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"You Can't Rent a Cop": Mall Security Officers' Management of a "Stigmatized" Occupation*

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Private security officers undertake work that is similar, in many respects, to that of police officers. However, private security is not seen, from the standpoint of portrayals of officers in popular culture sources or from surveys that measure occupational prestige, as nearly as esteemed as public police work. Given this evident lack of respect, this study seeks to ascertain how security officers in three Canadian shopping malls view their work, in particular, whether they perceive their occupation as stigmatized and how they manage public perceptions of them. Interviews with officers demonstrates that "stigma" is not necessarily an issue for them; they note that their work practices do comprise activities that are police-like, that police officers themselves often have to contend with a lack of respect, and that they marshal techniques of managing insults that constitute part of their interactions with clients. In sum, the notion that private security work can be described in any global sense as stigmatizing is challenged here due to the nuanced views that officers report.
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Introduction

This study gleans insight into shopping mall security officers' views of their occupation. Through in-depth interviews at three Canadian shopping centres, this report focuses on how respondents see their occupations, whether they see their work as stigmatizing or otherwise disrespected, whether they view their jobs as comparable to those of police officers (including whether they believe that the two occupational categories are similarly respected or disrespected), and how they manage the public's opinions of them. To attend to these issues, I will begin by considering how the public views private security officers.

Public perceptions of security officers

Livingstone and Hart (2003) consider a variety of sources to elucidate the historical development of public views of private security. They note that, as long ago as the mid-19th century, police managed to lay claim to the "policing" role in security services. Private security officers could, at best, claim a less prestigious "commercial" role in the public's view. This set the

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stage for the contemporary gap between public police and private security in terms of prestige, respect, and stigma accorded to and directed at both groups of officers. This gap is evident when one considers how private security officers are depicted in popular culture sources.

Contemporary North American popular culture is rife with negative portrayals of private security officers, especially portrayals of security staff in shopping malls. Among the most satirical are those from television, including *South Park*, which has featured mall security officers who are so unprofessional that they pepper-spray children; *The Simpsons*, whose security are inevitably pimply-faced teenagers, and the now-cancelled *Beavis and Butthead*, in which security officers were deluded, power-hungry oafs. In films, security officers are ineffectual loafers (*waydowntown*), rapists (*Dawn of the Dead* (2004), *Pulp Fiction*), and drug-using, scheming slackers with no other career options (*Friday After Next*). These images are typically unbalanced: if depictions of police officers almost always provide a "good cop" to counter the "bad cop," (as in *Serpico* and *Training Day*, among literally hundreds of examples), the filmic view of security officers is one-dimensional. The impression that popular culture gives of security officers is, in a word, derisive.

Given this consistently negative view in television and other entertainment media, one may ask what the "real" public view of private security is. One source for insight is occupational prestige rankings, which have been compiled by the (U.S.) National Opinion Research Center as part of occasional versions of the General Social Survey since the 1960s. For these rankings, the highest attainable score is 89; the lowest is 10. In 1993, as summarized by Nakao and Treas (1994), the most "prestigious" occupation from Americans' perspectives is physician, which gleaned a prestige score of 86. By comparison, the least prestigious occupation was a tie, with 13 points each, between "street corner drug dealer" and "fortune teller."

Those who work in public security services, including police officers, "policeman/woman," and "police lieutenant," received prestige scores of between 60 and 62, in line with airline pilots (61), journalists (60) and veterinarians (62). Although garnering the respect of the public, particularly in patrol situations, is one of the challenging aspects of police work among many sources of almost shocking work-related stress (Lumb and Breazeale, 2003), there is evidence here that police officers have, in general, little to be worried about with regard to the level of respect they can, generally, expect.

Private security officers are a different matter. Their occupational prestige is considerably lower than that of police officers. "Guard supervisors" received a score of only 38, less than for line workers such as "bank guards" or "museum guards" (40 apiece). While "mall security" was not one of the analyzed occupations, there is no reason to believe that they would not be similarly ranked. Other occupations in the 38–40 range include auto mechanic (40), typist (40), and public opinion pollster (39). While there are hundreds of occupations that are held in less esteem than are security guards, there is no question that they are seen more along the lines of blue-collar and service workers in prestige terms, and not along those of the usually-admired police officers.

At least one recent study confirms the disrespect that private security officers experience. Button (2003), in a study of security officers at a British retail complex, found that 40 per cent of officers had been physically attacked while on the job at least once in the previous

year; fully 47 per cent reported that they experienced verbal abuse *daily*. Thus, real security officers in, in Button's (2003) investigation, shopping mall contexts suffer from derisive public treatment. In light of the evident abuse of security officers in film and television, their additional lack of prestige from occupational rankings, and the negative engagement that they must endure from some of the public, it is appropriate next to consider whether and how research on private security officers has attended to these issues.

Research on private security officers

Private security, including security personnel, is everywhere. There are far more private security officers than municipal police officers in Western nations; in the U.S., for example, Benson (1998) estimates that there are two and a half private security officers for every municipal police officer, a trend that Jones and Newburn (1999) note is increasing in their study of the private security industries in the U.S. and the U.K. Waard (1999) notes the same trend in several other European countries. Newburn (2001) further ties this growth to an increase in privately owned space and the privatization of what had traditionally been public space in Western societies. Williams and Johnstone (2000) consider the growing presence of and reliance on closed-circuit television (CCT) in Britain with attention to the increased use of CCT in the private security industry and not only in the work of municipal policing.

Social scientific research on private security is, despite these trends, still scant compared to that on municipal policing, a topic that has earned its own academic subspecialty and countless research products. Research that does exist is diverse, with research attending to the need and prescriptions for private security in various locations (Ferguson, 1991; Benson, 1998) including the need for extensive specialized training (Walsh, 1994) and, in the case of shopping mall security, the need to have officers with whom customers can comfortably interact (Vellani, 2000). The legal aspects of private security have been attended as well, foundationally in the work of Shearing (1996) and Shearing and Stenning (1987). What has been missing in much of this research, however, is attention to the situated work practices, work strategies, and personal orientations to the practicalities of security as a lived activity. In other words, the practices, views, and discourses of officers themselves are missing. The work practices of police officers, by comparison, have a long history in research (cf. Bittner, 1967; Meehan, 1997). The literature search for this report did uncover a handful of pieces that take as primary topics the lived work of security officers; Button's (2003) article, again, surveyed security guards concerning the physical threats with which they contend, and Monaghan (2002) studied the embodied practices of "regulating unruly bodies" by bouncers. While these studies are laudable for attending to concrete social practices in security, they primarily acknowledge *that* officers might be mistreated or disrespected. This study innovates on this phenomenon by considering not only how security officers "feel" about such job-related challenges, but also whether and how they manage stigma more generally. This is, as such, the first study to examine officer's management of this presumably more pervasive "occupational hazard," one that would seem to exist over and above whatever actual threats they experience.

Data and method

This study entailed the analysis of interviews with mall security officers, security managers, and retail managers at three enclosed shopping malls in two major Canadian cities. The malls were all somewhat distinct in appearance and certain contextual (urban vs. suburban) respects, if not in retail offerings, which are very similar among Canadian regional and super-regional malls. I interviewed at least four persons at each mall, each identified pseudonymously here, including the retail manager at each, the security manager, and two officers. In one I was able to interview a security officer with a supervisory role as well (a "security supervisor"); all other officers where ordinary patrol officers.

Interviews were open-ended, and questions were tailored to the work of the recipient. Therefore, I questioned mall retail managers about the mall's retail environment and agenda as well as its customer base, catchment area, and of course its security program. Security officers and managers both received the same set of questions, which concerned their training, the course of a workday, typical and atypical encounters with customers, how they responded to crimes (or threat of crimes) and how they determined what might constitute a criminal event. I managed to interview one female and at least one male security officer at each mall, and although my sample size was much too small to make general statements with respect to gender, it was instructive to see that male and female officers did not appear different with respect to their work orientations, practices, or their spoken views on these phenomena. None of the retail or security managers was female.

The interviews lasted between 45 min and 1 h. The malls, their settings, and the numbers and types of respondents for each, are listed in Table 1.

A research assistant transcribed interviews verbatim. I then scrutinized these interviews for salient linguistic and narrative themes, and this paper examines one of those themes. The topic of this paper emerged in the course of the interviews as a phenomenon iterated and clarified in the talk of the respondents themselves. In other words, consistent with the sociological perspective of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984), the topic emerged as a prominent phenomenon for the interviewees as organized by and for themselves. Ethnomethodology proposes that sociology take the real practices and knowledge of social actors as its topics, and this study applies this recommendation with respect to the lived experiences of security officers. Thus, while there is inevitably some provisional (and

Table 1 Characteristics of malls and interviewees

Mall pseudonym	*Setting*	*Interviewees*
Darlington mall	Urban	2 retail managers, 1 security manager, 2 security officers
Chatham centre	Suburban	1 retail manager, 1 security manager, 3 security officers
Scarboro mall	Urban	1 retail manager, 1 security manger, 1 security supervisor, 2 security officers

therefore disputable) interpretation in the analysis that follows, I have endeavoured in every case to use the actual vocabularies deployed by the interviewees, without modification or euphemism, as support for those interpretations. The focus here is, as in all ethnomethodology, the interpretations and displayed claims by the research subjects, not the interpretations of the analyst.

This study is informed most clearly by the percepts and recommendations of ethnomethodology with respect to its take on, and skepticism concerning, stigma. This research specifically asks whether stigma, defined by Goffman (1968) as an expectation of a discrediting judgement of oneself by others in a particular context, is a problem for security officers, and if so, how they manage it. In this investigation, it is important to recognize that, while stigma is an undeniably important idea in sociology and other social sciences, one that informs notions of self-concept, self-esteem, and individuals' orientations to and management of their own purported deviance, stigma, as a working concept, can also deeply problematic when applied omnisciently to the experiences of persons under study. Manzo (2004) takes to task the notion that "stigma" can be used without reflection as an extant phenomenon that social actors themselves, and not social scientists, experience and orient to. Manzo (2004) examines the term "stigma" in its use in nearly 200 scholarly works, and concludes that "stigma" has become under-defined and over-used by social scientists as a convenient gloss of what are, in fact, far more complex phenomena than the pejorative and inaccurate term "stigma" can encompass. My intention here, then, is not to impute security officers as "stigmatized" a priori, because they may in fact not perceive their circumstances as stigmatizing at all. My goal is to ascertain how they view their jobs, to determine if those views comprise a stigma, and if not, what those views do comprise.

Study at all of the research sites additionally entailed ethnographic inspection of each of the malls, to clarify the architectural/design references that the interviewees used in their talk and to fine-tune the interview schedule to be relevant to each of the subjects. However, my research ethics protocol did not allow me to undertake "walk-alongs" to observe service encounters directly because of the concern that the persons observed in such encounters might be (and likely would be) minors, and the complications that would erupt in deploying minors as research subjects without garnering approval from their guardians.

Findings: methods for managing "stigma"

This analysis follows the interviewees' treatments of questions concerning their jobs' similarities with those of police officers and, in some interviews, pointed probes about whether and how expressions such as "rent-a-cop" affect them. The findings suggest a number of discursive, cognitive, and social-interactional strategies for managing disrespect, or the imputation of disrespect, of their occupations. It should be noted that in no case did security officers suggest that they *were*, in fact, in a stigmatized occupation. Their talk never entailed capitulation to or overt acceptance of a stigmatized status. Rather, security officers in this study adopted two general strategies in response to these queries. The first entailed various takes on their own work and theories about police work to evidence that private security is, for various reasons, not very different from police work (and, one infers, no more

stigmatized). The second set of strategies takes on the management of disrespect from mall visitors more directly.

Managing stigma I: drawing comparisons between security and police

Utterances that propose that security officers are similar to police officers presented three different lines of argument. The first was that security officers, like police officers, are well trained. Dan, who is a security manager at Scarboro Mall, and thus would be aware of officers' training, expresses this view.

Excerpt 1: "We do go through a lot of courses."

Int: So, you don't like it when people, I mean just, I'm not trying to raise your ire by bringing this up, but when people refer to security officers as rent-a-cops. What, how do you, if you could just sort of sit somebody down, and, and, and, tell them, respond to that? What would you tell them?

Dan: Explain that the individuals nowadays are going through more, and more, and continuing education – my role as a security manager besides the training that my officers get. And there's an organization that they can get training through that is run by security, or by police. And, uh, get all this training and it has to be certified. That's how my guys get their uh get their wages.

Int: Yeah.

Dan: You know, every course that they get, you know, they get a raise. So, you want to be able to identify that, you know, we, we do go through a lot of courses and be able to identify all the courses that we are going through. From, you know, race relations, to media relations, to conflict resolution.

Dan oversees the security program at his mall, under the auspices of the security firm that employs him. As such, he articulates issues surrounding not only his job, but also some concerning the profession in general; he moreover clarifies that one reason why security officers deserve respect is that they are well-trained professionals.

Kevin is also a security manager, at suburban Chatham Centre, and similarly suggests that his employees constitute a well-trained group comprising a number of different skills that help accomplish security. He responds to a question asking about training in considerable detail:

Excerpt 2: "It's actually multi-faceted"

Int: Um- can you describe the training that you provide?

Kevin: Yeah, uhm, there's a, there's, it's actually multi-faceted. I'll try and be brief with it.

Int: Ok.

Kevin: We have a – first of all an in-service training program, a new officer is on a three month probation. They come in, they're assigned to a training officer, so for the first month, they do night shifts. They come in on night shifts and they train with their assigned officer, they are shown the mall and the location. They are also shown a bunch of training materials which they go through in various different facets of the job. That's site training.

Int: Ok.

Kevin: We also – (Property owner) has a national security training program, which is based on the Canadian General Standards Board forty hour Canadian standard training and they take that in their first three months as well. So they – that's a 40 hour course and we have a three month in-house service training course as well.

Int: Three months?

Kevin: Three months is the training period.

Int: Right.

Kevin: Over that time they get, every month they get tested, to make sure they're taking in the material.

In this next excerpt, Kevin expounds not only on the redoubtable skills that his officers have, but also on the state of the security industry. It is, in short, a complicated position as Kevin describes it, one that deserves respect.

Excerpt 3: "We get education to our staff on a regular basis."

Kevin: So, we are moving away from that but there still are those lower level guards you know around that give the industry a bad name. As far as I'm personally concerned my goal at whatever I am is to develop the staff to a very high level. We have a program here in place where we get education to our staff on a regular basis and we've established standards. In our department here where you must within six months of being employed you must pass your certified protection officer program … One more quick example would be that on staff here we have one, one fully trained paramedic, three fully trained ENTs and two volunteer fire fighters, we have two first aid instructors, you know. So we have a lot of staff that are very highly trained… This is where security is headed now in large multipurpose facilities.

Line security officers, as against the managers, did not speak readily to the state of the security industry, but all were able to articulate certain similarities between their roles and those of police officers. In the next five excerpts, the officers note that there are important confluences between their tasks and responsibilities and those of police. Brian (of Darlington Mall) addresses the question of the similarities between the two occupations as follows:

Excerpt 4: "We have to do basically the same thing as a police officer does."

> Brian: We have to do basically the same thing as a police officer does. Except actually charging somebody because we have to go, we have to be careful how we make the arrest. You got to be careful how you make the arrest. And you got to be careful who you are arresting. Someone could say okay this guy stole a shirt. If they didn't see I can't touch them. I'm just going on what you tell me. I can ask him. But, I can't hold onto him.

Even though their jobs might entail "basically the same thing," Brian allows that the legal perquisites with respect to what an officer can do to a suspect are very different for him as opposed to for a police officer ("…I can't touch him"). He moreover suggests that his job can be more dangerous than that of a police officer, both in the previous excerpt concerning how "careful" he needs to be, but also in the actual dangerousness of some of the mall's customers. In response to a question concerning how his current position compares to his former one, as a municipal police officer in his home country, Brian says that it is similar, but he has no gun:

Excerpt 5: "…it's more like being a cop here anyways."

> Wayne: Being a security officer here it's more like being a cop here anyways. Because you actually do the same job which a police officer do, but it's just that they lay the charges.
>
> You just make the arrest, until they get here. So, once you do that, it's like, because if you knowa a guy has got a gun, you got to be thinking, you won't approach him because you're not equipped for that.

Christina (Chatham Centre) elaborates on some of these differences with respect to the security officers' "rights" and the question of what sorts of weapons they are permitted.

Excerpt 6: "Our rights are nowhere near what their rights are."

> Christina: So, that way we're similar, but we're different because our rights are nowhere near what their rights are. There's specific things, like we're not even allowed to respond to. Like, they have to take care of.
>
> *Int: Do you carry a weapon?*
>
> Christina: No.
>
> *Int: Does anybody here?*
>
> Christina: We're not allowed to. I think the only, I think in Canada, the only thing a security guard can carry is pepper spray but only after getting, like, thorough training.
>
> Int: Yeah.
>
> Christina: We just carry handcuffs.

Christina and Brian allow that security officers are limited with respect to the rights that they might enjoy in their duties, and this would seem to add to their sense of inequality and even stigma when discussing their work as compared to police officers'. However, interviewees also addressed how their jobs entailed certain advantages over those of police officers. Nathan (Scarboro Mall) articulates one such advantage, namely, that security officers always have the option of contacting the police when situations warrant it; police officers lack this luxury and must address problems on their own.

Excerpt 7: "We (have) an unfair advantage."

Int: Okay, do you have any thoughts regarding how your position is similar to that of a police officer's or not similar to that of a police officer's?

Nathan: Obviously there are some similarities. But, I think there's even more differences. We have less authority. We have, sorry, we have less tools at our disposal, less resources at our disposal. So we face different challenges because of that. The common reference is rent a cop. We're cop wannabes. We couldn't make it and that's why we're in this. Which is, for the most part, in my experience is not the, the truth.

Int: Not true. Okay.

Nathan: Most people have chosen this field. But, there are certain things that we can get away with that the police have to be a little more, uh, concerned with. One of the officers pointed out to me that other day that we had an unfair advantage in that, uh, that if I have an individual that's causing a disturbance, and I tell them listen either you cooperate and leave the property or I'm gonna call the police. Now, a police officer in that situation- who do they call?

This view was echoed by most of the officers interviewed, although not always as clearly expressed as an "advantage." Security officers recognize that they are, legally speaking, less accountable to manage disturbances and the like and all saw police as resources who can and do assist them with troublemakers. What Nathan suggests is that a police officer actually apprised him that this was an "advantage," and this narrative then lends some credence to the notion that security officers might just have jobs that are, on one detail at least, better than those of the police. It is especially notable that Nathan's discourse on the advantages of being a private security officer occurs after his acknowledgement of certain stigmatizing stereotypes, including "The common reference is rent a cop. We're cop wannabes. We couldn't make it and that's why we're in this."

To reiterate a point made earlier, neither Nathan nor any other officer capitulates with respect to these opinions. He recognizes them. All the guards recognize that these views exist. However, he deploys them linguistically as a claim to be disputed. He disputes them by suggesting that not only are security officers not "cop wannabes," they also have certain occupational advantages.

This is a vitally important excerpt as it encapsulates perfectly the most important theme in this paper, namely, that security officers are, indubitably, disrespected; however, this fact need not deter them from their work, and there are always ways to manage stigma. In this case, this technique is cognitive and linguistic: Nathan talks and thinks about his job in a way that minimizes stigma for him.

Another way of suggesting that security officers' jobs might be comparable to, or even better than, those of police officers would be to theorize about police work and to argue that police work itself is not esteemed. The following two excerpts expose precisely this argument. First, Diane (Darlington Mall) implies that police officers must manage disrespect just as she must.

Excerpt 8: "It's kind of the way I look at the police."

> Diane: Yeah, we hear the rent-a-cop thing a lot. The thing is I don't take that kind of thing very seriously. I let it go to this the uniform I don't let it you know. When I first started it bothered me lot. I'm not sure other than just telling people that were, it's kind of the way I look at the police. You look at me this way now, but you may need me. Keep that in mind when it's you car that gets broken into, or your little kid that gets lost, or your wallet that was stolen.

Police work is itself not always dramatic or "important," so in the next except, Christina de-privileges police work as superior to security work to begin with. She then addresses a vital similarity between police and private security officers in their reliance on discretion. She also suggests that she was not familiar with the expression "rent-a-cop" and implies that it is a silly expression. She finally argues that security staff often aspire to be police officers (although this ironically seems to confirm the "wannabe cop" stereotype that she does acknowledge).

Excerpt 9: "(Police work) is a lot of crap."

> *Int: Do you have any thoughts regarding how your job is like that of a police officer's, or different from that of a police officer's?*
>
> Christina: You want me to just compare it?
>
> *Int: Yeah.*
>
> Christina: It's that same because like of the variety of calls that you have to deal with. Some people think that police officers only get called like if there's a robber, or whatever, right? But it's not. Like once you get to know the cops it's a lot of crap, like just stupid annoying calls that come in. And that's what we have to deal with a lot too. Using your discretion, we have to be able to use your discretion and just knowing like yeah there's a specific rule, a specific law that you have to be able to make an exception for each individual situation.

Managing stigma II: defusing public disrespect

The fact that police officers might, according to some of the security officers, have to manage disrespect and other "crap," to use Christina's expression begs the question concerning how security officers manage the same thing. After all, police and security work share much, including the fact that all protective services entail contact with persons who are disrespectful. Security officers have to confront this on an ongoing basis.

As a security manager, Kevin acknowledges the problem of "stigma," and suggests that it can be lessened by an appreciation, in the industry and among the general public, of the growing importance of professional security (as opposed to "lower level guards") in a post-9/11 world:

Excerpt 10: "We are moving away from that."

> Kevin: I feel really bad and I can only imagine how these security people feel with each, in security there is that stigma that low paid, low trained, rent a cop type thing and we're moving away from that now. September the 11th has been one kind of paradigm shift in the importance of security. So, we are moving away from that, but there still are those lower level guards you know around that give the industry a bad name.
>
> *Int: Uh huh.*
>
> Kevin: As far as I'm personally concerned my goal at whatever I am is to develop the staff to a very high level.

Despite Kevin's optimism, the fact remains that security officers must manage public disrespect and even abuse as an ongoing practical matter. The most common reaction to disrespect reported was to take no notice of, or choosing not to respond, to taunts and other forms of disrespect. Chris (Chatham Centre), in the next excerpt, acknowledges that these verbal taunts are "constant" but says that he has learned not to respond ("I'll just keep going, so…").

Excerpt 11: "It's like, yeah, whatever."

> *Int: Yeah. Were you nervous when you first started here?*
>
> Kyle: Yeah. Oh yeah. Yeah. It takes a while to get used to the constant rent a cop, security, blah, blah, blah.
>
> *Int: Yeah.*
>
> Kyle: But, after a while it's just like yeah whatever. I've heard them all. If you come up with something original maybe I'll laugh at it but if not I'll just keep going, so.

Charlene adopts a similar strategy; like Chris, she acknowledges that disrespect is ubiquitous ("I get that all the time") but, again like Chris, chooses to "let people go on" and does not respond.

Excerpt 12: "Words aren't going to hurt me."

Int: Is there anything you can share about your work that people might not know about being a security officer? If you're, you know people can be disrespectful of security officers.

Charlene: Oh, yeah. I get it all the time.

Int: And I'm wondering if there was something, you could tell people to sort of make them respect you more or cause them to have greater respect for you? Is there anything you can say about that?

Charlene: Usually, I just let people go on with what they have to say.

Int: Yeah. It doesn't bother you?

Charlene: Words aren't going to hurt me.

In the final excerpt, Christina suggests that the concept of "rent-a-cop" is absurd. Her utterance comprises a number of intriguing arguments that entail, in turn, a critique of the term, "rent a cop" because a "cop" cannot be "rented"; the notion that being a "wannabe cop" is not itself pejorative because she sees herself as someone who does in fact "want to be" a cop (Christina earlier reported that she is in a police science program at a local college), thus defusing the pejorative nature of being a "wannabe"; and finally suggests that "half the guys here" are "pretty intelligent people," thus providing a possible pre-emption of any subsequent suggestion that security officers are, or are perceived to be, less than intelligent.

Excerpt 13: "You can't rent a cop."

Int: Is there anything you would like to share about your work that people might not know about being a security officer? If you were talking to somebody and they said you guys are all rent a cops or something like that. What would you do to school them in the real work of what you do?

Christina: Awe, I don't know. I never knew what rent a cop meant. You can't rent a cop. (Laughing) Okay, like, I don't understand what rent a cop means. But, like wannabe cops and stuff like that when we get called that. I want to say to them like half of us are, technically want to be cops, like. And I just want to say that this is the step up. You get to learn the basics before you have to do the big show, and it's like. I mean, and it is good practice whether they know it or not, and we're not stupid. Like, people think, like, security is stupid. They just couldn't get a better

> job or whatever, but like we're not. Like, if you talk to half the guys here they're pretty intelligent people.

There are not many examples in the interviews, even when the interviewer specifically invoked the slur of "rent-a-cop," in which the officers brought up instances of demeaning behaviours directed at them. If officers actively oriented to their jobs as stigmatizing, we might expect statements like, "I know I'm just a wannabe," or, "We're just rent-a-cops after all." In fact, these sorts of utterances were never presented in any of the interviews, and officers' discussion around such issues usually referred back to their training and professionalism, as did Nathan in excerpt seven. On balance, if there is a "stigma" surrounding private security, these officers usually choose not to acknowledge it.

Summary and conclusions

On "Stigma" and the security officer

It should be surprising that, despite the amount of insulting and thus "stigmatizing" imagery that North American culture comprises about mall security officers, that there appears to be no wholesale acceptance of stigmatized role among the admittedly small number of officers interviewed here. This study has suggested that the goal of security officers is to do an often-challenging job in the face of those challenges just as police officers do. Stigma appears not to be a major problem and certainly not one that can be isolated from the rest of job demands, and more research should be done to determine if this is in fact a characteristic of security work in general.

Evidence for officers' refusal of a stigmatized image comes from their discussions of their jobs and the responsibilities and reputations that accompany their work. In focusing on the discourse of the officers themselves in this study, we can witness not only how the interviewees manage stigma, but also that stigma was only be presented as a working concept, and a problematic one, when the interviewer posed it. In no case was stigma, disrespect, or anything analogous introduced as a salient by the persons under study here. By allowing officers their own voices and not invoking stigma presumptively in, for example, a preformatted survey, one can see that the concept, while mightily relevant for a researcher of a stigmatized occupation, may not appear as such for the occupants themselves.

This study begs further research into employees' own views of their work, particularly among those occupations that constitute the hundreds that are ranked lower than security officers on prestige rankings. How do garbage collectors, drug dealers, prostitutes, and even those maligned fortune tellers manage stigma? Of course some of these topics have been extensively covered, as in reports of the management of stigma by strippers (cf. Thompson and Harred, 1992; Thompson, Harred and Burks, 2003) and sex-trade workers (cf. Pheterson, 1993). What this study recommends is an ethnomethodological stance, one that does not assume a stigma as a priori and as ontologically genuine, and instead ascertains whether and how workers in disrespected occupations construe their jobs in negative terms, and if so, how they respond to those conceptions. It is important not to presume stigma, and too much of research that deploys stigma as a heuristic concept does just that.

Practical recommendations

This has been a primarily exploratory investigation with the goal of determining one small part of security officers' own orientation to their occupations. The questions that it posed have not only not been answered in previous research: they have not been asked. And like all exploratory study, this study might be thought of as adding to basic, foundational knowledge on the role of the security officer in contemporary society. Adding to this basic understanding should be the first contribution of this study. Determining that security officers do not, at least in the small sample analysed here, suffer from "stigma" despite the at times horrific gauntlet of disrespect, insulting media portrayals, and even physical attacks that they experience as security officers should not be understated. This is itself a notable finding.

However, all basic research should lend itself to practical recommendations, and one is that security firms stay the course with regard to a relatively new emphasis on human-relational, "customer service" training. The reason to emphasise this is that all disrespect and discrediting judgements that emanate from the public – the stuff of "stigma" in other words – are, in varying ways, outcomes of, informed by, and consequential for interpersonal communication in the course of these officers' jobs. If there is one way to express, as a gloss of all of the experiences uncovered in this study, how security officers manage stigma, it would be that they are, or attempt to be, unflappably professional in their engagement with customers. They are "professional" in their evaluations of their jobs as like police officers' (since police officers are, stereotypically, consummately professional); they are "professional" in their responses to insult; they are "professional" in how they perceive their places in society. All of these orientations can be taught, and as outcomes of appropriate training, they can only enhance the quality of services that these officers provide.

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