

## **'I NEED PEOPLE THAT ARE HAPPY, ALWAYS SMILING': GUEST INTERACTION AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR IN A CANADIAN DOWNTOWN HOTEL**

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### **CUSTOMER SERVICE WORK AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY**

**C**ustomer or interactive service work, i.e. that which involves the provision of a service based upon either face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public, is a major growth pole of the 'new economy' as seen in the expansion of industry sectors such as hospitality, leisure, retailing and call centres. It is often claimed, not least by industry representatives, that interactive service work represents a new form of non-regimented employment that offers great possibilities for discretion and even creativity in how workers interact with customers and certainly more possibilities than existed within manufacturing industry (Butler and Watt, 2007, pp. 135-47).

Such prognostications seem decidedly optimistic. For one thing, much of this work is low-paid and undertaken by those groups who are the most disadvantaged in the labour market, notably immigrants, women and young people (Guerrier and Adib, 2001; Zuberi, 2006; Butler and Watt, 2007). Furthermore critics of customer service employment argue that much of the supposed discretion and creativity is chimerical, based as the work ultimately is on profit maximization imperatives that include unquestioning subordination to the demands of customers (Williams, 2003). The pioneering and hugely influential work of Hochschild (1983) on 'emotional labour', based on research in the airline industry, indicates how women flight attendants have to manage their own emotions in a manner that is subservient to the needs of capital and ultimately results in alienation from their true feelings. Smiling convincingly for the benefit of passengers is a requisite commercial asset that airline companies encourage and expect from their cabin crew. As Hochschild argues, such emotional labour is furthermore something that women are expected to perform by dint of their supposedly innate nurturing capacities, but this gendering contributes towards its low status.

The concept of emotional labour has been shown to be highly relevant and applicable in relation to employees working in a variety of customer service occupations (Soares, 2003), including occupations in the hospitality industry (Guerrier and Adib, 2001; Adib and Guerrier, 2003). Customer service staff in hotels and restaurants are expected to manage their behaviour and feelings in ways that are conducive to meeting customer demands, even if the latter are not necessarily desirable or, in some cases, legal. Guerrier and Adib (2000) have highlighted how sexual harassment and bullying by guests and co-workers are significant work hazards for hotel workers, especially women.

Hochschild's work has been subject to considerable critique, notably in relation to the view that the performance of emotional labour is not necessarily either as simple or detrimental as she suggests (Bolton and Boyd, 2003; Williams, 2003). Hochschild is thus accused of underestimating the potentially satisfying elements of emotional labour, as well as downplaying the potential for resistance that customer service workers have. Guerrier and Adib (2000) discuss elements of resistance in relation to the various strategies hotel staff employ in dealing with sexual harassment and bullying by guests. Despite the various criticisms of Hochschild's work, the notion of emotional labour has proved an illuminating framework for understanding the social construction of interactive service employment, as Williams (2003) argues, and it is drawn upon in this paper.<sup>1</sup>

## THE RESEARCH

The empirical material referred to in this paper is taken from case study research undertaken at a major hotel located in the downtown area of a large Canadian city.<sup>2</sup> The hotel catered for a combination of business travellers and tourists, and employed several hundred staff, many of whom were immigrants. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with a total of 51 hotel employees, comprising 32 main-grade workers, five supervisors and 14 managers, plus one student on work placement. The interviews were based around a schedule that focused on work experiences and histories, as well as future employment aspirations. Managers were also asked about the operation of their departments, notably in relation to staffing issues.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the interviews, observation of work routines was undertaken both in the public areas, such as the front lobby and restaurant, as well as back-of-house operations such as room cleaning. The majority of main-grade and supervisory worker interviewees were, in fact, located in the back-of-house and were nearly all immigrants. There is some reference made to these workers, in particular room attendants, although the main focus of this paper is on those front-of-house occupations whose primary remit was guest interaction.

The paper begins by examining management discourses on the importance of taking care of the guests. It then moves onto provide an in-depth

account of how guest interaction was routinely experienced and enacted by staff employed at what Bird *et al.* (2002) describe as the 'front office', i.e. front desk (a.k.a. reception), reservations, switchboard and bell desk.<sup>4</sup> The latter section incorporated 'bellmen' and 'doormen' and, as these job titles imply, there was a clear gender division of labour at the front office, since men monopolized the bell desk positions. According to the bell captain, one woman had worked in his section, but she had quit after a month: 'the bags are too heavy for them [women]'. In contrast, all the reservations staff and most reception and switchboard staff were women. Furthermore, it was the women employed in such positions whose work involved extensive and intense emotional labour. In terms of age, the majority of receptionists were in their 20s. Younger people were also prominent in switchboard and reservations, but less so at the bell desk. Unlike the case of the UK where racial minority staff are unusual in customer contact positions (Adkins, 1995; Adib and Guerrier, 2003), the front office sections contained several racial minority and/or immigrant staff. The majority of front office employees interviewed were from immigrant backgrounds, as was the reservations manager. With one exception, all the front office staff were employed on a full-time basis at the time they were interviewed.

Aggregate labour turnover at the hotel was below 20%, but was noticeably higher at the front desk. At the time of the research, many departments at the hotel were unionized and these included the bell desk plus all the back-of-house departments. The union was the main hotel workers union, UNITE HERE Local 75. Unionization in the Canadian hospitality industry is nationally very low (9%), but up to 80% at the large hotels in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver (Lucas, 2004, pp. 143-4). The high level of unionization and multiethnic workforce at the case study hotel are typical of major downtown hotels in Canadian cities (Zuberi, 2006). Not all the departments were unionized, however, and the non-unionized departments included the front desk and reservations.

## MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVES ON TAKING CARE OF THE GUESTS

'Taking care of the guests' was unsurprisingly a prominent theme in the interviews with those managers responsible for front-of-house areas, i.e. restaurant, banquets, reception, switchboard, reservations, security and the bell desk. The needs of the customer came first. The Assistant Restaurant Manager explained how he would cover bar and restaurant shifts if, for some reason, they were short-staffed: 'the important thing is that the customer shouldn't suffer'. This prioritization of guests' needs and wants via what Williams (2003, p. 533) refers to as the 'silent servant assumption', i.e. the ethos that 'the customer is always right', emerged strongly around discussion of hiring policy and practices. Hiring front-of-house staff was primarily based upon 'personality', with

experience, skills and qualifications considered as secondary criteria by managers. The emphasis was very much on taking care of the guests, as the General Manager explained:

*If you go to one of the interviews [for front-of-house staff] and the person, you don't come across as a positive pleasant likeable manner then we probably won't hire that person, so we definitely do want to have people who are outgoing, pleasant and understand that they're. ... I know people say all the time, 'I like working with people', and I correct them, and I say 'well you're not going to be working with people, you're going to be working for people', because our guests, when they come into the hotel, they expect you to take care of them, they don't expect you to be their buddy.*

The emphasis was clearly placed away from developing relationships based on mutuality and friendship, as occurs in private life, towards an outward display of friendliness coupled with servitude. As the General Manager acknowledged, this servitude was based upon an asymmetrical power relationship:

*You have to have the attitude that you're there to serve somebody. You're not an equal, whether you like it or not, you're still there to serve. Even the General Manager, I still have to sometimes get down on my knees and be polite, well not be polite, but do things that I would not think I should have to do as a general manager, but the customer has to be taken care of, and if they want you to be that way, then that's what you've got to do.*

The General Manager did not consider himself to be on an equal footing with the guests, but nevertheless he had a large degree of status as a result of his position, reinforced by his gender. The asymmetrical nature of the relationship between guests and staff was far more pronounced in the case of routine front-of-house workers, especially women. In this relationship, the women workers were expected to control their own emotions in order to produce the required effect, one deemed conducive to good business. In other words, workers had to perform emotional labour, in Hochschild's terms. Management required them to be 'professional', even under provocation from aggressive guests. When asked what characteristics she sought in her staff, the Reservations Manager replied:

*The person has to be pleasant on the phone, demonstrate professionalism, they cannot be short-tempered. Some guests can yell at you for no reason and you have to maintain a certain professionalism and composure.*

Maintaining 'composure' in the face of guest aggression was an important aspect of emotional labour for reservations agents, but also for reception staff as we discuss below. Furthermore, front-of-house staff had to display those personal qualities managers thought the guests wanted, i.e. pleasantness, cheerfulness, being 'nice'. This could include providing service with a smile, with smiling being regarded as an important part of the customer service experience, as Hochschild (1983) highlights in the case of flight attendants. The Food and Beverage Manager, for example, had adopted a deliberate strategy of changing guest interaction practices in relation to servers on the late shift in the restaurant, including emphasizing the provision of service with a smile:

*I need people that are happy, always smiling. With a bit of training I can show how we do our work here. I want someone who is happy and a smile goes a long way, even if the food tastes bad, that server can make your day. If you'd had a miserable night, you don't want someone who looks miserable. (Food and Beverage Manager)*

As a consequence of the pressures to be seen to perform emotional labour, including the emphasis on appearing cheerful, the Food and Beverage manager said that some of the older servers had left and younger women and men had been hired:

*Some of the staff that had been here a long time chose to leave. I didn't want them to leave, just change their way of working, but they usually left by themselves.*

Although the Food and Beverage Manager subsequently proclaimed that he had not 'got anything against older people', the demands made by management vis-à-vis the workers' capacity to perform emotional labour could well have potential consequences for the demographic shape of the hotel workforce. The implicit valorization of the social category of youth, because of its association with both 'flexibility' and 'liveliness', probably contributed towards the de facto domination by young people of several front-line customer service occupations at the hotel. Young people were prevalent not only in the late restaurant shift, but also in other areas in which displaying a positive, outgoing front to the guests was seen as particularly important, for example, at the front desk. In marked contrast, the back-of-house workers were far more likely to be middle-aged. Furthermore, although looking 'attractive' was not a formal stipulation for women front office staff, unlike in the study by Adkins (1995), it was the case that their physical appearance and presentation was a managerial priority. By contrast, the male bell desk staff were not only generally older, but also their appearance seemed to be less significant for management.

How did managers monitor the guest interaction capabilities of their staff? Partly this was done directly through 'observing their one-on-one interaction with guests' (Assistant Guest Services Manager). In addition, staff were monitored indirectly via guests' verbal and written comments, including the use of comment cards supplied by the hotel as well as guests sending in impromptu emails. This surveillance by guests effectively amounts to what I would term a disciplinary Foucauldian 'guest gaze' in which managers could survey and even control their workers at a distance via the medium of guests' comments (cf. Sosteric, 1996).

The focus of this particular paper is on those front office occupations centrally concerned with guest interaction. By comparison, back-of-house workers, for example room attendants, are typically considered to provide an 'unseen service' (Hunter Powell and Watson, 2006), one that involves no emotional labour: 'the maid is expected instead to be invisible or a "non-person" ... who goes about her work without disturbing the guest' (Adib and Gurrier, 2003, p. 420). In fact, as we discuss below, there was a limited amount of guest interaction in the case of some back-of-house occupations. Written guidelines were also displayed on the housekeeping office wall on what cleaning staff should do in front of guests, including injunctions to smile (Hochschild, 1983) and ask if their room was satisfactory. We will now turn to examine how the workers themselves experienced interacting with the guests.

### **DOING EMOTIONAL LABOUR: DEALING WITH IRATE AND MESSY GUESTS**

The reception section had to deal with multifarious demands and queries by guests: 'the front desk is more pressured [than switchboard], they get millions of questions' (Guest Services Manager). This constant questioning regularly involved being on the receiving end of complaints, or as one woman who had transferred into the front desk from another department described it, 'when you're actually at the front desk, you get it' (FDA1).<sup>5</sup> As Faulkner and Patiar (1997, p. 104) have commented, 'whatever the cause of the guests' dissatisfaction, it is the front office staff who are required to deal with them face to face and resolve the problem'. Resolving guests' problems involved having to manage both the guests' and their own feelings and in so doing undertake emotional labour, along the lines indicated by Hochschild (1983), in which smiling through adversity was an expected part of the job. Dealing with 'lots of complaints' and the complex negotiating skills involved in doing so was described at length by one of the women front desk agents:

*That's one of the things that's tiring. I have to sit there and smile and be happy and be jolly for eight hours a day. And then have somebody come and like scream*

*in my face or like, getting all upset. We're obviously here before the restaurant, here is where the housekeeping [unclear], we're always here and then we have to figure out what does this guest want, all those things. [...] You can't freak out at people, it's not appropriate, you know. Generally people will start out all heated and then you kind of just like, you know, 'I'm listening to you, it's OK, we'll figure it out together', that sort of thing. [...] But it's hard sometimes when someone's like screaming at you for something that's not your fault, but you're having to take responsibility because you're obviously the first person that they see, and then turn around and have to be really nice to this person who's just like lost their temper on you. (FDA2)*

Although putting on a 'smiley face' was part of the job, it was clear from the descriptions given by the front desk staff that their performance of emotional labour involved far more than this. They had to absorb the anger coming from 'irate guests' (cf. Hochschild's 'irates'), calm them down and attempt to placate them, but at the same time control their own negative emotions towards the guests. This was a tiring process and was something that they had to regularly do as part of their job, a job that involved them standing up for many hours a day. Routinely having to deal with irate guests was by no means limited to the front desk, but was also a feature of reservations work. However, one woman who had transferred to reservations from the front desk thought that working in reservations was somewhat easier in comparison since it did not involve the element of face-to-face interaction which meant that the emotional labour was restricted to vocal performance:

*You do get irate guests on the phone as well [...], but you're not face to face with them. So, it's basically they're not seeing your posture, your body language and all that kind of stuff even though they can hear if you are a little upset as well over the phone through your voice. But it's not as stressful as being at the front desk. [...] Because people can read into your posture, if say you're at the front desk and an irate guest comes up to you with a problem and you're kind of, y'know, slouching and like 'whatever' kind of thing. That can be read through your body posture, body language. [...] When you're at the front desk basically you have to be very conscious of facial expression. (ResA1)<sup>6</sup>*

One of the ways that front office work was structured, which in theory gave an element of control back to the workers, was via 'empowerment'. Front office staff could deduct money from guests' bills without having to consult with a supervisor if there was a complaint and they agreed with the complaint. This was thought to make a difference in placating irate guests; 'you kind of know the tricks of the trade about how to make people happy - generally it has to do with money' (FDA2). There is considerable debate in the academic literature about the

effectiveness of empowerment within the hospitality industry (Hales and Klidas, 1998). From what several workers in the case study said, the hotel's empowerment programme did allow them a genuine degree of autonomy in dealing with guests. At the same time, the hospitality industry's emphasis on financially guaranteeing 'guest satisfaction' could have the unintended consequence of increasing the number of complaints in the first place, as one woman front desk agent suggested:

*I think a lot of people know because now in the hotel industry all you have to say is, 'guest satisfaction guaranteed'. I get the smallest complaints, from threads coming out of the bedspread, 'I'd like, it's supposed to be a really nice room, I'd like some re-imbusement'. [...] I don't think if I went somewhere else I would complain about something so small, or rather some people will and they actually expect to have refunds for it'. (FDA1)*

As discussed above, one of the main criticisms of Hochschild's notion of emotional labour is that it is one-dimensional and does not take into account the potentially satisfying elements of customer service employment (Williams, 2003). At the hotel, most of the front office staff said that they enjoyed their jobs and found them satisfying. Those women workers engaged in intensive emotional labour said that although interacting with the guests could involve stressful and demanding situations, it was also regarded as a pleasurable experience: 'it's interesting though because you get to meet and like talk about so many different aspects of life in one day, so it's kind of cool' (FDA2). Furthermore, irate guests only made up a minority of the total: 'even though 10 people are mean, there's like 100 people that are so nice and they just make your day' (FDA2). Guerrier and Adib (2001) rightly argue that guest interaction should not be presented as uniformly negative in character. At the same time, this does not mean to imply either that the performance of emotional labour occurred without genuine costs, as we discuss further below.

In relation to gender divisions of labour at the front office, management expected the bellmen to help guests by providing information about the city, as well as moving their bags to their rooms. However, this guest interaction element occurred in stereotypically masculine terms, involving the rational dissemination of information, often in list-like form:

*Usually our training is when the guests come in, we come to them right away. Most of the time, we know the guests, from the time they arrive at the turnaround area, with a taxi or by their own car, right away we go in there, offer our assistance, and then ask them how long they've been here in the city, how long they plan to stay, if they've been here before, and then, just to show to them that we're open for more questions, whatever they need to do. And everything*

*like that, whatever they would like to ask, what's happening in the city, what's showing in the theatres and everything like that, that's all. (Bellman 2)*

Unlike the front desk staff, most of whom were women, the bellmen therefore did not routinely engage in placating guests' unmet emotional needs. Even though the bellmen interacted with guests on a routine basis, this interaction took the form of offering information and advice in a friendly fashion rather than dealing with guests' complaints. In other words, the undertaking of emotional labour at the front office was gendered in that it was something the women workers, rather than the men, were expected to routinely do.

Although certain back-of-house positions involved virtually zero contact with guests, for example laundry attendants, others such as room attendants, nearly all of who were women, did describe having occasional limited interaction with guests. As one room attendant said, as well as undertaking the actual cleaning, 'this is like a personal service job also, because you have to deal with the guests' (RoomA8).<sup>7</sup> I came across no incidents of guest harassment among the room attendants I interviewed, although this is a potential occupational hazard as various studies indicate (Guerrier and Adib, 2000; Hunter Powell and Watson, 2006). As discussed above in relation to the 'guest gaze', guests' comments about the state of the rooms could feedback to the cleaners via managers and supervisors. If guests could complain, the room attendants on the other hand had to hide their own frustration at those customers who occasionally left rooms in what one described as, 'an unspeakable state' with vomit, broken bottles, used condoms and water all over the bathroom floor:

*Some people are respectable normal people and other people, especially young people, they leave the room a mess. I say to them 'you've been bad boys' and they say 'sorry'. 'You had a good time', but in the mean time I'm going [screams] argh! (RoomA1)*

In a facsimile of the typical domestic gender division of labour, the women room attendants cleared up after messy guests in the same way that women generally clear up after their children and male partners. However, in the case of the workplace, unlike the home, the room attendants could not exhort the guests to not leave their rooms in a chaotic state. Instead, the 'needs' of the customer had to come first, even if those needs entailed trashing the room; service with a smile had to be maintained. Emotional labour by room attendants therefore could occur in the form of controlling their own feelings in the face of messy guest behaviour, even if guest interaction was far more tangential to their everyday work than in the case of front office staff. As with the front office staff, however, although certain customers' behaviour did leave a lot to be desired, to

put it mildly, the room attendants as well as public area cleaners also commented on how guest interaction could be a satisfying part of their job.

## RESISTANCE STRATEGIES AND LABOUR TURNOVER

How did the front desk and reservations agents deal with rudeness and aggression from guests? As Guerrier and Adib (2000) found in their study of harassment, direct resistance via confronting guests was extremely difficult if not impossible. Instead, the hotel workers in the study adopted a number of covert resistance strategies. As well as seeking support from colleagues, they mentioned detachment via depersonalization, as described by Guerrier and Adib (2000). One of the reservations agents with several years' experience was very positive about her job and, despite saying that 'we do get a lot of people that yell and scream', was able not to take it personally:

*I like it [interacting with guests] because I've always been raised not to worry about people [laughs] being like, you know, when people get angry and start saying stuff I don't take it personally. So it doesn't bother me when I get those calls and they're yelling 'you don't want my business' or 'you've done this'. Or complaints or they don't like our rates or any of that stuff. It doesn't bother me. [...] I understand they need to vent and it's not personal against me because they don't know me. (ResA2)*

Research on call centre workers has shown that leaving the job can be a resistance strategy that is employed when all else fails (Mulholland, 2004). One front desk agent spoke about how several of her colleagues had left, including one woman for whom bullying by the guests, often seemingly men, became too much:

*FDA2: Another one got ... just couldn't take it... some people can't take the front desk. It's just really, really demanding, like people are very, very demanding all of the time. And they expect you to know everything on the spot, right then and there. [...]*

*PW: So she quit?*

*FDA2: One of the girls, yeah, she just didn't ... it wasn't her forte, she can't listen to it all the time and be happy and not be like, 'what are you talking about sir, please stop yelling at me like that'.*

As mentioned above, one of the reservations agents had previously worked at the front desk for over two years and the main reason she had transferred was the stress associated with guests' complaints:

*I just wanted a change from the front desk. I could not deal with the stress of the front desk anymore. I wanted something a little bit more low key, a little bit more ... less stressful. [...] It takes a particular type of person to really stay at the front desk and stick it out. It takes the type of person who I think is ... can be ... just let things roll off their back and just think, 'oh, it's not personal, it's not, you know, it's nothing against me', whilst you have other people who can't really do that for a long time, can just not take it personally. [...] After a while it wears on you ... after a while it really does. (ResA1)*

This quote indicates how the detachment/depersonalization strategy may work for short periods of time, but that over longer periods it becomes harder to sustain. It is noteworthy that Guerrier and Adib's (2000) study was based upon interviews with hospitality degree students on work placement, an inherently short-term period of employment. As such, Guerrier and Adib may well have exaggerated the long-term capacity of customer service workers to detach themselves via depersonalization from abusive guests.

It is unlikely to be entirely coincidental that the turnover rate of staff at the front desk was one of the highest in the hotel. One woman had worked in that section for only a year and a half, but was, in fact, the longest serving main-grade worker. At the same time, high turnover in front office positions is not uncommon, associated as it is with the staff's typically youthful profile (Bird *et al.*, 2002). It would therefore be a mistake to blame all of the high turnover at the front desk of the hotel on the pressures coming from performing complex emotional labour in order to placate irate guests. Front office staff at the hotel mentioned other reasons for leaving, or considering leaving, notably the demands of shift work. Burnout was therefore only one factor, albeit a potentially significant one, prompting staff to leave high stress customer service positions such as the front desk.

## DISCUSSION

This paper has highlighted what can be regarded as the 'dark side' of guest interaction as primarily seen from the perspective of front office hotel workers. It is important to note, however, that the research findings reported here are based on a single case study utilizing a limited number of interviews. Further research questions in relation to this important, but relatively neglected topic are included below.

The paper has examined how managerial policies and practices socially construct hotel work involving guest interaction. Front-of-house workers are chosen by management for their 'personalities' and especially their capacity to display a front of politeness and cheerfulness even in the face of provocation by guests. As such, adherence to the ethos that 'the customer is always right' was prevalent. Most of the front office staff actually enjoyed their jobs including finding aspects of guest interaction satisfying. Nevertheless, those women employed in front office positions had to enact emotional labour for prolonged periods of time and were subject to frequent complaints and even bullying by irate guests. The enactment of emotional labour at the front-of-house was gendered in that it was something the women workers had to routinely accomplish as they sought to maintain a cheerful disposition and veneer of attractiveness, even when they were being berated by irate guests. The women front office staff were therefore engaged in a ritual of placating guests by absorbing their anger, while all the while looking 'presentable' and sounding 'professional'. In the case of room attendants, who again were nearly all women, having to deal with 'messy guests' also involved a degree of emotional labour as they hid their own feelings. By contrast, the bellmen engaged in stereotypically masculine tasks of providing lists of information and shifting bags.

In terms of resistance, women front office workers spoke of being able to detach themselves via depersonalization. However, there was also evidence that their capacity to detach themselves from guest complaints was gradually eroded over time with the result that leaving the job became another resistance strategy. Leaving the front office was not solely a result of burnout in the face of continual guest provocation, however. Other factors came into play, notably the impact of the shift system. It is notable that both the front desk and reservations sections were non-unionized. What is unclear from the data here is whether trade union membership and action ameliorates the negative aspects of guest interaction. This is of course an extremely important issue, as we discuss below in suggestions for further research.

In relation to policy, the paper raises questions over perennial issues in hospitality employment, including problems over recruitment and retention of staff, as well as the inherent short-termism characteristic of human resource strategies in the sector (Toronto Economic Development, 2003). Given that disliking employment conditions in the hotel industry is one of the major reasons employees leave the industry (cited in Toronto Economic Development, 2003, p. 45), it would seem important for hotel managers in general to consider how far they can merely rely on a renewable supply of young people to work in front office positions, or whether they should take a more proactive stance in relation to dealing with the burnout that prolonged emotional labour can exact on workers. This would entail debate on where the boundaries should be drawn in relation to what Williams (2003) has referred to as 'demanding publics'. This

concept refers to 'those situations where the interests of customers and service workers are in conflict and where management has sided with customers or when its support for its service workers is, at best ambivalent' (Williams, 2003, pp. 521-2), including situations involving customer abuse, or where the norms of respectable behaviour are transgressed. In the light of the findings reported here, hotel management might consider whether tighter boundaries need to be drawn around what guests can legitimately expect and what service staff are expected to perform.<sup>8</sup> How can the rights of front-of-house workers be balanced with the dominant service industry ethos that 'the customer is always right'?

Unions have an important role to play in relation to fostering a climate of industrial relations in which hotel workers can expect to go about their jobs without having to take abuse or harassment from guests. This is clearly an issue that gels with the thrust of the North America-wide UNITE HERE Hotel Workers Rising campaign to raise the working standards and remuneration of its members, both in front and back-of-house positions.

#### **FURTHER RESEARCH ISSUES**

In relation to further research, several issues could be pursued. Firstly, the gendered nature of guest interaction work in relation to emotional labour needs to be fleshed out. Although the majority of hotel front office workers are women, and these provided the main source of interview material in this paper, there is considerable scope to compare the experiences of men and women doing the same jobs, front desk agents, for example. Secondly, the research reported here did not find any racialized dimension to the performance and experience of emotional labour, unlike the study by Adib and Gurrier, (2003) for example. This is something that would merit further research, especially given the fact that front office staff are increasingly drawn from racial minority backgrounds in Canadian cities. In Toronto, for example, 42.6% of front desk clerks were classified as 'visible minorities' in the 1996 Census compared to only 11.9% nationally (Toronto Economic Development, 2003, p. 28). Does the response of irate guests differ for racial minority as opposed to white staff, for example? The interaction between gender and race amongst front office workers in relation to the performance of emotional labour is something that would also repay detailed examination. Thirdly, the long-term impact of emotional labour on both current and ex-front office hotel staff is something that could be explored further. This could include considering whether higher rates of turnover in this sector of the hospitality workforce are linked to the more negative aspects of emotional labour, notably guest harassment. Finally, there is considerable scope to investigate resistance strategies by workers in relation to abusive guests and in particular how these can take both individual and collective forms. What impact do unions have? Is it the case, for example, that workers in non-unionized front

office positions experience greater levels of guest harassment? Front office work has a 'glamorous' image, but it is important that further research is undertaken on occupations that in practice entail highly demanding emotional labour.

## NOTES

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1. Thanks to Shirley Koster for her comments on drafts of this paper.
2. The research was undertaken during summer 2005 and was funded by a Canadian Studies Faculty Research Program award from the Canadian Government.
3. The research was based around interviews and did not involve examination of company documents. In relation to management, the research is therefore limited in the sense that it did not include a detailed examination of the hotel's human resource policy.
4. At the case study hotel, the reservations section was located in a separate department from the front desk, bell desk and switchboard, but since the actual work involves prolonged guest interaction, I have nominally included it within the front office. A total of eleven interviewees, eight workers and three managers, worked at front office positions.
5. 'FDA' is front desk agent; the number refers to the interviewee identifier.
6. 'ResA' is reservations agent.
7. 'RoomA' is room attendant.
8. See the methodological caveat in note 3.

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