



'Last hospitality' as an overlooked dimension in contemporary hospitality theory and practice



Viachaslau Filimonau*, Lorraine Brown

Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Poole, Dorset, BH12 5BB, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the on-going debate on how hospitality should be defined and what constitutes hospitality as a social and commercial phenomenon. The paper takes a conceptual approach, reviewing the literature relevant to hospitality and funeral care provision, and proposing a reclassification of hospitality. The paper reveals that funeral care holds a number of core attributes that have long been associated with (more) conventional hospitality services. The paper articulates these similarities and introduces the notion of 'last hospitality', which is conceptualised as the hospitality services provided by funeral directors to the deceased and their families and friends. The paper argues that 'last hospitality' alongside the related services of funeral directors should be subsumed into traditional notions of hospitality. The paper discusses the implications of this inclusion for hospitality research, theory and practice.

1. Introduction

The gradual growth of the hospitality industry on a global and national scale has accelerated the development of an associated research agenda (Rivera and Pizam, 2015). As a result, the scope of analysis in hospitality studies has expanded dramatically from (what can be considered as) rather traditional research areas, such as hospitality branding, marketing and management, towards new and previously unexplored study domains (Lugosi et al., 2009). These include the effect of the technological (O'Connor and Murphy, 2004), experience (Loureiro, 2014) and sharing (Cheng, 2016) economies and the impact of political, economic and social turmoil on hospitality operations (Ivanov et al., 2017), among others. The perception of what constitutes hospitality and what underpins the provision of its services has also evolved (Brotherton and Wood, 2008; Lugosi, 2014), with increasing interest paid to the re-definition of hospitality, the reconceptualization of hospitality services and the development of innovative approaches to hospitality management (Lynch et al., 2011). Despite a growing research agenda, definitions of hospitality alongside the identification of variables that affect the evolution of these definitions are at the centre of scientific discourse in hospitality (Ryan, 2015). More in-depth research on this topic is necessary to facilitate understanding of the industry's scope, and this carries implications for hospitality theory and practice (Ottenbacher et al., 2009).

As a social phenomenon, hospitality has traditionally been defined as a service of joy and gratification (Lugosi, 2008). From a commercial

vantage point, the entertainment element plays a crucial role in hospitality, especially in the context of foodservice provision and leisure (Hanefors and Mossberg, 2003). Furthermore, the hospitality literature has always underlined the importance of offering exceptional quality customer care and establishing friendly, welcoming relationships between providers of hospitality services and their recipients (Pizam and Ellis, 1999). To this end, the need to excite guests and amuse them with little surprises or 'sparkling moments' has been emphasised (Hemmington, 2007, p.753). Finally, the importance of delivering memorable experiences in hospitality is highlighted (Tung and Ritchie, 2011), thus 'adding value to human lives' (Hemmington, 2007, p.754) and enhancing the subjective well-being of consumers (Brotherton, 1999) in pursuit of return custom and competitive advantage (Ryu and Han, 2010). As a social phenomenon, hospitality has thus been viewed in a largely positive light (Lashley, 2008).

From a commercial viewpoint, hospitality has been considered a (dis)continuous realm (Lugosi, 2009), whereby the provision of hospitality services stretches from the moment of meeting and greeting guests to the time of their (temporary, with an intention to return) departure from the hospitality premises (Lugosi, 2008). Due to its focus on return custom, commercial hospitality can be pictured as a circular phenomenon (Hemmington, 2007), in which hospitality services re-occur every time a consumer returns, and every effort is made by hospitality providers to encourage this return (Poulston, 2015) (see Fig. 1).

While the positive, pleasurable nature of social hospitality and the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: vfilimonau@bournemouth.ac.uk (V. Filimonau).

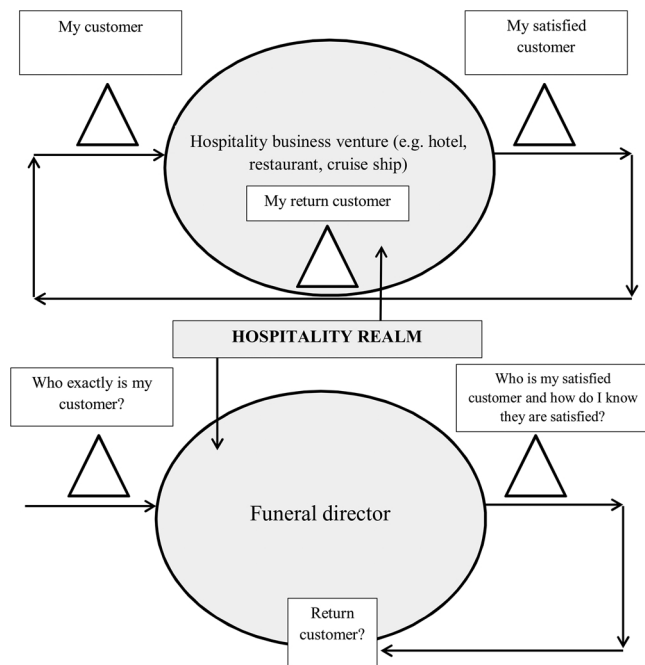


Fig. 1. The explicit circularity of the traditional hospitality realm versus the more finite nature of 'last' hospitality.

circularity of commercial hospitality services are well appreciated, there is a less gratifying, 'dark' dimension to the hospitality realm which has been neglected in hospitality research to date. Hay (2015) introduced the notion of 'dark hospitality' though its definition was limited to the provision of comfort and pastoral care by hospitality managers and staff to those customers who had planned to die in their hotel room. While this is undoubtedly an important and overlooked area of hospitality, it is argued that the scope of 'dark hospitality' can be extended to cover funeral care.

Although there are many differences, funeral care reflects the main attributes of traditional hospitality services, namely intangibility, perishability and variability (Korai and Souiden, 2017). The provision of funeral services is emotionally challenging, as it deals with distressed and grieving customers, and thus requires refined emotion management skills and dignified manners (Bailey, 2010; Hyland and Morse, 1995; Tims, 2014). Furthermore, funeral directors play a key role in comforting the family and friends of the deceased. Similar to the traditional vision of hospitality, this comforting role is based on human exchange (Brotherton, 1999) and requires exceptional execution of the core customer care skills that any hospitality professional should possess, such as empathy and responsiveness (Crick and Spencer, 2011). This points to the resemblance of the services provided by funeral directors to those of traditional hospitality providers, with the main difference lying in the definition of the customer and the more finite nature of 'dark hospitality' (see Fig. 1). This is because it is unclear as to who constitutes the customer from the perspective of funeral directors, that is the deceased or their family and friends. Furthermore, the notion of the return customer as it is traditionally understood in hospitality cannot be applied to the funeral sector. The hospitality services provided by funeral directors can be seen to constitute the 'last hospitality' that a person receives, as opposed to the 'meet and greet (and entertain)' concept which underpins services provision in the traditional hospitality narrative. This article conceptualises funeral care as a form of hospitality and recommends its incorporation into the hospitality literature and into the associated research agenda. It finally elaborates on the implications of this development for hospitality theory and practice.

2. Defining the scope of hospitality

To advocate the inclusion of funeral care into the hospitality realm, it is important to first understand the scope of hospitality. This is a challenge per se (Hemmington, 2007) as, although hospitality research represents a rapidly emerging study domain, defining hospitality has proven difficult (Brotherton and Wood, 2008), and there is an on-going debate in the literature on what constitutes hospitality services (Lugosi, 2008). Hospitality has been conceptualised from the social and commercial perspectives (Causevic and Lynch, 2009), where the former manifests hospitality services as a form of emotional, social exchange between providers (hosts) and recipients (guests), while the latter considers hospitality as a means of facilitating this exchange in transactional, business settings (King, 1995). Based on this social and commercial definition, a continuum of hospitality has been developed, which draws upon the difference between the ulterior and largely egoistic (commercial) and exterior and mainly altruistic (social) motives of offering hospitality services (Lashley, 2015). For the host, the imperative is to balance out these motives to provide truly hospitable services to guests while concurrently maintaining the long-term economic viability of their business venture (Lashley, 2000).

Furthermore, due to the blurred nature of hospitality definitions and substantial overlap of the main hospitality functions (Ryan, 2015), there is no consensus in the literature as to what activities can be classed as purely hospitality-related. In their seminal work, Ottenbacher et al. (2009) distinguish between the core hospitality services that encompass lodging, foodservice, leisure, attractions, travel and conventions and the external forces that determine speed and influence the successful delivery of these services. Given the complexity of the world of hospitality and the multiple associated interactions, Ottenbacher et al. (2009) define hospitality as a field, rather than as an industry or an economic sector. They further suggest that the scope and scale of the field of hospitality are constantly evolving, driven by various political and socio-economic variables and facilitated by advancements in social science research. For instance, the definition of the core hospitality services as originally proposed by Ottenbacher et al. (2009) has since been extended to cover healthcare and nursing provision (Rosalind et al., 2016; Severt et al., 2008; Suess and Mody, 2017) and religious missionaries (Brandner, 2013). Likewise, recent technological innovations and the rise of the sharing economy are the external forces that have reshaped the notion of hospitality and brought new definitions and phenomena into the hospitality literature, such as airbnbization (Richards, 2017), networked hospitality exchange (Molz, 2012) and hospitality (host-guest) value co-creation (Chathoth et al., 2016).

To summarise, the literature reveals that it is highly challenging to offer a universally accepted and stable definition of hospitality (Hemmington, 2007; Brotherton and Wood, 2008; Lugosi, 2008). Environmental changes including, in particular, technological advances have challenged traditional definitions. Meanwhile, there have been academic redefinitions of hospitality services to include healthcare, nursing and religious missionaries. This paper argues that it is time now that funeral care is also treated as a form of hospitality. As Lugosi (2014) argues, hospitality can be offered and received in what can be thought of as non-traditional hospitality settings, which poses a challenge to managers and researchers. The same could be said for the on-going re-evaluation of what is classed as hospitality services.

3. Death and funeral care as research objects

Death is a natural phenomenon. It is the most certain thing in life and, using travel terminology, a 'final destination' for every human being. In other words, it is an inescapable though unsettling fact of life (Heidegger, 1962). For this reason, the societal importance of funeral care is high, as it represents the very last service offered to the deceased while concurrently providing comforting services to their family and

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