

‘HOTEL ROOM ATTENDANTS’ DELIVERY OF QUALITY SERVICE’

Sandra Kensbock, PhD

Affiliation: Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management, Griffith University,
Brisbane.

Telephone: (61 7) 373 56710

Facsimile: (61 7) 373 56743

Griffith Location: Glyn Davis Building (N72) 0.37, 170 Kessels Road, Nathan, QLD, 4111

Postal Address: Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management, Nathan campus,
Griffith University, 170 Kessels Road QLD 4111, Australia

Email Address: s.kensbock@griffith.edu.au

Anoop Patiar, PhD

Affiliation: Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management, Griffith University,
Brisbane.

Telephone: (61 7) 373 54104

Facsimile: (61 7) 373 56743

Griffith Location: (N72) 0.31, Nathan campus, Griffith University, 170 Kessels Road,
Nathan, QLD, 4111

Postal Address: Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management, Nathan campus,
Nathan, Griffith University, QLD 4111, Australia

Email Address: a.patiar@griffith.edu.au

Gayle Jennings, PhD

Affiliations: Imagine Consulting Group International, Brisbane, Australia and Department of
Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management, Griffith University, Brisbane.

Postal Address: GPO Box 2843, Brisbane 4001, Australia

Email Address: gayle@imaginecgi.com

Hotel room attendants' delivery of quality service

Abstract

Illuminating the physical difficulties experienced by hotel room attendants in delivering service quality at 5-star hotels on the Gold Coast region of South East Queensland, Australia, our research was founded on socialist-feminist and critical-theory epistemologies. In-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of 46 hotel room attendants. We used a qualitative, social-constructivist, grounded-theory methodology to render the empirical material into a basic social structural process of *tasking*. Tasking offers a conceptual framework of room attendants' daily employment experiences as they transform hotel rooms to prescribed standards. Tasking illustrates the high physical demands placed on room attendants, tantamount to exploitation from their own perspectives. Tasking contributes to research on employment experiences in hospitality, particularly on hotel praxis, delivery of quality customer service and the operational demands placed on room attendants. This paper presents the results of the first in-depth examination of the daily functions and roles of hotel room attendants.

Keywords: Exploitation Hotel Room Attendants Service Quality Grounded Theory

Hotel praxis

I'm the one that cleans and tidies the rooms when the guest is not there. I make it so when the guest comes in it looks great, first impressions are really important, so you have to make sure that fine details are done.

(Maureen, Hotel Room Attendant).

Introduction

Within the hospitality industry, 'service quality' is espoused as a point of differentiation amongst competitors; and plays a critical role in improving operational efficiency, as well as generating improved profitability (Ali, Hussain & Ryu, 2017). Subsequently, service quality is recognized as an important issue for business performance, one that service-based organizations, such as hotels, need to intricately understand and effectively manage (Kapiki, 2012). Service quality in hotels is, specifically, related to the service process (e.g. speed of service) and functional quality (e.g. a hygienically clean bathroom). Consequently, the work of room attendants is a source upon which to build further service differentiation and competitiveness. Relatedly, psychological and behavioral aspects of how well employees perform their tasks also contribute to overall service quality (Caruana, 2002). Service quality within the hospitality sector can be frequently misunderstood due to the multi-dimensional nature of the concept, its varying applications, and the range of models used for measurement (Pizam, Shapoval & Ellis, 2016). Given the importance of service quality with regard to guests' satisfaction and hotel profitability, extant literature related to the role of room attendants in delivering service quality is limited (Grobelna & Marchiszewska, 2013). In this paper, we redress this gap in the literature.

Housekeeping is the second largest occupation in hotels, comprising 26 per cent of hotel employees (Scherzer, Ruguilies & Krause, 2005). While many studies identify the physiological and psychological stressors endured by hotel room attendants, only a limited number of studies, dating from the 1970s to the present, take a holistic consideration of room attendants' role in hotels. (See Boon, 2007; Hunter Powell & Watson, 2006; Kensbock, Jennings, Bailey & Patiar, 2016; Knox, 2006; Liladrie, 2010; Onsøyen, Myukletun & Steiro, 2009; Oxenbridge & Lindegaard Moensted, 2011; Saunders & Pullen, 1987; Shamir, 1975; Sherman, 2011; Sollund, 2006). Without exception, all of these studies reported the servicing of hotel bedrooms as a predominantly female occupation involving heavy workloads; yet none defined the concept-heavy workload, or its implications for room attendants. In addition, the studies identified the servicing of hotel bedrooms as associated with low workplace status, relatively low pay, with high labour turnover and little opportunity for advancement. A significant point to note is that despite the passage of time and literature, as well as co-varying national contexts and differing management styles, little has changed in room attendants' working conditions. Hotel room attendants continue to be exposed to two main elements of occupational hazards: physical exertion resulting from heavy workloads and continuous hard work; and exposure to chemicals and biological pathogens. As this research will show, these elements serve to negatively affect the delivery of service quality within participating hotels. Moreover, in our research, in order to achieve service quality, room attendants' employment experiences involving heavy workloads were conceptualized as a form of exploitation. Specifically, in this article, the concept of exploitation is taken to mean taking advantage of someone in a way that is unfair (Zwolinski, 2012).

The purpose of our research was to give 'voice' to room attendants, privileging them as the experts in the field. Our research makes the following contributions: First, we identify hotel

room attendants' onerous workload, highlighting how issues negatively impact on the delivery of quality service. Second, we present the narratives of the women and the interpretation of their employment stories to provide in-depth emic understanding of the role of women room attendants within the study hotels and the perceived exploitative nature of their work.

The following sections of this paper present a background of extant literature related to service quality. We then provide details of the epistemological foundations guiding our grounded theory methodology. The outcomes of this research are described by presenting the grounded theory of 'tasking' as a basic social structural process depicting the impacts of workload on quality service delivery within five star hotels. Finally, we analyse the outcomes by discussing how women room attendants struggle to provide service quality given the onerous workloads imposed on them. This detailed examination of provision of service quality and delineation of the heavy workload of room attendants are the unique contributions of this research.

Service quality

A plethora of literature contributes to our understanding of service quality, and is often linked to quantitative measurement of customer satisfaction. Within the hospitality industry, guest satisfaction may be considered the "degree to which a product or service meets the customer's expectations" (Pizam & Holcomb, 2008, p.66), and more recently to 'delight' customers (Barnes, Ponder & Dugar, 2011). Much research has been devoted to the mechanics of matching guest expectations with experiences of quality and linking

expectations to guest satisfaction (Lai & Hitchcock, 2017). The following discussion provides an overview of the service quality measurement tools currently in use within service industries, such as hospitality.

The concept of service quality is well embedded in extant quality literature. Examples of this embeddedness are reflected in the ISO 9000 standard, which was developed and published by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) to define, establish and maintain effective quality assurance systems for service industries. However, it should be noted that the ISO 9000 is primarily concerned with business processes rather than client satisfaction outcomes. Albeit, it does provide an assurance of quality to its customers. Another example, is Total Quality Management (TQM), which offers a holistic approach to quality management. TQM espouses zero defects, and emphasizes quality initiatives to ensure continuous improvements, and product innovation as a primary management business strategy to achieve a competitive advantage (Eraqi, 2006). The TQM approach is frequently applied within tourism and hospitality industries, as it is a people-focused management system that aims at continually increasing customer satisfaction (Kapiki, 2012). Earlier, the use of Quality Indicators (QI) was highlighted by Rosen (1974). The QI measurement approach classifies characteristics, such as room services, catering services, reception services, lounge and other communal areas services and then measures these in terms of the quality perceived by the client. Recently, Quality Function Deployment (QFD) advocates the mechanics of a service context in three phases, namely service planning, process control characteristics and action plans while linking the voice of the customer with service management requirements, yet defusing the customers' expectations in the service development process (see Bahar Kurtulmuşoğlu & Pakdil, 2017 for a current analysis of QFD process).

The SERVQUAL scale has become the most recognized approach to measuring service quality (Patiar et al., 2012). Originally developed by Parasuraman et al., (1985), SERVQUAL was later revised by the original authors and reduced to a five component structure encompassing: Tangibles; Reliability; Responsiveness; Assurance; and Empathy. A SERVQUAL derivative, LODGQUAL attempted to better focus on the service and product measurements situated within the hospitality industry (Getty & Thompson, 1995). A further related lodging and quality model was the Lodging Quality Index (LQI), developed by Getty and Getty (2003). The LQI uses a pool of 26 items representing five dimensions of tangibility or functionality, reliability of reservation and room readiness; ‘responsiveness’ in the willingness of staff to respond; ‘confidence’ of a safe environment with respect and politeness, and ‘good listening’ and communication skills of staff (Grobelna & Marciszewska, 2013). An additional variation of SERVQUAL has emerged in the form of SERVPERF, which attributes service quality to attitudes based on satisfaction (Eraqi, 2011). Both SERVPERF and SERVQUAL identify the need for tangibility and reliability and empathy, which are provided by room attendants in the hotel context.

Service quality within the hospitality industry is inextricably linked to customer satisfaction and retention, and subsequently to overall business success (Arvelo-Pérez, Arbelo & Pérez-Gómez, 2017). Lewis and McCann (2004) identify lack of cleanliness as the most important factor in guest perception of service failure, with responsiveness and tangibles as the most significant dimension of quality service. This paper identifies the difficulty hotel room attendants’ face in the delivery of two key dimensions of service quality: tangibility, and reliability from their perspective, due to their intense workload and the time pressures under which they work. The grounded theory methodology we followed is now explained.

Methodology

Our research was concerned with the workload of women employed as hotel room attendants and how this impacts the delivery of service quality. We used a qualitative research method, in order to obtain meaningful detailed descriptions and explanations of complex real world experiences and meanings (Jennings, 2001), with respect to hotel room attendants. Our research was founded on an ‘intertwined epistemology’ incorporating theoretical paradigms of socialist feminism and critical theory. Respectively, a socialist feminist epistemology asserts the norms and practices of knowledge production affect the lives of women (Buchanan, 2011), while a critical theory orientation seeks to liberate people from enslaving circumstances (Horkheimer, 1974). These epistemological influences permeated our research process, underpinned by the view that all knowledge is socially constructed, evolving and situated. As critical theorists we included an axiological aim to advance transformational changes (Jennings, 2001) in room attendants’ employment circumstances. We found the majority of studies conducted into service quality drew on post-positivist epistemologies. As the experience of quality is inherently personal, an emic - insider perspective (Jennings et al., 2009) based research design was adopted. This adoption aimed to capture the multiple meanings associated with the quality of hotel room hospitality experiences from the perspectives of room attendants. As noted by Jennings and Weiler (2006, p.304), “in order to understand experiences, industry and researchers need to interact with the stakeholders”. Room attendants, as providers of service quality, are therefore one of the major stakeholders within five star hotels.

Based on above arguments, we chose a ‘purposive’ (or highly selective) theoretical sampling of room attendants working at five-star hotels on the Gold Coast of south-east Queensland, Australia. The five participating hotels ranged in size from 243 rooms to 593 rooms and were comparable in terms of their market mix, location, and 5-star ratings with three belonging to international chains. Making initial access involved approval of several hierarchical levels of gatekeepers within the hotels (i.e., general managers, human resource managers and executive housekeepers). One-on-one, in-depth interviews were conducted with 46 women room attendants. Interviews were semi-structured in nature and focussed on the themes related to the daily experiences of room attendants. Participants ranged in ages from mid-20s to early-60s and were from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Each participant provided informed consent and was assured of their confidentiality. The length of interviews averaged 30 minutes and these were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The empirical material was interpreted using grounded theory methodological tools. First open coding was used, followed by selective coding. Grounded theory offers a sound method for empirical material (data) collection and interpretation (analysis) to encompass pro-activity rather than reactivity (Jennings et al., 2009). In addition, grounded theory’s methodological toolkit offers flexibility in inductive construction of categories to explain social phenomenon, in this research, the room attendants’ delivery of service quality.

The interviews were conducted in groups, interspersed with coding. We applied Glaser’s (1978) *Theoretical sensitivity* to derive the theoretical codes to express the interrelationships between the substantive codes arising from selective coding processes. The outcome of our interpretations was a conceptualization of *tasking* as a basic social structural process that encompassed the causal properties of physical tasks a room attendant performs on a daily basis to transform a hotel room into a ‘five-star’ quality commercial commodity. These tasks

include making the bed, manoeuvring the trolley and cleaning the bathroom. Intervening conditions are coalesced around the physical demands and time constraints room attendants are placed under and how these conditions impact the consequences of service quality delivery. The hallmark of qualitative research is groundedness and goodness of fit with those whom are participating in the study (Charmaz, 2006). The findings of this study were grounded with the room attendant participants, and were found to be a good fit with their lived work experiences. The following section presents *tasking* as a basic structural social process that room attendants undergo to fulfil their roles within hotels. In doing so, as intimated previously, we provide ‘voice’ for the room attendants and narrate their views of the physical duties that they are required to complete. Where verbatim quotes are used, pseudonyms are applied.

Findings

Tasking

Tasking as a “substantive theory” (Adelman, 2010) forms a basic social structural process, of being a room attendant in a five-star hotel. *Tasking* incorporates the major categories of hard work; including moving the housekeeping trolley, bed-making and bathroom cleaning; as well as meeting time pressures and paying attention to finer details in order to meet five-star service quality standards. The model of tasking is shown in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

In line with our epistemological position of privileging room attendants as the experts, each of the categories and their properties is represented through the use of verbatim quotes from room attendant interviews. There were also intervening conditions that further intensified the hard work, such as room layout, the functionality of cleaning equipment, and the behavior of some guests. The hard working conditions were accompanied by what attendants reported as an inequitable reward of low wages. Helen, in her 50s, expressed her opinion:

It's not fair, the pay is just the pittance for the hard work you do.

Hotels choose cost-minimization business strategies, which may be unsustainable, "... it makes no sense to prop up indefinitely firms whose very existence depends on paying poor wages" (Lloyd, Warhurst & Dutton, 2013, p.268). For example, the minimum legal rate of pay in Australia has become the 'going rate', and is representative of exploitation. Within the context of our research, the assumption that five-star hotels cannot afford to pay more needs to be reconsidered, particularly given the workload of room attendants as detailed below.

Hard Work

In the daily routine of hotel operations, the core concern of participating room attendants was the physical demands of hard work, requiring constant physical exertion, with recognized potential for causing physical injury. Alison, in her 30s, questioned current hotel expectations:

I can't understand why they push so hard, why is this industry so demanding? And the physical pain is hard, girls are getting hurt.

In hotels, organizational commitment, productivity and job satisfaction are affected by occupational health and safety risk factors. Fatigue from exploitative hard work, such as

identified in *tasking*, increases aging and diminishes the quality of work life of employees (Kiliç & Selim, 2009). Further, fatigue can increase the risk of physical accidents and a possibility of missing some important aspects of service delivery, particularly reliability. Our research details the most physically challenging tasks identified by room attendants as bed-making, manoeuvring the supply trolley and bathroom cleaning.

Bed-Making

The bed, usually of king size, was recognized by room attendants as being the primary element of ‘five-star’ presentation to guests when they entered the hotel room, and making beds was the most physically challenging and time consuming activity. Kirsten, in her 50s, emphasized the importance of the bed as a finished hotel product, which sets the guest room scene:

When a guest walks into a room, most guests look at the bed, if the guests come in there and see the bed nice and if there’s a little mistake that you might have forgot, they won’t worry about that because it’s nice and fresh looking.

While the number of beds a room attendant made varied daily with room allocations, most reported having to make between 26 and 32 beds in a day. The process of making a bed involves changing the linen daily with many movements back and forth around the bed, adding and tucking-in layers of linen and replacing up to six pillowcases. These bedding layers also require lifting the edges of the mattresses, (many are heavy, super king-sized mattresses), at least once all the way around. Room attendants also have to move the beds to check for lost property; to realign the base and mattress; and to restore the bed to the required position. The task of making beds, day after day, compounds into an enormous weekly and

monthly physical toll of exploitation on these women. The room attendants identified the activity of bed-making as a leading contributor to their fatigue and injuries.

Bed-making involves muscular and skeletal demands through stretching of arms and quick limb motions and requires awkward postures, physical exertion and repetitive movements of twisting and forward bending. Room attendants are exposed to compression forces in the bed-making task, which exceed prescribed Australian ‘safe lifting’ limits (Milburn & Barrett, 1999). Historically and recently, literature, identifies room attendants’ health status as worse than the general population (Larkin, 1969; Seifert & Messing, 2006). Such occupational accidents incur losses both for the hospitality sector and for the economy of a country (Kiliç & Selim, 2009). As a consequence, room attendants felt they were exploited in their efforts to reach assurance of room readiness.

The expectations of participating five-star hotels can only be described as ‘exploitative’ because the hard physical efforts of room attendants’ labour was, and continues to be, appropriated to benefit hotel owners. In line with our theoretical philosophical position as socialist feminists and critical theorists, we use related philosophical-positioning vocabulary. Consequently, our use of the term ‘exploitation’ is a moral or ethical choice and mirrors the “goodness of fit” of our understanding or interpretation of the situation room attendants experience in their daily working lives. We realize that we use an *a priori* principle of value in our assumptions. We view the current working conditions for room attendants as unfair and unjust.

The Housekeeping Trolley

After bed-making, the second most physically challenging task for room attendants was manoeuvring the housekeeping trolley. Room attendants were required to push a fully loaded housekeeping trolley from the location of the housekeeping department into lifts, along carpeted corridors and between rooms. These trolleys weigh over 70kg when empty (scif.com 2010). Rachael, in her 40s, describes what can happen:

The trolleys are pretty heavy, we have got some little girls [room attendants] and I've seen them struggling, they are just about horizontal trying to move them and get them up the corridor.

The trolley is meant to visually enhance the corridor experience for the guests' gaze by keeping the cleaning equipment tidy or concealed. By the end of the day, these trolleys were overloaded with wet towels and soiled bed linen, which increased the force required to push them around. Stocking the trolley and manoeuvring it between hotel rooms on different floors takes time that is often not included in the 30 minutes allocated for each room's service. The housekeeping trolley also provided the cleaning equipment for the third identified major physical challenge, the bathroom.

The Bathroom

Room attendants viewed bathroom cleaning as their most important task performed in the guest room. Miranda, in her 50s, clearly stated that the bathroom task was a key quality performance indicator for the guest:

Hygiene is what we are employed for and that is what the guest expects. The bathroom is important, the hygiene side of it.

To achieve a hygienically and aesthetically clean bathroom, repetitive broad arm movements are needed to wipe walls and shower screens, along with working on knees to clean the bath and shower floors. Many participating room attendants reported elbow, wrist, neck, shoulder and back strain injuries caused by bathroom cleaning. Janice, in her 20s, identified a condition that several other room attendants described:

I have what is called 'golfers elbow', it's on the opposite side of the elbow from tennis elbow, it's on the bottom and caused by repetitive scrubbing all the time, there's always someone [here] on WorkCover [A compensation scheme for employees who suffer workplace injuries].

Many room attendants reported working with pain on a daily basis, and also found cleaning bathrooms a repulsive and dirty challenge. Most room attendants expressed fears of contracting diseases, particularly from cleaning toilets. Ivy, in her 40s, identified potential threats:

Cleaning toilets is the worst, I'm always scared of splashes and flicks of water in my face.

Apart from exposure to pathogens in bathrooms, further occupational risks to which room attendants were exposed included the chemicals used for cleaning. There appeared to be little consultation with room attendants by the hotel management decision-makers about the cleaning products used. This marginalizes them as a community of value, who have in-depth knowledge of their *tasking*, as reported by Glenda, in her 50s:

It's the finance department who decides what product we use, and they just choose the cheapest with no idea whether it works or not.

We use ‘marginalization’ to denote room attendants’ exclusion from organizational decision-making. Inability to acquire the best and safest cleaning products is a service failure at the soul of the hotel showing a lack of standards regarding tangible service quality (Li & Krit, 2012). Room attendants are exposed to various dangerous chemicals used for cleaning (Lalla & Dingle, 2004), as well as to pathogenic bacteria as they undertake cleaning tasks. Corrosive cleaning agents used by hotels have been found to trigger high rates of lung damage, and to induce adverse neurological, immunological, endocrine and physiological reactions, with potential negative links to central nervous system tolerance (Caress, Steinemann & Waddick, 2002). Additionally, organophosphates, which are the basis of many insecticides used to control bed bugs, have been linked to an increased risk of dementia in later life (Hayden et al., 2010). Both the hard and hazardous work of bed-making and bathroom cleaning was exacerbated by intervening conditions, such as guests’ late departures delaying access to rooms, along with the messy state of some vacated rooms. These workloads made it very difficult to service or clean a room in the allocated time as well as to meet assurance and reliability of quality.

Messy Rooms

The messy condition of some hotel rooms was identified as demoralizing for room attendants. An untidy and dirty room takes longer to clean and increased time pressures on room attendants, as Rebecca, in her 50s, asserted:

The state of some of the rooms, the guests don’t seem to have any respect for us.

Room attendants were in consensus that family groups required much more physical effort, particularly as there was often a roll-out bed installed in the room which made access difficult. Helen, in her 50s, explained:

We have family rooms that are all the same size with a king bed in one room and two queens in the other, but they cram five and sometimes six people in them with a rollout bed as well, and it makes it really hard to clean the rooms, and then the kids' toys are everywhere.

A consequence of crowded rooms and young guests was that the room attendants needed longer time in these rooms to negotiate the extra furniture, which also constituted an occupational health and safety hazard. Other guests whose behavior caused delays due to the state of vacated rooms were male sports teams who often celebrated the end of their playing season on the Gold Coast. These teams were identified as particularly problematic. Kate, in her 50s, explained what she considered the worst task, reflecting an often-stated view by room attendants generally:

Oh picking up used Frenchies [condoms] that's disgusting, they are lying on the floor, we use gloves but it is not nice.

As room attendants enter the personal space of the guest, they can also witness intimate actions (sleep and self-cleaning). They are also exposed to offensive odours as Gwen, in her 40s, explained:

One thing I don't like is the body odour in some rooms, but the worst part is cleaning up people's spew [vomit].

There appears no provision of extra financial rewards for the room attendants who actually undertake these more 'dirty' tasks, although in some hotels their workload might be reduced,

subject to the availability of other staff. By not considering delaying incidents, such as the particularly messy rooms of certain guests, hotel management are taking advantage, or exploit, room attendants by failing to recognize these difficulties or compensate them for their additional efforts of hard and dirty work.

Hard work

The meaning and consequences of ‘hard work’ identified by room-attendants were women who were physically and mentally drained and demoralized workers. Valerie, in her 50s, encapsulated this as she explained her feelings at the end of the day:

We sit in here [locker room] exhausted, you can only do so many rooms.

Hotel room attendants who participated in this study reported giving full commitment to their performance of *tasking* each day. The physical demands of being a room attendant were believed to be a major cause of high staff turnover experienced at most establishments, as Valerie argued:

The room attendants are exhausted so they have a high staff turnover. There are a few that stay 10 or 12 years, but the majority of it is a turnover of six to eight months.

Room attendants believed that high staff turnover and high absenteeism were consequences of the demands of the hard work of *tasking*. The physical tasks of bed-making, trolley pushing and bathroom cleaning capture the majority of experiences associated with the descriptor ‘hard work’. Inherent in this hard work, is the exploitation of room attendants through overwork and injury risk, without recognition or fair recompense for encountering these risks. It is believed that poor internal service to employees leads to poor treatment of guests and this in turn affects delivery of service quality (Grobelna & Marchiszewska, 2013).

Further, Kiliç and Selim (2009) posit that physical, chemical and biological risk factors have an adverse effect on job satisfaction, wherein satisfaction decreases with an increase in occupational health risks. In addition to these physiological stressors of physical demands, and biological and chemical risks, room attendants were victims of psychological stressors.

Psychological stress has already been identified as an occupational hazard for hotel room attendants (Faulkner & Patiar, 1997). This stress is believed to be derived from hierarchical organizational structures (Kensbock et al., 2013a); from treatment of employees as ‘instruments of labour’ in monotonous, repetitive work (Herod & Aguiar, 2006); and from the demands of guests and role conflict (Kensbock et al., 2013b); Further, psychological stress is caused from work deemed to be of low social status (Creed & Muller, 2006; Faulkner & Patiar, 1997). Other damaging hazards potentially facing room attendants include violence and sexual harassment (Kensbock et al., 2014). Such physical and psychological stressors impact on both room attendants’ personal lives and performance at work. The remaining sections in this paper present the categories of *tasking* related to room attendants’ views of the time hotels’ allocated for cleaning the rooms and their endeavours to achieve service quality.

Time Pressure

Time pressures were described by room attendants as ‘stretched’, ‘tight’ and ‘difficult’. The average allocation of 16 rooms a day allowed an average of 28.12 minutes per room, without considering activities, such as preparation of trolleys, pushing trolleys between rooms, more

than usually messy rooms, and delays caused by guests who still occupied rooms. Time pressure was identified as so intense that even a few minutes was important, as Pamela, in her 30s, explained:

The workload, the amount of rooms we have to get done and the work we are expected to do daily, you don't have time.

As already noted, the number of rooms the attendants were required to clean varied between hotels, with an average of 16 rooms per day. Allowing insufficient time to clean each room placed enormous demands on hotel room attendants' physical *tasking* performance by requiring faster movements. Bronwyn, in her 40s, explains the difficulty of minimal room time allocation:

A room attendant is given half an hour to do one checkout, but to do a proper job, the way they want it done, is probably 40 to 45 minutes, it's a real challenge.

Room cleaning time-minimization can save several thousands of dollars in labour costs over months. This has the potential to increase surplus value for hotels and adds to further exploitation of room attendants through increased appropriation of their efforts. The extent of time pressure experienced by room attendants was also dependent on the number of departures as well as the requirement for some rooms to be ready at an earlier time. Eva, in her 20s, described the problem she found with front office failing to recognize the importance of timing in her tasks:

If they have been cleaned they can check them in early, like guests check out at eleven o'clock and yet people don't get out until 11.30 or 12, and you got to constantly reschedule your rooms, it's frustrating.

Despite guest departure lists from front office that inform the housekeeping department of vacated rooms, many guests remained in their rooms for some time after paying their account. A further consequence of this time pressure is that the room attendants cannot afford to lose even a few minutes talking to guests. Wendy, in her 40s, explained the dilemma:

I greet the guests, say 'good morning', but I can't talk because it takes three, four, five minutes and then I get behind.

Room attendants were torn between completing their tasks and fulfilling hotel requirements that they should interact with guests with empathy. Valerie, in her 50s, revealed that in order to meet allocated schedules, room attendants were exposed to further exploitation by virtue of the fact that they had to forgo rest entitlements:

If you take time for smoko [short break, such as morning or afternoon tea/coffee] it takes you five minutes to get in and get out, and that's why some girls don't take their smoko because you can't waste 10 minutes getting to and from the staff canteen.

The perceived inability to take legally designated breaks underlined the level of exploitation of these women. The hotels' appropriation of every minute of room attendants' employment time did not allow sufficient rest time from the intense physical demands. The time pressures, combined with the workload and the desire to complete the task to meet quality standards, resulted in some room attendants working in their own time. A key to performance is the organization of time, and for room attendants there was a trade-off between speed and meeting the prescribed service quality standards. Effective deployment of labour translates to less overstaffing and more understaffing. However, the lean staffing, evident at the participating hotels, can lead to poor performance of service quality (Scherzer et al., 2005) and is an external constraint imposed on room attendants by their own company's rules and procedures. Amongst the five participating hotels, there were no discernible differences in

working conditions or intensity, and, as noted in other studies, missing breaks or “undertaking unpaid work at the end of a shift was not uncommon” and, importantly, is illegal (Lloyd et al., 2013, 266). In sum, *tasking* exposes room attendants to a range of health and safety issues. The following section identifies how room attendants achieve service quality given the aforementioned impediments.

Achieving Service Quality

To deliver service quality and hence meet and exceed guest expectations, the room attendants’ aspired to be quality performers within the luxurious five-star hotels by taking pride in their job. From the participating room attendants’ perspective, as portrayed in the preceding text, hard, physical workloads and time pressures hindered the achievement of ‘service quality’. That being said, the pursuit of service quality provided room attendants with task satisfaction as Rachel, in her 40s, disclosed:

It’s a thrill to see the room gleaming and I can’t leave until it is like that.

In attempting to complete *tasking* thoroughly, room attendants demonstrate a strong work ethic to meet service quality standards. Unrealistic management demands in time allocation for room servicing, resulted in room attendants in some instances having to ‘cut corners’ in order to meet room cleaning-time. The demand for speed means “quality is likely to fall before speed, because poor quality can be concealed but not slow service” (Goffman, 1959, p.39). By not allowing sufficient time for room attendants to fulfil correct standards for *tasking*, room attendants’ workload was unacknowledged, and this affected the hotels’ service quality. According to participants, service quality equated to providing the expected

standards for guests. Maureen, in her 30s, explained her view of achieving quality despite a request for an early check-in:

If the guest is at reception they just wait until I'm through, because I don't want them to walk in and see something that should have been done, and because I was rushing I missed something and they complain. I'd rather they wait a little longer until I get the room immaculate.

Maureen's and others' perspectives show room attendants believe that guest satisfaction was a prime gauge of service quality. Nevertheless, the time pressures imposed on room attendants allowed little time for 'fixing' defects and highlighted the need to achieve quality through 'doing the right thing first time and aiming for zero defects', a tenet of TQM (Crosby, 1996).

The participating room attendants' statements revealed efforts to meet two dimensions of quality identified by Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) original proposition of the SERVQUAL (now called the customer satisfaction expectancy disconfirmation and performance) model. The two dimensions were reliability in performance of expected service, and demonstrably meeting the guests' expectations of a visually appealing room as a tangible offering. Not having a clean room has been noted as the most serious failure of service quality in hotels (Lloyd et al., 2013). Hotel room attendants are workers, who are central to a guest's experience of service quality.

Discussion

Tasking is an inductively derived substantive theory explaining hotel room attendants' operational functions. The room attendants believed their efforts to achieve quality service lacked acknowledgement by management, specifically with regard to the physical effort required and time constraints. Based on Kirsten, Alison and Rachael's perceptions and shared by others, room attendants were exploited within the three most physically challenging tasks identified as: making 26 to 32 king-sized beds daily, moving around the supply trolley in the course of daily work, and bathroom cleaning. The physical feasibility of accomplishing all *tasking* within time limits was affected by the allocation of rooms per shift, the availability of the rooms, and the condition of vacated rooms. Exploitation was revealed by high injury rates and psychological stresses exacerbated by room attendants' experiences as 'instruments of labour' by the physical demands Valerie identified. Luxury hotels have been identified as having the highest female workplace injury rates in Australia (United Voice, 2011). Nearly fifty years ago, the task of bed-making was identified as particularly challenging for the physiological capacities of room attendants in the workplace (Larkin, 1969). Nowadays room attendants make super king-sized beds, which incur even greater body stresses. Research shows that room attendants have a very high rate of musculoskeletal injuries (Milburn & Barrett, 1999).

The fears of Gwen relating to 'dirty' tasks are supported by studies identifying hotel bathroom cleaning as exposing room attendants to pathogenic bacteria, as well as the potential dangers from incorrect chemical use (Seifert & Messing, 2006). Valerie's description of her physical state at the end of the day reveal the excessive demands of hard work led to burnout, defined as becoming "exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources" (Fichter & Cipolla, 2010, p.159). Despite a range of literature identifying the physical hazards of hotel room attendants' tasks, there appears, judging by the

empirical material we collected, to have been little change in practice over time. The room attendants' experiences of time pressure identified by Pamela and Bronwyn above accord with the findings of Faulkner and Patiar's (1997) study of workplace induced stress amongst Australian hotel operational staff. The unavailability of rooms inhibits the reliability and responsiveness quality criteria identified by Parasuraman et al., (1985). The lack of time that room attendants had for guest interaction, as related by Wendy, has been identified as a component of negative customer satisfaction, which can be detrimental to a hotel's image.

The hotel industry appears to take advantage of room attendants for their own profit and these productive workers need to be in a position to appropriate the surplus value they create (Burczak, 2012). The intangibility and immediacy of service work complicates the management of service quality, and this is compounded by demands of efficiency and costs (Arvelo-Pérez, Arbelo & Pérez-Gómez, 2017). So what appears to be effective and functional at the strategic level may not appear so to the operational level and particularly in the delivery of service quality (Bolton & Houlihan, 2010). The failure by hotel management to acknowledge the time pressures placed on room attendants reified their exploitation through not correcting these concerns.

Conclusion

This paper presents a simple model of *tasking*, a substantive theory, where room attendants' reveal a holistic experience of their job responsibilities. The consequence of the exploitative hard work, identified in this paper, was women who were physically and mentally drained and not fully recognized through the hotels' lack of acknowledgement of their workload and paid minimum wages. Service quality was seriously compromised by room attendants'

workload. Under the current management of these hotels the focus is on ‘scientific’ management concepts of economic efficiency and cost cutting. To meet the challenge of service quality the room attendants appeared to have insufficient recourse to their physical exhaustion.

Theoretical and practical implications

As noted at the beginning of this article, our research contributes to hospitality literature firstly by using an intertwined socialist feminist-critical theory epistemology and grounded theory methodology. This approach provides a perspective not offered in previous studies by theory building from the room attendants’ empirical world experiences, and thus fills a gap in extant literature. Secondly, the insights of room attendants are grounded in the succinct model of *tasking* and gives hotel room attendants a ‘voice’ to explain their perspectives of their daily duties. The women room attendants’ concerns include working under physical duress with tight time restrictions, which have a detrimental effect on the delivery of service quality for guests. The perspectives of room attendants revealed herein provide insights for hotel operational praxis, particularly, acknowledgement of room attendants as a community of value in decision-making, and in moving towards a reduction in workload expectations prevalent under current management styles to ensure service quality delivery. This may be achieved through a psychological capital approach to develop constructs such as hope, optimism, resilience and self-efficacy (Mathe, Scott-Halsell, Kim & Krawczyk, 2017).

Limitations and future research

Finally, this study has only provided in-depth insights into women room attendants' employment experiences concerning workload in five 'five-star' hotels on the Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia in the early decades of the 21st century. In light of this research, further research directions are recommended using broader samples across all hotel 'star' ratings to provide a deeper representation of room attendant occupations in relation to their workload and remuneration. Given the nature of hard work performed by hotel room attendants the following questions require further examination:

1. How can hotel management positively change the workload for room attendants within everyday hotel operational settings?

2. How can room attendants be recognized as communities of value with regard decision-making and their working conditions, for example, in the choice of chemicals for cleaning?

3. How can hotel room attendants receive matched time workloads commensurate to task performance and quality assurance?

In answering these questions from varying stakeholders views, researchers will be able to both further refine the substantive theory of 'tasking' as well as to provide strategies that address the concerns of room attendants' experiences of exploitation through overwork, which affects their ability to deliver service quality to guests.

References

- Adelman, C. (2010). Substantive Theory. In A. J. Mills, G. Durepos and E. Wiebe. *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, Los Angeles: Sage.
- Alexander, M. W. (2010). Customer delight: A review. *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal*, 14(1), 39-53.
- Ali, F., Hussain, K. & Ryu, K. (2017). Resort hotel service performance (RESERVE) – an instrument to measure tourists’ perceived service performance of resort hotels. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 34(4), 556-569.
- Arvelo-Pérez, M., Arbelo, A. & Pérez-Gómez, P. (2017). Impact of quality on estimations of hotel efficiency. *Tourism Management*, 61, 200-208.
- Bahar Kurtulmuşoğlu, F. & Pakdil, F. (2017). Combined analysis of service expectations and perceptions in lodging industry quality function deployment. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence*, 28(11-12), 1393-1413.
- Barnes, D. C., Ponder, N. & Dugar, K. (2011). Investigating the key routes to customer Delight. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 19(4), 359-375.
- Bolton, S. C. & Houlihan, M. (2010). Bermuda Revisited? Management Power and Powerlessness in the Worker-Manager-Customer Triangle. *Work and Occupations*, 37(3), 378-403.
- Boon, B. (2007). Working within the front of house/back-of-house boundary: Room attendants in the hotel guest room space. *Journal of Management and Organization*, 13(2), 160-174.
- Buchanan, I. (2011). Socialist Feminism. *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press.
- Burczak, T. (2012). What kind of rights do workers need to eliminate exploitation?

- Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture and Society*, 22 (4), 518-523.
- Caress, S. M., Steinemann, A. C. & Waddick, C. (2002). Symptomatology and etiology of multiple chemical sensitivities in the Southeastern United States. *Archives of Environmental Health*, 57(5), 429-436.
- Caruana, A. (2002). Service loyalty: the effects of service quality and the mediating role of customer satisfaction. *European Journal of Marketing*, 36(7/8), 811-830.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory. A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Creed, P. A. & Muller, J. (2006). Psychological distress in the labour market: shame or deprivation? *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 58(1), 31-39.
- Crosby, P. B. (1996). *Quality is still free: Making Quality Certain in Uncertain Times*. USA: McGraw-Hill.
- Eraqi, M. (2006). Tourism service quality (TourServQual) in Egypt: The viewpoints of external and internal customers. *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, 13(4), 469-492.
- Faulkner, B. & Patiar, A. (1997). Workplace induced stress among operational staff in the hotel industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 16, 99- 117.
- Fichter, C. & Cipolla, J. (2010). Role conflict, role ambiguity, job satisfaction, and

- burnout among financial advisors. *Journal of American Academy of Business*, 15(2), 256-262.
- Getty, J. & Getty, R. (2003). Lodging quality index (LQI): assessing customers' perceptions of quality delivery. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 15(2), 94-104.
- Getty, J. & Thompson, K. (1995). The relationship between quality, satisfaction and recommending behaviour in lodging decisions. *Journal of Hospitality and Leisure Marketing*, 2(3), 3-22.
- Glaser, B. G. (1978). *Advances in the methodology of grounded theory. Theoretical Sensitivity*. California: The Sociology Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York NY: The Overlook Press.
- Grobelna, A. & Marchiszewska, B. (2013). Measurement of service quality in the hotel sector: The case of Northern Poland. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management*, 22(3), 313-332.
- Hayden, K. M., Norton, M. C., Darcey, D., Ostbye, T., Zandi, P. P., Breitner, J. & Welsh-Bohmer, K. (2010). Occupational exposure to pesticides increases the risk of incident AD: the Cache County study. *Neurology*, 74(19), 1524-1530.
- Hunter Powell, P. H. & Watson, D. (2006). Service unseen: The hotel room attendant at Work. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 25, 297-312.
- Herod, A. & Aguiar, L. M. (2006). Ethnographies of the cleaning body. *Antipode*, 38(3),

530-533.

Horkheimer, M. (1974). Critique of instrumental reason. Trans: M. J. O'Connell et al. New York: Seabury Press.

Jennings, G. R. (2001). *Tourism Research*. Milton, Qld, Australia: John Wiley and Sons Australia Ltd.

Jennings, G., Lee, Y.S., Ayling, A., Lunny, B., Cater, C. & Ollenburg, C. (2009). Quality tourism experiences: Reviews, reflections, research agendas. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management*, 18(2-3), 294-310.

Jennings, G. R. & Weiler, B. (2006). Mediating meaning: Perspectives on brokering quality tourism experiences. In G. R. Jennings & N. Nickerson (Eds.), *Quality tourism experiences*, (pp. 57-78) Burlington, MA: Elsevier.

Kapiki, S. (2012). Quality management in tourism and hospitality: An exploratory study among tourism stakeholders. *International Journal of Economic Practices and Theories*, 2(2), 53-61.

Kensbock, S. Jennings, G. Bailey, J. & Patiar, A. (2016). Performing: Hotel room attendants workplace experiences. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 56, 112-127.

Kensbock, S., Bailey, J., Jennings, G. & Patiar, A. (2014). Sexual harassment of women working as room attendants within five star hotels. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 22(1), 36-51.

Kensbock, S., Jennings, G., Bailey, J. & Patiar, A. (2013a). Distinction work and its

- consequences for women working as room attendants within five star hotels on the Gold Coast, Australia. *Hospitality and Society*, 4(1), 55-73.
- Kensbock, S., Jennings, G., Bailey, J. & Patiar, A. (2013b). 'The lowest rung': Women room attendants' perceptions of invisibility and five star hotel operational hierarchies. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 35, 360-369.
- Kiliç, G. & Selim, M. (2009). The effects of occupational health and safety risk factors on job satisfaction in hotel enterprises. *Ege Academic Review*, 9(3), 903-921.
- Knox, A. (2006). The differential effects of regulatory reform: Evidence from the Australian luxury hotel industry. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 48(4), 453-474.
- Lai, I. K. W. & Hitchcock, M. (2017). Sources of satisfaction with luxury hotels for new, repeat, and frequent travellers: A PLS impact-asymmetry analysis. *Tourism Management*, 60, 107-129.
- Lalla, F. & Dingle, P. (2004). The efficacy of cleaning products on food industry surfaces. *Journal of Environmental Health*, 67(2), 17-21.
- Larkin, J. A. (1969). *Work study. Theory and Practice*. England: McGraw-Hill Publishing.
- Lewis, B. R. & McCann, P. (2004). Service failure and recovery: evidence from the hotel Industry. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 16(5), 6-17.
- Li, X. & Krit, J. (2012). Service is power: Exploring service quality in hotel's business, Yunnan, China. *International Business Research*, 5(5), 35-48.

- Liladrie, S. (2010). 'Do not disturb/please clean room': hotel housekeepers in Greater Toronto. *Race and Class*, 52(1), 57-69.
- Lloyd, C., Warhurst, C. & Dutton, E. (2013). The weakest link? Product market strategies, skill and pay in the hotel industry. *Work, Employment and Society*, 27(2), 254-271.
- Mathe, K., Scott-Halsell, S., Kim, S. & Krawczyk, M. (2017). Psychological capital in the quick service restaurant industry: A case study of unit-level performance. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, 41(7), 823-845.
- Milburn, P. D. & Barrett, R. S. (1999). Lumbosacral loads in bed making. *Applied Ergonomics*, 30(3), 263-273.
- Onsøyen, L. E., Myukletun, R. J. & Steiro, T. J. (2009). Silenced and invisible: The Work-experience of room attendants in Norwegian Hotels. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 9(1), 81-102.
- Oxenbridge, S. & Moensted, M. L. (2011). The relationship between payment systems, work intensification and health and safety outcomes: a study of hotel room attendants. *Policy and Practice in Health and Safety*, 9(2), 7-26.
- Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A. & Berry, L. L. (1988). SERVQUAL: A multiple-item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality. *Journal of Retailing*, 64(1), 12-40.
- Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A. & Berry, L. L. (1985). A conceptual model of service quality and its implications of future research. *Journal of Marketing*, 49(4), 41-51.
- Pizam, A. & Holcomb, J. (Eds.). (2008). *International dictionary of hospitality*

management. Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Pizam, A., Shapoval, V. & Ellis, T. (2016). Customer satisfaction and its measurement in hospitality enterprises: a revisit and update. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 28(1), 2-35.

Rosen, S. (1974). Hedonic prices and implicit market: product differentiation in pure Competition. *Journal of Political Economy*, 82(1), 34-55.

Saunders, K. C. & Pullen, R. A. (1987). *An occupational study of room maids in hotels*. London: Middlesex Polytechnic.

Scherzer, T., Ruguilies, R. & Krause, N. (2005). Work-related pain and injury and barriers to workers' compensation among Las Vegas hotel room cleaners. *American Journal of Public Health*, 95(3), 483-488.

Scif.com. (2010). *Room attendant's trolley*. Retrieved from <http://www.scif.com/safety/ergomatters/RoomAttendants.html>.

Seifert, A. M. & Messing, K. (2006). Cleaning up after globalization: An ergonomic analysis of work activity of hotel cleaners. *Antipode*, 38(3), 557-578.

Shamir, B. (1975). *A study of working environments and attitudes to work of employees in a number of British hotels*. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of London: London School of Economics.

Sherman, R. (2011). Beyond interaction: customer influence on housekeeping and room service work in hotels. *Work, Employment and Society*, 25(1), 19-33.

Sollund, R. (2006). Mechanistic versus organic organizations' impact on immigrant

women's work satisfaction and occupational mobility. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 6(4), 287-307.

United Voice. (2011). *Hotels with heart*. Retrieved from <http://unitedvoice.org.au/industries/hospitality>.

Zwolinski, M. (2012). Structural exploitation. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 29(1), 154-179.

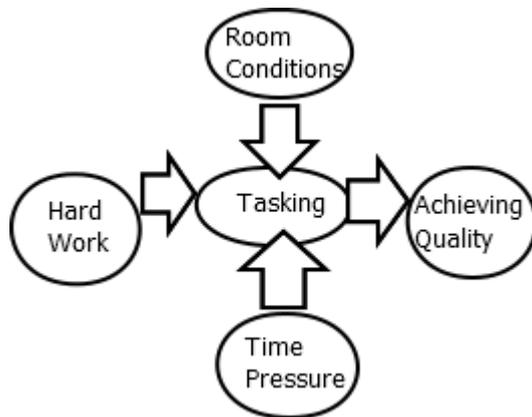


Figure 1. Conceptual model of tasking