the labor market. All workers could potentially benefit from the delegitimation of capitalist relations, and yet workers seem to channel their class anxieties into lateralized conflicts.

I propose that men's greater tendency to resist surveillance at Electromart can be understood as a series of manhood acts that allowed men to protect themselves against organizational processes that would further jeopardize their privilege, expertise and autonomy. Because store leaders and peers in male dominated units commonly used surveillance to establish their own worth and value as men, being *subject to* surveillance suggested that an individual man had been emasculated and lost control. The resistance strategies men employed (described at length in chapter six) – self-aggrandizement, disengagement, mocking, denying others' authority and challenging others' value – rarely resulted in organizational or macroeconomic change. Instead, these tactics allowed men to

reclaim some dignity and elicit deference in threatening historical and workplace contexts. Defending personal skill in the form of technical expertise – knowledge traditionally monopolized by men (Cockburn 1988) – may have yielded especially significant identity returns. Excluding female coworkers from peer contests and seeking promotion likewise allowed men to reestablish limited power in situations where they might otherwise feel powerless – protecting gender privilege in the face of economic weakness.

Women's tendency to comply with surveillance can likewise be understood in larger socioeconomic contexts. Women tended to have more education and thus greater opportunities than their male counterparts. Women who were extremely dissatisfied with monitoring processes at Electromart could either move into more cooperative, female-dominated units or leave the company entirely. Even women who remained in units with bully monitoring and masculine contests tended to be excluded from monitoring. Finally, women are socially rewarded for submission, not resisting control, meaning that women had to do less "ego defending" than men in order to successfully enact gender.

### *Theoretical Contributions*

This project reaffirms existing sociological theories regarding workplace surveillance, while also contributing valuable new insights. Labor process theory explains surveillance strategies as tools that employers develop and use to intensify labor and undercut worker resistance. Monitoring at Electromart obviously served these purposes. Hiring surveillance and cultural screening helped the company identify workers who would be industrious, compliant and non-conflictual. Cameras, walkie talkies and registers allowed managers to monitor workers'

actions and discipline those caught shirking. Supervisors and managers bully monitored their subordinates by directly observing workers' behavior and using electronic and customer feedback to establish control over workers. Finally, peer monitoring – whether in the form of masculine contests or cooperative surveillance – led workers to enhance their skills, improve sales and comply with company rules.

Workers' responses to electronic, peer and customer monitoring at Electromart likewise support Foucauldian perspectives proposing that surveillance leads workers to internalize organizational expectations and effectively police themselves. Like participants in Burawoy's (1979) research, men at Electromart developed their skills and secured sales as part of masculine contests resembling a game. The company's masculine culture structured shop floor relations such that men developed a personal stake in organizational success. Cooperative surveillance and selflessness arising in gender-balanced and predominantly-female units likewise reflects an internalization of Electromart's profit-making goals. Though workers did not experience panoptic control as tyrannical and all-encompassing as early theorists predicted (e.g., Fernie and Metcalf 1997; Sewell and Wilkinson 1992), resistance to electronic, peer and customer monitoring was relatively minor, consistent with theoretical predictions.

### Importance of Worker Agency

Just as my project underscores the continued value of labor process and Foucauldian approaches for understanding workplace surveillance, it provides several key insights that can strengthen these perspectives. First, I reaffirm Burawoy's (1979) contention that

employers' success in securing employee consent depends in large part on worker agency. Specifically, workers' stake in enacting socially-prescribed behaviors for their gender and race/ethnicity shapes how they will experience and respond to workplace surveillance.

As I showed with regards to masculine company culture, masculine contests and othering processes, gendered and racialized behaviors are often compatible with organizational rhetoric underlying surveillance. Electromart encouraged workers to adopt individualistic and competitive orientations towards their jobs, which encouraged salesmen to compete with their peers in ways that also allowed them to enact hegemonic masculinity. Similarly, Electromart constructed racial/ethnic minorities and the poor as threatening and undeserving, and workers eagerly adopted this critical orientation in order to boost their relative worth. By successfully "othering" customers and enlisting workers in customer control, Electromart successfully deflected worker resentment culminating from an atmosphere of distrust.

Other times, workers' gendered and racialized enactments contradicted organizational values, as with cooperative surveillance and selflessness. Workers' group-oriented behaviors in gender-balanced and predominantly-female units were at odds with the individualistic culture, yet managers, supervisors and workers therein nonetheless contributed to the company's profits and thus survival. This suggests that workers' actions in opposition to formal organizational values can occasionally benefit employers.

Finally, I find that workers' acceptance of company rhetoric can have unintended consequences that ultimately undermine employers' goals. Electromart successfully established a culture affirming individualism and competition, which led men in male-

dominated units to experience the labor process in masculine terms. Men's desire to enact hegemonic masculinity at work primed them to resist managerial control when they perceived that bully monitoring jeopardized their manhood. Had the company established a more gender-neutral culture, it is possible that male-dominated units may have been more apt to foster the cooperative response to surveillance that prevailed elsewhere in the store.

In sum, these findings suggest that social processes and expectations originating outside the workplace (and reproduced within it) fundamentally affect shop floor relations, though not necessary in ways that are clearly advantageous nor clearly disadvantageous for the company. Labor process and Foucauldian perspectives can be improved by continuing to examine when, how and why gendered and racialized enactments become important influences on workplace monitoring processes and labor control more generally. This would mean examining how organizations intentionally or unintentionally encourage workers to “do difference” as they extract value from workers' labor, as well as examining when workers depart from organizational scripts entirely.

Neo-Marxist scholars would also benefit from considering when and how workers' non-class identities can be used and/or muted in order to accomplish the humanitarian goal of delegitimizing exploitation at-large. Workers at Electromart acknowledged that their position in the class structure was vulnerable, but I never heard employees propose a class-based solution to their misery. More commonly, existing gender and racial/ethnic hierarchies simultaneously provided “safety valves” that protected the status quo and also served as a basis for white men's resistance – albeit limited in organizational consequence. Future researchers must examine whether workers will challenge capitalist exploitation while non-

class hierarchies remain, or if gender and racial/ethnic motivations could be used to launch a more meaningful critique of the economic system.

### Considering Weber

Second, though Marxist understandings built the foundation for both labor process and Foucauldian theories, Weberian ideas may add nuance to our perspectives on workplace surveillance and control more generally. Some theorists may consider using Weberian ideas to be an unwarranted departure from labor process theory's and Foucault's neo-Marxist roots (see Adler 2007), yet Marx's focal concern with domination and exploitation can be combined with insights from other theoretical traditions without sacrificing the integrity of Marx's ideas (Wright 2009).

Weber (1964) emphasized that we must understand social behavior by studying individuals' own perspectives, which are often fundamentally structured by gender and race/ethnicity. Taking worker subjectivity more seriously would mean looking at a wider variety of motivations for behavior than simply the economic (i.e., desire to exploit and avoid exploitation). Individuals seek power and status in ways that rely on their gender and racial/ethnic identities, and economic transformations have consequences for our gendered and racialized selves.

Weber (1964) argued that as class distinctions become less important for social stratification, non-class status differences will become more important. Given that experiences with precarity are no longer isolated to the periphery of the labor market, disproportionately occupied by women and people of color, white men may increasingly

perceive that they are in the same unstable boat as other groups (whether objectively true or not). White men may respond to their loss of economic privilege by defending unearned status advantages associated with their gender and/or race/ethnicity, thus strengthening non-class hierarchies.

Assuming that an understanding of non-economic subjectivities can help researchers understand workplace control processes – and perhaps increasingly so during the “era of insecurity” – sociologists must consider gender and racial/ethnic hierarchies as fundamental components of the labor process.

#### Updating Treatments of Gender and Race/Ethnicity

Third, this work suggests that the “doing difference” theoretical tradition (see Fenstermaker and West 2002) can enhance labor process and Foucauldian understandings of surveillance. Thinking of gender and race/ethnicity as something workers continually “do” in response to social expectations allows us to ask different questions about inequalities and the labor process than thinking of gender and race/ethnicity as mere classifications of workers. The latter approach – which has dominated research in the sociology of work tradition – risks treating workers as interchangeable subjects occupying reified categories that come with clear expectations and responses.

By conceptualizing gender as something workers do instead of simply something they are, I identified the importance of gender to workplace surveillance at Electromart in ways that I might have otherwise missed. For instance, consider how differently men responded to peer monitoring in male-dominated units compared to female-dominated units. In male-

dominated units, coworkers expected men to participate in masculine contests to assert their individual skill and worth and marginalize female coworkers. Individuals who failed to establish their manhood in this way were regarded as weak salespersons and indeed weak men. In female-dominated units, however, supportive supervision and expectations for cooperation discouraged displays of hegemonic masculinity.

Conceptualizing gender and race/ethnicity as something workers do helps us understand why sociodemographically similar workers in different contexts might respond to identical monitoring regimes in entirely different ways. Researchers can ask new questions about what gender and racial/ethnic expectations exist alongside control processes, where expectations come from, how these jive with workplace regimes, why expectations might change, and what behavioral consequences expectations have for worker resistance and consent. Asking new questions implicitly acknowledges the importance of history and time to understanding why workers either accept or resist exploitation (see also Gramsci 1917).

#### *Implications for Social Justice*

These findings also carry significant import for social justice. With regard to combatting workplace exploitation, I find that men's subversion of workplace surveillance occasionally allowed them to establish limited dignity at work and, more rarely, undermine managerial control. By challenging managerial conclusions, manipulating data, withholding effort, and launching personal attacks, men coped with their feelings of emasculation and provided the closest thing to a critique of the status quo. Their success was very limited in the sense that

they lacked system antagonism, were in weak economic positions, and could not see any alternatives to the existing economic order.

Men's resistance in defense of their masculinity may have had some revolutionary value, yet their associated tendency to marginalize women fragmented work groups and ultimately hurt workers as a class. By constructing worker control as a gender issue rather than a labor issue, men effectively prevented women from working as allies to blunt abuse. Such weak solidarity may not be surprising in the current economic and political climate, wherein many working class white men blame women and minorities – not elites – for their real losses in economic power (Fine et al. 1997).

Workers' participation in "othering" processes similarly yields contradictory consequences. On one hand, "othering" customers provided workers with a sense of value and power after managers communicated to workers that employees were not trusted. Establishing poor and minority customers as below workers in the store hierarchy partially diffused resentment and conflict. Yet workers and even managers at Electromart often shared more in common with the customers they subjugated than the corporate leaders who developed the company's aggressive anti-theft and monitoring processes.

Ultimately, the best way to ensure that all workers feel individually empowered without subjugating their peers or customers would be to establish alternative economic and cultural systems based on shared norms of equality and social justice. At least in the short term, it seems highly unlikely that workers like those at Electromart would lead such a revolution. Electromarts' workers feel trapped in their jobs, see no viable alternatives to the existing social order, and blame the wrong people (i.e., each other and customers) for their

shared misery. Many workers, and especially white men, had also become so jaded by the existing political system that they were skeptical about affecting social change and professed highly individualistic, libertarian ideologies.

Assuming that liberal changes within the confines of the capitalist economic order are more likely (though still highly unlikely) than a radical solution to the problems of unchecked surveillance, worker control, inequality and macroeconomic insecurity, I propose a set of concrete strategies that workplace activists may use to empower workers without the damaging social consequences of “doing gender” and “othering.” I believe that these strategies must be used in combination to be effective.

### Change the Rhetoric

Workers can demand that organizations promote equality by constructing more inclusive rhetoric. Electromart encouraged its employees to participate in one-upsmanship and bullying by adopting a hyper-masculine culture that pitted workers against one another using highly individualized productivity metrics. Though competition often led men, in particular, to feel empowered as they increased their skills and sales, it likewise elicited ego-centric, self-seeking behaviors that interfered with cooperation and contributed to the marginalization of women. Electromart’s judgment and treatment of poor and minority shoppers likewise engendered a tense racial atmosphere. An alternative model might enlist workers in culture formation, with a company-mandated goal of establishing a working environment that is welcoming to all organizational actors: managers, workers and customers. Individualistic evaluations, contributions and labor processes could be replaced by those that encourage

long-term cooperation, group achievements, interdependence, leadership rotation and equality (Perrow 1986). Organizations might even cooperate with such changes, assuming that inclusivity could be tied to productivity. Research on such issues is already underway (see Herring 2009).

#### Prevent Bully Monitoring

Male managers bully monitored their subordinates in large part due to intense performance pressures handed down from corporate. To alleviate bullying, workers must demand that organizations establish sustainable economic objectives and outline reasonable means by which to obtain those objectives. This would require that consumers and investors identify with and as workers, perhaps through a reinvented labor movement. Managers who feel empowered to reach goals and lead teams will be less abusive towards their workers, as their own economic precarity and masculinity would not hang in the balance. Companies that are held accountable for motivating their employees using more prosocial techniques, including opportunities for advancement, incentive schemes and worker participation, tend to elicit greater citizenship behavior and engender less hostility than those controlling by fiat and fear (Payne, Crowley and Kennedy n.d.).

#### Promote Integration by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

The treatment of women and racial/ethnic minorities at Electromart was worst in work groups predominantly composed of men and whites, respectively. Establishing diverse work units has the potential to foster relationships through cooperation (Payne, McDonald and

Hamm 2013) and mutual respect (Ely and Thomas 2001). As I have shown, even underprivileged groups operating in demeaning contexts can powerfully redefine social expectations at work. Strengthening and creating new legal mandates regarding the gender and racial/ethnic composition of work groups could facilitate integration.

### Democratize Surveillance

Workers at my site experienced monitoring as abusive and demeaning when it was used unilaterally to establish control and marginalize subordinate groups. Given that surveillance processes can improve efficiencies, prevent abuse and facilitate cooperation, it is unlikely that powerful groups or even relatively powerless groups would advocate their dissolution. An alternative strategy might involve democratizing surveillance (“sousveillance”), or expanding access to the means of monitoring and resulting surveillance data (see Mann, Nolan and Wellman 2003). Surveillance can be narrowly controlling or serve protective, group-enhancing purposes (Sewell and Barker 2006). Social justice advocates might identify ways to increase the latter while minimizing the former. The increasing use of YouTube to document abuses of power like police brutality, and social projects like Hollaback, where women submit photos of men who sexually harass them, suggests that individuals would enthusiastically participate in sousveillance.

### Provide Alternatives

Perhaps the worst abuse of workers at Electromart – eliciting sexist and racist responses – often took the form of questioning workers’ value and jeopardizing their livelihoods.

Educated workers could escape abuse by leveraging their education for better opportunities outside the organization. Enabling other workers to earn degrees and/or develop widely-marketable skills would not only provide an “out” for more individuals, but also make managerial threats and scrutiny less subjectively frightening for those who remained with the company.

### Enhance Social Support

Finally, beyond the confines of any single organization, workplace activists could promote a living wage, baseline benefits, regulations on work hours and improved working conditions. Humane treatment of workers at-large communicates that all individuals deserve respect and the resources to build healthy and happy lives. Establishing minimum expectations and rights for all workers could help alleviate anxieties that erupt in conflict lateralization.

### *Summary*

I conclude that variations in workers’ experiences of and responses to monitoring exist, and these are shaped by organizational culture and social contexts exogenous to the workplace. Taking variations in surveillance seriously not only improves existing theories, but also expands our knowledge of how to make workplaces and society at large more just.

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