

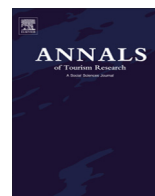


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# Performing: Hotel room attendants' employment experiences

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### ABSTRACT

Performing is a socio-psychological process of defining self as a room attendant and finding dignity in the course of completing daily tasks while interacting with other social actors—guests and hotel employees—on hotel stages. The grounded theory of performing emerged from qualitative research, informed by socialist-feminist critical theory and qualitative social constructivist grounded theory. Forty-six room attendants working in one of five participating 5-star hotels located in South East Queensland, Australia, were interviewed. Performing has ramifications for tourism service provision, specifically, hotel praxis and the need for greater acknowledgement of room attendants as a community of value, possessing practical knowledge that could be used to improve daily operations, enhancing guest interactions and tourism service experiences.

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*It's like walking into the Tardis, it's a completely different world. You transform yourself, you take off your clothes and put on the uniform, and that's who you are for the day until you go home.*

[Abbie, aged in her 40s, hotel room attendant for 14 years]

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## Introduction

Sociologically, Abbie's 'Tardis' experience associates with 'performance', a dramaturgical perspective pioneered by Erving Goffman (1959). A perspective wherein the social processes of everyday life are constituted of embodied performances by social beings, who engage in interactive roles before a variety of audiences. Everyone, everywhere, plays a role, and in these roles we know each other and ourselves (Goffman, 1959). Within tourism studies, human social engagements with tourism are studied physically and holistically—"performing" rather than 'gazing' [is] the dominant tourist research paradigm" (Larsen & Urry, 2011, p. 1111). In a 'performing' paradigm, tourist-service provision encounters are critical, especially "delivery by the relatively low-level service deliverers" (Urry (2002), p. 63). Jan Carlzon defines such encounters as "moments of truth" with regard to tourism service provision (Urry et al., 2002, p. 63). It is from these moments that tourists evaluate both tourism organisations and their overall touristic experiences (Jennings et al., 2010). During such encounters, touristic 'performances' by tourists and tourism service provision workers involve embodied practices and ascribed meanings (Hyde & Olesen, 2011). As social processes, these encounters serve to forge identities founded on both commodified and non-commodified labour (Crang, 1997).

Within extant tourism literature, the dramaturgical metaphor of performance has been used to analyse the conditions and circumstances of lower-level tourism service provision workers in the cruise-ship industry (Weaver, 2005). This study highlighted the poor compensation many cruise ship workers receive, the asymmetrical employer-employee relationships, and challenging working conditions (Weaver, 2005). Elsewhere, the dramaturgical metaphor has been applied to historical performances of tourism as 'performed art', demonstrating how guidebooks help construct tourism as a pursuit (Adler, 1989). Edensor (2000) used the metaphor to examine practices by tourists at the Taj Mahal. To identify contestation of space by tourists, locals and tourism workers, Mordue (2005) examined issues of power and control in performances in York's historic city center. In addition to such uses of Goffman's dramaturgical perspective of 'performance', Goffman's concept of 'front' and 'back' stages, has influenced a range of tourism writers, such as, MacCannell (1973), Pearce (1998), and Wilson (2009).

A related term permeating tourism studies research and writings is 'performativity'. Like performance, the concept of embodiment (Weaver, 2005) is imbued within performativity. Whereas performance focuses on social processes of everyday life as embodied performances, performativity emphasizes the roles language and communication play in shaping gender identity (Butler, 1999). Performativity studies in tourism have focused on embodiment, photography and 'family gaze' (Larsen, 2005), souvenir display and purchase (Muecke & Wergin, 2014), and adventure tourism (Cater & Cloke, 2007). Studies of gender and performativity include Johnston's (2007) negotiation of lesbian performance in parades. The characteristics of performative work also served to establish the main challenges facing service workers, such as, maintaining self-esteem (Baerenholdt & Jensen, 2009). Each of the performance and performativity studies noted herein have adopted a different focus. Each serves to underscore the complexity and range of social processes associated with tourism as enacted performance. That being said the use of performance metaphors and performative approaches in tourism research is not without critique. Baerenholdt and Jensen (2009) caution that performative work can trivialize hardships and exploitation experienced by workers. Larsen and Urry (2011), note that the performance turn in tourism is characterized by the study of bodily doings and enactments, which privilege practices over texts (Larsen & Urry, 2011).

Taking into account such critiques, our study of *performing* was situated within the two bodies of conceptual knowledge, performance and dramaturgy; and performativity and communication studies. As communication is a socially performed act (Goffman, 1959), there is overlap between the two bodies of knowledge. However, our study explores the socio-psychological processes of *performing* as action that constructs identities, rather than being a linguistic or discourse analysis. Hence our approach is more closely aligned to performance and dramaturgy, than it is to performativity studies, although we are indebted to some insights from the latter.

We start from the position that the dramaturgical perspective can be applied to a commercial social establishment (Goffman, 1959)—such as a 5-star hotel—where all interactions are shaped by the

context and individuals' agency (Goffman, 1959). Here the perspective is used to identify the physically challenging and psychologically stressful role of room attending as tourism service work through the grounded theory of *performing*. Applying Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective highlights how roles and expectations are articulated and negotiated by room attendants in 5-star hotels, focussing on the situatedness of interaction encounters between attendants and others. This tourism service work study examines room attendant employment, taking into account workplace hierarchies, the stereotyping, and the hard work and exhaustion experienced by them. Our focus on hotels was intentional because of their economic and cultural significance for the tourism industry. At their core, hotels offer rest and recovery as meaningful experiences for guests (Valtonen & Veijola, 2011), figuring strongly in the "combining [of] experiences" and "experience delivery" filters that tourists use (Jennings & Cater, 2010, p. 64, 66–7). Given both their tacit and explicit role in tourism experiences, hotels have a critical role to play in the evaluation of tourism experiences.

In adopting a dramaturgical approach to the study of the hotel sector of tourism, hotel operations are viewed as performances on a stage with the context, scripts and directions initially staged and produced by management and employees (Edensor, 2000). 'Initially' is used because, as Goffman (1959) emphasizes, life is not a 'staged play'. Managers' and employees' roles are merely the starting point, as hotel guests have their own roles to play and performances to produce. Using a gendered dramaturgical approach, hotels in patriarchal societies are perceived as places of socio-discursive negotiation between various actors with differing interests, influences and power. Room attendants prepare guests' rooms, a critical space for consumption and social reproduction (Herod & Aguiar, 2006a) in the 5-star hotel-related tourism experience. In Australia, room attendant work is dominated by women and is highly gendered, as reflected in the title 'housemaid' (Knox, 2006). We adopted a socialist-feminist critical-theory perspective to understand the nature of room attendants' work, and used a social-constructivist grounded theory approach to holistically foreground their perceptions of lived workplace experience. Our grounded theory analysis included Goffman's (1959) seven elements of everyday life performance: monitoring of 'front' (p. 22) including setting, appearance and manner; 'dramatic realization' of role; care to not 'misrepresent' (p. 58–9); 'idealization' (p. 35–6) of expected roles; ability to stay 'in character' (p. 51, 56); engagement in 'deception' (p. 70) when necessary, and 'belief' in role (p. 19).

*Performing* is a socio-psychological process of defining self as a room attendant and finding dignity in the course of completing daily tasks while interacting with other social actors—guests and hotel employees—on hotel stages. Our study of *performing* contributes to the broader body of performance theory by undertaking a micro-sociology perspective of the workplace experience of room attendants. To situate the grounded theory of *performing* within broader tourism and related hospitality literature, we examine prior studies of room attendants, and other literature related to physical and psychological implications of the tasks room attendants perform.

## Room attendants

Room attending is a predominantly female occupation involving physically and psychologically hard work, low status and minimal pay (Hunter Powell & Watson, 2006; Jones & Siag, 2009; Kensbock, Jennings, Bailey, & Patiar, 2013, 2014; Knox, 2011; Liladrie, 2010; Madanoglu, Moreo, & Leong, 2004; Sherman, 2011a; Warhurst, Lloyd, & Dutton, 2008). To reduce costs, Australian hotel workers are low-paid and experience high workloads (Aguiar, 2006). This contributes to tiredness, anxiety and stress (Knox, 2011). The common requirement to work weekends exacerbates work-family role conflicts such as child care issues (Harris Mulvaney & O'Neill, 2007). Further, room attendants' jobs involve considerable physiological and psychological stress (Oxenbridge & Lindegaard Moensted, 2011). Research shows room attendants' health conditions are worse than the national general population (Seifert & Messing, 2006). Room attendants have high injury rates, with musculoskeletal disorders particularly common (Lee & Krause, 2002). Frequent use of corrosive cleaning agents triggers damaging physiological reactions (Eriksson & Li, 2009). Monotonous and repetitive work (Herod & Aguiar, 2006b), guest demands and role conflict (Weatherly & Tansik, 1993), and hierarchical organizational structures (Sosa, 2006), all act as psychological stressors (Faulkner & Patiar, 1997). In

their work, room attendants must negotiate front of house/back of house boundaries, in order to create a positive service experience for hotel guests (Boon, 2007). Guests influence the timing, pace and effort involved in room servicing in unpredictable ways (Sherman, 2011a, 2011b). Reflecting wider societal views, a UK television series portrays room attendants as sexualized victims (Harris, Tregidga, & Williamson, 2011) and it is documented that they are frequently sexually harassed (Kensbock, Bailey, Jennings, & Patiar, 2015). Such physical and psychological stressors are likely to impact on room attendants' wellbeing and performance.

Room attendants' identities are shaped by their work as it is considered to be unseen, subservient and undervalued (Hunter Powell & Watson, 2006; Onsøyen, Myukletun, & Steiro, 2009). Emotional labour is a salient feature of their work (Ross, 1995). Therefore, room attendants are required to induce or suppress feelings to sustain an appealing outward countenance, as dictated by social norms, to facilitate the tourism service experience (Hochschild, 1983). Hochschild and Ehrenreich (2003) later applied Goffman's approach, distinguishing between "surface acting" and "deep acting", the latter involving the psychological management of feelings that commerce (or capitalism) uses for commercial gain.

Our holistic study of women room-attendants, theorized as *'performing'*, captures similar insights regarding the nature of room attendant work reported in the preceding studies. Such complementarities indicate the status quo of room attendant work remains unchanged. We extend previous studies, however, by taking a holistic, micro-sociological dramaturgical focus using room attendants' self-reports of lived work experiences. Such a focus privileged the room attendants' voices, rather than researchers'. This is consistent with a socialist-feminist critical theory perspective wherein researchers 'champion' their research subjects; here, room attendants as a community of value, wherein practical knowledge gained through on-the-job experience can provide efficiencies and effectiveness of praxis.

Our epistemological approach as socialist-feminist critical theorists requires some clarification of terms. 'Oppression' means dominating and subjugating of individuals or groups of people through unjust exercise of authority and/or power. 'Exploitation' manifests as unfair treatment of workers by dominant individuals, generating benefit for the latter (Zwolinski, 2012). 'Marginalization' occurs when people have little social and economic influence, rendering them powerless due to their limited or absent voice, and who are primarily 'othered' (de Beauvoir, 1953) by those with power. Correspondingly, our key research questions were:

- (1) What is the nature of room attendants' daily job routines?
- (2) What are room attendants' perceptions of their working conditions?
- (3) What are room attendants' experiences of the employment relationship and of their role as service providers?
- (4) How do these women perceive their value within the hotel organization?

The room attendants' subjective perspectives regarding the above four questions were critical for our grounded theory interpretation as it permitted exploration of the social processes that influence room attendant work, it allowed an examination of housekeeping operation from attendants' perspectives, and it focused on tourism service workplace experiences not usually considered elsewhere in operations-focused management-related studies. As a result, the grounded theory of *performing* makes a threefold contribution to extant literature: theoretical, methodological and applied. First, from a socialist-feminist and critical theory standpoint we highlight the low status and denigration to which women room attendants continue to be subjected and depict this in the theory of *performing*. Second, by adopting a constructivist grounded theory methodological approach, we provide a theory of *performing*, which is holistically constructed and founded on room attendants' lived workplace experiences. Third, with respect to hotel praxis, this research provides 'voice' for room attendants to be recognized as a community of value whose hitherto untapped knowledge could be used to improve the effectiveness of hotel operations within the tourism industry.

## Methodology

As our research sought to provide 'voice' for room attendants, we adopted a qualitative approach using constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006). The research was carried out

with the cooperation of five '5-star' hotels in the Gold Coast region of Australia, ranging in size from 243 rooms to 593 rooms. Theoretical sampling involved a 'purposive' (or highly selective) qualitative sampling method, deliberately selecting 5-star hotels to obtain a consistent context with respect to facilities and clientele. 5-star hotels offer a homogeneous scenscape that signifies social taste and distinction for guests, whose travel decision-making is affected by both factors. Initial research access involved approval of several hierarchical levels of hotels' gatekeepers (general managers, human resource managers and executive housekeepers). Empirical material was collected by in-depth, one-on-one interviews with 46 room attendants. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 61 and reflected a multiplicity of ethnic and cultural origins. Twenty-five identified as being of Australian or European extraction. Eighteen were from a Confucian heritage and/or South East Asian background, two from Papua New Guinea and one from Africa. Interviews ranged from 15 to 75 min, with an average time of 30 min. Interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim immediately after the interviews. The collected empirical material was initially treated to open coding, which often used gerund terms (verb or 'doing' format). A second more focused (selective) layer of coding subsumed these earlier coded materials to construct the properties of categories. The selective coding moved beyond mere description towards analytical insights. The highly iterative process of constant comparison enabled codes and categories to be modified and developed.

The aim of this coding process was to generate theoretical properties of categories, including their dimensions, conditions, consequences and relationships to other categories, according to the tenets of grounded theory. Theoretical saturation was deemed to have occurred when no new material or concepts emerged; this was supported by memo writing in an iterative process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Member checking indicated that the grounded theory of *performing* resonated with the participating room attendants' lived work experiences and had 'fit' and 'relevance'. Member checking recognizes there are many possible interpretations of the vignettes and so helped to affirm our interpretations.

## Performing

*Performing* is the end result of our interpretive processes. It reconstructs the dramaturgical processes of the operational and social life of a hotel as experienced by room attendants. The grounded theory of *performing* is graphically conceptualized in Fig. 1, followed by a key to the component social processes in Table 1.

The graphic conceptualization of room attendants' workplace experiences shows the theory of *performing* with causal factors as tasking (the actual physical duties that room attendants undertake). Influencing the performance of these physical duties are the intervening and contextual influences of workplace and social hierarchies and the inherent power relationships. *Performing* presents relationships between the categories identified in Fig. 1 which occur during the course of room attendants' work under various conditions: causal (influencing events), intervening (those that alter the impact of causal conditions) and contextual (related to the specific context). Despite the challenges of the work and the social environment, room attendants find dignity in their work and this is the identified outcome of the theory of *performing*. Table 1 shows the key structural and psychological component processes that make up the basic social process of being a room attendant.

We use Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor to describe the 'self' that room attendants produce in everyday interaction. As described in the introduction, performance metaphors are useful to examine the way in which interactive service work incorporates 'enacted' social encounters between guests and room attendants. Further, performative metaphors conceptualize the embodied actions of room attendants in the *mise-en-scène* of 5-star hotels, highly regulated tourist spaces where staff work to a script (Larsen & Urry, 2011). However, interactions defy complete standardization, as social encounters are often improvised and spontaneous, so dramaturgical metaphors capture this fluidity and adaptability. Our conceptual theory of *performing* is a parsimonious substantive theory unifying the central concepts and core issues facing hotel room attendants. The room attendants' perceptions, actions and experiences reveal that every act was conditioned by the contingencies of organizational and social interaction.

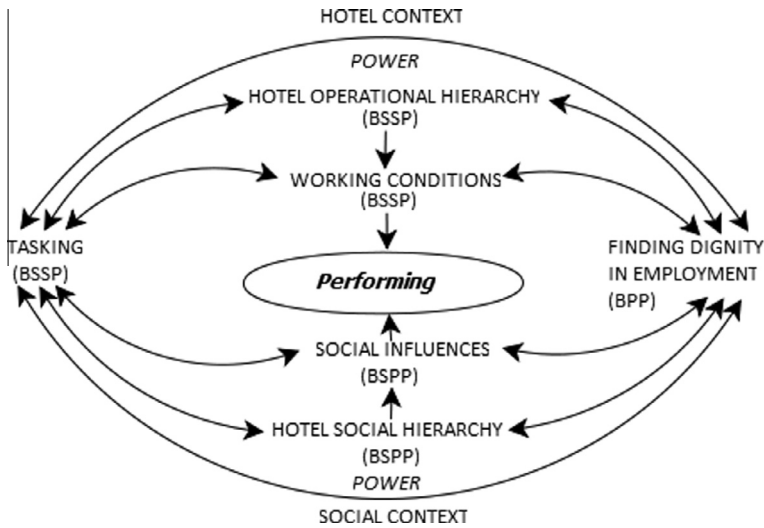


Fig. 1. Performing: graphic conceptualization of room attendants' workplace experiences

**Table 1**  
Social and psychological processes.

Basic social process	BSP of being a room attendant in a 5-star hotel
Basic social structural process	BSSP of working as a room attendant within the operational conditions of a 5-star hotel
Basic social psychological process	BSPP of having low occupational and social status
Basic psychological process	BPP of defining self as a room attendant and finding dignity in work

Source: Adapted from Glaser (1978).

As already noted, our socialist-feminist critical theory perspective privileges the voices of participating room attendants as we follow their performances. We recognize, as did Boje (1995) in his study of office work, that there are a multiplicity of performances, a plurality of stories and interpretations. Similarly, at the micro-sociological level within the hotel room and other hotel areas, many types of performance are possible depending on roles, scripts, cues and choreographies (Edensor, 2000). Given our dramaturgical focus, tourism employment is interpreted as theater, with room attendants as ‘actors’, who assume ‘roles’. They act on multiple stages, mainly front of house and guest rooms. Subsidiary stages are corridors and back of house. Uniforms are costumes, and cleaning equipment and other paraphernalia are props used in their acts. Room attendants perform a ‘show’ that repetitively ritualizes their workplace identity. Simultaneously, they perform as invisible and unseen ‘stagehands’ preparing hotel rooms for guests, as well as social actors interacting with hotel guests and staff.

The following sections provide a micro-sociological view of room attendants' workplace experiences with a dramaturgical overlay. In each section, we illustrate how room attendants negotiate and employ constraints and opportunities in tourism to inform authentic personal and felt room attendant identities. Themes covered are: tasking; working conditions; the hotel's operational workplace and social hierarchies; and finding dignity in work.

### Tasking

The basic social structural process of ‘tasking’ answers the first research question: What is the nature of room attendants' daily job routines? Tasking involves physicality and time pressures, which affect room attendants' ability to deliver quality service.

### Hard work

Tasks include changing the bed linen, vacuuming the carpet, cleaning the bathroom and restocking amenities such as towels, soaps, tea/coffee, and information brochures. Each day, room attendants on average are required to make 28 beds, with some making up to 32 beds. Attendants have to move the bed, clean, check for lost property, make the bed and restore it to the required position. Alison, in her 30s, with four years' experience, explains the physicality of bed-making:

*These are heavy beds, how can we humanly do it? You're lifting and pulling and bending over and squatting, and you're around the other end and back.*

As the room attendant engages in the performative process of cleaning the guest's room, her display is an enactment of moving or changing objects that are part of the set and ignored by other actors/audiences. The stage is carefully managed, with attendants using trolleys of varying designs to transport linen and cleaning tools, as well as trash. Rose, in her 60s, with 11 years' experience, expresses an often-stated difficulty in manoeuvring the trolleys:

*We go all over the hotel and have to walk a lot with the trolley and I have trouble with the trolley, sometimes I have to look out the side [laughs] cos I can't see.*

The trolley is a major prop in room attendants' performance. A functional piece of equipment that transports cleaning paraphernalia and conceals props that might discredit the performance, the trolley also indicates to the guest that the action of cleaning is underway. The props symbolically create the service image. While the room attendants' performance was usually organized around situated objects such as furniture, the trolley moved props from stage to stage.

The physical demands of tasking mean that many room attendants reported working on a daily basis with pain from the excessive physical demands of the job, leading to high rates of injury and, in some cases, compensation claims. Alison, in her 30s, with four years' experience, identifies the occupational hazards of room servicing:

*There are so many girls here on compo it's not funny. I get pain in my elbow and I can only lift my arm here [shows about head height] so scrubbing the shower walls is very hard, and also pain sometimes in my back and my neck.*

Alison relates the poor health of many in the theater 'troupe'. Exhausted room attendants are expected to undertake duties that harm them physically. Further, many in-room tasks, described by the room attendants as 'dirty', involve dealing with human bodily fluids. Several room attendants describe what they said were the common habits of one ethnic group as disgusting. This behaviour is explained by Elizabeth, in her 30s, with five years' experience:

*The [ethnic nationality] spit in the hand basin and leave it there, it can be quite thick sometimes and that makes you dry retch.*

Management requires that the stage be kept as a hygienic environment, thus requiring continual maintenance and visual order. The room attendant must thus negotiate a stage-managed space and set design that creates a hygienic and cultural physical space for guests. Heavy mattresses and trolleys often taxed room attendants' physical capabilities. The physical demands of the job are thus intense, varied and continuous, and must be managed by room attendants as they perform.

### Time pressures

The second concern of 'tasking' was the time pressures imposed with an allocation of 30 min to service each room. Room attendants describe these allocated times as 'tight', 'difficult' and 'stretched'. The feasibility of accomplishing all tasks on each stage within time limits is affected by the number of rooms allocated per shift, the messy state of some rooms, and difficulty accessing rooms if guests are still present. Jamie, in her 20s, with nine years' experience, seeks some flexibility based on the state of rooms entered:

*Sometimes the rooms are messy and they can take longer. I think if you have that extra five or 10 min then you can do a little bit more in a room.*

Similarly, Pamela, in her 30s, with five years' experience, explains:

*In housekeeping if you are behind 10 or 15 min you are gonna be behind all day and that's why you have to do something, have a strategy of how to cope, even five minutes is really important, and you have to decide to do something. You swap rooms with the other girl in the rooms next to you. You look around, check the doors and you can't start and minutes is going by and you are gonna be behind.*

To attempt to keep to time, Pamela engages in quick thinking and problem solving, and takes impromptu action to address delays in her cleaning schedule by changing her routine. The tempo of the room attendant's performance must be swift and comprehensive as they execute the mundane tasks. The allocation of rooms (up to 16 per shift) means that room attendants are often unable to take a break or, in performance terms, have an intermission. Attendants also reported that late checkout of guests was a further cause of frustration and stress. This led to tensions as attendants' routine activities were disrupted, requiring them to improvise outside of their normal script and set of stage directions.

#### *Meeting quality*

The third difficulty of 'tasking' that room attendants faced was meeting quality standards. All hotels had standard operating procedures outside the Executive Housekeeper's office, which prescribed the placement and appearance of items in the rooms to set the scenery design of 5-star presentation. Maureen, in her 30s, with one year's experience, explains her view of achieving quality:

*Quality is more important than quantity, cos you are doing the right thing, the guests want to come in and see that spotless room, and you've gotta make sure you have everything there.*

Maureen's performance required significant attention to detail to ensure a visual offering that sets a 5-star scene. Hence room attendants must, as social actors, demonstrate adroitness and dexterity in fulfilling their role. The aforementioned physical demands of hard work combined with the intense time pressures imposed on room attendants increase the risk of quality failure and a less than perfect performance.

#### *Working conditions*

This section addresses the second research question: What are room attendants' perceptions of their working conditions? The working conditions of room attendants form a basic social structural process including: low pay and increasing casualization of the workforce; few training opportunities; unsuitability of the uniforms; and the monotony of tasking. On the positive side, attendants developed considerable 'esprit de corps', or shared understanding and empathy, as a cohesive troupe.

#### *Pay and casualization*

Internationally, the hotel industry has tight profit margins, which are reflected in low rates of pay for many staff. Ivy, in her 40s, with six years' experience, complains:

*The pay check is pretty shitty, it seems like you work you're a..e off and you look at your pay slip at the end of the week and you think 'I only get that much?'*

Room attendants felt that their pay did not compensate them adequately for their efforts on the hotel stage, contributing to feelings of exploitation. The Australian hospitality industry usually pays the minimum legal wage (Knox, 2011), a practice followed by the hotels participating in our study. In addition, room attendants expressed strong concerns about insufficient working hours and increasing casualization, with working hours influenced by hotel occupancy rates, which significantly impacted income levels. Thus, there is seasonality to the performances of room attendants reflecting the increasing casualization within the tourism workforce. In addition, for permanent staff, some employees expressed concern about 'forced annual leave' dictating absences from the stage. Valerie, in her 50s, with ten years' experience, explains this practice:



*We're coming into what they call a 'quiet period', and the latest is we all have got to take holidays now, which means all us part timers have got letters to say you have got to take all the holidays you've got.*

While forced holidays minimize hotel costs, the performance of room attendants is predicated on demand or occupancy from guests as audience. Forced holidays also interfere with attendants' need to take leave for children's school holidays, or to align with partners' holidays or other family commitments. The denial or unsuitability of family role time, contributed to attendants' psychological and physiological stress.

### *Training*

Room attendants feel insufficient time is devoted to training, other than mandatory basic occupational health and safety instruction. While strict quality standards were laid down, there was no formal training in operational procedures, leaving room attendants to devise their own routines in order to move around various hotel stages as they performed their work. Most training for new employees was conducted 'on the job' and involved a very short rehearsal—spending a few days shadowing another room attendant as an understudy. Pamela, in her 30s, with five years' experience, reveals:

*They train me five days and then after that I am on my own, it's scary, I wanted to cry because I don't know if I am going to finish it or not.*

Pamela saw her training as insufficient, causing stress in her role performance. Such informal and unstructured training and limited rehearsal periods reinforces a view of room attendant work as unskilled work.

### *Uniforms*

Another concern regarding working conditions was the unsuitability of uniforms with regard to design and fabric, and therefore as costumes for 'tasking'. Tasking requires room attendants to bend, stretch and lift. Room attendants considered short dress designs—the most common costume—inappropriate for 'tasking'. Glenda, in her 50s with three years' experience, explains the difficulty:

*They gave us these uniforms about a year and a half ago and I don't know why they did, polyester is so hot, it's nasty and cheap.*

While room attendants often work in air-conditioned hotel rooms undertaking physically hard work in, and in 'back of house' that is often warmer because of constant through traffic, functioning of plant and equipment and lack of adequate ventilation. Synthetic uniforms were deemed unsuitable costumes since they do not 'breathe' and cling to bodies during the Gold Coast's hot and humid summers. As will be further elaborated below, attendants always wear a figurative 'mask', as their solitary performance may be interrupted at any time when a guest or supervisor appears on stage.

### *Monotony*

The intangible conditions of room attendant work included the daily monotony of repetitive 'tasking'. Alison, in her 30s, with four years' experience, explains the outcome of this tedium:

*The worst is that by lunchtime it can drag and nothing changes, every day is the same. I've seen girls actually fallen apart you know, physically and mentally, they just can't do it.*

While finding the work monotonous, room attendants value their autonomy since for most of the time they remain out of sight of other staff and guests.

### *'Esprit de corps'*

'Esprit de corps' refers to the relationship of mutual support that develops between room attendants. As a cohort, room attendants are the 'theater troupe' of housekeeping. 'Off-stage'—in theatrical terms, in the 'green room'—attendants meet in the staff lunch-room where they can reveal a more authentic self, putting aside the everyday room attendant mask. This 'esprit de corps' amongst their peers is very significant, as Maureen, in her 30s, with one year's experience, explains:

*They are a really good group of people. I love coming to work every day, cos I know like I'm gonna have a good time even when I'm working.*

'Esprit de corps' was a uniting force amongst room attendants through shared workplace experiences, despite the challenges of tasking, and attendants' vulnerability in workplace and guest hierarchies. 'Esprit de corps' was the situation that facilitated shared understanding, wherein room attendants felt comfortable sharing the highs, and frequent lows, of their work and finding empathy amongst each other for the negative aspects, in a back stage arena.

#### *Hotel operational workplace hierarchy*

Workplace hierarchy, and the following 'social hierarchy' addresses the third research question: What are room attendants' experiences of the employment relationship and of their role as service providers? As mentioned before, *performing* is a socio-psychological process of finding dignity in the course of completing daily tasks. This dignity is maintained despite the varied injustices that room attendants face within hotels' operational hierarchies. Hotel hierarchies are complex, with many departments, and layers within each department (Bennet, 2006). Situated at the lowest level, room attendants perceive that the housekeeping department is isolated, communication is mostly top-down, and attendants are sometimes subject to demeaning interactions with various levels of management. Valerie, in her 50s, with ten years' experience, reflects on room attendants' positions:

*There's always the hotel hierarchy to contend with. In a large hotel like this the pressure is put back on the bottom of the chain, and the bottom of the chain is room attendants.*

On the theater stage of the hotel, supervisors provide external surveillance by means of their disciplinary gaze to monitor cleanliness. The power invested in the supervisor operates as a hidden mechanism of control. Elizabeth, in her 30s, with five years' experience, comments on management's perceptions of her and her co-workers:

*We are at the bottom of the staff and no one thinks we have any mental capacity for anything, so no one asks us anything, we are cleaners, we are treated as the lesser workers.*

Interactions with staff in other departments highlights room attendants' low status. Jamie, in her late 20s, with nine years' experience, explains:

*Some staff from other departments are a bit standoffish, you can see in their eyes that they won't talk to me because I am in housekeeping, and it's not as important as their job.*

The behaviour of other actors reinforces the low workplace standing of room attendants. Hierarchies create social distance by restricting contact in order to encourage mystification or awe of the higher position. Executive housekeepers and supervisors, acting as choreographers, stage managers and directors of room attendant roles, are often capricious, resulting in intimidation and displays of power. Further, as the next section shows, a social hierarchy, involving interactions with guests, and with others in room attendants' wider social lives, augments the effects of the workplace hierarchy.

#### *Hotel social hierarchy*

The basic social psychological process of social hierarchy demonstrates that their lack of social power reinforces room attendants' lower status. Given the difference in status between guests and room attendants, our research showed that some guest behaviours caused emotional stress. Abbie, in her 40s, with 14 years' experience, states:

*They take advantage of the room attendants, they take things off their trolleys or make huge mess in the rooms and it's very stressful.*

Jamie, in her late 20s, with nine years' experience, was fervent about how the attitudes of others made her feel:

*I hate being a room attendant, because you are looked down upon by everybody else, you feel like a piece of s..t, it's degrading.*

While rules and conventions set boundaries, they cannot control or predict the nature of each performative interaction. However, the hotel acts as an agent of social exclusion through constraints on interactions.

Another major concern with respect to guest interactions involves male guests seeking sexual gratification of some kind from attendants. The space of the stage, its purpose, layout and sensual qualities influences some guests' involvement as actors. Attendants frequently spoke of sexual harassment. Fiona, in her 50s, with five years' experience, speaks of this problem:

*Oh they have a one-track mind, they ask me out. Mostly I just laugh and tell them I am just here to work.*

Room attendants often used humour to rebuff guest-initiated sexual harassment in an emotional display that demonstrated the skill of being able to empathize with customers. Room attendants receive little in the way of stage directions regarding how to handle sexual harassment, despite over ninety per cent of participants reporting regular harassment. To rebuff these common and unwanted advances, room attendants engaged in a distinct performative masquerade involving spontaneous improvisation so the guest does not lose face. A key element of their performance was responding to such overtures without diminishing guests' self-worth.

Even outside the hotel, wider social attitudes and family reactions to room attendants' choice of occupation affected their identity and sense of social status. Some family members who looked down on attendant work shamed room attendants. Elaine, in her 20s, with five years' experience, assesses a family member's attitude to her work:

*My parents are all right, they wish I had a better job, but my sister makes me feel crap about it, she thinks she is better, she always makes me feel I should be studying or have a better job, a proper career rather than clean up after people.*

Positioned at the lower levels of both organizational and social hierarchies, room attendants' experiences in both spheres reinforced their low status and marginalized position on the hotel stage and challenged their sense of dignity.

#### *Finding dignity in work*

This section addresses the fourth research question: How do these women perceive their value within the hotel organization? Finding dignity in work is a basic psychological process associated with a suite of different masks that room attendants adopt in performing their scripted roles. Room attendant actions relate to self-regulation and negotiation, inter-subjectivity and self-realization. Room attendants find dignity in their work through recognizing and celebrating their own values, beliefs, perceptions and motives. Room attendants take pride, for example, in displaying values such as honesty, discretion a positive work ethic, and high standards of tasking. Irrespective of societal views, the women consider their work as important to the hotel's success and as a marker of their self-worth. Angela, aged in her 40s, with 11 years' experience, describes how she adopts a personal standard:

*I always do them as though I am the one coming into the room, so it needs to be good and it needs to be clean.*

Many room attendants spoke of how they coped with others' attempts to challenge their dignity by showing that their occupation is worthy. Caitlin, aged in her 50s, with four years' experience, explains that she believes her own behaviour and attitude would alter the opinions of others:

*If you look down on the job then other people look down on the job. But if you do your job properly and you have this high regard for your work then they will too.*

Caitlin's belief in co-construction of the attitudes and values of society is a proactive measure to redress others' perceptions of room attendants' low occupational and social status. This demonstrates

that the room attendant wants the presentation to be polished, thus providing the reward of self-esteem leading to dignity in their work.

Through self-monitoring their role, room attendants take pride in their work and earn self-respect through positive self-evaluations of tasking well done. These positive self-evaluations counter anxiety caused by the guest comment card—a short survey questionnaire used to measure guest satisfaction. Negative comments are the equivalent of a poor theatrical review, the equivalent of ‘booing’ their performance. Conversely, room attendants view guests’ tipping as acknowledgement of their performance, similar to the function of applause for an actor. Overall, from a social psychological perspective, room attendants find dignity in employment by referring to their own values, capabilities and affective domain qualities.

## Discussion

As a grounded theory, *performing* fulfils the central tenets of fit and relevance; it works and is modifiable. *Performing* is an interactive and contingent process reflecting a social drama of co-performance by room attendants, other hotel employees and guests. *Performing* encompasses the key processes involved in room attendants’ lived employment experiences as they daily transform hotel rooms to the required standard. This theory shows how hotel room attendants preserve their ‘selves’ and find dignity in employment through their performances in tourism service work. The theory raises awareness of the oppressive nature of women room attendants’ circumstances revealed by their exploitation, powerlessness, and marginalization. Poorly paid and relatively anonymous performers, room attendants are scripted into tight roles. Such scripting renders them undervalued and under-recognized as social actors. Room attendants’ scripts involve them in constructing settings, and projecting a required persona during guest interactions. As social encounters between guests and room attendants are indeterminate and defy complete standardization, *performing* captures the improvised, fluid and spontaneous interactions within hotels. Room attendant scripts embody hegemonic, patriarchal and hierarchical perceptions of their employment and its place in contemporary society. In the following discussion of *performing*, we use Goffman’s (1959) seven dramaturgical elements ‘front’, ‘dramatic realization’, ‘misrepresentation’, ‘idealization’, ‘in character’, engagement in ‘deception’ and ‘belief in part’, in our socialist-feminist, critical theory critique. Goffman’s image of a theatrical stage as a dramaturgical metaphor for social interaction provides an appropriate analytical tool for examining the role of room attendants.

For most room attendants, the daily ‘front’ (Goffman, 1959) of tasking, setting scenery and working with props in hotel rooms and back-stage generated excessive fatigue. Room attendants’ social front includes activity that occurs in front of guests. It is influenced by the room’s settings (i.e., furniture and physical layout and stage props). Within this setting, room attendants project a personal front (composed of clothing, qualities such as gender and age, body language and verbal interactions) that forms a mask to present to others. ‘Props’, as explained by Goffman (1969), are central to the construction of self that is presented to others.

Additionally, room attendants’ ‘dramatic realization’ (Goffman, 1959) of tasking was exacerbated by tight time restrictions. To cover their fatigue, room attendants masked their feelings and pain by engaging in ‘misrepresentation’ (Goffman, 1959) of self. Room attendant work was perceived as demoralizing and unrewarding. The demand for speed in performing means “quality is likely to fall before speed, because poor quality can be concealed but not slow service” (Goffman, 1959, p. 39). Working creatively and intensively to counter the time pressures of their work, the surplus value of room attendants’ efforts, which exceeds their labour costs, is appropriated by hotels. Such intensification of labour within the hospitality industry gives sweatshop characteristics to the occupation of room attending (Herod & Aguiar, 2006a). Socialist-feminist critical theorists describe these circumstances as exploitative because such workers, with little power, are marginalized and unable to change the circumstances of their employment. A coping mechanism was room attendants’ ‘esprit de corps’, similar to the ‘tacit collectivism’ (Korczyński, 2003) by means of which workers create ‘communities of coping’. In creating such ‘esprit de corps’, room attendants produce embodied forms of practical knowledge (Edensor, 2000) as they recognize and construct their collective and individual knowledge, value and worth.

Room attendants' 'front' (Goffman, 1959) must reinforce their inferiority to those higher up in the hotel hierarchy. Hotels are characterized by a complex hierarchical structure. Power is endowed in individuals through the 'social front' of their positional authority (Stevens & Hisle, 1996). Power is seen as distributive, ubiquitous, and not a property, but exercised within intertwined networks (Hollingshead, 1999). Being located at a distance from, and with limited access to those in power, room attendants feel devalued and disempowered in the theater of daily hotel operations. The specific disadvantages of room attendants' low occupational status and lack of power include denial as a community of value, being 'othered' and subjugated through surveillance. At the lowest level of a hotel's operational hierarchy, room attendants' tasking functions are identified as cleaning, that is, 'women's work', and of less importance than work performed by other hotel employees. Defined by their functional utility (Primeaux & Beckley, 1999), room attendants have their gendered roles scripted by those in the hotel hierarchy as deferential and subservient. The continuous repetitive, ritualized, and culturally-sustained gendered performativity (Butler, 1999) of room attendants' roles remain little changed from earlier research findings. In an autocratic management context, the most important assets are knowledge and information (Wood, 1994). Treating relationships in a structural manner ignores valuable insights (Papageorgiou, 2008), including the worth of room attendants as a community of value with skills and knowledge, thus denying their ability to positively influence operations within the hotel.

The power relationships enacted and embedded in hotels are linked to broader social power (Weaver, 2005), and reflect wider patriarchal societal fragmentations (Savage, 2006). Specifically, the higher class status of guests as audience is (re)produced through direct interactions with room attendants in an asymmetrical power relationship (Sherman, 2011a). As noted, room attendants are stereotyped as women belonging to a lower socio-economic status. The resulting stigma is explained by Goffman (1963) as the result in failure to give due deference to each other during social interactions. Stigma is therefore, understood as a dissonance of the idealized self and actual self-identity, and in this way room attendants "are identified and categorized, that is their social identity" (Goffman, 1963, p. 56). Therefore, hotel scripts require room attendants to perform tasks in a servile manner for the leisured class, the guests. The perpetuation of servile relationships in tourism-related jobs (Kontogeorgopoulos, 1998) is not a new phenomenon. As Goffman (1959) observed, the idealization of impressions given to an audience reaffirms the values in society. Idealization occurs when a performance incorporates and exemplifies the values of society as a ceremony. For room attendants, these performances are enacted with masks, which perpetuate expected servility in broader society. This means the audience assumes that the character displayed before them is all there is to the individual (Goffman, 1959).

Guest-initiated sexual harassment is a significant and under-investigated problem, which results from gendered power relations (Williams, 2003), particularly in low-paid female-dominated work, and the isolated working environment of hotel rooms. A combination of anonymous spaces, marginality with respect to everyday life, and the continuous transit of people within hotels, creates conditions for sexual adventures (Valtonen & Veijola, 2011). Urry (1990) claims tourist travel mirrors the definition of freedom in that "everyday obligations are suspended ... There is license for permissive ... non-serious behaviour" (Urry et al., 1990, p. 10). A number of features of room attendant work create opportunities for harassment by guests, including sexualizing uniforms; the intimate and isolated nature of the guest bedrooms; and the intersecting effects of gender, age and ethnicity. Room attendant responses reveal they convey misinformation intentionally through deceit or feigning to preserve guests' 'front' (Goffman, 1959). Patriarchal representation and commodification of women's work situates women in a subordinate position socially and organizationally (Adib & Guerrier, 2003). Front-stage service is a bodily performance that needs to please, especially visually in what is called aesthetic labour (Warhurst, Nickson, Witz, & Cullen, 2000). Tourism literature has also highlighted the use of aesthetic labour, which requires staff to 'look good' (Baum & Kokkranikal, 2005) and in particular some female employees can be dressed and staged visually under a patriarchal gaze (Birkland, 1994). The organizational and social status positioning renders room attendants without substantive power and as particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment. Room attendants in this study utilized 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) to defuse difficult and oppressive situations, particularly incidents of sexual harassment. In doing so, room attendants displayed 'expressive control' (Goffman, 1959) to limit the supposed embarrassment of guests and themselves. Simultaneously, they engaged

in 'deception' (Goffman, 1959) to mask their real feelings. Rebuffing guest advances illustrates Goffman's (1963) 'composure' element of character, wherein room attendants display courage and gameness despite a perception of danger, to proceed regardless, indicating a character trait. From a socialist-feminist critical theory perspective, the ramifications of *performing* within oppressive-style hotel hierarchies coupled with negative social attitudes to the occupation of room attending diminished room attendants' self-worth.

Room attendants nevertheless found dignity in their work through 'belief in the part' (Goffman, 1959) that they were playing. The fulfilment that room attendants reported from a job well done echo other studies' findings that job satisfaction is not dependent on job status (Zell & Alicke, 2010). Goffman (1969) posits that identities are constructed through interactions in a dynamic social process. In this way social identities are constructed and challenged in the workplace (Nagar, Lawson, McDowell, & Hanson, 2002). Room attendants are hostage to the stigmatizing guest gaze and negative stereotyping. To cope with this, room attendants find dignity in their work by drawing on a suite of different masks to reinforce a sense of 'self' in the workplace. Room attendants' gendered roles presuppose conventional associations of femininity: honesty, initiative and responsibility (Sayer, 2007). Herein room attendants 'dramatic realization' (Goffman, 1959) of their roles mirrors their own honest characters. The masks, adopted on the hotel stage, are generated through 'self' qualities such as personal inclinations, dispositions, capabilities and affective domain qualities. By assuming these varied masks and roles, through 'belief in the part' (Goffman, 1959) one is currently playing, room attendants are able to deal with the most challenging negative aspects of their occupation and find dignity at work.

As noted earlier, housekeeping work is deemed unskilled (Herod & Aguiar, 2006a) or low level skilled work (Eriksson & Li, 2009; Knox, 2011). Our research found that room attendants required a wide repertoire of skills, especially in emotional labour to perform the tightly scripted roles of their work both to adhere to management scripts but also to improvise when necessary. Room attendants' identity involved perceiving their self as dramaturgical and acting a role in *performing* to convince co-performers, namely other staff and guests, of their authenticity and worth.

## Conclusion

The grounded theory of *performing* adds to theoretical development in the academic field of tourism advocated, for example, by Adib and Guerrier (2003). By taking an epistemological approach based on socialist-feminist critical theory, and studying women, this research furthers feminist analysis of gender and employment, a neglected area of research (Jennings & Cater, 2010). The applied contribution of this research is a call for greater recognition of room attendants as overworked deliverers of quality guest services and as a community of value, particularly for their practical knowledge. Considering room attendants as a community of value recognizes the specific emic, insider, knowledge that pertains to their work.

A dramaturgical approach captures the 'theatricality' of room attendants' employment-related social interactions. At a conceptual level, this study highlights the grounded theory of *performing*, showing room attendants are engaged in a social drama of co-performance with other employees and guests upon the stages of 5-star hotels. It demonstrates how the nature of the work, the conditions under which it is performed, workplace and social hierarchies and power relationships shape room attendant performances in their tourism service work. From the participating women room attendants' perspectives, there were few positive aspects of their roles in *performing* on the hotel stage. They faced oppression, exploitation and marginalization on a daily basis.

Our research shows how room attendants give meaning and purpose to their employment, and makes three important contributions to the tourism literature: theoretical, methodological and applied. First, from a socialist-feminist and critical theory standpoint '*performing*' highlights the low status and denigration to which women room attendants are subjected and continue to be so. Second, by adopting a constructivist grounded theory methodological approach, we provide a grounded theory of *performing*, which was holistically constructed and founded on room attendants' lived workplace experiences. These experiences represent social processes associated with the practical and psychological aspects of working as a room attendant. Third, with respect to hotel praxis, this research has implications for improving service delivery and guests' experiences in the tourism industry, as it gives

'voice' for room attendants to be recognized as a community of value whose hitherto untapped knowledge is yet to be fully utilized to improve the effectiveness of operations within the tourism industry.

*We are the heart of the hotel.*

[Catherine, aged in her 40s, hotel room attendant for 13 years]

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