Sexual Harassment of Women Working as Room Attendants within 5-Star Hotels

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Given the gendered power relations and the isolated nature of women hotel room attendants' working environments, guest-initiated sexual harassment experienced by room attendants is a significant, under-investigated problem. This study of women attendants' experiences of sexual harassment was conducted in 5-star hotels located on the Gold Coast — a notable tourism destination — of Queensland, Australia. Adopting a socialist–feminist critical theory epistemological perspective, the study used a qualitative constructivist grounded theory methodology. The research reveals the pervasiveness of sexual harassment experienced by women hotel room attendants. In particular, this study illuminates the varied forms, meanings and consequences of sexual harassment in a particular organizational context. In focusing on the interacting effects of the gendered nature of the hotel workplace and the hotel workplace culture, the near-complete 'normalization' of sexual harassment within the hotels is revealed. This outcome is a source of considerable concern, with implications for the industry, for employment relations institutions and for public policy.

Keywords: hotel room attendants, sexual harassment, guest interactions

Introduction

This article explores guest-initiated sexual harassment experienced by women room attendants working at 5-star hotels on the Gold Coast of Queensland, Australia. The research responds to Handy's (2006, p. 2) call for more studies of 'the ways in which sexual harassment is enacted in specific organizational contexts'. We found guest-initiated sexual harassment to be pervasive and normalized within the hotel workplace. In particular, such behaviour was embedded in hierarchical social structures and organizational practices within the hotels, which influenced the prevalence and specific forms of sexual harassment of women room attendants. Significant contextual factors included the gendered power relations implicit in encounters between room attendants and guests, attendants' low social status, and the relatively isolated and intimate work context of guests' rooms. For women room attendants, sexual harassment influenced their self-identity, negatively impacting on their well-being.

Our axiological aim was to advance transformational change in room attendants' work circumstances. We incorporated the theoretical paradigms of socialist–feminism and critical theory in an intertwined epistemology. (This is explained below in the next section.) Extant literature demonstrates that women's voices have been omitted in many research agendas (Chamberlain *et al.*, 2008; Jennings, 2001; Poria, 2008). Our epistemological approach contributes to feminist research on gendered employment, particularly the voices of women room attendants. We begin by examining the literature on sexual harassment. Then, we provide an overview of our methodology followed by representations of the lived work experiences of the women room attendants who participated in our

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research. The outcomes of our grounded theory study resonated with two factors that McDonald (2012) identifies in her review of the sexual harassment literature and that she describes as being vital in understanding sexual harassment. These factors are gender context and workplace culture, which we use to frame the interpretations of our empirical material for this article. We also draw on relevant theoretical work on harassment to examine attendants' experiences. Our study provides context-specific insights into how hotels' operational conditions contribute to the presence and types of sexual harassment experienced by women room attendants with respect to guest- (or customer)-initiated sexual harassment. As a consequence, we theorize that the role of room attendant exposes room attendants to such harassment due to the differential power held by hotel guests. Such theorizing sets us apart from other extant literature by examining this component of hotel guest-initiated sexual harassment. In our conclusion, we re-emphasize the significant implications of sexual harassment for room attendants' occupation identity construction, defined as 'who one is and one's relative value' (Unrah, 2004, p. 290), and in particular their sense of well-being, and for hotel praxis.

Sexual harassment: situating the research

Most scholarly definitions of 'sexual harassment' are founded on MacKinnon's (1979, p. 1) description as 'the unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of a relationship of unequal power'. Sexual harassment is a continuum, ranging from unwanted verbal comments, jokes and sexual gestures, to actions encompassing touching, coercive attempts to establish a sexual interaction and rape (Buchanan *et al.*, 2008; Chamberlain *et al.*, 2008). It is pervasive, unwelcome, unsolicited and offensive (Uggen and Blackstone, 2004). In Australia, sexual harassment is outlawed by the Federal Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Commonwealth of Australia, 1984), with related legislation in each state such as, in Queensland (where this study was conducted), the Anti-Discrimination Act 1991 (Queensland Government, 1991). Many employers have specific policies to deal with harassment by supervisors and other employees, although organizational responses are often inadequate (Gunsch, 1993, cited in McDonald *et al.*, 2008, p. 189). Employees seeking redress for sexual harassment can complain to their employer, who must investigate the issue. Customer harassment is much less likely to be covered by policies than is co-worker or supervisor harassment (Handy, 2006). That being said, an employer may be vicariously liable for harassment by both employees and customers. Employees may bring a complaint under the relevant legislation. However, despite 30 years of legislation in Australia, sexual harassment is still very common and is often unaddressed due to under-reporting. A recent survey showed 21 per cent of Australian women had been sexually harassed at one time but only 20 per cent of those make a formal report or complaint (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012) which is consistent with research elsewhere (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1995; Uggen and Blackstone, 2004; Welsh, 2000). Thus, despite the comprehensive nature of Australian legislation, sexual harassment may be widespread if organizational responses are often inadequate and employees are reluctant to complain.

Sexual harassment is widely associated with harmful psychological outcomes including depression and stress, physical health symptoms, and reduced productivity and organizational commitment (Brewis, 2011; Collinsworth *et al.*, 2009). From an organizational perspective, studies of sexual harassment within the service sector, and hotels specifically, find that the impacts of sexual harassment on employees include reduced job performance, increased absenteeism and turnover, and poor customer service (Gilbert *et al.*, 1998). These outcomes incur organizational costs in recruitment and training as well as investigating and prosecuting complaints, with less tangible impacts such as damage to an organization's reputation (Davidson and Timo, 2006). Therefore, sexual harassment extracts high human and organizational costs.

The literature examining the causes of sexual harassment identifies four models: the organizational model, the socio-cultural model, the sex role spill-over model and the biological model. All, in different ways, problematize the issue of power. The organizational model assumes that power differentials created by hierarchical structures — such as those in the guest-room attendant service

worker relationship — facilitate sexual harassment (Mathisen *et al.*, 2008). The low status of hospitality workers renders them particularly vulnerable (Poulston, 2008), with the power held by the instigator being a critical component of sexual harassment (Katila and Meriläinen, 2002; Wilson and Thompson, 2001). The socio-cultural model posits that sexual harassment is a mechanism for maintaining male dominance over women (O'Hare and O'Donohue, 1998). The sex role spill-over model is based on gender expectations in the workplace and theorizes that sexual harassment occurs more in gender-segregated workplaces where the job acquires aspects of the sex role (O'Hare and O'Donohue, 1998). We have omitted from consideration the biological model, as it normalizes sexual harassment by assuming that it is a manifestation of natural attraction between women and men, with men's stronger sex drive instigating sexually aggressive behaviour (Quinn, 2000). However this model may be relevant in an examination of male guests as the instigator of sexual harassment. The other three models are relevant to analysis of the empirical material. Regarding the organizational model, room attendants are low in hotels' organizational structure and hence have little power — a key component of sexual harassment. From a socio-cultural perspective, the occupation of room attendant has low social status within the broader society, as well as in the workplace. Finally, the sex role spill-over model is highly applicable because of gendered expectations that cleaning is women's work.

Scholars in the field mainly research the behaviour of co-workers and supervisors; there is much less focus on customer or 'guest-initiated' sexual harassment (Hughes and Tadic, 1998; Williams, 2003), particularly with respect to women hotel room attendants; hence, the focus of this research. While this article foregrounds extant literature, this literature was engaged with — for contextual purposes — only minimally prior to the study. The researchers re-engaged with the literature by taking a retrospective approach following a grounded theory interpretation of room attendants' experiences. In grounded theory, literature does not usually lead the writing up of interpretations. However, our grounded theory study resonated with two key areas identified within McDonald's (2012) review of workplace sexual harassment: job gender context and workplace culture. Rather than develop different nomenclature, McDonald's terms were used in the framing of our analysis. Additionally, the two areas reflect the systemic structuring behaviour and practices associated with women's traditional roles in society (Veijola, 2009), especially the highly gendered nature of hotel room attendant work. While the job gender context is consistent with the three models referred to above, the workplace culture approach focuses more specifically on the organizational model. Our research found that both areas were relevant. However, examining organizational factors in isolation would have missed much of what explains the prevalence and persistence of sexual harassment in this occupation as well as serve to segment rather than capture the relatedness of these two areas within the lived work experiences of attendants' work.

The historical genesis of this occupation in the domestic sphere means that low value is placed on room attendants' work (Bosmajian, 1972). This reflects women's status as dependent and 'other' to men (Schneider *et al.*, 1999), via the operation of patriarchal social mechanisms (Kosny and MacEachen, 2010), as described in the socio-cultural model. Hence, room attendant work is at the intersection of historically entrenched systems of patriarchy in the domestic and public sphere, making it unsurprising that sexual harassment in hotels is so entrenched.

The research that informs this article was situated within socialist–feminism and critical theory epistemologies, which share the activist purpose of exposing unequal relations and promoting changes in structures and power systems in society (Jennings, 2005). Ontologically speaking, taking a socialist–feminist critical theorist stance means arguing that the hospitality industry is constrained by patriarchal rules immersed in 'overt and covert power structures' that subjugate and subordinate women (Alvesson and Skölberg, 2000). Hegemonic hierarchical social structures, such as those in hotels, are infused with power and result in marginalization and oppression of employees such as room attendants; hence the need for a critical perspective. Our intertwining of socialist feminism with critical theory and social constructivist philosophical stances provides sensitizing theoretical concepts. As socialist feminists, we adopt and broaden Marx's critique of capitalism, seeking explanations of the way capitalism interacts with patriarchy to oppress women through systemic inequality. Critical theory critiques capitalism's absorption of workers into hierarchal systems where they lose

autonomy. These sensitizing concepts are framed by shared commonalities between ontology and epistemology in the social construction of reality, particularly in understandings of multiple realities ontologically, and subjective epistemologies focused on understanding (Jennings, 2005). We selected grounded theory methodology in order to generate an abstract theoretical understanding of room attendants' lived experiences.

Methodology

A qualitative constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006) informed empirical material collection and interpretation. Grounded theory was used because it offers a systematic approach for handling large amounts of empirical material, and provides flexibility in inductive construction of categories to explain social phenomena (Glaser, 1998). Grounded theory is suited to real-world contexts as an alternative to hegemonic positivistic scientific endeavours (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Importantly, constructivist grounded theory is reliant on researchers reflexively engaging with study phenomena rather than prescriptively relying on analytical methods to objectively represent empirical realities (Charmaz, 2005). Constructivist grounded theory, like socialist–feminist critical theory, holds that knowledge should transform social practice in order to contribute to a better world (Charmaz, 2006). As with classic Glaserian grounded theory, our constructivist grounded theory methodology was non-linear and iterative, involving looped interactions between collection and coding of empirical material. Consistent with constructivist grounded theory, we used the constant comparative method, theoretical sampling, theoretical memoing, sorting of memos and code saturation (which occurs when properties or categories are fully explained) (Jennings, 2010).

This research was carried out with the co-operation of five 5-star hotels on the Gold Coast in South-East Queensland, with standards and facilities typical of such establishments in Australia. Initial access to the participating hotels involved several hierarchical levels of gatekeepers, including general managers, human resource managers and executive housekeepers. The 46 women room attendants who volunteered were informed of the purpose and methods of the research and were assured of confidentiality, with pseudonyms used. In-depth interviews were conducted to allow participants to voice their concerns and identify employment issues important to them. Interviews ranged from 15 minutes to 75 minutes, with an average of 30 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and interpreted with open coding, followed by selective coding. Table 1 presents an example of open coding using gerund terms.

Ten interviews were carried out, then coded and interpreted, and then a further cluster of interviews were conducted to extend or clarify the emergent codes, and this process was continued

Table 1: Open coding procedure

Interview statement	Open code
1. R: Tell me how you would describe your	
2. Interaction with management and other staff?	
3. RA: although one time there was this man at the hotel	
4. I don't know I think he had a drink in the night	drinking guest
5. I knock on the door and no one answer,	knocking on door
6. you knock on it three times,	implementing protocol
7. and he was sitting on the balcony,	
8. and he only had a towel on I hate that,	being undressed
9. and he asks me if I would massage him	seeking massage
10. and things like that I have to ring down	reporting
11. I don't want that money	refusing money

until 46 interviews were completed and theoretical saturation was achieved. Glaser's (1978) 'theoretical sensitivity' was applied to derive the theoretical codes, identifying the interrelationships between the substantive codes that resulted from selective coding. Theoretical sensitivity relates to the researcher remaining open to the abstract theoretical codes that conceptualize the relationship between the substantive codes emerging during the interpretation process (Glaser, 2005). The outcome of interpretations of empirical material was a conceptualization of room attendants' interactions with guests, revealing the extent and nature of sexual harassment of room attendants.

Room attendants' perceptions of sexual harassment

Sexual harassment of room attendants by male guests was widespread. Forty-four of the 46 participating room attendants had experienced approaches by male guests. These behaviours ranged from inappropriate joking to explicit verbal propositions and touching. Reflecting the salient features identified by McDonald (2012) — specifically, job gender context and workplace culture — the following sub-sections explore the room attendants' experiences of sexual harassment. Firstly, we identify the gendered job context wherein the majority of room attendants were women performing traditional gendered work, placing room attendants at an increased risk of sexual harassment. We explore the power dynamic between attendant and guest, and how attendants' low power increases their vulnerability to sexual harassment. Secondly, we show how elements of the hotel workplace culture shapes room attendants' perceptions of the inevitability and impact of sexual harassment, and the coping strategies they used. We theorize that power is a key component of sexual harassment.

Job gender context

Three notable features that coalesced into job gender context raised in the research were the attendants' uniforms; the sexualized and intimate nature of attendants' main working spaces (the guest bedrooms or suites) where room attendants generally work alone; and the intersecting effects of gender, age, race and ethnicity.

Attendants' uniforms

Uniforms identifying the attendants as hotel employees were provided in all the participating hotels. Room attendants had two complaints about their uniforms. Many felt that the fabric and design were unsuitable for the hard work involved in bed making and bathroom cleaning and their forays into non-air-conditioned back-of-house areas. The fabric used in these uniforms at all the hotels was a synthetic material that was very hot to work in under normal Gold Coast summer climate conditions, which average 30°C (Australian Bureau of Meteorology, 2013). However, for the purposes of this study, what is more significant is that room attendants believed that the uniform's style (a variation of the traditional clothing for women — a dress) sexualized them and contributed to encouraging sexual harassment by guests. Ivy, in her 40s, expressed her perceptions about how the design of her uniform was interpreted by guests:

> I don't like these dresses. Especially when you are in a room and there is men in there and you feel like they're staring at you. You feel like an old-fashioned parlour maid in these uniforms.

Many room attendants expressed views that these uniforms did not suit their age (28 participants were aged over forty). Bianca, in her forties, explains the unsuitability of her uniform:

> The supervisors wear pants, and we're the ones bending over, heads down and bum up. It makes you sort of jumpy, 'woman … bedroom', [some guests] don't think beyond that, and this stupid

uniform doesn't help, I'm 43 and five foot ten and I have to wear a dress that doesn't even cover my knees, I wanted to wear pants but I'm not allowed to.

As Ivy and Bianca emphasized, the room attendants' dress-style uniform objectified them sexually, arguably underlining the room attendants' gendered social subordination (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009). The interviews make it clear that by banning practical trousers and mandating 'maids' uniforms in the form of dresses, hotels increased the risk of sexual harassment for room attendants. The lack of gender neutrality is reinforced by room attendants' experiences during interpersonal interactions with their dress signalling socially defined norms of sex categorization linked to gender stereotyping (Hatmaker, 2013). Overt and covert restrictions are placed on behaviour through the artifice of dress (de Beauvoir, 1972 [1949]). For hotel room attendants, their gender is embedded in the gendering style of their uniform (Bowdler and Balme, 2010). As room attendants' femininity is validated by their dress-style uniform, their gender identity is conflated as physical, thus encouraging male interest. Objectification of women working as room attendants also disempowers them with the resulting 'othering' reflecting the taint and stigma associated with cleaning work (Mavin and Grandy, 2013). Room attendants fill a gendered job where they are 'expected to be pleasant, accommodating, caring and unobtrusive, in short, to exhibit stereotyped "feminine" behaviour' (Folgerø and Fjeldstad, 1995, p. 309). The uniforms thus established behavioural schemas of the room attendants' role, identified by the sex role spill-over model. These behavioural schemas shape how male guests interpret the service encounter and, in the attendants' eyes, contribute to the likelihood of sexual harassment.

Working spaces

Room attendants' vulnerability to sexual harassment is increased because they work alone in the isolation of guests' 'bedrooms', which for the guests is an intimate, personal and potentially eroticized space (Boon, 2007). Guests might still be present while rooms were being attended, or might return to their rooms while the attendant was there. Importantly, the hotel bedroom offers the harasser a context that is usually devoid of witnesses. Jane, in her sixties, recounts how the isolation of the hotel bedroom made room attendants vulnerable:

Well, I think it's a male thing, they see bed, and what do you do in bed? And nice little girl, and it's a secluded area, so you've got a girl on a floor and not much else around so it's fairly common.

Echoing other participating room attendants, Jane describes the inevitability of sexual harassment and how the isolated situation gives guests the opportunity to harass. There is no oversight of their actions by third parties, and thus little accountability (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1997) and few sanctions. Guests' approaches were described by Elaine, aged in her twenties:

I get offers often, it's like 'Oh, what are you doing tonight? Do you want to come back here? I'll take you out'. I hate it. Some are nice but most of the time they are old.

Elaine finds this sexual harassment noxious and for her, as for many others, it creates occupational stress. Attendants reported that a guest making such an advance would often indicate that there was money available or attempt to shut the door while the room attendant was cleaning. Maureen, aged in her 20s, had such an experience:

When I went there he shut the door and I thought 'Uh oh' and I opened the door, and he said, 'Oh, you don't close the door when you are cleaning?' and I said, 'Yes, sir, the door must be open, it is hotel policy' and he said, 'Just close that door and you can have the money on the table', and I said, 'I'm sorry, sir, we are not allowed to close the door when we are working'. I said 'I am very sorry', and I went to the bathroom and started there because he was sitting on the bed, and then he undressed and went inside the bed and I grabbed my bucket and I ran.

Because of the pervasiveness of harassment, room attendants had a heightened awareness of their vulnerability, reflected in some hotels' protocols that required 'open door' cleaning. Clare, aged in her twenties, explained her feeling of vulnerability:

> You do get the dirty men who just like looking you up and down. I think you can tell, you know, you can feel danger.

Clare was explaining that attendants relied on their instincts to gauge sexual threats in their isolation within the hotel bedroom. This isolation, combined with the physicality and the nature of work, aligned to domestic housework, underlines for male guests the physical aspects of women's traditional roles and increases the likelihood of sexual harassment.

The gendering of the isolated hotel bedroom workplace is a largely ignored contextual factor in the literature on sexual harassment (Boon, 2007). Guerrier and Adib (2000, p. 693) identify hotel rooms as providing 'a potential place for sexual activity', which is pertinent in that context plays an important part in sexual harassment (Hall *et al.*, 2010). As Aristarkhova (2012) has observed, hospitality is intimate, and the nature of this intimacy could relate to misconstructions in the bedroom context. Our findings are consistent with a Norwegian study, which reported that some room attendants were afraid to work alone in guests' rooms (Onsøyen *et al.*, 2009). This finding aligns with sex role spill-over theory, wherein gender roles take precedence over workplace roles (Welsh, 1999), meaning that workplace sexual harassment is more likely to occur in private working spaces such as hotel rooms than in public spaces. As Sinclair (2005) argues, gendered employment contexts are eroticized by cultural norms within the broader social sphere. Hence, the socio-cultural aspects of room attendants' workplace mirror the broader patriarchal socio-cultural environment. Underlying both aspects of the hotel workplace culture were racial/ethnic aspects associated with sexual harassment by male guests.

Gender–age–race–ethnicity intersection

Some room attendants found age and race/ethnicity resulted in higher levels of harassment, as Helen, aged in her fifties, recounts:

> The younger staff, especially the Asians, have a lot of problems with the men trying to pick them up and chat them up and I think they find it pretty distressing.

Helen's statement regarding the younger staff's experience aligns with Stedham and Mitchell's (1998) finding that younger members of staff are more likely to be sexually harassed than older staff. Arguably, the inexperience of younger staff in occupational identity formation affects their harassment experience and their deep sense of shock (Guerrier and Adib, 2000) and, at times, incapacity to frame a response and to report incidents to management. Kate, in her fifties, relates how her dark skin colour was an attraction for one guest who physically touched her:

> One old [Asian] man he said to me he wants a girl, in his very funny [Asian accent] while he stroked my arm, 'Please, I want a girl, I want a black girl'.

As Helen and Kate indicated, sexual harassment often had an age and racial/ethnic element. The notion of the intersectionality of age, race/ethnicity and gender (Lundy-Wagner and Winkle-Wagner, 2013) assists us to identify this factor as a critical one for some room attendants.

Attendants reported that many of the propositions for sexual favours were from international guests. The context to this is that, while sexual harassment is viewed in many Western countries as an offence subject to significant penalties under civil law, it is not so in countries with highly entrenched traditional patriarchal systems, influenced by cultural ideologies (Herzog, 2007) which view women as sexual objects (Lewis and Simpson, 2012). In addition, privileges based on gender underpin culturally prescribed understandings of sexuality and may explain some guests' non-perception of

'sexual harassment'. In addition, globalization (including travel and tourism) has destabilized social identities, such that male travellers may not be constrained by cultural norms (Gosine, 2008).

Therefore, three aspects of job context that were found to increase the risk of sexual harassment for room attendants were the nature of their uniforms, the isolated workplaces and age/racial/ethnic socio-cultural influences. These aspects were exacerbated by the perceptions of acceptance of sexual harassment within the hotel workplace culture.

Hotel workplace culture

Our interpretation shows that the workplace culture, as identified by McDonald (2012), and applied to hotels and the influence of broader socio-cultural factors contributed to room attendants' acceptance that sexual harassment is inevitable. Many hotel room attendants deployed various strategies to respond to harassment, seeing these as key job-related skills. This was in the context of room attendants' perceptions of lack of preventative strategies by management, and an absence of sanctions for guests who harassed room attendants.

Normalization of harassment

There was evidence that many room attendants tolerated these sexual advances as 'typical male behaviour'. Miriam, aged in her forties, stressed her initial amazement at the behaviour she encountered:

Oh, they have a one-track mind. When I first started here I was shocked because I had not experienced that before. One would stay in the room and follow you around the room. But I was very lucky, I saw a houseman and I called him into the room and said do not leave. That [guest] then started criticizing what I had cleaned in the room.

The houseman on that occasion was a supportive co-worker, indicating that at times other staff could be called on to assist; however, this may not always be the situation. Miriam's experiences indicate that many room attendants believed sexual harassment was an inevitable 'fact of life', as is inferred by Chantel, aged in her twenties:

Oh yes, but they are just asking. But sometimes they ask me where they can find a girl. You know how they are, and I just point him to the telephone. He can read the advertisements and find one himself.

The expectation to 'pimp' ('a person who arranges opportunities for sexual intercourse with a prostitute', Davis, 2013) for male guests is another form of harassment of room attendants. It was noteworthy that room attendants almost invariably emphasized their 'skills' in deflecting harassment. Danielle, aged in her thirties, explained:

If they are in the bed naked, I just throw in the towels and leave. It depends on how they react as well, some girls come here straight out of school and they don't know how to handle certain men or situations, it comes with age and experience.

Danielle set strategic limits in her risk assessment when encountering male guests in the rooms. Some room attendants used their accumulated life experiences of being propositioned by men to handle sexual advances from male guests. Rebecca, aged in her fifties, reflected:

The young ones are very emotional and don't handle the difficult guests, some of the men can be a handful if they are drunk.

The most common strategy adopted to cope with unwanted and demanding male guest advances was to resort to humour, as Caitlin, aged in her fifties, revealed:

I am still smiling, you know because if you will be aggressive then the trouble will come. The young girls have to be aware for dealing with that, just don't be aggressive. If they will approach you just say 'Oh no, sir, I'm sorry, we are not doing the monkey business here'.

To cope with unsolicited requests, room attendants needed to strategize to avoid giving offence, requiring capacities and skills not in their job descriptions. Helen, in her fifties, stated:

They ask me out, mostly I just laugh and tell them I am just here to work, but sometimes they say come and sit down and talk to me, and I say sorry I can't do that, and they say 'Oh well we can go out after you finish work?' I laugh and I make it into a joke, so I don't hurt their feelings, because they are pretty old themselves and most not very attractive.

 Some room attendants spoke of having to reject persistent guests' invitations several times. Most room attendants refused guests' behaviour in a gentle manner, rather than a strongly assertive 'no means no' manner. This is consistent with findings that passive strategies are a common coping mechanism (Quinn, 2000), and that mature victims in particular engage in 'social reasoning' (Chan *et al.*, 2008). The passive strategy of humour was the preferred method of resistance used by the participating room attendants. This is in conflict with typical recommendations regarding dealing with harassers, which suggest a firm, negative stance should be taken (Butler and Chung-Yan, 2011). However, in the service sector context, confronting guests over their behaviour is considered bad customer relations (Folgerø and Fjeldstad, 1995) and indeed in one study 'women experienced increasingly negative consequences of sexual harassment as their responses became more assertive' (Quinn, 2000, p. 1173). Power differentiation may explain why victims of sexual harassment — even serious harassment — are more likely to ignore or joke about sexual harassment than report it (Welsh, 2000). Guests are placed high within the organizational model of power in hierarchical structures, thus deterring any challenge by lower placed room attendants.

 As Caitlin stressed, room attendants learned through experience to deploy strategies involving humour rather than assertiveness when rejecting guests' advances, to ensure no offence is given and that respect is still offered to the guest. Arguably, this is a type of 'deep acting' (Williams, 2003), involving unassertive responses to sexual harassment such as joking with the perpetrator (Goldberg, 2007). As indicated in the examples given, room attendants as front-line service employees are expected to have competencies in 'sophisticated social intelligence' so as to deter the guest without giving offence (Harris, 2010, p. 146). Some employees, frequently the older ones, deployed humour to deal with and pacify difficult customers, thus reproducing the gendered attributes of subordination (Virkki, 2008). In this way the socio-cultural model within attendants' workplaces enabled sexual harassment to operate as a mechanism to maintain male dominance (Bedford and Hwang, 2013; O'Hare and O'Donohue, 1998). In short, it appears that the broader social patriarchal environment encourages some hotel guests to instigate, and room attendants to deflect or ignore rather than challenge or report, sexual harassment.

Performance of emotional labour

Not only did room attendants perform emotional labour to deflect guests' advances, many believed that their emotional labour was often misinterpreted by guests. 'Emotional labour' is defined as the requirement for demonstration of unfelt emotion by room attendants in the hotel context, and service industries generally (Anderson *et al.*, 2002). Emotional labour can be a strongly gendered cultural performance, and has been linked by other scholars with how women respond to sexual harassment (Hochschild, 1983). Several examples of guest approaches to room attendants illustrate this issue. Eva, aged in her twenties, explained:

I think with guys you just have to talk to them nicely and they think they are in with a chance, and I've got to be nice as it's part of my job. But it's like, don't take this the wrong way, there's a fine line.

Eva reiterates the inevitability of sexual harassment while acknowledging the performance of emotional labour may give some men the impression that the room attendant is offering other than mere courtesy. It is believed that men are more likely than women to misinterpret friendliness as romantic interest (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1997). Within the hospitality industry, customer satisfaction is heavily dependent on the staff–customer interaction, and friendliness, and indeed sexualized interactions, are cultivated and exploited for profit (Guiffre and Williams, 2000). Further, the behaviour of some male guests is particularly problematic as the requirement for attendants to be submissive and subservient to guests makes it difficult for them to be proactive in deterring harassment (Bedford and Hwang, 2013). Also, it is believed that organizational tolerance may play a significant role in the incidence of sexual harassment by a lack of, or ineffective, policies and procedures (Goltz, 2005). Most room attendants felt that their establishment had ineffective measures to deal with sexual harassment.

Workplace protection

On the positive side, it appeared that the hotels had some protocols to ensure the safety of room attendants in relation to guest harassment. These protocols included formal policies that encouraged attendants to report incidents to supervisors and asking another employee to work with them. However, many room attendants questioned the effectiveness of these measures. Attendants confronting guests in a forthright way often resulted in retaliatory feedback, such as negative room servicing evaluations, as reported above in the incident involving Miriam. Elaine, aged in her twenties, recounted that while her employing establishment regarded sexual harassment seriously, a guest engaged in retaliatory action:

> I went downstairs and I told the executive housekeeper straight away and they came up with the duty manager and security and he said 'No, I just asked her to have a cigarette', but he wrote some angry comments on the guest survey card.

The potential for retaliatory negative guest surveys shows that guests' opinions could be a source of considerable social power vis-à-vis attendants. Further, room attendants said that they received little training in procedures to meet guests' sexual requests, other than to 'report it' when incidents occurred. Bianca, aged in her forties, identified the inadequacy of her hotel's protocol for reporting sexual harassment:

> I felt scared I was sexually harassed by a guest, and I followed procedure, I went down and did the right thing. He and his mates had this room and the next door room. I was given a [two-way] radio should anything go wrong. I complained and the new supervisor said, 'Oh, if anything should happen just shut the connecting door and ring down'. Well really how do they think you can do that, I just get raped and then ring you after, no worries, so I cracked a s..t over that one.

The supervisor in this incident was not skilled enough to recognize a serious situation, potentially subjecting the hotel to legal sanctions. The pervasiveness of sexual harassment in hotels found in this study can therefore be partly explained (at least in some establishments) by the fact that supervisors pay scant attention to potentially dangerous situations, thus normalizing them as part of the working environment.

The hotel workplace culture encompasses the organizational climate's tolerance of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1997) and the outcomes of attendants' performance of emotional labour. With respect to power relations, guests as agents from outside the hotel wield social power, having significant influence through informal evaluations (Gettman and Gefand, 2007). Their status as hotel guests gives them 'legitimate power' over room attendants via the guest survey (Popovich and Warren, 2010). Despite their relatively insecure tenure of employment, the attendants in this study related no hesitation in reporting the most serious type of incidents, as Bianca and Elaine's statements show. This contrasts with a study, which revealed that room attendants in Welsh hotels felt powerless

and too embarrassed to report incidents of sexual harassment (Hunter Powell and Watson, 2006). The key issue is elaborated by Handy (2006) who, borrowing from other research on the nature of service work, describes a 'cult of the customer', wherein women who are sexually harassed frequently do not report it. Within an organizational model of causality, those with lower status such as room attendants have few options regarding how to deal effectively with these customers, which in turn perpetuates the pervasiveness and persistence of harassment in contexts such as room attendant work.

Discussion

Room attendants' work is highly gendered, placing them at increased risk of sexual harassment. Room attendants carry a stigma linked to their work and their occupational identity, meaning that they actively need to negotiate their identity during guest interactions, and manage others' perceptions, especially during encounters with male guests. This then affects attendants' overall sense of security, safety and well-being in the workplace. Identity negotiation involves both blocking (stopping and attempting to escape from the behaviour), and rationalization (in part, mitigating the seriousness of the behaviour) (Strauss, 1997) in order to cope with the prevalence of sexual harassment and to avoid feeling bad about oneself. By rationalizing sexual harassment as normal for men, room attendants internalize the view that these interactions are part of the broader sociocultural behaviour, thus sustaining a hegemonic gendered culture rather than an urgently needed change to their workplace culture. Further, the effects of gender are mediated by social practices, as shown in this study and reported by others; gender interacts with race and class (Mavin and Grandy, 2013). Constructions of gender difference reflect male dominance in the broader patriarchal society, and this is identified in the sex role spill-over model. This model is based on gender expectations in the workplace, theorizing that sexual harassment occurs where the job acquires aspects of the sex role.

This study underlines the point made by many other researchers that behaviour related to sexual harassment is particularly evident in female-dominated jobs, and is subtly regulated by organizational practices and broader social norms (Katila and Meriläinen, 2002). Further, the relationship between power and patriarchy commodifies women's work and renders women in a strongly subordinate position socially as well as organizationally (Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Dyer *et al.*, 2010; Seymour, 2009), making room attendants particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment. Guests receive much attention and recognition which gives them power (Sherman, 2011), in contrast to employees, particularly those in low paid, so-called 'unskilled' positions. In sum, tapping into a very current debate on the effects of the customer on service sector employees (Korczynski, 2013), it is clear that guests in this case have a continual, pervasive and significant effect on attendants, rather than simply adding 'an extra dimension' or affecting only a few aspects of work organization. The continual threat and frequent actual occurrence of guest harassment is a constant reminder of attendants' subordinated gendered and classed occupational identity.

Implications

Sexual harassment is a significant workplace hazard for hotel room attendants, with implications for organizations and workers. Certain measures could deter harassing behaviour, thus reducing the room attendants' exposure to sexual harassers. From room attendants' perspectives, the incidence of sexual harassment is facilitated by their sexualizing uniforms, and the requirement to perform emotional labour in situations where it is clearly not appropriate. First, greater flexibility in uniform design, i.e. wearing trousers, would help alleviate their treatment as 'other'. A second factor is the organizational context of the bedroom or guest suite. As room attendants work alone in this area, consideration needs to be given to room attendants working in pairs. The performance of emotional labour and extent of engagement of room attendants with guests may require 'vacant'

room servicing wherever possible. Further, greater surveillance and 'walking the floors' by hotel security would deter harassment by guests. All importantly, management and supervisors should be aware of the high incidence of sexual harassment of room attendants, and review or establish complaints processes to encourage room attendants to report these incidents and ensure appropriate action is taken when they do. While increasing concern has been noted regarding employer liability for customer sexual harassment (Markert, 2005), it is clear that the normalization of sexual harassment, and its seeming acceptance by hotel management and supervisors, ignores the problem rather than addressing it. Hence, guests need to be advised that legal action will be instigated if sexual and other forms of harassment are perpetuated, as the potential for a formal complaint may act as a deterrent to predatory behaviour. Posters and placards warning against inappropriate customer behaviour are commonly used in settings such as hospitals and public transport facilities and, given the prevalence of sexual harassment in hotels, would not be out of place in that setting too. These steps by management would help to redress the differential power between guests and room attendants.

Although this study has identified an important feature of room attendant employment in Australia, as a qualitative study it has setting-specific boundedness. Further research is needed to examine both women and men room attendants' experiences. There is a need for research considering organizational responses to sexual harassment to be able to better understand gender harassment and the ways organizations handle these situations. Obtaining an organizational perspective would facilitate theoretical development by providing greater understanding of causes and incidents of sexual harassment. Further investigation is needed of 'good practice' that involves proactive leadership and management systems that provide effective training and guest policies that create a respectful and hospitable work environment for room attendants. As Ineson *et al*. (2013) have recently advocated, workers need to be made aware of their legal statutory rights and demand training to deal with — rather than simply deflect — sexual harassment.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to expose the extent and nature of guest-initiated sexual harassment experienced by women room attendants working at 5-star hotels on the Gold Coast of Queensland, Australia. Using a socialist–feminist and critical theory epistemology and constructivist grounded theory methodology, this study contributes to the sexual harassment literature by revealing that guest-initiated harassment was pervasive and related to power differentials within hotels. Organizational conditions that contributed included the sexualizing uniform, the isolated bedroom context, and minimal organizational attention to the problem. Sex role spill-over shows that the responsibility for dealing with harassment rested with attendants themselves, many of whom developed a wide repertoire of strategies that drew on complex forms of emotional labour. This, however, reinforced the problem as one to be dealt with at an individual level, rather than as an organizational issue. Further, as revealed in the socio-cultural model, sexual harassment impacted upon room attendants' occupational identity, reinforcing their subordinate position and contributing further to non-reporting. As hotel guests are perpetrators of harassment, hotel managements face considerable challenges in preventing it. Our grounded theory findings extend previous literature by providing in-depth grounded insights into women's lived experiences within a specific study setting, that is, women room attendants employed in five 5-star hotels on the Gold Coast, Australia.

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