

Death by Hospitality – Beyond the Call of Duty?

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Abstract

Hospitality staff are often very dedicated to their work, protecting guests' privacy even when circumstances are suspicious, and treating their wants and needs as paramount. In November 2008, several hotel staff were killed in India while protecting hotel guests from terrorists. This paper briefly overviews the circumstances of a death in which a hospitality employee went beyond the call of duty to protect guests. The implications of extreme dedication to service work are explored in terms of the duty of hospitality, along with the concept of sacrifice, particularly with respect to the exploitation of hospitality workers.

Topics for further study are suggested, particularly that of identifying the essential characteristics of hospitality service workers. The concept of lifestyle labour is proposed, as this, in conjunction with the characteristics of 'hospitality people', is thought to explain the dedication to service exhibited by many hospitality workers.

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1 The duty of hospitality

1.1 Historical base

Hospitality is a deeply rooted and enduring moral duty. Western hospitality has grown from the Christian concept of brotherly love, so is more akin to an ethical precept than a profitable occupation. Hospitality, once ‘proclaimed from the pulpit’ as the duty of a good Christian (Heal, 1990, p. 2), is now fundamental to the economic, rather than the moral values of the community, yet clearly there is enjoyment providing hospitality to family, friends and strangers, with or without economic gain. Modern hosts’ motivations may arise from a desire to use their worldly goods to impress, serve and please others, sharing their home, their food, and their friendship.

1.2 Lifestyle labour: work as self-expression

Perhaps it is this ‘duty of hospitality’ that attracts people to work in this industry, where their labour is a form of creative self-expression. Tasks such as serving coffee or wine, or producing a meal for unexpected visitors, are gifts that meet hosts’ needs just as much as those of their guests. For those who enjoy hosting, hotel and restaurant workplaces provide opportunities to serve and please others while earning a living. For them, hospitality is a lifestyle, even if it is hard work, and hospitality academics and practitioners talk of ‘hospitality people’ as having distinctive characteristics. Anecdotally, these include a love of tradition, an empathic and responsible attitude that ensures they would never drive on their neighbour’s lawn, innate leadership qualities, fastidious cleanliness, and common sense. These characteristics are part of hospitality people’s desire to serve others in an appropriate, meaningful, and selfless way. Their work is their expression, and their labour is part of their lifestyle. They would do it whether or not they were paid.

1.3 Service, sacrifice and status

Hospitality service requires a sacrificial attitude, because the ultimate aim is to please others, treating their desires and needs as paramount. Servers therefore accrue low status, not because they are inferior, but because, out of respect, they defer to others. A commitment to service, by definition, places servers in subservient roles, and vulnerable to abuses such as sexual harassment (Guerrier & Abid, 2000) and unfair treatment from guests and managers (Poulston, 2008). Furthermore, because ‘guests demand a certain amount of obeisance or servility’ (Horowitz, 1960, p. 15) from the providers of personal services, workers are relegated to the grade of second class citizens. This status, exacerbated by a strong desire to serve, may overpower their natural instinct for self-preservation at the physical, psychological, or emotional level. Like unconditional love, service is subject to exploitation.

The status of hospitality workers is also threatened by the ease with which service and servitude can be conflated, commodifying staff and opening the way to disrespectful treatment from those in positions of power, such as managers and customers. Experienced workers often develop the ability to be so discreet and invisible (Gabriel, 1990), they may appear to have no personality or emotions of their own, and therefore, few rights. Their motive and *raison d’être* is to please their customers at whatever cost, but in doing so, they risk losing their personal identity as a peer, and become instead, a server. Although Heal (1990) suggested that hospitality a gift to peers whereas charity is a gift to the poor, hospitality may be perceived by its recipients as a gift to them as superiors.

1.4 Exploitation and unconditional service

Commercial hospitality creates a tension between generosity and exploitation of customers

(Heal, 1990), but also sits at the nexus between generosity and exploitation of the server. True hospitality is a gift requiring no reciprocation (Derrida, 2000); a 'gift of friendship, shelter and physical replenishment' (Burgess, 1982, p. 49). However, the 'reduced sense of reciprocity and mutual obligation' affects guests and hosts in a commercial setting (Lashley, 2000, p. 13) by relieving them of social and moral obligations, leaving only financial ones. King's view that 'the guest's only obligation is to pay, and to behave reasonably' (1995, p. 229), allows them the freedom to go elsewhere if service dissatisfies them, which places hosts under pressure to maintain the guest-host relationship by providing unsurpassable service. This, and an inherent dedication to the duty of hospitality can affect servers' attitudes to guests, creating a commitment well beyond either guests' and managers' expectations.

Providing good hospitality service requires attention to others' needs, and is an act of sacrifice, because guests are given what the hosts also desire (such as something to eat) but often cannot have until after guests' needs have been met. In this way, hospitality differs from the services provided by real estate agents, nurses or bankers, (for example), as providers of these services do not necessarily desire the services they provide. Hospitality workers meet physical needs, and in so doing, subordinate their needs to those of the guests. They become subservient, creating a state of mind which renders them vulnerable to abuse, and perhaps creating a sacrificial state of mind. This paper explores the concept of sacrificial attitudes in hospitality workers manifested in acts of heroism at the Taj Mahal hotel.

2 The Taj Mahal Hotel, Mumbai

The Taj Mahal is a five star hotel in Mumbai, built in 1903, with 565 rooms and ballrooms catering for 2000 guests. Positions in this hotel are so highly sought after, the minimum qualification for a receptionist or reservations assistant is a bachelor's degree. It is a quality hotel, employing skilled, experienced, and well educated staff. On 26 November 2008, terrorists attacked the Taj Mahal and Oberoi hotels. Many heroes emerged from this attack, mostly army personnel, but amongst them were hotel staff, one of whom stood in front of the attackers, shielding hotel guests from their bullets. He was a 55 year old maintenance man called Rajan Kamble, and he died from his bullet wounds on 3 December. When the attack started, staff took diners from the Crystal ballroom to safe areas, hiding 250 guests and continuing to provide service by bringing them water, juice, sandwiches and canapés (Berry, 2008). Kanda Noriyaki, a chef at the hotel's Japanese restaurant, led frightened guests to safety in the restaurant. Apparently staff continued to serve food for several hours, but when the kitchens became too dangerous, they apologised for being unable to continue. Hotel workers were heroes, hiding or evacuating their guests to keep them safe ("Staff emerge as heroes in Mumbai hotel sieges," 2008).

3 Discussion

3.1 Everyday heroes or absolute dedication?

At first glance the story of the Taj Mahal maintenance workers may seem like any other story of valour such as those of police and army personnel who go knowingly into danger, or everyday street heroes who risk their lives for someone else. However, hotel workers do not generally expect physical danger in their work; they are service workers, not thrill-seekers. However, there are numerous newspaper stories to add to those recounted by hospitality workers and academics, some of which (such as those of assaults) are kept secret to protect the guests' and hotels' reputations. Stories such as that of the Stroud barmaid who confronted an armed robber in November last year and was shot in the stomach ("Barmaid foils armed pub raid," 2008) are nearly as common as those of bank teller murders, but bank tellers protect large quantities of money, whereas barmaids just serve drinks and chat to customers.

Such examples of dedication to duty demonstrate an aspect of hospitality work that might easily be forgotten in discussions of the industry's otherwise dubious reputation. They represent a love of service and absolute dedication that suggests some (or perhaps many) workers are passionately committed to their work, and do not question the safety of their actions if they are protecting guests or property.

3.2 Absolute dedication to duty

Telfer (1996) argues that hosts must protect guests from harm, as they are morally responsible for their safety. However, this duty incurs responsibilities which may conflict with other moral duties or the instinct for self-preservation. For example, Kant's categorical imperative would require a hotel worker to reveal suspicious activities to the police, which may be in conflict with the duty to protect guests. Derrida clarified this conflict, saying 'it is better to break with the duty of hospitality rather than break with the absolute duty of veracity' (2000, p. 71), yet hotel workers at the Taj Mahal treated the duty of hospitality as superseding all others. Three possible explanations for such dedication are proposed:

- 1 Hospitality workers are no different from anyone else in that they have a desire to protect and help others;
- 2 Hospitality work conditions employees to put service and guest protection ahead of other responsibilities, even if this incurs personal danger;
- 3 Those who are committed to serving others may be attracted to work in hospitality, and have a natural tendency to put others' needs first.

If absolute dedication to the duty of hospitality manifests as a sacrificial attitude, there is an element of martyrdom in hospitality service.

Martyrdom is perhaps more commonly associated with mothers who save the best food for their husband-providers and children, labouring selflessly to care for their families, but the hospitality server's role is strikingly similar in essence. Whether paid or unpaid, a server's role is to provide tirelessly and without question, anything needed or desired. The devotion to duty demanded in terms of long hours, ceaseless labouring for others' pleasure, and always placing others' needs foremost, may condition servers beyond mere acquiescence and subservience, to an unhealthy sublimation of personal desires and needs.

4 Further research

This paper cannot explain why some hospitality workers take risks for guests. However, it raises questions about the attitudes of hospitality workers, which could be answered by analysing further events to determine the likelihood that hotel workers will face danger to protect guests. Research into the concept of 'Lifestyle Labour' is also indicated, as this may help explain why hospitality workers labour for so little pay, and often, in such appalling conditions (Poulston, 2009). A study is therefore planned to determine the personalities, preferences, and characteristics of hospitality workers, as identifying these may help with an understanding of the relationship between work and pleasure, and therefore the desire to serve.

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