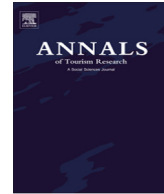




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# Performing: Hotel room attendants' employment experiences



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### ABSTRACT

Performing is a socio-psychological process of defining self as a room attendant and finding dignity in the course of completing daily tasks while interacting with other social actors—guests and hotel employees—on hotel stages. The grounded theory of performing emerged from qualitative research, informed by socialist-feminist critical theory and qualitative social constructivist grounded theory. Forty-six room attendants working in one of five participating 5-star hotels located in South East Queensland, Australia, were interviewed. Performing has ramifications for tourism service provision, specifically, hotel praxis and the need for greater acknowledgement of room attendants as a community of value, possessing practical knowledge that could be used to improve daily operations, enhancing guest interactions and tourism service experiences.

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*It's like walking into the Tardis, it's a completely different world. You transform yourself, you take off your clothes and put on the uniform, and that's who you are for the day until you go home.*

[Abbie, aged in her 40s, hotel room attendant for 14 years]

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## Introduction

Sociologically, Abbie's 'Tardis' experience associates with 'performance', a dramaturgical perspective pioneered by Erving Goffman (1959). A perspective wherein the social processes of everyday life are constituted of embodied performances by social beings, who engage in interactive roles before a variety of audiences. Everyone, everywhere, plays a role, and in these roles we know each other and ourselves (Goffman, 1959). Within tourism studies, human social engagements with tourism are studied physically and holistically—"performing" rather than 'gazing' [is] the dominant tourist research paradigm" (Larsen & Urry, 2011, p. 1111). In a 'performing' paradigm, tourist-service provision encounters are critical, especially "delivery by the relatively low-level service deliverers" (Urry (2002), p. 63). Jan Carlzon defines such encounters as "moments of truth" with regard to tourism service provision (Urry et al., 2002, p. 63). It is from these moments that tourists evaluate both tourism organisations and their overall touristic experiences (Jennings et al., 2010). During such encounters, touristic 'performances' by tourists and tourism service provision workers involve embodied practices and ascribed meanings (Hyde & Olesen, 2011). As social processes, these encounters serve to forge identities founded on both commodified and non-commodified labour (Crang, 1997).

Within extant tourism literature, the dramaturgical metaphor of performance has been used to analyse the conditions and circumstances of lower-level tourism service provision workers in the cruise-ship industry (Weaver, 2005). This study highlighted the poor compensation many cruise ship workers receive, the asymmetrical employer-employee relationships, and challenging working conditions (Weaver, 2005). Elsewhere, the dramaturgical metaphor has been applied to historical performances of tourism as 'performed art', demonstrating how guidebooks help construct tourism as a pursuit (Adler, 1989). Edensor (2000) used the metaphor to examine practices by tourists at the Taj Mahal. To identify contestation of space by tourists, locals and tourism workers, Mordue (2005) examined issues of power and control in performances in York's historic city center. In addition to such uses of Goffman's dramaturgical perspective of 'performance', Goffman's concept of 'front' and 'back' stages, has influenced a range of tourism writers, such as, MacCannell (1973), Pearce (1998), and Wilson (2009).

A related term permeating tourism studies research and writings is 'performativity'. Like performance, the concept of embodiment (Weaver, 2005) is imbued within performativity. Whereas performance focuses on social processes of everyday life as embodied performances, performativity emphasizes the roles language and communication play in shaping gender identity (Butler, 1999). Performativity studies in tourism have focused on embodiment, photography and 'family gaze' (Larsen, 2005), souvenir display and purchase (Muecke & Wergin, 2014), and adventure tourism (Cater & Cloke, 2007). Studies of gender and performativity include Johnston's (2007) negotiation of lesbian performance in parades. The characteristics of performative work also served to establish the main challenges facing service workers, such as, maintaining self-esteem (Baerenholdt & Jensen, 2009). Each of the performance and performativity studies noted herein have adopted a different focus. Each serves to underscore the complexity and range of social processes associated with tourism as enacted performance. That being said the use of performance metaphors and performative approaches in tourism research is not without critique. Baerenholdt and Jensen (2009) caution that performative work can trivialize hardships and exploitation experienced by workers. Larsen and Urry (2011), note that the performance turn in tourism is characterized by the study of bodily doings and enactments, which privilege practices over texts (Larsen & Urry, 2011).

Taking into account such critiques, our study of *performing* was situated within the two bodies of conceptual knowledge, performance and dramaturgy; and performativity and communication studies. As communication is a socially performed act (Goffman, 1959), there is overlap between the two bodies of knowledge. However, our study explores the socio-psychological processes of *performing* as action that constructs identities, rather than being a linguistic or discourse analysis. Hence our approach is more closely aligned to performance and dramaturgy, than it is to performativity studies, although we are indebted to some insights from the latter.

We start from the position that the dramaturgical perspective can be applied to a commercial social establishment (Goffman, 1959)—such as a 5-star hotel—where all interactions are shaped by the

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