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The social identity of waiters onboard UK cruise ships: 'Quasi-professionals' forming occupational communities

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Abstract:

This work-in-progress paper sets out to explore the existence of waiters forming occupational communities onboard cruise ships which operates in the UK industry.

Despite the increasing importance of the cruise industry worldwide, academic enquiry is recent and very little is known about the lives of cruise ship employees (e.g., Gibson, 2008; Van Broeck, 2010). Rapid industrial expansion and demand have put a strain on human resources, echoing the challenge of acquiring and retaining quality talent (Raub & Streit, 2006). In a competitive market and in an industry known for a strong service culture, cruise ship labour is central for business operations and success. Given a high degree of social control and a life dominated by their specialisation, seafarers have little opportunities outside of their occupation (Lukas, 2010).

A research proposition therefore would be to examine the relationship between occupational specialisation and community in the cruise industry. Exploring the concept of occupational communities, while linking the theories of social identity and self-categorization will provide a more fully integrated view of the self and present new insights in understanding the 21stC hospitality worker.

1. Introduction

This work-in-progress paper sets out to explore the existence of waiters forming occupational communities onboard cruise ships which operate in the UK industry, with the aim of providing new insights into employee behaviour and values towards work and industry. To further complement this line of interest, the analytical tools of social identity and 'self percept' (Kelly, 1991) will be applied and evaluated.

While employee profiles vary from ship to ship, and company to company, this research will focus on dining room waiters/dining room assistants. These positions assume similar work roles, levels of pay, and status, thus stabilising the identity and ideologies surrounding the occupation. Focusing on an occupational group, this study aims to determine why an individual works in a particular role/industry, evaluate what values they hold regarding their occupation, and how they identify with their role. This paper will begin with background information relating to the cruise industry, a literature review which introduces occupational communities, social identity and self-categorization, and finally methodological considerations.

2. Cruise Industry Overview

The modern cruise industry has changed dramatically since the early 20th C, predominantly influenced by technological advancements and changes in social perceptions, making cruising more accessible to individuals from wider socio-economic backgrounds. Such changes have evidently impacted on demand, and according to the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), the industry has experienced a continuing upward trend with average annual growth figures of 7.4% since 1980 (CLIA, 2010). This growing demand has put a strain on human resources required to offer the premium service that most cruise goers expect. A key issue recognised by the industry and academics is the challenge of acquiring and retaining quality talent that will benefit their operations (Raub and Streit, 2006; Lukas, 2010). In recent years the UK cruise industry has grown significantly, representing 33% of the European market (European Cruise Council, 2008), while 40% of all cruises around the world start from a UK port (Doggrell, 2010). This is a considerable contribution and promotes a plausible focus of investigation.

Labour contracts occupied by service related staff are often 4-9 months long and generally filled by individuals from less developed economies, which can be underlined by ulterior motives, i.e. the opportunity of worldwide travel with free meals and accommodation. The International Transport Workers' Association (ITF) documented that the average stay of hotel/catering crew employment onboard cruise ships has dropped from 3 years in 1970 to 18 months in 1990, to just 9 months in 2000 (ITF, 2002). Recent data regarding retention rates is not publicly available (Lukas, 2010, p.4) and it is recognised that this data is 10 years old. However, these figures have been used more recently (e.g. Chin, 2008), and does show an indication of key sequences which spans 30 years.

Developed through 'flags of convenience' the industry is able to negotiate with low wage labour from all over the world to reduce operating costs (Chin, 2008, p.2), a variable allowing cruises at lower prices. This has encouraged the formation of a multi-national crew, which characterises cruise ship employment today. A flexible labour market has positives for the employer and employee, however the industry cannot rely on continuously replenishing stocks (Wiscombe, 2010). Therefore understanding the behaviour and values of the 21st C worker should be reviewed in order to achieve sustainability and continuously drive this ambitious industry.

3. Literature Review

Cruise ships are often regarded as floating *cities* or *resorts*, and in many ways can be seen as what Goffman (1962, p.74) calls a 'total institution'. This enclosed nature fosters a community atmosphere, while the physical boundaries can create a sense of belonging (Weeden *et al* 2010). The occupation dominates the life of a seafarer, while spending time off duty with colleagues, there is limited opportunities outside of the occupation (Lukas, 2009). This differentiates it from many other types of work; when a seafarer finishes their shift, they can't go home, see their family or separate themselves from the place of work.

3.1 Occupational Communities (OC)

Organisations have cultures which may have distinct subcultures (Hofstede, 1998). One way of viewing such groups is to characterise them as 'occupational communities' (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984). The concept refers to them as 'bound by socially constructed rules and ethics' that express 'shared ideologies and cultural forms' (Elliot and Scacchi, 2008, p.6). Professional occupations usually rise to such a concept, although Salaman (1974) suggests that physical proximity may be more important for working class occupations. Lee-Ross (2008) suggests that these bounded work cultures are likely to form on cruise ships, forming short-term OC. To date, there is little evidence that waiters form an OC, although characteristics are indicated by Mars and Nicod (1984), supported by more recent research by Sandiford and Seymour (2007) who recognise OC are salient within the UK public house sector.

Salaman (1974, p.27) identifies a number of key factors that determine whether an occupation derives a sense of community. These are:

1. 'Involvement in work tasks;
2. Marginal status;
3. Inclusiveness of the work or organisational situation'.

Each factor would need to be satisfied and will determine the strength of the OC, with Salaman suggesting that it may not be definitive but in varying degrees. The degree of strength may determine how central attitudes and beliefs, supported by company values, are formed. This in turn may be parallel to organisational culture. The strength of this bond depends on the degree of influence the community or organisation may hold over an individual. Ultimately the organisation will have control, but considering such values may contribute towards knowledge for the 21[st]C worker.

Drawn from the work of Salaman (1974) and academics that continue to utilise his framework (e.g., Sandiford and Seymour, 2007; Cox, 2008), Figure 1 proposes the components that need to exist and be explored for waiters onboard forming OC.

```
                    Identity and              Inclusiveness
                    involvement                 of work
                     with work
                          ↖                    ↗

                        Occupational Community:
                           Waiters Onboard

                          ↙                    ↘
                      Marginal                Isolation
                       status
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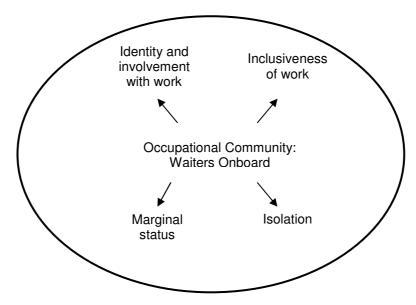
Figure 1: Proposed components of an occupational community

3.2 Social Identity and Self-Categorization

The society we live in today directs members to have an occupation (Saunders, 1981), therefore an occupation could be a significant determinant in how an identity is created (e.g. Becker, 1956). Through their identification with the occupation, individuals can derive a significance of their work in society (Bunderson, 2009), or in this case, the society onboard a ship. The dining experience is still regarded as one of the highlights of a cruise, where an individual plays an important part of the product.

A theoretical key to this research is Tajfel's social identity theory, which primarily deals with intergroup relations. Social identity is 'the individual's knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups, together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership' (Tajfel, 1982, p.31). This brings into play 'ingroups, outgroups' processes (Tajfel *et al* 1971), suggesting that an important component of the self-concept is derived from the memberships and socialisation in social groups and categories (Terry *et al* 1999), which emphasizes the differences between such groups and similarities among group members. The process of self-categorization therefore transforms; 'self-perception, beliefs, attitudes, feelings and behaviours are now defined in terms of the group prototype' (Terry *et al* 1999, p.284). Membership and socialisation causes people to behave in terms of group norms, viewing themselves as "we" instead of "I". In other words, members will affiliate to an ideology which will represent an identity of shared values, beliefs, and ways to behave, in contrast to members of other 'out-groups' (Stets and Burke, 2000, p.225). It is this affiliation that can be considered a criterion for defining OC.

This would suggest that the perception of 'self', what Salaman (1974, p.21) terms 'self-image', is able to affiliate to social categories, through a process called self-categorization, and so form an identity. 'Social identity theory and self-categorization theory are complementary theories explaining social identity in terms of what it is, the elements, and how it develops, the processes' (Korte, 2007, p.169). Through this explanation, individuals such as waiters develop a social identity (the element) through the process of self-categorization, by the way they see themselves within society and how they fit.

Although the hospitality and cruise industry has worked hard to move forward, the occupation and onboard work are arguably surrounded by constructed stereotypes and ideologies, e.g. not generally regarded as mainstream careers with low pay and long hours. Wildes (2007, p.6) further expresses that the occupation derives a 'worldwide stigma', which could be caused by the perceived *master/servant* identity historically and operationally created. This perception may vary from society to self, and also be institutional, i.e. the perceived glamour and service expectations of a cruise may enhance a professional identity. The role does exert a required expertise, especially onboard a cruise ship. Waiters could be regarded as 'actors' (e.g. Goffman, 1959, p.74-75), due to the *scriptive* and *performative* nature of the role onboard, which is closely tangled with 'emotional labour'. In this case, waiting staff with a crafts style orientation could be considered as 'quasi-professional' (Raelin, 1984).

This research understands that national culture and identity would be an important variable in an individual's perception of who they believe they are and the values they hold, and this paper has no intention of ignoring this. According to Hofstede (1991, p.182) an occupation appears to be more stronger by the way of cultural value system, rather than any one organisation, suggesting that through the socialisation of an occupation entails the acquisition of values and practices. Notwithstanding, it's at national level that values are the strongest. This noted, the multi-national flavour is encompassed under an occupational umbrella, in which members share a common ground to provide a service through company standards. In other words, although members of an occupational community may be multi-cultural, membership and socialisation will direct the members to behave in a particular way. It is in the interest of this research to explore these values and the attributes that encircle the occupation.

4. Research Issues

The aim of this research is the exploration of occupational communities onboard cruise ships, through an analysis of the societal identities and self-categorization of waiting staff. The objectives are to:

- Investigate the proposition that waiters form occupational communities onboard cruise ships, using the components identified in Figure 1;

- Evaluate the ideologies given to an occupation, through the concepts of self-categorization and social constructs within identity theory.

5. Methodological Considerations

Subject to ethical concerns and the cooperation from the industry, this study will take an ethnographic route. As work-in-progress, research which pertains to culture will further develop the literature review process. The methodological appropriateness will consider participation observation and discourse analysis as a tool to uncover the symbolic interactions created by the social ordering and constructs of onboard work.

To conclude, this paper has introduced future research for the hospitality industry, and the growing need for identity and social constructs to be researched in relation to the cruise industry. However, there is a realisation that this study is in its infancy and a need for further research is required.

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