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Abstract

“Ship-space” – Managing Talent on Cruise Ships: A Hospitality Perspective

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Abstract

Academic rigour in the area of cruise ship labour is relatively scarce, with little known of the life / work of cruise ship workers and how they make sense of this semi-closed industry. Through the theory of identity, this exploratory study seeks to investigate the strategies that frontline hospitality workers are able to negotiate and attach meaning to this consumptive work experience. Twenty in-depth qualitative interviews were undertaken with front line hospitality staff (waiters and pursers) and analysed thematically. The findings from the interviews uncovered five main themes which gave some insight into the work and lives of cruise ship workers – this is called ‘Ship-Space’. Ship-space is a term used to describe the attributes that workers related to in order to make sense of themselves in the cruise ship environment. In an under-researched industry, it is hopeful investigations such as this one can make valuable insights for employers, recruiting agencies and potential seafarers

Introduction

Interest in the well-being of cruise ship labour and the working conditions on-board has grown proportionally with the growth of the cruise ship industry (De Grosbois, 2016). This has somewhat resulted in the increase of awareness and empathetic views towards the consumption of cruise tourism and such consequences (i.e. environmental issues, labour practices, etc.), intensifying pressure for the industry to re-evaluate some of the working and operational practices established. In a semi-closed industry which tactfully uses international law, there is very little known about the how this type of work impacts upon individuals and how this talent is managed. Research which has been conducted in this area acknowledges the unique working conditions (Dennett et al 2014; Gibson and Perkins, 2015; Lee-Ross, 2008; Sehkaran and Sevcikova, 2011), particularly when this is compared to the usual practices on land. Due to the stark differences between the employment on ship and shore, such comparisons are often futile (Gibson, Lim and Holmes, 2016), suggesting any research investigating cruise ship labour must recognise the physical and socio-cultural parameters.

Further research has also highlighted a lack of transparency from the cruise ship industry (De Grosbois, 2016) which has created a mismatch between the expectations and reality of life on-board cruise ships (Matuszewski and Blenkinsopp, 2011). One useful route which could provide insight into how individuals make sense of themselves and their work environment is to explore identity.

Cruise Ship Identity

Identity at the outset is a ‘complex’ and ‘multidimensional’ area (Chase, 1992: p.121), and can be applied and discussed depending upon the context in which it is placed (Lawler, 2008). Researchers have conceptualised identity in numerous ways, although mainstream theories suggest that identity encapsulates cognitive and motivational components, while including individual and social processes, suggesting that identity is an on-going activity rather than a static entity (e.g. Tajfel, 1978). In this sense, identity is active, in that its premise involves person/environment interaction. Therefore the self can only be realised as a reflection of others, although the self and social are distinct, they are very much intertwined

Places where social boundaries are created (i.e. the cruise ship) often form conditions of inclusion/exclusion and sometimes a feeling of threat, which can impact upon how an individual comes to understand themselves within that world (Manzo, 2005). On-board cruise ships there are clear boundaries that separate organisational members from the outside world. The ship itself acts as a boundary – a physical boundary distinct from the natural environment and semi-isolated from society. Once on-board, further boundary devices are imposed that separate organisational members from guests, hiding the backstage from the paying participants. The physical or structural boundaries are not difficult to see or understand their purpose – it is the more cultural or symbolic margins that pose a complex underbelly, particularly with reference to the work and life of a seafarer. Research suggests that to work on a ship is in part sacrificial, yet within the secure and restrictive confines of the ship, a sense of freedom prevails (Dennett et al 2014; Matuszewski and Blenkinsopp, 2011). The ship-space gives the freedom for individuals to create a ship-based identity, but in resistance to this, the ship controls and manipulates this identity via its physical and behavioural (i.e. rules and regulations) boundaries. Furthermore, this type of work is often associated with a higher level of risk (Adams, 2017) which can trigger stronger attachments to the ship, which can act as a secure place, or a ‘home’ (Dennett et al, 2014), and therefore affecting an individual’s identity.

Identity categorises the individual in a given context, defining a set of cognitions and behavioural responses, providing normative guidelines for behaviour. Once in the society of the ship, individuals will derive their identities from the social categories in which they belong. Identity therefore is a fundamental concept, which helps explain what people think about their environment, the way they do things, and why people do what they do in those environments (Ashford et al. 2008). It is an on-going process of self-definition that can be relative to a collective. This can be considered a route for understanding patterns of meaning that are shared among members of a group, and the way this influences the dynamics of the group.

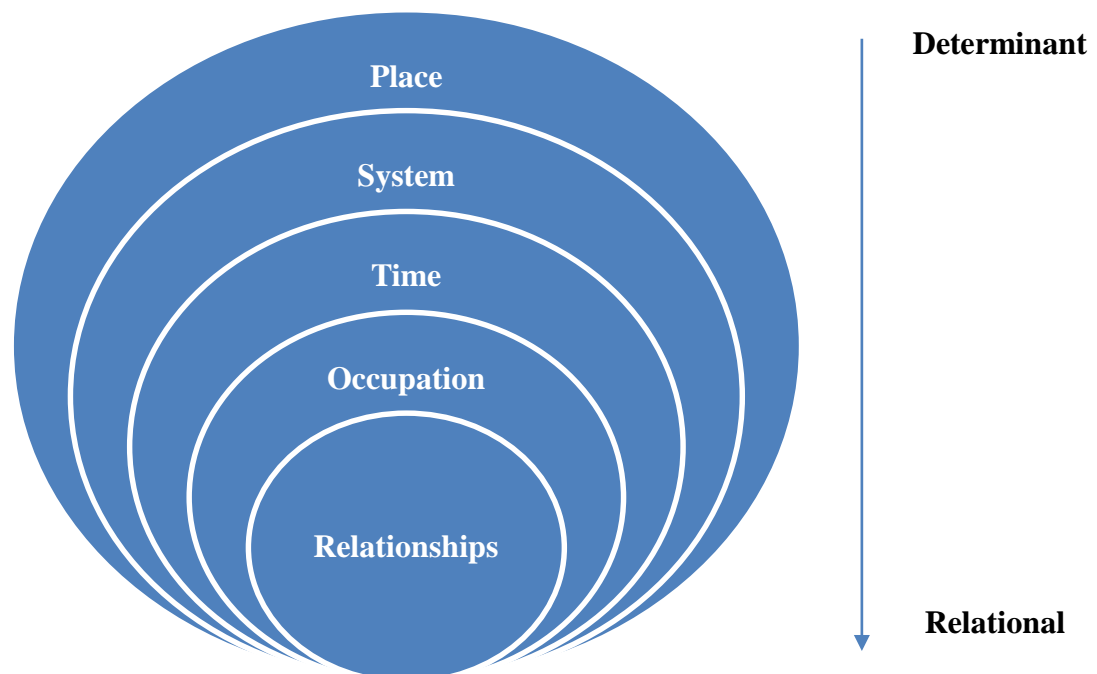
Methodology

Twenty in-depth qualitative interviews were undertaken with front line hospitality staff (waiters and pursers). Due to the difficulty to reach sample (being international and physically working on a cruise ship) these interviews were mainly conducted over the telephone, with one interview via Skype. The interview questions remained relatively general and open, encouraging the participants to “tell their story”, hopeful of giving a realistic account of the work and life on-board. The interviews were analysed thematically, following the steps offered by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Initial Findings

There were a total of five themes that emerged from the data. There were three determinant themes: the ship as a place, time, and the system of the ship. These themes were considered unique to the cruise ship industry, primarily acting as a binding mechanism, promoting a shared experience of belonging and attachment. The final two themes were relational: relationships and occupation. The determinant themes have a significant impact upon the relational themes, affecting the formation of identity and community.

Ship-Space



The identity of cruise ship workers is bound by place and context. This would imply that occupation, place and identity are inextricably linked. Individuals come on-board and unless they have worked on a ship before they have little comprehension of the realities of work and life at sea. Their identity before they come on-board, in part, is ineffective, who they are and what they know holds little relevance, which has similar connotations to Goffman's (1961) idea of 'total institution'. The ship acts as a separation from society and "normality", providing a physical and social barrier from the outside (e.g. Goffman, 1961), meaning that all aspects of one's life transpire within one place. Being bound to the ship in a physical and social sense has more of an impact upon an individual's 'life space' (Lewin, 1951). The physical boundaries of the ship limit the range of opportunities to be considered at that time, and social actions and behaviour are imposed by what is socially acceptable and valued within the system and place of the ship, which is furthermore strongly affected by one's occupation.

The cruise ship is a unique working environment - intense, restricted and encapsulated - which requires workers to adjust, adopt and sacrifice "to the way things are", thus through the transitory and active nature of identity salience (LeBoeuf *et al.* 2010), a ship-based identity is created. The findings in this study suggest that ship-space has significant impacts upon the formation of community and identity. Within this intricacy, a cruise ship worker is able to make sense of their-self and make sense of others, in which an occupation can be a valuable means of expression.

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