

HIST30060 Reflections on working in a supermarket during a pandemic

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I have worked at a supermarket in the western suburbs of Melbourne throughout the duration of the pandemic so far. It's profoundly changed the environment in which I and other employees are working and the place of supermarkets in our society in general. Being an essential service and one of the few places where people still gather, supermarkets have been a major site of transformation in our relations with other people, our consumptive practices, and an increasing culture of surveillance and public policing of behaviour.

It's hard to think of an area of my work which has been unaffected by COVID. We implemented a rigorous cleaning regime – wiping down the conveyor belt, screens and other surfaces after every customer. At the height of the pandemic, constant sanitisation caused cracks to appear in our hands. Particularly in the first few lockdowns, the sense of anxiety and tension in the supermarket heightened considerably. Staff were consistently commenting on customers having a shorter fuse, demonstrating increased irritability and suspicion towards us as service workers. Light conversation at the checkout turned very gloomy as the uncertainty about when this pandemic would be over set in. Supermarket workers would have to deal with customers who were sceptical about the necessity of these new rules and the legitimacy of the pandemic, as well as others who were complaining about those not following the rules.

Here are a few instances that I think reflect the bizarre and occasionally poignant nature of supermarket work during a pandemic.

During the first rush of panic-buying, supermarkets were forced to put limits on certain items like toilet paper, long-life milk and meat so that there were enough of these items to go around. However, for the first couple of weeks of these new limits, many customers were unaware of the changes until they came through the checkout and we had to inform them. In one particular instance, I had to keep taking items out of one particular lady's shopping because she was buying more than the limits allowed. She was getting distressed and frustrated, and as I was trying to explain the reasoning behind the new rules, she exclaimed, "I don't know why you're taking it off us! It's not us doing the hoarding, it's the Asians and the Indians!" She then got into an argument with another customer which a security guard had to break up (extra security had been employed to work at supermarkets for incidents like this one). These kinds of outbursts were quite common during the period of the pandemic.

On another occasion, at the height of the panic-buying period, I was serving a man of middle-Eastern appearance. He was staring in dismay at the frenzied behaviour of some of the people in the store, and the general atmosphere of blind overconsumption (he had just come in for fruit and veggies). "I tell you what," he said to me, "We're a bunch of soft-cocks. I come from the middle East and because of the West, they have nothing there. This... it's disgusting." I could only look around and feel ashamed at what this spectacle must look like to impoverished countries.

Finally, a middle-aged truckie came through my checkout one night in June 2021. This was around the time that cases were increasing exponentially in New South Wales and it seemed another lockdown was imminent in Victoria. "Bet you're sick of all this COVID stuff," the truckie had opened with as I packed his bags. He went on to talk about how long it'd been since he'd seen his family in NSW. I offered my commiserations then said something like, "You probably wouldn't want to be in New South Wales now, though. It seems pretty bad there," to which he responded, "Well, so they say." These interactions always had the potential to escalate so I said nothing, busying myself with his shopping. "It doesn't really make sense, does it?" He went on. "They said we had it bad last year, didn't they? And now they've passed it round so apparently New South Wales has it too..." This kind of vague conversation implying the seriousness of the pandemic had been exaggerated or constructed to some degree was not all that uncommon. There was another instance where I was frantically trying to clean all the surfaces of the checkout in between customers and the next guy in line leaned in to say, "Don't worry about that. It's all shit. This COVID thing. Don't worry about doing that." "I'll get in trouble if I don't," was my go-to response to such comments.

Ultimately, the supermarket has been an incredibly revealing place in which to work over the course of 2020 and 2021. I hope future historians of the pandemic will look back on supermarkets with the same sense of historical significance that they apply to hotels, hospitals and parliaments.