

“Better Than Your Mother”: Caring Labor in Luxury Hotels

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Abstract

This paper looks at a form of caring labor that has been neglected by students both of care work and of emotional labor in the workplace: luxury service. Drawing on 12 months of ethnography in two luxury hotels and 50 interviews with participants, I demonstrate that many of the elements that differentiate luxury service from non-luxury service are indicators of care. These include personalization; anticipation, legitimation, and resolution of needs; sincerity and authenticity; and available physical labor, both visibly and invisibly displayed. In contrast to some kinds of marketized care work, such as elder care, in which commodification and bureaucratization have led to the elimination of these intangible dimensions of care, in luxury service, these “extra” elements are the key to profit and are therefore emphasized by management. My evidence further indicates that the “needs” that are *met* in the luxury hotel are also often *acquired* there, as guests describe a process of learning what they are supposed to want and to do in the hotel. I argue that this process of consumption of care in the luxury environment produces and reinforces a particular sense of self as especially *entitled* to consume care, which in turn creates class dispositions significant for guests’ consumption and interpersonal relations beyond the hotel.

One of the best things about childhood is being spoiled by grown-ups. They fluff your pillows as they tuck you in at night, give you yummy treats to eat, and always remember your birthday. Then you grow up and all that tender loving care stops—until you check into a hotel.

–Stephen Whitlock, in *Condé Nast Traveler*, April 1999

They go out of their way to make you feel, y’know, like you matter. “If you weren’t here, we would be very unhappy about it.” . . . And to be taken care of and to have somebody who’s gonna do things for you in a way that’s, like, better than your mother! You know? It makes you feel good.

–Martha, luxury hotel client

When you check into a luxury hotel, your tastefully decorated room will feature a comfortable bed, superior linens, European amenities, a thick bathrobe, comfortable slippers, a CD player, a high-speed Internet connection, and possibly a breathtaking view. But these comforts are not all you receive for your \$400, \$500 or \$600 per night. The staff will also call you by name, even when you have not been introduced. If you are celebrating a special occasion, flowers or champagne will await you and workers will congratulate you. If you have stayed in the hotel before, workers will remember which newspaper you like, your favorite foods, and perhaps your favorite restaurant or type of music. Workers will be available to run errands for you, bring you food at any time of day or night, carry your bags, do your laundry, respond sympathetically to special requests, apologize for problems, and break rules to accommodate you. They will leave cookies by your bed and turn on the lights in your room before you return in the evening. In short, they will take care of you.

Care work is an increasingly important focus of sociological research. In one incarnation of the field, scholars and policymakers debate about what caring labor is, who should perform it, how it is affected by commodification, and how it should be valued (see, e.g., Abel and Nelson 1990; DeVault 1991; Diamond 1990; Gordon et al. 1996; Meyer 2000; Phillips and Benner 1994). These investigations occur in the context of discussions of how care work is gendered and how it can be understood philosophically (see, e.g., Bubeck 1995; Fisher and Tronto 1990; Gilligan 1982; Held 1995; Larrabee 1993; Noddings 1984; Ruddick 1989, 1998; Tronto 1993; Waerness 1984). In

addressing these questions, most researchers of care and care work are concerned with care that is indisputably necessary and valuable in our society, such as child care, elder care, and health care.

In another variant of the field, scholars look at care as part of other kinds of work, including that of flight attendants (Hochschild 1983), fast food workers and insurance salespeople (Leidner 1993), restaurant servers (Paules 1991), legal workers (Pierce 1995), and so on (see MacDonald and Siranni 1996; McCammon and Griffin 2000). This work is usually discussed in terms of “emotional labor” (Hochschild 1983) rather than “care” and in terms of the organization of work (see especially Leidner 1993). The debate frequently centers on the effects on workers of performing emotional labor (Hochschild 1983; Tolich 1993; Wharton 1993). Theorists of service work tend to look at types of work generally not characterized by the extreme level of care typical of “care work.”

Looking at the luxury hotel calls this bifurcation into question. Caring labor is one of the central features of luxury service, which has been understudied within sociology generally. In the hotel industry, market pressures have led to differentiation on the basis of service, which is particularly important in high-end hotels. Isadore Sharp, chairman and CEO of the Four Seasons luxury hotel chain, states, for example, that luxury “isn’t just building a different kind of building and adding more amenities; it comes through the service element, the ability to anticipate what guests’ needs really are—and then deliver” (Gillette 1998: 59). As I show, “service” in this context overlaps significantly with “care.” Some might argue, following Waerness (1984), that “personal service” is different from “caregiving” because it is unreciprocal and performed by a worker subordinate to the consumer. Yet research increasingly suggests that these elements also characterize many paid caregiving occupations or unpaid practices (see Abel and Nelson 1990; DeVault 1991; Diamond 1990). This overlap indicates that we should look at how care and personal service are related, rather than attempt simply to eliminate personal service from the definition of care.

In this paper, I elaborate what I consider the four major elements of luxury service, invoked (though not always explicitly) by managers, workers, and guests. These include personalization; anticipation, legitimation, and resolution of guests’ needs; sincerity and authenticity; and unlimited available physical labor, displayed both visibly and invisibly. I argue that these elements closely overlap

with others' definitions of "good care" in more traditional caring occupations. However, hotels differ from other sites of care, where these intangible components of care are minimized because they are expensive; in the luxury hotel, these elements are the source of profit. Finally, I suggest that luxury service not only *responds* to guests' needs, but also *creates* them. Guests describe *learning* the types of expectations and needs they should have in the hotel and becoming comfortable with a certain level of entitlement; the features of luxury service mediate this process. In creating these needs, I argue, luxury service also contributes to the creation of class dispositions and establishes that some and not others are entitled to care.

Methods

This paper is based on research including 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in two luxury hotels in a major West Coast city, 20 interviews with hotel clients, generated through snowball sampling unrelated to my work in the hotel, 30 interviews with managers and industry players, both in my sites and in other local hotels, participation in three luxury hotel employee orientations (in my two sites and one other hotel), and extensive review of industry literature. (Names of the hotels and of all participants in the research are pseudonyms.) I worked at the Royal Court, a 100-room, independently owned and managed luxury hotel in the retail and tourist district, for 8 months, in nine different jobs (telephone operator, bellperson, valet parker, front desk agent/concierge, reservationist, room service server/order taker, room cleaner, turndown attendant, and restaurant runner). I worked at the Luxury Garden, a 160-room luxury hotel in the financial district belonging to an Asian chain, for 4 months, primarily as a concierge (with short observational stints in other departments). Both hotels are extremely highly ranked and very expensive. The *lowest* room rate at the Royal Court was \$315 when I was there; at the Luxury Garden (the most expensive hotel in the city), it was \$475.

Dimensions of Luxury Service

Personalization

Customization is a key aspect of luxury service. Most fundamentally, this personalization occurs through consistent name recognition, one of the main tenets of service at any luxury hotel. For example, the first and third of the Ritz-Carlton's "three steps of service" include the command to "use the guest's name, if and when possible." The Luxury Garden's first service standard was "recognize guests personally through the use of their name, naturally and appropriately"; the Royal Court also emphasized name use. Management in both my sites encouraged workers to learn not only guests' names, but also those of their children or pets. (Another dimension of recognition work, of course, is to know when the guest prefers *not* to be recognized, at moments when he might want privacy or would be embarrassed at being acknowledged by staff [Dev and Ellis 1991; Mann 1993]).

Personalization also means noticing individual details about the guest. For first-time guests, the ideal is that workers use information they already have or what they can glean to customize their conversations with the guest. This imperative might mean remembering where the guest had dinner last night or that she is in the city for the first time, or noticing that a couple is there to celebrate a particular occasion and wishing them a happy birthday or congratulating them on their recent wedding. Luxury hotels typically acknowledge these special occasions by providing complimentary champagne or other amenities as well.

For frequent guests, personalization goes even further. Upscale hotels devote significant energy to gathering and acting on information about repeat guests' desires, including the type of room they want, particular services they require (such as ionizing the room to purify the air or not using chemicals when cleaning the room), and special preferences of rooms, pillows, newspapers, and food. The hotels also keep track of guest conditions like alcoholism and diabetes in order to avoid offering inappropriate amenities.

Beyond these basic elements of the guest's stay, preferences observed in the hotel span a wide range. At the Royal Court, for example, one married couple both insisted on being addressed as

“Doctor”; another guest at the Royal Court required that a rented red Jaguar convertible be waiting when he checked in; yet another preferred special ginger nut butter on her French toast in the morning. One guest at the Luxury Garden insisted that laundry workers avoid putting starch in his clothes; a second guest demanded that the head of his bed be elevated six inches off the ground; still another thought of a particular chair as “his” (he had reportedly carved his initials on it) and requested that it always be in his room when he was staying in the hotel. Room service workers knew by name a woman who insisted that her breakfast papaya be sliced with a straight edge, rather than the standard serrated edge (they believed she thought she got more that way). At the Mandarin Oriental hotel in Hong Kong, one guest’s toy monkey always awaits her on the bed; in another Hong Kong hotel, workers iron one guest’s shirt near his door “because he likes the feeling of warm cloth when dressing in the morning” (Lipper 2000).

Sometimes, as in the previous examples, observance of preferences results from the guest’s request. Yet luxury service also means fulfilling preferences when the guest has *not* explicitly articulated them. One manager at the Luxury Garden said that, for him, “luxury service” was exemplified by a housekeeper’s noticing that a guest ate a peanut butter cookie provided for him in the evening, but left the chocolate chip one untouched; the next night she left him two peanut butter cookies. A manager in another luxury hotel appreciatively described a housekeeper known for going through guests’ garbage to see what kind of candy they ate and what magazines they read, in order to enter their preferences into the guest’s database record. Workers in both hotels I studied were encouraged to record in the computer any information useful for personalizing service.

Research suggests that personalized attention is indeed an important element of creating customer loyalty. One industry study (Bowen and Shoemaker 1998) found 4 factors related to recognition, personal attention, and customized service to be among the top 8 (of 18) that clients said engendered loyalty to a particular hotel; 87.5% of clients surveyed rated “the hotel uses information from your prior stays to customize services for you” either 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale of important factors (mean rating of 6.4). The factors “the staff recognizes you by name” and “the staff recognizes you when you arrive” achieved a mean score of 5.6. Other research has identified personal attention and

recognition as 2 of the 3 factors determining the choice of a hotel brand (Dev and Ellis 1991). Marketing research reveals that affluent frequent travelers in particular look for recognition by name and, in making reservations, “a direct line to the general manager who inquires about a recent family triumph or tragedy, as any old friend would do” (Mann 1993: 56).

My qualitative data support these findings. Guests in interviews described personal attention as important to them. Many guests enjoyed being called by name; one young leisure traveler (Christina) appreciatively described how at a Four Seasons hotel the staff had remembered not only her name and her husband’s, but also the names of her two dogs. Another guest (Tom) was “dumbfounded” when his preferences were observed at a Four Seasons hotel—upon his arrival, he received plain strawberries instead of chocolate-covered ones, because on an earlier visit he had told the staff that he was “a low-fat eater.”

Guests particularly appreciated being distinguished from others and having their personhood acknowledged, often describing this treatment in terms of care. One businesswoman I interviewed (Betty) preferred luxury hotels because, she said, “they treat you like you’re a person” and “they respect me as a person.” Another business traveler (Tom) said, “Everybody likes to be recognized by their name; it makes you feel like they care about you and it’s not treating you like a number.” One older man (Adam) said of himself and his wife, “We feel [being called by name is] more a guest relationship and a human thing, that you’re not simply a number or a unit. You’re a person who is recognized and you can have a little conversation.” One guest (Shirley) found recognition of her preferences “flattering,” and another (Linda) said she felt “more at home” when the staff knew her name. Another guest (Andrew) echoed these ideas:

I think that that changes the whole equation for the entire hotel, when somebody who’s at the door in the lobby—there’s at least a sense of recognition. If he doesn’t know your name, he might say—like if you are coming back from dinner, he says, “Did you have a nice evening this evening,” like he really cares, “I care about you as a person.”

A female leisure traveler (Martha) echoed these sentiments, emphasizing the importance of individual recognition when she was far from home:

They zero in on you, and they make you feel like you're not lost in this huge crowd. And I think that's really the nicest thing, because all of us, when we're traveling, we're not home. . . . I think it's always nice to have somebody address you by your name. . . . It makes you feel like you've come to a destination. I think it's more a sense of you're finally here. Especially when you've been traveling a long [way], in and out of cabs, you may not know where you're going, or you're lost, to have somebody say, "Oh, Mrs. Smith, we'll help you with your bags." You say, "Oh good, thank God," you know.

By the same token, guests frequently complained if they did not get the personalized attention to which they felt they were entitled. On several occasions at both the Royal Court and the Luxury Garden, guests lamented, "No one here knows me anymore" or asked, "What happened to everyone that knew me?" A frequent guest at the Royal Court complained that during the recent renovation "they destroyed my room." One return guest at the Luxury Garden mentioned in a comment card that she felt "ignored" because the personalized stationery they received was always in her husband's name. Another return guest wrote to complain that he was given a lower-floor room when his travel companions, who had never stayed in the hotel before, were given a higher floor, although the friends "did not even care or have any experience [at the hotel]."

Anticipating, Legitimizing, and Responding to Needs

Beyond personalized service, luxury involves a comprehensive approach to guests' needs. First, workers are expected to *anticipate* these needs. Sometimes they are physical. Concierges at the Luxury Garden stood armed with umbrellas for guests who passed by the desk on their way out, even when the guest was unaware that it was raining. One worker at the Royal Court, when she had to upgrade someone to a larger room, would choose older guests because she knew that they were more likely to suffer due to lack of space. But often needs anticipation is more subtle. In the employee orientation at the Luxury Garden, the training manager encouraged workers to use visual clues to offer the guests something they might need. She role-played a woman massaging her neck and seeming tired and a guest arriving with a crying baby and asked what we would do to meet the needs they were not expressing verbally. The concierge manager at the Luxury Garden counseled me always to offer soup to

guests who mentioned they were not feeling well. One server at the Royal Court restaurant told me that he calibrated his behavior to what the diners seemed to want; as I paraphrased in my notes, he said “some people want you to participate, join in the fun, while others want you to stay out of it. (He can gauge from the beginning how the table wants him to be depending on if they let him stand there or acknowledge him.)”

Guests appreciated needs anticipation. One guest wrote on a comment card at the Luxury Garden: “Housekeeper apparently saw cold medicine next to the rollaway bed for our 10 year old daughter and thoughtfully left an extra box of tissues! Great attention to detail!!” One guest I interviewed was impressed when the Four Seasons staff made sundaes for the grandchildren of other guests without being asked. Another female leisure traveler (Shirley) was amazed when tea was delivered unexpectedly upon her arrival at one fancy hotel: “We’d checked into our room, and there was a knock on the door, and they brought chamomile tea and cookies. It was just those sorts of things, those unanticipated, delightful little things. You didn’t even know you wanted chamomile tea and it was the perfect thing.” Although these practices are known in the industry as “needs anticipation,” these examples demonstrate that the process is one of the *creation* of needs and of desires beyond actual physical requirements.

Workers also recognize clients by *responding* to their individual needs and problems. Managers in trainings and in industry literature stress that clients must be able to get whatever they want. Common instances of this approach include making particular foods available to guests or procuring special items for them, such as French cigarettes or salon shampoo. Frequently, workers are asked to do their errands as well, picking up prescriptions or taking their luggage to be repaired. Yet more extreme examples abound. At one Four Seasons property, for instance, the maitre d’ lent his tuxedo to a guest who did not have one for a black tie event, and he even had the trousers altered (Byrne 1998; see also Lipper 2000). Jones, Taylor, and Nickson (1997) describe a hotel waiter who drove around the city “to find a favorite bedtime drink” for a client and a “porter retracing a guest’s journey on the city’s trams to retrieve a lost wallet.” Workers at the Pan-Pacific Hotel in San Francisco will customize pillows to guest specifications if the guest is uncomfortable (Garchik 1998).

At the Luxury Garden, on two separate occasions a guest needed to buy a pair of shoes early in the morning; the concierge called a local department store, persuaded the security guard to put him in touch with management, and convinced the manager to open the store early. Another concierge there literally lent the shoes off his feet to a guest whose own shoes had been misplaced by the housekeeping department. At the Royal Court, when a group of incoming guests wanted to rent two new model Mercedes SUVs, front desk workers found a rental agency that could provide them, though it entailed having the vehicles delivered from Los Angeles. The hotel also installed a shower curtain for a frequent guest who disliked the remodeled open showers. At the same hotel, I was asked to procure a gauze bandage for a woman who had recently undergone knee surgery; when I delivered it, I was expected to help her dress the leaky wound.

Luxury service also entails that the worker *legitimate* these needs by responding sympathetically. Workers are expected to show sympathy for any situation the guest finds difficult, from a missed flight to a cloudy day. This standard extends to moments when the guest is dissatisfied with the hotel service itself. The Luxury Garden training manager emphasized five elements of responding to guest complaints, the second of which was “apologize first.” She said that when she studied guest complaints, most guests claimed that “all I wanted was someone to listen and care” or said, “no one apologized.” She told us that this was especially important in the luxury hotel because “we don’t have clientele that count pennies,” so monetary compensation when something goes wrong is less meaningful to them. The general manager told me in an interview that guests were most likely to complain that “their needs weren’t met” and that “they weren’t heard.”

Guests valued having their specific needs met and problems resolved and saw it as a key dimension of luxury service. For example, one guest at the Luxury Garden wrote in a letter to the general manager,

François [the concierge manager] and his staff were also extremely courteous and helpful when we needed to locate our lost luggage. I am sure that we seemed very high maintenance at one point when several calamities occurred at once. But François and his people never complained nor seemed in any way reticent to attack each challenge as it arose.

Asked in an interview what he meant by “caring service,” one guest (Herbert) invoked both recognition of needs and their legitimation (as well as personalization):

When you’re in the hotel and you order room service and—because I get up early, and I make a motion to the room service waiter that my wife and son are still asleep in the next room. The next morning the same waiter comes and delivers the breakfast and taps so quietly on the door I almost didn’t know he was there because he noticed—that’s sort of a very concrete example. He really did care that he didn’t want to wake them and knew I wanted to have coffee in the morning and *that’s really legitimate*. (Emphasis added)

Guests also saw it as a failure of service when workers did not acknowledge their problems. One guest (Christina), describing a stay at a hotel where “everything” had gone wrong, including that she and her husband had been given a room much smaller than the suite they had reserved, said, “If they’d put flowers in the small room or a fruit basket or whatever, all would have been forgiven, but we were totally ignored.” (In contrast, the same woman appreciatively described a situation in which she had arrived hours late at a luxury hotel because the staff had given her bad directions; she told the front desk agent what had happened, and the woman came out from behind the desk, put her arm around the guest, and petted her dogs.) Another woman (Shirley) described a bad experience in which the staff upgraded her and her daughter, but did not respond to her complaint that the room smelled musty: “They kind of poo-pooed my concern and acted as if I wasn’t being appreciative enough of the upgrade.” Here staff failed to legitimate the guest’s need, assuming that the bigger room would be more important to her than the odor.

Legitimation of guests’ needs carried another dimension: a sense of *unlimitedness*. The imperative to “never say no to a guest” is a kind of mantra in the industry. Check-in and check-out times were never enforced at the Luxury Garden, for example; one manager told me that for the rates guests were paying it would be inappropriate to enforce these rules, which would violate “five-star service.” If a guest decided to stay another night, he was never refused, even if that meant overbooking the hotel. The general manager at the Royal Court stressed several times in an all-employee meeting that “the

guest needs to be able to get anything he wants.” He said, “We can’t let rules get in the way,” berating the staff for turning a guest away from the restaurant because he arrived five minutes late for breakfast. “For \$400,” he said sarcastically, “we should be able to find a piece of bacon somewhere in this building.”

Guests approved of the sense of unlimitedness, the idea that rules could be bent or broken for them, and they often saw this willingness to transgress as a defining feature of luxury establishments in contrast to midrange hotels. For example, one couple wrote a comment card to the Luxury Garden praising the hotel for providing breakfast at 10:30 p.m. Several guests in comment cards at both hotels lauded the chef for making vegetarian meals available. One traveler I interviewed (Tom) said of these hotels, “You just don’t have problems. You just don’t hear about rules and stuff—you know, they solve [problems]. They basically do everything humanly possible in these nicer hotels to make your stay meet whatever you want and make it a wonderful stay for you and your family.” One female business traveler (Betty) described luxury service in an interview:

If I ask—like the Ritz-Carlton in Boston is one of my favorite hotels, and if I ask for something there they’ll do whatever they need to do to fix it, to accommodate me. But I was staying in some [non-luxury] place in Washington about four months ago, and all I needed was some pens for my room, and I got an argument at the desk. . . . You know they’re not going to go out of their way for anything unless you have an argument with them, and that bothers me. . . . [In luxury hotels] you don’t hear, “we don’t do it that way” or “we can’t do it that way” or “we don’t have that here,” that kind of thing.

Sincerity and Authenticity

Authenticity and sincerity are integral elements of luxury service, overlapping with the elements mentioned earlier. As we have seen, the requirement that workers legitimate guest needs involved expressing concern that appeared sincere (and often was) for guests’ problems. Managers encouraged workers genuinely to care about guests, even to approximate family relations with them. The training manager at the Luxury Garden told workers to pretend complaining guests were relatives, “so there’s some element of caring” even though the client is angry, or to think of them as “guests in your own home.” Managers also encouraged workers to see guests as dependent, highlighting that they are often

tired after traveling or disoriented in a new city, thereby attempting to elicit sympathy for the guests as disadvantaged vis-à-vis workers.

The idea of genuine care was key to guests' sense of luxury service. A business traveler (Betty) said, "I guess the biggest thing is, people want your stay to be comfortable and they don't just say that. They really do." Some guests contrasted sincerity to routinized interaction. As one man (Adam) put it, "I think good service begins at the front desk. . . . With a welcome that seems sincere. . . where people look at you, look you in the eye, instead of looking down at the computer and handing you a card without even looking at you. That ticks me off." As another business traveler (Herbert) said,

In a first class hotel, the staff that works there generally looks you in the eye when they walk by you in the hall. And when someone comes up and asks you, "Is there anything I can get for you?" or "Are you enjoying your stay?" they look you right in the eye, and they're really asking that question, as opposed to saying that "I have to walk into the lobby at an 18-minute interval and see if anybody wants anything."

A leisure traveler (Martha) contrasted the workers' distant reaction to the theft of her computer at a mid-range hotel to the more genuine response she imagined she would have gotten at a luxury property:

I lost my computer—[someone] stole my computer from Hotel X [a midrange hotel in New York] when I was there. . . . And it was really sort of an upsetting event. And I thought the difference, in retrospect, between if my computer had been stolen in the lobby of the Four Seasons, as opposed to the Hotel X, the people at the Four Seasons would have been, like, slashing their wrists! [Laughs.] You know? And the people at the Hotel X were like, "Well our insurance is \$500, and that's it." So, it's a difference.

By the same token, guests did not like workers to be overly formal or distant. As one woman (Shirley) put it when describing a hotel she did not enjoy, "There was a formality there where I didn't feel welcomed in any kind of intimate way. . . . It was a coolness." Violations of the sense of authenticity, then, rupture the guest's sense that her individual self is being recognized.

Visible and Invisible Labor

The previously mentioned elements of luxury service work primarily involve an especially personalized form of *emotional* labor. Another key component of luxury service, though it is not explicitly acknowledged as such either in the industry or among hotel guests, is the expenditure of *physical* labor on behalf of the guest. Guests in the hotel are entitled both to consume the labor of others and to avoid exerting labor themselves. Available labor indicates “care” to guests, just as a mother’s preparation of dinner indicates love for her family (DeVault 1991).

Many of the standards of the luxury hotel involve lavishing labor upon the guest. One of the service basics at the Luxury Garden tells workers to “proactively offer to assist guests in our public areas.” Another demands that “when directing guests around the hotel, escort guests to their destination.” A third service standard insists that all guests receive an amenity upon arrival, which “must be personally presented and not simply pre-set in the room.” In trainings there, front desk workers and concierges were told to come out from behind the desk in order to accompany guests to the elevators or other destinations. Concierges at the Luxury Garden were required to hand-write cards giving the guest pertinent information about their dinner reservations; at the Royal Court, all messages were delivered to the guest’s door, so the guest did not have to call the operator. Some hotels, inspired by the St. Regis in New York, offer the service of butlers, tidy guests’ rooms during the day, run their errands, and even draw them a bath, among other tasks (Witchel 2000). Packing and unpacking services were available at both my hotel sites. Available labor also inheres in the speedy service that characterizes the luxury hotel. The timely delivery of room service food or freshly pressed laundry indicates that there are plenty of people available to meet the guest’s needs.

By the same token, workers should never act as if their labor is scarce. Workers are exhorted to respond personally and immediately to any guest complaints; even if these are not the worker’s responsibility, the worker should never tell the guest to call some other department. The ubiquitous dictum “never say no to a guest,” translates into a permanent willingness to exert labor on the guest’s behalf. Workers must respond enthusiastically when asked to run any kind of errand, from renting camera equipment to picking up chocolates for a guest’s wife. They must be willing to wait on the

telephone while the guest ponders the room service menu, for example, or confers with her husband about what type of restaurant strikes his fancy for the evening. Extra labor is particularly worthy of praise; when management rewards workers, it is often for “going the extra mile.” Managers at the Luxury Garden, for example, on separate occasions rewarded a doorman who called a taxi company after a guest left something in a cab, and a front desk worker who taped a basketball game on her home VCR for a guest. Management at the Royal Court lauded a bellman for helping a guest transfer her luggage to another hotel several blocks away.

A corresponding luxury service convention dictates that the guest should never exert any labor. At the Luxury Garden, for example, a manager who was training me said, “Never let guests fill out their own forms.” For car rentals, tickets to visit local tourist attractions, or any other paperwork, it was the concierge’s responsibility to write the pertinent information on the form (often in the presence of the guest). Workers checking guests in at both hotels often asked them for a business card to save them the labor of filling out the registration card by hand. One of the service standards at the Luxury Garden dictated that employees should pass on information about guest problems to their co-workers, so that “the guest will not have to repeat themselves.” I was also told that “a guest should never touch a door.” And, of course, guests should never carry their own bags, and the time they wait in line must be minimized.

The exertion of labor is not necessarily interactive. Labor can also be demonstrated in the absence of human workers, as it is present in a variety of touches in the guest’s room. For example, at both the Royal Court and the Luxury Garden, the guest’s morning newspaper not only arrived in a fancy cloth bag that announced “Good Morning!” but was also hung carefully on the guest’s door handle. At the Luxury Garden, the guest’s laundry was delicately wrapped in tissue paper and presented with an orchid leaf. In both hotels, the toilet paper and the tissues were folded to neat points. The personalized stationery that awaited frequent guests in their rooms also demonstrated labor (as well as serving the purpose of individualizing the guest). At the Luxury Garden, when repair work was being done on the elevators, the management did not put up a sign in the lobby informing guests of the problem; rather, workers placed short letters explaining the situation, first into a small folder that announced “A Message

from the Management,” and then on the desk in every single room. One guest I interviewed (Andrew) related that at a luxury resort he and his wife returned to the room to find a package adorned with an orchid awaiting them; they thought it was a gift, but were pleasantly surprised to find it was their laundry.

Turndown service is an especially good example of these displays of labor. Literally folding the corner of the bedding down, of course, serves no useful purpose to the guest; the gesture indicates, rather, that an invisible hand has been at work. Other elements of the elaborate turndown service in these hotels—switching on lights, turning on the radio, closing drapes, emptying trash baskets, cleaning the bathroom and replacing used towels, setting the laundry bag and room service menu on the bed, and filling the ice bucket—do serve some purpose, but it is certainly inessential. At both hotels, guests received, with their evening cookies, a card predicting the following day’s weather; at the Royal Court, these cards were filled out by hand. These gestures primarily let the guest know that someone has been laboring on his or her behalf. As a butler at the St. Regis in New York told a reporter, “It’s nice for the guest to see that the butler’s been in” (Witchel 2000).

Although they did not refer to it explicitly as such, guests valued labor as a key element of the luxury service product. Asked what they thought constituted luxury service, they often invoked indicators of labor and speed. One interviewee (Linda) was impressed, for example, that little boys were available outside her room all night at an Asian resort hotel if she and her husband wanted anything. Another luxury hotel guest (Marty) described approvingly how at one Ritz-Carlton the hotel car would drive him anywhere he needed to go. A guest I interviewed (Herbert) defined luxury hotels in part as places where someone will “pop up to help unload your car and offer to put your car away for you.” Many guests, in interviews and in comment cards to the hotel, mentioned speed—in checking them in, delivering room service or luggage to the room, or getting the car from the garage, for example.

However, it was important that labor *not appear to be labor*. Visible labor must be delivered happily and appear unlimited. Guests enjoyed getting the sense from interactive workers that “nothing is too much trouble.” One woman (Virginia) who had lived in a luxury hotel for three months, due to damage to her home, described asking a worker for more dishes in her kitchenette:

If we were running low I would just ask her for—you know, ‘we need more glasses’ or something. In about three minutes we had an entire cabinetful of glasses. I wonder if we are demanding. But they never made you feel like you were asking them anything more than what they could willingly do for you. . . . They never batted an eye.

Another woman (Kim) said,

It’s nice when you forget your toothbrush or something. Just to call up and say, can I get one and they bring it to you. . . . Like when they ask you, can they take your bags, whether you want it or not. . . . “I’ll be happy to get that for you.” If you need some aspirin or you need some—just really anything, they’ll just bring it to your room as opposed to [you] having to get it.

Another guest (Andrew) characterized luxury service as “can-do.”

Conversely, when workers withheld or highlighted labor guests often reacted unfavorably. Several people I interviewed and many hotel comment cards characterized as “bad experiences” episodes when they had to wait for staff or when dishes were not picked up around the hotel, and negative comment cards were full of complaints about failures of labor. One irate guest wrote a letter complaining that the hotel’s staff had disappointed him by, among other things, not providing the American cheese he preferred with his eggs and not offering to go out and buy him cigarettes when the hotel’s gift shop did not carry his brand. On another occasion, a couple staying at the Royal Court wanted to wrap and take home flowers they had ordered for their room; I told them, “I’ll deal with it,” prompting the man to comment to his wife (right in front of me), “‘Deal with it’—that makes it sound like a problem.” (It is for this reason that managers encourage workers to use “proper verbiage,” such as “my pleasure,” “certainly,” or “I’d be happy to.”)

Clients could also be extremely sensitive to transgressions of their sense of entitlement *not* to perform labor. For example, in 1999, the Luxury Garden placed cards in the bathrooms suggesting that clients who did not want their towels changed every day for environmental reasons hang them up, whereas if they did want them changed, to leave them on the floor. The hotel received “a flood” of negative comment cards in protest; these essentially said, according to the rooms division manager, “I pay top dollar; I shouldn’t have to worry about this.” Guests in both hotels complained if they were not

offered assistance with their luggage or if they had to open doors themselves. One Luxury Garden guest lamented in a comment card that room service workers had failed to remove the table from his room after he had dined there; when he called to ask workers to take it, they “suggested that I move the table to the hall for pick-up,” which he found unacceptable. A guest I interviewed (Andrew) associated his own exertion of labor with a lack of intimacy: “When you’re standing in line, I mean, it’s a little colder, a little more matter-of-fact.” Another guest (Marty) appreciated that in luxury hotels they would deliver coffee without him having to make it himself in “that goofy pot.”

Guests also interpret labor exerted on their behalf as “personal” service. One male guest I interviewed (Andrew) said, in telling me about a luxury resort in Asia:

The beach boys, they just almost hover around you. They put the towel around the pad on the beach [chair]. Of course, the first thing they ask you is if they can bring you a drink and you get that. They come around periodically with towels that have been soaked in some sort of smelling water, rose water, and put in the freezer, because it’s so hot. And you kind of cool off with that. Again, *it’s a special personal service more than anything else*. It isn’t the size of the room; it’s not the amenities. I mean, I don’t think I’ve mentioned the word TV or VCR or that type of thing. *It’s the feeling of getting personal service*. (Emphasis added)

Even objects communicate to the guests a sense of personalization, though they are also demonstrations of labor. One young, female business traveler (Kim) said of the bowl of fruit in the room, “It’s as if they’re saying, ‘oh, we knew you were coming.’” Room amenities associated with frequent stays indicated to one businessman (Mike) that the hotel was saying “We’re glad you’re back.” A guest of the Luxury Garden wrote in a comment card that “I am very impressed. . . . Very nice *personal* touches with the fruit and the bathroom facilities.”

Like interactive, visible labor, non-interactive, invisible displays of labor also had to hide their character as work. although guests often appreciated the small touches in the hotel, they never articulated these as involving labor. Instead, they often referred to them as “attention to detail.” One businessman (Herbert), asked what he liked about luxury service, responded:

Attentiveness to detail. They pay attention to small things. If you went into the dining room to get a newspaper at breakfast, they would all be lined up in a nice little straight row. There would be no crumpled ones, you know. The flowers are going to be real flowers and there aren't going to be a bunch of petals lying on the table next to it.

Everything the guest mentions here involves labor, but he does not acknowledge that, instead perceiving these practices as indicators of *aesthetic* attentiveness. Lack of comfort with visible labor became especially clear when invisible labor was made apparent; for example, if the guests were in the room when the turndown attendant knocked on the door, they almost always requested that she come back later or refused the service altogether. The few times that the guests allowed the housekeeper (and me) into the room, they stood around awkwardly waiting for her to finish the service.

Luxury Service and Care

The luxury hotel, then, is like a perfect fantasy mother, anticipating needs and fulfilling them, never placing limits, and showering the guest with love and labor while asking nothing in return. Horst Schulze, president and COO of Ritz-Carlton, expounded on this theme in his keynote address at the Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International's 2001 summit. Speaking of a study his company had conducted to find out what guests wanted, he said,

“The first results that came back said that the guests wanted to feel at home, but I didn't believe that. So we did a further study and found out that what they really wanted was to feel like they did when they were in their mother's house.” This meant that they wanted an environment where nothing went wrong: light bulbs didn't blow out and food wasn't burnt. It also meant that every employee must be prepared to fix problems as they occur, according to Schulze. “Your mother doesn't call a manager when you have a problem, she resolves it herself,” said Shulze. (Gilbert 2001: 32)

This image of one's “mother's house” is clearly more fantasy than reality, as few parents go to such lengths to coddle their children. The analogy is further complicated by other differences between children and hotel guests. First, parents do set limits on their children's behavior. As Mimi Swartz points out (1999/2000: 130), the idea of never saying no “would be anathema to the parents of any toddler.” Second, unlike children, hotel guests retain ultimate control over the interaction; though hotel workers

influence guests' perceptions of their own needs, they do not have the authority to impose needs or behaviors on them (such as going to bed early).¹ Workers must create limits in only the most subtle ways. Third, while management may encourage workers to see these relations as familial, they are in fact commodified, conditional, and not necessarily reciprocal. Hence the service offered in the hotel in some ways actually goes beyond what children receive from their parents, because the boundary between needs and desires is erased, and their fulfillment appears unlimited.

The aspects of caring service offered by the hotel fit closely with several definitions of care in the literature on care work in other settings.² Wellin and Jaffe's definition of "personal care" or "identity care" in nursing homes (2001: 9), for example, includes several of these elements: "

In giving personal care, then, one is a detective and an advocate; has a conscious, creative awareness of the recipient; is informed by both biographical knowledge and emotional empathy; both listens for and tells stories—literal and metaphorical—that address trouble and lend support; and has a sense of intrinsic dedication to the work, as well as to particular recipients, that isn't captured by a conception of work as a job or a transaction.

A home health care aide defined *good* care as "It's not always the clean bed, it's not always some food or medication, but it's a smile or I'll get that for you or I'll do that for you, and so many of us tend to forget that aspect of caregiving" (Picker Institute, cited in Stone 2000: 95).

Indeed, many of the components of care that form the luxury service product are in fact precisely those that are *eliminated* in the rationalization of other kinds of care, especially elder and health care. Many scholars have demonstrated that the elements of "good care" become very difficult to maintain in sites of bureaucratized, marketized care (Abel and Nelson 1990; Diamond 1990; Lundgren and Browner 1990). Stone (2000), for example, discusses talking and listening, emotional attachment, respect for uniqueness, flexibility, and relationship development as elements of good care that are discouraged by management in a nursing home, because they conflict with imperatives of rationalization, standardization, fairness, and distance. These contradictions create conflicts for caregivers, who must reconcile their own standards of good care with the standards and possibilities emphasized by their superiors. In the hotel, however, *these components are a primary source of profit*—they differentiate

a \$100 room from a \$400 room—and thus are fully supported by the organization. Although occasionally imperatives for luxury service conflict with organizational realities (workers cannot spend unlimited time with a single guest, for example), the ideals of creating meaningful relationships, providing emotional and physical labor, and responding to any guest needs (explicit or not) are clearly articulated in the hotel.

Indeed, management at the Royal Court and the Luxury Garden, as well as at other luxury hotels, specified in great detail these expectations of workers, as previous examples of managerial standards have shown. Luxury hotel managers train workers on service standards in new employee orientations; sometimes they provide ongoing trainings and/or require mastery of written standards (the Ritz-Carlton is especially well known for its award-winning Total Quality Management program involving high levels of corporate culture and service standards). The Royal Court displayed a “standard of the week” near the employee entrance, and the Luxury Garden trained workers on dozens of standards, listing the most important ones on cards the workers were expected to carry with them (see Sherman forthcoming for further details). These managerial exhortations not only demonstrate how important these aspects of service are to management, but also illuminate the ways in which managers try to make explicit the components of care that are mystified in family settings (DeVault 1991).³

Hotels are not the only site of the provision of this kind of care, as incomes continue to rise (the number of U.S. households worth at least \$10 million rose fourfold in the 1990s [Harden 1999]). High-end services, including expensive restaurants, charter airlines, and exclusive cruises, are on the rise. Services available to first-class airline passengers already include chauffeured limousine pick-ups, massages on board, and “in-flight beauty therapists” (Bierck 2000), and airlines may soon begin hiring concierges (Coleman 2000). Wealthy people are increasingly hiring servants to care for their enormous houses, and training programs for these servants are expanding (Harden 1999). The Dunhill store in Manhattan now requires employees to undergo butler training (Tien 2002). Even some “boutique” doctors are offering special services to clients who pay annual premiums of several thousand dollars; these range from same-day appointments, 24-hour cell phone access, and house calls to heated towel racks, marble showers, and personally monogrammed robes in doctors’ offices (Belluck 2002).

The Caregivers: Hotel Workers

The bulk of the care work in the hotel takes place in the “front of the house,” as it is known in the industry; concierges, front desk workers, doormen, and bellmen have the most contact with guests and thus are responsible for the interactive dimensions of care. Back of house workers, including room cleaners, turndown attendants, and runners, have only limited contact with guests and thus are responsible for the non-interactive dimension of care, usually exhibited in invisible displays of labor. These workers respond primarily to fairly routine managerial dictates, while front of house workers have more discretion and autonomy in their jobs, because they must be able to respond to guest requests and needs on an immediate basis.

Variation along the dimension of guest contact maps onto a racial/ethnic division of labor. Workers in the front of the house are usually white, born in the U.S. or in Europe (though bellmen and doormen, who do more physical as well as emotional labor, are often men of color). In the back of the house, workers are almost always people of color and generally immigrants from a wide range of countries. This division held in the Royal Court and the Luxury Garden, though the Luxury Garden also featured Asian-American and Chinese and Filipino immigrant workers in the front of the house (in keeping with its Asian image).

Back of the house jobs are stratified by gender (turndown attendants and room cleaners are always women, and runners are usually men), and bellmen and doormen are almost always men. However, both men and women perform front desk and concierge work. It is important to note, however, that U.S.-born men in nonmanagerial positions that do not involve physical labor (i.e., front desk agents and concierges) are usually openly gay. Their willingness to perform caring and deferential labor may be related to less rigid definitions of masculinity than those associated with heterosexual men.

Interactive workers have more direct experience of unequal entitlement than do non-interactive workers, because they are required to provide deference and care. Their work is more difficult to routinize because of the discretion and autonomy inherent within it—as studies of other kinds of marketized care show, routinization eliminates these intangible elements of care. These workers also

have more opportunities on the labor market because they are usually white, have better English-language skills, and are often college educated. Hence eliciting their consent to do caring recognition work is, I suggest, more complicated than eliciting that of back of the house workers.

As I argue in more detail elsewhere (see Sherman forthcoming), managers partly overcome this dilemma by attempting to transform workers' selves through culture and training. But more important are characteristics of the work itself, including the discretion and autonomy inherent in interactive workers' jobs, the division of labor, the hierarchy of interactive and non-interactive workers, workers' relations with clients, and the demands of luxury service itself. These features of the job provide resources for interactive workers to recast themselves as powerful vis-à-vis their clients. They interpret their jobs as demanding and themselves as skilled and professional, and they judge guests on a range of dimensions. Their intimate access facilitates looking down on guests and making fun of them; the imperative to remember guests helps them predict how guests will behave and thus avoid guests they abhor or connect with ones they like. Workers also receive reciprocal recognition from guests in many instances (demonstrating Hegel's contention that the master must recognize the slave in order to constitute him as worthy of recognizing the master); when this recognition is not forthcoming, they avenge themselves in small ways. In contrast to managers' and guests' demands for unlimited emotional and physical labor, they constantly negotiate limits to their own effort. And although it may seem that workers in these settings only *perform* sincerity and authenticity in their work, in fact, like workers in more traditional caring occupations, they are often completely genuine in their care for guests and enjoy providing it.

Learning Luxury: Needs Creation and the Classed Self

In the 1990 movie *Pretty Woman*, directed by Garry Marshall, Julia Roberts's character is transformed from a street prostitute to a society lady worthy of the wealthy executive played by Richard Gere. Her transformation is mediated by the atmosphere and the staff of the luxury hotel in Los Angeles where she stays with Gere for a week. Occupied with his business deals, Gere often leaves her alone to muddle through the challenges of obtaining clothes and behaviors appropriate to being his companion;

the avuncular general manager of the hotel (played by Hector Elizondo) steps in and becomes her tutor in the ways of the wealthy. When she is scorned by workers in a fashionable boutique because of her “cheap” appearance, he delivers her into the hands of an accommodating saleswoman. Before she has to dine with Gere and his business associates, he literally teaches her how to use a knife and fork (and the other accoutrements of the high-end restaurant table). She is initially animalistic (she eats with her hands and sits on the table instead of in a chair), but the hotel “civilizes” her. When she emerges, she has left both her deviant (commodified) sexuality and her lower-class tastes and mores behind; she is ready for a life of monogamous true love and luxury consumption. After this transformation, commitment-phobe Gere decides he cannot live without her. Assisted by the general manager and the hotel’s driver, he rescues her from the small walk-up apartment (a sharp contrast to the plush hotel environment), where she is no longer at home, and delivers her to the life she is now meant for.

In the real-life luxury hotel, a similar process occurs. Though the tutelage they receive is somewhat less direct than that provided to Roberts’s character in the film, hotel guests learn class-appropriate behaviors in the hotel. Likewise, they not only express needs and desires, but learn what these are supposed to be through their experience in the hotel. Scholars have pointed out that needs are not objective, that they are created in a context of power relations (Fisher and Tronto 1990). In the hotel, guests’ biological needs are sleep and food. But the care characteristic of luxury service has much more to do with emotional needs, and this care is the locus of the intersection of “needs” and “wants.” The service guests receive both creates the need and legitimates it.

I argue that this process is part of the creation of a particular sense of self as *entitled* to care (in the previously elucidated sense of individualization, sincere needs anticipation, legitimation and resolution, and the physical labor of others). While guests perceive recognition work and visible and invisible labor as evidence of care for themselves as *individuals*, I argue that luxury service fulfills an additional function: to constitute and reproduce them as members of the dominant class. In other words, the individual self that is recognized and legitimated by luxury service is also a classed self.

Several guests, especially those who had grown up in less wealthy circumstances, described feeling intimidated in the luxury setting. They were unsure of the implicit rules of the hotel—whom and

how much to tip, what to wear, what they were allowed to request, and so on. As one business traveler (Mike) said, “There are internal cultural norms of how you manage yourself in those places, and early on you don’t know what those norms are.” One guest (Shirley) described feeling “like an impostor” and said that the anticipation of her needs initially “took me aback.” She described her own behavioral transformation:

For a long time, I traveled with my Land’s End luggage. It was perfectly fine for me. Then it occurred to me that people had—that how you look when you go into a hotel like that has a different—people don’t necessarily arrive in their jeans with their Land’s End duffel bag. That there’s a look. I started to pay attention, just because I wanted not to be inappropriate, especially if it was a business situation with my husband, I certainly didn’t want to call attention to myself in a way that might embarrass him, or—not that he’s like that—but I think it’s sort of coming to a role, that I should know how to handle those sort of situations. . . . I think I did; I started picking up a culture. I wanted to make sure I was *playing by the right rules* (emphasis added).

Another woman (Virginia) said of a luxury hotel experience,

I think I felt that I needed to *look like I belonged there*. I needed to get dressed up and not be in my sweat pants and T-shirt. . . . [In] the higher-end hotels, because you see people that come there either to stay or for meetings and stuff like that, that they tend to dress nicely and *look like they can afford to stay there*, I guess, if that makes any sense (emphasis added).

This concern with not breaking rules is an intriguing counterpoint to the guest appreciation I cited earlier of transgression of rules or unlimitedness.

Sometimes guests talked of feeling judged by the workers. They also feared that the workers expected more of them than they were going to demand—that their needs were not extensive enough. “I’m not going to be asking them to do a lot of things and [there’s] their expectation that I should ask them to do a lot of things” (Sally). One woman (Shirley) sometimes felt that workers “would expect a higher level of sophistication of their guests, maybe.” One businesswoman (Betty) felt that “there’s a certain level of satisfaction in the fact that you can stay at a Ritz-Carlton if you want, but you don’t want

to be treated like a nobody walking in the door.” Another guest (Marty) said perceived high worker expectations made him uncomfortable in the hotel, saying,

I mean I’m much more relaxed in the way that I deal with people. . . . [more than] I think a lot of people in hotels are or what the service staff expects you to behave like. . . . I think they expect you to behave in kind of a superior way, you know, that you should expect the solicitous behavior from them.

These guests felt inadequate because they suspected they were not demanding enough, that they did not inhabit or perform their status appropriately.

What mitigated this sense of insecurity and alienation, however, was the behavior of the workers themselves. What many guests liked most about luxury hotels was that the workers treated them “like you belong” or “like a friend.” They invested the workers with the power to decide whether they belonged or not. As one man (Andrew) put it,

When you’re in an upscale hotel you know you’re in an upscale hotel, and let’s just maybe analyze the other side of it. You certainly don’t want to feel—you don’t want the feeling that they know it’s an upscale hotel and there’s any doubt or any question that you should be there. I think the hotels that make you feel comfortable and almost like you’re coming home, so to speak, I think that’s a great feeling.

Another woman (Shirley) said, “Part of being able to play the role was having them *act like I belonged there*. Just knowing my name and anticipating my needs in a certain way” (emphasis added). A self-made businessman (Marty) described his process of acclimation to the luxury environment, saying “I think it’s kind of like going into Neiman Marcus for the first time. It can be a little intimidating. . . . But [the workers] are service personnel, and *after you stay there, you kind of feel like you end up belonging there*” (emphasis added).

The role of the worker in legitimating guests’ luxury consumption was illustrated ethnographically by an encounter I had with Mrs. MacKenzie, a woman who lived a couple of hours away and was planning to stay at the Luxury Garden with her husband on New Year’s Eve. She called the concierge

desk in November seeking assistance with her plans for the evening (and I spoke with her several times in the following weeks). I recorded it in my field notes as follows:

I was talking to Mrs. M. about New Year's and whether she should get a limo or a sedan [for the evening]; she seemed to want the limo, and I said, "Well, it's only once a year, you should have what you want," or something like that, and she said, "You should be in sales," and took the limo. Then [after checking with the limo company] I called her back to let her know it would be a 10-hour minimum, thinking she'd change it to a sedan, and she said, "I was thinking about what you said, and you're right; we don't do this very often, so I'm going to stay with the limo." Like I had just given her the justification she was looking for to spend more (about \$900 total probably, with the limo at \$70/hour for 10 hours plus tax and tip).

Her response demonstrates, first, her own ambivalence about spending the money, and second, the power she projected onto me to give her permission to spend it. Not knowing her at all, I had simply happened upon a framing of the issue that resonated with her. It made no difference to me whether she used the limo or not; I was simply trying to customize my response to what it seemed she wanted to hear. My job was to empathize with her, and in doing so I unwittingly also legitimated a desire about which she felt conflicted.⁴

These practices within the hotel lead guests to become comfortable with their own entitlement to stay in the hotel, to spend money, and to consume the services that are initially unfamiliar. In fact, over time, guests describe taking a new approach to the workers, in which they began to defend their own entitlement and to speak with a more authoritative voice. Several of the guests I interviewed described not only becoming accustomed to the service in these hotels, but in fact becoming more demanding and more sensitive to transgressions of their entitlement. Guests also learn over time that if they raise a fuss they are often rewarded for it. One leisure traveler (Andrew) described refusing to accept a hotel room he did not like:

This is something that I've gotten, I would say, a little more demanding [about], and I hope I don't come off as being a little more pushy when I make these statements. First of all, I ask at the front desk, is this the best room available. And I remember in this particular German hotel—and I think this is kind of where I got to be a little more

aggressive—they said, “This is a very good room.” They took me up to the room, and it looked like 1930s, you know, a prewar hotel room. I said to the bellboy, “This is unacceptable.” So he called back down, got the keys to another room, took me there. It was a bigger room but still no charm, no nothing, again kind of a thirties, German modern kind of a thing. I said, “This is not acceptable.” I said, you know, “I asked for one of your better rooms, and I don’t consider this to be a better room.” So he called back down. The next room they took us to was a two-room suite, very much in the Bavarian style, with wood canopy bed and just a lot of charm and everything. And I said, “This is an acceptable room. This is something that I will enjoy staying in.” I just kind of realized that these rooms are there and sometimes you have to ask for them and get a little pushy, I guess.

Another guest (Adam) said, of exerting authority:

I think also it can be your air of confidence and the way it shows in your voice. I’m not talking about raising your voice, but just the way you talk. If a front desk person is maybe a young person who’s kind of snotty or arrogant and you just with your voice demand attention without raising it a decibel.

How do you think you are able to do that?

Just experience and getting older and being secure.

Similar instances occurred in my field sites, where male guests in particular would say, using an extremely authoritative tone, “This is not an acceptable room.” These are examples of the emergence of a particular kind of authority, learned and legitimated through experience in the hotel. In *Pretty Woman*, Julia Roberts retains her heart of gold despite her transformation; real-life hotel guests may not.

The *permanence* of this interpellation was indicated by guests who talked about how hard it was, having become accustomed to this level of consumption, to lower their expectations. As one young woman I interviewed (Kim), who stayed in luxury hotels for her job but was not wealthy, said, “A luxury once tried becomes a necessity.” She recounted:

It’s this terrible thing that happens. I mean when you travel for business like that, and then you really get used to it and you want to repeat it. I mean I can’t believe I said this, but last Christmas I said to my sister, “I am *not* staying at the Holiday Inn,” and she was like, “What the heck is wrong with the Holiday Inn?” Then I realized what has

happened to me. I had to crack up weeks later when that statement was played back to me, like “What’s the matter with me?” . . . You just get used to stuff and it becomes—I think it’s natural. I’m sure I’m not the only one like that.

An older leisure traveler (Dorothy) expressed a similar emotion, saying, “I think if I went to Venice and I went back to, you know, like I used to stay at [a midrange hotel], I think I’d feel bad. Because it’s like when you get to be in first class sometimes, and when you have to go back in the back you know what goes on in front, so you feel bad.”

The preceding discussion illustrates how the hotel’s service constitutes guests as entitled to consume that service. It encourages them to define their desires as legitimate needs and expect those needs to be met. The personalization and labor characteristic of the service, performed by the workers, create a sense of belonging in the face of class insecurity and intimidation. The workers themselves, *through their caring behavior*, indicate to the guests that their consumption *of that behavior* is acceptable. Eventually this becomes a sense of entitlement to consume both care and labor in the hotel and other luxury goods and services.

Furthermore, displays of labor and of care indicate to both workers and guests not only that some people are entitled to consume more luxuriously than others, but also that some people are *entitled to be served by others*. Guests are entitled to consume the unlimited labor of others while not performing labor themselves, and they are entitled also to be recognized in their individuality while not recognizing that of workers. Like Hegel’s master, attended by the recognizing slave, wealthy guests are entitled to more recognition than non-wealthy workers; their needs and desires become more legitimate. DeVault (1991) argues that processes involved in feeding the family reproduce and naturalize relations of domination and subordination between men and women (see also Benjamin 1988 on the implications of unequal consumption of recognition for gender relations); similarly, luxury service reproduces class dispositions and practices, legitimating and naturalizing inequality of entitlement to care.

Conclusion

I have argued that the key elements of luxury service are also indicators of care. Indeed, these elements overlap with the intangible aspects of what is often considered “good care” in settings such as nursing homes and hospitals. But in hotels, these elements are not shunted off to the side, rationalized out of existence; instead, they are valued by management as a significant source of competitive advantage and therefore of profit. I have also argued that, rather than simply *respond* to needs, the consumption of luxury service in fact *constitutes* these needs. Guests learn what their needs should be in the luxury setting; desires are created and fulfilled at the same time. The recognition of self and the constitution of entitlement to consume labor help guests who lack these dispositions become comfortable and at home. This is one of many social processes that naturalize and reproduce unequal social relations.

The findings reported here have several implications for the study of care work and service work. First, they point to the need for a more specific discussion of the relation of “care” (usually seen as socially necessary and positive) and “emotional labor” (usually seen as commodified, inauthentic, and possibly detrimental to the worker). In particular, we need to revisit the notion of “personal service,” which often combines elements of both, and analyze it empirically in different contexts. We must also revisit the issue of authenticity in this context, because hotel workers are often genuinely invested in their relations with clients.

Second, the market (and the extreme wealth of those who can afford this kind of service) have made individualized attention to self and needs, as well as the right to consume the labor of others, a source of profit for hotel owners and management companies. This development calls into question claims that society as a whole is being routinized by the prevalence of routine interaction, especially in services (Leidner 1993; Ritzer 1996). Instead, some people are entitled to consume personalized care that feels genuine while others are slated to provide such care.

Finally, these findings raise the possibility that sometimes care is *not* socially valuable, even when it displays the intangible characteristics of “good” care. The care that in other contexts is positive and necessary may not be quite so beneficial when it is part of a product that *constitutes* needs as well as responding to them, while also establishing wealthy people as especially entitled to care. We must

look at consumption of care as a mechanism of *creating* inequality of entitlement rather than simply reflecting it (as it does in the salaries of care workers, for example). Thus we must turn to the question of what kinds of needs are socially worth fulfilling and how to define them.

Notes

1. My thanks to Barrie Thome for noticing this difference.
2. The explicit invocation of this kind of “care” as the hotel product contrasts with the way a discourse of care is avoided in discussions of publicly funded after-school programs (Garey 2002).
3. I am grateful to Arlene Kaplan Daniels for pointing this out to me.
4. Some concierges do have an incentive to promote this kind of consumption, because they receive commissions for limousine and other services (my intern status meant I did not receive commissions). This feature of the organization of work is one of the ways workers are encouraged to see guest consumption as beneficial to them (see Sherman forthcoming).

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