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ABSTRACT

Norms of 'professionalism' expected by the hospitality industry may create unrealistic and problematic expectations for employing people with learning disabilities. This study provides a first consideration of hospitality training for young people with learning difficulties. Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the popular television documentary series *The Special Needs Hotel*, generating two key themes: hospitality as achieving independence; and hospitality as expectations. Hospitality training is seen as a means of enabling 'independence' for young people with learning disabilities with strategies used to ensure the trainees meet the necessary 'expectations' and requirements of hospitality work. However, this positive representation contrasts with the struggles, fear and realities of independence and hospitality work for the trainees themselves. Contributing to discourses of representation and notions of inclusion and exclusion in hospitality, this study provides an opportunity to review and vary what is expected of hospitality work to increase employment for people with disabilities.

1. Introduction

Evidence exists that many tourism and hospitality businesses remain unchanged in terms of their policies and practices for the employment of people with disabilities¹ (Groschl, 2007). The hospitality industry has not readily found a coordinated way to serve the needs of either employees or customers with disabilities and industry awareness remains low (Bizjak et al., 2010; Darcy and Pegg, 2011; Ozturk et al., 2008). In their study of hotel experiences, for example, Poria et al. (2011) focused on the challenges of the hotel's physical environment as well as staff behaviours with the aim to contribute knowledge to overcome the challenges reported by hotel guests with disabilities. Service providers in the tourism and hospitality industry are given very little education and training around legislation, access provision, service and awareness training related to people with disabilities (Darcy and Pegg, 2011; Daruwalla and Darcy, 2005; Grady and Ohlin, 2009; O'Neill and Ali Knight, 2000). This is despite the fact that efforts to understand people with disabilities are argued to have mostly arisen from recent legislative endeavours (Poria et al., 2011). Likewise, the majority of tourism and hospitality schools have not initiated any specialised programmes for their students for the requirement of meeting the needs of people with disabilities, despite evidence that offering a range of topics on the disabled has the potential to improve attitudes of students towards people with disabilities (Bizjak et al.,

2010; Schitko and Simpson, 2012). In short, the hospitality industry has, so far, been a follower rather than a leader with respect to training and employment practices for people with disabilities compared to other industries (Groschl, 2004). Yet employment is a core plank of independent living for people with disabilities and a key part of their identity (Ormerod and Newton, 2013).

Disability is usually categorised into four different types: hearing disability, sight disability, physical disability and intelligence disability (Ozturk et al., 2008). Disability is complex and multi-dimensional (Groschl, 2007). This paper adopts the social model of disability, which views disability as a product of the disabling wider environmental – social and attitudinal barriers that compound a person's impairment and prevent their full participation in society (see Oliver, 1996). As such, removal of the social barriers around disability can serve to significantly improve the lives of people with disabilities by giving them the same opportunities as non-disabled people. This may be an opportunity for the hospitality industry to contribute toward positive social change. Given the need to change societal attitudes before there can be an increase in the employment of people with disabilities, there is an important need to examine representations of disability in hospitality training and employment. Representations are important because they set expectations around behavioural norms and can help break down barriers by influencing the perceptions of those who receive them.

This paper provides a first examination of how hospitality work and

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E-mail addresses: alison.mcintosh@aut.ac.nz (A. McIntosh), candice.harris@aut.ac.nz (C. Harris).¹ The term 'people with disabilities' is used throughout this paper as it is consistent with terminology associated with the social model of disability (Gillovic et al., 2018; Oliver, 1996).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2018.05.021>Received 19 September 2017; Received in revised form 17 May 2018; Accepted 21 May 2018
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training is represented in the popular television documentary series *The Special Needs Hotel* as it relates to training for young people with learning disabilities.² The three-part TV series followed the experiences of young people with learning disabilities as they received hands-on training in ‘the art of hospitality’ at the Foxes Hotel and Academy in Minehead, England (<http://foxesacademy.ac.uk/>). Foxes Academy is a specialist catering college and residential training hotel for young adults with learning disabilities. Whilst previous literature attests to the importance of disability awareness training in hospitality in informing and changing attitudes of employers and co-workers towards people with disabilities, such training has mostly focused on the customer with a disability, not employees or trainees. In fact, a focus on programmes dedicated to the training of people with disabilities is not evident in previous hospitality literature. However, such a focus can yield important insights into how hospitality work and training is considered and positioned within the perspective of disability, especially within the perspective of intellectual or learning disabilities which frequently renders young people more marginalised in employment than any other group of young people with disabilities (<http://foxesacademy.ac.uk/the-special-needs-hotel-on-channel-5/>). This poses challenges to employers over their management of the hotel servicescape and how they can render it welcoming or unwelcoming for employees and consumers with disabilities (Baker et al., 2007; Bitner, 1992; Poria et al., 2011). However, this understanding can open opportunities to review and realign hospitality employment and training with ethical and non-discriminatory principles and guidelines, which are essential if employment of people with disabilities is to be improved.

2. Literature review

2.1. Hospitality representations in the popular media

Television in particular, due to its accessibility, can serve as an excellent medium through which to view hospitality and wider society. Audiences can view television programmes as extensions of their own lives (O’Connor et al., 2009), or the lives they wish to have. As Parks and Kumar (2003, p. 3) noted, “we are all shaped in one way or another by the social, economic, and cultural relations that the medium of television has historically worked to structure and reproduce”. However, viewers have agency as, according to Gilhespy and Harris (2011), dominant forms of cinema and television offer a certain sort of viewing experience that ‘positions’ the audience or viewer. Film and television programmes are widely recognised for their power to induce people to visit destinations (Beeton, 2001; O’Connor et al., 2009). Reality television portrayals of tourist behaviour have been found to generate negative publicity about resort image, as Williams-Burnett et al. (2016) found to be the case in Kavos on the island of Corfu. This is significant, as TV viewing behaviour has been found to be the strongest predictor of entertainment motivated tourism (Spears et al., 2013).

Television programmes set in hospitality contexts such as *’Allo ’Allo!* and *Fawlty Towers* have proved extremely popular with television audiences, often conveying strong messages about hospitality settings such as hotels (Bartley, 2007), chefs, kitchens and restaurants (Leggott and Hochscherf, 2010; Randall, 2000), and airports (Hill, 2005) as sites for humour and drama. In more recent times, hospitality settings have also been used for ‘reality’ shows such as *Hell’s Kitchen*, *Airport*, etc. While a popular form of entertainment, reality shows tend to pitch hospitality work settings as sites for conflict, stress, aggression, frustration, and competition, where the strongest and loudest will win.

Berger’s (2016) content analyses of disability themes in popular media aimed to reveal the taken-for-granted assumptions about disability that underlie an audience’s interpretation of the material. He

explains that an analysis of humour in disability film and television illustrates the ways in which media portrayals both reflect and influence symbolic themes or cultural meanings about disability that are prevalent in society. Encouragingly, he also states that “a creative or cleverly constructed counter-narrative is able to disrupt this sign system, advance a critique of ableism, and portray disability as an affirmative social status and identity” (p. 158). Berger also cautions researchers using cultural material such as television, as to whether the public are able to “distinguish between disabling humour and disability humour? Is the difference between laughing at them and laughing with them a scholarly nuance that goes ‘over the head’ of most consumers?” (p. 166).

Whilst providing a lens on society, television also features information about the environment of work, serving as an important and easily accessible medium for people to access career information. However, few scholars have analysed television’s depiction of occupational roles in relation to gender and racial stereotypes (Signorielli and Kahlenberg, 2001), and even fewer have examined how disability is represented in tourism and hospitality work as portrayed on TV.

2.2. Disability, hospitality training and employment

It is often cited that people with disabilities are an untapped source of workers for hospitality labour (Chi and Qu, 2004; Groschl, 2004). The fact that the size of the disabled market is estimated at 10–19 percent of the general population is a notable reason for this position (Poria et al., 2011). Nevertheless, it is widely recorded that people with disabilities have lower employment rates than the non-disabled. Although the vast majority of them would prefer to work, people with disabilities continue to experience workplace discrimination (Chi and Qu, 2004; Ormerod and Newton, 2013; Paez and Arendt, 2014), are more likely to work part-time, and their hourly and annual incomes are less than employees without disabilities. The greatest barriers to the employment and advancement of people with disabilities have been identified as: lack of related work experience/lack of required skills/training; managers’ lack of knowledge about how to make accommodations; managers, co-workers, and consumers’ negative attitudes/stereotypes; and costs associated with training, supervising and making accommodations (Bruyere, 2000; Kalargyrou and Volis, 2014; Paez and Arendt, 2014). The lower employment rates of people with disabilities can become stigmatised wherein people with disabilities can be unfairly characterised as dependent upon society and public support (Chi and Qu, 2004; Groschl, 2004).

Being productive on a daily basis through meaningful employment is critical to establishing one’s independence, life satisfaction and self-esteem (Wehman et al., 1998). Groschl (2004) positions hotel and hospitality work as better able to accommodate people with disabilities than many other industries because of its wide range and variety of employment opportunities. Previous research argues that positive attitudes of employers and co-workers can facilitate successful employment for people with disabilities, with negative attitudes being one of the greatest barriers to employment opportunities. Indeed, Paez and Arendt (2014) reported unfavourable hotel and restaurant managers’ attitudes towards working with employees with disabilities. Chi and Qu (2004) found that prior positive experiences of working with people with disabilities can influence whether employers’ attitudes towards disability are favourable. This corroborates much previous research (Diksa and Rogers, 1996; Hutchins, 1990; Kanter, 1988; Levy et al., 1993; McFarlin et al., 1991).

Furthermore, employers’ attitudes are found to vary according to disability type. Wilgosh and Skaret (1987), McFarlin et al. (1991), Callahan (1994) and Scheid (1999), for instance, determined that employers were more likely to express positive attitudes toward individuals with physical or sensory disabilities than those with intellectual or psychiatric disabilities; these attitudes translated into their greater concerns over hiring persons with intellectual, learning or

² ‘Young people with learning disabilities’ is a term used consistently throughout the popular TV series, *The Special Needs Hotel*.

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