

DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY: WOMEN HOTEL FRONT DESK AGENTS LEARN TO
NEGOTIATE DIFFICULT GUESTS IN A PATRIARCHAL INDUSTRY

by

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(Under the Direction of Laura L. Bierema)

ABSTRACT

The service industry perpetuates the notion that the customer is always right. The hospitality industry markets to guests based on the service quality. The hotel industry has historically perpetuated gender, racial and ethnic stereotyping by placing women in gendered jobs with little power, such as hotel desk agents or cleaning personnel. Guest agents, the focus of this study, encounter a range of guest behaviors that may be negative such as yelling or throwing items. How do front-desk agents relate to guests when guests misbehave? This research examined this perplexing dilemma from the women desk agent's perspective. How did women of the hotel front office learn to negotiate difficult guests with regard to race and gender? The research questions included: (1) How did the nature of job status, race and gender influence how the women the negotiated guest encounters? (2) How did learning occur? and, (3) How did their experiences influence tenure and job satisfaction?

Ten women from four-star and three-star hotels were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method drawing on a critical human resource development (CHRD) and feminist theoretical framework. Findings indicated that women front-desk agents had learned to manage emotions of themselves and difficult guests.

Conclusions of the study were: (1) The women's learning occurred through incidental and informal learning, connectedness and communities of practice; (2) The women learned to silence their voices in subservience to the guest thus fueling the myth of sovereignty; (3) The guest encounter was experienced as emotion work on a continuum along a range of personalization and depersonalization; (4) Guests may reinforce asymmetrical power relations based the desk agent's gender, race, ethnicity, age, or class; and (5) Job stressors involved in relating to difficult guests may have long-term affects on wellbeing and job continuance.

This research contributes to Human Resources Organizational Development in presentation of the employee viewpoint. Hotel managers should not minimize the negative impact negotiating a difficult guest has on front-desk agents. Socially conscious organizations could use these findings and conclusions to establish a precedent in the industry of protecting employees from abusive guests. Scholars may further explore how management supports, trains and promotes women hotel employees. Additionally, this study contributes to adult education with insights into women's learning.

INDEX WORDS: Adult education; informal and incidental learning; women's learning; situated cognition; communities of practice; self-reflection; feminist research; critical race theory; Critical Human Resource Development (CHRD); socially-conscious organizations; management practices; training; job satisfaction; job dissatisfaction; emotional labor; emotional dissonance; emotional deviance; personalization; depersonalization; hospitality industry; hotel industry; three-star hotel; four-star hotel; front office; front-desk agent; customer service; customer satisfaction; guest relations; difficult guests.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work in loving memory of my stepfather, James D. Kidd. Sadly, Daddy suddenly passed away one year before I began the doctoral program, seven years ago. Two days before his death, we talked about my plans for to apply to the doctoral program. He was supportive and proud of me. At that time, I did not know I would make my academic journey without him.

Daddy was a straightforward and honest man, a sole proprietor of a bait & tackle shop for over thirty-five years. He rarely encountered a difficult customer because he always regarded his customer as a friend. When he did have an upset customer, he sought to satisfy their requests. I came to love customer service working along side him in the store.

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Third, my warmest gratitude goes to the women of this study. Willingly they shared their experiences. Without them, I would not have succeeded. I hope that I have represented them well in this dissertation.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Rule Number One: The customer is always right.

Rule Number Two: If the customer is wrong, see rule number one.

--unknown

In my teen years, I spent after school hours, weekends, and summers helping my stepfather in his bait and tackle store located on Milford Lake, Kansas. A sign bearing the axiom above hung on the wall. I recall reading it and thinking, first, that it was humorous. Then I pondered the practicality of rule number two: What if the customer really is wrong? How can I still accommodate their needs when they are so wrong as to be irate, belligerent, or personally offensive? Can the customer *always* be right?

When I entered the doctoral program, I knew I wanted to study the front-line worker. The service worker, often the least paid and most overlooked in organizations, performs daily activities so that organizations may realize profits. My passion for the service worker originates from my own experiences as a service worker. I have lived the dichotomy of serving a difficult customer while attempting to deliver quality service. Often I perceived a disregard for my position as a service worker by the very people I served. However, I was drawn and I still am, to the service industry, as I believe it to be a noble profession. Indeed, the service industry is increasing in global economic importance (Bryson, Daniels, & Warf, 2004).

Economically speaking, production is tangible or intangible. The tangible, created through manufacturing, are those products developed by raw materials. Intangible products can take the form of ideas, aesthetics, or services provided through human interaction with the consumer (Bryson, Daniels, & Warf, 2004). Employment in the manufacturing industry has decreased and jobs in the service industry have increased during the past three decades (Bryson, et. al, 2004; Korczynski, 2002). Manufacturing cannot exist without the service industry to deliver the goods it produces (Bryson, et al., 2004). Manufacturers and other industries such as car dealerships recognize revenue opportunities through product support after the sale (Bank, 2006; Banks, 2006).

Companies distinguish their company from the competition through their own brand of exceptional service (Marriott, 1997). The interaction between the service worker and the customer is the decisive moment (Carr, 1990). Companies of all types are creating a service culture emphasizing the need for management to remain focused on service leadership (Carr, 1997; Korczynski, 2002). The consumer is seeking the convenience, quality and reliability of service (Cram, 2001; Korczynski, 2002; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). Advertising and marketing alone will not help companies to retain customers if the customer does not experience the service expected. Satisfied customers naturally increase revenue by recommendation of an organization to colleagues and will pay the premium price for quality services rendered (Cram, 2001). Therefore, the service industry is heavily indebted to those who deliver service.

The service sector is broad in scope including finance, insurance, transportation, communication, retail, entertainment, non-profit agencies and hospitality (Bryson, Daniels, & Warf, 2004). The hospitality industry can include travel, restaurant, amusement parks, hotels and

motels (Williams, 2003). In this study I investigated the nature of service provided by the hotel industry.

The hotel industry grew exponentially in the later half of the 20th Century, with that growth consumer demand for quality service increased (Williams, 2003). A culture of consumerism has affected the hotel industry, especially in hotel chains where consumers expect little variation of services provided from hotel to hotel. Wyndham, seeking to attract repeat guests has established a program called “Wyndham by Request.” In this program, guests can define their room preferences such as the fluffiness of their pillows (retrieved November 23, 2006, <http://www.wyndham.com/main.wnt>.). Hotel organizations know that guest satisfaction is foundational to the success of the hospitality industry; indeed, it is foundational for revenue generation (Noe, 1999). The burden to *practice* customer-oriented institutional philosophy is on the front-line worker.

As company founder [of McDonald’s] Ray Kroc said, “The customer is number one. After all, that’s the name of the game.” Nice words? Yes. But words backed by action is where it counts—on the front line where the customer is served. (Quinlan, 1991, p. 146.)

There are multiple jobs in the hospitality industry where interaction with the guest is required. The focus of this study is on those service workers working behind the reception desk. The job at the front office is not “professional” in the sense of a qualified doctor or nurse. It is a subservient role in relation to guests and other employees of the hotel organization. Workers behind the hotel reception desk are the most visible to the guests. The front-desk agent bears the burden of guest complaints about other services of the hotel (Bardi, 1990). Regardless of their

lesser status, the burden of proof falls to the front-desk agent and other service positions within the organization (Guerrier, 1999).

The hotel industry has traditionally seen “ghettoization and stratification of ethnic groups into different departments and jobs” (Adler & Adler, 2004, p. 225). The industry has perpetuated racial and ethnic stereotyping in the name of customer service. Women dominate the hospitality industry in low-wage jobs, such as housekeeping and reception (Guerrier, 1999). The majority of the low-wage jobs go to black, Latino/Hispanic or other minority groups. By pigeonholing certain groups into lower paying jobs, the hospitality industry contributes to classism, often intersecting race and gender in the process (Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Guerrier, 1999). Florence (1998), in her book, *bell hooks' Engaged Pedagogy: A Transgressive Education for Critical Consciousness*, described this social phenomenon: “Patriarchy privileges male over female; White supremacy privileges White peoples over peoples of other races; and classism privileges the elite and economically advantaged over the disenfranchised” (p. 12).

Guests display demeaning language, behavior, and rudeness they would otherwise control in other social situations (Adler & Adler, 2004; Guerrier, 1999; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). For the reception, worker daily duties to meet the consumer need goes beyond operating the reservation system or appeasing guest requests. Workers are at risk of an encounter with an irate guest each time they step behind the front-desk counter. Their smiles behind the counter mask internal trepidation that a personal offense may characterize the next guest encounter (Guerrier, 1999). For this employee the daily job is an arena whereby the worker must balance serving the guest according to organizational requirements against a potential disrespect of themselves. Guerrier explains what it is like for hotel guest service workers:

The old adage that the “customer is always right” is not accurate; there are occasions when the customer is wrong. Although saying “no” to customers is always difficult, skilled customer service staff will develop ways of controlling customers whilst giving the impression that they are in charge. Managers have a responsibility for protecting their staff from unacceptable abuse but it is not easy to define the point at which abuse becomes unacceptable. (Guerrier, 1999, p. 234, 235)

The best of front-office training has this objective: “to develop and teach employees methods to use to promote various profit centers of the hotel” (Bardi, 1990, p. 255). Sales and profit focused training only teaches the employee how to perform on the job, handling the unpredictable guest encounter is less concrete. As much as training prepares employees to perform the job, managers know that it is difficult to “manage a smile” from the employees; not all employees will perform upon demand (Guerrier, 1999). Training directed toward “handling difficult customers” offers pat advice on how to negotiate irate or demanding guests but not always how to handle a personal affront by a guest. Training for managers and employees on non-discrimination and anti-harassment laws usually is directed to the internal discrimination and harassment between workers.

Service workers, in a culture where the customer is always right, often endure demoralizing behavior from guests. The hotel patrons are often in a “party” frame of mind, they may have fewer inhibitions than normal because they are away from home; this often lends to inappropriate behavior. “These long hours involve night, evening, and even holiday shifts. In an environment of heightened—almost forced—social interaction (particularly in smaller hotels with shared employee accommodation), a prime breeding ground exists for the existence of sexual

harassment” (Gilbert, Guerrier, & Guy, 1998, p. 51). Add to the fact that many service workers are minority women, the likelihood victimization of the worker escalates (Adler & Adler, 2004; Guerrier, 1999).

Hochschild (2003) describes the service work of negotiating difficult customer behavior as *emotional labor*. When confronted with an irate guest, the employee must conceal her own difficult display of emotions, thereby presenting positive displayed emotions. Suppression of emotions, adherence to the philosophy that the “customer is always right,” creates internal conflict leaving the individual to feel insulted by both the customer and the organization for whom they work. Hochschild discusses this suppression as acting, pointing out that “we all do a certain amount of acting” (p. 25). She explains that this acting may display in varying degrees. When the individual is acting for the purposes of an institution, organization or other entity, they are practicing what amounts to *institutional emotional management*. The pressure to perpetually smile and be friendly towards guests, without the ability to do otherwise may lead to worker burnout, possibly leading to their resignation (Gilbert, Guerrier, & Guy, 1998). In addition, when the guest is sexually harassing the worker there is potential for a devastating impact (Deitch, Barsky, Butz, Cahn, Brief, & Bradley, 2003), and psychological effects such as,

depression, anger, fear, irritability, anxiety, nausea, headaches, insomnia, tiredness, increased alcohol drinking, and smoking, as well as dependency on drugs, such as tranquilizers, sleeping pills, etc. Not surprisingly, the victim’s relationship with others (particularly other men) can also be adversely affected. Furthermore, a number of studies have shown that victims’ general attitude towards work can also suffer in terms of lowered motivation, decreased job satisfaction, lowered

confidence to do the job and lowered organizational commitment. (Earnshaw & Davidson, 1994, p. 5)

Research on the nature of customer sexual harassment within the retail industry identified the nature, prevalence, and consequences of sexual harassment for 63 female retail workers and 20 security workers (Hughes & Tadic, 1998). Female workers reported sexual harassment by customers. They struggled with how to handle customer sexual harassment, demonstrating a constrained response to the customer. Although Hughes and Tadic's study is focused on retail workers, Gilbert, Guerrier, & Guy, (1998) report that most hotel managers believe that customer sexual harassment is prevalent and is a growing problem in the hotel industry. Some hospitality workers reported being encouraged by management to "flirt" with the guests. "Interestingly on being asked if safe 'flirting' with guests was part of the job ...seven percent [of service staff] agreed it was and thirty-nine percent were neutral" (Gilbert, et al., 1998, pp. 50, 51). Others argue that employees are not blameless in the exchange of sexual innuendos between the worker and guest. Admittedly, the employee sometimes initiates flirting on the job (Gilbert, et al., 1998); waitresses report wearing shorter skirts on Saturday nights because the "men tip and the women don't" (Guerrier, 1999, p. 213). The idea is to keep the customer happy and coming back even if you have to use sexual attractiveness to accomplish the desired result.

In addition to sexual harassment, minority women may encounter discrimination from guests. Deitch, Barsky, Butz, Cahn, Brief, & Bradley, (2003) researched "everyday discrimination" in the workplace against Blacks. Everyday discrimination is defined as "subtle discriminatory behaviors, such as avoidance of Blacks, 'closed' and unfriendly verbal and nonverbal communication" (Deitch, et al., 2003, p. 1301). As was thought, Blacks reported having experienced or perceived subtle discrimination. The study noted that researchers should

expand the definition of what is discrimination on the job, noting that while unconcealed racial discrimination is no longer acceptable in society, this has opened the door to non-verbal communication or avoidance of minorities. Racial discrimination by guests toward minority women hotel front office workers may be overt or covert. Some guests will actually wait for a male or non-ethnic person to be available to help them. “Not only may everyday racism be more prevalent than discrimination that can be characterized as blatant and major, but its consequences for victimized individuals may be equally, if not more, profound” (Deitch et al., 2003, p. 1302).

In a narrative research study by Adib and Guerrier (2003), Pauline, a middleclass black woman, experienced discriminatory practices upon her hire as a receptionist and from at least one guest. Pauline explained that when her hiring manager was considering her for the receptionist position the manager indicated that he wanted to “run this by the Head of Housekeeping first.” His fear was that the black women in housekeeping would make life uncomfortable for Pauline if she was at the front-desk, a place not typically occupied by a minority woman. Pauline’s hiring manager was concerned that placing Pauline in the role of receptionist would cross over racial lines. Also, Pauline experienced racial discrimination from a guest at the reception desk. Pauline was assisting a white male but he acted as if Pauline were not speaking to him choosing instead to talk over her head to her manager. Pauline’s stories reveal that there are clear lines of demarcation of which gender, race, ethnicity, and class should hold certain hotel jobs.

Difficult customer behavior is also referred to in literature as “consumer misbehavior,” (Fullerton & Punj, 2004), “deviant customer behavior” (Reynolds & Harris, 2006), “inappropriate behavior” (Strutton, Vitell, & Pelton, 1994), and “problem customer behavior” (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994). Some of the researchers have explored the causes and manifestations of difficult customer behavior. Common types of difficult behavior include prostitution on hotel premises,

violent crimes, property crimes, drug use and intoxication. Another category is what most service workers would refer to as “customers from hell.” These customers display misbehavior such as foul language, inappropriate sexual innuendos, and demoralizing employees in front of others. Harris and Reynolds (2004) identified eight problem customer types in their study: 1) compensation letter writers, 2) undesirable customers, 3) property abusers, 4) service workers, 5) vindictive customers, 6) oral abusers, 7) physical abusers, and 8) sexual predators. Their findings showed that employees reported sexual predators thirty-eight percent of the time. The study did not identify racial discrimination as a type of difficult behavior nor did it explore its frequency.

Rather than look specifically at customer service encounters only from the customer point of view as some previous studies had, Bitner, Booms, and Mohr (1994) looked at the encounters from the employee point of view. Reynolds and Harris (2006) examined the tactics and coping strategies of restaurant reception workers, bartenders and food servers. Both studies were interviews of workers within the hospitality industry however not specifically women of the front office. Bitner, et al., (1994) indicated that often the source of the customer dissatisfaction was created by the customer’s own behavior indicating that the customer may at sometimes actually be wrong. Reynolds and Harris (2006) identified employee tactics for coping with customer misbehavior some of which worked or did not work. Their study, which looked only at restaurant workers, did not look at women hotel front office workers or ask how the worker learned to use their coping tactics.

Organizations have a legal responsibility to adhere to non-discrimination and anti-harassment laws in the provision of a safe workplace (Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964). All organizations would agree that adherence to the Civil Rights Act is a high priority. However, acknowledgement and enforcement only touches the surface of how organizations could influence

society. Bierema and Fenwick (2005) challenge organizations to become socially conscious through education and reward structures. From a Critical HRD perspective, Bierema and Fenwick define how an organization can develop social consciousness. A *socially unconscious* organization is only concerned with minimal legal compliance to the Civil Rights Act. Most hotel organizations provide customer service training that gives cursory acknowledgement of difficult guests, often with the exception of those that racially discriminate and sexual harass. *Socially conscious* organizations would provide training to employees that include guidance for serving difficult guests of all types. They would also reward ethical management practices, educate the business community and its guests of the importance of ethical treatment of employees (Bierema & Fenwick, 2005). In this way, socially conscious organizations could influence social change concerning women's rights.

Problem Statement

Worldwide, the service industry has grown considerably in the past thirty years. Increasingly, the service sector rather than the manufacturing industry is setting the pace of the economy. Service work does not produce a tangible product, but rather an intangible product, which is not easy to quantify. Some places that employ the broad category of service workers include health care, retail, restaurants, insurance, call centers, and the hospitality industry (Bryson, Daniels, & Warf, 2004). The hospitality industry is growing as a sector of the service economy.

The hospitality industry includes hotels, resorts, and motels. Hotels have sophisticated methods to attract, reward, and retain customers. Higher-end hotels can track guest preferences capitalizing on giving customers the feeling that out of all of the other customers they are special. The first point of contact for personalized service is the front office worker (Cram, 2001).

Training prepares service workers to regard the guest as “always right.” However, sometimes the service encounter is not pleasant for the front office worker. Guests may display demeaning language, behavior, and rudeness toward workers that they would otherwise consider inappropriate (Adler & Adler, 2004; Guerrier, 1986, 1999; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). Workers behind the hotel reception desk receive the brunt of guest complaints about other services of the hotel (Bardi, 1990).

These difficult guest encounters, to which the service worker is exposed, require emotional labor (Hochschild, 2003). Such behavior on the part of a guest is demoralizing to the worker. Guests sometimes sexually harass women workers (Gilbert, Guerrier, & Guy, 1997). Women of color may endure discrimination *and* sexual harassment. For women hotel front office workers the daily job is an arena whereby they must face a potential disregard of themselves and remain poised to serve the guest according to organizational requirements. Companies cannot ignore the degradation of their workers, as by law employers are to protect workers from a hostile work environment.

There is little research about hotel service workers (Adler & Adler, 2004). There is some research about women hotel managers (Guerrier, 1986). A few studies examine the sexual harassment in retail, restaurants, and the hotel industry. A small percentage explores the nature of racial discrimination in the workplace, only a few about the service worker (Adler & Adler, 2004). Some research on difficult guest behavior has identified sexual harassment as a type of misbehavior but falls short of naming racial discrimination (Harris and Reynolds, 2004). Consequently, literature fails to draw together the elements of race and gender as to how the woman hotel front office worker learns to negotiate difficult guest encounters.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how women of the hotel front office learn to negotiate difficult guest encounters with regard to race and gender. Research questions guiding this study were:

1. How did the nature of job status, race, and/or gender influence how the women negotiated the guest encounter?
2. How did learning occur?
3. How did their experiences influence tenure and job satisfaction?

Significance

This topic is important to the hospitality industry because while guest contact may be brief the guest may form an opinion of the entire organization based on the outcome of one interaction. The hospitality industry relies upon the front-desk agent to deliver the quality of service they advertise. Many organizations declare their employees as their competitive advantage in the provision of quality service.

As important as the hospitality worker is professed to be, the front-desk agent receives minimal training. Training only covers the basic skills to perform the job. Training provided to handle “difficult customers” ignores the personal implications of customer abuse. Tagged with a perception that they require minimal skills and are transient, the hospitality industry does not typically invest a large amount of money and time training the front-line workforce spending more time and money on management (Crick, 2002; Guerrier, 1999).

For the hospitality industry, this study contributes to a vital point of contact with the guest, which in turn contributes to increased revenue. Five-Star, Five-Diamond, Four-Star, and even Three-Star hotels rely upon all of their workers to provide the best hotel experience possible.

Luxury hotel management is most aware of the importance of the guest encounter on the bottom line.

Over the past couple of years, they [luxury hotels] have continued to maintain a healthy supply/demand balance, such that their occupancy levels have continued to rise. This is in contrast to the other chain-scale categories where occupancies have either leveled off or begun to decline slightly...When all these factors are considered, it seems likely that luxury hotels not only will continue to outperform the industry in general but also will report very good performance results for the next several years. (Lomanno, 2007, p. 16)

If a guest is unhappy, often the front-desk agent is given the authority to do whatever is possible to please the guest. The front-desk agent does not need to get a manager to handle almost any guest complaint brought to their attention. "Extended service encounters provide opportunities for the guest and employee to develop relationships in which the employee can show a personal interest in the guest," (Gould & Williams, 1999, p. 101). The hotel industry understands the critical moments during the guest encounter with either win customer loyalty or potentially a guest may leave the hotel angry, telling others about their bad experience.

The front-desk agent and other positions within the hotel industry experience high turn over rates; at present, it is as high as 60% industry-wide (Tracey & Hinkin, 2006). Front-desk agents are considered easy to replace. Most hotels do not spend money on employee retention for the front-desk agent position. Iverson and Deery (1997) found that high turnover in the hospitality industry is regarded as a natural part of the industry. Managers expect high turnover rates because of the nature of the job and the low pay structure (DiPietro & Conley, 2007)

Adherence to the philosophy that the "customer is always right," leaves front-desk agent insulted by both the customer and the organization for whom they work. Handling difficult guests day after day may contribute to high turnover. Pizam (2004) suggests that management should

provide support to cope with the emotional dissonance related to the job. He points out the other jobs where emotional labor is a recognized phenomenon, such as physicians and nursing staff, extensive training and education is provided. Conversely, hospitality employees are not given support to cope with guest abuse, but the attitude of management is “deal with it.”

This study adds to existing industry knowledge by exploring an employee category often overlooked in practice and in literature. Findings of this study may assist managers and trainers of the workers to better prepare women receptionists to negotiate difficult guest encounters. This study contributes to the field of adult education in the exploration of how hotel front office workers learn to negotiate difficult guest behavior. The study contributes to the field of Human Resources Organizational Development (HROD) in the identification of ways organizations could mitigate the impact and occurrence of guest abuse of employees. Studies of difficult guest behavior have not fully explored the impact of difficult guest behavior on the employee. This study explored the nature and impact of sexual harassment, racial discrimination and other forms of guest abuse. Findings may serve to enlighten the fields of HROD and Adult Education on the learning and development needs of the most important employee of the organization.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how women of the hotel front office learn to negotiate difficult guest encounters with regard to race and gender. Research questions guiding this study were:

1. How did the nature of job status, race, and/or gender influence how the women negotiated the guest encounter?
2. How did learning occur?
3. How did their experiences influence tenure and job satisfaction?

This chapter contains four sections. The first reviews literature about the hotel industry, provide a description of women front-desk agents and identify factors unique to the job. The second section explores the responsibility of hotel organizations to examine their training and support of women front-desk agents. The third section illustrates the difficult guest by definition and other research of this phenomenon. The final section explores women's learning, formal learning, informal and incidental learning, transformational learning, situated cognition, and feminist pedagogy as related to the problem.

Galileo and GIL searches for literature included journal articles and books in the business and adult education fields. Keyword searches were conducted for customer service, service worker, minority service worker, women service worker, hotel worker, hotel training, hotel reception worker, hospitality industry, feminist pedagogy, critical race theory, critical

management, critical human resource development, adult learning, informal learning, incidental learning, situated cognition, customer behavior, customer abuse and other related topics.

Introduction

The hotel workforce is gender segregated, the majority of women employed as front-desk agents, kitchen help, or housekeeping. Malveaux (1999) predicted that in the next years the greatest job growth within the hospitality and retail industries would be low-paying service jobs, with large numbers of women of color employed in these jobs. Equal opportunity for women in the hotel industry is still in question where more men are still in the higher paying jobs (Burgess, 2000) and receive more training opportunities (Burrell, Manfredi, & Rollin, 1997).

Management contributes to the low-status of women by type-casting women in certain jobs. Gender bias in the workforce is a historical and social phenomenon. Occupational feminization first began in clerical work, telegraph and telephone operators, and service occupations at the turn of the twentieth century. Employers with “expectations about performance and cost, the dictates of the customer, and sex prejudice influence how employers rank the sexes within labor queues” (Reskin & Roos, 1990, p. 38). For the male employee, lack of financial reward, mobility or job advancement opportunities can depreciate ranking in job queues (Reskin & Roos, 1990). Additionally, as service sector jobs have increased in the American economy, so have service jobs, which require the worker to maintain or influence emotional responses. This led to feminization of occupations such as sales, customer service and other jobs where interaction with the public is required (Reskin & Roos, 1990).

Doherty and Stead (1998) identified gaps between male and female pay in the hotel and catering industry in the UK. Through literature review and collection of public records they found considerable differences in pay between men and women. The hotel industry employs more

women than men but women hold the majority of the lowest paying, low-skilled jobs (Doherty & Stead, 1998). Black, Latino, Hispanic, or other minority groups represent the majority of the women low-skilled workers. Projections are that even though the status of black women improves in mainstream society many black women “will remain stuck in low wage jobs” (Malveaux, 1999, p. 663). Evidence suggests that the number of women versus men will only intensify in service jobs (Korczynski, 2002). Personnel managers have factored sexuality as an essential requirement of reception jobs in the hotel industry (Worsfold & McCann, 2000). U. S. Census statistics in the year 2000 for the city of Atlanta, GA reveal that 51.6% hotel front-desk agents were female, 48.4% were male. While the difference is slight, closer examination demonstrates that not only is the hotel industry gender segregated by occupation but also segregated racially. Black non-Hispanic workers significantly out numbered white non-Hispanic front-desk clerks; 20.8% of total workers were White, while 56.2% were Black. Even so, in the hotel industry, men, especially white men, have traditionally dominated management ranks, therefore as Guerrier (1999) observes, “Think management – think white male” (p. 202).

A significant part of the guest encounter is servitude on the part of the worker. The guest feels superior, fueling the myth of sovereignty, especially when the guest perceives the worker’s status as lower than his or her own (Korczynski, 2002). Lower paying jobs in the hotel industry have certain given characteristics that lend to the low status associated with the jobs. Much work performed by women is servile, dirty, cleaning, and caring for the needs of others giving way to the hierarchy of male-female roles (Guerrier, 1999). All of these traditional roles, whether a good thing or not, are characterized as “women’s work.” Service workers, in a culture where the customer is always right, often endure demoralizing behavior from guests. Add to the fact that many service workers are women, potential ill-treatment of the worker escalates (Adler & Adler,

2004; Guerrier, 1999). This ill-treatment may occur because of the emotional labor required to perform the job.

Emotional Labor

Hochschild (1983, 2003) identified two types of acting which we do in our everyday life called *surface acting* and *deep acting*. Surface acting occurs when one is acting *as if* she is feeling as certain way. Deep acting occurs when one pretends to feel something or suppresses feelings. Hochschild concludes that organizations may impose standards of behavior upon employees, where the employee must display positive feelings or emotions to a customer or hotel guest. This type of acting Hochschild refers to as *institutional emotional management*, where one must act according to institutional rules and customs. She questions institutional pressure upon employees to perform and act as if they feel a certain way for the financial gain of the organization.

But when we enter the world of profit-and-loss statements, when the psychological costs of emotional labor are not acknowledged by the company, it is then that we look at these otherwise helpful separations of “me” from my face and my feeling as potentially estranging. (p. 37)

Hochschild (1983, 2003) asserts that women more frequently are assigned tasks within the workplace where they must manage their feelings. “Almost everyone does emotion work that produces what we might, broadly speaking, call deference. But women are expected to do more of it,” (p. 168). Hochschild points out that service jobs are regarded as lesser status jobs. Emotions required performing lesser status jobs are given less importance. “High-status people enjoy the privilege of having their feelings noticed and considered important. The lower one’s status the more one’s feelings are not noticed or treated as in consequential, (p. 172). Because the service job of working at the hotel front-desk is regarded as less important than other jobs within the

industry, such as manager, the feelings of the front-desk agent may be regarded as less important. This disregard for the front-desk agent's feelings may be propagated by management and by the guest of the hotel. The lower status of the position implies that worker feelings are not important.

Hochschild (1983, 2003) believed that institutional emotional management would lead to worker burnout. Van Dijk and Kirk (2007) researched emotional labor and emotional dissonance within the hospitality and tourism industry. The researchers found that workers experienced emotional dissonance when their desired emotions were not congruent with their internal feelings. Interestingly, they also found that emotional labor "did not necessarily generate negative outcomes," (166-167). Negative outcomes that were identified included various coping strategies used by the employee and were strongly linked to emotional dissonance.

Since Hochschild wrote her groundbreaking book, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, countless scholars have researched the implications of emotional labor for various service industry positions. In 2003, Brotherage and Lee (2003), created the emotional labor scale (ELS) to assess the degree to which emotional labor occurs on various service jobs. Chu and Murrmann (2006) modified the ELS to fit the hospitality industry, creating the hospitality emotional labor scale (HELS). In a quantitative study using the HELS instrument, Chu and Murrmann used a convenience sample of 97 employees from three hotels in the Southeast. Participants were mostly food service or front-desk employees. Findings measured the occurrence of surface acting, genuine acting, and deep acting. Chu and Murrmann believe that results of the HELS instrument will allow managers to examine "how training changes the way an employee performs emotional labor," (p. 1189). Chu & Murrmann suggest that the HELS instrument may be worthy for tracking employee emotional labor performance in support of organizational performance.

Clearly, the job as front-desk agent requires emotional labor. Emotional labor may result in negative outcomes for the worker. Sometimes, however, emotional labor may not always result in negative outcomes. In addition to performing emotional labor as a hotel front-desk agent, women may also be subjected to sexual harassment or racial discrimination by customers.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment may be overt, asking the worker out for a date; or covert, what is casually called “harmless” flirting. Inappropriate behavior by some hotel patrons may be influenced in part because they are away from home and may have lowered inhibitions. The hotel work environment may also provide the opportunity for inappropriate behavior. “These long hours involve night, evening, and even holiday shifts. In an environment of heightened—almost forced—social interaction (particularly in smaller hotels with shared employee accommodation), a prime breeding ground exists for the existence of sexual harassment” (Gilbert, Guerrier, & Guy, 1998, p. 51).

Worsfold and McCann (2000) conducted a study in the hotel industry that explored sexual harassment, highlighting industry response and the impact upon the worker. The participants of the study were students working in the hospitality industry. No specific job was identified except that the worker had consistent interaction with hotel guests. The survey examined forms of sexual harassment, courses of action the participant might have taken, action actually taken, consequences of the action, feeling experienced and the effect of harassment on job performance. The survey also asked participants to identify who was the perpetrator of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment occurred between colleagues, management, chefs, and supervisors with categorically the highest number occurring by guests.

The types of harassment included suggestive remarks, suggestive looks, touching or physical attacks, or verbal abuse. The most frequent feeling experienced by respondents was anger and embarrassment. Some indicated the feeling of disgust or a feeling of being cheap. The adverse impact of the harassment on work performance was the participants' feelings about work, followed by their inability to work with others. Some participants were flattered.

Worsfold and McCann (2000) suggest that additional research is needed about guest harassment in front-line work but it has not been given much attention. The reasons for male-on-female, guest-on-employee sexual harassment could be due to the historical image of the hotel industry. The authors conclude that guests may "have an image of the hotel industry, which associates hotels with sexual and criminal deviance" (Worsfold & McCann, 2000, p. 253). The study also considered that sexuality was a job expectation for female employees. The authors report that some participants said that management encouraged flirting with guests because it was "part of the job."

Race in the Hotel Industry

Just as with sexual harassment, guests may overtly discriminate because of race, asking for someone else to wait on him or her; or the guest might covertly discriminate by simply choosing an alternate line where the reception person is more like themselves (Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Deitch, Barsky, Butz, Cahn, Brief, & Bradley, 2003; Guerrier, 1999). Deitch, et al., (2003) researched "everyday discrimination" in the workplace against Blacks. Everyday discrimination is "subtle discriminatory behaviors, such as avoidance of Blacks, 'closed' and unfriendly verbal and nonverbal communication" (Deitch, et al., 2003, p. 1301). As was thought, Blacks reported having experienced or perceived subtle discrimination. The study noted that researchers should expand the definition of what is discrimination on the job, noting that while unconcealed racial

discrimination is no longer acceptable in society this has opened the door to non-verbal communication or avoidance of minorities. “Not only may everyday racism be more prevalent than discrimination that can be characterized as blatant and major, but its consequences for victimized individuals may be equally, if not more, profound” (Deitch, 2003, p. 1302).

The hospitality industry contributes to classism often intersecting race and gender in the process in the pigeonholing of certain ethnic groups to certain jobs (Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Guerrier, 1999). There has traditionally been “ghettoization and stratification of ethnic groups into different departments and jobs” (Adler & Adler, 2004, p. 225). The patriarchic nature of the hotel industry reflects subconscious cultural thought, “Patriarchy privileges male over female; White supremacy privileges White peoples over peoples of other races; and classism privileges the elite and economically advantaged over the disenfranchised” (Florence, 1998, p. 12).

The perception is that whites, more than non-whites, have higher social status and education. Therefore, whites hold more hotel managerial jobs, creating a workforce segregated by race and class (Adler & Adler, 2004; Guerrier, 1999). The industry has perpetuated racial and ethnic stereotyping in the name of customer service. Guests have shown a preference for white females in positions of concierge or reception because the typical white male guest wants to see this profile (Adib & Guerrier, 2003). Of course men or women occupy the front-desk, but more often, there will be a white female at the counter. She must be friendly and attractive; the belief is that a sexually attractive white female is what the predominately-white male clientele want to see (Adib & Guerrier, 2003). However, more is behind this thinking than just sexual attractiveness. The question to ask is why women of color are *not* represented at the front counter. Collins (2000) elaborates this point:

U.S. Black women may have migrated out of domestic service in private homes, but as their overrepresentation as nursing home assistants, day-care aides, dry-cleaning workers, and fast food employees suggests, African American women engaged in low-paid service work is far from a thing of the past... Work as alienated labor can be economically exploitative, physically demanding, and intellectually deadening—the type of work long associated with Black women’s status as a “mule.” (pp. 46, 48)

Preference for white female representation at the front counter is in line with the historical view that Black women and other women of color should hold the most demeaning and hidden jobs within organizational structures.

Adib and Guerrier (2003) researched gender, race, ethnicity, and class exploring narratives of women in the hotel industry within the UK. The study focuses on two categories of women workers, the housekeeping and reception workers. The study provided examples of how race, nationality, class, and gender were interrelated. One interviewee, Pauline, a middleclass black woman, described two incidents of discrimination. The first incident occurred during the interview process. The male hiring manager indicated that he wanted to “run this by the Head of Housekeeping”—that he was going to put a black woman at the front counter. His fear was that the black women in housekeeping would make life uncomfortable for Pauline. The second incident of discrimination occurred while working at the reception desk. A white male she was assisting acted as if she were not speaking to him, choosing instead to talk over her head to her male manager. Adib and Guerrier indicated that through Pauline’s story, distinctions exist in the hotel industry of what gender, race, ethnicity and class should hold certain jobs. Clearly, the

preference for the white female at the front-desk goes beyond just the preference for a young pretty face.

The black female experience. Women of color are also vulnerable to both sexual harassment *and* racial discrimination. Race and gender are so tightly intertwined it is difficult to distinguish the two. Ransford and Miller (1983) posit that race and gender, for Black women, are so closely tied they refer to this phenomena as “ethgender” (p.46).

The notion of “ethgender” is somewhat akin to Gordon’s “ethclass” (Gordon, 1964), but it does not refer as clearly to a bounded social interaction reality. On the other hand, it is more than just a set of statistical aggregates. Black men and women have experienced powerful historical circumstances that affect their gender and racial identities. In particular, black females have increasingly come together in caucuses and special gatherings to define their goals and programs within a minority group context (Nieto, 1974). For our purposes, ethgender lies conceptually somewhere between Gordon’s idea of ethclass and a mere statistical category. We therefore prefer the term ethgender to a neutral term such as “race-gender” category. (Ransford & Miller, 1983, p. 46-47).

This fusion of race and gender for Black women influences the encounter between the worker and guest regardless of the race of the guest. First, Black women working behind the front-desk violate stereotypes, working in a job which is believed to be more suited for a White woman. This is a prejudice that contradicts reality, as the 2000 U. S. Census of Atlanta hotel front-desk clerks revealed. A closer look at the 2000 Census statistics report the 30.8% of total reception workers were Black female, 13.2% were White female. The remaining population was

25.4% Black male, 7.6% were White male. Decidedly, the “preference” for White female, as perceived by the industry custom, does not match the actual demographic.

Secondly, concerning the fusion of race and gender, Black women represent their gender *and* sexuality. Historically Black female sexuality is a core prejudice. Collins (2004) explains the reasons for and impact of sexual prejudices against Black women:

Under slavery, Black women were raped, but similar to marital rape; their victimization was not perceived as rape because they were chattel, not humans. In contrast, emancipation and the gaining of individual rights ushered in a new series of vulnerabilities because such women lacked the so-called protection provided by elite White men. No longer the property of a *few* White men, African- American women became sexually available to *all* White men. (p. 65)

This study gives voice to the invisible women.

Summary

The hotel industry is hierarchical in how it places women in jobs, typecasting women in servile positions. At the front hotel desk, guests have a preference to see a white pretty female rather than a woman of color. Guests regard the positionality of a woman at the front-desk in a subservient role to themselves. To perform the job as front-desk agent, women are subjected to institutional emotional management. Women may experience sexual harassment or racial discrimination from guests. Black women are vulnerable to both sexual harassment and racial discrimination. The lower status of women in a service position, in class, gender, and/or race, contributes to the myth of sovereignty, which is a commodity of the hospitality industry. The impact of race and gender in the guest encounter for women hotel reception workers is a phenomenon to which hotel management should become sensitized. Next, I will review how hotel

management can become more conscious to the issues of race and gender for the hotel receptionist.

Organizational Responsibility

It is not enough for organizations to recognize the need to attend to race and gender in the guest-employee encounter, although that is a good beginning. Organizations should examine their training practices, reasons for high attrition rates, and their social responsibility to address the problem. In this section, I will examine common management practices and discuss how a responsible organization should view and address the phenomenon of difficult customer encounters in practice.

Training developers in the hotel industry, as most organizations, design courses with the goal to improve employee performance. Progressive organizations will begin the process with a thorough job analysis to write an accurate job description, practice careful recruitment, selection, orientation and training. Then the organization should follow-through with employee appraisal systems to ensure adherence to performance standards. Training usually includes how to perform specific tasks on the job. A significant part of the training in the hotel industry is on the job. Reinforcement of training is left to the supervisor, where motivation, communication and supervision are all apart of the coaching and counseling process (Jaszay, 2003).

High employee turnover rates influence the amount of time and money invested in training low-skilled hotel workers. Within the lower employee ranks, turnover is high with the typical service worker leaving within a matter of months (Guerrier, 1999; Korczynski, 2002). Most organizations use the following simple formula for budgeting training cost per employee (Jaszay, 2003):

$$\text{Cost per trainee} = \frac{\text{total cost of training program}}{\text{number of trainees per year}}$$

Rapid turnover can be a factor in the development and implementation of a course especially if new employees must be placed on the job quickly to keep up with attrition. The amount of money and time spent on the front-desk agent can indicate the value an organization places on their contributions to the guest experience.

Managers often view front-desk agents as replaceable due to the low skills required to perform the job. Critical Management Studies is theoretical framework that can offer insight to address the subjugation of women front-desk agents to difficult guest behavior. In fact, at the core of critical studies and critical reflection is “the attempt to unearth and challenge dominant ideology and the power relations this ideology justifies” (Brookfield, 2000, p. 38). Critical management studies confront those in power whose ideology is dominant, those who might hinder emancipatory change. In challenge of those in power, CMS proposes to deconstruct and unearth the practices and discourse of the elite, opening potential for marginalized groups (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003).

Certainly, the purpose of all business activity is to make a profit. The U.S. economy would not function without free enterprise. Strategy exemplified is policy in action (Levy, Alvesson, & Willmott, 2003). This in and of itself is neither a crime nor a sin. The contribution of CMS to this discourse is to propose that organizations should question when its practices and influential power might be harmful to employees, the community or the environment (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003). “Critical Theory (CT) has an emancipatory agenda, which seeks to probe taken-for-granted assumptions for their ideological underpinnings and restore meaningful participation in arenas subject to systematic distortion of communication” (Levy, et al, 2003, p. 93).

Critique should become a common practice for both the scholar and the practitioner. Certainly, guest exploitation of women hotel reception workers should be challenged. Employers

have a responsibility to consider the affects of sexual harassment and racial discrimination on employees. The practice of hegemony for organizational gain should be challenged, particularly when women unknowingly participate in their subjugation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003).

Several researchers have explored the effects of sexual harassment by guests of employees. Hughes and Tadic (1998) found that the job related effects of customer harassment included poor job performance, avoidance of male customers, dressing differently to dissuade harassment, decreased friendliness with customers, loss of interest in work and ultimately resignation from the job.

Cunningham (2004) calls for HRD to allow critique into discussion. Not only should organizations focus upon workforce productivity and revenue generation. Her challenge to the field is that “the appropriate goal for economy activity is to build community, not privilege, for individuals” (p. 236). Cunningham’s strongest statement to this effect is, “There is no permanent rapprochement until those in HRD engage in critical pedagogy in the workplace as should their colleagues in academe” (p. 236). Critique of management and HRD as a matter of discourse is to hold a mirror in the face organizations, reflecting back to the scholar and practitioner the potential influence of those in power.

Critical Human Resource Development (CHRD) also challenges organizations to recognize the impact of harassing guests on employees. There may be ways in which organizations can circumvent the incidents and impact of difficult guest behavior on women. CHRD opens discourse of “undiscussables” (Bierema, 2000, p. 287) such as racial discrimination and sexual harassment that women hotel reception workers experience in some guest encounters. Bierema and Fenwick (2005) define Critical HRD as a threefold assumption: (1) it views the workplace as contested terrain; (2) opposes the subjugation of human knowledge, skills,

relationships and education to organizational gain and goals that are primarily economic or instrumental; and (3) is devoted to the transformation of organization of organizations and HRD practice toward a just, equitable, life-giving and sustainable workplace. In light of this three-fold assumption of CHRD, HRD practitioners should question the ethics of employee exposure to difficult guests that may be personally offensive to workers. In addition, women front-desk agents should not be subjugated to guest sexual harassment or racial discrimination for organizational gain.

CHRD calls for socially responsible organizations, which was the premise of this study, that organizations should be socially responsible in the treatment of women front-desk agents. Social responsibility goes beyond responsibility in the treatment of employees; it includes economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary responsibility (Carroll, 1999). Bierema and D'Abundo (2004) describe four types of organizations, to the degree that socially responsible HRD is in practice; these are, *socially unconscious HRD*, *socially compliant HRD*, *enlightened self-interest HRD*, and finally, *socially conscious HRD*.

Organizations have at least a legal obligation to protect employees from a hostile work environment (Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964). Bierema and D'Abundo (2004) challenge social irresponsibility. A *socially unconscious organization* is only concerned with minimal legal compliance; for the hospitality worker this would mean a cursory acknowledgement of non-discrimination and anti-harassment laws. Most likely little action is taken to enforce sexual harassment and anti-discrimination laws consistently, especially concerning guest behavior. *The socially compliant HRD* also observes minimal legal compliance will recognize difficult guest behavior as a problem but is not consistent with enforcement and application to all operational procedures. HRD with *enlightened self-interest* is committed to social responsibility; the

organization is enlightened to recognize that guest behavior is of concern to their employees. This organization, dedicated to change, promotes the social good. *Socially conscious HRD* is does not only comply with the law because they should do so, ethical management is encouraged and rewarded. What sets this organization apart is they not only accept responsibility for their own actions but also educate the community and its guests of what is considered ethical.

Summary

Front-desk agents often are regarded as dispensable employees and turnover in the job is high. Organizations have a responsibility to re-consider the effectiveness of training and preparedness of front-desk agents to handle difficult guests. The amount of time and money devoted to training should be evaluated. Critical HRD opens discussion about “undiscussables” and challenges organizations to be socially conscious in the treatment of employees. The challenge to organizations is to be committed to social responsibility. A socially conscious organization recognizes that difficult guest behavior may subject employees to harassment and discrimination. Next, I will discuss the nature of the difficult guest and previous studies about difficult guests.

The Difficult Guest

While the customer contact may be brief the customer may form an opinion, whether positive or negative, of the entire organization based on the outcome of one interaction. The service industry relies upon the front-desk agent to deliver the quality of service they advertise. Many organizations declare their employees as their competitive advantage. Marriott holds this view of the people who work for them:

The philosophy of putting employees first is particularly important in our industry, because Marriott is in the *people* business, not just the service business...the right

human touch can make all the difference between a mediocre or poor experience and a positive, even unforgettable one. Naturally, if the people who are responsible for supplying that human touch are unhappy, tired, stressed out, poorly trained, dissatisfied, or otherwise distracted, they're probably not going to do a good job. (Marriott, Jr., & Brown, 1997, pp. 35, 36)

A few studies have identified difficult customer behavior as “consumer misbehavior,” (Fullerton & Punj, 2004), “deviant customer behavior” (Reynolds & Harris, 2006), “inappropriate behavior,” (Strutton, Vitell, & Pelton, 1994), and “problem customer behavior” (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994). These definitions include all types of behavior including aggressive behaviors such as “partaking in threat making and rudeness toward customer-contact employees” (Harris & Reynolds, 2004, p. 342). Bitner, et al. (1994) considered in their study behavior such as drunkenness, verbal and physical abuse, breaking company policies or laws, and uncooperative behavior. Types of behavior explored by Fullerton and Punj (2004) were customer misbehavior directed against a marketer's employees, other consumers, merchandise and services, financial assets, and physical premises.

Lovelock (2001) coined the term “Jaycustomer” to describe difficult customers. He created the word from the word “jaywalking.” He notes that the prefix “jay” comes from the nineteenth century slang for “stupid person.” A person crossing the street without using the crosswalk is misbehaving, so also a “Jaycustomer” is deviant. He defines “Jaycustomer” as “one who acts in a thoughtless or abusive way, causing problems for the firm, its employees, and other customers” (p. 73). Lovelock identified six segments of “Jaycustomer” behavior. The *thief* includes customers that steal, shoplift or otherwise do not intend to pay for services. Second “Jaycustomer” is the *rule breaker*. The company may impose the rules in compliance to federal or

state laws; sometimes the organization establishes rules for procedural purposes to protect the company from liability. The *rule breaker* is one who tries to skirt the enforcement of the rule or demand an exception made to accommodate them. The third “Jaycustomer” is the *belligerent* customer. This customer displays their anger by shouting, insulting the service worker, using threats or obscenities. This behavior may include physical attack, sometimes perpetuated by intoxication. The *family feuders* are a subcategory of the belligerent customer. These customers may get into public fights with members of their own party or other customers nearby. Fifth, the *vandal* will damage company equipment in rage against the company. Hotels may fall victim to this type of customer that burns holes in carpets, linens, or tablecloths, leaves broken furniture, or damaged room fixtures. Again, drug and alcohol abuse may contribute to this type of behavior. Finally, Lovelock identifies the sixth “Jaycustomer” as the *deadbeat*. He separates this person from the thief but designates this person as those who end up with delinquent accounts due to non-payment. The six “Jaycustomer” types do not identify sexual harassment or racial discrimination. The belligerent customer will often personally insult the service worker. Lovelock did not fully examine tactics employees use to cope with these types of customers, only occasional tips on defusing customer anger or organization controls to prevent the behavior.

Harris and Reynolds’ (2004) study included sexual advances or contact by customers but it was only one of eight customer types. They interviewed a wide cross-section of the hospitality industry, hotel, restaurants, and bars. Participants included front-line workers, bartenders, and managers. Notably they also included customers in their study. Also using Lovelock’s (2001) term “Jaycustomer” in their study, they identified these types of difficult customers: 1) customers who frequently wrote letters of complaint for retribution, 2) undesirable customers, 3) property abusers, 4) behavior directed at service workers, 5) vindictive customers, 6) oral abusers, 7)

physical abusers and 8) sexual predators. Ninety-two percent of the eight customer types were oral abusers. Their study indicated a small percentage being of a sexual nature.

Fullerton and Punj (2004) were concerned with the question of *why* customers display difficult behavior. They posit that marketing activities, “which seek to promote a philosophy of consumption so that consumers will buy more” (p. 1240), incite the ideology of consumption with leads to customer misbehavior. Also interesting is organizational attitude toward customer misbehavior. It is not an attitude of protection of the employee but the relationship with the customer that should be preserved at all costs. Managers, embarrassed by customer dissatisfaction, theft or misconduct, will downplay the impact upon their organization. “The ‘customer is always right’ philosophy is used as a rationalization for consumers’ misbehavior. The typology shows that markets in effect accept much of the misbehavior directed against their own employees” (Fullerton & Punj, 2004, pp. 1243-1244).

Their study also revealed that consumer misbehavior spans all socioeconomic levels. It was not a lower income, lower class phenomenon as is frequently assumed. Another potential contributor is the feeling of sovereignty the customer holds in the encounter. This relationship with the guest as receiver and the front line worker as the servant contributes to what Korczynski (2002) terms the “myth of sovereignty” (p. 160). The myth of sovereignty is a commodity to be purchased and consumed.

Fullerton and Punj (2004) propose that consumer misbehavior “is an unintended consequence of the marketing activities of firms, which seek to promote a philosophy of consumption so that consumers will buy more,” (p.1240). In addition to consuming more products and services, the myth of sovereignty is also a commodity to be consumed. The consumption of the myth of sovereignty is influenced by three factors connected with the behavior and identity of

the front-line worker. First, the myth is more likely to be consumed if the wider—socially embedded—status of the front-line worker is a low one. This allows an easier envisioning by the customer of implicit superiority within the service encounter. Second, the myth is more likely to be consumed if the appearance is maintained that the customer is in control of the service encounter in which he or she is in charge of its terms and pace. These first two factors are clearly interrelated in that the appearance of customer control will be easier to maintain if the customer's socially embedded status is higher, or at least not lower, than the front-line worker's. Finally, consumption of the myth will be affected by the degree of empathy to the customer shown by the front-line worker (Korczynski, 2002, p. 160, 161).

Rather than look specifically at customer service encounters only from the customer point of view as some previous studies had, Bitner, Booms, and Mohr (1994) examined the nature of encounters from the employee point of view. The authors wanted to know about both satisfying and unsatisfying customer service encounters. They also asked customers about incidents to determine if the two groups agreed upon the nature of the outcome. Using the critical incident technique for data collection, they interviewed hotel workers, restaurant workers and airline workers. Categories of customer behavior analyzed included drunkenness, verbal and physical abuse, breaking company policies or laws and uncooperative customers as reported by employees. Their findings indicated that often the source of the customer dissatisfaction was in fact created by the customer's very own behavior, indicating that the customer may be wrong. Implications for future study challenged researchers to explore how managers might identify problem customers and prepare employees to deal with them.

Reynolds and Harris (2006) examined the tactics and coping strategies of restaurant reception workers, bartenders and food servers. Using narrative interviews the authors collected

employee stories of how the worker coped with the incidents. Coping tactics were categorized as pre-incident, during the incident, and post-incident. Pre-incident tactics included mentally preparing for work, consuming drugs, altering one's clothing (to be more or less alluring), and observing patrons closely. During the incident, workers would ignore customers, exploit their own sexual attractiveness, or alter speech patterns to name a few. Post-incident, workers isolated from others keeping the incident to themselves, some talked to colleagues, or they gained revenge on the customer. All of these were learned behaviors as tactics that worked or did not work to cope with difficult customers. The study, which looked only at restaurant workers, did not look at women hotel reception workers or ask how the worker learned to use their coping tactics.

Only the aforementioned study by Worsford and McCann (2000) comes closest to the purpose of this study. Their research was specifically directed toward hotel workers, although not specifically the reception worker or only women. They do establish that while some sexual harassment occurs within the work environment, that the customer perpetrates a significant amount. Worsford and McCann indicate that only 29% of respondents to their study reported the incident to their manager. They indicate that there were many reasons why the participants did not report the harassment incident to management; these included fear of ridicule, fear of repercussion, concern with being believed, and the belief that they may have encouraged the situation. Regardless, this study demonstrates that sexual harassment within the hotel industry is a significant problem.

All of these researchers have explored difficult customer encounters from multiple angles. However, the question of how race and gender factor into the equation is glossed over, if not overlooked. It is the intent of this study to add to previous research by looking at how women and women of color are impacted by these difficult encounters.

Summary

Several studies examine causes and manifestations of difficult customer behavior. Some common types of difficult behavior include prostitution on hotel premises, violent crimes, property crimes, drug use, and intoxication. Customers also display misbehavior such as foul language, inappropriate sexual innuendos, and demoralizing employees in front of others. Previous studies have failed to recognize racial discrimination (Harris & Reynolds, 2004) a few have identified sexual harassment by customers in the service industry (Worsfold & McCann, 2000). The emotional impact on service workers has been researched since Hochschild's 1983 groundbreaking study on emotional labor. However, literature specifically does not explore how race and gender influence how a woman hotel reception worker learns to negotiate difficult guest encounters. In the next section, women's learning on the job is discussed.

Women's Learning on the Job

Now that we know what a difficult guest is, we must address how women learn to negotiate the difficult guest encounter. What actions have women considered taking when handling such guests? If they have tried a tactic, has it been successful? Have they learned tactics by observing or speaking with others? Does their training give them the tools necessary to negotiate successfully the encounter so that the guest remains satisfied?

First, HRD practitioners should consider if job-training programs meet the unique needs of women workers. As mentioned earlier, most training programs focus on *how* to perform the job. Across many industries customer service training is similar having only a few deviations from this customer service industry standard: (1) *Greet* the customer in a friendly engaging tone, (2) *Listen* to the customer concern, (3) *Repeat back* to the customer their concern, (4) *Offer a solution* to their problem, and (5) *Cheerfully close* the encounter so that the customer will want to return to

the business in the future. How to handle difficult customers is often discussed only in terms of customer types and how to respond to their concerns. Consistently the preferred customer encounter is wrapped in the philosophy that the customer is always right.

Training programs do not always address the specific needs of women. Rarely if ever is the personally offensive customer discussed, such as one who is sexually harassing or racially discriminating. Employees are expected to display professionalism at all times that prevails upon the encounter. Additionally, women's issues of balancing life and work responsibilities are not discussed. "Typical job training programs may not address issues of combining family and work, sexual harassment, or discrimination, which can serve as additional barriers to women's job performance, work satisfaction and career advancement" (Hayes, 2002, p. 36). It may be a case of omission or simply lack of awareness that some workplace training programs neglect the issues women face in working relationships and customer encounters.

This leaves women to learn how to display professionalism in the face of an offensive customer on their own. They may try any one of the coping tactics that Reynolds and Harris (2006) identified in their study, such as ignoring the customer. If they are fortunate enough to have a good example in the workplace of how to handle the difficult customer with dignity, they may model their behavior after a co-worker. Conversely, they may not have a good model to follow or find support from their manager if they should ask for help. Otherwise, they may be left on their own to learn and experiment on the job for the best method of assuming a professional stance in the difficult customer encounter.

There are multiple theories of learning styles to explain how employees learn on the job; only one will not elucidate how learning occurs (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Knowles (1980) introduced the concept of andragogy to adult education, which served to delineate that pedagogy

is inadequate for the adult learner. Dialogue in the adult education field during the 1970s and 1980s circled around pedagogy and andragogy. Pedagogy is a learning model which has been the model used for the educational system for education of children. The debate surrounded whether pedagogy or andragogy was the ideal model to describe adult learning. As Knowles summarized in his final column of the *Training and Development Journal* in August 1980, “The andragogical model does not replace the pedagogical model; it provides an alternative set of assumptions” (p. 49). Those assumptions are that adults (1) take responsibility for and self-direct their learning, (2) have life experiences they bring to the learning activity, (3) are interested in learning what they need to know to solve current problems, (4) learn best when learning is centered around life circumstances, and (5) motivation to learn is internal and self-fulfilling (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, 1980).

These assumptions indicate that adult learners are more readily stimulated to learn if the topic or subject is applicable to their immediate life situation. In order for this learning to occur, the context in which the learning takes place must be considered as “a physical and psychological climate conducive to learning” (Brookfield, 1986, p. 101). If an atmosphere is not conducive to learning resistance or hesitation to learn may serve to be a barrier to adult learning.

Feminist Pedagogy

As stated earlier, the specific training needs of women should be considered by organizations. Feminist theory offers some insight into the needs of women. The many different forms of feminist theory have one thing in common: to reveal and eradicate gender inequalities (Martin, 2003). Feminist theory holds that social, political, sexual, and intellectual oppression of women is part of human history and crosses many cultures. (Crotty, 1998). bell hooks (2000a) explains, “Exploited and oppressed groups of women are usually encouraged by those in power to

feel that their situation is hopeless, that they can do nothing to break the pattern of domination” (p. 27, 28).

Within feminist pedagogy theories, Tisdell (1998) describes three models, (1) *psychological models* that focus on the creating a safe atmosphere whereby women can find their voice and construct knowledge, (2) *structural models* in which politics, structures of power, and positionality are questioned, and (3) *poststructural feminist pedagogies* that confront the intersection of gender with race and class. Poststructural feminist pedagogies raise consciousness and deconstruct opposites such as white-black, heterosexual-homosexual, man-woman and theory-practice. This study is informed by poststructural feminist pedagogies as the intersection of gender, race, and class are challenged within the social structure of the hotel industry.

Within feminist pedagogy, scholars have also considered if there are unique characteristics of how women learn. Research on women’s ways of knowing offers insight into how women might learn to negotiate the difficult guest encounter. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) researched the way in which women learn. Research began in the late 1970’s and was first published in 1986. Belenky, et al. (1997) produced a landmark study in of women’s learning. The authors interviewed 135 women who were in college, had left college and women who had not attended college but participated in parenting classes. The research revealed five stages of learning common to women, each of which reflects how women graduate toward independent lives.

The first category of women learners is referred to as “Silence,” whereby women remain silent in relationship to authority. Typically the silent women were young with the least educational and economic advantage. Characteristically, silent women denied themselves

remaining dependent upon authorities for direction passively choosing to comply rather than to speak up. In fact they did not perceive themselves as having knowledge or opinions.

Second, women were found to be receivers of knowledge from others. This is different from silence in that they understand the words are a source of knowledge, even if the words are not their own. Consistently these women rely upon authority to tell them what is right or wrong. Even though they place a great deal of confidence in what others tell them still they lacked self-confidence to speak their own opinions.

Third, the women graduated to having subjective knowledge, demonstrating a growing trust in their own thoughts and beliefs. Women of this category were of multiple class, ethnic, age and educational status. They were autonomous and expressed independent thoughts. They had come to know that trusting their own intuition was self-preservation. They were their own source of authority.

Fourth, women graduated to procuring knowledge, or that of obtaining and communicating knowledge. Most often, this knowledge came from experience, not from an authority outside themselves. In addition, they had no longer a reliance exclusively on intuition but their own perception were draw from life lessons they had learned.

Finally, women had constructed knowledge; as such, they were creators of knowledge. They were critical thinkers. They understood that others, even themselves could be wrong about an issue at hand. They used their knowledge to protect themselves from authorities knowing that authorities could be wrong.

Women front-desk agents may learn through one of these paradigms. The woman may remain silent in response to the difficult guest keeping the experience to herself. Alternatively, as a coping strategy, she may listen to authority, her manager or another co-worker, for guidance on

how to respond to the guest. If she is more subjective, she may trust her intuition to say or do something appropriate in response to the difficult guest. If she obtains and communicates knowledge the woman might be assisting, others to negotiate the guest encounter based on her own experiences. Finally, if she is the creator of her own knowledge she may understand there is no right or wrong, correct or incorrect way to cope and respond to difficult guests.

Informal and Incidental Learning

The difficult guest encounter is the decisive moment for the worker. The guest holds the power; they have the “say so” about the nature of the encounter (Korczynski, 2002). At that moment, the service worker must interpret the experience and make a choice for how to handle the situation. How should she react or respond to either overt or covert difficult behavior? If she does not respond positively to sexual overtures, will the guest complain to her manager that she was rude to him?

The worker might observe co-workers or to ask a co-worker or manager to intervene in the encounter. Often the worker is not aware or conscious that learning is occurring. She is simply responding to the guest. The manner of her response may work for one guest but may not work for another. The worker must now deal with any intended or unintended consequences of their action, i.e., the reaction of the guest. The worker now learns about the effectiveness of the chosen solution. Perhaps their response to the guest did not achieve the desired result; now perhaps the guest is angry. Perhaps, however, the guest makes a turn-about and is apologetic for their behavior, albeit, they may not openly use those words. The worker now has new information to reflect upon for the next potentially difficult encounter.

This process of learning informally, as the incident occurs has been described by Marsick and Watkins’ (2001) seminal work on informal and incidental learning. Marsick and Watkins’

Informal and Incidental Learning Model as Adapted with Cseh (2001) identifies the context in which learning occurs as critical to the development of the learner. Marsick and Watkins describe six characteristics of incidental learning: “(1) It is integrated with daily routines; (2) It is triggered by an internal or external jolt; (3) It is not highly conscious; (4) It is haphazard and influenced by chance; (5) It is an inductive process of reflection and action; and (6) It is linked to learning of others” (p. 28). Incidental learning begins with a “trigger.” A trigger is the teachable moment for the worker. The teachable moment is not necessarily within the classroom experience but more often from an event on the job. “Our studies emphasize the unintentional, unanticipated learning that is often influenced or triggered by a chance encounter with a person or event or a need imposed upon the person by the organization” (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, p. 215).

The Learning Organization. Due to Marsick and Watkins’ research on informal and incidental learning, organizations are supporting informal learning in the workplace. This has led to research for how to create a learning organization (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). However, the focus is on the organization as a place where learning occurs rather than on the individual as learner (Ellinger, 2005). In an effort to determine what will encourage individual learning, Ellinger (2005) researched employees of an actual company she referred to as “Reinvented Itself Company,” a pseudonym selected to mask the identity of the organization. She interviewed a cross-section of employees to learn what organizational contextual factors influence informal learning. Her findings suggest that a “learning committed leadership and management” enhance informal learning in the workplace. She found seven sub-themes to describe learning committed leadership:

Managers and leaders who create informal learning opportunities, manager and leaders who serve as developers (coaches or mentors), managers and leaders who

visibly support and make space for learning, managers and leaders who encourage risk taking, managers and leaders who instill the importance of sharing knowledge an developing others, managers and leaders who give positive feedback and recognition, and managers and leaders who serve as role models. (Ellinger, 2005, p. 409)

As well, Yang, Watkins, and Marsick (2004) sought to develop and validate an instrument designed to measure dimensions of a learning organization. Nine dimensions he identified were that an organization must be committed to (1) continuous learning, (2) inquiry and dialogue, (team learning, (4) embedded system, (5) empowerment, (6) system connection, (7) leadership, (8) financial performance, and (9) knowledge performance. Yang, et al. have identified the elements that should characterize the culture of the organization, and Ellinger's (2005) findings provide significant information on how a program for informal and incidental learning should be designed to enhance individual learning. As Marsick and Watkins (1990) conclude learning is not only an individual activity, for informal and incidental learning to be most effective it "must take place with the collaboration and joint inquiry of others in the workplace who form a learning community" (p. 209).

Transformational Learning

If the difficult guest encounter is what contributes to informal and incidental learning, what must occur for the individual to respond differently the next time the incident occurs? The guest contact with a discriminating or harassing guest may not occur within a day's work, or even within a regular workweek, perhaps it occurs only 3-4 times a month. When it happens, the worker may not take the time to learn from the interaction and outcome. Even though it may only occur sporadically, the learning experience is enhanced by critical reflection upon the incident

because the worker can consider what to do next time (Kessels & Poell, 2004; Mezirow, 1991). Reflection requires “learning from mistakes, opinion sharing, challenging groupthink, asking for feedback, experimenting, knowledge sharing, and career awareness” (Kessels & Poell, 2004, pp. 148, 149). Mezirow proposes the individual process of critical reflection is more pivotal to learning than sharing our experiences with others. Critical reflection, says Mezirow (1990),

enables us to correct distortions in our beliefs and errors in problem solving.

Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built....Learning may be defined as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action. (p. 1)

Mezirow believes that the process of learning, like incidental learning, begins with a trigger or disorienting dilemma. Learning does not occur within the event, but because one is critically reflective (Mezirow, 1991). Critical reflection brings one to a transformation in perspective.

Mezirow has had many critics of his model for transformational learning. Brooks (2002) comments on Mezirow in that women’s transformative learning may be different than Mezirow suggests:

In particular, researchers have identified several weaknesses in the model: the idea that the catalyst for transformative learning is always a disorienting dilemma; the omission of historical and sociocultural context as important; the valuing of critical reflection as the most significant learning experience for adults; and the overemphasis on rationality as a way of knowing. (p. 141).

Feminists argue that women often lack control over their lives as do men. Women hold multiple roles within their lives. Women define themselves as relational to others often placing

the needs of others over their own. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) assert that women's transformational learning is connected to an increasing sense of self-knowledge. It has been suggested that transformative learning Tea Brooks' research in narrative cognition offers some potential insight into women's transformational learning. Women tend to share stories to make meaning. Narrative transformational learning fits this assertion. Narrative thinking is both a personal and social interaction. It is a result of personal story telling. The learner thinks in general and critical terms and involves sharing experiences to collaborate. Narrative transformational learning is moral in nature as past mistakes are critiqued and learned from. Finally, the narrative transformative process exercises mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical responses.

Situated Cognition

Situated cognition, sometimes referred to as a social learning theory or context based learning, may offer insight into how women learn to interact with guests during a difficult encounter. "Adult learning does not occur in a vacuum" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 22), likewise, situated cognition is learning which occurs within a social setting and activity whereby the tools, people and context intersect to provide learning opportunity (Hansman, 2001; Wilson, 1993). For the adult learner, situated cognition is a logical explanation for how learning occurs. Wilson (1993) says, "Adults no longer learn from experience, they learn in it, in situations and are acted upon by situations" (p. 75). Wilson also says that situated cognition cannot be simulated as in a classroom activity, rather situated cognition occurs during "authentic activity" (Wilson, 1993, p. 76). It is pragmatic to identify social learning within workplace learning, as social learning may occur during employee socialization and during on-the-job training (Gibson, 2004). Within the hospitality industry, on-the-job training is convenient for rapid acclimation of new employees (Jaszay & Dunk, 2003). When minority women encounter a discriminating or harassing guest

learning about how best to handle the situation may occur *within* the experience. Simulation of the direct encounter with the guest may not provide the same learning result. In many ways, each encounter is unique although the psychological and emotional result is the same for the worker (Worsfold & McCann, 2000).

There is also a social element to situated cognition or context based learning. The woman may discuss the guest encounter with another co-worker or manager learning how they might have handled a similar difficult encounter. This is called a community of practice, where learning is a shared experience with others. Shell and Black (1997) explain that there are three assumptions in the definition of a community of practice: 1) unnecessary competition is an inhibitor of learning; 2) the individuals may be more self-empowered as a result of the learning; and 3) knowledge and acquired meaning generally follow in an atmosphere of trust. This means that for the women at the front-desk to create a community of practice they should refrain from competition with one another, they can expect to grow in self-confidence as a result of the learning, and an atmosphere of trust between members enables growth of shared knowledge. Brown, Collins and Druid (1998) also identified traits shared by groups that function as a community of practice: 1) Shared problem solving through group synergy; 2) individuals display multiple roles within the group; 3) the group identifies and questions ineffective practices; and 4) individuals develop skills through collaborative work.

The women front-desk agents may work alone when interacting with a guest, but as a workgroup, they have shared experiences. These commonalities may promote learning by sharing stories of guest encounters, offering customer service strategies that were effective, and through observation of one another. A front office workforce functioning as a community of practice may empower individuals to deliver a confident presence when relating to difficult guests.

Summary

Adult learners need an atmosphere conducive to learning otherwise there may be resistance or hesitation to learn. Research suggests that there may be unique characteristics of how women learn. If women learn under unique circumstances, HRD practitioners should consider if job-training programs are palatable to women. Informal and incidental learning is known to occur when there is an event to trigger learning, such as the difficult guest encounter (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Transformational learning may occur when women are confronted with a difficult guest, which upon reflection; they may discern how to react the next time (Mezirow, 1990). Brooks (2002) suggests that women's transformative learning may be different than Mezirow suggests. Brooks believes women make meaning through the process of sharing stories, a phenomenon she calls narrative transformational learning. Social learning within workplace learning, or situated cognition, occurs during employee socialization and assimilation to the job. I suggest that each of these learning theories may have a part in describing the way women learn when confronted with a difficult guest.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study is to explore how women front-desk agents learn to negotiate difficult guest encounters with regard to race and gender. Hotel management contributes to the low-status of women by recruiting sexually attractive women for front-line reception jobs. Within this role some women may contend with many types of difficult guests, including sexual harassment. Black women or other women of color are vulnerable to both sexual harassment and racial discrimination.

There is no doubt from the few studies that have explored it, sexual harassment (Forseth, 2005; Gilbert, Guerrier, & Guy, 1998; Hughes & Tadic, 1998) and discrimination (Adib &

Guerrier, 2003; Deitch, Barsky, Butz, Cahn, Brief, & Bradley, 2003; Malveaux, 1999) occurs in the hotel workplace by guests. Organizations adhere to anti-discrimination and discrimination laws (Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964) to protect employees from a hostile work environment created between employees. Employers are also responsible to protect employees from harassment and discrimination from guests. Granted, not much can be done to change or restrain the guest unless the guest is threatening physical or bodily harm. Managers cannot control the ignorance of a guest but managers can have an awareness of such treatment on the part of guests toward employees.

Critical Human Resource Development may inform organizations to become a socially conscious organization to circumvent the incidents and impact of difficult guest behavior on women hotel reception workers. A socially conscious organization would recognize that guests might sexually harass or racially discriminate. A socially conscious organization would seek ways to deter difficult guest behavior through education of guests and employees. Such an organization would provide training to meet the unique needs of women of the hotel front office.

Studies have identified difficult customer behavior as “consumer misbehavior,” (Fullerton & Punj, 2004), “deviant customer behavior” (Reynolds & Harris, 2006), “inappropriate behavior,” (Strutton, Vitell, & Pelton, 1994), and “problem customer behavior” (Biner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994), and the “Jaycusomter” (Lovelock, 2001). Some research has been done to identify coping tactics workers learned. Worsford and McCann (2000) identified sexual harassment as a problem within the hotel industry. Racial discrimination was omitted as a factor in the studies researched.

Belenky, et al. (1997) produced a landmark study in to women’s way of learning. Brook’s (2002) research suggests that women learn through narrative transformation, through the telling of stories. Other adult learning theories that may explain how women learn to cope and address

difficult guests; these include informal and incidental learning, transformational learning and situated cognition. In consideration of these learning theories, together with a feminist pedagogical and critical HRD conceptual framework, I explored how women front-desk agents learn when confronted with a difficult guest.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how women of the hotel front office learn to negotiate difficult guest encounters with regard to race and gender. Research questions guiding this study were:

1. How did the nature of job status, race, and/or gender influence how the women negotiated the guest encounter?
2. How did learning occur?
3. How did their experiences influence tenure and job satisfaction?

Design of the Study

Research studies are informed by a philosophical framework or theoretical foundation. The philosophical framework determines the research methodology most suitable to the research question. This study was informed by two key foundations. First, Critical Feminist Research under girded this research as it addresses the positionality of women. Second, because the objective of the research questions was to investigate *how* women are impacted by difficult guest encounters, qualitative research is an approach and methodology was best suited to examine the research questions. The constant comparative method was the research tradition from which the data was analyzed. In this section, I review Critical Feminist Research and qualitative research.

Critical Feminist Research

Critical research, or research that intends to emancipate the oppressed, was the nucleus of this research study. Critical research calls for change. Words and concepts used in association

with critical research are “emancipatory,” “action research,” “dialectical,” “reflexive,” “socially-critical,” and “transformation through collective action” (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 134, 135). Lather (2004) describes critical research: “Doing critical inquiry means taking into account how our lives are mediated by systems of inequity such as classism, racism, sexism, and heterosexism” (p. 205).

Feminist theory holds that social, political, sexual, and intellectual oppression of women is part of human history and crosses many cultures (Crotty, 1998). bell hooks (2000a) explains, “Exploited and oppressed groups of women are usually encouraged by those in power to feel that their situation is hopeless, that they can do nothing to break the pattern of domination” (p. 27, 28). Feminist research gives voice to the silenced and exposes marginalization and invisibility (de Lauretis, 1986).

Critical research designs, in order to spotlight exploitation and oppression, have some common characteristics. Research methods encourage dialogue and interaction with the goal of creating equal space. Meaning is associated with power structures such as power and control. Respect for the experiences of the participant is paramount. Finally, critical research designs seek to allow the participant to speak on behalf of herself and not the researcher on her behalf (Lather, 2004).

The voices of the women of my study resonate in the ears of those who have forgotten that the person behind the counter is a dignified being. “Frontline employees are, after all...thinking, consuming adults themselves” (Zemke, 1991, p. 147). Core assumptions of this study were that women, due to their positionality, were regarded differently than men by male and female guests. As customer-facing employees, the guest perceived women front-desk agents as in a position of servitude. In this lesser status, the women were expected to remain silent, except to speak to the

guest in the provisioning of service. As women, they were targets for customer abuse, sexual harassment, and, women of color were targets for racial discrimination *and* sexual harassment. As emotional laborers, they were required to comply with the wishes of the guest, always considering the customer as right. Qualitative interview methodology allowed their voices to be heard and their feelings and perceptions about difficult guests were revealed.

At the heart of this study I expose a social phenomenon in the hotel industry and its impact of women front-desk agents. The problem for this study has originated from my personal experiences as a front-line worker where I felt exploited and oppressed. Sandlin (2004) states, “I often have found that critical research projects have their roots in personal experiences that cause researchers to question oppressive practices or taken-for-granted ideas” (p. 371). Hence, my rationale for choosing a critical feminist perspective was to spotlight the exploitation of women in the course of their workday. From the perspective of Critical HRD, I questioned management practices related to the training, management and protection of women of the hotel front office. Alvesson and Willmott (2003) explain, “In one sense, all of feminist theory is a critique of patriarchal forms of hegemony” (p. 69). Sandlin (2002) explains the difference between critical research and other types of qualitative study: “A critical study using qualitative methods differs from a mainstream qualitative study in that the research questions and data collection set out to make the workings of societal power visible” (p. 372). Next I will describe the nature of qualitative research.

Qualitative Research

The intent of this research study was to explore the perceptions of the participant. Quantitative research does not adequately answer my specific questions as it explores correlations

and comparisons. Merriam (2002) describes five characteristics of qualitative research that explain why qualitative research is the best fit for this study.

First, qualitative research methods allow the researcher to explore the experiences of the participant. The researcher is “interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed” (Merriam, 2002, p. 4). The qualitative interview is subjective and the data are a revelation of the participants’ world. I could only capture an understanding of the experiences of the woman front-desk agent by speaking directly with her. I needed to ask questions that encouraged the women to describe their feelings.

The second characteristic is “that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). Qualitative research is about the participants’ experiences not about how the researcher interprets those experiences. The researcher is only the instrument by which their story is told. Given this human element, the story can be told in a way that quantitative research cannot explain. The human element was also a potential limitation of the study in that it relied upon the discipline and wisdom of the researcher to remove her own experiences from the analysis. There was risk that as a novice researcher that I might extrapolate data that is less substitutive than the experienced researcher. I relied upon my major professor and methodologist to guide me in directions I did not consider to traverse.

The third characteristic of qualitative research is that “it primarily employs an inductive research strategy” (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). This means that I did not test an existing theory or hypothesis. In fact, there may not already be theory in existence to explain the phenomenon of the guest encounter with the woman front office worker. The inductive strategy builds theory which may later be tested.

Finally, “the product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive” (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). I did not present my data in the form of quantitative data. I presented stories woven together to form a larger story. This was achieved through qualitative interviewing. When carefully constructed the interview exposed depth of data.

Depth is achieved by going after context; dealing with the complexity of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting themes; and paying attention to the specifics of meanings, situations, and history. To get that depth, the researcher has to follow-up, asking more questions about what he or she initially heard. Research design and questioning must remain flexible to accommodate new information, to adapt the actual experiences people have had, and to adjust to unexpected situations. (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 35)

Sample

This research focused on women front office workers age 18 and older. Women of any race or ethnicity were welcome to participate in the study. Participants worked full-time or part-time in the position as a front office worker for a period of six months or longer to allow for the experience of difficult guest encounters. The study was limited to hotels rating as 3-AAA Diamonds and 3-Mobil Travel Guide Stars or higher because this category of hotel has a strong emphasis on guest satisfaction often basing their reputation on service quality.

Selection Method

As soon as the committee and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study I began recruiting participants using several methods. First, I made contact with some persons I knew in the hotel industry and faculty at local technical colleges. Because of these contacts I found two participants. Second, as I interviewed I asked if participants knew of someone else that

may wish to participate, using the “snowball” or chain method (Patton, 2002). I obtained the majority of my participants from one hotel in this manner. The first participant told her co-workers, explaining how the interview was conducted. Then calls began coming in from people of the hotel until I had interviewed nine women from the same hotel.

Third, as a method of obtaining some participants I canvassed hotels in the Southeastern region of the United States. No specific hotel chain was targeted. I located the hotel in which I interviewed nine women by canvassing the metropolitan area. It was my original intention to find a sample from various hotels. I was unable to achieve this criterion. I canvassed multiple hotels and locations. Many were unable to allow distribution of the recruitment flyer (*see Appendix A*) due to company “no solicitation” policies.

IRB required that I obtain written permission of on-site managers to recruit participants using the flyer at the hotels I canvassed. In the permission statement, (*see Appendix B*) I asked management to agree that they will not be informed of how many participants originated from their hotel. In addition, managers would not be privy to transcripts or the identity of the participants.

As it happened, the first hotel I went to I found the majority of my participants. I approached the front-desk manager with the recruitment flyer, explained the study, and requested that she obtain the permission of the general manager. The front-desk manager went to the general manager to request permission and to get the signature for permission to distribute the recruitment flyer. The general manager agreed to distribute the flyer in the women’s mail boxes. Participants from the hotel were eager to participate and urged others to participate.

I was not successful in obtaining permission from other hotels. The permission statement and the flyer were barriers. Managers did not want to sign the permission statement without

express permission from Human Resources. Some Human Resource departments reviewed my materials but politely declined. Because of no solicitation policies, most of the managers would not distribute the recruitment flyer to their employees.

Finally, I contacted hotel professional organizations to obtain permission to advertise through their organization for participants. I contacted at least one organization to determine the feasibility of this avenue. The organization denied access or information about membership for confidentiality reasons. I posted an announcement on a general discussion thread on the American Hotel & Lodging Association. There were over one hundred views of my posting during a period of five months, but no one contacted me.

I interviewed participants on their own time at a location of their choosing. The locations were restaurants where I purchased their meal or beverage. Because I had a microphone that blocked background noise, the sound quality of the interviews was clear. I had microphone problems on one interview. I had failed to turn the microphone on. The participant stayed to repeat the interview. Interestingly from that interview, I obtained some of the richest data about how the participant internalized guest encounters.

Participants matching the criterion who were willing to participate were interviewed. I gave each participant a \$25 American Express gift card and a jar of candy. This was not a requirement of the department or IRB, and I paid for the gift cards from my personal funds. Participants identified their race or ethnicity because the study had potential to reveal some racial discrimination by guests. Education level was requested to determine their career goals and ambitions. The participants reported their marital status and sexual orientation. Even though some of those factors are not readily identifiable by guests, it was thought that guests may make assumptions. The participants chose flower names as pseudonyms. Some were very specific in

their choice of flower indicating that the flower characteristics were a reflection of their personality. Below is a demographic chart of the participants.

Table 3.1: Participant Demographic

Participant Code Name	Hotel Ranking	Age	Marital Status	Sexual Orientation	Race or Ethnicity	Education	Time in hotel industry	Full/Part Time
Sunflower Girl	★ ★ ★ ★	27	Married	Heterosexual	Black Caribbean	Bachelors	3 yrs.	Full Time
Rose	★ ★ ★ ★	20	Single	Heterosexual	African American	High School	2 yrs.	Full Time
Gardenia	★ ★ ★ ★	37	Separated	Heterosexual	African American	Some College	12 yrs.	Full Time
Daisy	★ ★ ★ ★	29	Married	Heterosexual	African American	Bachelors	2 yrs.	Part Time
Lily	★ ★ ★ ★	29	Single	Heterosexual	African American	Some college	10 yrs.	Full Time
Lilac	★ ★ ★ ★	28	Single	Heterosexual	White	Bachelors	9 yrs	Full Time
Jasmine	★ ★ ★ ★	30	Single	Heterosexual	White European	Masters	4 yrs.	Full Time
Tea Rose	★ ★ ★ ★	30	Married	Heterosexual	White European	Masters	7 yrs.	Part Time
Wisteria	★ ★ ★	20	Single	Heterosexual	White	High School	6 mos.	Full Time
Iris	★ ★ ★ ★	33	Single	Heterosexual	White European	Some College	2 yrs	Full Time

Data Saturation

Qualitative research does not specify sample size. Qualitative data should have breadth and depth. Breadth of data is accomplished by sampling a larger number of people to obtain information that demonstrates variance. Depth of data is achieved by using a smaller number of people to reveal rich information into a phenomenon. When redundancy of data emerges during the analysis of the data, the qualitative researcher can safely assume that saturation has been achieved and enough data has been collected. Redundancy of data is identified when little or no new information is obtained (Patton, 2002).

I will now describe the process that I experienced when interviewing to the point of saturation. I did not predetermine the number of participants except that I would interview as few

as eight and as many as twelve. I interviewed eleven participants. However, I was able to use only ten. The third participant I interviewed, Sweet Pea, contacted me five months after her interview to request that I destroy her interview recording and data. She informed me that her employer had found out that she had participated in the study and they were questioning her about it. We believe that the employer became aware because she had attempted to distribute my recruitment flyer to her co-workers. Possibly one of her co-workers showed the flyer to a manager and it became known that Sweet Pea participated in my research. She indicated to me that she was in fear of losing her job. As per her request, I destroyed all data stored on my hard drive and other data storage devices. While I did not use the data in contribution to the research, I cannot deny that the data shaped my thinking about the emergence of themes.

To determine that saturation has occurred, Ruona (2005) offers these thoughts about concluding the interview and data collection process:

The choice of when to stop your quest for understanding and meaning—when to finalize that coding system and complete your analysis—will be challenging. You must trust yourself and your process to make it when the time is right. (Ruona, 2005, p. 244)

I interviewed two to three women, then transcribed, and then coded. After the first and second interviews, I did not have a clear sense of the general themes. I interviewed more participants, went back to the previous data, and compared it to the new data. Preliminary analysis during data collection identified recurring themes. As the interviews progressed, each new participant gave information that unfolded the story.

Major themes began to emerge after the fifth or sixth interview. By the eighth interview, I knew what to expect from the participants. By the tenth, I was confident saturation had occurred.

With that, I felt I had reached saturation of data. I expected that to interview five more women would not have provided additional data.

I did choose to interview one person a second time. Gardenia had described in the first interview a guest encounter in which Gardenia believed the guest was passing judgment on Gardenia's appearance. Gardenia is a black woman. She has a gap between her two front teeth and gold dental work on the front teeth. Gardenia implied in her story that the guest, whom Gardenia had only spoken to on the phone, was surprised to see what she looked like when she met Gardenia in person. I could not discern if Gardenia believed the woman was reacting to her race or her dental work. Gardenia was not specific in her description. I realized that I could not and should not infer Gardenia's meaning. I arranged a second interview and learned Gardenia's true feelings. She also gave me more examples where she experienced some kind of discrimination from guests.

Data Collection

In the data collection process interview protocol is intended to guide the researcher. Methods of data collection are those that will serve to answer the research questions. I began by asking the participant to describe an encounter with a difficult guest. By beginning with this type of inquiry I will allowed the participant to call to mind an incident in which the customer was disrespectful by their own definition. I asked questions about how management supported, directed, and trained them to handle difficult guests.

Interview Questions

In this section, I will review the interview protocol used to conduct the study. An overview of questions is discussed and details about how the interview was conducted are reviewed. It is necessary to enter the interview process with clarity about questions to be asked

and how the interview is staged. Otherwise, there is room for error, fumbling, forgetting key questions, and unprofessional mistakes. With preparation, I was able to set the participant at ease and keep the discussion focused.

The standardized open interview uses an interview guide to structure the interview. In addition, the interview guide serves as an instrument to evaluate the validity of the research or for examination by the committee and the IRB. It outlines not only what is going to be asked but also “what is not going to be asked” (Patton, 2002, p. 347). I created an interview guide that I used as a tool for data collection (*see C*).

The design of the interview includes three different kinds of questions. *Main questions* are in direct alignment with the purpose of the study and the research questions. *Follow-up questions* encourage the participant to share richer data. Finally, *probes*, used in the moment, are used to glean additional data and serve as prompts for the interviewer.

The interview guide should direct conversation but not be so structured as to sound rigid or interrogative. There is a danger in preparing too many questions, as the interviewer may be tempted to rush through all of them in one interview. I began each interview with demographical questions pertinent to the study; including age, race, education, length of tenure in job, and if the participant is full-time or part-time. I constructed seven questions for the interview. A second interview was to be used if it is evident in the first interview that the participant wished to give further information. However, at the conclusion of the first interview it was clear that participants had shared all information necessary. Thus second interviews were not scheduled.

In the construction of all questions be they the *main*, *follow-up* or *probing* questions, asking *why* should be avoided. Asking *why* encourages the participant to make a judgment or rationalization about the event or even themselves. This may lead to the participant proselytizing

on the topic. In addition asking *why* questions may elicit a defensive stance on the part of the participant. “Although these questions may not be intended as antagonistic, they nonetheless can close down or inhibit interview subjects....On the other hand, if asked in response to these same statements, ‘How come?’ they may offer complete responses in a relaxed manner (Berg, 2004, p. 89).

The main questions according to Rubin and Rubin (2005) generally do not ask how a participant feels or thinks about a topic. Main questions should mirror the research questions. While my research questions are sound according to academic standards, most participants would not know what I was asking for if I simply asked one of my research questions. In addition, the vocabulary of the participants is essential in the wording of questions. For example, throughout this transcript I have used the word “customer” to refer to the person purchasing the goods or services. In the hotel industry customers are referred to as guests. I have structured my questions to use the word “guest” in reference to customers (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Given these guidelines for creating qualitative research questions I arrived at these questions:

1. Describe an incident that sticks out in your mind where have you experienced a difficult guest.
2. Who, if anyone, influenced your actions? How?
3. Describe the most important things you have learned from/about handling difficult guests.
4. Has the training you received been helpful?
5. What advice would you give a new person about handling difficult guests?
6. How do the challenges of difficult customers affect your view of this job?

7. Do you think this is a job you will do short-term or long-term? Why?

To construct follow-up questions it is helpful to utilize Patton's (2002) method of positioning questions about experience and behavior, opinion and values, feelings, knowledge, sensory, and background. Patton also suggests that one can ask the same question to probe for past, present or future behavior.

I used various probes to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences. A probe, when delivered in a cavalier manner may sound condescending or disarming. Probes typically deal with who, what, when, and how of the question at hand. Probes come in various forms. *Continuation* probes encourage the participant to continue talking about the subject. *Elaboration* probes ask for more detail. *Attention* probes signal to the participant that you are listening carefully. *Clarification* probes ask for a clear understanding of detail. *Steering* probes help lead the conversation back on track when it has strayed away from the topic. *Sequence* probes ask for a step-by-step account of an event. *Evidence* probes are helpful when conflicting information is attained from various sources; asking for evidence of the reason they view a situation in a certain way can validate the data. *Slant* probes help you determine the participant's point of view (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I wrote on of each probe type on my interview guide as a reminder for myself. Probes can also come in the form of nonverbal indicators, such as a nod of the head.

A significant part of a valid research study is in the treatment of the data, specifically what and how it is collected. I will now describe how I set up the interview for each participant. I began by telling them the interview would last only 30 to 45 minutes, indeed no interview lasted longer than 45 minutes. I explained the nature of the study, explained that they may withdraw at any time and obtain a signed statement of confidentiality. I worked to ease any intimidation or stress on the part of the participant by explaining the interview process, the placement of the microphone and

taught them how to turn the microphone off if they wished. I kept notes as I listened to responses. I maintained eye contact and positioned my body in an open stance. The interview was recorded using a digital recorder. Digital recordings were downloaded to a computer.

To protect the confidentiality of the participants I assigned a code name. The first participant suggested the name of Sunflower Girl. I decided after that interview to go with the theme of flower names as code names. Thus, participants chose flower names for themselves. Field notes and interview scripts associated with each participant were stored in a separate envelope, labeled with the participant code name. Institutional Review Board confidentiality statements with signatures were stored separate from the field and interview notes. Paper files and electronic files are now stored in my home safe under lock and key and will remain so for a period of five years, after which all will be destroyed.

Practice Interview

As practice I interviewed one person in the fall of 2006. She was a Black female employed at a local hotel. She was a full-time graduate student and a part-time employee working at the front office desk. The interview was about 40 minutes in length. The interview questions I asked at that time were focused strictly upon her experiences of sexual harassment and racial discrimination. While I would not presume to make assertions based on this data, there was evidence that sexual harassment and racial discrimination are common phenomena within the hotel industry.

Although I have not analyzed the data, the practice interview activity was a helpful exercise for me. I revealed my bias when I asked, "Is it usually a white male, or what is the race generally [of the guest]?" I was alarmed when I heard myself ask the question. I also learned that some of the questions were leading toward my bias that the difficult guest is always sexually

harassing or discriminating based on race. Of course, at that time, the problem statement for the current study had not come to fruition. This practice interview, thus, helped me to craft the current problem statement.

Of interest to me was that this participant reported that the sexual harassment happened more frequently than discrimination. More importantly, it was difficult for her to separate the two. The interviewee made several points that piqued my interest:

- 1) The guest would make sexual advances in the company of others, one in particular in front of his child.
- 2) That race was not a strong determinant in the guest encounter.
- 3) The male co-worker was shocked to observe the guest behavior.
- 4) The interviewee indicated that she perceived that she and other women were targets of sexual harassment because they were young college students.
- 5) That the power differential as a woman, as a receptionist, as a college student and being young were all perceived as factors influencing guest behavior.

Overall, the process served to shape the current interview guide. It forced me to remove my own biases when constructing questions. I also now understand the importance of allowing the participant to tell me what they consider to be a “difficult” guest, rather than to impose my interpretation of what a difficult guest is. Some participants may say a guest that yells is difficult, or one that is intoxicated. Gender or race may not be strong factors in the difficult guest encounter to some of my participants.

Data Analysis

The Constant Comparative Method

Creswell (1998) describes the Constant Comparative method as a zigzag where the researcher collects data, analyzes data, collects additional data, and analyzes the new data comparing it to the earlier data. The researcher is “constantly redesigning and reintegrating his theoretical notions as he reviews his material” (Glaser & Strass, 2006, p.101). Social scientists have a unique challenge of making sense of multiple variables. Qualitative researchers can use this method of comparing data sets to categorize the data to bring order. Convergence of causal conditions and causes allows for emergent themes when using the constant comparative method for data analysis (Ragin, 2005).

Transcription of the interviews began after the first interview. I transcribed all interviews without the assistance of another person. As I completed transcription, I began the coding process.

Analysis of qualitative data, I can now attest, can be an overwhelming activity. It took me several hours to transcript a 30 minute interview resulting in several pages of data. The challenge to the researcher is to find common threads, themes, and contradictions. Sentences and phrases are coded and cataloged.

Ruona’s (2005) method for *Analyzing Qualitative Data Using Microsoft Office Word 2002* will be utilized for the sorting and categorizing raw data. Dozens of researchers in the United States have used Ruona’s method, designed to be used for constant comparative data analysis. Ruona uses this method to walk the researcher through four stages of qualitative data analysis: “1) data preparation, 2) familiarization, 3) coding, and 4) generating meaning” (p. 251). Her method allows the researcher to accomplish data analysis efficiently and concisely. It allows the researcher to analyze and code data from each participant, merge it with it with data of other

participants, sort by multiple variables, and search for keywords and codes. Especially important to me I will not have a large learning curve or expense of unfamiliar data analysis software as Microsoft® Word is utilized to sort the data. I will now discuss the four stages of qualitative analysis using Ruona's analysis method.

Stage One: Data Preparation. Ruona (2005) recommends that the transcriptionist type using italics to identify the participant words and plain text to identify the researcher's words. Then using the "Convert Text to Table" command, the raw data is organized in a table. I followed this process in the transcription of the interviews.

Stage Two: Familiarization. This stage allows for deep reflection of the data. The researcher should manage their time to allow for the deep reflection and familiarization necessary at this step. If this process is rushed, rich data may be overlooked. Familiarization with the data is accomplished by recording, either in written or voice recorded format, insights, and thoughts about the data. This may occur immediately after an interview or at any time thoughts about the data are realized. The researcher should also read the data carefully to reflect and familiarize oneself with participants' comments. At this stage, editing and spell check of the data is recommended. I found that transcribing the interviews myself gave me the familiarization necessary to proceed with coding and analysis.

Stage Three: Coding. In qualitative research themes can be created by using research-driven codes by looking to previous research to create of themes and codes or the researcher may use data-driven codes by looking to the data itself for emergent themes. Coding the data is essentially a process by which the data are reduced to create theory and categories are delimited and saturated. "Thus, the collected universe of data is first delimited and then, if necessary, carefully extended by a return to data collection according to the requirements of theoretical

sampling” (Glaser & Strauss, 2006, p. 112). Constant comparative data analysis uses three methods for coding. It begins with open coding, where categories and sub-categories created. Axial coding is where the interrelationships and interconnectedness of data are analyzed. Selective coding where a storyline is identified that connects the categories (Creswell, 1998).

Open coding begins by the identification of emergent themes within the data. I recognized similarities between the incidents described by the participants as I continued interviewing more participants. *Categories* will begin to evolve. These categories were labeled with a code. For example, one category I discovered was “acting” which I labeled with code 12000. Within these categories, I identified *subcategories*. For example, when one acts they might focus on “playing a role” or “acting like they “empathize with the guest.”

Axial coding uses the categories and subcategories to identify central phenomenon. Causal conditions that influence the phenomenon and strategies that result for the causal conditions are identified. The context and interventions that influence the strategies taken and the consequences of the strategies are mapped. For example, I angry guests that yelled as the central phenomenon. I looked for conditions (such as the unavailability of a desired room) that caused the customer to be angry. Then I identified strategies used by the woman to handle the angry guest (speaking softly to the guest). I looked at the context of the incident (the front-desk counter and the check-in process) and intervening conditions (other guests present) and the consequences of her strategy of speaking softly to the guest (the guest calmed down).

Selective coding ties are created when the axial codes are connected. In this process I compiled a storyline that the woman learned to negotiate the difficult guest encounter to calm the guest down by speaking softly when checking in a guest while other guests are nearby. I connected several stories together to draw this conclusion.

Stage Four: Merging Data to Generate Meaning. The purpose of this stage is to analyze the data across cases. Each analyzed participant data set will be merged into one larger document. Using the Table/Sort command in Microsoft® Word, the data can now be sorted by code, question number or participant number. This allows the researcher to view the data collectively and analyze the emergent themes across all cases. I found an emergent theme that angry guests yell in the presence of other guests at the check-in counter.

Critical Feminist Analysis

I said earlier in this chapter, that as a result of this study I intend for the women's voices to resonate in the ears of those who have forgotten that the person behind the counter is a dignified being. In the data analysis process I ensured their voices are heard by returning again and again to the data for clarification. Feminism is concerned with giving women "voice" and "space." Hayes (2002) explains three different meanings of the word voice:

First, the word *voice* can be used in a literal sense, to signify women's actual speech or speaking style; this use of the word, to mean *talk*, focuses on how women use spoken language in learning situations... Second, the word can be used in a metaphorical sense, to represent the expression of women's identity; this use of the word, to indicate *identity*, focuses on how women's identity is reflected in what they say... Third, the word can be used in a political sense, to reflect the power and influence that women have in a particular situation; this use of the word to mean *power*, emphasizes women's development of a consciousness of their collective identity and oppression as women, and of the means to challenge this oppression. (Hayes, 2002, p. 80)

To give women voice is to allow their words to be heard, their identity to be understood, and their power and influence to emancipate. Giving voice and space begins with interview techniques where I allowed time for the participant to formulate their responses, refrained from interruption or putting my words into their sentences. As I listened to the recordings I noted that I spoke sparingly and allowed the participant to speak as long as they wished. I was careful during transcription to include the uh's, um's and you know's as distracting as that can be in written speech. I also transcribed each interview myself. I am confident that I captured everything that was spoken. Giving voice depends upon thorough analysis and accurate reporting. During data analysis, I was careful not to manipulate the data to fit my assumptions. To do so would have been unethical, not to mention contrary to critical and feminist research.

While I did not employ a narrative interview structure, I asked my participants to tell me short stories about their experiences. Therefore, I looked to narrative researchers to gain insight on “giving voice” with some narrative data analysis techniques. There is more to the data than just the content. Riessman (1993) speaks from experience, “I recommend beginning with the structure of the narrative: How is it organized? Why does an informant develop her tale this way in conversation with this listener?”(p. 61). The interviewer should evaluate the data for a beginning, middle and an end. This is, in part, the storyline that selective coding of the constant comparative method will illuminate.

Story telling is intrinsic to feminist research. Storytelling plays a significant part in how women gain their voice and how women learn from themselves and others (Maher & Thompson-Tetreault, 2001). In the simple act of telling me their story the women commented on things they were learning about how they negotiate difficult guests. As women learn and grow they listen less to the voices of others and more to their own voices (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule,

1986). I kept these things in mind as I analyzed data to ensure that the women's voices were heard. This is especially important when women at the front-desk counter are to maintain a professional image and temperament at all times by not speaking out to the guest when he or she displays difficult behavior.

In summary, to remaining cognizant of the feminine voice was paramount as I analyzed the data. The constant comparative method and Ruona's (2005) qualitative analysis method facilitated my analysis and helped me to efficiently code, categorize, and sort the data. Throughout the entire process, I was concerned with the trustworthiness of the data. Next, I will describe how I will protect the validity and reliability of the data.

Trustworthiness of Data

Flanagan (1954) advises that the credibility of research rely upon the validity and reliability of the entire research process. He challenged me to accept the dual responsibility of reporting data accurately and to analyze the data without allowing my own interpretation to cloud my judgment. Ruona (2005) states that three key issues are important in regard to validity or trustworthiness of the data. These are, "1) internal validity or credibility, 2) consistency of the findings, and 3) external validity or transferability of the findings" (p. 247). I will attend to validity and consistency at each step of the research process. The artisanship of the research plan will determine its validity. "Validation comes to depend on the quality of craftsmanship during the investigation, continually checking, questioning, and theoretically interpreting the findings" (Kvale, 1996, p. 241).

Internal Validity

Validity begins with the appropriate conceptual framework applied to the research and interview questions that support the conceptual framework. I sought to protect the internal

validity of the data to circumvent bias in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data.

Internal validity attends to the degree to which the findings match reality. As researcher, did I report the findings as they really were, or did my own biases seep through? I made certain that my bias did not affect analysis of Gardenia's story by conducting a second interview.

To protect the internal validity of the data qualitative researchers go through the process of data collection, analysis, and then seek clarification through member checks. Member checks are used to clarify the interpretation of data. After the data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed I sent both the transcript and analysis to the participant for a member check. But because I provided both the transcription and my analysis it gave them opportunity to tell me if I interpreted their experience correctly. This allowed each participant to comment on or amend my interpretation, or change her response. As in the case of Gardenia, the member check and second interview served to purge my bias from the interpretation and brought depth, richness and reliability to the data (Merriam, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Consistency and Reliability

Consistency of the findings attends to the degree that the data concurs with previous researchers' data. Did I create a study whereby other researchers would agree that the data collected is dependable and accurate? The nature of qualitative research is different from quantitative research in that using the same data two separate researchers could potentially draw different conclusions. Constant comparative analysis is not designed to replicate the results exactly, "it is designed to allow, with discipline, for some of the vagueness and flexibility that aid the creative generation of theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 2006, p. 103).

One way to protect the consistency of data is to give careful attention to my notes throughout the process using the reflective process to develop sound categories and subcategories of data. I will

also follow IRB procedures for the collection and treatment of the data storing it properly. After I completed each transcription, I listened to the recording again making corrections and noting any omissions.

Field Notes. Immediately after each interview, I scheduled time to write field notes to record my immediate thoughts on paper. Second, I used my voice recorder to record my reflections and thoughts as they occurred. The data was on my mind frequently. Because I was not working during this time I was able to focus exclusively on the data without distractions. Analysis occurred throughout the process daily. Through reflection and journaling I was able to determine the major themes of the study.

External Validity

Finally, external validity refers to the degree to which the study may be replicated and the findings applied to other settings. For example, do the data results from the hotel study fit into other situations such as women working as waitresses in restaurants? External validity can be achieved through a valid account of the main findings of the study. Have I used my judgment to discern the limitations of the study correctly? Am I able to relate my findings to existing literature?

To attain generalizability and external validity the researcher should provide rich, thick descriptions so that the reader can potentially relate the data to other situations. This is achieved by providing a strong database so that the reader can determine transferability (Merriam, 2002). The rich data of qualitative research is what sets it apart from quantitative data. I achieved this by careful attention to the interview process, asking probing questions, so that participants had opportunity to reveal their thoughts and feelings. I also minimized interruptions of the participant during the interview. This ensured the capture of rich data.

Another technique to achieve external validity is to design the study to collect data from multi-sites. Unfortunately, I was not able to meet this criterion for the reasons stated previously. This was a clear limitation of the study that I did not anticipate.

Admittedly, my personal bias could potentially skew the study results. Although I am the principle investigator I will rely upon my major professor and methodologist and other committee members to confirm the findings of the study. In the next section, I will review my biases that I reflected upon throughout the research process.

Bias and Subjectivity

It is important for researchers to identify their biases before and during the data collection, analysis, and interpretation phases of research. As arduous as it is, this reflective process demands personal honesty and transparency. At times, it can be difficult to view oneself objectively because we all hold many biases of which we are not aware.

In qualitative research, it is impossible for the researcher to stand apart from the participant. Our personal histories, gender, social class, ethnicity, characteristics, beliefs, and biases influence every stage of the process. All of this affects what we hear, observe, and deem as important. (Ruona, 2005, p. 235)

Bracketing my personal experiences allowed me to acknowledge how I could influence the study with my perceptions. This is an important activity for the researcher especially in critical feminist research where the voice of the participant must be heard. As a white woman, I have no experiential understanding of how it feels to be the recipient of racial discrimination. I have worked to overcome this by listening carefully to women of color describe their experiences with racial discrimination. To minimize the influence of my own positionality and status I used interviewing techniques such as probing and careful analysis to unveil the participants' view of

themselves. I also presented myself in casual clothing during the interviews so as not to intimidate the women with class descriptors. Many of them were dressed more professionally than I was as they were either going home after work or to work after the interview.

As I gathered data, I guarded my assumptions about the meaning of the participant experience. Prior to the interviews I postulated that Black or Hispanic women may not be as open to me about their experiences as they would a woman of their own race and ethnic background. I did not perceive that the black women were holding information back from me in fear that I would not understand their experience. Of course I cannot be absolutely sure of that, however, I found that all the women extremely open about their experiences be they positive or negative. In the case of Gardenia, however, I believe that she was more open with me in the second interview than she was in the first as she described racial discrimination. I had gained her trust by initiating the second interview. She told me at the second interview that my first analysis “wasn’t complete.” In this case she believed that I didn’t interpret her meaning correctly. However, she did not initiate or offer this critique on her own. In general, other member checks did not reveal that I had misunderstood meaning or projected my own understanding into the analysis. I also relied upon the personal expertise of the African-American faculty of my committee to verify that I had not projected my limited understanding onto the data. She provided specific insights into the Gardenia interviews. Review of the data with my dissertation methodologist and committee chair also served as a check and balance for any bias interpretation.

As I have been writing about this topic for over a year now I have tapped into some strong feelings, assumptions and opinions I hold about the nature of the problem. I was challenged in many ways to bracket personal biases lest I influence the data collection and analysis processes. My experiences with difficult customers were not in the hospitality industry but in retail and in

some restaurant venues. I did have face-to-face contact with customers. I experienced irate, rude, and sexist customers. Men have sexually harassed me. When it happened to me, I had feelings of disgust, shame for myself, and anger at the man. My angry feelings have fueled my energy around this topic. In some previous unpublished personal writing, I have categorized sexual objectification as assault, confrontation, and violence. I had the assumption that the women I interviewed would also hold strong negative feelings about customer sexual harassment. I recognize that due to my experiences I assume sexual harassment is male on female, where as it could be female on male, male on male, or female on female.

In those situations where customers sexually harassed me, I complained to my manager. At the company for which I worked, management encouraged me to endure politely whatever type of customer behavior I might encounter. The rule that “the customer is always right” prevailed upon all interactions with customers. However more than just serving customers that may be offensive I was encouraged to flirt in return to increase sales. My manager’s response was doubly offensive to me. These experiences with management have influenced my standpoint about company policies regarding customer misbehavior. I believe that a company is responsible for creating a non-hostile work environment.

Unlike me, where I had grown weary of difficult guests, several women described their jobs in positive tones, many saying that they loved their jobs. I noted that participants with several years of experience in the hospitality industry described their work in positive terms. Because of my own bad experiences, I found I needed to guard myself during the interviews to project a neutral opinion. One participant, Tea Rose, struck a cord with me however. Tea Rose described her experience with guests as if they were personally attacking her. I related to her stories and descriptions of feeling wounded. In one story, Tea Rose was incensed that a wealthy guest would

be demanding about minor flaws in the room. As I listened to Tea Rose, I recalled an experience where I had served a demanding wealthy woman in which she was demeaning to me. I was impressed that Tea Rose managed to rise above the situation and still provide excellent service. I reflected on these things after Tea Roses' interview. I had admiration for her that she was so professional.

Throughout the interview process, which lasted for more than eight months, I reflected at length upon my previous experiences in customer service. I compared how the women resolved difficult encounters to my own experiences. They were more skilled in many ways than I had been. Through this process, I came to understand why I had chosen the topic of difficult customers. Upon reflection of my early career working in retail sales, I realized that I had internalized the belief that I had failed to handle difficult customers appropriately. They intimidated me. They were the reason I changed careers in my early thirties to something that took me away from direct customer contact. Difficult guests haunt me to this day. I can still remember the few that were especially difficult. This academic journey caused me to do serious soul searching about my own inability to handle confrontation. In the process, I have made peace with myself regarding my competence as a customer-facing employee. I did the best that I could at the time; I was a competent worker.

I was concerned that my social status as a middle class worker would be a barrier to my participants, but I did not find this to be so. This may have been because at the time of the interviews I was unemployed. I did not mention much personal information before, during, or after the interview. Although I had been at a similar socio-economic status as my participants at an earlier time in my life it was not a concern to the participants. My education as a PhD candidate was also not a barrier as I had anticipated. In fact, I found all the participants to be very

open and willing to share their experiences. They welcomed the opportunity to share their experience. Some told me it helped them to take time away from the job to talk about work with an objective person.

Chapter Summary

This study proposed to examine the ways women hotel front office workers learn to negotiate difficult guests in their day-to-day activities. Critical and feminist research illuminates the need for the women to speak about their experiences. Qualitative research methods allowed for the voice of participant to be heard through the data. The constant comparative method was employed during data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The primary data collection method was interviews. Follow-up questions and probes delved into richer data. Personal bias was held in check by remaining a reflective researcher throughout the process and holding to the discipline of field notes, reflections, member checks and a second interview as needed.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how women of the hotel front office learn to negotiate difficult guest encounters with regard to race and gender. Research questions guiding this study were:

1. How did the nature of job status, race and/or gender influence how the women negotiated the guest encounter?
2. How did learning occur?
3. How did their experiences influence tenure and job satisfaction?

Introduction

The findings were a wealth of the data because the women were open to sharing their experiences. The findings revealed the types of difficult guests the women encountered the consequences of guest behavior and how they learned to negotiate the difficult guests. In this chapter, I will describe all of these things allowing the women to speak, diminishing the influence of my own voice.

First, I will introduce you to the women of the study. Ten women graciously gave of their time and took an interest in my research. Each one eagerly shared her own perspective about difficult guests. While each approached the job of handling difficult guests in her own way, the majority generally wanted to satisfy each guest they encountered.

After I introduce you to the women, I will discuss the findings of the study, the main categories that emerged as common to the women's experiences. The stories of the women are

woven throughout the chapter as they relate to the categories and sub-categories of data. The women come to life as they tell their stories.

The Women of the Study

I collected data from ten women between the ages of twenty to thirty-seven yielding 107 pages of transcript data. Table 4.1 shows a demographic summary of the participants. They chose the names of flowers as pseudonyms, an idea that began with my first interviewee, Sunflower Girl. Five were women of color, five were Caucasian. Six were single, three were married and one was separated at the time of the interview. All were heterosexual. Education ranged from high school to master's degrees. Five had some formal education in the hospitality industry. Their work experience ranged from six months to twelve years in the hotel industry. Eight worked full-time, two worked part-time. Nine were from the same four-star hotel. One worked at a separate three-star hotel.

Because nine of the participants were from the same hotel, I learned primarily about one hotel's culture. The hotel policy was such that they expected the front-desk agent to do anything within their power to please the guest. The women were empowered to do almost anything such as rent a movie or order pizza for a disgruntled guest. Sometimes they would do extra things just to surprise a guest to make them feel special. Other hotels may not have such a liberal guest services policy. Also I was able to only gather data on one hotel's training practices. Other hotels may have used classroom training prior to assigning the women to the front-desk, whereas this hotel was more likely to use on-the-job training. This bias of one hotel may skew the data such that my analysis is only applicable to the hotel represented in this study.

Table 4.1: Participant Demographic

Participant Code Name	Hotel Ranking	Age	Marital Status	Sexual Orientation	Race or Ethnicity	Education	Time in hotel industry	Full/ Part Time
Sunflower Girl	★★★★	27	Married	Heterosexual	Black Caribbean	Bachelors	3 yrs.	Full Time
Rose	★★★★	20	Single	Heterosexual	African American	High School	2 yrs.	Full Time
Gardenia	★★★★	37	Separated	Heterosexual	African American	Some College	12 yrs.	Full Time
Daisy	★★★★	29	Married	Heterosexual	African American	Bachelors	2 yrs.	Part Time
Lily	★★★★	29	Single	Heterosexual	African American	Some college	10 yrs.	Full Time
Lilac	★★★★	28	Single	Heterosexual	White	Bachelors	9 yrs	Full Time
Jasmine	★★★★	30	Single	Heterosexual	White European	Masters	4 yrs.	Full Time
Tea Rose	★★★★	30	Married	Heterosexual	White European	Masters	7 yrs.	Part Time
Wisteria	★★★	20	Single	Heterosexual	White	High School	6 mos.	Full Time
Iris	★★★★	33	Single	Heterosexual	White European	Some College	2 yrs	Full Time

The women were grateful for the opportunity to be interviewed saying that they never had the opportunity to just talk about work with others. They appreciated that I was an outsider not affiliated with the hotel. Because the majority were from the same hotel, they talked to one another about participating in the interview, encouraging their friends to participate. I suspect there were several conversations between the women at the work place about the interview process. Thus as researcher, I influenced the environment by facilitating conversation about difficult guests. In the process of being interviewed they told me they learned some new things about themselves.

The women varied in their experiences. Some were not intimidated by an angry guest seizing the opportunity to “turn the guest around” to have a pleasant experience at their hotel. Others were so intimidated that they perceived each difficult guest encounter as a personal

affront. Most were somewhere in the middle, having both good days and bad. I will introduce them to you in the same order as I met them.

Sunflower Girl

My first participant was Sunflower Girl. She described herself as Black Caribbean. She mentioned in her interview that she had also lived in the Netherlands. She was married, heterosexual and a mother of a young child. Sunflower Girl was twenty-seven years old and had a bachelor's degree with hospitality as her major. She had been in the hotel industry three years and worked full-time at a four-star hotel. She was very eager to participate in the study and encouraged many of her co-workers to meet with me. She presented herself professionally in a quiet manner. While she had chosen the hospitality industry as a career, she had days when she questioned her decision. At the time of the interview Sunflower Girl wished for a job transfer saying that the front-desk was not her passion.

There were times when Sunflower Girl described herself as being timid and shy and if the customer saw that within her, they escalated their behavior. If she presented herself as confident, self-controlled and focused the guest calmed down. She altered her performance after received constructive criticism from her manager during a performance review. She sought the advice of coworkers, followed the good example of other coworkers, and benefited from the training she received. She described self-resolve: A personal determination to improve interactions with the guests. In this process, she understood that she could determine the outcome of the encounter. She could remain calm, focused, and purposeful in her speech, which caused the guest to calm down. She knew that if she argued with the guest it would make things worse. She was professional in that she sought for ways to resolve the guest problem to make them happy. She was in many ways

an ideal employee. She had grown the within her job. She had learned to think of solutions on her own and had confidence in the solutions she presented to the guest.

Rose

Rose was one of the younger women of the study, age twenty at the time of the interview. She was African American, single, heterosexual and had a high school education. She had worked in the hotel industry for two years full-time at a four star hotel.

Rose displayed professionalism on the job but harbored some grievances with the management of her hotel. She admitted to having an “attitude” at times and expressed many times that she was not particularly happy in the job. For example, the compensation structure had recently changed diminishing the amount she could earn when up-selling guests to higher priced rooms. Rose was very disgruntled about the change. She said that she is only staying on the job because she did not have another job. Rose talked about angry guests. She felt frustration that she could not always meet guest needs. It was frustrating to her if the problem was not her fault to begin with, managers are not there to support her, or she had to figure out how to handle guest on her own.

Gardenia

Gardenia was the eldest participant I interviewed at age thirty-seven. An African American, heterosexual, her marital status was separated. Gardenia had taken some college courses, had been in the hotel industry for twelve years and worked full-time at a four-star hotel. Gardenia began her career in the hotel as a housekeeper and had endured several hotel chain mergers. She transferred from a New Orleans hotel to her current hotel of the same chain when Katrina hit her city. She was mentored by a male manager several years ago who helped her transition from housekeeping to working at the front-desk. She admitted that few housekeepers

are able to make the job transition that she had made. She was a Talent Coach in the “Whatever-Whenever” department. A Talent Coach is a non-management role but a more senior person to help new employees learn the job. The “Whatever-Whatever” department was a specialized group that attended to special guest requests. Despite her past career growth Gardenia felt she was being blocked to receive promotion to management. She attributed this to her appearance. Gardenia had gold dental work on her front teeth and there was a gap between the two front teeth. Gardenia had been encouraged by management to repair her teeth to remove the gold dental work. Gardenia made the decision to have gold dental work at the age of 15 when it was the style at the time. Now she regretted the decision to have gold dental work because it has hindered her career growth.

Gardenia possessed a positive attitude that seemed to come natural for her. She was a loyal employee, generally content in the job, saying that she considered the hotel industry to be a career. Generally, Gardenia enjoyed gratifying relationships with guests as she sought to build enduring relationships in hope that guests would return to the hotel. She said, “I’ve had some guests they’re the sweetest people. They come back all the time because of me.” She found satisfaction in making her guests happy, “I look at it as win-win because if they’re happy it makes me happy.”

Daisy

Daisy worked part-time at a four-star hotel. She had two years experience in the hotel industry. Daisy held a bachelor’s degree but it was not in the hospitality industry. Daisy was twenty-nine, heterosexual, married and African-American. Daisy’s work attitude was average; she had good and bad experiences with guests. She enjoyed building relationships with the guests; one had sent her flowers in gratitude of her service. While those were the most rewarding aspects

of the job, a difficult guest encounter could almost ruin it, she said. After two years, Daisy was thinking of a career move. For nearly two years, she worked full-time but at the time of the interview had dropped her hours to part-time to spend more time with her small child at home.

She expressed that her greatest learning occurred through experience. Training could not prepare her for the realities of the job. She mentioned that not much was discussed about handling difficult guests in training. It was an eye-opening experience for her once she got on the job. She learned through coaching but that was not the primary way she learned.

She concluded by saying that difficult guests were just a part of the job—she meant that not in a negative way—only that difficult guests are a part of the package. She found the picky guests to be the most trying for her to deal with. In particular, it was stressful for her to deal with customer complaints about issues for which she had no control to fix.

Lily

Lily was an extraordinary person. She exemplified good customer service in nearly every guest encounter. She possessed an attitude that few people can imitate. Lily was twenty-nine, heterosexual, and single. She was an African-American. She had some college but ten years experience in the hotel industry. She worked full-time in a supervisory role as a Talent Coach.

Lily carried herself with style and grace. She made a stunning impression when she entered a room. She had a positive persona that she brought to her job. She refused to let any difficult guest get the better of her. Lily considered it a challenge, when she encountered a difficult guest, to turn them around, saying, “Everyone has a breaking point.” What this meant to her was that she could kill them with kindness, apologize, speak in a lower tone and bring the guest anxiety down. She believed in the work she did and always sought to exceed guest expectations. I don’t believe she has had a difficult guest encounter end badly because she worked

so hard to soothe and relieve the guest of stress. She did not take encounters personally, she said that one should establish a “boundary” so that guests could not personally offend. Lily enjoyed her career and aspired to own a hotel some day.

Lilac

Lilac was single, twenty-eight, and heterosexual. She was Caucasian. Lilac held a bachelor’s degree in hospitality. She had been in the hotel industry for nine years and worked full-time. Lilac was no longer fully satisfied in her job. At the time of the interview, Lilac was not working at the front-desk but had transferred to concierge where guest encounters were less frequent. Lilac was somewhat timid in her demeanor with guests. She believed that guests “walk all over” her, and sometimes made her look stupid.

When asked if difficult guest encounters affected the way she viewed the job, Lilac said she wanted to get away from the problem guests so much so that she asked to work in concierge where guest encounters were less stressful. She identified the workload at the front-desk as stressful. Lack of management support was also a factor in how she felt about the job. She was aware of this personal weakness and seemed unable to overcome it.

It was disconcerting to Lilac that she was not encouraged by management to build her skills for advancement. She had worked at various hotels and the jobs were always entry-level jobs. She asked about going to management training but was not given the opportunity to attend. Consequently, she had come to the realization that the hotel industry might not be a long-term career.

Jasmine

Jasmine was single, heterosexual and thirty years old. She was White European and spoke with a European accent. Jasmine held a master’s degree in International Tourism. She had worked

in the hotel industry four years but began her career several years ago as a Tourist Agent. She worked full-time at a four-star hotel. Jasmine had a professional demeanor with her guests. She found satisfaction in making her guests feel happy. For her, the hotel industry was a long-term career.

Jasmine did not feel that the training was especially helpful for learning about guest relations. The content was about communication techniques but it was not designed for the front-desk. She said she learned the most through experimentation and repetition.

Though Jasmine had worked at her hotel four years, she had been in the tourism industry for more than 10 years. She found due to recent tourism industry changes a move from tourism to hospitality was necessary. Even though at times the job was stressful to her, she still enjoyed the job because of the professional challenges.

Tea Rose

Tea Rose was heterosexual, married and had a small child. She was White European and had a distinct European accent. Her educational background was a master's in International Tourism. She had worked in the hotel industry for seven years, four of those years at a four-star hotel. The first two years Tea Rose worked at the front-desk. She expressed strongly that she hated the job at the front-desk saying that difficult guest encounters affected her emotionally. She said she felt like she was a punching bag for the guests. Encounters with difficult guests caused Tea Rose to feel wounded. Using the imagery of a cake, she said that she was like a cake; each guest takes a piece of cake from her until it is all gone. Guests take a part of her with them until there is nothing left. She grew exhausted from handling difficult guests.

When Tea Rose began the job she had enthusiasm about the job. Slowly she lost the strength and will to continue in the job. It became so stressful she requested a job transfer to

another department with less customer contact. She was one of the few I found that had such strong conflicting feelings about the job. On one hand, she liked guest contact and the power she had to go out of her way to make guests happy. On the other, she was too stressed to continue in the job. Curiously, even with this feeling about the front-desk, in the future she desired to own a small hotel in Europe.

Wisteria

Wisteria is single, heterosexual and in a significant relationship. At age twenty, she is still living at home with her parents. She had worked at a three-star hotel for six months at the time of the interview. She had a high school education but was enrolled at a local technical college studying hospitality management. She was Caucasian and had lived in the Southeast all of her life. She enjoyed her full-time job at the hotel. She aspired to work in a department that handled special events such as weddings.

The guests that she found difficult were those that were angry, yelling, demeaning, and critical of her. Sometimes guests made comments that were of a personal nature; because she was a woman or because she was young, implying that she was too inexperienced to perform the job. When guests yelled at Wisteria, she froze, unable to think of a response. Wisteria did not receive formal training when she began the job. Everything she learned, she learned while performing the job. Wisteria described feeling that she was just thrown on the job.

Iris

Finally, Iris was thirty-three working full-time at a four-star hotel. Iris was single and heterosexual. She was White European and had a heavy European accent. She had some college and had worked in the hotel industry for two years, all at the same hotel. She worked full-time at the front-desk where she sometimes both answered phones and greeted guests at the desk. She

enjoyed the customer contact with her job though she had some personally offensive guests to deal with. She was emotionally hurt by personal remarks made toward her, specifically about her foreign accent.

Iris verbalized the dilemma the agent had in serving the guest and working for the goals for the hotel. Guest satisfaction was paramount, over the emotional well-being of the front-desk agent. She described how her manager did not defend her character when the guest complained about her. Iris believed that her job would be easier if her managers were supportive. Specifically she believed that the front-desk was understaffed which had a direct negative impact on customer satisfaction.

Iris confirmed that learning occurs through practice. She was critical of the training, saying that it did not cover how to handle difficult guests and she was ill prepared for the mechanics of the check-in, checkout process.

Sweet Pea

I interviewed an eleventh participant, Sweet Pea. She was actually the third participant of my research. Sweet Pea was referred to me by a professional in the hospitality industry. She worked at a five-diamond hotel; she was the only participant I interviewed from that hotel. Six months after the interview she called to withdraw from the study; she requested that all data be destroyed. Management at her hotel learned that she had participated in the study. Her managers were highly critical of her decision to participate. Sweet Pea felt her job was threatened. She and I believed that her manager discovered that Sweet Pea was a participant when she volunteered to distribute the research recruitment flyer to some of her co-workers. As per Sweet Pea's request, all data was destroyed and this action was confirmed in a letter to Sweet Pea.

Summary

The study participants painted a vivid picture of the challenges of negotiating difficult guests at the front-desk. They ranged in job satisfaction from loving the job to hating it. Some never allowed a difficult guest to get the better of them; others had good days and bad. They learned through experiences, observation, mentoring, and self-reflection. Overall, as a group, they desired to give the guest the best experience possible at their hotel. Most found satisfaction in the relationships they were able to build with guests. Next, I will describe the research findings; the categories and sub-categories, which reveal the richness of the data.

Findings

Four main research categories emerged from the data. These were (1) *managing and coping with negative guest behavior*, (2) *manifestations of emotion work*, (3) *nature of learning* and (4) *impact on women's career development*. Table 4.2 provides a description of the findings. Subcategories of the main categories are itemized and defined.

Table 4.2: Summary of Findings

Category	Sub-Category	Description
1. Managing and coping with negative guest behavior	a) Guest Anger	Verbal anger, physical anger, threatens safety.
	b) Discriminating Factors	Customer response to agent based on job status, race/ethnicity or gender.
	c) Gender-related guest interaction	Discrimination based on gender, sexual harassment.
	d) Administrative Complaints	Billing, operations and systems issues.
	e) Jaycustomers, Freeloaders & Picky Guests	Trying to get things for free, stealing, excessive complaints.
2. Manifestations of emotion work	a) Depersonalization	Surface acting, deep acting.
	b) Internal conflict	Institutionalized emotional labor.
	c) Personalization	Emotional dissonance or emotional deviance.
3. Nature of learning	a) Training Classes or On-Job-Training	Training provided either during an initial training period or as continuation training.
	b) Informal and Incidental Learning	Multiple experiences and practice, trial and error
	c) Self-directed learning	Books, videos, self reflection.
	d) Learn from others	Coaching, mentoring, observation and feedback from co-workers.
	e) Teaching others how to do emotion work	Share experiences learned through mistakes.
4. Impact on women's career development	a) Job satisfaction	Generally find the job satisfactory.
	b) Job dissatisfaction	Contemplate quitting, transfer to new job.

Guest behavior was the catalyst for learning. The woman responded to the guest behavior, whether it was positive or negative. These behaviors may include but were not limited to anger, discrimination, administrative complaints, or customers with excessive complaints.

The consequence of the guest behavior was that the women experienced some type of emotional reaction or level of job satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The women's emotional responses ranged from depersonalization of the encounter, to internal conflict between felt feelings and the job requirements, or to personalization of the guest encounter. All of these feelings were experienced on a continuum and were not exclusive to one person. For example, while one woman could find it easy to depersonalize most difficult guest encounters, she could on another day or with another customer experience internal conflict or personalization. Other consequences of the guest behavior were either a general sense of job satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The women may consider the hotel industry a career or come to the realization that the job was not suitable for her.

The nature of the women's learning occurred through various avenues as a result of the guest-agent encounter. The women may learn from training courses or on the job training provided by the hotel. Frequently the women learned by means of informal and incidental learning, experience, and trial and error. The women learned from others, through coaching, mentoring, observation of others, and feedback from co-workers. The women also learned by reflection upon the events as they occurred and from some self-directed study. Having learned from personal experiences the women began to teach others techniques for emotion work. Learning from each experience transferred to the next guest encounter as the women continued to practice techniques that were successful. Over time, maybe weeks or months, the women gained competency in negotiating difficult guest encounters.

Next, I will describe guest behaviors that the women described as difficult for them. I did not define what a characteristics defined a difficult guest; I allowed their stories to unfold the nature of guest behavior. This is not a conclusive list of guest behavior that may be displayed in the hotel industry, but are those that the women described to me. I will also describe how guest behavior influenced the women in terms of the emotional labor required to perform the job and the impact of guest behavior on job satisfaction.

Managing and Coping with Guest Behavior

Learning begins with the guest's displayed behavior. Whether positive or negative in nature, the women were required to respond to the guest in a consistent, controlled, and professional manner. During the interview, the researcher did not provide a definition of what constitutes a difficult guest. Instead, I left the nature of a difficult guest to emerge as the women described their encounters. Table 4.3 itemizes the various types of guest behavior the women experienced.

Table 4.3 Findings Regarding Managing and Coping with Guest Behavior

Category	Sub-Category	Description
1. Managing and coping with negative guest behavior	a) Guest Anger	Verbal anger, physical anger, threatens safety.
	b) Discriminating Factors	Customer response to agent based on job status, race/ethnicity or gender.
	c) Gender-related guest interaction	Discrimination based on gender, sexual harassment.
	d) Administrative Complaints	Billing, operations and systems issues.
	e) Jaycustomers, Freeloaders & Picky Guests	Trying to get things for free, stealing, excessive complaints.

The nature of guest problems was varied. Most often, the guest displayed anger, either verbally or with physical actions. Physical actions included guests throwing items at the woman

or threatening the woman's safety by encroaching on her physical space. Some guests sought to intimidate the women by use of discrimination based upon job status, race or ethnicity, age or gender. Many complaints originated from administrative problems such as billing issues or operational issues like faulty air-conditioning. The final type of guest behavior is what Lovelock (2001) called the "Jaycustomer"; guests that tried to get things free, who stole from the hotel or simply had excessive complaints.

The role of front-desk agent is service oriented. This automatically places women working at the front-desk in a lesser status. The positionality of the women as the front-desk agent can be likened to that of a servant. They must consider the needs of the guest as more important than their own. If a guest is demeaning, they must overlook the guest's attitude and project a positive attitude. If the guest is yelling, they must speak in a professional tone. If the guest is particular, or "picky," the front-desk agent should accommodate their needs. Rarely did the women report speaking up to the guest about their behavior, though on occasions it was acceptable to remind the guest that they expected to be spoken to in a respectful tone.

Guest Anger. A guest who yelled out his or her anger was the most common negative guest behavior described by participants. Guest anger caused the most discomfort for the women. They described the guests as inconsolable and difficult to calm down. Some guests, as Rose described it, "will react to just about anything." Sunflower Girl said that, "Some guests were very upset and might not return. I see some guests who said they would never come back to this hotel very, very, very upset." A male guest whose room was no longer available because he arrived a day later than the day he had originally reserved it lashed out on Lily.

And he just went off, like, he just went irate, he was yelling and screaming. I never had a guest, like, scream that much in my face before... He stood at the desk.

Screamin', hollerin', cussin', fussin', he threw a tantrum.

Hurried guests were common. Daisy said, "There was one, um...he came into the hotel to start the check-in process...He was very agitated, rushing us." Lily also had a memorable guest that had left her wallet in the cab she arrived in, realizing it as the cab drove away:

And on top of that, she got out [of the cab] screaming and hollerin' she realized that she had left her wallet. She was hollerin' and screamin' at me, she was hollerin' and screamin' at the bellman. She was irate! Not that we had done anything, but she had no one else to lash out at. The cab driver had just pulled off with her wallet with all this money in it, her credit cards, all her information.

What's she gonna do? She started crying.

Soothing the guests became the responsibility of the women. Lily spent four hours of her time with the woman that lost her wallet, just trying to help her and calm her down. With this responsibility came the burden of bearing the guest's anger. Sunflower Girl found it distressing to take the anger, yelling and cursing about something that was not her fault. She said it was hard *not* to take it personally. She described feeling frozen and intimidated. Guests that yelled at Wisteria would cause her to freeze, unable to think of a response. She described the feelings saying that she felt like withdrawing, as a dog would cower in a corner when being attacked. Wisteria lost a sense of herself when guests yelled at her.

I get really like red-faced, you can obviously tell that I'm unsure what to say....when people are yelling at me I don't do well. I'm kind of like a dog and I will kinda like bring myself in...I kinda lose my personality, my fun personality, and then I get really serious, and its...I don't like being cursed at. So I kinda forget what I'm doing, I kind of go to another place...I'm like, please stop yelling at me,

blah, blah, blah...cause I'm not used to that environment.... you forget what step goes next. It's like you're nervous and shaky legs...you just forget everything.

If the guest did not get the result they expected from the front-desk agent they would ask to speak to a manager. The women described the guests as demanding and demeaning when they asked for a manager. For example, Sunflower Girl described a guest, "He said, 'No, I want to see your manager right away, blah, blah, blah, cause you need reverse it right now!'" Gardenia's guest was demanding to speak to the manager to bully her to do something for him.

The General Manager at the time, he would call his [the manager's] name all the sudden and say "well I'm going call him and I'm going to tell him you won't do this."... "And you're gonna get him. I'm going to tell him you guys are a bunch of incompetent so-and-so's!"

Wisteria believed that when guests asked for her manager, they were doing so because they believed she was not capable of handling the issue herself. However, they seemed to accept the manager's explanation even if it was the same as they one Wisteria gave guest.

And people always like to ask, "Where's your manager?" Like I can't handle it myself. So it's like, so people have to hear it from a manager. You see what I mean? They have to hear it from some other person. 'Cause I'm wrong, you know.

However, the women worried most when a guest contacted corporate. Those situations made them feel helpless. They knew that when their manager found out about the problem their manager would not be happy. Lily explained:

Yeah. Not per say the management at the hotel, 'cause the management at the hotel should have your back I would think. But corporate, um, it's just different. They're not there, like, all they see is the complaint; you know... corporate gets letters all the

time with complaints about their stay. So, all they see is the complaint they don't see the situation and it falls back onto us. And then our management is like, well, "Why did this happen?" Yeah...so it's kinda like a ladder always going up and down.

Another incident Lily described caused her to feel her safety was threatened. A man got so angry because the hotel was sold out of rooms that he came around behind the desk as if to threaten or harm her.

He threw his stuff, on that desk, came to, came to the desk where I was. At the time we didn't have any kind of door to close off the guests, so if the guest wanted to walk in behind the desk they could. He threw a tantrum, was screamin', hollerin', cussin', and fussin'. He proceeded to come behind the desk at me. In the nick of time the general manager of the hotel happened to walk up with another colleague of mine while this was happening. I was so nervous and scared. And he was coming up saying I better get him a room. At this time I didn't know what to do, I was really nervous. I was looking for something, I didn't know if I had to defend myself. The general manager walked up and he told him not only would he have somewhere to stay tonight, if he came behind that desk he would have a cot with 3 meals.

After her manager intervened, she was able to focus on solving the man's problem. She called various hotels and eventually found him a room. She was able to calm him down, he apologized to her and came back to her hotel a day later to apologize again and bring a gift.

He apologized. We started talking. Um, I was able to find him a room at a hotel.

He stayed at the hotel. He came back to my hotel. He left me a gracious gift. And

he was very, very apologetic about his actions and how he reacted over something that was his own fault... And that point on he wrote a letter to the company, he even explained his wrong doings.

That incident stood out in Lily's mind because she was able to transform a guest that could have potentially physically harmed her to an apologetic gentleman bearing gifts. As she told the story, I observed how confident she felt about the outcome of the situation.

Physical expression of anger happened to several of the women. The most common was throwing items on the desk. Gardenia and Sunflower Girl both had guests that threw their keys on the desk in anger. Rose and Lilac had guests that slammed their fist on the desk or tapped the desk with a pen in frustration. Some guests threw things at the women. A co-worker, as described by Rose and Gardenia, was spat on by an angry guest. Lilac was hit in the face with a crumpled piece of paper and was called a b---h by the guest.

Discriminating Factors. Sometimes the guest would make comments that were of a personal nature toward the women displaying discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or gender. The guests might draw attention to the fact that the front-desk agent was a woman, young, refer negatively to her race or ethnicity, her accent or her appearance. Sexual harassment was not unheard of by the women; no one said they had been sexually harassed, but perhaps a co-worker had.

The women described situations when guests referred negatively to their job status. Lilac said that she felt that guests saw her as laid back and that they tended to walk all over her. She believed that they saw her as an easy target for getting something free, indicating that she believed they saw her as "that girl behind the desk." The guest may have viewed her as having lesser status. This feeling of vulnerability troubled Lilac. She took their comments and attitude

personally saying that she felt the guests made her look stupid. Given that the women must consistently bow to the guest's request or whims, it is understandable that they would appear as an easy target to the guest. Behind the desk, while separated from the guest, as a person of lesser status the women are vulnerable to guests' personal attacks.

Gardenia experienced both overt and covert racial discrimination by guests. Her experiences were the most personally offensive encounters described by the participants. In addition to being African-American, she had a gap between her front teeth and gold dental work on those teeth. She had experienced disapproval from her management because of her dental work and believed that she would not be promoted to management because of it. In the following story, Gardenia believed that the guest was discriminating based on both race and her dental work:

There was a guest, and....it's so funny that...she just happened to be this white person. She didn't know who I was by talking to on the phone. She came to the desk and said "Can Gardenia please come to the desk I have something for her?" So they called me to the desk. So when I got there I came around from the desk....So I said "Yes, ma'am, what can I do for you?" She said, "Can I speak to Gardenia?" I said, "I'm Gardenia." She just looked at me; she stepped back and said "Oh?" I said, "Is there something I can do?" "Yes, I'm Ms. [Jones], and you're Gardenia?" I said "Yes Ma'am." "I just don't believe..." "Yes ma'am I'm Gardenia." So she was giving me a bottle of wine. And with the wine, it's like she didn't want to let it go [laughs]. She didn't want to let it go. So I was like, OK. So I didn't say anything. So she gave it to me, but that was that. She said, "Thank you, have a good day" and she walked out.

Gardenia felt at the time of the incident that the guest was surprised that the same person she had spoken to on the phone was African-American. Then as others began to tell her that her gold teeth gave a negative impression, she felt in retrospect that the woman was reacting to her dental work. She told me in a second interview that she believed the guest reacted to both race and her gold dental work.

Gardenia chose to have gold teeth when she was 15 years old when it was in fashion at the time. Now in her professional line of work the gold teeth were a hindrance. She told me that others associated gold teeth with the hip-hop culture, a culture of which she did not belong. She felt hurt when guests and management viewed her negatively because of her appearance. She had an impeccable work history and reputation as a customer service provider. But managers had told her that her gold teeth, unless they were fixed, would keep her forever in a non-management role. Her feelings were hurt because of this attitude shared by management—especially her own managers that knew her well. When people heard her on the phone, she was not perceived as black. She presented a conundrum for the public; her gracious personality belied the persona her physical appearance represented to others. The constant negative reaction to her appearance, especially by her managers, had an impact upon her performance, altering her personality from outgoing to withdrawn.

In a separate incident, Gardenia experienced overt racial discrimination from a guest. This guest encounter was debilitating to Gardenia. Management of the hotel had received a warning from another hotel of the same chain that a certain guest was harassing to employees, suggesting that management should not allow the guest to stay in the hotel. Gardenia's hotel management decided not to allow the woman to check in to the hotel and sent out an email with orders not to give the guest a reservation. When the woman arrived at the hotel Gardenia was in the back office

so another co-worker greeted the guest. The woman was loud, rude and drunk. She was yelling at the front-desk agent asking why she could not check into the hotel. Gardenia went to the front to see how she could help her co-worker. This is the encounter as described by Gardenia:

So when I came to the desk I just stood there because I don't like to step on their [co-worker] toes. I like for them to handle it. So apparently, she [the co-worker] had to keep leaving, you know, because she didn't know exactly what to tell this lady. And clearly she [the guest] was drunk. And like our general manager said we did not have to make a reservation for her. So I told her I said, "Ma'am". I said, "um...we got orders from our general manager..." "I'm not talking to you!" [the woman said]. I said, "That's fine." I said, "I'm talking to you." I said, "We got direct orders from our general manager and we cannot allow you to check into the hotel." [She replied], "Who would say that?! They can't!" I said, "Ma'am, I'm just telling you." I said, "Now do you need me to call security?" The other girl was standing behind me. She said, "What is her name?" I said, "Ma'am, my name is Gardenia." "I want your name!" [the woman said]. I said, "I just told you my name." She said, "You need to go get you a job where you're from!" So I'm like, so I said, "Ma'am where am I from?" "You go get a job where you're from!" I said, "So where am I from?" So she walked away and then she turned around and she said, "F---ing N-word!"

Indeed, this guest was very personally offensive. Words cannot capture the extent of the hurt the guest inflicted on Gardenia by using a racial slur. Gardenia's response was physical—it moved her to walk from behind the desk toward the woman. It was a reflexive action. Gardenia did not know what she would have done if the security guard had not caught her arm. It caused

her to cry. It hurt her deeply. She was in disbelief of what had just happened because she had never been called that derogatory name. Others around her thought the incident was funny; of course, that offended and hurt Gardenia. Management tried to discuss the incident with Gardenia the next day, but no one could fix the situation nor comfort her. She knew that she must find the inner strength to overcome the hurt. In her own words, this is how Gardenia reacted and felt:

And I said, you know what...so I walked from behind the desk but before I could reach the outside, the security guard grabbed my arm, because I had had enough. He said, "What were you gonna go and do?" And I said...and I cried because I have never been called that. Out of all the things that have happened, I've never been called that. So the guy, he um, he said, "Gardenia what were gonna go and do? What were you gonna go and do? Were you..." I said, I handled it very professionally, I said, "Don't [inaudible]." He said, "What were you gonna go and do?" I said, "I don't know what I was gonna do." I said, "I don't know." I said...you know they found it funny, which I didn't. I said, "It's not funny." Because I've never had to experience that and I've never been called that. So..."How did you expect me to handle it?" so the guy was like, "Don't worry about it, its OK." I said, "It's easy for you to say, because you weren't the one." So the next day I was called into the general manager's office. And he talked to me and said, "Some people are just..." I said, "Ninety-nine of you can come in here and give me an explanation as to why this lady said this, it still won't do me any good. It still won't help me. Its something I have to get past myself." So I said, "No offense to you or anybody else, you can talk to me but it's not going to do me any good." I said, "That was the most hurtful thing that I have ever been called."

A friend and co-worker suggested that by some divine providence she was “chosen” to be the one to encounter the woman, telling Gardenia, “at that time that was your job to handle that right there. Because who knows the other girl probably couldn’t handle it. So you were the strongest one that could have handled it at that time, no body else could have handled it.” Gardenia was deeply hurt from the incident but found some solace in the belief that for a person to be so insulting they must have a difficult life. Even so, Gardenia should not be required to be the receptacle of another’s vicious attack because of their tormented life. Gardenia pointed out how she feels about taking guest abuse on behalf of the hotel:

Right now I am taking all these jabs and hits for somebody else’s company. I mean you know they are all the ones making all the money. And what am I doing? I’m taking care of their guests and making them more money. Because in return I am having more repeat guests come back to that hotel....so I do all this and I take all the hits.

Gardenia was required to suffer silently personal insults and mental abuse from guests for the benefit of the company’s financial gain. She did not personally benefit for her sacrificial acts on behalf of the company.

Iris described two guests that were discriminating against her because of her accent. Iris had a heavy European accent. The first guest, a woman, had phoned the hotel to obtain transportation to the hotel. What should have been a ten-minute pickup was delayed by 45 minutes because the driver did not immediately drive to where the woman was waiting. Iris maintained contact with the guest by phone several times while the delay was happening. Finally, the driver picked the guest up to bring her to the hotel. A few months later Iris sent a standard

follow-up email to the guest for feedback on her stay at the hotel. Iris received the response and learned what the guest really thought about the encounter:

And months later I write her for her feedback, just you know. At that time I didn't remember the name but when I saw the email I recognized myself. Basically she described me as the girl who barely spoke English. And the driver when he got there he told her that he just received the call... and it was just very, I remember that my day was ruined and I was literally shaking.

Iris was hurt by the guest's reference to her accent but also by the inference that she had not done her best to assist the woman. The guest's reference to her accent may have implied that the guest perceived her as incompetent. Iris reaction that she was "literally shaking" demonstrates the emotional impact of the encounter upon Iris. Iris explains her feelings:

So, and, the thing is about me is, uh, you know, I take it very personally. Usually when they are offensive or abusive or they're upset it's because they had certain issue. They're not upset with you usually. But uh, that time I was very new and it was very difficult you know. And its being self conscious about my English, uh, you know my broken English.

A second guest also referred to Iris' accent in a derogatory manner. Again, the encounter began on the phone when the guest, a woman, called to obtain directions to the hotel as she was driving into the city. Later the woman was speaking to another employee about the encounter. Iris described the conversation with the guest as described by her co-worker:

And she called after some time and she spoke to a co-worker. Basically I don't know if I should quote her, she said you know, "Some f---ing Mexican gave me directions." And uh, you know wrong directions because she didn't know where

she is. She called a few more times. When she arrived at the hotel, she talked in a very funny way; we realized she is drunk, basically. And she said she didn't want to speak to foreigners. You know, "Why do you have people with accents working at the hotel?" and stuff like that.

Clearly, the guest was referring in disdain to Iris's European accent. The woman was however unable to distinguish the difference between the sound of a Hispanic accent and a European accent. In the case of this guest Iris could see that the guest was also rude to others in the hotel. Still Iris felt the brunt of the guest's rudeness.

Tea Rose also has a heavy European accent. Guests that detected her accent also implied that foreign workers are incompetent. Tea Rose remembers the encounter with the guest very well.

Then he detected accent, my accent. So he said, "You foreigners don't you know what you're doing!" He was really rude and upset. Didn't apologize at all...it was bad, I remember the situation.

While Iris and Tea Rose felt they were at a disadvantage for having a strong European accent, Sunflower Girl felt that her racial-ethnic background and her exposure to various cultures was an asset when talking with guests. She described her race as Black Caribbean. She had also lived in the Netherlands during her lifetime. She felt her varied cultural experiences enabled her to relate well to different people.

Another thing is that sometimes I think that I bring a unique factor to the table being that I'm a woman, I am a woman of color but I'm not an American woman of color, so I come from the Caribbean. I studied in Europe so sometimes I get into conversations with people that unique and different things, so somebody that don't

have that background probably would never get into a conversation like that. So I just find things I have in common with the guests. Or sometimes I have a lot of guests that are staying with us from the Netherlands, I lived in the Netherlands, that's always a way for me to pick up on a good conversation there, and they are always amazed, wow, here is this black girl living in America who studied in the Netherlands. Wow does this all come together? They're always intrigued by that.

Thus, ethnicity was an advantage to Sunflower Girl in a large metropolitan city where many hotel guests came to visit from around the world.

Gender-related guest interaction. During some guest interaction, the women experienced gender-discrimination and sexual harassment from the guests. Sunflower Girl said that being a woman, regardless of her race and ethnicity, was not a benefit for her. Sunflower Girl, who is a petite woman, described her male manager, who was a large man. She observed that he seemed to carry more authority with guests than she did. She noticed that guests would listen to him whereas guests tried to intimidate her.

Like I have a manager, a manager that's really big, an African-American guy, really tall, like 7-foot, the way the guest would talk to him if they have a problem is not the same as they would talk to me. I guess because of his stature that's intimidates them, where for me there is nothing intimidating so they would, they would go off more on me more than they would say to him.

Sunflower Girl attributed guest negative reactions because she was petite and she was a woman. Wisteria believed a guest was demeaning because she is a woman, implying that Wisteria was too inexperienced to perform the job. The following story demonstrates how a man reacted being served by Wisteria instead of a male desk agent.

He did attack me saying that I was...you know he asked, you know, what I was doing in this position; because there were men around me. Because I guess to him the position I was in was a men's position. Like the front-desk agent has to be a male. Because he was like well... "You know I'm studying this, Sir, I know what I'm talking about, I'm going to school for this." And I think the reference to school could have affected the way he looked at me. I'm not sure. He just was very, I guess, not willing to come to the fact that he was wrong, was what the whole thing that it came down to.

In addition to being a woman, Wisteria, who is twenty years old, believes that guests also judged her as young, dismissing her as inexperienced. In the following situation the guest referred to her youthful appearance and asked to speak to a manager. She felt the guest believed she did not have the ability to complete a guest transaction.

Both times he did mention that I was a little young. But people don't know my age. Um, usually if I put a little more make-up on I can look...I mean I don't really look like...I carry myself, I don't look like a 20 year old...And people always like to ask, "Where's your manager?" Like I can't handle it myself. So it's like, so people have to hear it from a manager. You see what I mean? They have to hear it from some other person. 'Cause I'm wrong, you know. And it happens with all the younger, quote-unquote, employees vs. Doug my front-desk manager who is a good amount older, like he's married, has kids.

Wisteria has also observed guests refuse to be served by a manager if the manager was a woman. Not only male guests refused service from female managers; sometimes other women refused service. In this story, she described a guest reaction to the fact that the manager the female:

And it's great because they think the men are going to be the manager, it's usually a woman manager. And she comes in and their like, its like they keep trying to find someone else to talk to. And then they ask who your general manager is and you say, "Kathy." And they're like, "Oh!...okay..." You know like, "A woman runs this whole place!" So I guess it's strange for people to think. And some women have problems with women. You know...and they'll ask me like, "Are you sure?" I'd be like, "Would you like to talk to my manager?" and they're like, "yeah!" And my [woman] manager comes out and their like, "never mind."

Just as Wisteria's story suggests, guests appeared to have a preference one way or another for either a male or a female agent. There are no predictors of what a guest preference may be however. Sunflower Girl said that she observed which agent guests chose to check them in when she was at the desk with a male counterpart. She noticed that men gravitated toward her to check them in if both she and a male were available. Women likewise gravitated toward the male. These observations were not strong indicators to make an assumption about guest preference concerning the desk agent's gender.

Overt sexual harassment by the guests toward the women was not a common personal experience reported. It may have happened, but the women interviewed did not report it as happening to themselves except for Lilac.

Um, they, I've had a couple that have asked me out. Nothing like too forward or anything. Just very respectful, like "Oh you should come out after and have a drink with me." You know things like that...I've seen it to where people are like, you know, "Hey baby, you should come up..." like you know. But that's never happened to me, thank God.

I asked Lilac if she had accepted the man's invitation to go out for drinks. She said didn't join him. She said it didn't bother her, however she said that with a nervous laugh. It was an incident memorable enough for her to tell me about it. Even if she considered his actions as inconsequential, his actions would be considered as sexual harassment in the workplace during litigation. I suspect that it may have bothered her more than she was telling me.

Administrative Complaints. Generally, many guest complaints were of an administrative nature. Frequent guest complaints had to do with hotel services and were not of a personal nature. The guest did hold the women personally responsible to provide a resolution however. When problems occurred that were out of the women's control, such as operational problems, the restaurant bungled room service or someone promised something that they were unable to provide the women were caught in a frustrating position. When the guest came to the hotel expecting a certain amenity or service to be provided, especially when it was promised by the reservations agent, guests would understandably be upset. However, the front-desk agent was the one to face that upset guest. They had to apologize calmly for the inconvenience, an inconvenience for which they had no control to circumvent.

It was common for the women to receive complaints about the billing of hotel services. Some guests disliked paying parking charges or phone charges. Some guests felt they were wrongly charged for services they had not ordered. Guests frequently negotiated the room rates. The front-desk agent had the power to make changes to the bill to satisfy the guest. Sunflower Girl described a guest reaction to the hotel policy of a \$10 parking fee.

We charge for parking at our hotel. We are one of the only hotels in this area, because it's not downtown. And I get this a lot, we charge for parking, \$15 for valet parking, \$10 for self. Which I personally feel is pricey. That's why I have a

problem all the time when the guests are complaining...I really want to say “I feel the way you feel.” But this is a management decision. So the guests complain a lot, they say, “Why do I have to pay \$10 for self parking? This is not downtown!” This one guy told me “You guys are crazy; you're out of your mind!”

Rose and Tea Rose had guests complain about the wire package for phone calls, internet access and 800 number charges. Rose’s guest reaction was surprise at the room charges. There was apparently a billing mistake or the guest misunderstood exactly what he had ordered. Rose described a guest complaint:

...and he comes to the desk and he says “Well I ordered...I ordered something else, I ordered, um, you know, the wire package which includes local numbers and 1+ 800 numbers.” And he goes, you know, “Why are you guys charging me for this?”

Tea Rose also encountered a guest that was upset about the room charges for 800 numbers. Some hotels do not charge for 800 number calls. The guest said to her: “How could we charge 800 numbers?” Tea Rose said that if she had a frequent guest, one that management would not want to lose, she removed the charges from the bill. These situations placed the agent in the position of screening the guest complaint, to decide how to appease the guest while maintaining adherence to company policy. Management at this given hotel had given employees the power to make these on the spot decisions to appease a guest. If this were not the case, potentially the agent could have felt caught in the middle between company loyalty, adherence to policy and the potential for a guest to get upset.

Rose described a situation where she felt caught between what the sales office’s promises and the angry guest.

The sales office always says, “I can do this for you, we can do that for you, we’ll do all this.” But they’re not communicating you us, you know, what’s going on...So some nights we can’t do pretty much anything that’s promised. They’re already here and somebody promised them they could go ahead and check in, they could go upstairs and change clothes, no problem. And they were supposed to have his name on the reservation, and all this, and none of this stuff was done.

Rose told me that if the sales office would simply communicate to the front-desk, make a note on the reservation file, the front-desk would be alert to a promised amenity or service. This simple communication, Rose believed, could avoid many disagreeable situations for the guest.

System or operations problems frequently were a source of customer complaints. Circumstances often inhibited the front-desk agent’s ability to satisfy a guest. Yet even though the problem did not originate from the front-desk, the front-desk agent must take responsibility for the problem. When problems were outside the agent’s direct control, it was a source of discontent for the women. Some problems were outside the direct control of the front-desk agent included computer system outages, no air conditioning in 103 degree weather, power outages, non-working fixtures in the room, no valet at the valet parking desk, the hotel being sold out and rooms that had not been cleaned. These situations placed the women in the precarious position to provide an answer when they did not know when or if the problem would be resolved. The women had to get creative and maintain professionalism when they delivered a negative message to the guest. Sunflower Girl described what she had learned to say to the guest when an operational problem had occurred.

Um, immediately apologize. Immediately apologizing always calms a person down because apologizing and letting them know that them know this is not the type of

service or this is not what we are not wanting to portray, this is not our image, immediately makes them feel that you are relating to them and you do show sympathy for their situation upfront. So that, that really works well.

Tea Rose had a guest who was upset because she could not order room service because the power was out. Therefore, Tea Rose ordered a pizza for the guest and delivered it to the room. Jasmine had a guest that was upset because the light fixtures in his room were not working. Not only was this an inconvenience, this man was the lighting designer for the hotel chain. Jasmine really went the extra mile to please her guest. After the guest had returned home, she ordered a lamp sent overnight to the guest's home. Because it was a \$500 lamp Jasmine obtained special permission from management to make this gesture. Jasmine said that she would be disappointed with herself if she could not please a guest, especially a guest that was not making a demand for restitution as this man was not. Jasmine had also learned that when dealing with problems to avoid detailed explanations. This is the way she handles guests:

Don't try to explain [to] them how something happened. Just offer them as many things possible to make them feel better. Try to cut that situation and offer them something better instead of explaining. I started explaining in the beginning. And I thought the more I explain to guest they will understand and wouldn't feel that frustrated about the situation.... [But] it's useless to try and explain to that person what happened. Just, "I'm sorry and I can offer you this, this, and this and what would you like?" If it's something more special, we just ask them "What do you want me to do?"

Guest complaints that originated from another department in the hotel were frequently a challenge for the women. They were uncomfortable promising things to the guest that another

department must correct, such as when they needed to send engineering to fix a toilet. Would engineering respond quickly to satisfy the guest? If not, the women at the front-desk knew they would hear about it. In addition, the women felt helpless when they were obligated to apologize for the mistake of someone else. However, some guests were just difficult to please. Nothing could be done to please them; these were the “Jaycustomers,” the guests that seemed to complain constantly.

Jaycustomers, Freeloaders and Picky Guests. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Lovelock (2001) coined the term “Jaycustomer” to describe unruly guest behavior. The women of this study described guests that could be classified as Jaycustomers. Most common was the guest that complained just to get something free. Guests of this nature were often continually bringing complaints to the front-desk over minor details. After hearing the complaint, the front-desk agent was obligated to do whatever they could to please the guest. The women told me they had learned not to ask open-ended questions such as “What can I do for you?” but instead to say, “I can offer you a free breakfast in the restaurant or a refund on your bill. Which would you like?” As one can surmise, asking an open-ended question gave the guest opportunity to ask for anything, such as a free night’s stay. Ultimately, a free night’s stay was the end goal of some guests, not necessarily to have the problem resolved.

Close in relation to the freeloader were picky guests, particular guests or to phrase it more professionally, discriminating guests. These guests would continually complain about the smallest details. Tea Rose described a guest she considered picky.

I would check a couple...I’m sure they were rich; sometimes they were not even rich, they would just act this way when they come into the hotel. But this couple, I’m sure they were rich. I checked them in. They went up to the room. They came

back 5 minutes later saying there was a stain on the carpet. So I gave them a key to a new room. Uh, they came back again saying there was something wrong with that room as well. So I took 3 rooms, 3 new rooms, I made the keys. And I basically went up there; I walked them to the rooms, from room to room. And as they would be walking in the room they would be checking for mistakes, looking for stains, checking for wrinkled stuff; literally looking for a problem. So you do have problem guests.... When I discussed the situation in my head after that, I usually rewind in my memory, and I think about stuff, I just couldn't understand how people are like this. I mean, we have people dying from hunger, you know. They're homeless and stuff. And they are staying at a 4-star hotel. Minding a stain on a carpet?!

It was exasperating to Tea Rose to deal with this guest type because not only were they particular, but also that she perceived them as rich. Tea Rose's family background was not wealthy. She could not afford the luxuries she provided to her guests everyday. She could not relate to guests that she perceived as privileged.

It was common for guests to steal items from the room. Lamps, bathrobes, coffee pots, generally anything they wished. Jasmine said, "Some people steal the lamps. They try to steal everything they can. They even ask, 'Are these bath robes for free? Can we take them with us?'" A guest told Gardenia upon checkout that he had taken the robe with him. Gardenia laughed as she told the story:

...one guest said, "I have your robe." I said, "That's OK 'cause we have your credit card number." And they right there took it out of the suit case and gave the robe to me right over the desk!

Sometimes guests went to other hotel properties of the same chain. If they were excessively demanding, rude or difficult the manager of that hotel would “red flag” the guest in the system to warn other properties. Daisy described a couple that was extremely particular about their room, their food, and other services of the hotel. They began their complaints as soon as they arrived in the room.

And when they got to the room, I went to the back and started answering the phones. It was the same thing, it’s not cold, it’s not hot, they didn’t bring ketchup.

We told them we wanted water they brought us this. You know stuff like that. So I kept on dealing with them on and off. Like it was almost a constant thing for that particular day.

These guests had worn Daisy down over the few days of their stay. Eventually the hotel management researched the guests and saw that they were red flagged as problem guests by other properties. The manager informed the staff of what was going on, that this couple had a history of complaining to get something for free and to just be aware of what the guests were trying to do. Daisy had multiple encounters with them. She could not see how everything in the hotel could go wrong for the same guest. Even so, Daisy knew she could not tell them she was suspicious but that she had to treat them as regular guests. For Daisy, that was a challenge.

Lilac also described guests as difficult who were trying to get something free. Lilac, a young woman, often felt that guests tried to take advantage of her because of her youth. Lilac felt discouraged when this was happening, because she wanted the guest to view her as competent.

You know this has happened a number of different times. They’ll try and, like I said earlier, try and get stuff for free. Really elaborately lie about the situation. I really did take that personally ‘cause I didn’t think they thought I knew what I was doing.

Or, you know... “Oh, this girl that works the front-desk she’ll give it to me if I just complain,” you know, do whatever. So... Yeah it is kinda hard...you do take it...Because I’m a people pleaser. I like to please people, I’m kinda laid back that way, I’m not stern. So I don’t really want to change my personality to tell guests “No.” So I kinda feel sometimes that guests walk all over me. And so I need to work on that a little bit.

When guests complained to get something free, it caused Lilac to second guess herself, reflect upon what happened and wonder if she had done the right thing. Lilac was concerned that how she handled situations would reflect negatively upon her performance.

Truly I would like to say that guests are always...I just feel sometimes it makes me look stupid...But, uh, if they’re pulling a fast one or they’re asking for something too extreme...if the guest just has like, I don’t know, maybe their air conditioning not working and we fixed it and they wanted a free nights stay after that and you know they’re going to complain or you know call corporate...it just makes you look like you didn’t do your job.

Lilac was an introverted person and did not present herself in a forceful manner. The fear that guest might perceive her as incompetent characterized several of Lilac’s stories.

Guests can be clever when trying to manipulate the front-desk agent to do something or give them something free. Most of the front-desk agents knew when they had this type of guest. When guests are obviously lying, the front-desk agent could not indicate to the guest that they were aware the guest was lying. Sunflower Girl handled those situations carefully.

And then...you know, people just try you. They try things to get you to feel bad for them. They make up stories. It's, it's hard sometimes to deal with that. You

can't tell people that “you're a liar,” because of the position you're in. You can't tell people “oh you're joking,” so you just kind of have to go with them. You know in a way, you want tell to them, “I know you're lying, you know, so let's get past this.” You don't say “you're lying.”

The women were called upon to display professionalism when relating to Jaycustomers, freeloaders or particular guests. Some women felt that the guest believed she was incompetent, both because of the problem and because of the guest questioned their ability to resolve the problem. Guests that were lying or being manipulative were treated as any regular guest, but in some ways with extra care so complaints would not escalate to corporate. Constant complaints from guests were described as “exhausting.” The women all had some degree of emotional response to the guest behavior. In this next section I will explain the impact guest behavior had on the emotions of the women.

Manifestations of Emotion Work

There were consequences the women experienced because of the guest behavior. Table 4.4 lists the consequences, which included depersonalization, internal conflict, personalization, job satisfaction, and job dissatisfaction. The women’s stories in this next section illuminate the fact that the impact of relating with difficult guests cannot be minimized.

Table 4.4: Findings Regarding Manifestations of Emotion Work

Category	Sub-Category	Description
2. Manifestations of emotion work	a) Depersonalization	Surface acting, deep acting.
	b) Internal conflict	Institutionalized emotional labor.
	c) Personalization	Emotional dissonance or emotional deviance.

Depersonalization. The real work of the women at the front-desk was emotion work. The processes and procedures, the computer, and the check-in/checkout processes were easily accomplished compared to the challenge of remaining calm and professional in the face of an angry or disgruntled guest. Nearly each woman I interviewed said the most important thing they would teach a new employee is “Don’t take it personal[ly].” Depersonalization was necessary in order to buffer one’s self from emotional harm. For some of the women depersonalization took extra effort. For others each negative encounter was a personal attack.

I will first explain depersonalization as it was experienced by the women, then I will explore the women’s stories for whom depersonalization was difficult. However on any given day or during any given encounter, the same woman may easily depersonalize one encounter yet struggle with depersonalization on the next encounter. Depersonalization, just as one’s emotions, fluctuated along a continuum.

Depersonalization took place, as the women described it, by showing no outward reaction to the guest’s poor behavior. Internally the woman may have felt frustrated, hurt or angry, but outwardly they must project a calm demeanor. This was surface acting as described by Hochschild in her 1983 book, *The Managed Heart*. The women would manage their emotions, using self-control to give the guest the impression that an angry guest could not shake them. It is necessary to remain calm because if the women were to lash back at the guest, the scenario would only escalate.

Jasmine liked the job to acting. It was important to convey that the guest was special and that their problem was of great concern. Acting, portrayal of a concerned persona, was more than a strategy, it was a technique used to manage the outcome of the encounter. Jasmine explained:

Stay as positive as possible, smile. Even if you know about that problem, act like

that's the first time you heard the situation. And like, make the guest feel special like he is the only one that this thing happened to him. And it's so horrible and it's going to be fixed right away...he will feel better if I say, "Oh, my God, are you serious? That never happened before. I'll send engineering up right away upstairs."

The acting is not always easy. Jasmine made a conscious decision to portray a positive image. In the moment of the difficult guest encounter, Jasmine consciously reminded herself to smile and to choose her words carefully.

Yeah, in the first moments you just tell yourself, OK smile now, smile. Be careful what you're gonna say...of course the less you try to make an explanation to something bad so they won't catch you in something difficult. The less you say the better and the more you offer the better.

As Jasmine described it, she parceled her words and presented a pleasant smile. She also had learned that the less she said in the moment the better the outcome of the encounter. She frequently offered amenities to placate the guest.

Jasmine learned that depersonalization of the guest encounter made it easier to perform her job. Jasmine said that the front-desk agent was the face of the hotel, taking guest complaints was part of the job.

It depends upon how personal[ly] you are going to take the guest complaint. As long as you don't take it personal[ly] and you just realize you are the face of the hotel and there is nobody else that he would throw his keys at because you're the only person there... and as long as you try to understand the situation its...it won't change your perspective. It just would confirm, yeah, its crazy...Its difficult, its unique, that's what I like about it. You deal with all these people; everybody reacts

differently to these situations.

Jasmine acknowledged that the job could at times get difficult, but she also liked the challenges because each situation was unique. It seemed that the variety of guests made the work more appealing.

Gardenia described her job of interacting with guests as sometimes acting, sometimes challenging, and sometimes gratifying demonstrating that depersonalization is experienced on a continuum. She acknowledged that some guests could be difficult and extremely insulting as in using a racial slur as I previously described. As well, Gardenia knew the personal satisfaction that came from excelling in customer service skills. Regardless of how she was feeling Gardenia tried to portray to each guest that they were unique and special. Her manager said this to her:

And one thing that my General Manager told me, she said “You know what,” she said, “There are times... You are great at what you do. But there are times when you do get down.” She said, “You know what, just think of it as you’re playing a role and you are on stage. And you’re playing this excited ...this person that’s so happy with being a welcome guest agent. And you are playing that role. When you walk on and someone says ‘Action’ so it doesn’t matter who comes up to you, you are still playing that role.” So that’s what I do.

The fact that Gardenia’s manager encouraged her to act a role points to the importance of surface acting as a coping mechanism in the job and that the women were required to engage in institutionalized emotional labor (Hochschild, 2003). Rose also used acting as a coping mechanism. She knew that she could not tell a difficult guest what she really felt about their behavior. When asked what advice she would give a new person she said:

You have to really be an actress to work there. And that's really the thing, you know, mainly I would tell them you have to be an actress. You can't say what you want to say. You can't do what you really want to do. You just have to try to act like you really care. [laughs] Try to fix the problem and make them feel special. That's kinda it.

Lily made it her personal goal to make guests happy. She used her communication skills and techniques to achieve her goal. She would tell a new person to be careful about their choice of words, watch their body language, try to calm them down, stand firm and be confident. Although providing excellent customer service came natural to Lily, she recognized that it doesn't come easily to others.

Like I said customer service doesn't come very easy, especially to people who are sensitive. The very sensitive, they take things personal[ly]. Not that there's anything wrong with that, at the same time you have to build a boundary. Because if not you will take that home with you. You'll be upset, you'll be emotional, thinking, "Why did this person say this to me or do that to me?" And they're sleeping in their beds and you're losing sleep and they're fine! And it had nothing to do with you; you were just the person that they got at the time.

Lily was an exemplary person, truly dedicated to customer service. For her, a difficult guest was only an opportunity for her to influence a positive change in the guest's demeanor. She was mature in her attitude about problem guests. I asked her if handling difficult guests influenced her view of the job, she said:

No. Not one bit. Not one bit. It goes in one ear and out the other. It doesn't affect that, it may at the time that I'm dealing with it; the only thing on my mind is to

turn the situation around and get a solution to the problem. That's it. And making sure that they're happy. And how I can go above and beyond... Even the most difficult guest, the most difficult who will not budge, who will not break, there's always something that you can do. Absolutely.

Lily chose not to allow a challenging guest to dissuade her ability to perform her job. She was unique in that she firmly believed that she could make any guest change their attitude. She pressed the guest with kind gracious service until they could not continue to be angry with her because she was so genuinely kind. She explained to me that she had learned that not only should she control her tone and choice of words, but she should also control her body language. In a very animated manner, she described to me how body language could tell a person more about how you feel than the spoken words:

Not what's coming out of your mouth, but your body language affects a lot that you're saying. And it does, because if I'm saying "I apologize." [frowns] with my hands on my hips, my fingers pointing at you, my hands in the air or just by my actions if I'm saying that with my body but my mouth is saying "oh, I apologize, I'm so sorry." Then that's telling you how I really feel and not what I'm talking to you with.

Therefore, Lily had learned to manage her emotions, her words, and her body language when speaking with guests. She knew that she needed to present a confident, positive persona.

All of the participants were cognizant that their job at the front-desk was to make guests happy. Each desired to conclude the encounter with a satisfied guest. In the learning process each learned the important lesson to depersonalize the encounter. The most common tactic was to remain calm, apologize to the guest, and seek a solution to the guest problem. That was what the

guest experienced, however the process of depersonalization was an internal dialogue on the part of the agent.

Internal conflict. Depersonalization of the guest encounter was not an easy task. One reaction of the women was to freeze in front of the yelling guest. When Sunflower Girl first took the job, she was timid, difficult guest encounters were intimidating to her. She described how she felt when facing a yelling guest.

I would crawl into my shell and shut down. I didn't even want to deal with the guests anymore, I would just let them go, and I would just be standing there. Like, okay, are you finished?

I could visualize her standing in front of the yelling guest, dumbfounded, eyes wide-open, jaw dropped, frozen in place. She felt so uncomfortable with a yelling guest that more than once in the interview she referred to the guest behavior as “ripping me to pieces.” She also wanted to lash back, sort of put them in their place. She described her internal conflict.

...you don't want to, um, fight back with the same thing they are giving you because if they're starting to argue with you, you don't want to argue back with them. If they're starting to curse you don't want to start to curse back at them.

Therefore, there was an internal conflict between wanting to take a defensive stance and the reality that it was their job to remain calm continually and use professional language. This was the emotional internal conflict, also referred to as emotional dissonance, to be required to display positive emotions when one wishes to do the opposite. Daisy also experienced the internal conflict. She described her feelings at the beginning of her job at the hotel.

In the beginning I would feel offended. They didn't have to say that or there's no need for them to do that! And stuff like that, because they do different stuff.

There's a lot of stuff they've done. Some will shove the keys in your face. You know they do all those things. But [laugh] you just have to keep calm and don't take it personal[ly].

Daisy appeared, in that story, to be surprised that a guest would behave offensively. Also she described mild shock at the actions, such as throwing keys, which the guest would demonstrate. Daisy concluded the story with the understanding that she was not to behave in the same way with the guest.

One way of coping with the internal emotional conflict was to understand that though it seemed the guest was angry, actually there could be multiple other reasons why the guest was being difficult. Even though the guest might say, "*You* dropped the ball!" the guest did not actually mean the woman had dropped the ball. Daisy said she knew that the guest really didn't mean that she personally had dropped the ball, but that they were disappointed with the hotel's service. Sunflower Girl said they "come at you like they are attacking you...[but] they're attacking management, everybody as a whole. The way they project it, they say "you" a lot...*you, you, you!*" Gardenia said, "They're not yelling at you. They're not mad at you they're mad at the situation." Lily described why she does not take the guest personally:

But you're there at that time, its easy for them to lash out at you. They needed someone to lash out on, so basically that's what happens. And I don't take any of it personal[ly]. You have someone that's frowning, you never know what a person had just encountered prior to them coming to you, and the reason they lash out at you.

The women also resigned themselves to the fact that handling difficult guests was just part of the job; there would always be problem guests, they were an everyday occurrence. Daisy had this attitude:

Another thing is, that's part of my job I guess. It's not that I am being paid to be made fun of, or you know, or for someone to harass me or anything, but its part of the package. It comes with the package. We have to be strong and you know, take whatever comes. Don't take it personal[ly]. Cause its not on us. It's not my house, it's the hotel.

Sunflower Girl had come to the point where she accepted the problem guests as an everyday occurrence. She had adopted the view that she should *expect* to deal with all types of guests, difficult ones being just a part of the job.

I'll just say, in hospitality industry especially the front-desk, because that is where everyone has to come there at some point in time. Even if you don't checkout front-desk, which you don't have to if you got your bill in everything fine, you can just leave. But you must check in with us. We are the face of the hotel; we are the ones that create that first impression. So all I can say is that in the front office environment you're always going to deal with some problem situations.

Sunflower Girl sought to relate to her customer with respect and expected the same from them in return. She did not hesitate to take a stand for herself and ask them to be respectful if the situation was particularly bad. She exercised that right if necessary.

I would immediately end the conversation. "Sir, I will not continue this conversation if we cannot speak to each other as grown and respectable adults then I guess we have to end it right here."

In this way, Sunflower Girl was able to preserve her personal dignity and also remind the guest that their own behavior was unacceptable. I also saw others take this same tactic as necessary.

Gardenia did not allow guests to continue in behavior that was offensive to her or others. When a guest spit while speaking to one of her employees and persisted in his offensive words and actions, she advised him that, “As long as you are talking like this, I can’t help you. Until you can calm down then I will be able to help you.” Gardenia told me, “I let him know that I can’t let him treat my talent that way. Although he’s paying whatever he’s paying, we are still people.” Gardenia also told co-workers that they should not allow the guest to continue to be offensive, saying, “You don’t have to be disrespected by a customer. But I don’t want you to talk back to them the way they are talking to you. If you feel you can’t handle it your need to excuse yourself and get somebody else.”

Daisy recognized that the interaction with the guest does not only include the initial check-in, but that because she may encounter them again during their stay. She regarded the check-in process as building a relationship.

They’re there [in the hotel], on the phone, they are not going away. They are staying there. They are like guests in your house, you can shut them out. Its, um, the personal relationship you build with the guest; them being able to remember your name. Yeah. That means something to me. ‘Cause if they’re nice to you, you feel good about what you’re doing. It makes it better, yeah.

Daisy remained focused on the guest relationship when she remembered that the first encounter at check-in was only the beginning of a series of contacts. This helped her to depersonalize and it gave Daisy personal satisfaction in her job.

Personalization. When a guest was difficult and the woman was unable to depersonalize the encounter, some women reported having hurt feelings, they grew unhappy in the job, and they contemplated quitting or transferring to a new hotel position. The women who were unable to depersonalize were unable to separate their internal emotions from the situation at hand. Tea Rose was an example of one who found it difficult to depersonalize guest encounters. She began the job with enthusiasm. She was eager to learn. Because English is a second language for her she had to put more effort into learning. Over time, Tea Rose came to take the difficult guest encounters personally. These emotions progressively got more frequent. She said, “And I came to take it very personally. At the beginning, I was fine because I was learning. But, uh...at the end I took every single thing personally.” Making the guest happy is so important to Tea Rose that when she is not successful she described her emotions as “furious”. Sometimes she acted on her emotions by taking revenge on the guest. In order to make her feel better Tea Rose would demonstrate emotional dissonance in a devious manner:

But then you can get so furious; you can hold money on their credit card for two days you know. It happened. No one was hurt but sometimes you just lose it. You want to punish the guest, yeah. In a way that they’ll... probably some of them didn’t even notice. It’s just for my good feeling. I’ve done it once.

Over a period of repeated negative guest encounters, Tea Rose grew progressively weary. She said that she began to feel like a punching bag for the guests. She said they would come to the desk and yell at her about things like the toilet not flushing. She said, “Everything that goes wrong you are the first person of contact. So you really have to bear a lot...a *lot*.” Bearing the burden of the guest complaint became so painful Tea Rose felt wounded. Using the imagery of Jesus on the cross, she likened the difficult guest encounters to being wounded. This eventually

caused job fatigue. She wanted to avoid guest encounters and found it difficult to look guests in the eye as they approached the desk.

You give a little piece of you with everything you do. I just have this feeling, you know. And then I give everything to the guest at the front-desk. And then I just didn't have anything left. Because they really wore me down. I wanted to make them happy but sometimes it just doesn't work that way. And I came to take it very personally. At the beginning I was fine because I was learning. But uh...at the end I took every single thing personally. And there was one thing. I pictured myself as a Jesus on the cross hanging on the wall behind the front-desk. And literally every body throwing darts at me. You know, darts, that's how I felt. Every single guest would just make a little wound. Because I have pictures for every single event in my life, so that's how I felt at the end. My hands were tied around the cross and they would just throw the darts. I could not take it anymore. Sometimes I would be looking up at the guest and they were coming to the desk and I could not even look at the guest. And it was all because of being tired of it.

Eventually Tea Rose became so fatigued by the stress that she requested a job transfer to another part of the hotel where she had less guest contact. At the time of the interview she had not worked at the front-desk for two years. Even though time had passed, she clearly recalled the personal pain she endured in the job.

Wisteria experienced a situation where a guest that she was not helping but who was being helped by others, became angry at Wisteria because she was ignoring her. Yet Wisteria was only following protocol allowing her co-workers to handle their guest without interruption. It was disconcerting to Wisteria that a guest would believe she was not customer service oriented,

especially when Wisteria was performing exactly as expected. She took pride in providing good customer service and had this to say about the incident:

Because, you know, I represent the front-desk, I represent good customer service.

And when someone is basing me on my bad customer service, based on what our philosophy is of not interrupting. I kind of took it because I was not...for doing what I was supposed to do.

Evidently, the guest had an expectation that everyone, including Wisteria should be focused on her problem. Wisteria felt helpless to meet the guest expectation when it was not her place to speak to the guest. She felt threatened by the woman as if the woman were attacking her.

So she wasn't...it wasn't a difficult situation that anybody else couldn't handle it just was her, this demeanor; the way she was kind of treating me as a person. She kinda like was attacking each of us. So well, I guess that made her difficult in that way.... So I guess it was....I felt like she was attacking me. Just the way she would make comments and the way she would look at you. So...and she would look directly at me.

Guests that attacked Wisteria, or attacked the hotel, left Wisteria unable to show them that she was not the kind of person she was perceived to be. She took personal offense when someone would not only attack her reputation but also that of the hotel.

You know and it was just like he was attacking me, it was like...he said, "This hotel is a bad establishment." And I was like, "We're not!" You know.

Wisteria was sensitive to guest perceptions. She was eager to please each guest. When she was unable to do so, it was uncomfortable for her. She took guest anger and verbal comments as

personal attacks. Wisteria was vulnerable to personalization of the guest encounter because she identified herself within her work.

Rose reported using coping mechanisms such as “walking to the back” and “counting to 10” to calm herself down. She also mentioned that a manager had told her to calm down saying “it’s not that serious.” Rose said you just have to “let it go” when the guest got upset, saying that patience was required to perform the job. She recognized that guests that were difficult may have other things on their minds. Rose said, “But everyone is going through something different, and you never know what that person has gone through.” Even though Rose used coping mechanisms, her internal feelings or her “attitude,” as she says, may be evident to guests. She struggled with emotional dissonance. She spoke of herself, “I believe my attitude does come across a little bit.” She said that she got frustrated and wanted to say, “I don’t want this guest in my face!” Rose knew that she should display a positive attitude but sometimes found it difficult.

Personalization and depersonalization of the guest encounter was experienced on a continuum. Sometimes it was easy to depersonalize a guest encounter. However, the same woman that could depersonalize some encounters could just as easily personalize the next encounter. Especially customer attacks were directed at her personal characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, job status, or age. One woman, such as Lily may choose to never allow a guest to affect her attitude. Another, such as Tea Rose may feel emotionally battered with each subsequent guest encounter.

The goal of depersonalization was to ignore or suppress ones true emotions and display a professional demeanor. Suppressed emotions created emotional dissonance when the women are required to engage in surface acting. Depersonalization required coping mechanisms. Coping mechanisms were used to recognize that the guest was not angry at one personally but at the

situation at hand. Some women reported that they chose to walk to the back, count to 10, or take deep breaths until they could calm themselves. Finally, the women who resigned to the fact that difficult guests were just “part of the job” appeared to find it easier to depersonalize.

The impact of emotional dissonance was job fatigue and job burnout as in Tea Rose’s description of herself “like a Jesus on a cross.” She could not even look an approaching guest in the face. Next I will discuss how emotional labor influenced the women’s job satisfaction.

Next, I will describe how the nature of learning for the women as they learned to depersonalize guest encounters. Success on the job required emotion work, learning to defer to the guest emotions rather than one’s own. It required the women to influence the emotions of the guest. They learned how to do the emotion work through various learning techniques and theories.

Nature of Learning

The nature of the women’s learning often occurred through supportive relationships with co-workers and managers in which they were able to commiserate over handling guests that they learned. Table 4.5 indicates that they learned through training, but they also learned through incidental and informal learning and through self-directed learning or self-reflection. They shared experiences with one another, talked about past mistakes. Often, as they learned they transformed their thinking about how to best relate to difficult guests. They transformed their thinking about whether to take guest behavior personally or not. They grew in personal power as they had successful outcomes. Some began the job not realizing how challenging guests could become. Tea Rose and Gardenia both said that they did not realize there would be difficult guests. Yet Tea Rose could not depersonalize, but Gardenia was able to depersonalize on most occasions.

Table 4.5: Findings Regarding the Nature of Learning

Category	Sub-Category	Description
3. Nature of learning	a) Training Classes or On-Job-Training	Training provided either during an initial training period or as continuation training.
	b) Informal and Incidental Learning	Multiple experiences and practice, trial and error
	c) Self-directed learning	Books, videos, self reflection.
	d) Learn from others	Coaching, mentoring, observation and feedback from co-workers.
	e) Teaching others how to do emotion work	Share experiences learned through mistakes.

Training Classes or On-Job Training. Formal learning was offered to new employees as they entered the job as front-desk agent. This training was either formal training classes or on-the-job-training. Continuation training was offered to incumbent employees and was usually formalized classroom training lasting a few hours. There was not consistency in the amount and type of training received by employees, even employees of the same hotel.

Formal classroom training was less frequent for the participants I interviewed. Other hotels may have training programs that are more extensive. At the four-star hotel, the participants were more likely to be trained on the job when they were short-staffed. Formal training classroom was rarely reported. If formal training was given, it was about operational procedures and the computer system. In addition, they learned some simple scenarios on guest interaction, but it was mostly about the hotel procedure to solve the problem, not how to speak to the guest. After initial training, some additional training was offered. This training was about body language and communication styles. However, the classes were generic not customized for the front-desk. Overall, many would have liked more structure at the beginning of the job.

Gardenia said the initial training was not structured. She often was called upon to conduct on-the-job training for new employees in her role as Talent Coach. She described her own training as mostly coming from other employees of the hotel. Later Gardenia attended some management training on communication styles. The training was not customized for the front-desk. Gardenia said has practiced communication skills learned in her everyday life.

When I...um... initially the ladies in the department when I came from housekeeping, the ladies in the department trained me. But as I continued to progress in my work, I went to supervisor redevelopment trainings. And um... We have this thing called language and lifestyles; it actually helps you learn about the [hotel name] brand as well as in your lifestyle. So the training you can use within the hotel and also in your lifestyle....

Gardenia liked the content about communication styles but Jasmine criticized it because it was not specifically designed for the front-desk. Jasmine did not feel that the training was especially helpful for learning about guest relations. Jasmine explained, “We have some training course that for a few hours they have periodically, for instance like Body Talk...nothing in particular oriented towards the front-desk.” Jasmine wanted to receive more training about handling difficult guests. The management training on communication styles was helpful but it did not draw conclusions for how communication styles would translate to the job at the front-desk.

Sunflower Girl said continuation training was somewhat helpful because it gave her a safe place in which to learn. Sunflower Girl felt that she was not given the opportunity on the job to reflect upon events and to obtain feedback about how she handled guests. Nevertheless, when Sunflower Girl went to training she felt she could use the role-plays to practice new techniques.

You then get to step back, cause you're now in an environment where you can be a little more relaxed and see that you know, this is how we work different things out.

Lilac did not receive formal classroom training. At the time she was hired the hotel was short staffed, consequently she was trained on the job. Lilac felt she was just thrown on the job. She said that she was not sent to formal training about how to use the computer that she has "just picked up things" as she is working with the guests.

Um, the training at this hotel is a different that what I am used to, um, you're kinda just thrown right in because we were so short staffed when I started working there.

Um, that you just picked up things, um, like the computer system just by doing it you would just learn.

Tea Rose said the ongoing training facilitated in shift meetings with the supervisor was helpful because it was focused on handling difficult guests. This training was usually short in nature and did not count as formalized training. The most empowering thing was not that she was equipped for the job but that she was able to do whatever was necessary to please the guest.

Um, we had meetings once every 2 months. And uh, the manager would show up and tell us how to handle difficult guests. We did have the power to maybe take off some charges that was the issues. Usually when they got charged for something, when they wanted to change the rate from, um, one rate to another, because we have lots of rates. You know, um...they would be asking for a group rate, or for a corporate rate, um...so that's how we got trained, you know, to use our power to do stuff and not to do stuff.

When Iris began at the hotel, she worked in housekeeping. Later she was transferred to the front-desk. Iris did not feel that she was trained adequately when she started working at the front-desk. Iris was thrown on the desk to perform. Iris said that most of her co-workers experienced training in the same way. Iris said, “It’s interesting, that is basically what everybody is saying, they just throw you in, they just, uh, throw you in the water and see if you are going to swim or you’re going to drown.” Iris felt that being forced to learn on the spot was a challenge that new employees should not have to endure. Because Iris was left to learn on her own, she was not given the guidance she needed to learn.

I would ask a question when I was brand new and no body would give me an answer. So you just have to push yourself to do it despite of it. So, its, I think could be much better.

Wisteria’s hotel used on-the-job training exclusively. They assigned the new employee to a manager for training and coaching. Usually the manager and the employee were of the same gender when the training began; men where paired with men, women with women. Then after a week or so, they would give the new employee a new manager from which to learn. Wisteria described her experience.

Um, they like to just throw you on it. They love that, they love to see you like, be confused. You know, like, “What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?” And then they watch you and they learn from it. Like...they just watch, like....They’ll tell you to do little tiny little tasks....So they give you kind of like situations that they put you in to learn from that. And then they’ll put you in front of customers. And then see how you deal with the manager, watching the manager, and then you do it. And then the manager watches you.

Most participants felt ill prepared to handle real-life situations. Their formal training, whether classroom or on-the-job, did not adequately prepare them. Few received classroom training and had been required to learn on-the-job. Most of the women said the best learning experience was acquired through repeated guest encounters, through trial and error.

Informal and Incidental Learning. Marsick and Watkins (2001) describe six characteristics of incidental learning: “(1) It is integrated with daily routines; (2) It is triggered by an internal or external jolt; (3) It is not highly conscious; (4) It is haphazard and influenced by chance; (5) It is an inductive process of reflection and action; and (6) It is linked to learning of others” (p. 28). In the following stories, the woman learned as they performed daily tasks. Learning was often experienced as a type of revelation or insight, yet at times was so much a part of their daily activities that some may considered their skills as part of their personality. Learning did not happen as a result of a planned learning event and was as unpredictable as the type of guest who approached the counter. Their learning involved others who supported, encouraged, and coached the women. The data collected confirmed informal and incidental learning in it many manifestations.

After multiple experiences or a singular incident, the women reported a transformation in their thinking about handling difficult guests. For some, what they learned was to no longer take the guest comments and behavior personally. The women who chose not to take the guest encounter personally were able to elevate their behavior above that of the guest. For some, who found depersonalization difficult, they transformed from a naiveté about customer service to a more guarded perspective. Many of these women described believing at the beginning of the job that customer service was easy or that there would not be as many difficult guests.

The women reported that they felt that to learn the job, one must do the job. This may be a common assumption held by the hotel industry as it was observed that most of the training occurred on the job. Through their experiences, some women could identify a moment in time when they decided not to personalize guest encounters. These women clearly learned through a critical incident. Incidental learning as defined by Marsick and Watkins (1990) is learning that occurs as a by-product of another activity. The learner comes to a new understanding through making mistakes. Incidental learning is often taken for granted, with the assumption that it occurs without much effort, unintentional in nature (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Given that incidental learning is often overlooked as a type of learning, it is significant that data within this study clearly reveals that incidental learning takes place.

They reported learning that they should depersonalize the encounter through their experiences. Learning often occurred over time, through trial and error. The women would experience a guest, decide in the moment what action to take, and then learn in the moment, gauging the guest reaction whether the action was successful or not. Iris feels that to experience the job is the best way to hone skills over time. Learning is a process that only time can provide, “So it takes time and I think really some skills too, I suppose that’s when you become a real professional.” Learning was facilitated through coaching from the supervisor, self-reflection or formal learning through training courses.

Many of the participants indicated that on-the-job or formal training they received at the beginning of the job did not adequately prepare them for what they would encounter. In some ways, they understood that a training course could not possibly cover the multitude of guest types. This lack of preparedness as they began the job was often coupled with their own preconceived notions of what the job would be like.

Lily expressed that her greatest learning about managing emotion work occurred through experience. Training could not prepare her for the realities of the job. She mentioned that not much was discussed about handling difficult guests in training. Rose felt she learned the most by just doing the job. Training provided Rose with the procedures, but not the techniques for handling difficult guests. Overall, Rose did not feel the training prepared her; she told me she was thrown out there to learn the job herself. Rose describes herself as a “hands-on” learner. She believes you cannot learn the job in the classroom, but “you have to actually work there, kinda...you can’t get it by training...” Rose explains:

...they told you stuff that is inappropriate to do, but they haven’t said “this guest is this way”...uh, you know...and me personally they just threw me out there, you know, on the front-desk...I actually, I just, I just ended up training myself....so whatever...It was actually a lot to learn if you haven’t worked with the system before. Its, its something you have to do a couple of times to get it.

Daisy said that it was recollection of training during the guest encounter that had the biggest impact upon her learning. When she first began the job, she was unaware of how difficult the job could be when guests were difficult. She did not pay much attention during training but soon realized when she got on the job that things she learned in training could be helpful to her. Daisy did not believe that formalized classroom training could really prepare one for the job, but that one had to experience the job.

...you know how you are training for something that you haven’t actually experienced? You don’t know the impact of it until it actually happens to you. Then you recognize, “Oh this is what they said in the training.” So I think in the beginning I didn’t think it would be that hard. And then I realized, I said, “Wow!

This actually gets bad!” You know, you don’t...in the beginning the training is more of, um, it’s preparing you but until you feel it or experience it that’s the only time you’re going to realize that you go back to your training.

Gardenia learned quickly that the job of taking care of guests was different than she expected. She thought that checking guests in was easy and the encounters would be pleasant on most given situations. Gardenia was somewhat resistant to the notion of handling difficult guests. She said, “I thought no guest is supposed to be difficult. They’re supposed to be like proper. You come in and you check in, you have a great stay, you go home.” Gardenia quickly learned that difficult guests were the norm rather than the exception. She described learning the most on the job through each new experience.

Lilac learned through a strong negative experience that she should not to take the guest situation personally. While working at Disney in her early career, Lilac tried very hard to please her guests. She was usually unhappy with herself if she was unable to satisfy a guest. Nevertheless, it took only one very difficult experience for her to realize that she could not perform the job if she continued to take guests personally. Lilac told me this story:

...there was one instance; I think it was when I was working at Disney. This lady wanted me to switch her room because it was a handicap room. And I told her I couldn’t because we were sold out that night but I could move her to a room the next day. And she crumbles up this piece of paper and like throws it at me.

[nervous laugh] And it hit my face and she called me a b---h. And I was like, I was like, I was so upset I started crying and I ran to the back. I think it was that day that I said, “OK I’m not going to let any body affect like she did” cause she really, you

know, I was like, so...so that was the day. [laugh] But then she came back an hour later, she came back and she apologized....so I felt a little better.

The situation was a memorable one for Lilac because it affected her deepest emotions about how she feared guest disapproval. Lilac felt hurt, she cried, she was embarrassed, and so she escaped to the back room. It was in that incident that Lilac not only learned that she could not allow a guest to offend her personally, but in that moment, Lilac made a conscious choice to set her feelings aside during guest encounters. In this way, learning constituted making a choice to set a barrier between the guest and herself. The lesson was that Lilac could protect herself by removing her feelings from the situation. Even after that experience Lilac still had trouble with setting aside her emotions. As stated earlier, Lilac also had a fear of appearing incompetent in front of the guest.

Jasmine also learned through an incidental-learning event. She described a moment in time where she learned a valuable lesson on how to handle difficult guests. She said that when she began the job she thought that she should explain to the guest why they were having a certain problem. She thought they would listen, understand, and say, "OK, I understand, I'm sorry." But this type of customer was rare. The more she tried to explain the reason a problem had occurred, the less successful she was in appeasing the guest. Jasmine began to realize that guests were not that understanding nor would they take the time and listen. One incident taught Jasmine the futility of explaining too much to the guest:

...uh, we are almost sold out and we had a guest that we have to walk to another hotel because we don't have a room available for him that night. Its 1:00 at night, the guest is really upset that and I apologize to him but we didn't have rooms for him. And the thing that I said, I started explaining it to him that we didn't have a

chance to clean all the rooms so we didn't have any clean rooms available for him. We had, let's say, 10 rooms that were dirty that we could not sell. So I explained that to him, thought he would understand the situation. But then he ended up writing to corporate saying that, "OK you people say you can't book something at your hotel and you didn't clean all the rooms? And I'm sent to another hotel but you actually had rooms but it was dirty?" That was an example that taught me that. For me this is a normal situation. For the guest that booked the hotel at 1:00 a.m., but had to walk to a different hotel, even though we were paying for it, it was still a huge thing. Yes...That's why...And I'm trying to pass it over to all the people I am working with or training. Don't explain yourself because you never know that by trying to say something to make people understand that actually it might be worse.

Jasmine never tried to explain things to the guest again. She even told a white lie when she had to, just to keep the guest from reacting. It was such an important lesson to her that she taught others what she had learned.

Since the training was not helpful to her, I asked Jasmine if she had learned her skills through coaching by her manager or by observing another employee of the hotel. She learned through experimentation and repetition. Jasmine began using a technique of remaining calm when dealing with an angry guest and found the guest changed their behavior because she was relating to them in a professional manner.

I can't say it was somebody that I saw dealing with somebody and I liked the manner....Its, uh, I'm a very calm person in working in that kind of environment. I learned that the more calm you stay the better the situation. Because whenever you

see somebody really frustrated in front of you, or I even had cases of people throwing keys at me and yelling like crazy. If you stay really calm and you respond as if nothing happened in a nice manner with a nice voice and a smile...that just snaps at these people and they turn their whole behavior and they realize what they did. That happened to me a few times, so I just keep steady on that.

It was through experimentation that Jasmine discovered what worked and she decided to repeat the same technique in future encounters. She discovered she had the power to calm a guest through monitoring her own emotions.

Lily did not describe a specific moment or event that influenced how she learned to negotiate difficult guests. She described her ability to satisfy guests as a personality trait. Nevertheless, even though her positive outlook was a natural part of her persona, Lily was focused on persuading an unhappy guest to become happy. Her earliest recollection of interactions with difficult guests was while she was in high school working at a fast food restaurant.

When I started working in the fast food industry, I noticed a lot of difficult guests would come in there. They would always be upset. And I always used to try and figure out, how can I help this person? So I used to make small talk with them. Making small talk and trying to turn them around, eventually they'll leave with a smile on their face.

Lily was learning how she could influence an unhappy guest to be positive. She tried techniques such as small talk and learned that customers would change their mood. She became so good at this newfound skill that her manager noticed it. She was promoted at an early age within the fast

food industry. Because her manager's observation of her and feedback, Lily grew believe that she had a natural ability that others may not possess.

I had this thing about me, you know, to care about people, to try and take them in if they are upset or fussin' I would always try and calm them down and try and make the situation better.

Eventually Lily went to work in the hotel industry. She noticed that the clientele was different from the fast food customers. Lily learned that she had to work harder to please guests. Even though she viewed her skills as natural traits, Lily did learn along the way to use certain techniques, which she routinely uses today. Self-reflection also occurred as a method of learning. Next, I will describe how women reflected or educated themselves on how to negotiate difficult guests.

Self-directed Learning. Some participants to gain knowledge used self-reflection upon past incidents. Some sought outside opportunities to learn such as by reading about customer service and the hotel industry. Self-reflection, or self-directed learning, was an effective method of learning for many of the women.

Situations that were outside of the desk agent's control to fix were a challenge because the agent struggled for the right words to say to a guest. Gardenia described a situation in which training had not prepared her. In this situation, she knew what the company policy was but she had not been trained for what to *say* when delivering disappointing news to the guest.

When I first went to the Whatever-Whenever to answer the phones, nobody trained me for that side ... They told me that the guests are going to call and they are going to want this. I said OK I can do that. But when they are calling and yelling at me because there is no hot water, no body told me they would, you know....I'd be like

“OK let me put them on hold.” I’d say, “This guest says they don’t have hot water and what do I do?” “You just tell him we’re going to send engineering up.” OK but what now? After I tell him I’m going to send engineering up, he’s still yelling at me.

Gardenia was left to figure out what to say on her own. She said that she began reading books on customer service on her own time, just to familiarize herself with finding the right words to soothe the guest. Her job training had not adequately prepared her to respond to guest problems. In her self-study, she reached a realization, “So once I started reading that it’s all about the customer, OK...now I’m a consumer, and I don’t want them to treat me like this when I go somewhere.” Gardenia learned through her reading that she should put herself in the place of the customer, empathizing with them.

The most successful women were actively learning everyday. They learned through practice or trial and error; from others who were gracious enough to coach them, from observation of others and from the process of self-reflection. The women looked at each new encounter as a new challenge, a new opportunity to learn something. For the more experienced women such as Lily or Gardenia they seem to thrive in the face of the most difficult guest. They took personal delight in changing the guest mood from disgruntled to pleasant.

Learning from Others. The front office staff forms a natural bond with one another because of their shared experience. In a real way, they are a community of practice. They commiserate with one another about difficult guests. They offer one another solutions for problems. They share the workload with one another. They will take a guest over from a co-worker if the situation becomes too difficult. Those everyday-shared experiences were rich with learning opportunities. The management, however, did not actively encourage these learning

opportunities. Sometimes a shift manager would begin the shift with a 15-minute meeting, but most of that time was taken discussing operational issues rather than customer issues. If learning occurred in the community of practice it was only a natural outgrowth of the job, it was not a cultivated learning event.

The women learned a great deal from observation of and feedback from others. Several of the women reported learning from more experienced co-worker and managers, from coaching and mentoring. Coaching from a supervisor was useful because it helped the women to identify weaknesses. Often through coaching, the women improved their performance in difficult guest situations.

Sunflower Girl's manager coached her control her emotions. She was told that her demeanor changed from happy to unhappy when interacting with a difficult guest. After that coaching session, which occurred during a performance review, Sunflower Girl consciously thought about projecting a positive display of emotions. The coaching she received was pivotal in her learning. The coaching helped her to realize that her feelings were visible to others. She said that she felt she had improved after she stopped taking the encounter personally. This is what her manager said to her:

... and she [the manager] said "I notice that you shut down and you let the guests affect you and it changes your whole demeanor and your service goes from here (raises right hand high) to there (holds left hand below right hand)."

After she received feedback, Sunflower Girl eventually learned to suppress her internal feelings. To help Sunflower Girl the manager had described her own experiences with difficult guests and her internal feelings about them. The manager explained to Sunflower Girl how she learned to cope. The manager also said that she went to some training and found role-plays to be helpful.

The feedback from the manager appeared to be the turning point for Sunflower Girl. She also learned she could handle situations alone, largely because of circumstances in which she was forced to think and act alone.

So I went back and I asked two of my colleagues and asked them who wants to play the manager, cause sometimes we have to do that. And they are like, you play the manager. You're the manager. So, you know what, yes I need to figure this out on my own. So I moved away from my colleagues and that's when I thought of this by myself.

As Sunflower Girl described the previous situation to me, I sensed that she was proud of herself for handling the difficult guest on her own.

Daisy named one individual that had the greatest influence upon her career. There had been a man in the position of Director of Rooms that she admired. Daisy always felt he would make himself available to help her or coach her. She also learned from the experiences of others.

Director of Rooms, yeah. He was doing a lot of things but he was the type you could go up to and say, "I have this issue." And we'd discuss this. And he would put his time aside and listen to what you have to say. So, yeah...we had that, and um, just other people around you, people you work with. They say, "Oh this has happened to me. That's nothing."

Daisy attributed her success to the coaching she received. The openness and availability of the manager, even a senior manager, was instrumental in her learning.

Gardenia attributed her growth in the hospitality industry to a male manager that actively mentored her. She began working with him in the same hotel chain in New Orleans. She was in housekeeping when she met him. Gardenia felt that without his support she would not have

moved from housekeeping to the front-desk. She described how the relationship began and how he coached her:

Actually I followed him from the [hotel name] in New Orleans to here ...I started out in housekeeping and then when the [hotel name] took over I transferred from housekeeping to a department called the “Whenever-Whatever” department, which is service express. So from there he began my mentorship. He showed me how to do things, he wouldn’t do things for me but he would just tell me how they were done; with my interactions as far as dealing with different members of my team and dealing with guests.

When the manager demonstrated to Gardenia how to do things, rather than to give instructions, he modeled the correct behavior. The manager’s coaching centered around nurturing positive relationships with her co-workers and with guests.

Tea Rose she attributed her learning to the mentoring she received from her first manager. Her manager was her role model. With her manager’s coaching, she learned most effectively while performing the job. Tea Rose had more challenges than the average employee did, as English was her second language. Tea Rose is self-conscious about her broken English; the language barrier was a hurdle she had to cross as well as to learn the job.

So...Yeah...but my manager was there for 4 years. I think, and my supervisor she was my role model. The one that trained me she was there for 4 years. Yeah. And again the best way to learn is to step into the situation and do it, not to watch.

That’s how she made me a well trained front-desk agent, cause she made me do it and she watched me....Maybe first day, but I remember 1st day I checked people in. And I could hardly understand them. [laugh] But I learned, yeah, I learned

everything, so... [You learn] by doing, you don't watch, you do it. And she was very kind and she basically pushed me to the front row and do it. So... that's the best way how to learn.

In the relationship Tea Rose had with her manager, she appreciated how she was encouraged by her to perform the job under supervision first. There was safety in knowing that her manager was right there when she needed her. She learned quickly in this way and appreciated how her manager taught her not to be afraid of greeting the guest.

Rose said that she trained herself. She learned the computer system on her own. She answered phones at first as she was learning. The women learned from one another how to manage their emotions, how to perform emotion work. Rose learned a great deal just by observing other co-workers. Lily was an especially good example for Rose:

She's [Lily is] like a lead, which is almost like a manager, but not quite. If she handled situation in you can't tell that something's bothered her, you know. She has an extra, you know, special attitude. She talks about things, you know, she makes a guest smile when they're upset.

Gardenia said that she is always learns new things about managing her emotions from her co-workers and managers.

But I have mentors that don't know they are mentors to me...So I pick up things the good things I like from other people about the way they interact with guests and other people, so they're my mentors and they don't even know it.

Learning from others through observation, was so impressionable the women were able to recall the way someone else handled it and were able to try the same technique while they performed

the job. Sunflower Girl explained how an event, which had occurred months prior, was recalled when needed.

When I thought about it, I've seen one of my supervisors done that before, but it hadn't been a recent thing I've seen her do. I just went back in my memory box of how I handle this.

Sunflower Girl attributed her learning to “looking at how other people handle problem guests, self evaluation, and building up my own confidence.” She also said that her learning was experiential. She summarized it this way: “I’ve learned how to deal with it. It comes with experience, that’s what it is.”

Lilac looked to one manager as a role model. Lilac admired her manager, Violet, who always knew the right thing to say to the guest. Lilac said she would like to be like Violet. Violet was successful in managing her emotions during guest encounters. Lilac is admired Violet for how she was able to always find the right thing to say at the right time.

...you look at them and the way they handle guest situations and the way they talk to people. It kinda just flows like, they’re so...it just flows out of their mouth just like they were doing it forever. And sometimes, in my instance, I just have to think about what I’m going to say first then start saying it. You know, I guess as you do it more in like a management role, like you do get used to it, and that’s what I want. That’s what I want! [laugh] But yeah, just the fact that Violet can go up to a guest and just, you know just, when she opens her mouth and talks to them like it calms them and soothes them, I mean, she has that touch, something.

Lilac found that for herself, she had to stop mentally to think about the right thing to say. Whereas Violet and others like her, are able to speak easily. Even though Lilac is in wonderment of Violet, I suspect that Lilac has learned and practiced what she has observed Violet doing.

Wisteria learned from other co-workers and her managers as they negotiated difficult guest encounters. What she learned from them is to modulate her voice to a quiet soft tone when a guest is displaying negative behavior.

One of my co-workers, Magnolia, what she's done is she's learned to keep quiet.

Because the louder you get, the louder they get. So I've kind of adopted that, you know keep your voice down. So they have to listen. Like they're not...you're not yelling at them, waving hands, and throwing stuff at them, just kind of keep it slow. Talk real slow and real quiet. Then they have to listen. And if they chose not to listen then that's their own fault. And they're not going to solve their problem.... Yeah. I mean I've kind of adapted other people's ways of doing things...My woman manager talks really slow, really quiet. So I think that's where I picked it up, cause then people are really like, attentive, and their like "What is she saying? I want to know more." Like if you talk real slow, it's like, its kinda like a mysterious type thing.

Wisteria observed that the technique of speaking softly and slowly was effective for two people she worked with, so she tried the technique herself. At the time of the interview, Wisteria had only been working on the job for six months. Perhaps Wisteria was motivated to observe others because in having been "thrown in the job" she had no other way to learn, except through trial and error.

Teaching others how to do emotion work. Jasmine, Lily and Gardenia as Talent Coaches were more often taking the role as teacher to others. They were eager to pass along to others the benefit of their experience. Often they were role models to their co-workers. Lily was always teaching by her example. Rose named her as someone to whom she looked up. Her positive attitude was pervasive. She would actively seek for opportunities to teach others.

Jasmine was also active in teaching new employees other skills. Jasmine has learned not to explain too much to a guest about the reason for their problem. She made certain to teach new employees not to explain too much to the guest. In addition, she told them not to blame the problem on someone else.

And the other thing, that reminds me of another thing I try to tell them [new employees]. Never try to blame on the hotel or another associate. Even if we know that it's somebody's fault, we just try to skip on that blaming part. Try to deal with the unique single situation that just happened. Try to fix it as soon as possible.

Gardenia had developed from learner to teacher on her job. She described how she coached employees on how to handle difficult guests. "So I consider myself management in training. So and uh...I take on roles similar to my manager, and I pass that on to my talent to raise them up." Gardenia's role as a teacher on the job had an impact upon how others have learned to handle difficult guests. She described an employee she trained that when she started had a poor attitude about the guests.

When I had to train this one girl I thought this was a test. I'm not going to last long, this is a test. Who set me up for this cause she was so difficult to train? And every thing was like "Why? Why do we want to go out there, they're [guests] getting on my nerves!" And I was like, well they're here for you, if they weren't

here you wouldn't have a job. So I went to my then manager and I was like are you testing me do you want me to quit? This girl just doesn't get it. Whenever I tell her to do something she said, "Why, they get on my nerves?" I'd say, we should not say "No," we are here for them. So now she is one of our lead agents. The same girl, and I tell the story... I tell new people, when I train new people I tell them her story about how she came. And she'll tell them too, "Gardenia was really patient." I'm like, Girl, I wanted to strangle you! I've got this person that is getting on my nerves. God, this is a test that's what I kept saying, "Is this a test?"

Gardenia enjoyed teaching. Through the process, she discovered that she has a special talent to teach others. Indeed, she was a patient and encouraging individual. She mentioned that because of her role as Talent Coach she envisioned herself one day as a motivational speaker. She said that she often encouraged her team to excel in their jobs.

The women described in many of their stories that lessons or techniques they learned about how to negotiate difficult guests were carried into subsequent guest encounters. Jasmine expressed that she learned through one incident where she had explained to the guest why his room was not ready that she learned to explain less.

With each new experience, the women learned something new. Sometimes they would commiserate with one another and learn that somebody else had a similar situation. They would laugh about some of the things guests would try to do to get something free. In telling these stories to one another, they taught one another how to handle the next guest better.

Impact on the Women's Career Development

The women discussed Job satisfaction or dissatisfaction frequently. As mentioned, the woman all wished to provide a positive hotel stay for the guest in hopes that the guest would

bring repeat business. The women described positive guest interactions as gratifying and rewarding. These women often enjoyed compliments, gifts or lasting friendships with their guests. They were more likely to want to build a career in the hotel industry. Those women who were dissatisfied were less likely to volunteer for extra duties, possibly ask for reduced hours, a transfer to another hotel department or contemplate quitting the job.

Table 4.6: Impact on the Women's Career Development

Category	Sub-Category	Description
4. Impact on the women's career development	a) Job satisfaction	Generally find the job satisfactory.
	b) Job dissatisfaction	Contemplate quitting, transfer to new job.

Wisteria regarded the hospitality industry to be her chosen career. She viewed the front-desk as short-term. She said that she would work the front-desk for about two years then apply for a transfer to another department. It was her ambition to stay in guest relations rather than hotel operations. She felt that what she learned at the front-desk in invaluable and it would aid her success in future hotel positions. Wisteria hoped her in next job that she would have the opportunity to build longer-term guest relationships.

Its short term at the place I am now, because I want to be...hospitality has different spin-offs. In the hospitality industry I want to do wedding and event planning. So the front-desk is kinda giving me the experience of dealing with people. Not necessarily how to run a hotel. I don't want to know how to run a hotel I want to know how to deal with people. So that's my...customer service vs. how to run a hotel. You either go in saying I want to learn how to run a hotel or I want to do customer service. You know there is a happy medium for some people, but I'm more of the customer service. I want to make everybody happy. So...and I

think in wedding and event planning, that's what you want to do, you want to make everybody happy.

Overall, Wisteria's job satisfaction was high. Her only complaint was that she was required to stand for long periods. She liked the people she works with and appeared to find satisfaction with the overall experience.

Lily also loved her job. She was the woman that never lets a negative guest affect her mood. However, Lily considered leaving her job as front-desk supervisor at a 4-Star hotel, not because she was no longer happy, but because she wanted own her own hotel! She explained that she had always considered the job as a long-term career but had begun to explore other opportunities.

...at one time I viewed it as a long-term career. However, up until recently I'm having a change of heart. I'm, um, I want to work my way up, however I want to own my own hotel. And so I'm currently thinking about different things, speaking with different people, you know to see where I would start, what is it that I need to do and what are the next steps that I need to take. And I don't think that I'm going to own my own hotel, I *know* that I'm going to own my own hotel. I know that for a fact.

Sunflower Girl chose the hospitality industry as a career, and held Bachelors in Hospitality. She began her work as a front-desk agent. At first she felt intimidated by angry guests, especially those that yelled at her. In a previous section, I described how she would freeze in place wondering when the yelling would stop. She said, "After going to college and studying hospitality I asked myself 'What did I do?' I still do occasionally have that view..."

Later, when her manager gave her a performance review and coached her, Sunflower Girl

found the job less stressful. She had learned new techniques and skills to negotiate difficult guests. Her manager, who was also a female, helped Sunflower Girl to see that she was not alone in feeling intimidated by angry guests. With new confidence, Sunflower Girl's job satisfaction increased. At the time of the interview, it was clear that she was one of the more respected members of the team.

Job dissatisfaction. Much like depersonalization and personalization of guest encounters, the women experienced job satisfaction on a continuum. Sunflower Girl was generally satisfied on the job. However, she indicated that after two, almost three years at the front-desk she was ready for a change, that she had been there "too long." She felt that some other type of position in the hotel would be more desirable. Sunflower Girl did not consider the front-desk as the most desirable. She said it was "not my passion." She preferred to have a job within the industry that did not require as much interaction with the guest.

I interviewed Gardenia twice during data collection. In the first interview, Gardenia beamed with satisfaction when she said that she loved her job. She considered her job as a career having already been in the industry for nine years. Gardenia said, "I feel that this job has put me on the path to doing other things." She envisioned her future in a role of motivating others, since that is what she did on her job. What she enjoyed about working for the [hotel name] was that she could do anything to please her guests.

I do for them [guests] what I would expect. And working for the [hotel chain name] you can do that. I don't know any other hotel companies that let you just go out and...if the guest will tell you my favorite movie is "this" and they will let you go out and buy it have it in that guests room for them when they arrive. And that's

I guess this company that I work for I put my personality into what I am doing and not get slapped on the hand for doing it.

In Gardenia's second interview, I asked her to explain in more detail the experience she had with the guest that brought her the bottle of wine but seemed to withhold it from Gardenia as she handed it to her. Gardenia had implied in the first interview that there was discrimination on the part of the guest, but I wanted to know how Gardenia perceived the incident. Gardenia told me that she felt the guest was passing judgment on her because of her gold teeth and because she was African-American. Gardenia proceeded in the second interview to tell me about another guest that called her a racial slur. I explained the situation in a previous section of this chapter. I noted that she appeared to have changed her view of the job during the second interview. Perhaps she had become more comfortable with me and expressed her true feelings. In the second interview, which was conducted six months after the first, Gardenia was contemplating taking a new job with a new company, which had been offered to her that week. She expressed that taking verbal and mental abuse from guests for the benefit of the company was no longer as gratifying to her. She still loved the guests that were a joy to serve, but especially after the encounter with the racially offensive guest, Gardenia's mood appeared to have changed. She also had had some significant conversations with managers about advancement opportunities. They were discouraging Gardenia to pursue management because of her gold dental work, saying that it would be a barrier for her career growth. Gardenia could not help but feel hurt by these statements. She was considering the job offer because the hiring manager had met her in person and was so pleased with her attitude he offered her a job on the spot. Gardenia was encouraged to have met a potential employer that had high regard for her customer service skill, despite her

appearance. She had not received validation from her managers in the company in which she had worked faithfully for eleven years.

Tea Rose, as stated earlier, left the front-desk two years prior to the interview to work in another area of the hotel with less customer contact. Tea Rose felt especially wounded by withstanding the worst of customer assaults. She viewed them as throwing darts at her. What appeared to distress her most was not necessarily the difficult guests, but the fact that she did not have *control* over the outcome. Still in her current job of catering, she had to depend on banquets to perform their job to satisfy her guest. To have control over the outcome, the ability to prevent customer problems, was what she desired most in her job.

Again I'm in catering now. And I am doing this business meetings and stuff.

Again, it's the banquets that make them happy. I do my paperwork, I'm in touch with the guest. And some are difficult some are not. But again if banquets messes up, that's it! I cannot do anything. Again that's out of my control. So I'm thinking of maybe move into banquets. Again maybe it's a department I've never been to; I've never worked for. Because I had an experience where I did everything right on my end, but banquets messed up. You know, so, what's the point, again same problem.

At the beginning of the job, the process of learning was satisfying and challenging. However, once it was apparent to Tea Rose that she had learned the job, she found the job too repetitive. Tea Rose felt that to a certain extent, one must come to the job with the aptitude for guest relations. This may be because of her inability to depersonalize the encounter; possibly, she felt that she did not have the innate ability for the job. Tea Rose said, "You need to be born to be in hospitality. Its, um...you don't learn that, you are born with that." She added:

And everything was in the learning process. As soon as you're done with learning, and then you're just doing everything over and over....there was no space for learning anymore, you know. I wanted to do more things but it was limited. The job itself is easy, um, you have to use the computer, the phone be very polite, that's...that's not a problem.

The repetition and the difficult guests began to wear on Tea Rose. As she mentioned, she felt that the difficult guests were directing their anger at her personally. She described it as if she were a cake; each time a difficult guest attacked her, they took a piece of cake from her, until the cake was gone.

And you get this difficult guest, they take a piece of you, and they kind of...they wear you down. So the energy not...there's no energy left for that anymore.

She wanted to make people happy, but the fact that some people simply would not be happy was a disappointment to her. She lost her enthusiasm for the job. The wear of the job exhausted her.

...because it was this constantly not happy people that would make you kind of make you tired. You want to make everybody happy—some people don't want to be happy.... So Um...that's why I left. Because of these difficult guests. And enthusiasm, it's the bottom line for doing your job. If you lose your enthusiasm, that's it, you cannot do your job, especially the front-desk. Its like you run out of fuel. If you run out of fuel the car's not going to go! It's not going to move!

Tea Rose did not consider taking a supervisory position to manage others. The fact that she would be dealing with difficult guests of employees bothered her most. Managing others was not intimidating to her.

Tea Rose had strong feelings about how difficult the job of front-desk agent was. She felt that the front-desk agents were not paid well enough for all the problems they must resolve on a daily basis. She complained that the front-desk was often short staffed to save on labor costs, but that this directly influenced the quality of service delivered.

And these people are not paid enough. Usually the hourly employees that, those that really make a difference, they are not paid well. And I know that labor is a very high cost at the hotel, but they do make a difference. So, you know. And I think it is a problem. That's why you have such a big turnover at the front-desk, because first of all they don't get paid well and they get a lot of crap. You know. And all it would take to get a really good front-desk agent, pay them, keep them. And you're going to make thousands of people happy. You know, I don't know why they don't do it. I would, you know, I would. But then it's the cost of labor at the hotel that matters. That's why. It's a tough business.

Curiously, even though Tea Rose left the job as a front-desk agent because of the difficult guests, Tea Rose aspired to own a small hotel in Europe. She explained that she would enjoy being the owner of a small hotel because she would be in control of the operations. Still I wonder if owning the hotel would really be the answer for Tea Rose, considering how wounded she can feel by aggressive guests. If it were her own hotel, yes she may have more control on outcomes, but there are some things for which she will not have control: a worker who reports out for an illness, delivery of supplies delayed, or any number of things. It may be that Tea Rose was struggling with her choice of career. After she had invested so much time and money on a Master's in Hospitality it may be difficult to admit that she might be in the wrong career. It

remains to be seen what direction her path will take her, but it is possible that the negative experiences will continue to haunt her.

Iris' chief complaint was that managers do not defend or protect employees from abusive guests. In the case of the woman who called for directions and later called Iris an "f---ing Mexican," Iris observed her manager excuse the woman's behavior and not defend Iris as an employee. The woman came to the desk to complain to the manager that she did not want to talk to Iris because of her accent.

...she stopped at the desk to speak to a manager, that she cannot understand me, and you know, the manager said, "You can always speak, uh, ask for somebody else." I think that I was thinking at that time she should have been told, "I really apologize that you feel that way but actually we never had issue. We never had complaints like those in the past." ...what I'm trying to say is that at some point management needs to try to defend and protect, you know the employees. Because it's important to give the guest the best service but I don't think we should encourage them being, you know, rude and uh,...aggressive.

Iris felt betrayed because the manager did not defend her reputation. The woman's opinion of Iris prevailed over Iris' feelings. The old adage that "the customer is always right" may have influenced the manager's attempt to soothe the guest. Iris watched as the guest was granted a gratuity for the inconvenience.

You know she was drunk, she was complaining and she was given a complimentary appetizer. I took it a little bit personally. She was actually treated as a regular guest. So at some point I feel a little bit betrayed.

Iris felt that the guest should not have been allowed to offend her. In a separate incident with another person of the hotel, the woman threatened a manager's safety. The manager had not given the woman a free meal as she claimed to the bartender. The manager's name was Joe. Iris explained, "She stopped by the bar the next day and said she will make a sign that says 'kill Joe' and she would tell everybody." Eventually the woman was asked to leave the hotel. Still Iris was not defended and protected from the abuse. Nor was she acknowledged as having done a professional job in a difficult situation. Iris felt that her compensation did not make up for the difficult guests she must endure. Sometimes she felt it is not worth it to do the job as Iris felt she gave much more than she received.

The most frequent complaint about management was that they kept the front-desk short staffed. The front-desk agent performs multiple tasks. Check guests in, answer the phones, print reports, prepare for the next shift and respond to guest requests. So when the front-desk is short staffed often the tasks not associated with the immediate needs of guests are not completed. The result is the work that did not get done falls to the next shift. The women complained that some agents did not perform administrative tasks; often they were doing work left over from the previous shift. In addition, when the front-desk is short staffed guests have to wait for service.

Lack of management support in the day-to-day operations also negatively affected Iris. Management, according to Iris, kept the front-desk short staffed to save money. Iris felt that an understaffed front-desk contributed to the number of guest complaints received. In turn, when a guest complained, the front-desk agent was empowered to offer a gratuity such as a free meal from the hotel restaurant. Iris felt that the money spent on offering gratuities should be spent on staffing which would ultimately reduce guest complaints. As a whole, Iris was dedicated to doing the best job she can as a front-desk agent. She took pride in her work, which may be why she felt

hurt by guest complaints. She had received some recognition as employee of the month. She felt at least that she is appreciated for her customary professionalism as an employee.

Daisy was accomplished at her job but said she would not stay long-term. The stress of handling multiple tasks at the front-desk and the difficult guests influenced how she felt about the job.

...when I first started it was something I thought I could do for a very long time, but now, it still is sort of, you know. I'm still deciding. I feel its something I could do, like on the side. Maybe a two day in a week type of thing. I don't think I would be able to handle it just full-time. Because, um, sometimes it's difficult like when you have these guests. And you're having your own issues. You come to work and that's there, its stressful. And I just feel like the hotel has sometimes, umm, too many tasks for you. So sometimes it's too much for you to handle.

Daisy's job attitude and dissatisfaction was related to her experiences with difficult guests. The job stress included not only the difficult guests but also required extra tasks. Perhaps Daisy did not find multi-tasking easy and preferred instead to focus on one task at a time.

Rose indicated she was not likely to stay in the hospitality industry. She said that she loved customer service, but she might look for a job in some other capacity. For Rose, her feelings about her work were mixed: "We have fun at the hotel some times. We have our good days...a lot of bad days." Her chief complaint was that the compensation structure had recently and suddenly changed. The front-desk agents had been paid to up-sell a room rate and got 10% of the rate per night. At the time of the interview, the incentive program had decreased to a \$5 spiff for a rate up-sell of \$30. Rose was very upset about the change and spoke about it at length.

It [the new compensation structure] frustrates you even more, first I had something to look forward to, but now it...it's even more frustrating because you feel like you're working for minimum wage... You are doing a job where you can barely afford to do what you used to do anymore cause it's a extra cut in your salary... So that can really affect one's attitude from a difficult customer standpoint.

One cannot blame Rose for reacting to the compensation change. She expected a certain income potential when she took the job, but some months into the job, the rules had changed.

It was disconcerting to Lilac that she was not encouraged by management to build her skills for management. She had worked at various hotels and the jobs were always entry-level jobs. She asked about going to management training but was not given the opportunity to attend. Consequently, she was coming to the realization that the hotel industry may not be a long-term career.

I could see it long-term if I was I guess set in the right direction. It's right now where I'm at I just keep getting these entry level positions, you know. I'm always going... Lets see here... I'm always going from front-desk to front-desk at different properties, or concierge. So I'm not, I don't really see, I'm not really moving up the way I want to, you know... I've applied to like supervisor positions, management you know, their always telling me I need more experience. I like how do I get the experience if you're not gonna, you know... I don't know... I have a lot of experience... I do what managers do I just don't have that title so they're not going to hire me. So... So yeah I'm kinda like well, am I ever going to get a management role?... I'm always constantly asking questions like what do you do to, like, you know, go to trainings or what-not just to get more experience. And

people are always, “Oh we’ll set you up. We’ll do this or we’ll do that...” You know it’s just a lot of talk. It’s never really been set or done. And when I do bring it up again and again, they’ll, you know, it’s the same answer.

Lilac was adamant that she wanted to get away from problem guests when she asked to work in concierge. In addition, she identified the workload at the front-desk as stressful. Lack of management support was also a factor in how she felt about the job.

Um...sometimes. like I guess its different situations...there were times when I would be the only person at the desk working and, um, just encountering difficult guests, difficult situations, I would hate it, I would hate working the [front] desk, I would hate my job, I didn’t like being there. It got to the point where, um, I wouldn’t, I just wouldn’t put my all into it. I would just kind of just get through the day. Whereas, you know, you should always want to do the best that you can do.

But sometimes I felt like they [managers] weren’t giving me that respect...

Bad days were hectic, filled with multiple tasks, guests were difficult, and the front-desk was short staffed.

For many of the women job satisfaction was related to the nature and number of difficult guests they must handle. A few said they found great satisfaction in the job, even said they loved. Interestingly more of the participants indicated that they felt more job dissatisfaction than job satisfaction. They knew that they had a job to do, and they sought to do it to the best of their ability. They had their good days and they had their bad days. However, the factor that influenced dissatisfaction most was the negative guest encounters. They spoke of feeling wounded, attacked, offended, or ridiculed. This did not balance well in the face of low pay and working in a short-staffed department. Dissatisfied front-desk agents tended to consider other options for

employment. The maximum length of time spent on the front-desk was two years. After two years the women were seeking new opportunities.

Chapter Summary

In this study, I sought to determine how women front-desk agents learned to negotiate difficult guests; to examine how job status, race and ethnicity, and gender impact guest encounters. The findings of this study indicated that gender and race did influence how the guests perceived the women. It also revealed that ethnicity, nationality, appearance, and age were factors affecting guest reaction. These personal characteristics were openly expressed as undesirable. Guests had no remorse about calling the women derogatory names. When the guest addressed these characteristics unfavorably, the women were personally offended. They struggled with providing professional service in the face of intolerant guests.

Though this study does not compare women to men, it reveals that the guests often took into account the fact that the participants were women. Their job status or authority was questioned. Ethnicity and race were factors for the guests. Some guests verbalized disdain for a woman based on her race or accent. Some guests choose not to be served by them because of race or ethnicity. These factors cannot be separated one from another. Being a woman, white, or black, American born or foreign was often a potpourri of reasons garnering respect or disrespect by the guests.

The guests demonstrated various negative behaviors. Yelling and anger was the most common. One guest threw his belongings in anger on the desk and went behind the counter threatening the desk agent. Guests were frequently described as lying about problems to get something free from the hotel. Guests threw keys, threw wadded paper and pounded on the counter. Some guests were personally offensive casting judgment on the woman's accent, race,

ethnicity, appearance, or gender. Wisteria said, “People underestimate the job. They think its just printing out a bunch of things, checking-in, checking-out people. They don’t understand how many guest complaints you really do get in a day.”

Because of the negative displayed guest behavior, all of the women described the need to control their emotions. Emotional labor was displayed as surface acting more often than deep acting. The institutionalized emotional labor required to perform the job was exhausting for the women, causing them to feel emotional dissonance when their true feelings did not match displayed emotions. Several of the women were unable to overcome the stress of this emotional dissonance, choosing to ask for a transfer to another department.

The women learned they must depersonalize the guest encounter. If they were able to depersonalize guest behavior, they were able to elevate their attitude and behavior over that of the guest. Some found job satisfaction in the process of making an unhappy guest happy. If they personalized the encounter, they suffered emotional hurt, job fatigue, and contemplated leaving the job. The reasons for burnout include emotional dissonance; acting as a friendly pleasant employee when internal feelings contradict external emotional displays over a long period of time (Hochschild, 2003). Guest anger directed towards the women is perceived as personal failure if the guest leaves dissatisfied (Forseth, 2005).

This study inquired as to how negotiating difficult guests impacted job tenure and satisfaction. Relating to difficult guests was stressful. The workload at the front-desk was stressful. The women felt overwhelmed when the desk was understaffed. Some women were looking for new job opportunities with less guest interaction. Dissatisfaction with the job was mentioned frequently. Those that said they loved the job were focused on pleasing guests. They

received gratification and appreciation from gracious guests. Overall, most of the women's dissatisfaction with the job was because of the repeated occurrence of difficult guests.

Some women would act out a positive display of emotions, regardless of how the guest spoke to or regarded her. Some would feel hurt and withdraw from the situation. Two women described feeling frozen when the guest yelled at them. Others chose to quit the job or considered the job as short term.

The women genuinely wanted to make their guests happy and they understood it was a necessary attitude required of the position. Even though the women used various techniques to depersonalize the guest encounter, most of the women enjoyed their job and its challenges.

Many of the women said that they gain gratification on the job when they are able to turn an upset guest into a satisfied guest. Lily looked for opportunities to help difficult guests because she takes delight in changing guest attitudes and moods. Jasmine's goal is to conclude every guest encounter with a happy guest. Jasmine can usually satisfy them by offering an amenity, free night's stay or some other compensation for their inconvenience. The most challenging type of guest for her is not the one that is angry, yelling, or using offensive language. For Jasmine, she finds the guest that does not want compensation for the inconvenience as challenging. If she cannot send a guest away satisfied with the hotel experience, she feels frustrated.

The data analysis revealed that the women learned primarily by experience. The women learned during the encounter and through reflection on the encounter. They observed co-workers and managers, practicing techniques they observed as efficient. They were coached or mentored. Through experiential knowledge, they improved how they interacted with other guests. If they had learned a specific technique had calmed an angry guest, they practiced that technique in the future.

The women learned by observing others, receiving feedback, and coaching and by personal experiences. The hotels of this study mainly practice on-the-job training only offering a few classes on communication skills. The women said that there is little time on the job to debrief with one another about difficult guests.

Lessons the women learned over time about how to negotiate difficult guests were often transferred to the next guest encounter. Some reported that when they learned to remain calm and speak in a controlled manner, the guest would respond favorably. They continued to practice such techniques on subsequent guests, as they were successful. All the women were impressive because of their professionalism and desire to please the guest. They demonstrated strength each time a negative encounter was turned into a successful one.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how women of the hotel front office learn to negotiate difficult guest encounters with regard to race and gender. Research questions guiding this study were:

1. How did the nature of job status, race, and/or gender influence how the women negotiated the guest encounter?
2. How did learning occur?
3. How did their experiences influence tenure and job satisfaction?

Introduction

As is reflected in Chapter Four, there was a wealth of data to review. In this final chapter, I will present and explain my conclusions. I will identify the limitations of the study and discuss implications for research and practice in the field of human resources organizational development.

Conclusions

There were three conclusions that reflect the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the participants.

1. Women learn to silence their voices in subservience to the guest through incidental and informal learning, connectedness and communities of practice;
2. Guests may reinforce asymmetrical power relations based the desk agent's gender, race, ethnicity, age, or class; and

3. The guest encounter is experienced as emotion work along a continuum of personalization and depersonalization; such job stressors may have long-term effects on wellbeing and job continuance.

I will now discuss each conclusion and expound upon how each conclusion contributes to existing research.

Conclusion One: Women learn to silence their voices in subservience to the guest through incidental and informal learning, connectedness and communities of practice.

The first conclusion is that women learn to silence their voices in subservience to the guest through incidental and informal learning, connectedness and communities of practice. They learned together and shared with one another ways to downplay their own feelings in deference to the guest. They commiserated with one another over difficult situations.

In silencing their own voices, the women's subservience fuels the myth of sovereignty (Korczynski, 2002). The myth of sovereignty exists when the guest perceives her status as greater than that of the front-desk agent. The women of this study are compelled to project an always friendly, compliant attitude in the context of relating to the guest. Management capitalizes on friendly and compliant employees for institutional advantage within the marketplace. In the hospitality industry, as in any customer service industry, quality customer service is held as an advantage over the competition. When an institution requires one to emote for financial gain it is engaged in institutional emotional labor (Hochschild, 2003). They were required by management to silence their own thoughts and feelings when relating to a difficult guest. They must listen to the guest first, then to apologize for the problem. Lilac said, "We are just told like to listen. Um, you know apologize." Sunflower Girl said to wait your turn to speak and "first of all, let them know you apologize." The women must remain calm. Jasmine said that it is important to "stay

really calm and you respond as if nothing happened in a nice manner with a nice voice and a smile...” I posit that to silence their own thoughts and feelings when relating to guests the women’s experience is similar to the silencing Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, (1997) describe as “the absence of voice,” (p. 24). In many instances, the women were personally offended by guests yet had to remain silent about their feelings. The women were compelled to take a “passive, subdued and subordinate” (Belenky, et al., 1997, p. 30) position to appease the guest, but consequently at a cost to their own well-being.

The passive, subdued, and subordinate stance is merely an act however. The women are not likely prone to behaving in their normal lives in a passive, subdued, and subordinate manner as Belenky, et al. (1997) describe. In actuality, they are proficient and accomplished women. They are able to maintain personal control in the face of the public display of angry frustrated guests. Hochschild (2003) has named the controlled response to negative guest behavior as institutionalized emotional labor. The institution of the hotel industry calls for front-desk agents to maintain a positive, happy attitude regardless of guest behavior. Not only does the industry require the front-desk agent to engage in surface acting where she smiles regardless of internal feelings, but the agent is required to engage in deep acting that will enable her to maintain the positive attitude for the entire shift (Hochschild, 2003). Hotel management actively encourages the agent to project this image. Gardenia was told by her manager to “think of it as you are playing a role.” Playing a role that does not reflect internal feelings and it creates emotional dissonance for the front-desk agent. The service employee feels emotional dissonance when they are required to maintain false external emotions over a long period of time (Hochschild, 2003).

The word “voice” can be used to represent speech or choice of words, the woman’s identity in as indicated by what she says, and can be used to reflect power and influence (Hayes &

Flannery, 2002). In this sense, the women's choice of words was crucial to how the guest responded to her. Several of the women indicated that they were careful or "used kid gloves" when speaking to an angry guest. As for their identity, guests judged the women in their choice of words; their very credibility was under scrutiny of the guest. In addition, the women could be influential to guests in what and how they spoke to the guest. Some of the emotion work required was to influence the emotions of the guest. The women were to defuse guest anger by conveying confidence and authority through their voice.

Gaining one's voice or developing a voice is an aspect of critical race theory that has significance (Collins, (2002). Historically black women working in domestic labor were judged by their degree of deference, submissiveness, and obedience in relation to their employer (Collins, 2000). Even one's choice of words when speaking to authority was critical. Collins (2002) explains this notion: "Techniques of linguistic deference included addressing domestics by their first names, calling them 'girls,' and requiring that the domestic call the employer 'ma'am'" (pp. 56, 57). For the women of color participating in the study I venture to say this cultural background may have influenced how they interacted with guests.

Reskin and Roos (1990) have researched the idea that some occupations are devalued by the sheer fact that they are female-dominated. Many capable men in the hospitality industry hold positions at the front desk. However, is the male status perceived as lesser-than because women work in the same job? That would be a question for another dissertation; this author is not prepared to research the question at this time. Reskin and Roos (1990) explain that any occupation that pays a low salary and offers minimal promotion opportunities is by its nature devalued and is not perceived as a desirable permanent job for men. They also point out that women more often hold jobs requiring emotion work. Women sales people of their research were

to have a softer approach to sales than men in the same job, hinting at the notion that women should not be domineering, but give deference to others. The feminization of jobs, such as the front-desk agent, serves to lower the job status but also serves to silence the women to the point of invisibility (Reskin & Roos, 1990).

In giving deference to the guest, the women contributed to the myth that the guest is superior to themselves (Korczynski, 2002). Managers may also be contributing to this myth when they fail to support the front-desk agents (Harris & Reynolds, 2004). The women frequently mentioned that they were left alone at the desk or could not find a manager. In addition, Iris witnessed that a manager did not defend her credibility to an angry guest. Management complacency may fuel the “increasingly vicious and escalating cycle of abuse, mistreatment, and exploitation,” (Harris & Reynolds, 2004, p. 352).

What the women learned to do was to silence their voices, but how they learned to do this was through informal and incidental learning, connectedness and the community of practice. Many of the characteristics of informal and incidental learning as defined by Marsick and Watkins (1999) are present throughout the women’s stories. Learning is experimental and non-institutional; it is a by-product of checking a guest into the hotel. The women reported that learning occurred in the moment of the guest encounter. Some literally tried a technique, such as speaking softly, and discovered in that moment the guest’s anger diffused.

Incidental learning is enhanced through “creativity, proactivity and critical reflection” (Marsick, Volpe, & Watkins, 1999, p. 88, 89). Creativity implies that the women should be allowed to be inventive in trying new things to satisfy guests. Many of the women described unique things they did for guests and emphasized that creativity was especially helpful when dealing with frustrated, angry, or irate guests. Proactivity is necessary in anticipating a guest’s

needs before they can reach the point of frustration. In addition, critical reflection is necessary to incidental learning and was demonstrated by the women when they described thinking about the day's events as they drove home at the end of their shift.

The women described replaying the guest encounter in their mind and reflecting upon what they could have done to improve the situation. This type of reflection is what Schön (1987) calls *reflection on action*, "thinking back on what we have done in order to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome," (p. 26). *Reflection-in-action* is making a judgment while doing something, such as negotiating a difficult guest. Schön distinguishes the two stating that reflection-in-action is, "...an *action-present*...our thinking serves to reshape what we are doing while we are doing it," (p. 26). Some of the women described doing something in the moment that effectively calmed the guest; stating that they found it worked so "they just kept on with that," [Jasmine].

Schön's (1987) work was ground-breaking in adult education but there are some that respectfully disagree with him that reflection-in-action is only performed by professionals, or what he calls, "a community of practitioners whose special knowledge sets them off from other individuals in relation to whom they hold special rights and privileges," (p. 32). Clegg (1999) posits that Schön's definition of a professional is contrary to feminist analysis. Clegg says Schön "shows no awareness of feminism as part of the radical critique of professionalism or the work on gender dynamics," (p. 174). Specifically, Schön does not view low status workers, such as factory workers, as possessing the skill to reflect upon their work. Clegg points out that Schön does not attribute the same knowledge claims to female-dominated professions, such as teaching or nursing, as to male-dominated professions. She questions his definition of professions stating that women now have a stronger presence in the workforce than they did in the 1960s and 1970s. She

challenges Schön's notions, posing the idea that if women are to possess the knowledge to practice reflection-in-action, is reflection-in-action now devalued by Schön's definition? Clegg might ask, if Schön is correct in his assumptions, then do women at a lower status, such as front-desk agents, have the skill to practice reflection-in-action? My findings indicate that the women did practice reflection-in-action as Schön defines it in its purest form, without regard to masculine bias.

To be creative, proactive and exercise critical reflection the women needed to have self-knowledge or connectedness with self (Hayes & Flannery, 2002). Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1997) refer to this connectedness with self as subjective knowledge; which is exercised when a woman listens to her own inner voice in decision-making. The women frequently told me of situations in which they were required to make decisions based on their own knowledge as often another co-worker or manager was not present.

The women actively learned from one another. Hayes and Flannery (2002) explain why women are prone to learning from one another. These include physiological, psychological, sociological and social-psychological, anthropological and political explanations. The authors cite numerous studies that point to the possible reasons why women learn in these ways. However, they caution scholars and researchers from making broad assumptions that all women learn in connectedness with others. Some women learn best on their own. Even so, the women often took time to learn from others though their busy work environment gave them little opportunity to do so. They were eager to tell me their stories and appeared to have a sense of relief that someone wanted to hear how challenging negotiating difficult guests could be. Discussions about difficult guests were stimulated back on the job because I interjected myself into their environment by conducting off-site interviews. The women need opportunity to interact with colleagues,

encouragement to actively learn from others, and time to evaluate their own values and beliefs that govern their actions. What Gardenia needed from her colleagues after the woman used the racial slur was for someone to listen to her so she could process what the incident meant to her. As she told me the story, she said she felt the second interview was like therapy. She said that she had not found someone, even among her friends that would listen—at least in a manner that she felt was understood. Even if I could not fully understand her pain, she knew I had given her space to process safely her feelings.

Enz and Siguaw (2003) examined the best practices of hotels around the country. One hotel was found to have created a self-directed team in housekeeping. The result was improved customer service and staff motivation. One reason this may have worked so well is that it provided the means for situated cognition within the workplace. Stein (1998) says that situated cognition occurs when the learner creates meaning from daily activities. Likewise, hotel front-desk agents can learn from self-directed teams to benefit from the real events of daily activities in a way that classroom training could not provide. Thus learning to improve guest services does not end after employee orientation but continues as the self-directed team takes opportunity to learn from one another. Opportunity to reflect on events would enable the women to learn more effectively.

The concept of self-directed teams is referred in adult education literature as communities of practice (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, Schell & Black, 1997; Wenger, 1998). As a community of practice, they teach one another the skills of emotion work (Hochschild, 1996; Wenger, 1998). Hotel management should recognize that a strong community of practice is readily available and should encourage social learning. While the team may be temporal or continually changing as members enter and leave, the group can benefit from learning from one

another. Wenger (1998) says that this ebb and flow of the group dynamics creates a shared history of learning. Where there is a shared history groups learn through “forms of participation and reification,” (Wenger, 1998, p. 87).

Gould-Williams (1999) studied the impact of employee performance on guest loyalty and the guest’s perceived feeling about service quality. Using the SEVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) Gould-Williams examined the impact of performance cues on guest perceptions. Her findings demonstrate that key performers should be identified by management to further equip them with skills to perform well. Data from this study suggests that key performers are also good examples to other workers. Therefore learning opportunities which include group work or create a community of practice may also translate best practices to other workers. Managers should also take on the role of learning facilitator, rather than as the dictator of rules and policies (Gilbert & Guerrier, 1997). Managers with strong interpersonal skills are more likely to see higher productivity among employees (Gilbert & Guerrier, 1997).

I will speak later about the personal impact of denying one’s self upon the women. Next, I will explore how the woman’s gender, race, ethnicity, age and class influenced the guest encounter.

Conclusion Two: Guests may reinforce asymmetrical power relations based the desk agent’s gender, race, ethnicity, age, or class.

The second conclusion of this study is that guests may reinforce asymmetrical power relations based the desk agent’s gender, race, ethnicity, age, or class. This is an important consideration because Malveaux (1999) points out that the status of women of color within the job market will remain in low-paying jobs, also attributable to the status of Black women as a

“mule” (Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 48). Historical attitudes of African American slaves as property, as was also the case for women and children, have influenced society’s perception of human rights (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Everyday racism exists despite white perceptions and denial. As recipients of everyday racism African Americans view the white majority as insensitive and insincere (Hill-Collins, 1991).

We see the evidence of racial discrimination when we look closely at Gardenia’s experience with the guest who used a racial slur. Gardenia was so impacted that she was moved to go around the desk. The offense moved her body into action. She would have continued to move around the desk had she not been stopped. She said that she did not know what she was going to do once she got around the desk, but she was moved anyway. The guest may have intended to hurt Gardenia personally. The guest chose to attack Gardenia verbally, emotionally and on a vulnerable personal level. Everyday racist actions and comments can be blatant and profound for victimized individuals (Deitch, Barsky, Butz, Chan, Brief & Bradley, 2003).

Johnson-Bailey (1994) found that women who are confronted with the forces of race, gender, class and color use coping mechanisms of silence, negotiation, and resistance. In deconstructing Gardenia’s dramatic experience, we can see how she was silent at first when she encountered the guest. She even stood back to observe the situation before intervening. The situation began to escalate when the angry guest told her to “go back from where she came.” Gardenia took a more active stance of negotiation when she said, “And where am I from?” This exchange between the guest and Gardenia was meant to imply that because Gardenia was African-American that she should go back to Africa. Gardenia demonstrated resistance when it became grossly personal by attempting to move around the desk.

Class issues were paramount in the exchange Gardenia had with her management about her gold teeth. Again, Gardenia coped by first remaining silent. Since the second interview, Gardenia has contacted me to say that she lost her job at the hotel for some “trumped up reasons.” Now she is looking for another job. She has been turned down because she does not “meet dress code.” Gardenia told me that she negotiated with the HR manager that she would take a non-customer facing role, then when she has insurance she would fix her teeth. Her story continues along this vein.

From the field of sociology, Brown (2003) researched the impact of racial stratification upon mental health from the perspective of critical race theory. He hypothesized that there are mental health problems that could exist; these include: “(1) nihilistic tendencies, (2) anti-self issues, (3) suppressed anger expression, (4) delusional denial tendencies, and (5) extreme racial paranoia,” (Brown, 2003, p. 292). Prolonged exposure to racism and other forms of discrimination can have devastating effects (Deitch, Barsky, Butz, Cahn, Brief, & Bradley, 2003). Likewise, the less blatant discrimination, “subtle discriminatory behaviors, such as avoidance of Blacks, ‘closed’ and unfriendly verbal and nonverbal communication” has much the same effect. (Deitch, et al., 2003, p. 1301). The hospitality industry, which has historically been a patriarchal industry, contributes to classism often intersecting race and gender in the process in the pigeonholing of certain ethnic groups to certain jobs (Adib & Guerrier, 2003; Guerrier, 1999). Ransford and Miller (1983) posit that race and gender, for Black women, are so closely tied they refer to this phenomena as “ethgender” (p.46).

Some women were not confronted with race or classism but only with issues of gender. Wisteria, a young white woman, was asked by a guest to “get her manager.” Then when her female manager arrived, the guest did not want to speak to the manager either, presumably

wishing to speak to a man instead of a woman. Reskin and Roos (1990) speak of gender related job queues, where males and females are typecast into certain jobs and roles within organizations. This speaks not only to the expectations of management bur also “the dictates of the customer,” (Reskin & Roos, 1990, p. 38).

When the woman bears the brunt of negative attacks it can have a negative effect on future guest relations and ultimately customer satisfaction (Gould-Williams, 1999; Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, & Jansen, 2005). Most people, because they are human, would struggle with their work attitude after a personal attack and feel emotionally exhausted (Van Dijk & Kirk, 2007: Walters & Raybould, 2007)). At least, one would have to take a step back and calculate their next move. Personal attacks on the women not only affect them but it influences how the women perform on the job. Guests may not receive the same level of service as was given by the front-desk agent before the personal attack.

Organizations should anticipate the handling difficult guest encounters could have a negative effect on performance, job satisfaction and retention (Reynolds & Harris, 2006; Van Dijk & Kirk, 2007; Walters & Raybould, 2007). Difficult guest encounters are a given by-product within the service industry. Every service industry proprietor has entertained an angry customer. Management should anticipate this and support employees in the process of relating to difficult guests (Harris & Reynolds, 2004). Employees should not be penalized if the guest complains but should be defended for their adherence to professionalism. Guests should not be allowed to continue in demoralizing behavior if an employee reports it (Harris & Reynolds, 2004). This can be accomplished by a “take over” by the manager, whereby the manager personally cares for the guest, shielding employees from abuse.

Customer behavior, or “Jaycustomers” (Lovelock, 2001), most commonly presented as anger or verbal attacks. Rarely did the guest threaten physical safety or make sexual innuendos toward the women. This was consistent with the findings of Harris and Reynolds (2004) in their study of customer behavior as reported by workers in the service industry. They posit that when managers fail to control customer misbehavior they are contributing to the notion that the customer is always right. Iris expressed that she felt betrayed by her manager when he did not defend her to the customer that complained about her accent. Failure of management support is found to contribute to job burnout among hospitality workers (Walters & Raybould, 2007). Management that is not supportive is essentially silencing the women, when they are not supportive as in Iris’ case (Hayes & Flannery, 2002; Reskin & Roos, 1990). The women then learn that they are to remain silent in their role as front-desk agents.

Next, I will examine how coping with the emotional work of depersonalization had long-term affects on the women’s wellbeing and their decision to continue in the job.

Conclusion Three: The guest encounter is experienced as emotion work along a continuum of personalization and depersonalization; such job stressors may have long-term effects on wellbeing and job continuance.

My third conclusion is that the guest encounter is experienced as emotion work on a continuum along a range of personalization and depersonalization, and such job stressors may have long-term effects on wellbeing and job continuance. When asked, the women all said they would tell a new person simply, “Don’t take it personal[ly].” The skill to depersonalize was what they taught one another. The successful ones had learned not to take events of the day home with them. Even so, this research reveals that the degree of depersonalization varies day by day, guest by guest, and worker by worker. There is no simple formula for success when emotions of both

the guest and the woman front-desk agent are taken into account. An individual may find it easy to depersonalize with an upset guest who complains about room service. But the same woman could personalize an encounter, especially if it is directed at her personal characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, job status or age.

The women are required to perform emotional labor as front-desk agents and are expected to do emotion work to defer to the status and emotions of others (Reskin & Roos, 1990). This emotion work is sold as a commodity in public-service jobs (Hochschild, 2003). Customers assume the right to publicly vent anger toward the service worker because they have paid for the service rendered which includes receiving positive emotional display (Grandey, Fisk, Mattia, & Jansen, 2005; Hochschild, 2003; Korzinsky, 2002).

Hochschild (2003) describes three stances a worker may take to manage emotional labor. First, the worker that identifies too wholeheartedly risks job burnout and is most likely not to depersonalize encounters. Second, when a worker distinguishes herself from the job she may suffer less burnout but is mindful that she is only acting and not projecting a sincere attitude. Third, the worker is resolute in the acting role she projects viewing it as a by-product of the job.

In the first stance the worker is much too present in the role, in the third stance, she is not present enough. In all three, the essential problem is how to adjust one's self to the role in a way that allows some flow of self into the role but minimizes the stress the role puts on the self. (Hochschild, 2003, p. 1888)

Guests may be able to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic gestures of friendliness (Gould-Williams, 1999; Hartline, Woodbridge, & Jones, 2003). The impact of friendliness upon guest satisfaction is enhanced when tasks are performed with competency (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, & Jansen, 2005; Wollard, 2008). Grandey, Fisk, Mattia, and Jansen

(2005) argue that authenticity of positive displayed emotions is an extra task required of front-desk agents.

Lily was able to call upon a positive display of emotions in part because she has an extroverted personality, which also why she was not prone to job burnout. Rather Tea Rose was exhausted from the effort to fake her emotions and developed an attitude of cynicism (Kim, 2007). Bierema (in press) posits that emotions are a taboo subject within organizations; workers are expected to always be in control of their emotions. Within the guest encounter, it is a challenge to maintain this control of emotions; incongruence between felt and displayed emotions can result in emotional dissonance (Van Dijk & Kirk, 2007). This may lead to acts of emotional deviance such as sabotaging the guest experience for revenge. Tea Rose suggested this when she said she held a sum of money on a guest's credit card for a few days without their knowledge. She said that it made her feel better for having done it. Rose suggested that her "attitude" may also be evident to guests. Gardenia's reaction to the racial slur, walking from behind the counter toward the guest, could also be a display of emotional deviance.

The emotional dissonance may have a negative impact upon the health of employees and emotional exhaustion and contribute to job burnout (Van Dijk & Kirk, 2007; Walters & Raybould, 2007). Organizations can also have an impact upon the health of employees if the organization operates in an unhealthy manner (Goldman-Schuyler, 2004). Hochschild (2003) suggests that management should be aware that presenting a positive display of emotions over a long period of time can have long-term effects and may lead to job burnout.

Research that has looked specifically at the hospitality industry for the presence of job burnout and emotional dissonance has revealed that both exist for the hospitality worker. (Van Dijk & Kirk, 2007; Walters & Raybould, 2007). Van Dijk and Kirk (2007) however sought to

determine if emotional dissonance is an outcome of emotional labor by comparing it with concepts associated with cognitive dissonance theory. The authors found that “emotional labour and emotional dissonance are distinct constructs and that the negative outcomes of emotional labour are linked to conflictive cognitive appraisals,” (Van Dijk & Kirk, 2007, p. 157. In other words they believe that the dissonance experienced by the worker is actually more cognitive in nature than emotional in nature. Hochschild (1996) also understood that emotional dissonance was “analogous to the principle of cognitive dissonance,” (p. 90). Nevertheless, Hochschild is clear that “maintaining a difference between feeling and feigning over the long run leads to strain,” (p. 90). Findings of this research also hint at the presence of emotional dissonance and job burnout as a result of acting out pleasant feelings when internal feelings are in conflict.

Job stressors involved in relating to difficult guests may have long-term affects on wellbeing and job continuance. Pizam (2004) asks in his editorial in *Hospitality Management* if hospitality employees are equipped to hide their feelings. He points out that other occupations, such as physicians, nurses, or counselors are prepared and trained to manage emotional displays not consistent with their true feelings. However, hospitality workers are not equipped for emotional labor and experience emotional dissonance, the conflict experienced when felt and displayed feelings are incongruent. Pizam associated this with high turnover rates within the hospitality industry.

Riley (2006) suggests that having organizational expectations for positive guest encounters is insufficient to guarantee a positive outcome. He suggests also that high employee job satisfaction is also not a guarantee that guest encounters could have a negative outcome. This research supports that point in that women with a high degree of job satisfaction also experience negative guest encounters. For example, the angry man who came behind the desk counter

threatened Lily's safety. Riley also points out that the employee's view of their job includes not only that of dealing with people but also workload, duties and responsibility to company policy. All of this contributes to whether the worker is satisfied within their job and may influence the length of time to stay within the job as front-desk agent (Riley, 2006).

Anger from the personal attacks may have an effect on the woman's emotional well-being, contributing to emotional dissonance (Van Dijk & Kirk, 2007). When organizations overlook the impact of worker burnout it affects the extent to which the employee feels valued and supported by management (Walters & Raybould, (2007). This may be a significant factor in high turnover rates. Interestingly, (Ricci & Millman, 2002) found in their empirical study of retention of hourly hotel employees that most employees reported intrinsic factors and working conditions as related to higher retention rates. Employees respond more readily to "encouragement, motivation, energy and innovation," (p. 61) than to monetary rewards. Tea Rose and Rose expressed that they felt insulted by the low pay, but endurance of poor working conditions, lack of management support and difficult guests was especially de-motivating.

Employees also base their job satisfaction on the amount and quality of job training offered, especially when the type of training offered was conducive to their learning goals and constructs. (Schmidt, 2007). One of the complaints mentioned by the women was either lack of training opportunities or the ineffectiveness of the training provided. Managers should consider the findings of this study with regard to how women learn in the development of training. The opportunity for career development is also a factor that influences job satisfaction (Barnett & Bradley, 2007). Barnett & Bradley also established that when employees are given the freedom to participate in their career management that satisfaction increases.

To lose good employees who would have made a contribution to the organization if they

had been recognized and supported in career advancement is a loss to organizations. Gardenia was considering a job change, especially after her management had not been supportive in the incident in which the guest was racially offensive and had told her that her gold teeth were a barrier to her advancement. The cost of retention in the hotel industry of hourly employees has traditionally been thought of as minimal (Tracey & Hinkin, 2006). The job does not require a high level of skill or education to perform, though it is often a starting point for bachelor students and new graduates of the hospitality industry. The high turnover has not been as great a concern as that of management turnover (Tracey & Hinkin, 2006). Management personnel require greater training, which constitutes an investment of time and money by the company.

Retention costs do not only include the cost of training, however, it also includes the cost of “pre-departure activities, recruitment, selection, training, and lost productivity,” (Tracey & Hinkin, 2006, p. 7). Contrary to what is thought, Tracey and Hinkin (2006) found that the selection cost for low-complexity jobs was higher than for management jobs. One reason may be that there are fewer qualified persons for low-complexity jobs thus the recruitment and selection process takes more time, i.e., money spent, to fill those positions. While the overall cost of turnover between the two job categories was statistically significant with high-complexity jobs being more costly, the time spent for recruitment and selection of low-complexity jobs was 25.8% of the total cost as compared to 9.6% for high-complexity jobs (Tracey & Hinkin, 2006). Additionally lost productivity was the highest cost associated with all job types. Therefore, the cost associated with losing a front-desk hourly employee should not be minimized when considering job burnout due to negotiating difficult guests.

I will now review how I attempted to overcome limitations of this research study.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study as in most research studies. First I was unable to make sample selections from a number of different hotels. Nine of ten participants were from the same hotel. Even though I canvassed several hotels, I was unable to obtain permission to distribute the recruitment flyer to their employees. Managers expressed genuine interest in the study but cited company non-solicitation policies as a reason for refusal.

Observation of the guest encounters was not feasible for this study. Therefore, this method of data collection was ruled out for a number of reasons. It would be impossible to predict when a negative guest encounter would occur so as to observe the interaction. Most likely hotel management and employees would not agree to observation of work in practice. Additionally, researcher presence would have influenced the outcome due to physical interjection into the environment. Use of a camera for recording the guest interaction would have legal implications and it may have been difficult to obtain IRB approval. Therefore, observation either in person or by camera recording was not used for data collection.

I could have asked managers about what they have observed in the way difficult guests are handled. However, I wanted to have the worker perceptions of guest encounters. Managers would more than likely report company expectations rather than report any observed employee problems or challenges.

Finally, I was limited by my lack of experience in the hotel industry. Because I lacked experience in the industry, I researched the hotel industry extensively prior to data collection. On the one hand, this lack of experience could potentially cast a shadow of doubt on researcher credibility. However, I did not encounter from participants a concern with my lack of experience. Consequently, I believe my personal lack of industry experience enabled me to ask questions

without prior assumptions, thus lending credibility to my analysis. I will now review implications for adult education and HROD research and practice.

Implications for Research

Future research could be conducted to determine if men experience difficult guest encounters differently or the same as that of women. As I explained my study to interested persons, I was often asked why men were not selected as participants. In fact, one woman told me that the men of her hotel were jealous that they could not participate. Indeed, the men would have provided rich data to the study. However as my research was focused on feminist research, the choice of women participants was a logical option. The perspective of the women does not focus on differences of women to men, to say that one perspective is better than another is. Rather the perspective of women is explored for the sake of obtaining information about experiences that may be unique to women.

One area of future research is to determine why one person is able to depersonalize and another is not. Kim (2007) entertains this concept in his research on the antecedents and effect of burnout. He found that persons high in neuroticism are more likely to use pretense or surface acting. Persons high in extroversion are more likely to engage in deep acting. Nevertheless, why is the difference in personality a predictor of success? There is a common assumption in the service industry that one has to “have the personality for it.” Several of my participants mentioned this idea. Some large luxury hotel chains use extensive interview processes to determine if the person is equipped to handle the job because they believe personality type is a predictor of success (personal conversation with Jon McGavin, General Manager of Ritz-Carlton, July 19, 2008).

Bierema and Fenwick (2008) found in a qualitative study of eight managers in large organizations that HROD practitioners are marginally engaged in corporate social responsibility (CSR). Critical HROD scholars may wish to take this study to the next level to identify current management practices and policies concerning the protection of employees from abusive guests. Managers might be interviewed to determine how they perceive difficult guests and their perception of the impact on their front-desk agents. This research may influence HROD in the hotel industry for ethical management practices and corporate social responsibility.

Research in the customer service industry may also wish to explore how and in what type of ways the worker engages in emotional deviance by taking revenge on the customer (Reynolds & Harris, 2006). In this study, I uncovered at least one employee that engaged in such deviant behavior. Scholars may wish to explore this phenomenon in depth to uncover what would drive an employee to take revenge on the customer.

Several persons with whom I discussed the premise of this study were surprised to think that I was looking at difficult guest encounters from the perspective of the *employee* rather than the guest. Perhaps this is because even in research, scholars of customer service have held to the ideology that “the customer is always right.” In this study I have focused on some negative guest experiences and have found that for these women sometimes the customer can be very wrong.

Implications for Practice

Practice could benefit from the findings of this study, if only just to recognize that difficult guests are an issue that should be addressed in the hotel industry. Implications for practice include employee training, employee support by management, retention, women’s career development and organizational development.

Women learn in various ways, through informal and incidental learning, connectedness,

and communities of practice. The hospitality industry should take a proactive role in the women's learning. The organization should:

...make time and space for learning, scan the environment for changes, pay attention to the learning process, attend to goals and turning points, build and inductive mindset and reflective skills to complement action and build climates of collaboration and trust. (Marsick, Volpe, & Watkins, 1999, p. 91)

Practitioners should recognize that negotiating difficult guests is a regular job task and should prepare employees to deal with them. Managers should look for opportunities to allow the front-desk agent to learn from events of the day. Just taking the time at the end of a shift to debrief the events can allow the woman to go home without taking work home with her. As Grandey, Fisk, Mattia, and Jansen (2005) argue that authenticity of positive displayed emotions is an extra task required of front-desk agents and suggest that company policies and training be enacted to promote positive displayed emotions.

Yet can one manage a smile? Pizam (2004) suggests that hospitality employees are not equipped to hide their feelings. Policies alone will not change employee behavior because the more organizations attempt to force desired emotions of its employees the more inauthentic they may behave (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, and Jansen, 2005). I propose to avoid potential emotional dissonance, that rather than establish policies to enforce positive displayed emotions, that skill training be established for the management of guest emotions thus giving the worker control of the outcome (Grandey, et al., 2005).

Management should recognize negotiating difficult guests can deflate confidence and reduce performance, rather than just assume it is just part of the job (Kim, 2007; Pizam, 2004). Perceived organizational support on the part of the worker is a crucial factor on whether the

worker chooses to stay in the job. Exhaustion and cynicism may need to be addressed by management to prevent job burnout and employee turnover (Walters & Raybould, 2007).

As was mentioned by several of the women, their hotel chain would “red flag” a guest in the system when a guest was disruptive. Managers took the liberty to refuse service to guests of this nature. Yancy (2006) asks in her article of the same name “When irate guests pounce: Should hotels have a blacklist?” She suggests that hotels may benefit from an industry wide “blacklist.” Such a database would have many logistical issues and possibly legal issues when guests are refused service. Nevertheless, some workers think that guests should be controlled in some manner (Yancy, 2006). The customer service industry might do well to protect their employees through a method to identify and exclude customers that are abusive to staff (Harris & Reynolds, 2004). If only within the hotel chain as the main hotel of this study had.

The hospitality industry can use the findings of this study to proactively reduce attrition. The implications of these findings have relevance to the hotel industry as the turnover rate is at 60% (Tracey & Hinkin, 2006). Tracey and Hinkin (2006) also point out “it is imperative to understand the nature and consequences of employee turnover,” (p. 13). Hotel management should not consider lightly the negative impact negotiating difficult guests has on front office employees.

The luxury hotel industry, even though the economy is currently soft, in late 2007 the hotel industry was projected to have moderate growth (Hanna, 2007; Rica, 2007; Sheehan, 2007). It was predicted that a 5.2 percent increase in average daily rate, potentially averaging \$100 (Sheehan, 2007). It was also anticipated that there would be a 2 percent growth in demand matching a 2 percent increase in supply (Hanna, 2007). A couple of reasons for this projection was that corporate travel is expected to be strong and the weakened dollar value could attract

international tourism to the U.S. (Hanna, 2007). Wyndham hotel's strategy for 2008 is for development plans, revamped customer service, updated products, and target marketing for Generation X (Ricca, 2007). Development within center-city business districts is a priority. Sheehan (2007) projected that in 2008 luxury hotels will lead all markets with 700,000 rooms and 5,200 hotels under development. It remains to be seen how the recent downturn in the U.S. economy will affect these previous projections.

Employee performance is critical to the continued success of the luxury hotel industry. A Cornell study of guest perceptions of hotel quality within interactions with hotel workers concluded that guests look for cues to determine hotel quality from employee interactions (Hartline, Wooldridge & Jones, 2003). Cues related to employee performance were most critical having the strongest affect on guest perceptions. Five employee group categories were examined: front-desk, housekeeping, room service, bell staff, and parking. Of the five, the front-desk agent is perceived by guests to be the most critical to guest satisfaction.

Women's career development may also use this research in regard to how women are perceived by management as eligible for promotion to management. Bierema (1999) found that women's career development is enhanced by relationships with others and mentoring. Though I did not address it as a specific finding, at least two women indicated that they were not encouraged to pursue management. Specifically, Gardenia was told that her gold teeth were a barrier for her. Lack of mentoring and discouragement for progression is a troubling finding even if it has happened to only one person of this study. How women in the hotel industry are mentored and encouraged to progress or barriers they encounter would make for very interesting and viable research.

Human resources organizational development in the hospitality industry might use this

research to examine their practices concerning monitoring employee job burnout (Walters & Raybould, 2007). The 60% job turnover rate and costs associated with replacement as referenced earlier (Tracey & Hinkin, 2006) offer compelling evidence that HROD should take an active role in preventing these business costs. Training developers might also use this research for building training that addresses the emotional factors of the job so that as employee performance improves customer satisfaction might also improve (Gould-Williams, 1999).

A socially conscious organization (Bierema & Fenwick, 2005) would consider these findings and conclusions to establish a precedent in the industry of protecting their employees from abusive guests. In setting this precedent a socially conscious organization would also reward ethical management practices, educate the business community and its guests of the importance of ethical treatment of employees (Bierema & Fenwick, 2005). In this way, socially conscious hotel organizations could influence social change concerning women's rights.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how women of the hotel front office learn to negotiate difficult guest encounters with regard to race and gender. I inquired how the nature of job status, race and/or gender influenced how the women negotiate the guest encounter. I wanted to know how learning occurred on the job. And I wanted to know how their experiences with difficult guests influenced their tenure and job satisfaction.

I found that the women were compelled silence their own voices in subservience to the guest and they learned to do this through informal and incidental learning, connectedness and communities of practice. When a hotel organization calls for front-desk agents to maintain a positive, happy attitude regardless of guest behavior, the organization enforces institutionalized emotional labor. Though they had no voice, by their choice of words, they defused guest anger by

conveying confidence and authority through their voice. They were in many ways a community of practice and taught one another how to cope with difficult guests.

Guests may reinforce asymmetrical power relations based the desk agent's gender, race, ethnicity, age, or class. Guests were abusive and abrasive toward some women because of their race or ethnicity. Personal attacks influenced how the women performed on the job. Organizations should anticipate that emotional labor can negatively impact performance, job satisfaction and retention.

The guest encounter is experienced as emotion work on a continuum along a range of personalization and depersonalization and as result of job stressors some women were unable to continue in the job. Within the guest encounter, it is a challenge to maintain this control of emotions; incongruence between felt and displayed emotions can result in emotional dissonance (Van Dijk & Kirk, 2007). Emotional dissonance sometimes resulted in acts of emotional deviance such as sabotaging the guest experience for revenge. Riley (2006) suggests that having organizational expectations for positive guest encounters is insufficient to guarantee a positive outcome. The cost associated with losing a front-desk hourly employee should not be minimized when considering job burnout due to negotiating difficult guests.

In conducting this research, I hoped to open the discourse about employee and women's rights on the job. I also hoped to raise social consciousness within HROD to develop programs to encourage ethical management practices. As a by-product, this study may contribute to the hospitality industry, giving a perspective on customer service seldom explored. Perhaps this research will also contribute to the field of adult education in regard to women's learning, a subject entertained by many well-respected scholars of the field who have come before me.

Dissertation Conclusion

The women of this study desired to give the guest the best hotel experience possible. Wollard (2008) found that hospitality workers went so far as to display a caring concern that bordered on loving the guest. I also found that caring loving concern for guests by these women. As I reflect on the women, I am both in awe of them and I empathize with them. They do a job that few can successfully perform day after day, guest after guest—always in a professional demeanor. They must deny themselves to a certain extent to please a guest in exchange for monetary gain for their employer. Their own rewards are few, recognition from management is sparse, and the pay is low. All of these things and they still must maintain that the customer is always right. And as Tea Rose said regarding whether the customer is always right, “So he’s right. Even if he’s not, he’s right.”

They are the face of the hotel. This not only means that they can be positive representations of the hotel image, but also that they must take the brunt of the complaints and apologize for inconveniences for which they have no direct ability to correct. They are “managers” of their workstation, responsible for the success or lack thereof for the entire hotel.

They are to remain silent in their role, passively acquiescing to the angry guest. It is my hope that in telling their story that I have given them a voice; that their polite silence is broken in the telling of their experiences. I hope I have raised a banner of respect for the women front desk agents that greet guests. Finally, perhaps I have spotlighted a social phenomenon in US society whereby the customer is not *always* right.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A—Recruitment Flyer

*Front Office
Women
Professionals in the
Hotel Industry*

A Doctoral Research Study

Theresa Price
Doctoral Candidate
404-202-8668
770-381-1558
taprice@uga.edu



The University of Georgia

Women Working in Hotel

Front Office Needed

This doctoral study will delve into the dynamics of handling difficult guests from a woman's perspective:

- How you handle difficult guests
- How guest encounters affect you personally
- How you learn to handle difficult guests
- How your training has prepared you for difficult guest encounters

Your participation will contribute to the hotel industry's understanding of the unique training needs of women.



In gratitude, you will receive a \$25 American Express gift card.

Women Only

- You must have worked in the front office for six months or more.
- You may be full or part-time.
- Work at a 3-Star hotel or higher.
- Women of any age, race or ethnicity are welcomed.

Discussions are:

- Strictly confidential.
- About 1 to 2 hours of your time.
- At a location of your choice.
- Will **not** be conducted while you are working.

Your hotel management has agreed:

- Who or how many participants from your hotel will **not** be identified.
- Comments you provide will **not** be shared with any member of your management.

Please Contact

Theresa Price
404-202-8668
770-381-1558
taprice@uga.edu

Ms. Price is **not** associated with or employed by any hotel organization.

The University Of Georgia

Department Of Adult

Education And Doctoral

Candidate Theresa Price Thank

You For Your Consideration.



The University of Georgia

APPENDIX B—Permission to Distribute Recruitment Flyer

Date: _____

Approving Manager: _____

Hotel: _____

Location: _____

As manager at _____ hotel, I agree to allow Theresa Price access to employees for recruitment to participate in her study about women hotel front office workers. The purpose of the study is to identify how women of the hotel front office learn to negotiate difficult guest encounters with regard to race and gender. I understand that this study is affiliated with the University of Georgia as a doctoral program requirement and is in no way connected with the above mentioned hotel. This study is not funded by a grant or a hotel organization. Ms. Price is not affiliated with any hotel organization. Copies of the attached flyer will be provided by Ms. Price for recruitment for distribution to employees and/or posted in an employee accessible location. The identity and number of employees who participate will not be revealed to hotel management. Specific data collected will not be shared with hotel management. Employees will neither be influenced to participate as a job requirement, nor will they receive reprisal for participation.

Manager Signature _____

APPENDIX C—Interview Guide

Demographics		Interviewer Notes
Date		
Participant Code Name		
Location of interview		
Hotel		
Hotel Rating		
Hotel location		
What is your age?		
Marital Status		
Sexual Orientation		
How would you describe your ethnic/racial background?		
What is your highest level of education?		
How long have you worked in the hotel industry? For this hotel?		
Full-time or Part-time worker?		

Research Questions (Will not be asked of participant)		
How does a woman learn to balance her dignity against the idiom that “the customer is always right” with a difficult guest?	How does the nature of job status, race and/or gender influence how the women negotiate the guest encounter?	How do difficult guest encounters influence subsequent guest encounters and their continued affiliation with the company?
Main Questions		
1. Describe your most memorable guest experience when the guest was disrespectful of you.	2. Did it seem that your job status, race or gender influenced the difficult guest encounter?	3. Has handling difficult guests changed the way you relate to other guests and affect your desire to continue working for _____ hotel?

Follow-up Questions

1A. Have you received any training about how to relate to a guest that is disrespectful of you?

2A. What have you learned or observed from other women to handle guests when they are relating to you based upon your job status/race/gender?

3A. Do you agree with how your company has trained you to relate to difficult guests?

Example Probes	
Continuation	After the guest spoke to you, what did you say?
Elaboration	Tell me specifically what you said to the guest.
Clarification	Can you explain that to me again, I am not familiar with that process?
Steering	Sorry I got us off track, let's get back to...
Sequence	Tell me the step-by-step process for checking a guest in.
Evidence	You said that another co-worker was treated badly; did you actually see/hear it happen?
Slant	How did you feel? Were you angry, surprised, or frightened, etc?
Post Interview Notes:	