CONFERENCE REPORT

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Council for Hospitality Management Education Conference, Horsley Park, Surrey, UK, 5–7 May 2010

I discovered the Council for Hospitality Management Education (CHME) annual research conference three years ago after some disappointing forays to gatherings that were somewhat peripheral to my interest in the fascinating world of hospitality. The CHME website explains that the original purpose of this conference was to present research on hospitality education (Council for Hospitality Management Education 2010), but debate about a myriad of hospitable things is welcomed. In particular, there is always a strong critical studies stream, in which hospitality is often used as a 'social lens' (Lashley, Lynch and Morrison 2007) through which to view the many elements of our social world that are so intriguingly replicated in hospitality operations.

The CHME conference, described in the book of abstracts as a 'showcase for research in hospitality' (Roper and Lockwood 2010), is an event hosted each May in the United Kingdom and attracting around 200 delegates. CHME (a non-profit organization) is comprised of representatives from various

colleges and universities offering hospitality programmes around the United Kingdom. It aims to 'contribute to the professional development and status of UK hospitality management education, through the sharing of best practice in scholarship and pedagogy' (Council for Hospitality Management Education 2010). In my humble opinion there is no other group that furthers hospitality education so effectively, as CHME's interests reach well beyond the operational substance of hospitality management into hospitality studies and (dare I say it) postmodern approaches to thinking and analysis. The annual research conference is a forum that brings researchers together to share ideas, arguments and hypotheses, and to generally seek and offer advice.

The reviewing process is thorough; instead of the usual acceptance or rejection on the basis of a 300-word abstract, each full paper is given the benefit of a double blind review (i.e. by two reviewers who are not given the author's name). This process consistently produces a stimulating collection of well-written and thought-provoking presentations. This year the reviewers accepted just under 40 papers that ran over two days in four streams: culture and critical studies; food and consumer studies; developments in applied hospitality research; and research and practice in teaching, learning and assessment. Naturally this attracts a hard core of hospitality thinkers, primarily from around the United Kingdom, but this year, also from Denmark, Sweden, France, Japan, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. Apart from croquet on the lawn, a history tour of Horsley Towers and a murder mystery at dinner, there was also a pre-funeral discussion about the very separate but impending demises of both the British pub and healthy food, and a range of fascinating papers. Throughout, questions that stretched beyond empirical research and into philosophical ponderings emerged for a good airing (e.g. What is hospitality? What are critical studies? What are the motivations for providing hospitality?). Occasionally I wondered if I really had come to a hospitality conference or perhaps just stumbled on a glorious opportunity to discuss anything of social interest. However, the themes were definitely hospitality focused, covering the usual issues of financial management, human resources and marketing, but extending the context to hospitals, home-stays and cruise ships, but not (at least not yet) to prisons, which some argue are also a part of the hospitality industry (e.g. Brotherton 1999). Also, and as usual, related topics included culinary and wine tourism, social issues within hospitality and hospitality education. In many ways, hospitality is an analogy for the wider community and because it has an industry draped around it, hospitality academics can happily discuss and examine everything related to the way it is and the things it does, and what we think about all of that, without feeling even the slightest bit off topic. I will try to capture the essence of a few critical studies papers here as an example.

The theme of hospitality and society bellowed at me, although in fairness, I kept thinking of Rockman's comment in the 1970s musical, *The Point*: 'You see what you want to see, and you hear what you want to hear' (Nilsson 1971). Throughout, I saw hospitality and society as inextricably intertwined parallels of each other. Crispin Farbrother talked about free home hosting, which pokes at the very essence of commercial hospitality by raising the question of motivation. I wondered why anyone would invite strangers to their house without seeking compensation for their time, loss of privacy, fatted calves and, even worse, their best wines. Derrida (2000) argued that this is the ultimate expression of virtue: the interruption of self, the gift of self and home, seeking no compensation and (according to Derrida's philosophy, but not Crispin's) without even asking a

stranger's name. This is absolute rather than conditional hospitality, which is the domain of commercial operations and probably most family Christmases. However, I was intrigued to discover Crispin's real motive. Was it a form of entertainment, a quest for an audience, or a virtuous act? And if he is really providing absolute hospitality, do we have another Derrida in our midst, or is his underlying motive the same as our predecessors', to secure a place in heaven?

Lugosi (2009) refers to this as 'asymmetric' hospitality: whereas 'symmetric' implies giving and receiving between people, Crispin was giving to a larger, amorphous and ambiguous entity – the couch-surfing community. Reciprocity does not necessarily come from the people hosted, but from others in the community, in a sort of paying it forward process (Hyde 1999). It is a complex web of hospitable ties that do not necessarily bind.

Crispin's research method, a form of auto-ethnography, is unusual if not unique for an academic study in this particular hospitality setting, and led to interesting anecdotes about his guests and their unusual habits. He offered observations of both host and guest from a host's perspective, but I wondered if his guests knew of their contribution to his work as a social scientist and, if so, at what stage in their stay. Although I was unsure about the ethical implications of recording observations without explicit consent (if he had this, he did not mention it), he provided an extraordinary first-hand account of a less common mode of home hosting.

In separate presentations, David Solnet and Stacey Roche talked about hospitality work and age, alluding to the various myths about Gen Y and older people. David suggested that as Gen Y's dress standards may be different to those of their older employers (who may favour neither tattoos nor piercings), employers might benefit from being a tad more accommodating and perhaps less discriminatory about the differences (his discussion about resistance to change reminded me of the criticisms about long hair on men when the Beatles first became popular). I decided this was partly about the problem with aesthetic labour (see Nickson and Warhurst 2007), and partly about hospitality. After all, hospitality should be extended not just to paying guests and couch-surfers, but also to staff and their various expressions of difference. Including people with green hair. Or then again, maybe not.

However, I was troubled by Stacy's description of age as a social construct, as I had always believed it to be a strictly chronological measure of time. While I am happy to defer to her youthful wisdom (no, that was not an oxymoron), I did wonder, considering our different viewpoints, how much negotiation we would need before reaching an agreement, and if we even needed to agree. Such are the troubling questions that arise when a normally reliable demographic characteristic becomes subjective. In fact, when seemingly 'real' things are subjected to this kind of social scientific critique they somehow stop seeming so real and definite. It can be quite vexing.

Stacy presented a marvellous overview of the challenges encountered in her study of older (that is, over a certain chronological age) workers in the restaurant industry. Discussing an ageing population in the context of hotel employment is of economic interest because of the potential to resolve traditional labour shortages and the associated service problems. She delivered a stimulating and challenging presentation and raised provocative questions such as, 'Is aesthetic labour a short-cut to incompetence?' As I poured myself a coffee I thought about her questions and wondered whether the era of old age and treachery defeating youth and beauty had finally come to an end, which would be a most inhospitable result.

The demise of the British pub was the topic of the first keynote speaker. According to Nina Bentley of Elliott People (a marketing agency in the hospitality and tourism industry), 15 million people drink in a pub once a week and 600,000 workers rely on pub jobs. Pubs are important to the British economy and social structure, and provide a convenient means of observing and perhaps measuring the various and curious habits of the British. Sadly, the pubs are failing. They are unable to keep pace with changing consumer trends and face intense competition; there are too many of them and are often no longer in residential areas; the smoking ban has driven away the persistent smokers; and they struggle with increasing costs and decreased retail prices. As the arrangements between the publicans and the landlords were sounding suspiciously like the management contracts used by companies such as Hyatt and their landlords, I began to think that size does indeed matter. However, there were other problems, such as the coffee shops, petrol stations and supermarkets trampling over the pubs' traditional territory. So what does it all mean?

In Britain, beer is touted as the drink of the working class; it provides a pleasant warm haze and gradually puts the happy worker to sleep. Coffee, however, is more of a middle-class drink; the caffeine stimulates the nervous system, and it is generally thought to wake up those who drink it. The shift from beer to coffee may reflect a reorientation of priorities; an increasing need to be alert; and perhaps even a tendency to becoming too preoccupied to have time to relax over a beer ('Beer to go, madam?'). Coffee can be gulped on the run in a supermarket or garden centre while frantically getting on with something else, whereas beer is definitely more appropriate to a sedentary occasion. Somehow we have morphed from human beings into human doings, and the days of single tasking are over; no wonder women are in such demand in the workforce. Pubs are for drinking beer in and supermarkets and shops are for eating and drinking coffee in, and frankly, we are just too busy to sit around drinking beer all day. But I digress.

I went to the coffee machine and topped up my coffee; even though I had sat down most of the way, the 24-hour jaunt from New Zealand had quite tired me out. Still, I struggled with the rationale for wanting to save the pubs, as I was unable to decide if it were economically or emotionally driven (i.e. hospitality management or hospitality nostalgia?). Pubs are certainly a tourist attraction, part of the British heritage and lifestyle and significant providers of work, but why was everyone so insistent on keeping the past instead of marching bravely into the future? Interestingly, it was pointed out that saving the British pub requires the coordinated efforts of consumers, publicans and landlords. This was helpful in terms of various patterns I was finding, because group formation is a common approach to solve problems (e.g. the European Union). We have to use pubs if we want to keep them, so it is entirely our decision – all power to the consumer. I dealt myself a coffee and headed off to another presentation – Peter Lugosi was about to start talking about women and children as consumers. However, I was beginning to experience a kind of empathy crisis, caused by shifting my perspective from one side to the other in discussions about Gen Y versus older people, and publicans versus consumers. I noticed that whichever side I was on, the other side was 'them', the ubiquitous and anonymous other that always threatened my rights, yet in reality I was both publican and consumer.

Peter's presentation on the hospitality experiences of women with children addressed social justice issues in a hospitality context, and gently encouraged the idea of engaging with marginal issues, people and relationships generally.

His presentation raised moral and philosophical issues that sit at the heart of both absolute and conditional hospitality. I lost track of the hospitality issues after a while and started thinking about his comments about critical thinking. He said that being critical is 'looking at things we haven't noticed before', and critical research mediates between business and social research. I think of critical studies as the search for meaning in social issues, often resulting in the joyful discovery of patterns with universal application, and identifying what something is an example of elsewhere. I think we agreed but I am not sure.

His topic had more social than economic significance, which was probably of negligible consequence to some of the philosophers and social scientists in his audience. It was certainly interesting to hear a man interpret the world from a woman's perspective, identifying the limitations imposed on us by our duty of care, bodies and roles. Peter was interested in consumer co-creation, and suggested that hospitality experiences are not just 'dyadic relationships, involving hosts and guests' (Lugosi 2010: 17) but also others who are not part of the consumption experience. He observed that childhood is a transitory stage – like pubs, I thought. He described an American restaurant chain that changed their menus and fonts as a result after consulting with children about their preferences. Consumers might appear to rule, but I wondered if this company's motivations were economic or social.

Hanna Osman presented 'a Moslem woman's journey' in hospitality, interpreting her experiences of working in a Glaswegian Italian restaurant. She began by explaining that it would be difficult for her to talk about her experiences, as her upbringing was in a culture that did not encourage free expression of ideas. I expect it was also difficult to express this idea to her audience, as this was quite a personal disclosure. She called her doctoral scholarship her ticket to freedom, but admitted that she had brought her emotional baggage along too. I felt connected and identified with her, even though our backgrounds are strikingly different. Westerners have baggage too.

This was Hanna's first job, and therefore her first experience of exchanging labour for reward, with all that implies. Her challenges included the weather, language, sexual harassment, tensions between her culture and her work ('Should I serve alcohol?'), hiding, and managing multiple selves. She catalogued several shortcomings of the hospitality industry but when I asked if these were representative of society generally, to my delight, she unhesitatingly replied that they were. The problems she identified were: (1) ignorance of the 'other'; (2) unwillingness to listen, learn, help and accommodate; (3) failure to integrate work and difference; and (4) inability to recognize potential or celebrate difference. Is this what hospitality is about?

Another doctoral student, Adam Dennett, presented a fascinating paper on the social identity of waiters on cruise ships, in which I learned that a cruise ship is a floating society but those who work on board do not have 'proper' jobs. This was a curious claim, not just because the theme of hospitality and society was quite overt, but also for the suggestion that cruise-ship work is not proper. I have heard it said that hospitality work is not 'proper' either, which I find troubling, but probably true, at least in some communities. I suspect a proper job has status, which roughly translated means your mother would not brag about your hotel job to her neighbour, whereas she would if you worked in a university or hospital, or owned a business (but not a hospitality one). Adam agreed with Fine (1996), who said that workers belong to a community whether or not they choose, and then talked about Goffman's ideas (1959) on performance (which are probably compulsory reading for many hospitality students). In

a remarkably readable text on the 'presentation of self', Goffman proposed that we are always performing and therefore always on stage. Although you and I both know it was Shakespeare who first made this claim, I was still pleased with Adam's reading list. However, the actors, hosts, servers, consumers and non-reciprocating others were becoming so intertwined I could barely keep them apart. And I was developing another nagging worry: if we are all performers, then authenticity must be an imaginary state; the rest is mimesis.

The other keynote speaker was Martin Caraher, who gave a well-informed presentation on food policy. Martin has sat on the London Food Board that advises the Mayor about food in London ('Chips or potatoes, your Worship?') and was a member of the Olympic Food Committee. He most certainly knew his topic and was interested in the tensions between sustainability and healthy food. Some of his concerns were:

1. Every week, 5–10 organic growers/producers let their certification lapse.
2. Organic food has lost its niche market position as the prices are out of reach to many consumers; a mother with two children needs to spend half her income on food if she chooses to eat healthily.
3. For every local job created by monopolies such as Tesco and McDonalds, twenty are also lost locally because their food is sourced from outside the local area.
4. Because so little food is sourced locally, the United Kingdom has only three days' food supply. This means in an emergency, there will be just nine meals available at the local supermarket before stocks are depleted (I was pleased to live in New Zealand).

Although this was ostensibly a hospitality conference, I had heard one keynote speaker talk about the demise of the pub, and now I was hearing about the demise of healthy, locally produced food. Maslow, where are you now, when we need to sort out what comes first? If pubs and food supplies are under threat, then our social needs are never going to be met, and the entire fabric of our society could collapse because there is insufficient interest in beer and decent food. I nibbled at a peppermint, drank my coffee and wondered who was to blame.

One of the last presentations I attended was Paul Lynch's discussion about funding research into home hosting, thereby completing the circle. The conference that had opened by asking questions about free home hosting was ending with questions about how to get money to ask more questions about home hosting. These first and last papers embraced the theme of welcoming strangers into private homes with liberality and generosity. I wondered if it were planned like this, or whether a circle of thought is a natural occurrence because nothing is new; the thoughts just go round and round, at least until an excited academic grabs one and pulls it apart to see how it works. Sharing host spaces with guests is like locals and tourists, publicans and drinkers, mothers and children, monopolies and consumers, teachers and students, hosts and consumers, paid performers and paying performers. Each pair contains interchangeable companions in terms of power balancing; whereas the host appears at first to be in power, in reality this is at the discretion of the guest (and the children, and the consumers. etc.).

In the wind-up session, the debate turned to concerns about the identity of hospitality research. Alison Morrison used the metaphor of voice to describe hospitality research as vibrant but marginalized. Intangibility is not just a service characteristic but also the research discipline of hospitality – diffuse, pervasive

and ubiquitous. She talked of research 'gatekeepers' and 'the voice of hospitality' as if the discipline were a person, and as if society were just one multifaceted person. In the same session, Peter Lugosi talked about knowledge generation being centrifugal, pushing outward as it gains momentum. Anthropologists, ethicists, geographers, sociologists, economists and philosophers discuss hospitality, yet hospitality researchers lack an exclusive and descriptive identity. Perhaps we are hospitaliers, or just any of the above with whom we identify at a given moment. In the closing speech, Peter Jones commented on the advantages of being part of a larger group, with wider debate and more participants. Peter warned against creating unhelpful boundaries in assertions of our distinctiveness. In short, he reminded us about the importance of remaining hospitable in creating a healthy, engaged research community.

The CHME conference serves as a constant reminder that hospitality research is a conduit for mediating various experiences and a way of making sense of the world. It is increasingly eclectic, providing opportunities for researchers to contribute to wider debates. The streams I attended were deliciously critical, in that the presenters raised moral and philosophical questions relating to hospitableness and generosity. Such criticality is considered a high point in hospitality research, and it is surely a sign of maturity that we can look at ourselves, our world and our discipline, and ask so many questions.

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