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## Frontstage Dramaturgy, Backstage Drama: An Ethnographic Study of the Provision of Hotel Accommodation

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy

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FRONTSTAGE DRAMATURGY, BACKSTAGE DRAMA: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC  
STUDY OF THE PROVISION OF HOTEL ACCOMMODATION

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Maziar Raz

Graduate Program in Business Administration

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

The provision of service is a growing focus of scholars in the fields of management and organization studies. Yet research in this area continues to reflect the tenets of Weberian bureaucracy with the predominant conceptualization of the provision of service as a “production system” in which customers and the organization’s resources are inputs, and services are the outputs of the organization. Accordingly, the organizing work of managers is conceived as activities that protect the “production system” from input uncertainties and external influences. What is overlooked in this perspective, however, is the dynamic tension between the organizing work of managers and the realities of service encounters.

This dissertation expands the current understanding of the provision of accommodation as an example of the provision of service. Based on an ethnographic study of the Front Desk and Housekeeping departments of a large hotel, this dissertation investigates how the realities of encounters between the frontline employees and the customers influence the organizing work of managers. This dissertation takes on a dramaturgical perspective of the provision of accommodation. Building on the idea that the lives of service providers can be understood as resembling actors’ performances on a theatrical stage, this study analyzes the role of managers in (a) setting the stage for the provision of accommodation, (b) defining the roles of service providers, and (c) employing symbols and artifacts that give direction to the service encounters.

The findings of this dissertation offer three key insights about the work of managers and the provision of service. First, while managers employ categorizations as rationalized systems of organizing, the meanings, and thus the organizing effects, of categories are related to the employees’ work. Second, managers work at an empirical interface, a point at which the organization meets the vagaries of the real world. Consequently, the work of managers in organizing the provision of service involves manipulating symbols, things, and people. Third, the work of managers comprises both caretaking and transforming the organization. However, caretaking or transforming actions depend on the managers’ daily encounters with the real or the abstract elements of the organization.

## Keywords

Provision of service, Managers' Work and Occupation, Organizational Structure, Ethnography, Dramaturgy, Goffman, Categories and Classifications



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# Chapter 1

## 1 Introduction

Over the last few decades, service organizations have grown to become major players in Western economy. The growing importance of service organizations has captured the attention of scholars in management and organizational studies. With the change in the organizations' focus from manufactured goods to provided services, scholars are increasingly interested in understanding the organization of service firms and their provision of service. However the concern of the literature has largely remained on the effects and the efficiencies of organizations, i.e., forms of organizing that increase the performance of the organization. In this regard, scholars typically consider the provision of service as a production process (Schneider & White, 2004), with organizational resources, including customers, as inputs (Argote, 1982), and intended services as outputs. Accordingly, customer diversity, increase in variability of input, and related ambiguities induce uncertainties into the production process (Chowdhury & Miles, 2006; Tansik, 1990).

With the focus of the literature remaining on these contingencies and on the mechanisms with coping with the uncertainties induced in service encounters (Bateson, 2002; Bowen & Jones, 1986; Jones, 1987; Skaggs & Huffman, 2003), the dominant views of the provision of service reflect the tenets of Weberian bureaucracy with which the provision of service can and must be protected from uncertainties and external influences (Thompson, 1967). As a result, for the most part, scholars have assumed that concepts and theories developed for bureaucratic settings are also adequate for studying service organizations.

The change from products to services, however, also suggests a change in the nature of work and what actors in service organizations actually do (Barley & Kunda, 2001). Consider the provision of accommodation as an example of the provision of services of a hotel company. As part of the provision of accommodation, the managers of a hotel acquire relevant resources such as physical assets (Bitner, 1992; Conlon, Dyne, Milner, &

Ng, 2004), human resources (Ployhart, Van Iddekinge, & MacKenzie, 2011) and employ appropriate roles (Bechky, 2006) such as bellhops, doormen, check-in agents, room attendants. They also set and impose rules and behavioral expectations in service interactions that facilitate the consistency of the provision of accommodation. As an illustration, as dictated on pocket-sized cards issued to all employees, the managers of a luxury hotel spell out service rules for interacting with customers: “Smile—We are on stage. Always maintain positive eye contact” (Groth, Hennig-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009, p. 959). However, due to the nature of work in providing services to the hotel guests, the actors of the organization, such as bellhops, have to deal with the physical layout and the rules of engaging customers, as well as the behavioral norms of interaction that comprise the services offered by a bellhop. Likewise, due to the nature of interaction with the hotel, customers too must deal with the physical layout, respond to rules and standards set by the organization, and engage the bellhop with their norms of behaviour.

Because of an inescapable link between the organization and the service work, the old assumptions that the concepts and theories developed for bureaucratic settings are adequate for studying service organizations may no longer hold. Therefore, theories of the provision of service must go beyond a bureaucratic focus on the systematic productions of services, and incorporate the findings of other studies, in particular in marketing and in sociology, which have advanced our understanding of the nature of service interactions and the realities of service work.

Refreshing the existing theories of the provision of service with these dynamics — i.e., the tensions between the managerial activities aimed at organizing for the provision of service and the reality of service interactions — is important and interesting for several reasons. It is important because service interactions form the foundation of the exchange between the organization and its customers. Thus, the economic performance of any service organization is dependent on the performance of the individual service providers and the satisfactory experience of the customers (Heskett, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1997). In addition, it is important because organizing for the provision of work is central to many of the organization’s decisions and crucial to its structure (Barley & Kunda, 2001). This dynamic tension further emphasizes the interplay between the structure of the

service firm, the actions of the service providers, and the reality of their encounter with customers. The dynamic tension is also interesting because it shifts focus away from what management scholars conventionally consider central to the organization, i.e., the strategic activities, to the periphery of the organization, to the mundane and the daily lives of the inhabitants of the organization.

In this dissertation I develop a theory of the provision of service that builds connections between our existing views of organizing for the provision of service and the realities of service interactions. To achieve this, I study the provision of hotel accommodations as an instance of the provision of services offered by an organization. By focusing closely on the daily interactions between a hotel's service providers and the customers, while at the same time addressing how managers organize these interactions, I aim to draw attention to the dynamics between managers' organizing activities for the provision of service and the realities of service interactions. With the purpose of exposing challenges in our existing understanding of the phenomenon of the provision of service, in the next section I provide an outline of related concepts in the management and organization literature added to those studies in marketing and the sociology of work.

## 1.1 The provision of service

From the perspective of the managers of service organizations, there are two sets of activities related to the provision of service. One set of activities focuses on the services as the output of the organization, and aims to address questions like "what types of services are to be offered, to whom, and at what price?" (Porac, Thomas, Wilson, & Paton, 1995; Porter, 1985). As an example, managers of a hotel may focus on selecting the company's service offerings and choose to target "luxury" and upscale patrons. They may set the characteristics of luxury accommodation, which may comprise in-house dining, 24-hour room service, valet parking, concierge, spa and fitness centres, etc. The other set of managerial activities, however, relates to organizing and coordinating the provision of services (Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). These activities impose intent and consistency on the service encounters between the organization and its customers. They bring intent as they describe the intended service interactions, for which they also define boundaries and the characteristics. They bring consistency as they organize a structure,

with templates for ongoing patterns of action within which the intended service interactions can foreseeably be realized.

The existing views of manager's organizing activities for the provision of service aim at highlighting the rationalizations and standardization of services, with which provision of service can be protected from uncertainties and external influences (Thompson, 1967). First, service organizations rationalize the external environment to arrive at market segmentations. Recognizing the heterogeneity of customers and their needs, service organizations segment the target markets by viewing the heterogeneous environment as sub-classes of homogenous markets (Smith, 1956). Put differently, service organizations, literally and figuratively, customize the provision of service according to particular segments of the market (Skaggs & Huffman, 2003). For instance, they segment the market into classes of customers based on certain attributes such as demography, geography or socioeconomics, to provide distinct services to different classes of customers (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000). In short, scholars consider segmentation as a rationalization practice by which service organizations deal with uncertainties induced in production of service (Cordero, 2012).

Scholars have also paid attention to another rationalization practice among managers of service organizations: the segmentation of the outputs into classes of services. For example, providing accommodation, as output of a hotel, can be classified into ostensibly distinct services categorized as providing rooms with beds and bath, Housekeeping, in-room dining, business services, recreation and spa, concierge, valet parking, etc. Subsequently, viewed from this perspective, hotel managers adapt and assign particular classes of services to particular segments of the market (e.g. spa services targeted to upscale customers). Referring to service segmentation as service focus, Skaggs and colleagues (2003) suggest organizations manage customer-induced uncertainties by offering a narrow service focus (limited classes of activities). As organizations narrow the focus of services, or classes of activities, they reduce the customer base to those segments that have specific, and therefore certain and predictable, demands (Argote, 1982).

The third bureaucratic concern of management scholars is the employment of standardization as a means of control and protection from uncertainties in the external environment (Thompson, 1967). Standardization, as an organizing mechanism, moves to create work rules that leave the customers and the service workers with less input and discretion in the service encounters. As an illustration, from this perspective, hoteliers would standardize the check-in and check-out times to add more certainty into the input (arrival times) process of the provision of service. The picture that emerges in the standardization is that of a “McDonaldization” of provision of service (Leidner, 1993; Ritzer, 1996) in which organizing activities are largely recognized as management control of service encounters. In this view, managers’ organizing activities are aimed at achieving efficiency, predictability and consistency.

To summarize, the concept of provision of service in management literature predominantly mirrors the similar concept of production of goods in which managers organize activities and practices that produce intended and consistent services (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). The focus of the literature is primarily on the produced services, and how they are defined and intended for particular classes of customers. The focus is also on the bureaucratic rules and controls that standardize the service encounters. As a result, provision of service takes on the characterization of a replicable performance of intended service activities in a patterned, and repetitious way (Winter, 2003). This characterization, akin to the Ford Model T assembly line, captures the steps customers go through, in which the service interactions are ordered, practiced, even scripted to produce intended consistent services.

There persist three concerns with these views. First, most studies take managers’ work for granted. While the managerial activities are pushed to the background, the focus is fundamentally on the outputs of managers’ work, i.e., rationalized structures. Second, such structures and rules, themselves, are considered abstract, rigid, and deterministic. Lastly, beyond characterizing the service interactions as uncertain and ambiguous, management literature has shown limited concern with the nature of such interactions and thus the implication on organizing the activities.

## 1.2 The realities of service interactions

While management and strategy scholars have largely been interested in the problems related to organizing the production of service, many in the field of marketing have placed the intangibility of services, exchange processes, and relationships as their focal concern. Scholars in this field conceptualize the provision of service as the application of specialized competences (knowledge and skills) through deeds, efforts and performances for the benefit of the receiver during organization-customer interactions (Rathmell, 1966; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Service encounters form the foundation of economic exchanges between a service provider (the organization) and the recipient (the customer). In these exchanges, while the seller provides clues (e.g. brands) and signals (e.g. price) to define the characteristics of the promised act or deed (the service), the customer enters the exchange with prior expectations forming their valuation in monetary terms (the reservation price) (Berry et al., 2006; Bowen & Jones, 1986). From a conventional perspective, as long as the perceived price of the promised, or provided, service is above the seller's cost and below the customer's reservation price (willingness to pay), the transaction results in mutual satisfaction of the exchange (Monroe, 1990).

Scholars in this tradition, however, recognize the social nature of these exchanges (Czepiel, 1990; McCallum & Harrison, 1985). Due to the intangible nature of service, such encounters provide social occasions in which buyers and sellers can negotiate the terms and the reality of the exchange. Therefore, each encounter is viewed not so much as a discrete economic event as it is a continuation of a relationship with past performances and future possibilities (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). Contrary to the conventional views of pure market-based economic exchange, where the identities of the exchange participants are irrelevant to the exchange, the service encounters are opportunities to reduce the social distance between the buyer and the seller (Czepiel, 1990; Geertz, 1978). Within such social encounters, on the one hand, frontline employees providing services are motivated to perform their roles according to the expectations of their returning customers. On the other hand, in anticipation of future encounters, customers too are required to open up and voice their idiosyncratic needs and personal concerns. Such an opening up, or voice, is not a natural occurrence in just any buyer-

seller encounter. It implies the social aspect of a relationship corresponding to the “articulation of one’s critical opinions rather than a private secret vote in the anonymity of a supermarket.” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 16)

Service encounters are also relational in nature. In a dyadic service encounter, both the provider and the customer occupy roles that are socially defined in relation to those occupying the other positions in the encounter (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985). As a result of role socialization, each role is accompanied by a set of expectations composed of duties, obligations and privileges. The expected behaviour of a check-in agent, for instance, is to register the hotel guests and provide them with a key to a room. Similarly, the expected behaviour of the hotel guest is to walk into the lobby, get in line for checking-in (rather than sitting at a table waiting to be served by an agent). Consequently, the relational aspects of service encounters create mutual expectations upon which the reality of the service encounter is constructed and subsequently evaluated.

In summary, service encounters, as manifestations of provision of service, are social and relational in nature. Relational role definitions and mutual behavioural expectations, as well as the symbols that accompany the encounters, help shape the reality of the service being provided. It is for these characteristics that service encounters are considered as co-productions; the realities of the service get co-produced during the service encounters (Bowen & Jones, 1986; Korczynski & Ott, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2006). Thus, what is present in these discussions is the role of things, symbols, or people in shaping the realities of service interactions. What is relatively absent, however, is the work of the manager in manipulating the things, symbols, or people (Barley, 1996).

### 1.3 Dynamics between the organization and the service interactions

Several different research traditions have shown interest in the tension between managers’ organizing activities and the realities of the service encounters. First, scholars in the sociology of work have long been interested in managerial activities that influence service work and thus service interactions. For instance, Arlie Hochschild’s (1983)

classic concept of emotional labour brings critical attention to the imposed feeling rules, in encounters with customers, aimed at aligning service workers' emotional displays with the standards intended and ordered by the managers. Influenced by this work, service work scholars have largely been focused on power dynamics, conflict, resistance and control in the customer-worker-management interactions or the so-called service triangle (Korczynski & Macdonald, 2009; Leidner, 1993). Nevertheless, central to these discussions is the notion that although service workers ostensibly follow the bureaucratic rules, or the training and indoctrination techniques (Leidner, 1993), behind the codified exterior lies the enactment of local worker agency (Lopez, 2010).

In another tradition, set in interpretivist views of organizations, scholars have elaborated how employed symbols and artifacts provide clues that contextualize the reality of the service. Along these views, Rafaeli and Worline (2001), for example, assert that when the bellhops at a hotel wear the same shoes as important, high-powered corporate executives, the service encounter is intended to be realized as prestigious and elegant. Such managerially made available artifacts — or what Bitner (1992) referred to as “servicescapes” — shape the reality of the service encounter. In a sense, in this perspective, while the service performance might ostensibly be the same, the artifacts employed by the managers moderate the reality of the service encounter.

Finally, the third research tradition on the tension between provision of service and service encounter is set in the literature on role theory (Czepiel, 1990; Siehl, Bowen, & Pearson, 1992; Solomon et al., 1985). In this transition, the focus is on service encounters as purposive and task-oriented human interactions. Thus, service encounters are role performances where each party has learned — “with different degrees of facility” (Solomon et al., 1985, p. 101) — to perform the roles with sets of relatively standardized appropriate actions and behaviour for the situation. When an individual is labeled as a bellhop or a housekeeper, it is possible to expect a profile of activities performed by the person. Nevertheless, different degrees of facility in filling the roles, and differences in reading from the common script of the particular role, often result in encounters that do not match the expectations created by the roles. For instance, a bellhop may not be prepared to make restaurant recommendations, or a customer might resent an overly



friendly manner from a housekeeper. The role theory perspective of service encounters suggests that roles, often made known in labels and titles (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997), create behavioural expectations in the service encounters. Such expectations, however, are not always congruent with experiences or the reality of the service encounter.

Putting these traditions together, the employed resources, the installed rules, and imposed roles exert influence in the reality of the service encounters. In essence, the managerial activities that organize the provision of service create expectations, often set in these resources, rules, and roles, but such expectations may not necessarily be congruent with the experiences realized in service encounters. In turn, the dynamic tension between experiences and expectations result in customer satisfaction, or conversely, infelicities, with the service encounter (Groth et al., 2009; Liao & Chuang, 2004; Mayer, Ehrhart, & Schneider, 2009; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985).

While these transitions have conceptualized the influence of the work of managers on the realities of service encounters, conversations on the inverse relationships are often omitted. Put differently, given the interplay between expectations and experiences, between the intended order in provision of service and the reality of service encounters, managers also engage in maintenance activities that respond to customer infelicities caused in these dynamics (Dwyer et al., 1987; Gutek, 1999). One aspect of these relationship maintenance activities relates to service failures — encounters that lead to customer dissatisfaction — and the organization's response to such failures. "They lost my room reservation but the manager gave me the VIP suite for the same price" is an illustrative case as exemplified by Korczynski and Ott (2004, p. 585). Conversely, there are also incidents when in cases of service failure, the provider disregards the relationship maintenance activities. The other aspect of relationship maintenance activities concerns the service providers' responses to idiosyncratic customer expectations or the providers' failures to read the intended service cues. Together, these shed light onto the relationship maintenance activities such as apologizing, or even offering complimentary or free services.

In general, the existing understanding of provision of service fails to account for the social and relational aspects of service encounters, and for the organizing work of the managers. As mentioned earlier, management and strategy scholars tend to view provision of service in light of efficiency and predictability, reflected in rationalizations and forms of bureaucracy in which the customer is likely to be an input, passing along a metaphorical assembly line. In turn, provision of service would, in this view, relate to managerial activities that somehow fashion a structure or an order that helps managers cope with uncertainties and brings intention and consistency to service encounters.

To recap, the existing views of this dynamic tension must provide a language that goes beyond abstract structures that order intended and consistent services. Considering the tension, and given that the activities that organize provision of services are part of managers' work mandate, the literature has yet to offer adequate explanations as to how the reality of service encounters influences the work of managers. This has several implications. Ignoring this phenomenon would reify existing views of organizing for provision of service as those that promote rationalization, routinization and the reign of management control. Similarly, focusing on abstract bureaucracies and structure would push the work of managers into the background. In turn, such views would likely mask the real work of managers and promote abstract ideal-types instead. Subsequently, our views of the work of managers would likely remain rather stable and further fuel the assumption that existing "concepts and theories developed for bureaucratic settings are adequate for studying most organizational contexts," including service organizations (Barley & Kunda, 2001, p. 76).

## 1.4 Research questions

Given the above, theories that explain the tension between managerial activities that organize provision of service and the realities of service encounters must be grounded in what people in organizations do (Bechky, 2011). Another important feature of such studies must be that while they remain theoretically true to the organizing work of the managers, instead of taking imposed rules and employed resources as principles of deterministic structures, they ought to consider them in performances and daily activities of the inhabitants of the organization (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). For instance, while

developing theories of managers' work in segmenting the market or classifying the service activities, attention must be given to the role of such segmentations and classifications in the work of service providers as well as their influence in the expectations of the customers. Added to that, such studies must maintain focus on the social aspects of the service interactions, and keep a theoretical eye on the relational roles (Barley, 1996; Merton, 1957; Nadel, 1957; Solomon et al., 1985), mutual behavioural expectations (Goffman, 1959), and the interpretive meaning of objects and artifacts (Bechky, 2003). Lastly, to account for the dynamic tension between service interactions and managers' organizing activities, such studies must also focus on the larger organizational concerns, in particular, the performance of the service providers as experienced by satisfied customers in the framework of an economic exchange.

In this dissertation I develop insights on the phenomenon of the provision of service aimed at incorporating the dynamic tension between organizing for the provision of service and the realities of service interactions. To achieve this, I address challenges with our understanding of the phenomenon of provision of service by examining several questions: What do service providers do in their daily work and how do they interact with customers? What roles do the employed resources and installed rules play in service interactions? How do managers organize the daily work of service providers? What role do relationship maintenance activities play in the organizing work of managers?

Empirically, I approached these questions by conducting an ethnographic study of managers' organizing work at a service organization, a hotel. Ethnographic studies focus on situated understanding of the lives of inhabitants of organizations as they go about their daily work. Organizational ethnography is an appropriate approach for studying organizing work as it is centrally concerned with goal-oriented activities (Neyland, 2008; Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009), as well as the social and relational aspects of such activities (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Bechky, 2011). This approach is also well suited for theorizing the material and interpretive aspects of organizational schema (Rerup & Feldman, 2011), formal rules (Kellogg, 2009) and resources (Bechky, 2003; Kaplan, 2011).

Using ethnographic techniques, in this dissertation, I construct an image of service interactions at the hotel, and how the hotel managers organize the provision of services. To do so, I take service encounters as the unit of analysis. I then follow the moments and the spaces of interactions between the hotel and the customers. Subsequently, I expose how different services are provided in different terms, via different means, for different customer groups, with different degrees of detail, all of which influence the experience of the customers and thus their evaluations of the hotel services. In various stages of encounters, I follow particular service failures — moments of customer dissatisfaction — and trace the set of relationship maintenance activities. Throughout the study, I pay particular attention to the presence, and the influence, of the employed rules and resources in the service interactions. Finally, I construct an image of managers' organizing activities in directing the provision of services and in particular, the service interactions.

Taking seriously the dynamic between managers' order-seeking activities and the service encounters, what becomes apparent in my study is not the consistency of the intended service, but the inconsistency of services that incorporate relationship maintenance activities. Therefore, despite prominent views in the management literature, organizing for provision of service cannot be reduced to a reliable bureaucratic structure, in a rationalized model per se, or to the organizational capability to provide consistent and intended services. Rather, our understanding must also take into consideration dynamic tensions between managers' organizing activities and the mundane daily lives of the organizational inhabitants, which shake the image of stable organizational structures erected to produce consistent services. Such an inconsistent image of organizing, and thus of an organization, can only be perceived when one gets closer to organizations and shifts focus of research away from what scholars conventionally consider central to the organization to the periphery of the organization, i.e., to the mundane and daily lives of the inhabitants.

This dissertation is organized as follows. In the next chapter (Chapter 2), I present the context of the study, i.e., the research site, HotelCo. I also provide an account of my role as an ethnographer at HotelCo, and my data collection practices, as well as my method in

analyzing data and building theories. Next, in Chapter 3, I build various images of the core service offering—hotel accommodation—as well as the exchange between HotelCo and the customers, i.e., accommodation for money. In doing so, I show it is not possible to arrive at an empirically finite and clear image of accommodation as the produced “output” that gets exchanged for money. I therefore argue that the provided service, accommodation, is, in essence, phenomenological experiences associated with patterns of complex interactions between HotelCo and the customers. The focus of Chapter 3 is on these interactions. In Chapter 4, I show the stages of interactions and expose the roles and resources used in frontline interaction scenes that together construct hotel accommodation as a phenomenological experience. I find what appears as a simple exchange, accommodation for money, is a product of series of interactions, each with their own tensions in performance. To explain the organization of these interactions, in Chapter 5 I explore the work of HotelCo managers behind the scenes. In particular, I discuss how managers organize service interaction scenes by defining the roles, and the role scripts, of the frontline service providers. I also discuss how managers’ assessment of the performance of the organization influences their organizing work. Finally, in Chapter 6 I discuss the findings and the implications on current theories of provision of service. I also discuss the contributions of this thesis to existing theories of organizing, and develop an outline of possibilities for future research directions.

## Chapter 2

### 2 Research methods & setting

#### 2.1 Theoretical approach

Earlier, in the introduction chapter, I highlighted how current conceptualizations of the provision of service, in the management and strategy literature, is akin to those of a production system, the output of which are intended and consistent services (Schneider & White, 2004). I also brought attention to the bureaucratic role of the manager in configuring the production systems (Bateson, 2002; Bowen & Jones, 1986; Jones, 1987; Skaggs & Huffman, 2003). The existing views of manager's organizing activities for the provision of service focus on the rationalizations and standardization of services, which can protect the provision of service can be protected from uncertainties and external influences (Thompson, 1967).

I also highlighted three shortcomings of the existing perspectives on the provision of service. First, the existing views of the provision of service need to go beyond considering managerial rules and organized structures as abstract and deterministic schemata. The rationalized rules and imposed structures need to be considered in daily lives of the inhabitants of the organization and studied in particular in service encounters. Second, our conceptualization of the provision of service must account for the realities of service encounters, focus on the social and relational aspects of service interactions (Barley, 1996; Merton, 1957; Nadel, 1957; Solomon et al., 1985) and recognize the interpretive meaning of objects and artifacts in service settings (Bechky, 2003). Third, to account for the realities of service encounters we must also focus on the larger organizational concern, namely the economic performance of the organization resulting from the performance of the service providers as experienced by the customers. To that end, beyond considering the work of managers in designing and protecting the production system, our conceptualizations of the provision of service must also take the relationship maintenance work of the managers into consideration. That is, our perspectives on the

provision of service need to capture the daily work of managers and their role in maintaining the ‘production system.’

Therefore, to address the research questions posed in earlier sections and to account for the shortcomings of our current perspectives of the provision of service, I draw on dramaturgy as an analytical approach. Based on the works of Erving Goffman (1959), dramaturgy draws on the imagery of the theatre and thus views the social encounter as a “performance.” In dramaturgy, performance refers to all the activity of an individual (the actor) that occurs in a setting (on the stage) in a continuous presence before a particular set of observers (the audience), and that has some influence on the observers (impressions). In this perspective, the service encounter—a social encounter—is viewed as a performance in which organizational actors (e.g. service providers) play their roles in the provision of service. The customers, in return, can be conceptualized as audience members who are, in some form, influenced by the performance of the service providers. Below, I outline the foundational concepts of dramaturgy and also highlight how a dramaturgical approach to investigating the provision of service can help overcome the challenges mentioned above.

Dramaturgy as an analytic perspective is concerned with micro-sociological accounts of social interactions in daily lives. It has its roots in symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986) that focuses on a distinct and peculiar character of interaction as it takes place between human beings. The foundational premise is that human beings, as social actors, interpret or define each other’s actions instead of merely reacting to each other’s actions. Therefore, the response is not merely to actions of another but rather is based on the meaning which they attribute to such actions or what Goffman calls the “definition of the situation” (1959, p. 13). In a sense, human interaction is mediated by interpretation or by the read of the situation. As Blumer points out this mediation is equivalent to inserting the actor’s process of interpretation between stimulus (such as structural arrangements, schemata and rules) and response in the case of human behaviour (1986, p. 180).

In the context of a service encounter—in the interaction between the service provider and the customer—the customer’s read of the situation and thus their assessment of the

service can be potentially influenced by the actions and gestures of the service provider, and by attributes of the physical environment including objects and artifacts. Recall the example of the bellhops' shoes presented in the introduction chapter. Rafaeli and Worline (2001) suggest that when the bellhops at a hotel wear the same shoes as those of the high-powered corporate executives, the service encounter is intended to be realized as prestigious and elegant. From this perspective, in an interaction, any action, gesture, expression, or any attributes of the physical environment has the potential to influence one's read of the situation and ultimately one's reciprocating behaviour. As attributes of the physical environment of the service, the bellhops' shoes can signify the service encounter as prestigious and elegant. Goffman refers to these objects and artifacts, or even actions and gestures, as "sign-vehicles" which help frame the meaning of the situation (1959, p. 37). This implies that sign-vehicles (i.e. specific actions, gestures, objects and artifacts) become communicative media (i.e., symbols) through which service providers can influence the customers' assessment of the interaction. Therefore, in service encounters, in striving to provide a particular impression (i.e. an intended service) the organizational actors use and manipulate symbols to influence the customers' read of the situation. Returning to the same example, the bellhops' use of such shoes are intended to impress upon the customers the particular meanings of prestige and elegance of service. Subsequently, from this perspective, the production system—as it is referred to in the management literature—would comprise the creation of impressions, or definitions of reality, as observed by customers in the service encounters. For these reason dramaturgy uses the language of theatre to cloak social interactions, e.g. service encounters, as the production of dramatic performances.

In dramaturgy, performance is a concept assigned to the total activity of an individual (the actor) in a continuous presence before a particular set of observers or audience (1959). In the context of the provision of service, the total activity of the service provider (actors) during their interaction with the customer (audience) is considered as a dramaturgical performance. In order to communicate a particular meaning of service in their performance, however, the actors employ certain expressive equipment, symbols, collectively termed the "front" (Goffman, p. 22). Since symbols—as communicative media—comprise actions, gestures or language, and attributes of the physical



environment such as objects and artifacts, the front of the performance includes aspects of the actor's personal appearance and manner (the personal front) as well as a collection of physical arrangements (the setting) such as the décor, furnishings, and physical layouts. Returning to the bellhops example, the shoes and their uniform added to their mannerisms constitute the personal front of their performance, while the physical surrounding such as the décor of the hotel lobby and any other communicative symbols form the setting of the performance. Together, the front is staged with such symbols to signal a particular meaning of the service interaction—in this case, prestige and elegance.

While dramaturgy invites attention to aspects of impression management, in particular the frontstage performance of actors, it also sheds light on the activities of actors in the backstage or where the audience is not present. Often in the backstage the actors may be designing, practicing and rehearsing their performances. In addition, in the backstage parts of the frontstage performances might be “adjusted and scrutinized for flaws” (Goffman, p. 112). This is akin to considering the backstage the regions of the organization in which the intended service are designed, the roles of the service providers are defined, and the physical areas in which service interactions occur are staged. The backstage is akin to the regions where the managers work to organize the provision of service. While it might be tempting to consider the backstage as real physical areas of an organization, it is important to note that in this dissertation I consider the frontstage-backstage division of regions as an analytical tool to separate the provision of service in the moments of customer interaction from the organization of such interactions.

There are two important characteristics of dramaturgy worth noting. First, although it is appealing to consider symbols as fixed, dramaturgy and the symbolic interaction perspective emphasize the subjective, flexible, and creative manner in which actors use symbols. Put differently, the symbolic meanings attached to actions, gestures, or objects, are neither constant nor universal; the meaning of things arise out of the social interactions one has with others. The shoes do not innately carry the meaning of prestige or elegance. Rather, the observers—in this case, hotel patrons—interpret the meaning of the shoes, and thus the service encounter, based on their subjective experiences with the shoes in others social encounters. Therefore the shoe alone cannot symbolize prestige and

elegance. It is the interpretation of the observer in interaction with the symbol that generates the meaning of the setting. As Blumer points out, meaning is a social product; it is created, not inherent in things (1986, p. 4). As a result, there are possible service encounters in which the customers—for instance those from distant cultures—do not render the meanings of prestige and elegance from the bellhops' shoes.

This invites an immediate attention to the possibility of discord between the meanings of a service act as purposefully produced by the service provider and that which is ascribed by the customer—i.e., between what is intended versus what is interpreted. Such a discord could result in customer dissatisfactions to which the organizational actors might respond based on their read and interpretation of the interaction with a dissatisfied customer. In the framework of an economic exchange, as those in a service encounters, this perspective brings attention to the larger organizational concern: the economic performance of the organization as a result of the performance of the service providers. In a sense, it highlights relationship maintenance activities in light of the organizations' responses to the dissatisfaction of customers in service interactions. Subsequently, in addition to the creation of impressions as noted above, the provision of services would also comprise the maintenance of impressions as observed by the customers.

Second, considering the dramaturgy of the service encounters implies paying attention to the daily interactions among the organizational members as well, and how they interpret others' actions and gestures as well as the surrounding objects and artifacts. Recognizing the symbolic interactionist foundations of dramaturgy requires giving thought to the service providers' read of the situations and their interpretations of reality in organizational encounters. This highlights how managers' actions and bureaucratic rules as well as the structured arrangements of objects and artifacts enter through an interpretive lens before being responded to by the service providers. Therefore, investigating the provision of service from a dramaturgical perspective goes beyond considering managerial rules and organized structures as abstract and deterministic schemata. Rather, from this perspective, managers' actions, rules and structures are considered as symbols in the daily interactions of the organizational members.

In summary, a dramaturgical approach in investigating the provision of service helps overcome the challenges I posed with the existing conceptualization of this phenomenon in the management and strategy literature. Dramaturgy is concerned with the realities of service interactions, and maintains focus on the social and relational roles of actors involved. Based on its roots in symbolic interactionism, it recognizes the interpretive aspect of actions, gestures, objects and artifacts. As a result, dramaturgy goes beyond considering the rules and resources, deployed by managers as part of an organized structure to provide service, as deterministic and abstract. Finally, dramaturgy provides an analytical tool to incorporate the relationship maintenance aspect of the provision of service.

## 2.2 Empirical approach

In management and organization literature, most analyses of organizing activities, in particular those related to the provision of service, are abstracted from the actual work of managers. Despite Weick's (1979) emphasis on shifting focus from organization (noun) to organizing (verb), much of the literature remains largely focused on reified concepts such as structures and rules. Barley and Kunda (2001) argue that scholars' efforts to make sense of postbureaucratic organizing fall short because they fail to take into account detailed studies of work and situated aspects of organizing. While scholars have recently begun investigating the work of managers, the focus has predominantly remained on what is conventionally considered central to the organization: strategy-related activities (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Kaplan, 2011; Whittington, 2006).

To study the work of managers, scholars are paying closer attention to what managers do, though, in discrete organizational events, such as meetings, workshops, or away-days (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008). Yet managers' work in organizing activities may or may not fall squarely within these studied discrete events, e.g., in a meeting or two. Managers perform work every day. Whether organizing occurs within heightened moments of attention (e.g., meetings or workshops) or happens on an ongoing basis as part of managers' daily work, investigating managers' organizing activities requires the researcher's presence and attention to managers and their activities in situ. In addition, to investigate the organizing work of managers related to the provision of service not only

requires close attention to what managers do but also accounts of the social world in which they operate, i.e., the collective mindsets, perspectives and representations of events with details that configure the mundanity of their daily lives. Furthermore, investigating the dynamic tension between managers' organizing activities and service interactions requires a research methodology capable of capturing the world of managers and the world of service providers, not only separately but also as they relate to one another.

Accordingly, my research method of choice in this dissertation was ethnography. Ethnography is a method both for data collection and analysis, which are inescapably tied to the other (Rosen, 1991). It is a method with which the researcher enters the "world" of a group, an organization, or a society, to investigate the behavioural norms and structure of their daily lives. The goal of the ethnographer, as stressed by Malinowski, is to "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world" (1922, p. 25). As a method of analysis, ethnography has two analytical approaches, "emic" and "etic" (Fetterman, 1998). The emic approach investigates the world of the inhabitants from an insider perspective: how they perceive and categorize the world, their rules of behaviour, what has meaning for them, etc. The etic approach shifts the focus from inside to outside and arrives at a systematic interpretation of the world of the inhabitants for those who would eventually use the product of the ethnography (Rosen, 1991). While the emic approach draws an image from the point of view of the inhabitants, i.e., the members of the organization, etic analysis draws on the concepts of social science and aims for a theoretical portrayal of the world of the inhabitants (Barley, 1996).

Given these, choosing ethnography as the method of research forced me into close contact with the phenomenon under investigation, by embedding myself in the world of the inhabitants of the organization. Subsequently, I acquired an understanding of the patterns of organizing activities related to the provision of service, as well as the context in which these activities were realized, of which the organizational member may be unaware.

## 2.3 The research site, HotelCo

To investigate the questions raised earlier, I spent eight months as an ethnographer at a hotel company (which I will call HotelCo). Built in the 1970s, HotelCo is an internationally recognized, AAA four-diamond hotel, with more than 1400 rooms and 130,000 square feet of meeting space, located in the downtown of a large North American metropolitan city. HotelCo is a privately owned and operated property of one of the world's largest hotel companies, HotelCo International, which operates more than a thousand proprieties comprising hotels, resorts spas and vacation residences. Although there are five "sister" properties in the same metropolitan area, HotelCo is considered the flagship property due to its size and location. During the period of my study, HotelCo's monthly occupancy rates — a simple measure of the company's performance — ranged from 75% during the winter months to 89% in the summer season. To compare, average occupancy figures in North America for the period 2012-2014 ranges between 49.7% in January to 69.8% in July (Statista, 2012-2014).

At the time I began the study of the 760 employees of HotelCo, approximately 210 were working in Housekeeping and 135 in the Front Desk departments. During special events (e.g., conferences), up to 160 part-time employees are added to these departments on a temporary basis. The remaining employees work in other areas such as Food & Beverage (F&B), Conferences, Banquets, Sales & Marketing, Information Technology and Engineering, as well as Finance and Human Resources<sup>1</sup>. Except in the administrative areas (e.g. Finance or HR), work at HotelCo is divided in three eight-hour shifts, starting at 7:00 AM. While some employees are permanently assigned to particular shifts (e.g., the midnight shift, from 11:00 PM to 7:00 AM), others work on a rotating and staggered basis as assigned by managers.

HotelCo was an ideal site to study the provision of service for three reasons. First, the relationship between HotelCo and HotelCo International provides an interesting set-up to study managers' organizing activities. Because HotelCo is owned and governed by

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix B for a snapshot of HotelCo's Organization Chart.

HotelCo International, HotelCo's managers are for the most part focused on organizing the provision of accommodation as envisioned at the head quarters. For instance, the decisions regarding the type or category of accommodations HotelCo provides (e.g., boutique, luxury, resort, conference, or limited-services) are made at the head quarters. Likewise, as I was informed by the General Manager of HotelCo, "curved shower curtain rods, red carpets with black writing, and ice buckets in the fridge in every single room" are examples of "brand standards," and such decisions are made by the managers at HotelCo International. The remaining organizing activities related to provision of accommodation, given the vision defined by HotelCo International, are within the realm and focus of HotelCo managers.

Second, due to its physical layout and accessible location, HotelCo attracts a wide array of local, domestic, and international customers. Beyond tourists or international travellers, HotelCo attracts customers attending conferences, banquets, conventions, and weddings, many of which are hosted by, and held at, HotelCo. In addition, the average length of stay at HotelCo is 2.5 nights with a standard deviation of 4. Therefore, while there are transient customers who stay for a night or two, some stay for longer periods, even weeks.<sup>2</sup> These add to the complexity of provision of accommodation, which in turn heighten the need for organizing. In a sense, HotelCo would meet the criteria for an "extreme case," one in which the theoretical phenomenon is more transparent than it would be in other settings (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Third, the high level of access I was granted to HotelCo marks this site as an ideal setting for the research. For ethnography, gaining and maintaining access is an ongoing challenge (Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003). The process of obtaining initial access took approximately six months. Initially, it consisted of contacting high-ranking executives at more than 30 worldwide hotels. In the email communications, I explained my dissertation research and interest in studying their organizations. From those contacted, I received six

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<sup>2</sup> These figures are dramatically different among hotels. At the one extreme, there are airport hotels that mostly attract overnight customers. At the other extreme are hotel residences where customers stay for weeks.

invitations to meet, either via Skype or in person. I presented a brief outline of my research interest, and the type of access I would require, as well as a tentative timeline and length of engagement with the company. Only one of the six, a general manager of a luxury boutique hotel in the city, agreed to grant access. However, he suggested HotelCo would be a more appropriate research site, given its size and complexity. He further offered to refer me to, and arrange an in-person meeting with, the executive vice president of HotelCo International, since the two were former colleagues in another hotel. Eventually, the EVP of HotelCo International agreed to ask the general manager of HotelCo to grant me full access. Although initially reluctant, after several in-person meetings, the general manager finally agreed to grant me access to HotelCo. He decided that it would be best if I began my study at the Front Desk, since this group had a new director, a former hotel manager at a luxury cruise line. This decision stemmed both from the general manager's perspective that the Front Desk services were the most "hospitable" group at HotelCo, and from his personal interest that I should follow the new director as she was going through her "on-boarding" process. I began my work as an ethnographer at HotelCo in December of 2012.

## 2.4 My role as an ethnographer

My first full day on site corresponded with the first workday for the new director of Front Desk services. I spent the entire day following her around as she too was being introduced to other executives, directors, and staff at HotelCo. In these encounters, I was often introduced as "a researcher who is hanging out with us to understand how we do what we do." I would immediately explain that I was a researcher who would be around, but certainly not in their way, and I would not be reporting my observations back to management. I further explained that whatever I observed or heard remained anonymous.

Over the next few weeks, in order to build rapport with the employees, I made sure I built both a personal and a professional relationship with them. Personally, I showed interest in their lives even beyond HotelCo. I would join them during coffee or cigarette breaks, lunches or after-work drinks. Professionally, I made sure I exposed the rigour involved in the study. For instance, on many occasions during the first week, I joined the managers and employees of the midnight shift (11:00 PM to 7:00 AM) and [admittedly forcing

myself] stayed up all night. I volunteered to skip my personal plans in favour of being helpful during the New Year's Eve celebration, as it was described as a "crazy time" at HotelCo. In addition, since I was not adequately trained to interact with customers or perform any particular tasks, I made sure to exploit all opportunities in which I could lend a hand or be of general use. As an illustration, one late evening, a female Front Desk manager needed to walk with an apparently angry HotelCo customer to a dark area of the parking lot in order to help resolve a dispute about a scratch-and-dent on the customer's car. I offered to accompany them so the manager would feel safer. She was very appreciative.

By the second month, I had become a familiar presence for many of the people at HotelCo. I could navigate around the property without having to follow the director of Front Desk. I became absorbed in the HotelCo rhythm, attending routine meetings, and observing different managers in the Front Desk department. I found several people who became "key informants" and spent many days with these individuals, most often focusing on the issues they were facing at the time. The discussions about the daily challenges of the managers often led to conversations around the computer screens, navigating through HotelCo's computer system, and going over various reports and documents. I spent the initial months trying to learn as much about the work of the Front Desk managers at HotelCo as I could. My main interests were to understand what aspects of HotelCo services they would be concerned with, what tools they would use in their daily work, and how they would interact with other HotelCo actors.

After three months, I had become familiar enough with the Front Desk activities that I "entered the floor" and shifted my focus from the Front Desk managers to the employees and their interactions with hotel customers. My initial focus here was the work of the doormen and bellhops. The types of interactions with customers these employees had were intermittent, as it depended on the arrival patterns of the customers. Therefore initially I chose "hanging out" with them during the down times, such as mid-mornings or late at night. My conversation with these employees, for the most part, was informal. These employees spent many hours of work standing, and I learned it was important for them not be seen sitting or resting, either by hotel customers or by the management. For



that reason, I invited them to coffee chats during their breaks, at a well-hidden, nearby café. Although the first few times, it was I who invited them for coffee, within a week's time it was me who was being invited to join them on their break. Soon, the one-on-one informal coffee chats turned into two-on-one meetings when another doorman or bellhop would join in our talks. However, their work/break schedule never allowed these informal meetings to grow to a larger group. Eventually, I joined them on their work turf and observed them in action, during which time I also asked occasional clarification questions about their work. Invariably, I kept the focus on their work and its history, their approach with individual specific customers, and their daily interactions with HotelCo management.

Through observing the work of the doormen and bellhops, my focus shifted toward other moments of customer interaction, most notably at the reception counter. While I was able to interview the Front Desk agents during their breaks or after hours, observing them in action was challenging for three reasons. First, I discovered that standing behind the agents at their reception counter changed the nature of interactions with the customers. On the one hand, many customers assumed me to be the manager, since I was wearing formal attire that was not the standard uniform of HotelCo agents. On the other hand, the agents themselves felt awkward — as they complained — in helping out the customers. Second, because some customers assumed me to be a HotelCo manager, they were approaching me with questions and concerns to which I was not equipped to respond. As an example, once I was asked about the accuracy of a customer's bill, and another time I was asked to upgrade the customer to a larger room. As I immediately referred these to the agent whom I was observing, I noticed the customers repeating the questions or concerns to the agent with frustration. Third, in interacting with the customers, HotelCo agents depend on their computer monitors to consult, or register, various pieces of information regarding the customer or the transaction. As an ethnographer, it was important for me to understand how the agents interacted with the technological tools and what information they relied on. For that reason, to observe the agents in action, I needed to stand fairly close to be able to see, and read, the computer monitor. This further frustrated the agents as I was, literally, entering their personal space.

To overcome these challenges, I took two new approaches. The first was that I began collecting answers to the general and often-repeated questions the customers would ask me. For instance, for the times I was on the floor and not behind a particular reception counter, I carried instructions about accessing Wi-Fi in rooms, maps of local area attractions and restaurants, etc. For the customer-specific questions, I recorded their concerns and offered to investigate on their behalf. I escorted the customers to the lounge chairs in the lobby, and asked them to wait for my return with information. I would then travel to the back area and ask any available agent or manager for answers. The second new approach was asking the agents to introduce me to the customers as a “trainee” when I was an observer behind the reception counters. This allowed me not only to stay close to the agents and observe the interactions with the customers, but also to take notes visibly without the customer being unclear of my presence.

By the end of this period of observation, nearly all my time on site was spent at the Front Desk area with the Front Desk managers and employees. Many of the interactions with the customers, however, were about accommodation at HotelCo. For that reason, I then shifted my focus to the Housekeeping group. Since, by design, Housekeeping attendants work behind the scenes, when and where hotel customers are not present, observing and interviewing them did not produce the above-mentioned challenges. The ethnographic challenge, however, presented itself differently. Since by then I had spent many months at the Front Desk, I had somehow become associated with the Front Desk services from the perspective of employees in other areas. As a result, initially, the managers, the director, and the Housekeeping attendants interacted with me as if I were snooping on behalf of the Front Desk services department. This was evident in the way the Housekeeping informants responded to my first interview questions, by opening their answers with statements like, “We see things differently here at Housekeeping, *than you guys* at the front of the house” (emphasis added). While I became curious about the ways in which the two groups were seeing things differently and made that the focus of my inquiry, I made new efforts in building rapport with the employees at the Housekeeping group.

My ethnography at HotelCo was contained, for the most part, within these two functional groups. I arrived at this decision based on a combination of factors, including practicality of conducting ethnography, empirical focus, and theoretical saturation. From a practical perspective, growing the ethnographic focus to other areas would have likely added many months of on-site data collection. The constraints of the dissertation timeline, however, did not allow for such an expanded engagement with HotelCo. From an empirical standpoint, while provision of accommodation involved other areas and groups (e.g., Sales and Marketing, Facilities, Technology and Engineering, Banquets and Conventions, as well as Food & Beverages) Front Desk and Housekeeping together had the bulk of the interactions with the guests. Most importantly, from an emic perspective, the boundaries of the world of the service providers (as perceived by the agents, room attendants, managers and directors) were drawn around these two departments. Finally, from an etic perspective, in ethnographic studies, the breadth of data depends on theoretical saturation, referring to the point when no new data for themes emerge or when concepts and categories are clear, well developed, and validated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Although I finished my ethnographic field work at HotelCo in late August 2013, after approximately eight months on site I kept in weekly contact with many of the key informants for many more months.

## 2.5 Data Collection and analysis

Upon receiving approval from The University of Western Ontario Ethics Committee (Appendix A), to collect data, I relied on a broad range of ethnographic techniques comprised of participant observation, interviews, field notes, organizational artifacts and archival information. As an observer I watched and listened to what was happening around me. Either at that very moment or immediately after the observation (e.g., at night when returning from being on site), I would record my observations along with what I felt and thought about them. My observations were mostly focused on the work of managers and the service providers. However, because as an ethnographer I did not have scripted questions or previously determined interview protocols, I would occasionally pierce quiet observations with questions. These questions at the beginning were mostly descriptive ones (Spradley, 1979) aimed at clarifying or elaborating on the work being

done by the informants. As an example, in one of my first days on site, I asked a manager to clarify what it meant to “comp a guest,” to which she responded it meant to remove all the room charges and make it a free stay at HotelCo. As I grew more familiar with their work, language and culture, my questions were more structural and contrast questions. For instance, regarding the same topic, I would ask structural and contrasting questions like, “In what cases would you comp a guest? Who makes the call to do that? How frequently does it happen? When do you decide not to comp a guest?” I would then follow these questions with requests for specific examples.

In addition to these informal interviews, I also conducted a number of formal ones (see Appendix C for a list of interviews with informants). These lasted anywhere from 60 minutes to 75 minutes, and were held in quiet offices of the managers or in the crowded resting spots such as lounges or bars. With the informants’ permission, I audio recorded and transcribed the interviews. While the focus of the interviews depended on the role and the work of the informant, I structured the interviews around three themes related to their activities as they related to a) others in their group, b) other departments at HotelCo, and c) the customers. In interviews with managers, held in their offices, I also focused on any documents or reports on their desk that they were either reviewing or authoring, as well as the signage and posters displayed in their vicinity. I then would ask for a copy of the documents, if they felt appropriate to share. Occasionally I took photographs of various spaces or artifacts using the camera on my mobile phone.

Throughout these observations and interviews, I took extensive notes in a small paper notebook. I used field notes in two related ways. I used the left side of the notebook to record long, detailed descriptions of my observations of workers’ interactions and the contextual setting, along with my thoughts and feelings about the observed activities. I used the right side of the notebook as a to-do list, to record quick reminders or questions to which I needed to return. For instance, once, while I was observing the doormen in action, I noticed the doorman calling a limousine for a customer when he had hailed a taxi for the previous customer who needed of airport transportation. I used the right side of the notebook to record: “Doormen: hailing or calling? Taxi vs. Limo. When, how and why?” Later, at a time when I was able to approach the doorman, I asked these specific

questions, and recorded his lengthy and detailed responses in the left side of the notebook. Within hours of leaving HotelCo after a site visit, I would expand on the field notes on my laptop, including further details in the form of memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

In total, I have gathered two thousand pages of field notes, interviews, organizational artifacts and other records. These form the basis of an ongoing ethnographic analysis to arrive at a theory grounded in data. While the findings of the analyses are presented in subsequent chapters, what follows is a brief account of the approach I used in the analysis of the data. At a high level, my approach to the analysis of data consists of three distinct activities: coding the data and refining my understanding of the subject matter, seeking to understand the data in the context in which they were collected, and identifying theoretical concepts and themes through constant comparison of the collected data and the literature. These activities formed a continuous and iterative approach to the analysis of the ethnographic data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

At first, I started by organizing the workers' actions and activities. I developed emic categories through coding within each group (Housekeeping and Front Desk) to reflect the tasks or services performed by each role occupant. For instance, at the Front Desk, the initial categories, or free nodes, included tasks such as checking-in, upgrading, arranging for transportation, luggage handling, etc. Additionally, I developed data attributes and other categories that marked specific instances of performed service(s) or tasks within a particular context (e.g. New Year's Eve or Valentine's Day) for specific guests. I then grouped the specific instances to refine concepts, identify their properties, and explore possible relationships. My aim at this stage was to integrate the data to arrive at an etic understanding of what type of services were provided to whom (which type of customers) and under what circumstances. When I finally decided this path of analysis was creating more chaos than order, I took the results back to the field, and began collecting additional data related to this line of thinking. In the interviews with both employees and managers, the answer to my question, "How do you choose which services to provide to which customers?" was invariably, "It depends."

After several iterations, I began re-analysis of the data, taking interactions — instead of merely actions — as the unit of analysis. The new focus was on the construction of narratives surrounding the service interactions, i.e., between HotelCo employees and customers, and between HotelCo employees. The purposes of the narratives were to capture the contextual attributes that surrounded the interactions, including the clues the employees would use to decide what types of actions (services) to perform for which type of customers. I continually compared specific narratives within different groups and across time to refine etic concepts and eventually to arrive at a coherent theory. This formed the foundation of constant comparative method as proposed by research scholars (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## 2.6 Statement of reflexivity

In doing research there is an implicit assumption that the researcher is investigating something ‘outside’ of himself or herself. For instance, in this dissertation there might be an assumption that I, as a researcher, am engaged in an investigation of an ‘objective’ phenomenon—the phenomenon of provision of accommodation in a hotel setting—which is traditionally conceptualized as the ‘object of research.’ But, all researchers and in particular ethnographers are to some degree connected to, or part of, the object of their research (Davies, 2008). In fact, in the practice of ethnography the relationship between the researcher and the researched is quite intimate and long term. Moreover, in ethnography, the researcher is the main instrument of research (Yin, 2011). As a result, the concerns about doing an ethnography that maintain adequate ‘objectivity’ in the produced text and constructed theories may have an even greater scope.

Since the ethnographer cannot enhance the rigor of research by removing or even distancing the instrument of research (i.e., himself or herself) from the researched, there is an invitation to reflexivity, i.e., the acknowledgements of privileges and biases throughout the research process (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008). Here I provide a brief statement of reflexivity about my prior experiences with, and perspectives on, the ‘object of research’ aimed at exposing the awareness of possible biases and preconceived ideas that may have played a role in constructing this dissertation.

Conducting this study was not an arbitrary choice. It has roots in my educational and professional background. I began my university education in physics, in particular astrophysics. Initially I was drawn to the abstract and objective nature of that field of science. I was attracted to the grand nature of physics aimed at explaining the universe of things. Yet, soon I was awakened to the limitations of the discipline. Eventually I was convinced that physics was simultaneously highly abstract and highly contextual: the theories of physics required a context (a setting) to be understood and explained; and the contexts themselves were only understood by their physics, i.e. the theories of physics. This dialectic has influenced my conceptualization of knowledge—and science at large—as the tension between the universal and the particular, between theories and contexts, or between abstractions and complexities. This is reflected in this dissertation in three forms. First, the phenomenon of my interest is itself a tension between the realities of service interactions (as complex settings) and the managers' organizing work (as abstract 'theories' and structures). Second, as described in this chapter, the methodology of choice, ethnography, is arguably a tension between the etic (theoretical) and emic (contextual) accounts of reality. Lastly, the presentation of the text, i.e. this dissertation, is also a tension between the rich nuances of the data and the structured analysis or theories.

My professional background and my history as a management consultant, also contributes to my choice of conducting this study. After completing the MBA program, I began working as a consultant in the airline industry. My role as a consultant involved numerous interactions with the senior executives of airline companies. In one particular event, in a discussion between a senior consultant and the CEO of a large North American airline, I encountered a statement by the consultant that “a clear and comprehensive *product* philosophy is missing which hinders a continuous quality development along the *service* chain for all *service* classes” (emphasis added). There seemed to be an ambiguity in the meaning of products or services within the industry. This ambiguity was so common that for the most part the combined term “products and services” had dominated the documentations communications and role definitions in firms. The ambiguity was not limited to the airline industry. In my doctoral program, I continued to encounter the ambiguity of “products and services” in the management and

strategy literature. Initially, my interest was in disentangling the ambiguities and in arriving at clear boundaries between products and services. Later, this gave way to the curiosity surrounding the risks of confounding the two concepts. First, why do we, as strategy researchers, persist in lumping products and services in one category and consider our models of management universal across the both products and service firms? Second, if there is a substantial distinction, how would that have an effect on our theorizing and understanding of organization? In this study, my goal has not been to address these concerns, but the structure of my inquiry has arguably been influenced by them.

By exposing my beliefs, perspectives, as well as my past experiences, I am not claiming to have conducted ‘objective’ research free of subjective biases. Rather, my aim is to convince the reader of the rigor involved in the research, in particular in the choices of the ‘object of research,’ the methodology, and the analysis. In short, I do not consider this study as a discovery of truths about an objective reality. Instead, I position it as a construction of a social reality (Alvesson et al., 2008). In doing so, the purpose of this statement becomes the exposition of the foundation of this construction, with the hope that it demonstrates rigor and trust in what has been constructed.



## Chapter 3

### 3 The Provision of Accommodation

#### 3.1 Accommodation for money: the simple images

The simple image of HotelCo's business is the exchange of temporary accommodation for money. In this exchange, for finite periods of time, HotelCo provides lodging, and food and beverages, to customers; in return, based on an agreed-upon price, customers render payments for the accommodations. A slightly more detailed image is one in which HotelCo provides different forms of accommodation for different purposes or for various occasions. Consider the following observations made while I was conducting ethnography at HotelCo:

Over Christmas time, a divorced father, with his two young children, checks in at HotelCo for three nights. During the check-in process, he mentions to the HotelCo staff that he is spending Christmas with the kids at the hotel; these three days are a rare occasion when he could fly into the city to see his children. He also mentions that he is feeling terrible because he does not have a Christmas tree for his children. Without informing this customer of her intentions, the check-in agent purposefully stalls the check-in process to arrange for a Christmas tree to be pulled from the lobby of the hotel and placed in the customer's room. As clichéd as it sounds, for this customer HotelCo has provided accommodation in form of a "home –away –from home."

A few days later, on December 31<sup>st</sup> and January 1<sup>st</sup>—statutory holidays celebrated nationwide when most organizations have paid days off—HotelCo is busy providing a "place to watch the fireworks" or "place for partygoers to crash" during the New Year's Eve celebrations. HotelCo's location in the downtown core, in a close proximity to the main city square, has attracted many customers who participate in the New Year's festivities. Many used HotelCo's accommodations for a late-night sleep and a place to recover from that night's drinking. Many customers opted to stay with their friends or

loved ones in high floor rooms to enjoy the view of the “spectacular fireworks,” as the customers called it, or to make a private toast with champagne and kisses.

In late January, during one of the worst winter storms of recent history, in which a crippling snowfall halts all transportation, HotelCo provides shelter not only to stranded visitors to the city but also to many local residents who can not make it back to their homes. Finding a place to stay for the night is nearly impossible, with many surrounding hotels quickly selling out. Because of its large size, HotelCo manages to provide shelter for many customers, as well as for a few of its own employees and staff.

A few weeks later, HotelCo is hosting one of the largest conferences of an international association of high school students. For three days and two nights, approximately 1500 young students, mostly in school uniforms, roam the lobby and the banquet halls of HotelCo, and participate in national competitions and award ceremonies. The lobby of the HotelCo (Figure 3.1) looks like a scene typical of a crowded high school (Figure 3.2). HotelCo provides not only the physical space for the conferences and events, but also accommodation in the form of dormitories and sleeping quarters shared by four students.

**Figure 3.1: The lobby of HotelCo during a quiet moment**



**Figure 3.2: The lobby of HotelCo during a conference**



In many other instances, HotelCo provides private spaces for customers to engage in private matters. Occasionally, HotelCo provides accommodation for men and women who do not wish to be seen in public together, nor wish to leave any trace of togetherness behind. HotelCo provides two connecting rooms (although only one room gets used) and carefully safeguards confidential records of their meeting. Or, in similar cases, HotelCo regularly provides accommodation for customers like Ms. Michelle — as she is known at HotelCo, with no last name — who always pays in cash for rooms she uses for entertaining visitors. Conversely, HotelCo provides accommodation in the form of a public arena for customers who want to see and be seen. For example, during several citywide festivals (most notably Pride celebrations and film festivals), HotelCo’s spaces become filled with customers who are not only “stargazing,” but also showing off themselves and their fashion styles.

HotelCo also provides accommodation in form of a “green room:” a waiting room for customers (or performers) before and after a performance nearby. For instance, during the mentioned festivals, customers use the hotel accommodations to change from street clothing to film-festival evening gowns and suits. Many weddings also take place at HotelCo throughout the year, and customers use the accommodations for grooming, for make- up, and for changing into or out of their ceremonial costumes.

In other cases, the accommodation that HotelCo provides is a getaway or departure from daily life. During hot summer days, the cool HotelCo environment provides a getaway — an escape — for customers who relax by the outdoor swimming pool or rest in the air-conditioned rooms. In July, some were there specifically to attend a Björk concert at night and sleep late the day after. Along the same lines, I encountered many customers, mostly couples, who were in town for the weekend, staying at HotelCo to “have a quick bite” at the hotel’s restaurants before attending nearby theatre shows.

Beyond these accommodation needs, HotelCo also offers a sort of care facility. I met a customer, a single man in his 40s, who had flown in from Columbus, Ohio, to undergo a shoulder surgery at a downtown hospital. After his discharge from the hospital, before he could return to Ohio, he stayed at HotelCo to recuperate from the surgery, and was visited by mobile home-care nurses. I met him as he was checking out of the hotel, asking for assistance with transportation arrangements to the airport and help with his luggage because his shoulder was still in a sling.

Of course, HotelCo also provides more typical accommodations: a place to sleep (for example, for airline crew members on a layover), or a work space (for the university professor who was there to meet his doctoral student, or the author who was finishing her novel). However, not all forms of accommodation are typical. After few months of being on site, I learned from members of the Housekeeping staff — in a hush-hush meeting — about the case of a businessman who had checked in the hotel in 2008 to commit suicide. As the tale of this tragedy goes, the man had suffered severe financial losses in the stock market. He checked into HotelCo and asked specifically for a room facing away from the main street on a high floor. He used a chair to break the window, and threw himself out of the building. He left behind a note of apology for his family, and some cash for the Housekeeping staff.

Overall, the above images portray HotelCo’s business as one that — for a price — offers temporary accommodation in various forms, including a “home –away from home,” a place to crash, a party room, a shelter, a dorm, a private space, a public space, a getaway destination, a care facility, or a working space. While these images provide some

instances of HotelCo's business, they do not capture the reality of the meaning of accommodation as the thing that is exchanged for money. In essence, accommodation is an intangible phenomenon, pre-categorical and pre-thought, and its reality is a basic structure of an experience. That is, from the perspective of customers, accommodation could mean many things, and many combinations of experiences (e.g., sleeping, resting, grooming, dining, entertaining, and so forth). From the perspective of the hotelier or the managers at HotelCo, to provide accommodation is to arrange the possibility of such experiences. Therefore, what takes place during a HotelCo-customer exchange is the encounter of the customer with vast array of intangible phenomena and experiences, for which the customer renders a payment to HotelCo. Below I describe the intangibility of accommodation and the real aspect of this phenomenon beyond those in the above simplified or stylized images.

### 3.2 Accommodation: a phenomenological experience

To get an understanding of the reality of "accommodation," I traced various customers' interactions with HotelCo over a period of time. My aim was to capture a real image of the thing (or things) at the core of the exchange. To achieve this goal, I paid particular attention to the meaning, or characteristics, of accommodation from the perspective of customers as expressed in responses to questions — asked by the hotel staff during check-out — about their experience with accommodation at HotelCo. To help recognize these characteristics, consider the four excerpts, listed below, from a sample of customers' accounts of their experiences with HotelCo. It is important to note how some responses to the question "how were your accommodations at HotelCo?" are not typically about the stylized image of accommodation. Indeed, vagueness, intangibility, subjectivity, and complexity are characteristics of the concept of accommodation that became evident.

"We arrived late to the city. We simply wanted to get to our rooms and get a good night of sleep."

"I needed a fridge and a microwave which they promptly delivered to my room."

“This was the worst stay ever. I could not find the safe in the room. I was forced to carry my valuables all the time.”

“The number one reason we booked this hotel was because of the outdoor [swimming] pool.”

### 3.2.1 Accommodation as a vague intangible phenomenon

Defining accommodation is difficult, as it seems to lack precision in meaning. For instance, as suggested by the first customer above, accommodation might refer to getting “a good night of sleep.” Although accommodation refers to an activity (i.e. sleeping), there are cases in which it is not clear whether or not the concept refers. There are many instances of “sleeping” to which the application of the clarifying term “good” is, ironically, not clear. HotelCo, like many other similar hotels, pays particular attention to the quality and comfort level of the mattresses and the beddings. Would this constitute a good night of sleep? Similarly, HotelCo makes a serious effort in maintaining low levels of noise — especially on the higher floors of the building — for a quiet night of sleep. HotelCo staff members are instructed on the check-in process instruction sheet to “ask the guest / uncover information about guest’s reason for stay;” Using this information they may try to segregate potentially loud customers, e.g. the partygoers, from those who are more likely to enjoy quiet. Would this constitute a good night’s sleep? As expressed by one angry customer, there remain noises created by other customers:

“Why do people feel they MUST slam doors? 2:00 AM and they come in and SLAM their doors - how about putting up signs saying something like 'Hey, be kind to those sleeping' - I was very tempted to wake up at 5:00 AM just to SLAM my door!”

Even if there no slamming doors, there still remains street noise, occasional ambulance sirens, frequent sounds of water running in the pipe systems, elevator chimes, or the 8:30 AM voice of the Housekeeping attendant knocking on some other customer’s room

announcing her entrance: “Housekeeping... good morning... Housekeeping.” It is unclear to which cases the concept of “good night of sleep” refers.

Similarly, in the last excerpt, although hotel accommodation refers to an artifact (i.e., an outdoor swimming pool), it is unclear which set of criteria or standards of the artifact must be met in order to be applicable to the concept of hotel “accommodation.” The swimming pool at HotelCo is open for customers from 7:30 AM to 10 PM. It is a four-lane, 25-yard-long, all-season outdoor pool with loungers and chairs on three sides, and colourful swim noodles and red lifesavers at the remaining side. Throughout the year, some customers use the pool to swim laps, some families use it for fun. During warmer weather, many use the surrounding area of the pool, reading under the large umbrellas or tanning in the sun. Many just dip themselves in the pool to cool from the heat. There is often upbeat and cheerful music coming from poolside speakers — even if there is no one at the pool. On some weekends, especially during a busy cultural festival in August, the lifeguards change the music to calm and slow jazz tunes to prevent over crowding at the pool. The lifeguards are not present at all times. In summer months, depending on the expected business (hence busyness), more lifeguards are present. In other months, warning signs advise the customers that there is no diving in the shallow end.”

There are many issues to consider about the optimal pool set-up. Should the outdoor pool be wider with more lanes, or narrower with more chairs and loungers? Should it be deeper for adult swimming lanes, or shallower for children’s play? Should it be a calmer environment for poolside resting and relaxation or more energetic for activities and fun? These are questions that highlight the vagueness of how this artifact is related to “accommodation.” It is unclear which subset of these criteria, and to what extent, must be met to be applicable to hotel “accommodation.”

### **3.2.2 Accommodation as a subjective intangible phenomenon**

The reality of accommodation does not exist in some tangible, objective outside world, but in subjective human experiences. What highlights the subjectivity of accommodation is the bearing of multiple inferences it has to different things. As evident in these excerpts, for some customers, accommodation is about temporary lodging, a room for

getting “a good night of sleep.” For others, food and beverage highlight the meaning of accommodation. Although food and beverage involve tangible goods, the subjective experiences are intangible. While some customers use the upscale restaurants, some enjoy the experience of evening cocktails in the top floor lounge with the panoramic view of the city, and others might experience the more casual “burger joint” at HotelCo. Some might order room service, and experience food and beverage in the privacy of their rooms and the comfort of their pyjamas. Although room service is available all hours, the menu is limited between 11 PM and 6 AM, and orders may take up to 45 minutes. During these hours, HotelCo offers customers their choice of room service or take-out from a nearby pizza shop or the 24-hour diner.

Yet for many customers, as evident in the third excerpt, accommodation implies a different meaning: a temporary “stay” that is safe and secure. The safety and security is not just about accessibility to an in-room lockbox. Some customers request rooms located at the end of the hallways, close to emergency staircases and fire exits, and as close as possible to the ground floor. Conversely, many customers, particularly women travelling alone, request rooms next to the elevators, fearing the long walk down quiet, “dark” hallways. For others, accommodation characterizes different aspects of temporary lodging — even those perhaps not typically acknowledged as such — for instance, rest and relaxation around the outdoor pool or pampering at the spa. Beyond these, many customers consider accommodation not only as lodging, but also as a temporary place to do work, to entertain others or to be entertained. This is not to suggest that accommodation is an amalgamation of the above, or that each activity is a subcomponent of it. Rather, it suggests that accommodation is a phenomenon that comes into being through subjective experiences of customers with these activities. In short, it is difficult to associate accommodation with just one specific meaning or a particular thing, or an assembly of activities, experienced by all customers.

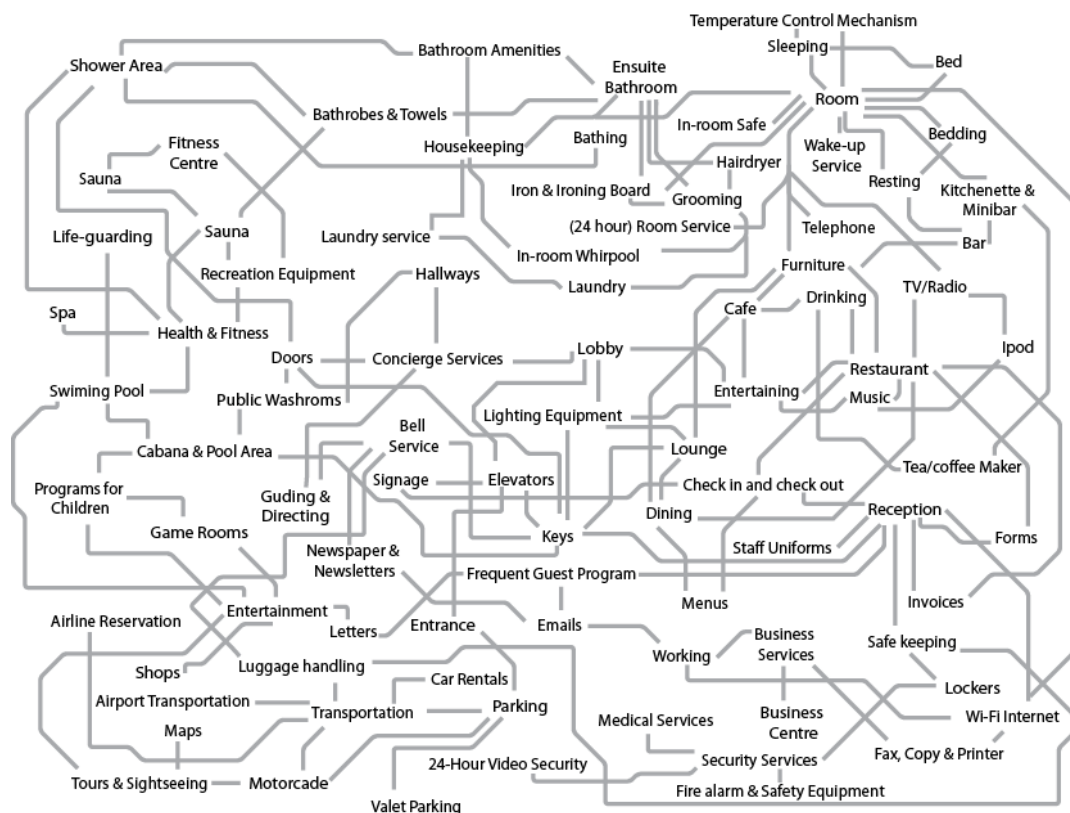
### **3.2.3 Accommodation as a complex concept**

Not only does the concept of accommodation carry vague references, but also there are infinite sets of interrelating elements that can be associated with this concept. Drawn from the data of customers’ interaction with HotelCo, in Figure 3.3 I show a snapshot of



the numerous interacting elements—a gathering of things involved in various exchanges between HotelCo and its customers—that complicate the meaning of “accommodation.”

**Figure 3.3: Elements comprising accommodation at HotelCo**



This image depicts the involvement of generic statements of complex relations of things that, together, build some meaning of accommodation. However, the manifestations of this image, in reality, vary across time and space as each HotelCo-customer interaction becomes a unique instance of a subset of the elements involved. As a consequence, accommodation can mean many things, involving many elements, to many people. Consider Figure 3.4, which brings to the foreground a subset of activities in which customers might engage as part of their temporary lodging at HotelCo. Part of the reason accommodation means many things to many people, is the manifestations of temporary lodging that, in reality, include an indeterminate set of activities: for instance, resting and sleeping, bathing and grooming, drinking and dining, entertaining, exercising, playing cards, celebrating holidays, getting married, or even committing suicide, as the investor did back in 2008.



these chairs. In fact, in the cold winter months, members of HotelCo staff (called the “lobby ambassadors”) carefully guard these chairs and fend off non-customers (for example, homeless people) so that the chairs remain available for customers.

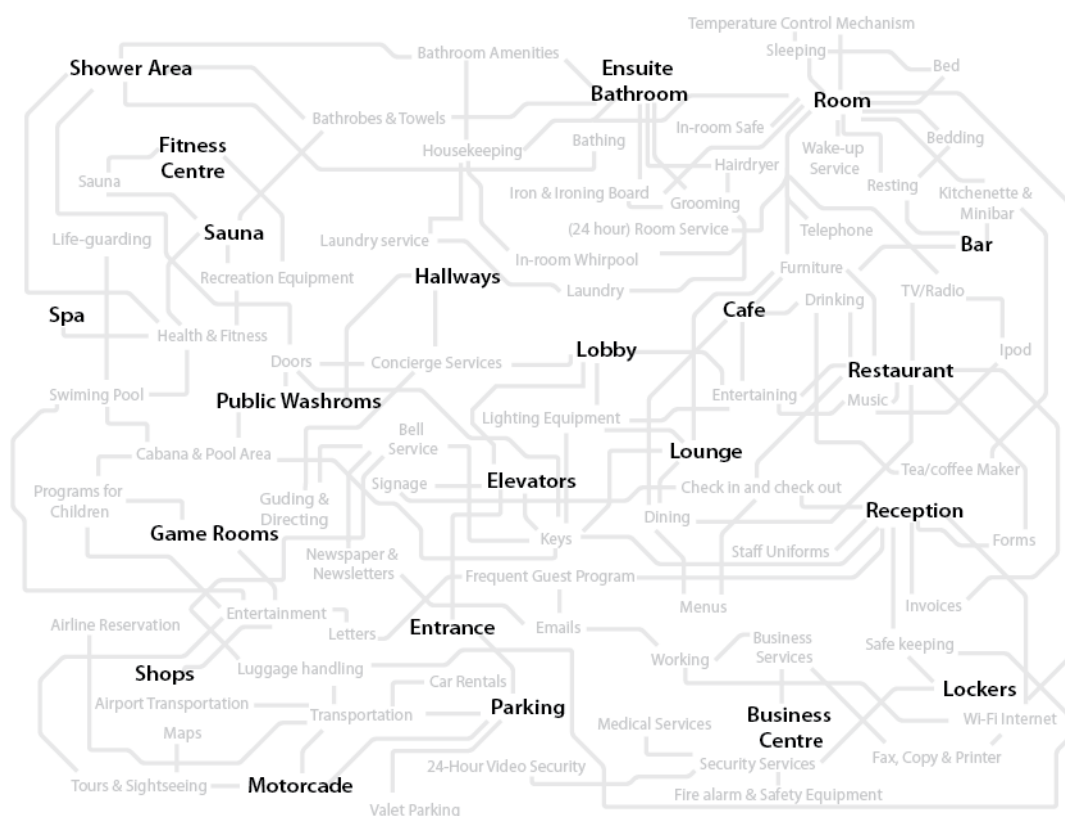
Similarly, customers may hold business meetings in their rooms, or HotelCo’s restaurants, or bars. Customers may also hold meetings in a “secret” boardroom. This boardroom equipped with advanced meeting-related technology, is well hidden on the top floor of HotelCo, and access is only possible with the right combination code on the digital key panel outside the door. The room’s entrance is behind a set of traffic doors (two swinging doors with round windows, similar to those often used in restaurant kitchens) that separate it from the public hallway. Locked (and masked) cabinets outside the entrance store the glassware and chinaware used for serving the meeting attendees. I was informed, after several months at HotelCo, this room is used (albeit, rarely) by “heads of companies” or “government people” to hold private meetings in a “neutral place” away from their usual meeting grounds. Of course, many customers use the more visible conference facilities for meeting purposes as well.

Or consider the activity of entertaining visitors. At HotelCo, visitors of staying customers may simply access the elevators and go directly to the room. However, some visitors ask at the reception desk about the customer’s room number and direction. In these cases, HotelCo staff call the customer for security purposes, to confirm that the visitor is expected, before they divulge the information to the visitor. Customers may receive visitors in their rooms, or meet with them in other physical settings; for instance, in the upscale restaurant, the cocktail lounge, the bars, or even in the “burger joint” outside the lobby.

Accommodation may also involve other activities. For some, it may include reading a book or newspaper, responding to emails, or conversing on the phone. They could perform these, as I observed, at the hotel café, the lounge, the lobby, or by the swimming pool. For some it may also include physical exercise and health-related activities at the hotel gym, the outdoor running tracks, or by the swimming pool.

Overall, the phenomenon of accommodation relates to an indeterminate set of activities performed by customers in countless physical spaces. As seen above, unwinding or resting — as an intangible activity performed by the customer — is performed in various physical settings, eliciting different meanings of the activity and thus of “accommodation.” This exacerbates its intangibility and marks the complexity of the phenomenon of “accommodation.”

**Figure 3.5: Various locations where activities in accommodation could be realized**



In addition to the above, two other aspects of customer activities add to the complexity of “accommodation.” Customers can perform an activity in multiple ways, using a variety of tools and artifacts. Consider, for example, the cases when HotelCo customers “entertain” in the privacy of their hotel rooms. Sometimes during the check-in process, customers ask the hotel staff to have champagne sent up to their rooms. Other times, some customers in (luxury) suites ask for instructions on using the entertainment unit or the iPod docking station in the Presidential Suite. Customers may play video games, or watch

movies on TV or they may just “chill” or simply chat on the sofa, use the loveseat, or stay in bed. Consider the events surrounding Valentine’s Day and how customers “entertain” on their beds in specially prepared rooms. On the morning prior to Valentine’s Day, four members of HotelCo’s senior staff discussed the “Valentine packages” these couples had purchased:

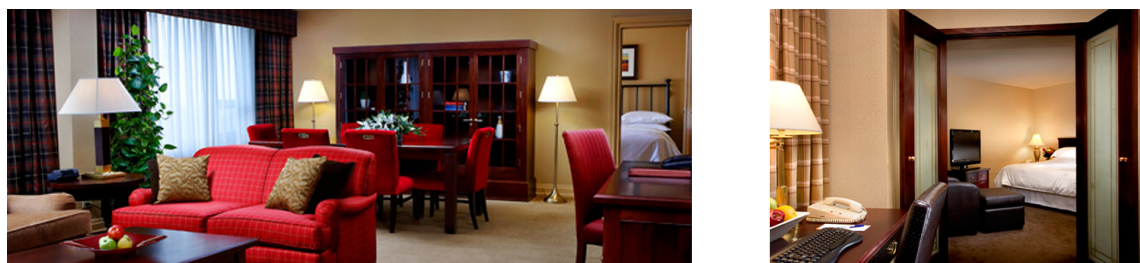
“We made the beds with [towel] folded swans and nice little hearts as well. Flowers are placed inside the heart so it is not on the white duvet not to cause stain. We went out and purchase some red dyed chocolate roses which should be fine to put on their beds. You know it makes it nice and romantic for those special guest that we book the exclusive package.”

Similarly, as part of performing the activity of “entertaining,” customers may want to use a Jacuzzi. A young couple was looking to celebrate their wedding anniversary at HotelCo. During the check-in process, they asked if they could see a room with a Jacuzzi. As a member of the staff gave the couple a tour of the rooms with Jacuzzis, she learned that the customers were looking for a particular set-up where the Jacuzzi tub, surrounded by candles, was next to a window overlooking a spectacular view. After visiting several set-ups, the customers eventually checked in; however, they learned they were not allowed to use real candles — only electric ones were allowed.

All in all, in reality, there are multiple ways, with many possible artifacts, that the activity of “entertaining” can be performed. Listening to music, watching a movie, drinking tea or a beverage, relaxing in the bed, or being romantic in the Jacuzzi are all instances of infinite ways the activity of “entertaining” — as manifested in accommodation — can be performed. The artifacts employed in such activities play defining roles in framing the meaning of the activity. For instance, the red-dyed chocolate roses and folded towel swans, as well as the candles surrounding the Jacuzzi, play a defining role in adding romance to the entertaining activities.

At HotelCo, not all rooms have similar décors or are equipped with similar artifacts. During a “room walk”—a weekly audit of the physical state of different rooms performed by a group of senior managers—the director of the Housekeeping department described the differences, and the reason behind different decors. Every few years, HotelCo undergoes room renovations and upgrades; however, to maintain the operations of the business, only a block of rooms, on few adjacent floors, get renovated at a time. As a result, there are a handful of different decors stacked across multiple floors. On the floors we were visiting that day, the Housekeeping director pointed out the brown “cigar-themed” carpets and the black leather chairs and loveseats, referring to them as a “masculine” decor (the image on the right in Figure 3.6). On another floor, rooms had brighter colour carpets and red chairs and loveseats (the image on the left in Figure 3.6). Some rooms had tufted loveseats with red velvet upholstery.

**Figure 3.6: Example of different room decors at HotelCo**



The differences in the rooms are not just limited to the decor or the colour themes. There are also differences in the amenities in different rooms. Some rooms, for example, are equipped with microfiber bathrobes, whereas in others, there are plush basket-weave bathrobes and towels. Every room has a coffeemaker, ground coffee, tea bags, milk and cream, and sweetener and sugar packets. In some rooms, this set-up is accompanied by two white Styrofoam cups, whereas others have are “eco cups” (environmentally friendly, biodegradable paper cups). However, in the restaurant, lounges, bars and cafes, coffee and tea are served in china cups and saucers. Therefore, in a sense, a black leather loveseat used in entertaining visitors signals a different meaning of the activity than does a tufted loveseat with red velvet upholstery. Similarly, Styrofoam cups frame the meaning of entertaining guests differently than do “eco cups” or china ones. Likewise,



concept. As part of their exchange with HotelCo, in reality, customers may perform many activities, in many different physical spaces, in various forms involved with various artifacts, which together compose unique manifestations of the abstract concept of “accommodation.” Yet, not all activities are performed by the customers. To add to the already complex image, some activities are also being performed by the members of HotelCo staff, either on behalf of the customer or for the added benefit of the customer. Consider the following case when a customer explains her experience while working at the lobby of the hotel:

“The homeless people kept coming by at lobby computer station to beg for change. At least 3 came at one sitting on my first night at the hotel. During my whole stay, there might have been close to total of 10 people asking for money. This happened at different times of the day, but often in the middle of day. I have informed a Front Desk once during my stay and she called a security. People kept coming by for the rest of the stay so it was not taken care of fully. You may want to consider stationing a staff in the area so these people don't come around. I would also like to mention that this is the first time that the homeless came by. I have stayed at your hotel 3 times this spring and it had never happened to me before.”

In response to cases similar to these, HotelCo did in fact station the “lobby ambassadors” to guard the lobby area and fend off homeless people. They, on behalf of the customers, deal with the nuisance of beggars or homeless people. In a similar role, while customers spend time with their families and children by the outdoor swimming pool, as part of their exchange with the hotel they may be receiving the services of lifeguards who take charge of the safety and security of everyone in or near the pool.

In another example, the bellhops may carry customers’ luggage as they enter or exit the hotel. Yet, while the customer who stayed at HotelCo while recuperating from shoulder



surgery did indeed require help with his luggage, many might enjoy the service of the bellhops for added comfort or even for status. In a similar manner, when the member of the check-in staff arranged for a Christmas tree to be taken to the customer's room, in effect she "made a magical Christmas" for the customer, as expressed in a thank you note by the customer. Similarly, by searching for two connecting rooms and allowing cash payments, the check-in staff provide confidentiality for the Misters and Misses who do not wish to be seen together and who magically want any record of their togetherness disappeared. Therefore, the wide range of such services provided for the benefit of the customers — from lifeguarding to safeguarding, from bellhops to concierge, from making Christmas magical to magically making records disappear — add to the complexity of the concept of "accommodation." Figure 3.8 brings to the foreground a subset of these services that interact with customers' activities, physical spaces and artifacts that are elements of the complex image of "accommodation." In addition to the range of services being performed, the way they are executed, the physical location in which they are carried out, and the objects and artifacts used in their execution, increase the complexity and the multitude of instances of the concept of "accommodation."

In summary, it is not possible to arrive at an empirically finite and clear depiction of accommodation as the one *thing* that gets exchanged for money. Therefore, accommodation is a reference to varied phenomenological experiences and intangible concepts associated with perceptual consciousness of events that loosely depict patterns of complex interactions between HotelCo and its customers.



do not experience accommodation solely in the hotel rooms, or just when they are sleeping, as it might be stereotypically conceptualized. This not only further highlights the intangibility of the experience, but also implies that customers are constantly experiencing the “production of accommodation.” For this reason, providing accommodation (i.e., supplying accommodation to the customers) is the same as producing it (i.e., actualizing the phenomenon of accommodation). Within the service industries, this is regarded as the simultaneous production and consumption/experience (Bateson, 1977; Normann, 1991). Therefore, what is at the core of the exchange is not a particular product (specifically referring to created goods) or service; rather it is the exchange itself. This implies accommodation cannot be stored or produced in advance — a critical distinction between products and services (Bowen & Ford, 2002, p. 450) — nor can it be reduced to a particular component. In short, accommodation is produced and actualized during HotelCo-customer interactions, and thus, all HotelCo-customer interactions matter in its provision or production.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.3.1 The relational nature of HotelCo-customer interactions

As exemplified earlier, at HotelCo, customers interact with non-human entities such as the artifacts, arranged in physical settings, that customers encounter during their accommodation at HotelCo. For instance, customers interact with physical artifacts such as the hotel room’s Jacuzzi tub, or the outdoor swimming pool. Likewise, customers interact with non-physical artifacts such as the music played at the swimming pool, or the lighting in the hallways, or symbols and signs used in various physical settings.

In essence, these artifacts are relational entities that provide clues that frame the meaning of the interaction and thus the experience of accommodation for customers (Bechky, 2003; Goffman, 1974). Consider, for instance, the meaning of “Jacuzzi tub” as defined for the couple who are celebrating their wedding anniversary and wish to be romantic in the tub. In essence, the meaning of Jacuzzi is defined in relation to the couple’s romantic

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<sup>3</sup> From here on, “provision” and “production” of accommodation are used interchangeably, keeping in mind the preferred meaning of each concept as described above.

activities; similarly, the meaning of romantic activities also defined in relation to the existence and use of the artifact, i.e., the large bathtub with a system of underwater jets. The relational aspect of the interaction of HotelCo customers and artifacts can also be seen at the outdoor pool. The meaning of the outdoor pool when it is used by people to cool down on hot summer days or relax by its side is different from the one when used by adults to exercise and swim laps, or from the one when used by children having fun. The artifact — the pool — gets different meanings (e.g., a social space, or an area for exercising, or a playground). In return, the meaning of the activities performed by the customer are in relation to the existence of the artifact, i.e., a concrete tank painted blue and filled with water.

In addition to the interaction with artifacts and physical settings, customers' interactions with staff at HotelCo are also relational. They are relational in so far as in the encounters there are roles defined in relation to those occupying the other positions in the interaction (Solomon et al., 1985). For instance, as part of provision of "accommodation," there are roles such as bellhop and check-in agents that are defined in relation to the role of the customers. These roles are dynamic and behavioural because they emphasize interpersonal interactions as opposed to actions or a set of recurrent activities that fall within the scope of a person's job or role (Barley & Kunda, 2001, p. 89).

As an example, the role of the bellhop performs, or the work that he does, is defined in relation to the customers. At a high level, the role is defined as welcoming the customers to HotelCo, responding to their inquiries, anticipating their needs, and (occasionally) socializing with them. The performance of the role, however, is in relation to the customer and to in instances of customer interaction. As I observed at HotelCo, although bellhops welcome all customers, they greet them differently. At times they simply use common pleasantries such as "good morning/afternoon/evening" or "welcome to HotelCo." At other times, they may address them as "sir" or "ma'am," address them using their last name, or in some cases, even by their given names. Similar relational aspects are also evident in their role of assisting customers with their luggage. In a conversation with one veteran bellhop (with over 30 years of experience at HotelCo), he explains how his interactions differ from one customer to another, and how he has

mastered this adaptation. For some customers, he carries their luggage to their room, ahead of them, in a separate elevator. For some, he accompanies them in the elevator. In these occasions, he sometimes holds onto the room key and opens the door for the customer. At other times, he lets customers keep the key and open the room themselves. He tells a story of a time he pressed the floor-button in the elevator for a customer. He recalls that the customer reacted with anger, saying, “I am not handicapped, I am quite capable of reaching the button.”

Indeed, the role of the customer is also defined in accordance to what is socially expected in the encounter with a member of HotelCo staff. For instance, the expected action of a customer upon entering the hotel premises is to find and walk to the physical area designated as “reception,” rather than sitting down in the lobby and waiting to be “received” by a hotel staff member. In conclusion, the interactions between the customers and the members of HotelCo are relational because the roles are defined in relation to those occupying other positions in the interaction.

### 3.3.2 Short-term aspects of social interactions

Recall the interaction between the member of the check-in staff and the divorced father spending Christmas at HotelCo with his two young children. The interaction provided the social occasion for the father to describe the circumstances surrounding his divorce, as well as his emotions as a result of his failure in having a Christmas tree for his children. This suggests that the social content of the interactions helps shape the meaning of the exchange. In a way, this is contrary to the received notion of exchange in the marketplace, where people who are unknown to each other perform arm’s length transactions. In fact, here, the social connections and the identities of the parties in the exchange are relevant to the interactions (Czepiel, 1990; McCallum & Harrison, 1985).

At HotelCo, face-to-face encounters happen numerous times. In theory, customers only interact with HotelCo staff in two occasions: once during check-in and once during check-out. Yet, in reality, there are countless other occasions in which customers interact with the staff. For instance, consider the following instances of common interactions taking place between stay-in customers and members of HotelCo staff. As I observed,

many customers walk up to the reception counter (or to the concierge desk, or to anyone in HotelCo wearing a uniform and a name tag) asking for directions to places in the city (restaurants, attractions, banks, government offices, etc.). Some might ask for specific directions (“Can you tell me how to get to the [named] restaurant?”) while others ask for suggestions or recommendations (“Where can we find a good Thai place?”). On other occasions — quite frequently — customers show up at the check-in counter asking for their room numbers (as they had forgotten them) or looking for new keys (as they had left theirs in the room).

Special requests are another form of social interactions that occurs frequently. In fact, approximately 30 percent of the hundreds of interactions I observed at the reception desk were of this type. Customers request a wide range of personal items (e.g., umbrella, newspapers, extra blankets, different kinds of pillows, toothbrush, shaving or sewing kits, etc.), including highly private ones (such as condoms). The social nature of these interactions is evident when one considers the “stories” customer embed in these interactions. As an example, I encountered a customer with a special request, a travelling consultant from British Columbia working at Accenture who was so preoccupied with his presentation to the clients (a financial institute) that he had completely forgotten to pack his iPhone charger. The fact that we - the member of HotelCo staff and I - in a span of few seconds learned so much about him (and his iPhone request) is evidence of the social characteristics of such interactions.

Customers also initiate interactions with HotelCo staff regarding issues or problems they might be experiencing with their “accommodation.” During one of the night shifts (11:00 PM to 7:00 AM), as I was observing the work of the manager on duty, I noted numerous occasions when customers would telephone from their rooms, or walk to the reception desk, and complain about issues. For example, one customer reported “the whole floor smells like marijuana” and another complained about “the couple next room were very loud while making love.” In response, the manager on duty would look for ways of responding to these issues. In the former case, the manager first offered to move the customer to a different room and then dispatched security to that floor. In the latter case, after learning about the customer’s travel itinerary and schedule the next day, the

manager on duty offered to extend the customer's check-out time so he could sleep later. The point here is not to highlight the exact nature of problems the customers encounter, or how HotelCo responds to such complaints. Rather, the point is to draw attention to the very nature of accommodation that includes intricate issues and problems (smell and noise, for instance) that culminate in interactions between customers and HotelCo. Although these complaint-related interactions are not exactly pleasant, nevertheless, they are social in nature.

Not all interactions are initiated by customers. HotelCo staff often exchange pleasantries with customers. For instance, at the main entrance to HotelCo, the doormen always politely greet the customers. The doormen look for ways of identifying the customers to address them by name; if there is a name tag on the customer's luggage (perhaps an airline luggage tag), the doormen try, tactfully, to read the name or to discover the home city of the visiting customer.

Among many locations in which I observed such pleasantries, elevators were the most frequent location. Every time I followed a HotelCo manager into an elevator, if they encountered a customer, without fail they would initiate social talks, asking clients about their experiences, making some comments about the weather, and wishing them an enjoyable stay. At the beginning, my goal as a researcher was to remain invisible in these encounters and interactions. Within weeks, however, I noticed that I too was initiating pleasantries and social talks with the customers.

### 3.3.3 Long-term aspects of social interactions

The social aspect of interactions between HotelCo and customers are not just limited to moments of face-to-face encounters as exemplified above. While many customers might be staying at HotelCo for the first time (or just one time), many are returning customers who repeatedly seek accommodation at HotelCo. As an example, consider Ms. Michelle — the known customer with no known last name, who always pays in cash for the rooms she uses and who always has visitors in her room. Or consider the customer who explained her experience with homeless people in the lobby and stated, at the end, "I would also like to mention that this is the first time that the homeless came by. I have

stayed at your hotel 3 times this spring and it had never happened to me before.” Each interaction with these customers is not so much a discrete exchange or random economic event, but a continuation of a relationship with past experiences and future possibilities (Dwyer et al., 1987). Contrary to the conventional views of pure market-based exchange, where the identities of the parties in the exchange are irrelevant to the exchange, at HotelCo these interactions are opportunities to reduce the social distance between the customer and HotelCo (Czepiel, 1990; Geertz, 1978). Within these social interactions, HotelCo employees interact according to the expectations of the returning customers. In addition, in anticipation of future interactions, customers are also required to “open up” and voice their idiosyncratic needs as well as their appraisal of their experiences. Such an opening up — for example, going to the extent of writing a note about loiters and homeless people in the lobby, and suggesting possible solutions — is not a natural occurrence in just any buyer-seller encounter. It implies the social aspect of a relationship corresponding to the “articulation of one’s critical opinions rather than a private secret vote in the anonymity of a supermarket” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 16).

### 3.4 Summary

In sum, as manifestations of the provision of “accommodation,” the interactions between HotelCo and its customers form the foundation of the exchanges. The relational and social aspects of these interactions help give meaning to accommodation as it is experienced by customers and exchanged economically. The relational role definitions, mutual behavioral expectations, and physical spaces, as well as the symbols and artifacts that frame these interactions, help bring the experience of accommodation into existence. It is for these characteristics that the production (or provision) of accommodation is considered a co-production; the realities (plural) of accommodation get co-produced by HotelCo and the customers at the times of these interactions (Korczynski & Ott, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2006). In a way, the production (or provision) of accommodation at HotelCo is about setting the stage for these experiences, arranging the physical spaces in which such interactions take place, defining roles, providing scripts of interactions, and employing and deploying artifacts to frame the meaning of customers’ experiences with “accommodation.”



## Chapter 4

### 4 Frontstage Dramaturgy

#### 4.1 Overview

To help explain the production of “accommodation,” I draw on a dramaturgical approach that provides a framework of thinking about the production or provision of service as a performance directed by an organization (Grove & Fisk, 1992; Schreyögg & Höpfl, 2004). Dramaturgy is a mode of analysis that articulates the patterns of social interactions. As seen earlier, these interactions could be the encounters of two or more people (the customer and a member of the HotelCo staff), as well as the encounters of persons with artifacts that invoke a particular definition of a situation (e.g. the encounters of the customer with the hotel room, the Jacuzzi, the outdoor pool, or the music played at the pool). From this perspective, whenever the behaviours or gestures of an actor at HotelCo are the focus of attention of the customer, the actor is — metaphorically speaking — performing on stage. As an illustration, consider the interactions of a doorman and a customer (the first face-to-face interactions of customers with HotelCo). During the interactions, the doorman is “on stage” performing. He wears a costume: a double-breasted uniform frock coat with white gloves and a top hat. Consider how he acts in his role, as I observed, by standing in the vicinity of, but not directly in front of, the main entrance to the lobby. He smiles, greets the customers politely, uses pleasantries, and holds the door open for those in need. If customers are arriving by car, he directs them to the parking structure. If customers are leaving, he instructs the valet staff to retrieve the customers’ car from parking. For departing customers in need of transportation, he arranges taxis and limousines; he steps away a few meters, then either whistles or holds his hand high, waving toward the closest taxi cab or limousine. Even when he is not interacting with a customer face-to-face, or perhaps just standing at his station’ he is “on stage” performing, as his actions and gestures are observed by other customers in the vicinity. He is, in a sense, performing his role and putting on a show to impress the customer.

The roles that the actors perform, as discussed earlier, are relational. That is, the performances are not a set of recurrent activities that fall within the purview of repetitious tasks. Rather, they are dynamic and performed according to the characteristics of the situation or, more specifically, the needs of the customer. Earlier, I highlighted the example of the bellhop who purposely adapts his performance in assisting customers with their luggage: he accompanies some customers in the elevators; for others, uses an alternative elevator to carry their luggage to their room. The same can be seen with the doorman and his performances. In a conversation with a doorman at HotelCo, I asked him how he adjusted his role to the needs of the customers. His response illustrates the relational aspect of his role:

“A guest is standing in the lobby or he stands in the motor-court, he is looking around. You know what is he looking, he is looking for something. So what do you do as a person? Go approach him, ask him what he needs. Understand what he needs. Talk to him, make the communication. You will understand what he needs during the conversation. Obviously you are not God to know to know everything he thinks. You will know only when you interact. Some guests are so repetitive that you know what they simply need. If I see a face ... there is a guest called ... forgot the name ... he has a silver Honda. If, I see him, I know that he needs his car [retrieved from the parking ] in 5 minutes. If you don't know the guest sometimes by the look of the luggage or shoes he is wearing you can tell if you should get them a taxi or a limo.”

In a way, the doorman adapts his performance according to his read of the needs of the situation or the customers. Interestingly, he looks for signs and clues to read the situation or the needs of the customers. He identifies the customer ironically not by name but by the Silver Honda he drives. He peeks at the customers' shoes to assess whether they would need a taxi or a limo. All in all, he performs his relational role and puts on a show

to impress the customers. This can be said about all interactive roles performed by actors at HotelCo.

In spite of the relational aspect of the role, a part of the performances appear generally in a fixed fashion. Goffman referred to that part of the performance as the “front” (1959, p. 22), or the expressive equipment, employed by the actor, that functions to define the situation for the observers of the performance. There is the “setting,” which refers to the scenic parts of the expressive equipment, and there is the “personal front,” that refers to items that identify the performer. Dramaturgically speaking, the “setting” refers to the backdrop and the props on stage, while the “personal front” loosely corresponds to the actors’ dress, costumes, and identifying characteristics. For instance, the performances of the doorman occur in a particular physical setting; the main doors of HotelCo, the carpeted area of the entrance, the motor-court, and the glass booth are expressive equipment in the “setting” that function to define the meaning of the doorman’s performance for the customers. The fact that we, whether as customers of HotelCo (or any hotel for that matter) or as social observers, already imagine the doorman *with* that expressive equipment brings light to the “front” of the role of the doorman. Similarly, while imagining his role, as part of his performances — the personal front — we may include his clothing (uniform, white gloves, the top hat, etc.), his smile, posture (as he stands tall and alert) or even his greeting patterns signaling politeness. Such arranged artifacts and mannerisms signal the meaning and the realness of the performances and the roles the performers play. In short, from a dramaturgical sense, actors perform their roles and present themselves in their actions in a manner to elicit particular impressions before an audience. The doorman performs his roles in a manner to convey the image of politeness and cordiality. In these interactions, actors customize their performances to their read of the situational needs, and adjust the expressions they give off in the context of a frontstage.

Since these interactions, as performed in the frontstage, form the foundation of accommodation as experienced by the customers, the production of accommodation is achieved through planning, arranging, rehearsal and directing that occurs in the backstage. There, to “stage” the experience of the customers in the backstage — away

from the customers' view — the roles are designed, and the critical aspects of the performances are planned and practiced in order to give coherence to all interactions. Staying with the doorman example, the backstage (where the performances of the doormen are designed, rehearsed and directed) is geographically located behind a door to the side of HotelCo's main entrance. This physical area is in stark contrast to the public areas of HotelCo (i.e., the areas that customers interact with). Bright florescent lights, rather than mood-enhancing spotlights, light up a long white-painted concrete corridor. The end of this hallway connects to the freight elevators. Along the way there are the offices of the "Guest Experience Managers" (who oversee the performances of the doormen, bellhops, valet, and concierge) as well as resting rooms and washrooms for the employees. The walls of the hallway are covered with printed notices, flyers, safety warnings, and a large white board with four columns of hand-written notices. On one side of the notice board, the daily/nightly schedule of the staff are written, with start –and stop times, including breaks. The information cues the actors when they are needed "on stage." The second set of notices, updated daily, provide relevant information on the daily operations of HotelCo (e.g., the number of incoming and departing customers, the daily special parking rates, the negotiated parking rates for specific conference groups, the status of nearby road closures and construction updates, etc.). This information is used to enhance the performance of the actors. Another set of notices, updated less frequently, provides directions for the actions and the performances of the actors. It alerts the readers to the current status of the performances of the doormen and the bellhops as measured and monitored by their managers. For instance, it displays a measure of "greeting defects at the bell desk" or the frequency of failures in greeting customers, acknowledging their presence, and offering assistance. The third area of the notice board has a reminder for employees to sign up for training on Aggressive Hospitality. According to the Guest Experience Manager:

"Aggressive hospitality means approaching the customer before the customer approaches you. If there are problems, take ownership of them. [For example] you know that the customer's car is damaged [in the parking lot] or you know that there is something wrong with the car. Inform the

customer prior, instead of waiting for them to come to you and tell you ‘you know what, you guys have done it. You pay for it.’ Then you have to end up calling the security, check the cameras... So we run a training on Aggressive Hospitality every year in January for all customer facing employees. That is very a interesting training.”

Here, at the back stage, the performances of the doormen and bellhops are planned, arranged and monitored. In addition, the roles are rehearsed (with training such as Aggressive Hospitality) and directed with specific critical cues (such as the greeting defect frequency that needs to be improved). Of course, this is where the actors join — behind the scenes, in the resting room — to “chill and chat” about their performances and about their audience. Overall, considering the theatrical images used in dramaturgy, the concept of “production of accommodation” receives two related meanings: one refers to the common management concept of production as the efforts of HotelCo toward creating an output (i.e., accommodation); and the other refers to the theatrical concept of backstage production as planning, setting the stage, rehearsing, directing the actors’ performances and frontstage presentations to the audience.

In what follows next, I will further explore the dramaturgy that unfolds at HotelCo. To provide an account of “production of accommodation,” I will draw the [theatrical] Acts<sup>4</sup> in which customers and HotelCo interact, describe the front- and backstage performances, introduce the actors and their roles, as well as the symbols and artifacts that make up the stage.

## 4.2 Act 1: Agreement

The first Act of interaction between HotelCo and customers, typically known as the “reservation,” occurs when customers and HotelCo reach an agreement by negotiating the terms of the exchange. In Act 1, HotelCo shows descriptions of available types of

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<sup>4</sup> I will consider an Act a thematic segment of the produced performance (the play). Acts are further subdivided into Scenes of sets of performerances.

accommodation as well as other available services. Given an agreed-upon price for specific dates, attracted customers reveal their identities and offer a customary guaranteed form of payment. The Act ends when HotelCo provides a reservation or confirmation number — a symbol of negotiated deal — awaiting the customer’s arrival to the hotel for the formal exchange. Below, I provide further detail and dramaturgical analysis of Act 1 being performed on the frontstages of the interactions, as well as the drama that unfolds behind the scenes, or the backstage.

At HotelCo, the agreement Act can take place on one of three stages: the Internet, over the phone, and physically at HotelCo. The Internet, specifically the HotelCo’s website, is a common stage for these scenes in which customers interact with various virtual representations of HotelCo. A combination of text and images (and videos) are aimed at representing accommodation at HotelCo. Customers can read about hotel features (the pool, the fitness centre, the spa, the business centre, the lounges and various restaurants, etc.). Accompanying these texts are images, or snapshots, of the features of the hotel being showcased. For instance, Figure 4.1 accompanies the following text about the swimming pool, which actually puts the pool in the background and brings to the foreground an adult with two happy children standing outside the pool:

“HotelCo is proud to offer you the opportunity to swim and relax in the largest pool in the city. The water is always perfect. Be sure to bring the latest gossip magazine or bestseller and relax poolside with a cocktail from our seasonal pool bar.”

**Figure 4.1: An image on HotelCo's website depicting the swimming pool**



Customers can also read about available rooms at HotelCo and the rooms' dimensions and layouts, as well as the list of amenities available in the room. In addition, for the choice of travel period, the price of the room is also displayed accompanied by all the terms and conditions of the exchange. For instance, customers can read about a "traditional room" with the following description:

"Sleep in style and comfort in fully redesigned rooms and suites. A rich mahogany desk incorporates a built-in power panel and instant High Speed Internet Access (extra charge applies). Upgraded technology includes a digital thermostat, key card access, and a dual-line telephone, while large windows that open help you relax with fresh air and views of the city's skyline. Each of our rooms is designed for a great night of sleep with our signature HotelCo™ bed. Upgraded bathrooms include marble counter tops and large mahogany-framed mirrors."

Further details of the "traditional room" include 300 square feet (28 square meters) of space, with a comfortable working area; one king-sized bed, bathroom magnifying mirror; bathrobes and bath amenities; complimentary bottled water; and complimentary fitness centre access. The price is displayed as \$369.00 per night with high-speed Internet access available for an additional charge.

In general, in these interaction scenes on its website, HotelCo is represented by an arrangement of symbolic artifacts, i.e., descriptive texts, images and figures. From a dramaturgical perspective, these artifacts re-present HotelCo in the interactions with the customers. Note that here, the verb "to re-present"<sup>5</sup> is meant to place a dramaturgical emphasis on the act. First, it emphasizes the presentation act, the show, and the performance of the artifacts. Second, it highlights the representational act, that is, performing an act on behalf of HotelCo; the artifacts symbolize HotelCo and serve as a

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<sup>5</sup> Different from "to represent" (no dash).

sign or the embodiment of the hotel. The show the artifacts perform is about re-presenting HotelCo — and accommodation — in a particular way with particular meanings.

The scene, and thus the Act, ends when the customer agrees to enter into an exchange, i.e., accommodation for money. As a result of these interactions a symbolic artifact is produced, i.e., a “reservation” document. This document, identified by a number, symbolizes the agreement between HotelCo and the customer, with a description of the terms of the exchange. Figure 4.2 depicts a snapshot of the section of this document where accommodation is re-presented.

### Figure 4.2: Confirmation of reservation of accommodation at HotelCo

Thank you for your reservation! We look forward to seeing you.

You may wish to print this page for your records.

Confirmation Number: **731146096**

Check In	Check Out
09/11 - 3:00 PM	09/12 - 12:00 PM

1 Adult,  
1 Room

Traditional, non-smoking: King Bed, Non-smoking, 300 sq ft / 28 m<sup>2</sup>, Sleeper Bed, City View, Comfortable Work Area, High-speed Internet For A Fee

Third-party websites, such as Priceline.com or Hotwire.com, are other common stages on which scenes related to Act 1 (HotelCo-customer agreement) are played out. There, similar artifacts (texts, photos and figures) re-present HotelCo; however, the performance of these artifacts is arguably different. On Priceline, the text re-presenting the features of a room at HotelCo reads as: “Room Details: 1K Bed:Traditional Non-Smoking:Living Area With Sofa:Comfortable Work Area.” Naturally, in comparison to those on HotelCo’s website (exemplified above), the performance of this text results in a more abstract representation of a room at HotelCo. Consequently, the customer, as the audience of this performance, will likely have a generic impression of the re-presented room. This abstraction is further heightened on Hotwire’s website where the performers of the act of re-presenting are all masked. Instead of any descriptive texts or photos, only a symbol — 4 out of 5 stars (★★★★☆) — re-presents HotelCo in these negotiation



scenes. The scenes however end similarly, as a document symbolizing an agreement between HotelCo and customer is produced. The difference is that accommodation at HotelCo is re-presented in a highly abstract form.

The HotelCo-customer agreement Act also takes place on the phone, where a customer interacts with a HotelCo staff member to arrange for and reserve accommodation. As I was informed in an interview with the telephone operators at HotelCo, this stage is no longer the most common stage for the agreement Act to unfold. Nevertheless, occasionally, customers call either a centralized 1-800 number or HotelCo's direct line to reserve accommodations. While I was not able to observe such interactions directly (i.e., an interaction between the telephone operator and a customer), I was told by the telephone operators in the "reservation" group that they would essentially read off a computer system the "availability of room types" (e.g., 1 King Bed, or 2 Double Beds) and prices over the phone to the customers. Subsequently, they would obtain the customer's contact information and a guaranteed form of payment in order to produce a verbal confirmation number. Therefore, the role of re-presenting HotelCo in these scenes is performed by the telephone operators.

The third stage on which the agreement Act takes place is the physical property of HotelCo. Two possible types of interactions occur. One possibility is when a walk-in customer approaches the reception area in order to reserve accommodations either for a future date or for immediate use. Here, the customer interacts with an actor (a Front Desk agent) standing behind a counter. In addition, the customer also encounters other aspects of the physical surrounding and the staged environment. For instance, the walk-in customer has already passed through the main doors, interacted with the doorman, and walked through the lobby designed to impress the customer. In essence, here, what represents HotelCo in the agreement Act is a combination of actors (the Front Desk agent, and the doorman, for instance) and objects or artifacts on stage (the physical setting). Moreover, customers can also expand the stage in the agreement Act. They can, and as I have observed they do, request to view other physical areas of the hotel including the rooms. Recall the Jacuzzi couple, those celebrating their wedding anniversary at HotelCo. Before entering into an agreement with HotelCo, a member of the Front Desk staff

showed them various rooms. In another example, I encountered a walk-in customer requesting to be shown a room before he would stay at HotelCo. A member of the Front Desk staff showed him four or five available rooms. The customer eventually decided not to stay at HotelCo and instead chose a luxury hotel three miles away. He expressed his impression of the accommodations at HotelCo as “tired” and looking “worn down.”

Another possibility of face-to-face interaction between a customer and HotelCo occurs when the customer is being represented by an agent. Examples include when senior executives of a large South Korean automobile manufacturing company, or a prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, were interested in staying at HotelCo. Other examples are the cases when an association or a group (such as the international association of high school students, or a seniors’ bridge club) are negotiating the terms of the exchange with HotelCo. In such cases, the customer is represented by an actor (e.g., a travel planner, a conference organizer, a representative from an embassy, etc.). The interactions are thus performed by re-presenting actors on both sides of the exchange. The scenes are performed in private sales offices at HotelCo or the elaborate office of the general manager. The customers (in these cases, the actor re-presenting the real customer) is given a private tour of the hotel, and a show of HotelCo’s most elaborately staged rooms such as the Presidential room, or the Royal Suite<sup>6</sup>. These rooms, interestingly called the “show rooms,” are showcased to the actors representing the customer. As the director of Front Desk was showing me the Royal Suite, she mentioned:

“The actual room number in the [computer] system is 4225.  
It is not like, ‘Where is the royal suite?’ There is no real  
Royal Suite. We don’t sell this suite, unless we have to, for  
that big, big VIP guest or whatever. We always go through

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<sup>6</sup> The Royal Suite is a multi-room suite, approximately three times larger than other suites at HotelCo. It is staged and decorated completely differently: with luxury marbles bathrooms, separate showers rooms and bathtubs, a living room with an eight-seat dining table, drawings and paintings commissioned by local artists, as well as a technologically equipped study-room.

the General Manager to sell the room. Because this [suite] is ideally used as a show room so that the sales person can bring up the customer and they can say: ‘look, this is where your president can stay ... this is where your CEO can stay, when your group chooses to stay with us.’”

In summary, the agreement Act is played out in multiple scenes on multiple stages. The play is about exposition, i.e., showcasing accommodation at HotelCo. Whether the scenes are performed on the Internet, over the phone, or in person, there are actors (human or non-human entities) that perform the act of re-presenting HotelCo in the agreement Act. The Act ends when there is a reservation, an agreement between HotelCo and customer, and an artifact (a document) depicting the agreement is produced. While these scenes are played out on these stages, the ways at which accommodation is re-presented are different. On one extreme, on third-party websites (e.g., Hotwire), HotelCo accommodation is re-presented only by a symbol (4 out of 5 stars). The role of this symbol is to signify the abstract and stylized images of accommodation at HotelCo. On the other extreme, on the physical stages, the scenes are played out by human actors re-presenting HotelCo. There, accommodation is “shown” — for real — to the customers or to a representative of the customer. However, what is shown to the customer is another abstraction of accommodation in time (experienced in a brief interaction), and space (experienced in an interaction with a carefully staged setting, e.g., a room, the lounge or the pool). In all scenes in Act 1, however, what is to be exchanged — that is, accommodation at HotelCo — is re-presented in an artifact, a reservation document, with abstract terms.<sup>7</sup> What is covered and masked in all of this Act is the reality of accommodation that potentially unfolds during the customers’ interaction with HotelCo.

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<sup>7</sup> Here, I invite the reader’s attention to multiple meanings of the term “term”; i.e., a group of words signifying something, a period of time, conditions with regards to an agreement.

## 4.3 Act 2: Arrival

The second Act of interaction between HotelCo and customers occurs when customers enter the hotel premises and formalize the exchange. The arriving customers, who already have a negotiated agreement with HotelCo, are now considered “guests” and are referred to as such in all subsequent interactions. In this Act, typically referred to as the “check-in,” the guests and HotelCo review the terms of the exchange as set out in the reservation agreement. HotelCo then offers accommodation; in return, the guest provides payment assurance. The arrival Act takes place on two stages: the entrance and the reception area. To shed light on the arrival Act and these stages, below I provide detailed dramaturgical analysis of the above interactions. I describe the performances on the frontstages, the actors involved, and the roles they play.

### 4.3.1 The Entrance Scene

#### 4.3.1.1 The doormen

Earlier, in the doormen examples, I described the setting, the front, staged at the entrance. I also highlighted some of the drama that unfolds in their act. For instance, the role of the doorman is to offer courtesy and greetings, and provide assistance with their luggage. For this, the doormen are staged outside the entrance, rather stationary as they “guard” the door. Their role involves assisting the guests with lifting and carrying the luggage from the car (or taxi) to the door. In return, sometimes the guests give tips (a gratuity) for the assistance provided by the doormen. However, as a veteran doorman (with more than 30 years of experience at HotelCo) explained, these types of social exchanges have changed:

“In the past, when I first started here, there were no wheels under the luggage. Helping them out with heavy luggage was really appreciated and we would collect good tips by the end of the shift. Now, they yell at us and say: ‘let me do it myself, I will take it from here.’ Or, don’t even say: ‘thank you.’ Sometimes the nice ones want to tip, but they don’t know the rituals and they don’t do the handshake tip [when the guests extend handshakes with a folded bill in

their palms]. There was a guest yesterday who pulled out a 20 and asked if I had change for it.”

#### 4.3.1.2 The valet

The primary role of the valet is to provide parking assistance to those guests arriving with their own car. The valet either provides guests with directions to parking, or takes the guests' cars to the parking themselves. As I have observed, guests often inquire about the parking rate at HotelCo before making a decision whether to self-park or use the valet services. The valet staff inquire whether the guests are part of a large group or a conference before offering the standard \$30 rate per day (special rates, either higher or lower, apply to different individual guests or groups). Once the guest decides to use the valet services, a ticket stub is given to the guest in exchange for the car key. The guest is then instructed to hand the ticket stub to the reception desk. The valet staff then take the car to HotelCo's parking. For some guests, however, as a favour, the valet drives the car to an in-house car wash before parking it.

#### 4.3.1.3 The Bellhops

As opposed to the doormen and valet, the bellhops are staged inside the hotel, by the entrance, and are less stationary as they travel to other areas of the hotel, most notably while carrying luggage to the guests' rooms. Nevertheless, their performance in welcoming and assisting the guests is also affected by similar changes described above. For instance, since for most guests the check-in time begins at 3:00 PM, the bellhops provide storage and protection of luggage to early arriving guests until they return to HotelCo after the check-in time. Some guests, mostly those with just a carry-on, carry their luggage around until the check-in time. Or, in another example, many guests insist taking the bell-carts to their rooms themselves and not use the bellhops' services. However, one bellman mentioned he had found a work-around for this “problem”: he tells the guests that for safety purposes only he can operate the bell-cart.

### 4.3.2 The Reception scene

The reception stage at HotelCo, commonly referred to the “check-in” area, is set in a wide corridor leading to a back row of check-in counters. Aisle stanchions and line dividers separate the corridor into two columns; the left side (a red carpeted aisle) leads to two check-in counters reserved for high status guests.<sup>8</sup> The right side (which has no carpets) leads to six check-in counters serving other guests. On both sides of the stanchions, guests wait in lines (queues) to be served by the check-in agents. In some cases, however, especially during peak arrival hours (between 3:00 PM and 7:00 PM) the lines are quite long, and customers often wait up to 20 minutes before reaching the check-in counters. This delay and these lines are even more pronounced during weekends, conferences, festivals, or the New Year’s Eve celebrations. In these times, a manager of the check-in staff “works the lines.”<sup>9</sup> The role of this actor, in working the lines, is to give assurance that HotelCo is doing its best to check everyone in in a speedy fashion, and to instruct the guests to have their documents ready on hand.

The role of the “line worker” is also to usher the guests into the appropriate line — the left, carpeted line for high-status guests, and the right, uncarpeted one for others guests. To ascertain which of the guests should be lining on the left and which on the right, the “line worker” looks for signs or symbols of the guests’ status. The line worker does this either through conversations with individual guests, asking if the guest has already subscribed to HotelCo’s Elite Club,<sup>10</sup> or by simply looking for, literally, card-carrying members of the Elite Club.

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<sup>8</sup> More discussion high-status guests will be provided later.

<sup>9</sup> After a few weeks of being on site, I too was asked frequently to “work the lines.” I was instructed by the manager-on-duty to interact with guests, answer any questions they would have, and find out if they were “high status” guests.

<sup>10</sup> HotelCo’s Elite Club is a loyalty club that offers rewards and benefits to frequent guests of HotelCo or any of the participating hotel properties across the world.

Once the guest reaches a check-in pod, a large computer monitor mediates the face-to-face interaction between them and the check-in agent. The interactions at the check-in counter are aimed at formalizing the agreement, i.e., the reservation. Using the confirmation number, the role of the check-in agent is to recall the terms of the agreement as recorded in the reservation document. Given these terms, the role of the agent is to find and assign a room matching the description documented in the agreement. For instance, if the reservation reads as “Traditional, Non-Smoking, King bed,” the role of the agent is to search a database and find an available traditional room with a king bed. The role of the guest is to reveal their identity and provide payment assurance. In return, the check-in agent repeats the price to the individual guest (quietly, so other guests cannot hear), produces a key to the assigned room, and wishes the guests a “nice stay.” The arrival Act ends when the guest is given the key and is directed to the elevators leading to their room.

The above interaction scenes, as they appear, are the “fronts” of the dramaturgical performance played out on the reception stage: the guest queues in line, walks up to the check-in counter, provides identification and/or the reservation number; the check-in agents assigns a matching room, with a key, in exchange for payment assurance. The scenes, however, are more involved and more dramatic than they show. There are three things at play in the above scenes. First, because — as discussed earlier — the interactions are relational and social in nature, the role of the check-in agent involves a serious effort in distinguishing the status of the individual on the other side of the counter, as a guest at HotelCo. Put differently, part of the performance is about making the interactions relational and social. Second, because in these scenes, accommodation is re-presented symbolically (signified as a “room”) the status of the signified accommodation is at play here.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, what is also at play here is the “formal” exchange of accommodation for money; “formal” in the sense that it is both an actual explicit exchange (there is, literally, an exchange of a thing versus another), and in a

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<sup>11</sup> Ironically, the room itself is also symbolically re-presented either by an access key or by some arbitrary identifiers such as the room number (e.g. 3217) or by a name (e.g., the Presidential Room, or the Royal Suite).

sense that is marked by a ceremonial form. As a result, the agreement that was set the previous Act, played out on a different stage, is now “formalized.” Therefore, the status of the agreement is also at play.

In the following sections, given the above characteristics of the performance of the check-in agents, I highlight the drama that unfolds in these scenes on the reception stage. Specifically, I bring light to the status of the guest, status of the room, and the status of the agreements at play.

#### 4.3.2.1 Status of the guests

Part of the interaction at the reception is to identify the status of the guest — that is to establish the social and relational parameters of the interactions. As I observed, almost invariably, the check-in agents’ first order of interaction is to identify the customer, i.e., to distinguish the customer as a known guest and to recall their history of interactions with HotelCo. In many cases, the guests are already known personally to the check-in agents (as an example, check-in agents all know Ms. Michelle). However, when unidentified or new customers walk up to the counter, upon handing over their personal identifiers (either the unique reservation number or their government-issued ID), the agents first and foremost look for their names. And only then, the agents look up the guests up in the historical database, discovering any past interactions with HotelCo, in order to establish the parameters of the current interaction. Only after identifying the guest, the agents begin the ritual of “welcoming” the guest and initiating the check-in process.

Beyond the guest’s identity, what is also at play is their history of interactions with HotelCo. If the guest is already known to HotelCo (either personally by the agent, or as prompted by the computer database), the agent recalls their past interactions with the help of the guest’s database “profile”: a snapshot of historical interactions with the guest as recorded in abstract form in the computer database. The guest’s “profile” informs the agent of the guest’s past visits, last negotiated rates, and any issues or problems encountered during their previous stays at HotelCo. For instance, a part of the “profile” of a guest, Mr. Eric B., would read:



“Eric B. is a partner at ConsultingCo. As of [date] 10 stays at HotelCo. Must stay in room 3739. RATE=369.00”

The “profile” of the guest also captures known special requests or preferences, examples of which are outlined in Table 4.1. For instance, a segment of the “profile” of Mr. Rahul, highlighted in Table 4.1, indicates his preference for down feather pillows, king size beds, upper floor rooms, and the Wall Street Journal.<sup>12</sup>

**Table 4.1: Samples of guest preferences as show in HotelCo’s computer system**

Guest ID	Guest Name	Attention & Remarks:
xxx794	Rahul W.	FD: DPL, K, UPR, WAS HSK: Extra slippers + prefers cotton bedding
xxx915	Colin S.	FD: Guest broke ankle while snowboarding
xxxx713	Mike K.	FD: High floors away from elevators HSK: Must have a commode seat or raised toilet
xxxx739	Jaime E.	FD: guest had issues during last stay. Please make sure we WOW guest.
xxxx239	Kerry C.	FD: SVP. & COO AirlineCompany

Should the interaction be with a new guest, however, upon uncovering the guest’s reasons for seeking accommodations, the agent then presents information about the attributes of HotelCo that would meet the guest’s individual needs. For instance, in one interaction with a couple who were unknown to the hotel, I observed an agent rather suddenly begin describing the swimming pool, and the opening hours, as well as directions to the closest shopping centre where the guests could purchase swimwear. However, in the interaction with the next guest who was also unknown to the hotel, the same agent offered information on the Wi-Fi network instead of information about the swimming pool. In response to my inquiry how the agent modifies showcasing these attributes, he explained:

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix D for the list of “preference categories” marked in the database.

“[Judging from their home addresses] the previous couple was from Detroit. It looked like they were here on vacation. She was holding a straw hat and he was in plaid shorts. I figured they might like the pool. This guy [referring to the last interaction] was here on business. He was using his corporate credit card.”

In the cases of interacting with previously unknown guests<sup>13</sup>, the role of the agent includes offering the guest the opportunity to enroll in HotelCo’s loyalty program or the Elite Club. In fact, upon entering the ID of the guest into the computer system, a “pop-up screen” appears, informing the check-in agent that the person is not a member of the Elite Club. In response, the agent either suggests enrolment to the guest, or even enrolls them without asking. For instance, as I observed, Jack, a check-in agent, would normally say to the guest, “I have checked our systems and realized you are not in it. Can I enroll you in our loyalty program?” to which the guests’ answer was sometimes a sharp “no.” Conversely, instead of asking for permission, Victor, another check-in agent, simply uses the guests’ ID and address information to enroll them in the program and then telling them:

“I have checked you into a beautiful room with a great view. Let me also give you your loyalty number, on this card, so you can collect points, starting with this stay. You can read about other ways of collecting points in this brochure, or on our website.”

In addition to identifying the guest as a unique individual with a history of stays at HotelCo, the interactions at check-in counter are also organized around the “social status” of the guest. Some guests are categorized as high status and are interacted with accordingly. As an example, recall how “high status” guests are provided separate queues and lines, on a red-carpeted path, leading up to the check-in counters. Or in other

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<sup>13</sup> Approximately 10% to 15% of guests have no recorded history with HotelCo.

examples, consider the case of the senior executive of the South Korean automobile manufacturing visiting HotelCo. Although this guest had no prior history with HotelCo, and no one at HotelCo knew the Korean executive personally, the interactions at the reception scene were performed according to the guest's social status. There was, in fact, no need for the guest to line up, or to stand at the check-in counter. While he sat comfortably in a chair in a secluded area of the lobby, and was offered tea and refreshments, the general manager and the hotel manager socialized with his entourage. At the same time, the manager on duty performed the check-in process in a back office without the face-to-face interactions with the guest(s). Once the check-in was completed and the keys produced, the manager handed the keys to the hotel manager who escorted the guest (and his entourage) to his assigned room.

Of course, not all high-status guests appear with an entourage nor are they served refreshments during a private and personal check-in staged in the lobby. Consider other cases (such as Mr. Eric B., a partner at ConsultingCo, or Mr. Kerry C., the SVP & COO of the AirlineCompany as shown in Table 4.1) where the interaction scenes occur at the check-in counters as they normally do with other guests. Upon recognizing the status of the guest as a high-profile corporate officer, the check-in agents would upgrade the guests to a different room, or would [discreetly] inform the manager to send a gift basket to their room.

The two examples above show interactions with guests who arguably benefit from socially established high status, i.e., high-ranking officers of large corporations. Yet not all high-status guests at HotelCo have high status in society. Recall Ms. Michelle, a guest who is known to the employees (however, not a member of the Elite Club), who benefits from special status in the reception scenes. As I was informed by the check-in agents, instead of being assigned any available room, she is always assigned her preferred room(s) and receives gift baskets (the contents of which are not known to the check-in agents). Despite this high-status — celebrity-like — reception at HotelCo, her social status outside of the hotel is not known to the check-in agents. The opposite is also evident in the case where the social status of a guest, who was the head of a School of Management of a university in the United Kingdom, was not acknowledged during

check-in. This individual, who was travelling with his wife and three children, was denied a request to have two connecting rooms. He later wrote of his experience in an email to the General Manager:

“I had requested connecting rooms but we were told this would not be possible. When I asked to speak to a manager, the manager-on-duty came along and was rude, unsympathetic, walked away mid conversation and even suggested cancelling our booking... As someone who heads a Business School, I will be using HotelCo as an example of poor customer service with the many thousands of students that pass through our programmes each year.”

Overall, the above is an indication how the status of guests is at play in the reception scenes. The role of the agent involves identifying the status of the guests using what Goffman (1959, p. 37) calls “sign-vehicles” or “status symbols,” such as a straw hat, a corporate credit card, a pop-up screen, or a data artifact in the computer system. The identification of the guest status is organized around two fundamental forms. In one form, the individual status, the guest as an individual is recognized as a uniquely distinguished identity through their name. In the other, the categorical kind, the guests are assigned in one or more “social categories” (Goffman, 1983b, p. 3). These are the underlying dramas unfolding in the interaction scenes on the reception stage.

#### 4.3.2.2 Status of the Accommodation

The other drama that unfolds in the reception scene is related to the status of accommodation at the time of check-in. Although as seen, the interactions are relational and social, the story is still about accommodation at HotelCo and thus the interactions are about, and around, the exchange of accommodation for money. Yet since accommodation — as a phenomenological experience — does not have a tangible presence in the exchange, what is at play in these interactions is identifying the “thing” that is being

exchanged. That is, both the check-in agent and the guest are to recognize the status of accommodation as the object<sup>14</sup> of exchange.

Approximately 85% of arriving guests have previously stayed at HotelCo International, either at this particular hotel or one of the “sister properties” across the globe. As a result, these guests have some prior experience with (and thus an understanding of) “accommodations” at HotelCo. Therefore, what is present in the interactions with the check-in agent is their past experience and their accounts of what accommodation looks like. In my observations at the check-in counters, some of these guests bring these experiences to the interactions. For instance, guests might ask, “Can you give me the same room I stayed in before?” or “We would prefer a more quiet room this time.” These are not just limited to past experiences with the rooms; rather, other aspects of their experience of accommodation at HotelCo can also be present in the interactions. For instance, a guest asked, “Is Lily still working here? She was a very pleasant lady at the Front Desk.” Or another stated, “I had a difficult time parking my car in the usual underground spot. I had to drive around the block a few times to find another parking structure.”

In the above interactions, a past experience of accommodation is re-presented in the scene as the guests recall aspects of their stays with HotelCo or HotelCo International. In other interactions, however, from the perspective of the guest, the status of accommodation at HotelCo is less familiar as the guest may not have had the experience of staying at HotelCo. Recall how in some scenes in Act 1 (agreement), the guests are shown staged accommodations at HotelCo. In these scenes, at the time of check-in, the agents give a tour of the hotel to the guests and in particular, show the rooms. This was exemplified in the cases of the Jacuzzi couple celebrating their wedding anniversary, or the walk-in customer who, after being shown many rooms, decided not to stay at HotelCo. In these scenes, accommodation is re-presented in a show of the hotel including the rooms. Note that what is shown and presented as accommodation to the guests is not

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<sup>14</sup> The term “object” here is also used with two meanings: a) the tangible thing at the centre of the exchange, b) the end towards which the interactions are directed.

a perfect reflection of accommodation in the sense of the phenomenological experience or the varied intangible concepts associated with complex interactions between HotelCo and the guests. What are actually shown to the guests are produced physical stages, dramaturgically speaking, with all the proper props and dressed actors. What is masked, however, is the actual play (the performance) that unfolds on these stages. Nevertheless, accommodation is re-presented as the physical stage of the hotel, and most notably as a staged hotel room.

In other interactions, as compared to the above, there is no past or present experience with “accommodations” at HotelCo. Rather, accommodation is merely re-presented symbolically in abstract forms. When there is prior experience, or when there is no show involved, accommodation is merely re-presented as what is recorded on the reservation or confirmation document, e.g., “Traditional, Non-Smoking, King bed.” As I have observed in agent-guest interactions, guests often inquire about the status of accommodations. Questions such as “Which way is the room facing? Is there a fridge available? Is Wi-Fi available? How far from the elevators is this room? What are the swimming pool hours? Is there a curling iron in the room? Can we access the lounge? Is there a safe in the room?” are examples of those asked by the guests in these scenes, to establish the status of the accommodations at HotelCo. To summarize, part of the drama that unfolds in the reception scenes is about the status of the object of exchange, i.e., “accommodation.” Dramaturgically speaking, from the perspective of the guests, the story of accommodation can be related to a prior experience or performance, a preview of the performance, or a mere abstract of what the performance will entail.

At the time of check-in, part of the role of the agent is to make accommodation the object of the exchange. From the perspective of the agent, accommodation is symbolically re-presented by a numbered room. Therefore, the object of exchange is an available numbered room that matches the parameters or description set out in the agreement or reservation. For instance, if the reservation reads as “Traditional, Non-Smoking, King bed,” the role of the agent is to find an available room that meets these requirements. Or, as discussed above, with the guest requesting a particular room, the role of the agent is to find either that very room, or one similar to it. As a result, for the check-in agent, there

are two things at play: a) identifying the status of the room in its characteristics; and b) identifying the status of the room in its availability.

To identify the status of the room, the agents rely on the computer system as a “sign-vehicle” (Goffman, 1959, p. 37). Similar to the guest profile, the computer system also records a room profile, i.e., a descriptive account of the room (including information on its layout, floor level, location, and type of beds). For instance, the profile of the room identified as 3217 is a traditional room, on the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor (the first two digits indicate the floor number) midway down the hallway (the last two digits indicate approximate how far from the elevators the room is), with one king-sized bed (written as “1K” in the profile). The numbering scheme also allows the agents to know which direction the room is facing (thus what the view would be). As I was informed, the room numbers ending with odd numbers face the south side (thus have the skyline view) and room numbers that end with even numbers face the north side (and view the park). This logic only holds, however, if the last two digit are less than 50; otherwise, the room has a special layout (e.g., with a balcony, or facing the courtyard) that requires further investigation. In a sense, the room identifier (the four digit number) is a symbol that signifies some stable characteristics of the room and thus the “accommodation.”

The check-in agents also rely on this computer system to identify the status of room availability. At any moment, any room could be occupied by existing in-house guests, recently vacated by a guest though not yet cleaned and remade by Housekeeping, out of service (for maintenance reasons), temporarily blocked for various reasons, or vacant and clean and ready to be assigned. The real-time status of the rooms are maintained by the Housekeeping department as they keep a record on the computer system (more on this later). Therefore, relying on this system — in particular, a computer query of the status of 1400 rooms — the agents identify an available room as an object of exchange.

In conclusion, the above shows how the status of accommodation at HotelCo is at play in the reception scenes. Similar to the status of the guests, the identification of the status of accommodation is organized around two forms. On the one hand, the unique status, accommodation is identified and re-presented with a unique distinguished identity

through a symbol (the room number). On the other hand, the categorical kind, the rooms are then assigned in one or more “available” categories. In the reception scenes, this is the underlying drama that unfolds regarding the object of exchange between HotelCo and the guests.

#### 4.3.2.3 Status of the Agreement

The third drama that unfolds in the reception scene is related to the status of the exchange agreement. In the scenes in Act 1 (agreement), particularly those played out on the Internet or on the telephone, the interactions were about the agreement of future exchanges of accommodations for money. At the end of the Act, artifacts — “reservations,” in the form of documents identified by confirmation numbers — were produced that signified the agreement between HotelCo and the guest. The artifacts themselves represented the terms of the exchange (e.g., Figure 4.2).

Ironically, although the reservation document signifying the agreement between HotelCo and the guest is considered a “confirmation,” the status of the agreement at the time of check-in is not always confirmed. In many instances, what was promised by HotelCo in the agreement Act, cannot be upheld at the time of check-in. Consider the following examples of many similar instances I observed during check-in interactions.

First, there are many instances where the type of “confirmed” accommodation may not be available. For instance, the reservation signifies a “Traditional, Non-Smoking, 2 Double Beds” room, but at the time of check-in, no room matching these descriptions is available. In another instance, during check-in, a guest discovers that the outdoor swimming pool — as shown on the website — is closed for maintenance purposes. Another discovers that the tiles in the spa are being replaced and because of this, the spa is closing early that evening.

Second, there are instances in which what is signified in the agreement, in particular what describes accommodation at HotelCo, does not match its reality in the reception scenes. For example, at the time of check-in during a summer festival, a father in a family of four guests visiting from the UK expresses his frustration about his check-in experience:



“We’ve spent fully 45 minutes waiting to check in. There is effectively a night club in the hotel lobby with all the loud music and the crowd. It is noisy, busy and impossible to make calls that I hoped to make back to the UK. We were not aware that our stay is coinciding with this festival.”

For this guest, and many similar to him, neither waiting 45 minutes in line, nor the “night club” ambience in the lobby matched the description of accommodation that HotelCo represented in the agreement Act. In other examples, prices or rates are another instance of discrepancies between what is signified in the agreement and the reality of the deal at the time of check-in. As recounted by one of the check-in agents, one guest complained about the security deposit requested by the check-in agent: “Nowhere on the [Hotwire] website says you were going to block off a \$300 security deposit on my credit card.” The check-in agent further explained, “This women drove me crazy. She was paying \$50 on her debit, \$50 on visa, \$5 on this, \$5 on that. She was short \$25 and couldn’t get it from anywhere. She finally called her friend to bring \$25!”

In general, in the above cases what was initially promised in the agreement between HotelCo and the customer was, for various reasons, not upheld at the time of check-in. In other words, the reality of accommodation as presented in the reception scenes did not match the reality of accommodation as signified by the artifacts (e.g., website texts and photos, or the confirmation document). What is at play in these scenes is the status of the exchange agreement. Thus the drama that unfolds in these interactions is about the status of the agreement.

Therefore, part of the role of the agent in these instances, is to re-establish the status of the agreement. As such, as I have observed, there are multiple reactions available. First, the check-in agent might offer a substitution such as, “We are currently sold out of the room type you had requested. I can offer you a king [room] instead.”<sup>15</sup> Although the

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<sup>15</sup> While being “sold out” is the reason provided to the guest, in reality there are many other possible reasons some of which are not known to the check-in agents. Of course,

alliterative option could be of equal price (for example, a “Traditional 2 Double Beds” and a “Traditional 1 King bed” might, for those dates, be at the same price), the guests may have different evaluations of the new accommodations. As an example, in response to the above offer of equal price (one king bed instead of two doubles), two male friends would not accept the new accommodations as they refuse to sleep in the same bed. Second, the check-in agent might offer a gift in the form of an “upgrade” — that is, alternative accommodations of higher price, such as: “We are currently sold out of the room type you had requested. But I have managed to upgrade you to a suite with 2 Queens.” Third, in a similar manner, the agent might “compensate” with gift giving (Mauss, 1954), vouchers or rebates. As an example, the guest(s) may be offered complimentary breakfast, free Wi-Fi, free parking, or loyalty points that could be redeemed in future at other HotelCo International properties. In rare cases, the agent might “comp” the guest: provide a complimentary stay.

What is evident in such performances is the maintenance of the exchange relationship. The emphasis here is less on the script of the agent’s performance or how, and in what situations, the agent would react to the discord between the reserved and the reality of “accommodation.” Rather, the emphasis is on the observation that there is a reaction to the discord and the role of the agent in re-establishing the status of the exchange relationship. In short, in the arrival Act, in the reception scene, the story is also about the status of the agreement. What is also at play here is the “formal” exchange between HotelCo and the guest. This is “formal” as it relates to the form of accommodation being exchanged. Thus part of the drama is about the conformity (e.g., agreement in form) of the reality of accommodation present at the time of reception with the accommodation re-

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one reason is indeed being sold out; since there are limited supply of particular room types, those who had checked in earlier might have already been assigned all available “Traditional, Non-Smoking, 2 Double Beds.” Another reason is that existing guests occupying these rooms have either not checked out or have extended their stay. Mechanical problems (plumbing, HVAC) or pest control procedures could also temporarily be making particular rooms unavailable.

presented in the agreement Act. It is also ‘formal’ as it relates to the formalities of social rituals of exchange relationships, in particular, reciprocity and gifts (Mauss, 1954).

#### 4.4 Act 3: Accommodation

This Act begins when the guest uses his key to enter the assigned room, and it ends when the guest leaves the room at the end of the agreed term of accommodation. Recall that the performance in the first Act (the agreement) is about attracting the customer: HotelCo presents “accommodations” to customers and negotiates the terms of the exchange. The performance in the second Act (the arrival) is about making unknown individuals (customers) known guests, in addition to “formalizing” the exchange. The performance in the third Act, however, is about accommodation as experienced by the guests. Earlier, I illustrated various instances of accommodation as experienced by various guests: a “home –away –from –home” for the Christmas tree father, a place to be romantic for the Jacuzzi couple, a hangout for the New Year’s Eve partygoers, a shelter for the victims of the winter storm, a dormitory for the conference attendees, an arena for those who wish to show off in public, a hideout for those who wish to do private things and things in private, and a care facility for those who wish to rest, etc. All in all, the performance in the third Act is to accommodate (the verb) various instances of accommodation (the noun). Put differently, dramaturgically speaking, there are two dramas unfolding in the performance in scenes in this Act: 1) setting and maintaining the physical stage for accommodation to be experienced by the guests, and 2) accommodating various needs of the guests.

##### 4.4.1 The frontstage of Accommodation

Compared to the arrival Act, where the performances are staged at the entrance of HotelCo and in the reception area, the performances in the accommodation Act are staged on many fronts. Dramaturgically speaking, HotelCo, as a large physical arena, has been bracketed, spatially, into different frontstages on which these performances occur. The key to note is the role of the markers, or frames, that bracket a space into a frontstage (Goffman, 1974, p. 252). Consider the HotelCo lobby, for instance, which is a space separated from the outside (e.g., the motorcade area), the reception area, the business

centre, the cafe, and the elevator banks. Although these spaces are connected (indeed, they are arguably all in one area), certain markers, signs or brackets distinguish one stage from the other. The entrance door, including the large “Welcome” floor-mat, bracket the lobby from the outside; likewise, a sign hanging from the ceiling that reads “Reception” brackets the lobby from the “reception” stage. More subtle signs also distinguish “lobby” as a stage: background music is heard only in the lobby area. (Perhaps the reverse is true: the space becomes “lobby” when one hears the music.)

The lounge at HotelCo is another example of how a space is marked by signs and brackets. The physical area is on the top floor of the building, at the end of a hallway with hardwood floors<sup>16</sup>. The lounge is enclosed by glass windows and doors in a way that one can see the inside while standing in the hallway. What marks the boundary of the lounge, however, is a single pod— a counter —attended by a single uniformed hotel employee. The role of this employee is, literally and metaphorically, the gatekeeper of the lounge. As I observed, by assessing the status of the guests (using the key card assigned to the guest’s room), the attendant either grants permission or restricts access to the lounge. In essence, while for the most part all the activities in the lounge are visible to those outside, the lounge — as a stage reserved for high-status guests — is marked and bracketed by a gate and a gatekeeper. For that, the lounge itself becomes a restricted “backstage” with reserved access for the private performance of high-status guests.<sup>17</sup>

The markers, or frames, that bracket the space as a stage are more evident (and perhaps taken for granted) for a hotel “room.” Marked and signed hallways separate the hotel rooms from other spaces of the hotel. A hotel “room” is bracketed by walls and a door, marked by a four-digit number (the identifier). This sign (and not the door) brackets a

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<sup>16</sup> The hardwood flooring itself marks the distinction of this hallway from other hallways at HotelCo, for instance, the carpeted ones leading to guest rooms, or the concrete-floor hallways at the back of the main entrance where the valet and the doormen rest.

<sup>17</sup> Or perhaps, the status of the guests is marked by whether they land inside or outside of this bracketed stage.

hotel room from the hallway, and the hallway from other bracketed rooms, with identical doors, such as the door to the janitor's closet. In a sense, the physical stages on which the accommodation Act is performed are spatially bracketed and categorized from HotelCo's arena at large. The lobby, restaurants, bars, the gym, the spa, the business centre, conference halls, and the hotel rooms are all spatially bracketed frontstages. For each frontstage, however, there are keys, clues, cues and markers (a welcome mat, background music, a four-digit number, a hanging sign) that frame the space, and consequently the activities performed in that space.

While all these fronts are the stages on which the accommodation Act is performed, in the sections that follow I particularly focus on the hotel room. As seen in earlier Acts, hotel rooms symbolically re-present accommodation at HotelCo; they are the private spaces in which the guests get to perform, and experience, their own meaning of "accommodation." In the sections that follow, I provide a dramaturgical analysis of the accommodation performances as they are played out in the hotel rooms. I focus on the performance of the rooms, and those maintaining the rooms (i.e., the housekeepers). Following that, I highlight the "accommodating" scenes as played out in other arenas.

#### 4.4.2 The Hotel Room scene

The stylized image of a 'room' at HotelCo is a bracketed private space, equipped with bed(s), desk(s), furniture, a TV, and some artistic decorations. Every room also contains an ensuite bathroom, towels, and other bath-related amenities. In fact, this stylized image is akin to the ones presented on HotelCo's website (see Figure 3.6, for example). While the above, at an abstract level, captures a typical image of any of the 1400 rooms at HotelCo, in reality, as experienced by the guests, every room is different in space and in time.

The spatial differences are based on characteristics including size, layout, level, and view. Rooms at HotelCo range from 300 up to 1500 square feet in size; the Royal and the Presidential suites are three to four times larger than other rooms. Because of the variations in size, the rooms are laid out differently as well. Some are laid out in a compact manner where the bed(s) and the working area are only a few feet away, while

others are more spread out and more roomy (no pun intended) in the living or the working areas. The layout of the room is also a function of the size of the bed(s) in the room. At HotelCo, bed sizes follow standard North American mattress sizes (full or double, queen, and king). Nevertheless, a compact room (approximately 300 square feet) could have either a king bed, or a double bed. Likewise, a larger room (approximately 520 square feet) could have either a king, queen, or two double beds. The layout of the rooms also varies based on the size, location, or the design of the ensuite bathroom. For instance, a spa suite at HotelCo could have an open-concept Jacuzzi bathtub within feet of the bed (Figure 4.3). Levels and views are two other spatial dimensions that mark room distinctions. There are more than 36 levels of rooms with several different views or lookouts (northern view, southern skyline, garden view, pool view, and the corner lookouts).

**Figure 4.3: A spa suite at HotelCo**



Also, as discussed in earlier sections, the rooms are staged and decorated differently. Recall the brown “cigar-themed” carpets with black leather loveseats, versus the bright coloured carpets with red velvety loveseats. The beds in the rooms are also set up differently. Some beds are boxed, while some are metal framed. As I was observing the work of a housekeeper preparing a room, she explained how some beds (approximately 20%) were metal framed, which made cleaning under the bed easy. The boxed beds were heavier and more difficult to clean, as they had to be pushed to the side. However, according to her, she needed to get on the floor and look under the metal-framed beds,

since occasionally guests forgot personal items that had rolled under the bed. She further explained how some rooms have different beddings. For instance, on the higher-level floors, the beds are made up with 100% cotton fitted sheets, whereas in the traditional rooms, they are made up with flat sheets in a 60/40 cotton blend. In addition, the beds on the higher-level floors are made with “triple sheeting,” where the beds have a sheet on top of the blanket, so all the guests touch are the sheets and not the blankets or duvets.

Overall, the above characteristics mark the differences in space. The layouts, sizes, levels, views, set-up, and beds distinguish each hotel room. Thus, while at an abstract level every room at HotelCo matches the stylized image painted earlier, in reality, each room is uniquely staged. Spatial differences, however, are not the only distinguishing characteristics. Every room at HotelCo, is also different from one point in time to another. For instance, the same housekeeper attendant explained how some rooms experience mechanical issues, particularly with the drain in the bathtub. On the same topic, the director of Housekeeping considered the most difficult aspect of maintaining the rooms to be the “hair problem” as hair would eventually clog the bathtub drain, causing it to drain slowly. As he explained:

“You talk to any executive housekeeper and you ask them the question, ‘Do you have a problem with hair in the room? They would say, ‘That is right, yes,’ if they are honest. Nobody has that solution for hair. We need new tub technology, or we need hairless guests. (Continuing jokingly) Just put a bottle of Nair (a hair removal product) in each guest room as an amenity, and say, ‘Please, the hotel recommends it.’”

In addition to plumbing, other aspects of the mechanical performance of hotel rooms include technology, noise, smell and other cleanliness issues. For example, one of the main performance differences of rooms is related to the TV. As the director of Housekeeping explained:

“Some TVs don’t get some of the channels. When the room attendants are dusting the TV, after two or three weeks of that, the cable (behind the TV) will just ease its way out. We are looking into getting the alligator clips. So no amount of movement will unwiggle that.”

With respect to noise, the role of an enclosed private room is to restrict outside sound disturbances and maintain a degree of quiet. Different rooms, however, perform this role differently at different times. For instance, between the hours of 8:00 AM and 6:00 PM during the month of August, a nearby construction site created sound disturbances. Some rooms were not able to block the drilling sounds, for instance. As a result, a few guests requested to be moved to a different room (perhaps on the opposite side of the building). However, not all noise disturbances are construction related. Recall the cases of loud neighbors (guests in other rooms), whether they were party-goers, or love-makers, or those who slammed the doors at 2:00 AM. Or recall the voice of the Housekeeping attendant knocking on some other guest’s room announcing her entrance: “Housekeeping ... good morning ... Housekeeping.” These occasional disturbances, and the performance of the room in restricting the disturbances, mark one of the differences between rooms at HotelCo. Of course, the same can be said about smell, for instance, when a guest expressed her experience with the room smelling like marijuana.

In summary, the performance of each bracketed and enclosed stage in the accommodation Act is different and distinct. On the one hand, these stages are as a unit considered hotel “rooms.” On the other, each is different in space and in time, and thus each interaction with the guest is different in space and in time.

#### 4.4.3 Keeping the Rooms

From a dramaturgical perspective, one drama that unfolds in the third Act is about maintaining the physical stage for “accommodation.” While the role of Housekeeping is, as the name suggests, “keeping the house” or the various frontstages at HotelCo, in this report I solely focus on the role of Housekeeping in keeping the hotel room as it represents accommodation at HotelCo.



Compared to those at the Front Desk, the role of the Housekeeping attendant does not involve face-to-face interactions with the guests. The Housekeeping attendants are “stationed” in the basement of HotelCo by the laundry facilities. Upon arriving at work through a private side entrance to the building, as they “clock in” their arrivals, the attendants change into their costumes, i.e., beige overalls, flat shoes, and white aprons. At the “station,” the house manager (the manager on duty in the Housekeeping department) distributes daily assignment sheets to the attendants; the assignments include lists of rooms to be attended to. On the assignment sheet, some rooms are marked with a star (\*) signaling an expected departure that day, and some are marked by two stars (\*\*) signaling an expected departure and arrival on the same day.

Upon receiving the daily assignments, the attendants equip their supply carts and travel to the assigned rooms. It is worthy to note the attendants are not physically present on the frontstages at HotelCo. At all times that I accompanied the attendants to their assignments, we travelled through the building using only the service elevators and staff corridors. In addition, we purposely avoided interactions with the guests. In fact, many of the room attendants at HotelCo do not speak English well. One of the attendants I met, who had more than 20 years of experience at HotelCo, was a person with hearing disability who could only communicate in American Sign Language. Nevertheless, in the rare occasions of face-to-face encounters with guests (nearly always in the hallways outside of the rooms), the attendants suffice with pleasantries as short as a “good morning.”

The attendants then follow the daily assignment sheet to perform their roles in attending and “making” the rooms. Occasionally, the house manager communicates either “rush orders” or “special requests” through radio communications or by dispatching a messenger (a “runner”). The “rush orders” are changes to the attending order of the rooms; for instance, 3217 must now be “made” immediately because a guest is about to be checked into that room. “Special orders,” however, change the arranged staging of the room. Recall the case of the divorced father for whom a Christmas tree was brought in from the lobby in order to stage the room as a “home-away from home.” Or recall the case of the Jacuzzi couple who rearranged the staged room with (electric) candles. Other

examples of “special orders” are when the guests have particular requests (e.g., a commode seat or raised toilet, extra slippers, or down feather pillows instead of foam pillows). In such cases, Housekeeping attendants arrange and re-arrange the staged room.

While these are examples of “rush orders” to re-stage the rooms, the more noticeable role of the attendants is when they “make up” the room for existing or future guests. With the interactions of the guests and the rooms, the staged arrangement of the rooms changes; and thus the role of the Housekeeping attendant is to return the room to its staged arrangement. As I observed the work of Housekeeping attendants, the changes to the rooms could be as routine as those done to the beds, to the bathrooms or bath amenities (towels, soap, etc.), and to the alarm clock (set for a particular hour). The changes could also be infrequent. For instance, during the New Year’s Eve celebrations, as described by the guests themselves, one guest in a party of four accidentally broke a beer bottle and injured himself. The blood from the injury stained the bed covers, part of the furniture and the carpets. The role of the Housekeeping attendant was then to return the room to its original staged arrangement by remaking the bed and replacing the furniture and deep cleaning the carpets.

To “make the room,” as explained in the training documents, the Housekeeping attendants follow a script known as the “ABC” of Housekeeping: “Away with the old (garbage), Bed, Cleaning (chemicals), Dusting, Everything in the bathroom, and Finishing the bedroom.” Despite this script and the defined roles, the performances of the Housekeeping attendants vary. As an example, in a complaint to a Housekeeping manager, one guest expressed his frustration that an attendant had disposed of his work-related papers. The attendant responded she had indeed thrown out papers, though she had only thrown out the garbage and “balls of crumbled papers.” In another example, the director of Housekeeping explained how there are four “deadly sins” of Housekeeping:

“Room attendants are shown — and will be shown again next month as we are doing a retraining of the ABC of Housekeeping to make sure that our room attendants understand — what clean is and what the expectation is,

and are held accountable to that expectation. There are four deadly sins of Housekeeping: hair in the bed linen, garbage or debris in the room, hair in the bathroom, and mold on the tiles.”

In a way, the performance of the Housekeeping attendant is contingent on a subjective understanding of “what clean is” or conversely what constitutes “garbage.” Therefore, to perform their roles, to “make the room” or to keep the (clean) status of the staged room, the Housekeeping attendants look for sign-vehicles or as Goffman suggests, “status symbols” (1959, p. 37). In essence, hair, garbage or debris, and mold, are symbols that signify the status of the room. As such, the role of the Housekeeping attendant is to attend to, and interact with, these symbols and signs. Of course, not all Housekeeping roles are performed as scripted. Recall the “hair problem.” As described by the director of Housekeeping, not all attendants can detect hair in the bed linen or in the bathroom. While pointing to an image in the training document (see Figure 4.4), the director of Housekeeping expressed his frustration with the attendants not always detecting hair in these two places.<sup>18</sup>

“The only thing I can tell [them] is to wear your glasses if you require them. Check your prescriptions so that you can see better as opposed to letting the guest discover the hair.”

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<sup>18</sup> In these images in the training document, note how hair is framed, literally and dramaturgically.

**Figure 4.4: The "hair problem" as shown in Housekeeping training manuals**



Nevertheless, once the performance of the attendant is completed, and the attendant deems the room as “made,” he or she uses the phone to “punch in a code” in HotelCo’s computer system signifying the status of the room. As I was told by a Housekeeping attendant, they enter “11” to indicate the room is “vacant clean” or “99” to indicate the room is “vacant dirty.”<sup>19</sup> The vacancy or occupancy status of the room is determined by visual inspections, using signs of the guest’s presence such as a suitcase or a toothbrush, as she suggested.

In summary, the role of the Housekeeping attendants involves identifying the status of the room using sign-vehicles or status symbols, such as one or two stars (\* or \*\*), garbage, debris, or hair. The identification status of the room is of two forms. In one form, the room attendant identifies the individual status of a room (as clean vs. dirty, vacant vs. occupied). In the other, the categorical kind of identification, the rooms are assigned to one or more categories in order of priority (e.g., rush vs. no-rush). Once the status of the room has been returned to its staged arrangement, as deemed by the Housekeeping attendant and as entered in the computer system, the room is then available for assignment to future guests.

#### 4.4.4 The Accommodating scene

The second drama that unfolds in the third Act is about accommodating various requests of the guests. Some of these requests are negotiated in earlier Acts, in particular prior to

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<sup>19</sup> If a room is neither “vacant clean” nor “vacant dirty,” by default it is deemed “occupied dirty.”

formalizing the agreement between HotelCo and the guest. Recall the case of the Accenture consultant who, at the time of check-in, inquired about an iPhone charger. Or other interactions at the reception scene when the check-in agents place a “special request” order for the guests’ needs for cotton bedding, down feather pillows, or commode seats. These “special requests,” made at the time of check-in, would then be picked up via the computer system by the house manager and subsequently communicated to the Housekeeping attendants. Many of these requests, however, are made in the third Act, i.e., once the agreement between HotelCo and the guest has already been formalized. Indeed, approximately 30% of the interactions I observed occurring at the reception stage were initiated by in-house guests making these requests<sup>20</sup>. To that extent, part of the drama in this Act is about HotelCo’s response to these improvised requests. In the examples below, I highlight three instances of such drama, i.e., begging, bickering, and bargaining.

#### 4.4.4.1 Begging

Although in Act 3, the terms of the exchange (accommodation for money) have already been formalized, some guests approach the reception area requesting “free” items, for example, personal items such as an umbrella, extra blankets, pillows, fresh towels, curling irons, toothbrush, medicine (e.g., Tylenol), nail polish remover, and shaving or sewing kits. Or, for instance, the guests might ask for assistance with car rentals, transportation, help with restaurant reservations, or directions to places nearby or in the city. All in all, there are series of interactions unfolding in this Act whose nature is requests initiated by the guests.

There are three characteristics worth noting of the interactions I observed at the check-in area: the object of interaction, the form of interaction and the boundary of interactions. The first is the object of the interaction, i.e., a request for a free “thing.” The guests, for instance, would ask for specific goods (either to consume, use or borrow) such as

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<sup>20</sup> Many of these requests are also made over the phone when the guest dials “0” for the reception desk.

medicine or blankets for the room. Likewise, they might ask for information about events in the city or directions to the subway station. Or the guest could ask for a service to be provided — a task to be performed — by the check-in agent; e.g., setting up a wake-up call, or exchanging foreign currency. In short, the interactions were requests for free items. As such, in these interactions, there was no mention of remuneration or expectation of payments of any sort.

The second characteristic of the interaction is the form of the request initiated by the guest. Consider the examples in Table 4.2 that I observed at the check-in area. The forms of requests the guests were making ranged in style from a command or a demand, to an inquiry or solicitation. From a dramaturgical perspective, Goffman suggests that implicit in speech, or forms of talk, is the condition (or obligation) that the guests render their requests understandably relevant to the social context of the interaction (Goffman, 1983a). For instance, formulating the request in a commanding or demanding fashion (such as “I’d like to have a wake-up call for 5:30 AM”) presupposes a social relationship of a service recipient and a provider. Likewise, formulating the request in an inquisitive way (e.g., “Do you have any medicine for headaches?”) presupposes a different social relationship — imagine the same question being asked in a commanding way. The point here is less about the ways the requests are made and more about the fact that they are formulated in various ways. The range of such formulations shows different presuppositions of the social relationships between the guests and the check-in agents.

The third characteristic of the interactions relates to the boundary of the requests, or what constitutes a “reasonable” request. This can be illustrated by the responses given to the guests’ requests. Consider the cases in Table 4.2 where the check-in agent denied the guests’ request. For example, in response to the guest’s request for medicine, the agent explains how they “could not” (for unspecified reasons) accommodate the request. Similarly, following a guest’s request for currency exchange, the agent later expressed her frustration to me:

“We are not a foreign exchange centre ... and I am certainly not going to do that out of my own pocket.”

Such denials of the requests presuppose a boundary for reasonable requests for free goods, information or services. Thus the requests falling within the boundaries of reason are, to some extent, associated with the presupposed roles played out in the interactions. In a way, arranging extra blankets or setting wake-up calls fall within the socially defined boundaries, or “occupational mandates” (Nelsen & Barley, 1997) of the role of the check-in agents. Conversely, handing out medicine falls outside such boundaries or socially accepted mandates (though, as I observed, providing Band-Aids and first aid items was within such boundaries). In a way, although the third Act, dramaturgically speaking, is about accommodating the guests, part of the drama in these scenes is about exploring the boundaries of the exchange and what might constitute “accommodation.”

**Table 4.2: Examples of guests' special requests**

<i>In a commanding fashion:</i>	
• Guest: “Can you send up extra blankets to room 2210, please?”	• Agent: “Of course.”
• Guest: “I’d like to have a wake-up call for 5:30 AM.”	• Agent: “I’ll set that up right away, sir. Enjoy your night.”
<i>In a demanding way:</i>	
• Guest: “Can I have an umbrella?”	• Agent: “No, sorry, Ma’am. There is a convenience store half a block away.”
• Guest: “How do I get to the metro [underground]?”	• Agent: “I’ll give you a map... hang on...”
<i>In a solicitous or inquiring way:</i>	
• Guest: “Could you exchange this [a Euro bill] into dollars, please?”	• Agent: “We can accept foreign currency but cannot exchange it for you. The closest bank is one block away. Would you like me to get you a map to there?”
• Guest: “Do you have any medicine for headaches?”	• Agent: “I am sorry sir, but we cannot give out medicine to our guests. You can ask the pharmacist in the mall. They should be open now.”
<i>In an exploratory fashion:</i>	
• Guest: “I almost missed my flight coming here; I was so rushed that I forgot my iPhone charger. Would you, by any chance, happen to have one I could borrow?”	• Agent: “I will be glad to find you one. I’ll have it sent to your room.”
• Guest: “I am not sure if you have the answer to this, but... is there anywhere nearby I can buy a nail polish remover? Somewhere that is open late? I have to join friends for dinner now but I was hoping to look for it after [dinner]...”	• Agent: “Let me check with the ladies at the back.”

#### 4.4.4.2 Bickering

In Act 3, the second form of interactions that occur are about the issues or problems with experiencing accommodation at HotelCo, as raised by the guests. I observed numerous occasions when customers would call the reception agents or walk to the check-in desks, stand in line, and complain about issues. Some guests would even approach anyone wearing a uniform and a name tag. The complaint interactions, ranged in content and form. For instance, one customer complained, “The whole floor smells like marijuana,” suggesting other guests in nearby rooms might be smoking. Another guest telephoned and complained about the TVs in the gym not working. Another raised the complaint, “The couple next room were very loud while making love.” Other examples include the case in the hot month of July when the air conditioning units at HotelCo were not functioning adequately; a few guests approached the reception area and complained about the heat.

Not all complains were about the performance of the physical stages of accommodation. In one incident, a visibly enraged guest described how he had missed his important business meeting since HotelCo<sup>21</sup> had failed to put through his request for a wake-up call. The actions of the enraged guest (loud speaking, almost yelling, and using profanity, for instance) created a “situation,” as Goffman would suggest (1959, p. 13). As such, the definition of the situation, or an event that is mutually observed, is marked by the guest’s enraged performance. In a way, the guest is putting on a show observed by many audiences: other guests waiting in the check-in line, other check-in agents, the concierge desk and the bellhops, who were all then involved in the situation. In another situation, an upset guest complained about the performance of the Housekeeping staff at HotelCo for having thrown out his work-related papers. This situation, however, occurred in the back room at the Front Desk area, in a room assigned for “handling angry guests.” Similarly, another guest complained about a bloodstain on the duvet. The situation occurred in the guest’s room, away from other audiences. However, rather than merely describing the

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<sup>21</sup> In this instance, this was a general reference to the organization and not an individual.



situation, the guest staged the event (the situation) by taking everyone to the side of the bloody bed in the room itself.

There are two forms of responses to these complaints and situations. First, facing these issues, the check-in agents (or the manager on duty) would perform acts aimed at addressing or repairing the issue. For example, when a guest complained about the heat, the agent reacted by sending the engineers to check out the AC unit in the room. In a similar heat-related instance, another agent offered to move the guests to a different room, one in which the air conditioning units were known to be working. Likewise, when the guest complained about the bloody duvet, the house manager ordered a complete replacement of the bedding. In all of these cases, the response also included repairing the relationship between HotelCo and the guests. The agents, the managers on duty, or the house manager offered rebates, discounts or other offers, such as free nights, loyalty points, free parking, or breakfast vouchers.

The second form of response is an effort to recover the exchange relationship when the issue itself is not, or cannot be, resolved. Consider the situation created by the enraged guest complaining about the missed meeting. In response to this incident, facing multiple audiences, the manager on duty simply apologized (“de-escalate the situation,” in his words) and offered to make the stay complimentary. The manager on duty invited the guest to his back office in order to make the “necessary changes to the account.” In a similar manner, when the guests were complaining about construction noise, the agent, in a low voice intended not to be heard by nearby guests, apologized and offered discounts or rebates:

“We are sorry about the noise. It is not in our control to stop the construction. To compensate for your disturbance, I will add 5000 loyalty points to your account.”

There is a limit, however, to the effort of recovering the exchange relationship. Recall the case of the guest complaining about loud neighbours making love. In response, the manager on duty offered to extend the customer’s check-out time from 12:00 PM to 4:00 PM, so the complaining guest could sleep later. The guest, however, did not accept this

offer and insisted on being compensated with two nights of free stay. In the end, the manager on duty offered one free night, instead of two, yet the guest chose not to accept and suggested he would like to talk to the general manager. The manager on duty entered a note on the computer profile of the guest:

“gst complain about noise. Offered 1 free nite. Wanted 2 instead.”

Immediately after the phone conversation was over, I inquired how the manager on duty chose to respond to such complaint. Pointing to the profile of the guest on the computer screen, she replied,

“Look ... he’s a transient guest on a Hotwire rate. I’m not gonna give him two free nights only because he heard some noise. Let him write to the GM.”

In all of the above cases, HotelCo actors do not publicly question the sincerity of the complaint during the face-to-face interaction. In most cases, what is raised by the guest is taken for real (e.g., the construction noise complaints). However, in some cases (as evident in the loving-making noise issue), and only in the backstage area, the actors would privately question the validity of the guests’ concerns. Consider the case of the bloody duvet. After the incident, once everything was resolved for the guest, in the privacy of his office, the House Manager explained to me:

“The blood was so fresh, you could tell [it was her own blood]! But she was complaining, and I can’t tell the guest she is lying. I gave her free parking for her stay. She was happy and she left.”

Similarly, in the marijuana case, once I, questioned the validity of the complaint in the back offices of the reception area, the manager on duty responded:

“It doesn’t matter, she is complaining. We *did* [emphasis added] handle the issue. We moved her to a different room,

we did send the security guy and we even comped<sup>22</sup> her. What else did she want us to do? This is a hotel, we can't search people [for marijuana] before they go up to their rooms.”

In short, in responding to these concerns, the agents appear sincere in front of the guest, yet they might express their cynicism behind the scenes. In addition, whether the agent is sincere or cynical depends on his or her read of the situation. For the house manager, the apparent freshness of the blood signified the dishonesty of the complaint. Similarly, the computer-prompted signals of “transient, Hotwire” guest framed the response of the manager on duty. In a way, the performances of the HotelCo actors are, at times, apparent responses to the criticisms raised by the guest. Therefore, the drama is about the read of the situation and the objective of repairing the exchange relationship.

#### 4.4.4.3 Bargaining

The last form of interactions that occur in Act 3 are about renegotiations of the terms of the exchange. Here, the guests request modifications to the existing parameters of the agreement set with HotelCo. The guests might request extending or shortening the initially agreed terms of their stay. Or they might request an upgrade to a different type of room. In these scenes, similar to the ones outlined in the previous form of interactions, the “accommodating” response of the HotelCo actor is dependent on their read of the situation. Consider the following two sets of interactions I encountered at the reception area. During a busy stretch of days at HotelCo (approaching the tourism months of the summer), a guest approached the reception area and asked for a two-night extension of her stay. The responding agent asked the guest to wait while he checked with the manager. I followed the agent to the back area of the reception where the manager was. The conversation between the agent and the manager unfolded as follows:

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<sup>22</sup> To “comp” a guest is a terminology used at HotelCo that indicates compensating for the guest’s stay, or in effect, making it free.

Agent: “The guest in 2717 wants to stay for two more nights. She’s a gold member of the Elite Club. I’ve already checked the house count [forecast numbers]; we are at 85% [occupancy]. Can we do it?”

Manager-on-duty: “Let me check what rate she’s at. (The manager entered the computer account of the room 2717 to check the rate. The system displayed \$409.29) Okay... I don’t think we can get a walk-in at a higher rate than this. Give it [the extension] to her. But don’t move her to another room.”

The second set of interactions occurred during a summer festival weekend. Two young male guests sharing the same room approached the manager on duty (and I) in the lobby of the hotel. The guests inquired about an upgrade to a suite because they wished to bring two other friends in their room to “have a party.” The manager on duty asked the guests to wait while he “checked with the system.” We travelled to the back offices of the Front Desk reception area. The manager on duty had a brief chat with an agent about another guest, then checked his email on his Blackberry. He did not check the system. He walked back to the lobby and responded to the guests:

“The only available suite would be an extra \$209 per night.”

The guests did not accept the offer and walked away. Later that day I inquired how the manager on duty had made the choice because he, as we both knew, had not looked up the price in the system, as he had said to the guests. His answer below highlights his read of the situation in responding to the guests’ request:

“I just gave them a high price since I didn’t want them to take the room. I did not want them to ‘trash’ my suite. You saw them, didn’t you? They looked they were heavy partiers.”

In these interactions, while the story is about renegotiation of the terms of the agreement, the agents (or the managers on duty) respond to the guests' requests according to their read of the situation. In the first set of interactions, their read of the situation, or the reality in which the request is framed, is signified by clues and cues such as the "house count," the "gold" status of the guest's membership with the Elite Club, and the displayed rate in the computer system, as well as other thematic events occurring (e.g., the busy tourism months). In the second set, the read of the situation is informed by the guests' appearances as framed by the manager on duty. The emphasis here is less about the accuracy of his read of the situation. Quite possibly the two guests could have held a party without "trashing the suite." The emphasis is on the fact that in these interactions, the actors' responses are based on their read of the situation given the clues, cues or other sign-vehicles. What is also interesting is the framing of the responses given by HotelCo actors. Their performance is an indication of "impression management" (Goffman, 1959, p. 132) to maintain the apparent relationship between HotelCo and the guests. The performance the agents put on — for example, the manager on duty's act of going to the back office to "check with the system," — is intended to impress upon the guests the realness, and the sincerity, of the "only available suite" being \$209 extra per night. The sincerity of this performance or the authenticity of the response given by the manager on duty can only be questioned when one (e.g., I, the social observer, or you, the reader) has been given backstage access to the secrets of this performance. Consequently, in this exposition of the secret of the manager on duty's performance, what becomes apparent is "impression management" or the intent to maintain the relationship between HotelCo and the guests.

#### 4.5 Act 4: Au revoir

This last Act of interactions between HotelCo and the guests begins when the guests leave their assigned rooms to end their accommodation at HotelCo. In this Act, typically referred to as the "check-out," the guests and HotelCo complete the formal exchange. The drama that unfolds in this Act is about the guests' critique and evaluation of their experience of accommodation at HotelCo. It is also about HotelCo's responses to such critiques and the effort to maintain the long-term social aspects of the exchange

relationship. The scenes in this Act are played on multiple frontstages. In what follows, I describe these stages and settings from a dramaturgical perspective, the actors involved, and the overarching drama that unfolds in this Act.

#### 4.5.1 The Departure Scene

In a simplified image of the departure scenes, the guests return the key and render the promised payments to HotelCo. These scenes are either performed on the reception stage, with face-to-face interactions, or on the Internet stage, performed via emails and automatic credit card processing applications. A more dramatic image of the departure scenes, however, captures the interactions in which the guests critique or evaluate HotelCo's performance and subsequently HotelCo responds or reacts to these critiques. Although, as I observed, there were numerous instances in which the guests express favourable evaluations of their experiences with HotelCo's performance, the instances in which the evaluations were negative generate a series of dramatic responses from HotelCo. Consider the following interactions between a guest and actors at the Front Desk.

Guest: "Is there a shuttle bus to the ABC Hotel?"

Agent: "No, there is not. Was there a problem with your stay?"

Guest: "Yeah... there was no AC."

Agent: [Silent for a long while as he prints the folio, and checks the guest's profile on the computer system for any recorded history of interactions between the guest and any other HotelCo staff. There is none.] "I am sorry to hear about that. Your account shows it was prepaid by Priceline. I will not be able to reverse the charges. I can issue loyalty points, and can arrange for taxi vouchers instead. The doorman can help you hail a taxi."

In another check-out interaction, a young female guest insisted raising her complaint, regarding the elevators being temporary out of service, to the director of Front Desk services. She refused to talk to the manager on duty.

Guest: “A security staff member, who I understand you hired temporarily for this weekend, suggested that I should use the service elevator. I mean, I might do that if there was a huge issue with the elevators and everyone was doing that. But if he is only suggesting that to me, I mean, that’s harassment.”

Director of Front Desk Services: “We are having an executive meeting soon to go over the issues from this weekend and find out what worked and what did not work. I will raise your concerns with them. I apologize for your inconvenience. I can relate to that; sometimes these elevators don’t even work for me. Please take my card. Next time you come back here, email me in advance and I will see what I can do for you to make your stay a pleasant one.”

Guest: “I heard something about points.”

Director of Front Desk Services: “Are you an Elite Club member? If so, then yes, I will gladly post points on your account. This will take two to three days to show up on your file. Please check it later and if you have any problems email me.”

Once the guest departed, in the privacy of her office, the director of Front Desk services expressed her frustration with the interaction: “It is just crazy how much rebate and points we are paying out to the guests. It’s crazy. We have spoiled the guests. That whole security and harassment story was made up just to get me to give her the [rebate] points.”

In the above interactions, and in other similar ones, the guests expose their assessment of their experience of accommodation (whether it is room-related or otherwise) to the representative of HotelCo. In turn, the actors representing HotelCo (whether the check-in agent, or the director of Front Desk service) responded with their own read of the situation. As seen in earlier sections, and other face-to-face interactions with the guests, based on clues and cues, the HotelCo actors evaluate the sincerity or the realness of the guests' critiques.<sup>23</sup> In the first example, the repeated patterns of heat-related complaints during the hot month of July frame the realness of the guests' critiques. In response, in order to maintain the long-term aspect of the exchange relationship with the guest, the agent reacts with measures to compensate for HotelCo's poor performance. In the second example, however, the realness of the guest's critique is privately questioned by the director. The front of the relationship, however, is kept by the director and the long-term aspect of the relationship is maintained in the framework of social rituals of reciprocity and gifts (Mauss, 1954).

The conciliatory responses, and the gift-producing reaction of the HotelCo actors are dependent on their read of the long-term status of the relationship. Note, in the above example, how the director sought to identify the status of the exchange relationship by inquiring about the guests' membership with the "Elite Club." Also, recall the case of the guest complaining about the lovemaking noise heard in neighbouring rooms. Incidentally, that guest raised his complaints again during check-out. The guest insisted on meeting the general manager. While I did not directly observe the interaction between the general manager and the complaining guest, I was informed by the director of Front Desk service, "[The] GM didn't comp the guest. It was just a Hotwire account anyway." Thus, not all dramatic interactions in the departure scenes end in reconciliation. The interactions in the departure scenes, however, are framed against the backdrop of the actors' read of the

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<sup>23</sup> Similar interactions occur via email, letters or telephone calls. While the medium of interaction is different, the essence and the objectives remain the same as the face-to-face ones.



situation and in particular, of the long-term status of the relationship.<sup>24</sup> The actors' read of the situation, and of the long-term status of the exchange relationship, is informed by clues and cues observed in the interactions.

#### 4.5.2 The Measures of Guest Experience

The previous section highlights the dramatic interactions in the departing scenes, in particular, those concerning the guests' critiques and negative assessment of HotelCo's performances. Such interactions are often initiated, and raised, by the guests and are often focused on a particular aspect of HotelCo's performance (e.g., the AC malfunctions, elevator breakdowns, noise, or the security concerns). Another set of similar interactions focused on the guests' critique of the performances occur in the departing scenes, though initiated by HotelCo International. Usually within 24 hours of the guests' check-out, random guests are invited to participate in a survey or a formal assessment of their recent experience with HotelCo's performance. Approximately one percent of guests respond to the survey request. The survey, commonly referred to as the "Guest Experience Survey," is composed of 100 questions, 95 of which are measures of the guests' experiences with specific aspects of HotelCo's performance. For instance, guests are asked to rate their likelihood to return to HotelCo (on a scale of 1 to 10), their overall satisfaction (also on a scale of 1 to 10), and whether they agree or disagree with the value for price paid. The guests are also asked about specific "conditions" of the hotel, e.g., the state of the public areas, the cleanliness of the rooms, the safety and security of the hotel in general, and the quality of the rooms and en suite bathrooms. The survey asks the guests to compare these conditions with their expectations (worse than expected, same as expected, or much better than expected). The remaining five questions are "free text" fields where the guests are invited to provide an overall assessment of HotelCo's performance in their own words. For each completed guest experience survey, a composite loyalty score is

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<sup>24</sup> For the same reasons, it is possible to presume some guests, whose evaluations of HotelCo's performances were negative, would depart the hotel without raising their voice. Such an act could possibly be informed by the guests' assessment of the long-term status of their relationship with HotelCo.

calculated ranging from 1 being the lowest rating to 10 being the highest. For every score below 3, the system automatically raises a “red alert,” and an email is distributed to all senior executives of HotelCo.<sup>25</sup> The executives (the general manager, the hotel manager, and the members of the executive committee) either telephone, email, or talk face-to-face with the directors “responsible” for the poor performance. The “red alert” remains in effect until the situation has been resolved with the guest.

There are several aspects of the “red alerts” worth noting. First, as I observed, once they are brought to the directors’ attention (whether by email, in person or by a phone call), the “red alert” receives immediate attention. As the director of Housekeeping said, “Every day, every bloody<sup>26</sup> alert is the top thing in your mind; everything has to stop until you put this off your table.” Second, the directors assess to whom the alert belongs. For instance, after having received a “red alert” email just before midnight on a Friday, the director of Front Desk said:

“Well every day I get a line-up with [the check-in] desk fully staffed. Our computer system has been an issue. It is a new program. It works slower because there is so many more steps to fill, click here, click that, write this, write that. The check-in that used to be really fast is not. It is not the agent’s fault. The delay is four or five minutes or more so that is a problem. Then we don’t have staff. I am staffing as tightly as I can because the [HotelCo International] say: ‘Oh [the number of agents] has got to be based on average per room, whatever it is the projected occupancy.’ But again we get Sales department to flood the market at the

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<sup>25</sup> On average, one “red alert” per day is produced. That is, one in three respondents to the survey trigger the alerts.

<sup>26</sup> Note the director’s frustration, calling a “red” alert a “bloody” one.

last minute, with Pricelines and Hotwires. So then it becomes my staffing issue. It isn't our problem.”

Third, the director's reactions are then focused on repairing two sets of relationships, those with the senior executives and those with the guests. For the former, the director begins an investigation of the circumstances of the guest's experience. In one situation, the director and I spent almost three hours investigating why a high-status guest was moved from room 2244 to 1093 — a smaller room with limited amenities. The investigation involved reviewing the guest's computer profile and the notes recorded on the profile, discovering which agent authored the notes or authorized the move, physically locating the involved agents at the hotel, and interviewing them about the circumstances regarding that particular guest's stay, which had occurred 48 hours ago. These resulted in a relationship maintenance act, a phone conversation with the general manager in which the director assured him an investigation was in place. The second set of relationships being maintained are those with the guest. Similar to previously mentioned cases, the director's performance involves repairing the relationship by providing gifts, rebates, points or even a full refund to the guest.

The “red alerts” also play a role in the interactions between HotelCo and HotelCo International. As the “red alerts,” along with the Guest Experience Survey, signify the status of HotelCo's performance, the general manager invokes a set of relationship maintenance activities with HotelCo International. As the hotel manager described in an executive meeting in which the general manager was not present, “HotelCo International is breathing down the GM's neck for the number of unresolved reds [alerts] he's got in the system. We need to let our parent company know we are on them and we are doing our best to have them [the alerts] removed from the system.” In fact, every HotelCo's “red alert” that stays in the “system” for more than 48 hours generates another alert for the executives of HotelCo International, the parent company.

## 4.6 Summary

In this chapter, I took on dramaturgical approach, based on the works of Ervin Goffman, in analyzing the provision of accommodation at HotelCo. Such a framework considers

the production or provision of service as a performance directed by HotelCo. Moreover, it becomes a mode of analysis that articulates provision of accommodation as patterns of interactions between HotelCo and the guests. In essence, in this chapter the study of interactions and thus the scenes and the drama that unfold in the interactions become a substantive concern in their own right. To that end, in this chapter I presented the overarching story, the provision of “accommodations,” in four Acts. In each Act, I presented a dramaturgical account of the interaction scenes, the roles and the performance of the actors, the stages of interactions, the backdrop or the framing of the interactions, and of course the drama that unfolds. In doing so, several patterns emerged in the stories.

First, the interactions occur between both real and represented actors. For instance, in Act 1, the agreement, the interaction is between the guest and an actor re-presenting HotelCo. Likewise, in other Acts, HotelCo is re-presented by other actors, such as the agents, the rooms, etc. Conversely, for the reception actors, the interactions are with the real guest, whereas for the Housekeeping actors, it is with represented actors (e.g., the guests’ suitcases in the room or their name on the daily assignment sheet).

Second, the actors perform their roles in a manner or fashion that is socially expected of the role, the so-called occupational mandate. For instance, the role of the doorman is to welcome the guests, the bellhop to assist, the agent to receive, the room attendant to keep and maintain the rooms. Given their roles, the performance of the actors is relational in accordance with the needs of the situation. Recall how the bellhop adjusts his performance in assisting the guests based on the apparent needs of the guest. Or recall how the agents at the reception desk adjust their interactions based on the “situation” or the drama in the scene.

Third, the provision of accommodation is about maintaining the frontstage of the performance. And the front of the performance is about “accommodating” idiosyncratic experiences of the guests. To that end, physical spaces are “bracketed” into front spaces (e.g., lobby, reception, lounge, rooms, etc.) that accommodate various activities and experiences of the guests. The bracketing of the spaces is intended to organize (or

bracket) the experiences as well. Recall how “resting” is performed by the guests on multiple stages: the lobby, the swimming pool, the spa, or the room. Likewise, how “work” is performed by the guests on multiple bracketed stages: the room, the lobby, the lounge, the bars, or the restaurants. The bracketed spaces are signed with various symbols to frame the experience or the performance on that stage.

Lastly, the interactions themselves are also framed by sign-vehicles or status symbols. For instance, at the scenes at the reception desk, the status of the guest, the status of the rooms, and the status of the agreement are at play. Consequently, status symbols, or sign-vehicles (such as a straw hat worn by the guest, a sign or symbol captured in the database, the room number, etc.) help identify the status at play. In all interactions, however, such identifications are organized in two forms. On the one hand, a unique and distinct identity (the name of the guest, the room number, the reservation confirmation number, etc.) is recognized through a signifier. On the other hand, a categorical status (e.g. high or low, vacant or occupied, member of the Elite club or not) is distinguished in such interactions.

In conclusion, what appears as a simple exchange, accommodation for money, is a production of series of frontstage interactions, each with their own dramatic performances. To understand the organization of these unique performances, I explore the scenes behind the backstage of HotelCo in the next chapter. In particular, I discuss how the dramatic frontstage scenes are organized and how the directors of the production provide a “script” for the actors to perform their roles in the unique scenes.

## Chapter 5

### 5 Organizing for the production of Accommodation

#### 5.1 Overview

Earlier, in Chapter 3, I showed the core exchange, accommodation for money, is in reality a series of interactions between HotelCo and the guests. That is, the experience of accommodation comes into existence in and through HotelCo-guest encounters.

Subsequently, the provision of accommodation, i.e., the business of HotelCo, becomes about the production of performances experienced by the guests. In Chapter 4, using a dramaturgical framework, I illustrated aspects and elements of these performances, such as the stages on which they occur, the artifacts, and the roles involved, as well as the drama that unfolds in the interaction scenes. The focus of this chapter is to show the organizing role of the managers in directing the staged performance (the show or the play). Building on dramaturgy, and set within the above perspective, the aim of this chapter is to examine the role of managers in the production of accommodation at HotelCo. Specifically, I explore organizing activities such as setting the stage(s) on which HotelCo-guest interactions occur, and arranging the physical spaces and the artifacts (the props). I also explore defining, organizing and directing the interaction roles performed by HotelCo actors. To begin, I outline details of an event at HotelCo (“unexpected visitors”), and use it as the basis on which I exhibit the organizing activities mentioned above.

##### 5.1.1 A stand-up meeting

In one morning “ops meeting” that I attended, the hotel manager informed the Front Desk and Housekeeping directors about an unexpected visit by people from HotelCo International. “This afternoon, our friends at HQ are coming for a visit to the property and perform a site audit,” said the Hotel Manager. Along with the auditors, the meeting attendees were informed, one “brand person” was coming to take new photos of HotelCo for the website. The upcoming visit by the “friends at HQ,” which incidentally would

correspond with the international high school students' conference at HotelCo, set a series of actions in motion. Immediately following the ops meeting, in a stand-up ad hoc meeting held in the mezzanine overlooking the lobby, the hotel manager (the second in command after the general manager) ordered a series of changes to the lobby and its layout. He opened the meeting by saying:

“I want the mess these kids made in the lobby gone, now! Find a way to get them out of the lobby and somehow lock them [the conference attendees] in the conference halls. I don't care where you pull bodies [referring to the employees] from, make this place look presentable.”

In the same standing meeting, the Front Desk and Housekeeping directors explored options of finding “bodies” to usher the conference attendees away from the lobby and into the conference halls. The decision was to call to work five former Housekeeping attendants who were on paid disability leave.<sup>27</sup> The challenge was then to find the right uniform sizes for these people, since their Housekeeping uniforms were not deemed appropriate for this new lobby role. The other problem was that, typically, the Housekeeping employees are not adequately trained to interact with the guests; or worse, they are not trained to be a “voice of authority,” as the Front Desk director put it, in ushering the customers to different areas of the hotel. Nevertheless, the eventual agreement was to proceed with this idea and to call these people “lobby ambassadors” and to “teach them simple phrases to say.” As the Front Desk director told the others:

“Our goal is to [a short pause, then almost a smirk as he stressed the next word] ‘encourage’ the kids to move to the mezzanine level. If they [the new actors] are challenged by one of the guests or the kids, if they are asked why they are

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<sup>27</sup> The terms of paid disability leave allows HotelCo to use the employees in light physical duties. Standing and walking around the lobby for short periods would fall into this category of work.

being moved, they need to respond by saying, ‘Because we created a special conference experience for you on the mezzanine level.’”

The meeting also resulted in the rearrangement of the physical look of HotelCo. Gardeners were rushed to make the outdoor pool area “look neat;” a maintenance crew was radioed in to sweep up the cigarette butts outside the main entrance and in the motor-court. The director of Housekeeping and I paid a visit to a few recently renovated (and vacant) rooms. He inspected the rooms, looked for possible old stains on the furniture and carpets, made sure the windows were streak-free and the beds were made according to “HotelCo standards.”

The lobby was another area that was re-staged in anticipation of the HQ visitors’ arrival. Normally, a contracted florist delivered fresh flower arrangements daily for areas of the lobby. On the day of the visit of the “friends at HQ,” the director of Front Desk services and I walked to a nearby unfamiliar florist to order four new flower arrangements. When we returned to the lobby, the director and I explored several different locations to place the flowers. Multiple scenarios and set-ups were tried out with different arrangements of furniture, flowers, lightings, and signs. After each set-up, the director of Front Desk services left the lobby and immediately re-entered through the main doors, acting out the entrance of the “friends at HQ,” pretending to be one of them entering the lobby for the first time and being “wowed” or impressed by the arrangements. After nearly an hour of testing different set-ups, she decided on a final look. The lobby was then dressed with new flowers, arranged with a new layout of furniture, and maintained by new actors “ushering” the crowd, and hiding the guests in the conference halls.

## 5.2 Backstage activities

The activities of the above-mentioned event are about all things that appear, generally in a fixed fashion, to the “friends at HQ.” In a sense, from a dramaturgical perspective, these activities are about impression management, or maintaining the “front” of the performance (1959, p. 22). What is interesting about these activities is that the audience



is no longer the guests. Rather it is the “friends at HQ” — who are neither strangers, nor guests or customers of HotelCo — who are the intended audience of the performances being organized in this event. Thus, the activities of this event are about organizing the front of the performance of which the “friends at HQ” are the audience.

In this regard, dramaturgically speaking, the backstage is where the frontstage impressions are coordinated and organized. It is where the actors and performers are present but the audience is not. In the above-mentioned event, the ops meeting is where HotelCo managers (the members of the operations committee) are present and where the activities (i.e., the meeting) is about giving particular impressions to the “friends at HQ,” the audience. The ops meeting is held every day at 8:30 AM in a rather empty-looking room with a round table, beside the laundry facilities in the basement of the hotel. This physical area is a backstage in part because it is not visible to the audience, in this case, the guests or the “friends at HQ.”

In previous sections, I shed light on other backstage areas in which the performances of the frontstage were being coordinated and organized. For instance, in Chapter 4, I described a particular backstage area: the physical area behind a door on the side of the main entrance to HotelCo that included a long concrete hallway leading to the service elevators, and the office of the guest experience managers from where the performances of the doormen, bellhops and valet are coordinated, organized and rehearsed. Another example of a backstage in which performances of the frontstage are organized is the physical area behind the reception stage (Figure 5.1). What is common in these examples of backstage areas are the spaces where no members of the audience are allowed. In a way, in these backstage examples, what separates the front from the back is a marked boundary or a gate; for instance, these backstage areas are separated from other areas of the hotel with locked doors accessed only by a numeric passcode shared only among HotelCo managers and staff.

**Figure 5.1: Backstage office behind the reception area**



At HotelCo, as I have observed, what defines a space as a backstage is not the geographical location (e.g., the back of the reception area), nor is it the way the space is physically staged (e.g., concrete hallways as opposed to carpeted ones). Rather, what truly marks an area as backstage is merely the absence of the audience and where the actors can reveal truths about their frontstage performances. Consider the ad hoc stand-up meeting held about the events related to the visit by “friends at HQ.” As opposed to the backstage meeting area in the basement, the mezzanine level overlooking the lobby is an area where guests do frequently appear. Moreover, there are no physically marked boundaries or gates. Instead, what made the mezzanine level a backstage that day at that moment was the absence of guests (the audience) at the moment of the meeting. The standing meeting attendees, including myself, made sure of that. In a similar example, the lobby — where guests do appear — was the backstage in which the director of Front Desk organized and coordinated the set-up specifically intended for the “friends at HQ.” There, while the guests were indeed present as she was arranging the flowers and furniture, the intended audience, i.e., the “friends at HQ,” were not.

In these meetings, HotelCo actors stepped out of the characteristic roles they perform in encounters with the guests. For example, the hotel manager’s reference to the guests as “kids” was an instance of stepping out of the polite role he always plays in encounters with the guests, even the young conference attendees. Likewise, the Front Desk director stepped out of her characteristic role performed in encounters with the audience (the “friends at HQ”); while she maintained her front with the guests in the lobby, she discussed the problems of staging, and asked questions about the conditions of the sign-vehicles (e.g., flowers), etc. She also, at times, acted as if she were one of the visitors from the HQ. Goffman refers to these “communications out of character” occurring in the

backstage; the former example is one of derogatory treatment of the audience, or “treatment of the absent,” and the latter is one of “staging talk” (1959, pp. 108-112).

In summary, the backstage is an area where HotelCo managers coordinate and organize frontstage performances. It is a relative space in the sense that it only exists in regard to a specific audience. While a marked area (such as the back of the Front Desk reception area) is considered the “back,” what truly distinguishes the backstage is the absence of the audience. Therefore, any area, marked or not, in which managers co-ordinate and organize the frontstage performances in the absence of the guests is considered a backstage. What is critical to note is that the audience is absent in physical form. Evidently, the audience, i.e., the guests, is indeed represented in abstract and symbolic form in the backstage. In the above examples, in the backstage activities, the members of the audience (i.e., the real people from the headquarters visiting HotelCo, whose individual names were not ever used) are abstracted and symbolically represented as “friends at HQ.” Likewise, in the backstage activities where the lobby was being rearranged, the director of Front Desk services re-presented the members of the audience by acting out what the audience might typically do (e.g., walking through the main entrance).

### 5.3 Crafting, setting and maintaining the stage

Part of the backstage activities are related to coordinating and organizing the dramaturgical set or the scenic parts of the expressive equipment in the frontstage. An example of the backstage activities preceding the visits by the “friends at HQ” are those related to setting the scenic parts of the lobby, the motor-court, and the gardens surrounding the pool area, as well as the rooms. These were the intended stages on which HotelCo would interact with the “brand person” and the other “friends at HQ.” As illustrated, setting the lobby involved cleaning the “mess” made by the conference attendees, clearing the area from these “kids,” rearranging the furniture and showcasing fresh flowers at the entrance. The intent is to showcase the set in a particular way to the audience to elicit a particular impression and meaning, e.g., a clean, clear, manicured, flowery frontstage.

### 5.3.1 Crafting a stage

Before a set can be staged or showcased in a particular way, it needs to be bracketed as a dramaturgical stage, as a frontstage. At HotelCo, the current frontstages (e.g. the rooms, the swimming pool, the lobby, etc.) have been bracketed and marked (labeled) as such since the construction of the building began. However, one of the doormen, who has more than 30 years of experience at HotelCo, explained how approximately 20 years ago, the general manager at the time converted a breakfast hall on the mezzanine level to a conference hall. The general manager subsequently “carved out a breakfast bar from that corner of the lobby,” noted the bellhop as he pointed to the existing breakfast bar. In a similar example, during my time at HotelCo, I observed backstage activities of the director of Front Desk services that were aimed at carving out a new set or frontstage. The project, called the “Elite Club Check-in,” was intended to distinguish the reception areas of the high-status guests by converting the area just outside the panoramic lounge on the top floor into a check-in set. After a week of creating drawings on paper and drafting blueprints of the stage, the director of Front Desk took three people from engineering, IT and facilities to see her vision in the existing empty space outside the lounge:

“We can put our Elite Club carpet [on the floor]. Maybe we get the carpet smaller or don’t even bother because [the Elite Club members] already know this is their access-only floor. [Pointing to one corner of the area] So you got here two check-in pods and again we could use the newer pods that they have that are narrower. Picture two pods... So you are [pretending they are high-status guests] coming up to this area and Steve [a check-in agent] would go, ‘Welcome, good evening, welcome...’”

At a later date, once the physical layout of the area was designed and the idea of the bracketed space was exercised, after multiple rehearsals — particularly, imagining the traffic flow of the guests — the director of Front Desk decided not to proceed with the project. Nevertheless, the important point to note is the group of activities involved in

making a staged front. The conceptualization of a space as a stage, the consideration of artifacts, and the rehearsal and walk-throughs are all activities related to marking a space as a staged front.

### 5.3.2 Setting and maintaining the stage

Recall instances of stage-setting activities at HotelCo. As I observed during Christmas, the lobby was staged with typical Christmas music playing in the background, decorated Christmas trees and other red and green ribbons and ornaments. During Valentine's Day, the lobby is staged with red flowers, the check-in counters have bowls of pink-wrapped Hershey's Kisses, and some rooms are set with folded-towel swans with "nice little hearts." Likewise, during an summer festival, a corner of the lobby is staged as a dance area with a DJ — who incidentally was one of the Front Desk agents — "spinning happy music," as described by the house manager. While these are instances in which a particular space (e.g., the lobby) is staged differently for different occasions, some other frontstages of the hotel are generally set in a more stable fashion. Consider the staging of the rooms in a "cigar-themed" or "masculine" fashion, as described in earlier chapters. Such stagings are relatively stable, and have been consistent over the past decade, according to the director of Housekeeping. The furniture in the rooms does not get rearranged as frequently as that in the lobby. Nor do the rooms normally get equipped with flowers, Christmas trees, or music. Yet, back stage activities do indeed include maintenance and repair of the staged artifacts. Recall the director of Housekeeping's visit to selected rooms to check for old stains on the furniture and carpets. Also recall the managers' "room walks," a weekly audit of the physical state<sup>28</sup> of different rooms. These are instances of back stage activities for setting and maintaining the front.

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<sup>28</sup> One might argue a subtle difference between artifacts that are employed as sign-vehicles (e.g., flowers, Christmas tree, etc.) and those that are used as resources and tools during guest interactions with the hotel (e.g., furniture, carpet, etc.). The point that needs to be highlighted is that in both use cases, artifacts are used as sign-vehicles to frame the definition of the situation and the activities performed in those scenes. For this reason,

Therefore, in setting the stage as part of the backstage activities, managers employ artifacts to play a role in setting the scenic part of the frontstage. Put differently, in setting the stage, managers employ specific artifacts to invoke a particular definition of a situation (Goffman, 1959). The flowers, the Christmas tree and ribbons, the red heart-shaped boxes, and the music, are employed (as resources) to impress the audience with intended meanings and experiences. Such artifacts frame the meaning and the significance of the interactions occurring on the frontstage. These sign-vehicles bracket the HotelCo-guest interaction scenes to provide a cue to what the interactions mean (Bechky, 2003; Goffman, 1974).

### 5.3.3 Defining and creating role structures

Another part of the backstage activities is related to coordinating and organizing the actors and the roles they play. Consider the “friends at HQ” event and the related backstage activities. Recall the discussions in the standing meeting about finding “bodies” to clear the “mess the kids made in the lobby,” as said by the hotel manager. In that event, the managers were organizing a set of behaviours, collectively understood as “ushering,” to be displayed by some “bodies,” in interaction scenes with the guests. In essence, the managers were defining a role as a set of behaviours that are characteristic of a person, e.g., the usher. The role of an usher, however, relates to those being ushered (here, the guests). In organizing the set of behaviours of the role, the managers were also organizing the social status of the ushers as those with a “voice of authority” with respect to the guests. Likewise, the social status of the ushers was also being organized with respect to other sets of relationships they would have, for instance, those with the Housekeeping attendants, the managers, the reception agents, etc. Managers, however, labeled the role as “Lobby Ambassador.” Labels are sign-vehicles and status symbols that organize the role in two fundamental forms. In one, the label signals a set of behaviours and conduct considered normal by some social conventions associated with that symbol (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997). There are a set of expectations and obligations that are

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two different loveseats (a red velvet one compared to a black leather one), although used in an identical way, frame the activities differently.

signified by the label “ambassador,” for example. Likewise, there are a set of expectations and obligations that are signified by the label (symbol) “manager,” or by lumping together and labeling a group of behaviours as “manager on duty.” In another form, the label signals the categorical status of the role in some larger social system. In short, as part of backstage organizing activities, HotelCo managers engage in two distinct, yet related, activities; role definition and role structure. Below, I briefly explain each set of such activities.

### 5.3.4 Role definitions

As part of backstage organizing activities, managers lump and group sets of behaviours as a role. These sets of behaviours are composed of bundles of non-relational and relational aspects (Barley, 1990; Nadel, 1957). According to the distinction first made by Nadel (1957), and then elaborated by Barley (1990), the non-relational aspects of the role are the sets of recurrent actions and formal duties that become obligations and expectations of the persons occupying the role. For instance, the non-relational aspects of the role of lobby ambassadors are dressing in uniform, marching around the lobby, arranging the lobby (e.g., pushing the chairs back to the table once it is vacated by a guest), and — as discussed in the meeting for that one day — ushering the guests in the conference halls when needed. Similarly, the non-relational aspects of the role of the doormen include standing at the door, greeting the guests, opening doors, hailing cabs, etc.

HotelCo managers define these non-relational aspects of the roles.<sup>29</sup> Dramaturgically speaking, these roles are given scripts or sets of acts to be performed on stage. In the case

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<sup>29</sup> Indeed not all roles are explicitly and exclusively defined by HotelCo managers. The roles of bellhops, doormen, the concierge, the valet, check-in agents, Housekeeping attendants, runners, and lifeguards are examples of those that are employed by HotelCo and not defined exclusively by the managers. Of course, the roles of the managers, directors, the hotel manager, and the general manager are also included among those not explicitly defined by HotelCo.

of the “lobby ambassador”, the role scripts, dictated by the managers, were those of “ushering the guests” and “encouraging them to move to the conference areas” and saying, “We created a special conference experience for you on the mezzanine level.” Other such examples described in earlier chapters include the “aggressive hospitality” script given to bellhops, the “arrival” one assigned to the doormen (see Figure 5.2), and the “ABC of Housekeeping” given to the room attendants. Dramaturgically speaking, managers also organize role rehearsals. For instance, to instill “aggressive hospitality,” the guest experience manager explained how they brought in a consultant to hold a three-day workshop for all the actors performing the roles of bellhops and concierge. Likewise, when there was a new set of behavioural scripts defined for the check-in agents, a rehearsal event was organized to walk the actors through the new behavioural requirements of their roles. The director of Front Desk services described the new scripts being rehearsed:

“We are having a whole training on the new ‘welcome program.’ They [the check-in agents] are going to say to the guests, ‘Oh, what time are you checking out so we can sort of get a rough estimate.’ That sort of thing. We also want them to get comfortable asking for more information from the guests, like their email address so we can send them their e-folios [receipt], etc. I’ve put aside hours in every agent’s schedule to go through this new training.”



### Figure 5.2: A sample script for the "doorman" role

**Acknowledging the Guest** begins when the guest arrives at Motor Court and continues throughout their stay. At every opportunity, during every encounter with a guest, we should

<input type="checkbox"/>	• Establish eye contact
<input type="checkbox"/>	• SMILE
<input type="checkbox"/>	• Approach all guests, greet them with a warm and friendly welcome
<input type="checkbox"/>	• Demonstrate sense of urgency (Open Car Door)

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**Offer Parking Option** is the next step.

<input type="checkbox"/>	• Fully explain parking option to the guest. Special weekend rate.
<input type="checkbox"/>	• Offer Luggage Assistance
<input type="checkbox"/>	• Guide guest to the check in desk
<input type="checkbox"/>	• Advise guest bell desk associates with take them up to the room

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**Staging of Cars** Allow flow of traffic in the Motor court at all time

<input type="checkbox"/>	▪ Guide guest to the correct drop of/pick up area
<input type="checkbox"/>	▪ Connect with valet on car's that should be taken down to the garage.
<input type="checkbox"/>	▪ All car's have the appropriate tickets

These roles have relational aspects, as they are dynamic and performed in interpersonal interactions. In a way, the relational aspects of roles require an alter ego, or a specific other, who plays the complementary part. For instance, there can be no reception agent without a guest to be received, no lifeguard without a swimmer, and no usher without patrons. Equally important is to note that there can be no reception agent without a Housekeeping attendant. In essence, the relational aspects of the roles at HotelCo involve interactions, dependencies and expectations between roles. For instance, I observed that by virtue of wearing HotelCo uniforms and being present on stage in the lobby, the lobby ambassadors are often approached by guests who ask a wide range of questions, both related to general information, such as check-out times or Wi-Fi information, and to specific requests about their accommodation. In the early days of their roles, the lobby ambassadors would often refer the questions to the people at the reception desk. As the weeks passed, however, I observed the lobby ambassadors (the same people) writing down the questions and guest inquiries, walking to the back area of the reception desk

and asking either the manager on duty or any check-in agent present. One lobby ambassador came in the back area (a space frequented only by the reception people) with one guest's folio (bill) in her hand and, on behalf of the guest, requested clarification on a line item. After spending a notable amount of time tracing the information on the folio, and correcting an error, the manager on duty instructed the lobby ambassador to return to the guest with a new copy of the folio, along with the manager's apology. What is shown in this interaction is the relational aspect of the role of the lobby ambassador formed by the interdependencies and changing expectations that occur between the roles.

### 5.3.5 Role structures

Given the relational aspect of roles, part of the backstage activities include organizing social statuses that designate the parts the role plays in a larger social system (Merton, 1957). Role status involves not a single associated role (i.e., not just a dyadic relationship between the check-in agent and the guest, or between the manager on duty and the director of Front Desk services) but an array of roles. Put differently, role status signals a complement of role-relationships in which the actors are involved by the virtue of occupying a particular social status at HotelCo. Subsequently, the backstage activities of managers include organizing the structure of this social status at HotelCo.

One way this organizing is accomplished is through the means of a formal structure of role relationships as abstracted in a documented "org chart" (see a snapshot of HotelCo's organization chart in Appendix B as an example). What is interesting about this declared structure is its formality: "formal" in a sense that it denotes actual role relationships, and in a sense is marked by a ceremonial form. As an illustration, consider the relationship between the director of Front Desk services and the general manager. Recall the instances of "red alerts" as discussed in chapter 4, in the *au revoir Act*. The "red alerts" begin a set of interactions between the director of Front Desk services and the general manager in which part of the director's role is to maintain the status of the relationship. For instance, upon receiving the "bloody red alert," the director would behaviourally act in ways that maintained the appearance of an investigation of the "red alert" as requested by the general manager. On the one hand, the formal structure of the roles, and the role statuses, would oblige the director of Front Desk to serve the requests of the general manager.

That is one “formal” aspect of this structure. On the other hand, maintaining the front of the relationship in a ceremonial fashion, as it appeared to others (including the general manager) demonstrates the other “formal” aspect of this structure. To emphasize, while at HotelCo there is a formal structure of roles — whether abstracted in an artifact or commonly understood among HotelCo actors — there are sets of role performances aimed at maintaining the appearance of the role structures. In a way, there is a whole other dramaturgy occurring in the backstage of HotelCo.

## 5.4 Directing the interaction scenes

As part of backstage activities, HotelCo managers organize the interaction scenes between HotelCo and the guests. From a dramaturgical perspective, part of backstage activities is about stage and scene directions. Once the roles are defined, scripted and structured, managers organize the HotelCo-interactions scenes by directing how actors perform in the interactions, and by staging distinct interactions for distinct audiences.

Recall part of the drama at play in the interaction scenes in Act 2 (Arrival) was about the status of the guests. In particular, two interactions between one check-in agent and two different guests are worth recalling. In one instance, the check-in agent had made the encounter with a Michigan couple about HotelCo’s swimming pool, and the very next encounter with a second guest about Wi-Fi access and HotelCo’s business services. Drawing cues from sign-vehicles such as the straw hat and plaid shorts of the Michigan couple, and the corporate credit card of the other guest, the agent had essentially played two distinct performances, one framed for leisure and the other for business guests.

## 5.5 Categories

These distinct frontstage performances are directed from the backstage by the managers. As part of their structuring work, managers employ category labels to bring coherence of meaning in interactions scenes. For instance, at the Front Desk managers segment their guests, based on their travel purpose, into categories of LEISURE<sup>30</sup> and BUSINESS.

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30 From this point forward, I use block letters to place an emphasis on category labels.

Alternatively, HotelCo managers categorize guests into COUPLES, CONFERENCE, SINGLES, AIRLINE, GROUPS, and FAMILY. Likewise, based on their past history with HotelCo, and their status with the loyalty Elite Club, managers lump guests into AMBASSADOR, SILVER, VIP, BRONZE, or GOLD groups. Indeed, as seen earlier, such category labels are also used in crafting and setting the frontstage. To organize the frontstages, managers bracket and label physical spaces, such as the LOBBY, RECEPTION, HALLWAY, LOUNGE, GYM, SPA, SUITES, and GUEST ROOMS. Further, the guest rooms are also categorized based on their layout (SPA SUITE, STUDIO, PARLOR SUITE, DELUXE SUITE), bed type (DOUBLE, KING, QUEEN, 2-DOUBLE), or even location (EXECUTIVE, PREMIUM, CLUB floors).

As part of organizing activities, categorizing is about clustering of variants (e.g., customers or guests, physical spaces, or even roles) that are regarded as more similar (i.e. with family resemblances) than the elements outside of the cluster (Wittgenstein, 1967). By lumping, grouping and bracketing guest types or physical spaces, the managers bring saliency to the perceived similarities that outweigh the differences among them (Zerubavel, 1996). For instance, while all vacationing guests are indeed different individuals and unique in their own sense, bracketing and labelling them as LEISURE frames and highlights their shared similarities (e.g., preference for using the swimming pool). The purpose of categorizing is to direct (give directions to) the interaction scenes by reducing the infinite differences to behaviourally reasonable proportions (Rosch & Lloyd, 1979). Dramaturgically speaking, the purpose of categorizing (bracketing and labelling) is to frame the interaction scenes, to select and emphasize what happens and what matters. Categorizing frames the interaction scenes, in order to manage and comprehend the situation, and to choose an appropriate repertoire of actions (Goffman, 1974, pp. 10-11).

What is important to note is that categorizing is not necessarily about the creation of novel clusters of guests or new ways of labelling. In fact, at HotelCo, many of the employed categories are common across various social fields or industries, and are not unique to the organization. LEISURE, BUSINESS, and GOVERNMENT category labels of customers, for instance, are common in many hospitality fields. Likewise, categorizing

spaces, and labelling them as ROOMS and HALLWAYS, are not organizing principles unique to HotelCo. In spite of the availability of categories common to the society at large, managers have agency and the choice of employment of the categories as well as what similarities and differences the categories represent. For example, while the common category label VIP is widely employed to signal “Very Important Person”, at HotelCo, the category label is used to signal irritable and picky guests. As one Front Desk agent explained:

“VIPs are guests who have stayed with us on a regular basis and they have said things like, ‘You know what? You guys need to stop putting me in this room. You guys need to make sure that I have slippers and chocolate cake in my room every time I come,’ or something stupid or ridiculous like that.”

Thus, bracketing and labelling a group of guests as VIP provide some sort of cue about these guests and subsequently the interactions with individuals categorized in this manner. In summary, as part of their backstage organizing work, managers employ category labels to give directions and to bring coherence of meaning to the interactions. In a way, categorizing can be seen as part of the backstage activities that organize patterns of HotelCo-guest interactions. While the employed categories are socially recognized and perhaps not specific to HotelCo, the managers’ categorizing activities highlight their choice in directing the production of accommodation.

## 5.6 Classes

Much like roles, as outlined in previous section, categories too are bundles of non-relational and relational aspects. The non-relational aspects of categories are the sets of patterns and similarities that are signaled by the category label. For instance, the category label KING ROOM signifies and frames the patterns, or similarities, among the members of the group. In this case, such a label signifies similar layouts, room sizes, and the type of bed used in bracketed physical spaces. Yet, the relational aspects of categories are those that signify the position, the status or the class, of the labeled element as part of a

larger set. The relational aspect of the category KING ROOM signifies the layout, size or bed type, of the members in relation to others, e.g., QUEEN or DOUBLE. Put differently, while the non-relational aspect of categorizing is about clustering variants based on similar and shared characteristics, the relational aspect is about classifying, about relating the members in some social status, hierarchy, or rank order.

Therefore, the subsequent classifications are status symbols representing the structural relationships between categories (Vergne & Wry, 2014). As part of their backstage organizing activities, managers at HotelCo classify and organize categories to create distinct schemas of interactions with distinct guests. For instance, in the interactions in Act 2, at the reception stage, the check-in agents are provided role scripts to ascertain the guests' purpose of travel, and adjust their interactions accordingly. As illustrated in Table 5.1, while there are common interactions for all guests, some scripts are customized for a particular guest category (e.g. wake-up call for BUSINESS guests, or pool and spa for LEISURE ones), and some are also adjusted based on the status of the guest as members of the loyalty Elite Club. HotelCo offers a wider array of services to guests labeled as BUSINESS than to those labeled as LEISURE. HotelCo also sets and arranges distinct amenities in distinct room classes. Table 5.2 illustrates such distinctions. Based on these classes, the role of the Housekeeping attendant is scripted to stage and maintain physical spaces based on their assigned category and class. During their daily cleaning rounds, as the Housekeeping attendants encounter a room labeled in a particular category, they are scripted to follow the schema that is associated with that particular room class. For instance, as one Housekeeping attendant explained, "We place no bottom or fitted sheet for TRADITIONAL rooms. We use flat sheets for EXECUTIVE rooms." In short, as part of backstage activities, managers employ category and category labels to organize patterns of HotelCo-guest interactions. Managers also classify categories to provide role scripts and schema of interactions that structure the interactions.

**Table 5.1: Check-in interactions, adjusted to the guest's status**

	Check-in interactions with guests
Common for all guests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obtain ID</li> <li>• Confirm departure date and room type</li> <li>• Collect method of payment</li> <li>• Uncover information about guest's reason for stay</li> <li>• Give key and proper key packet</li> </ul>
	Added interactions for high-status guests
Ordinary Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assign rooms based on availability</li> <li>• Highlight the attributes of the room (e.g., view and location)</li> <li>• Inform guest of the CLOSING time of the breakfast bar</li> </ul>
High Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obtain information on room preference (distance from elevators, bed type, level, layout)</li> <li>• Offer room choices, if available</li> <li>• Offer choice of newspaper</li> <li>• Inform guest of the evening lounge hours</li> <li>• Inform guest of the OPENING time of the breakfast bar</li> </ul>
	Adjusted interaction based on guest category
LEISURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer Internet access information</li> <li>• Offer wake-up call service</li> <li>• Inform guest of the business center</li> <li>• Inquire about departure time</li> <li>• Offer transportation arrangement, if needed</li> <li>• Notify guest that a receipt will be emailed</li> </ul>
BUSINESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obtain information on room preference (distance from elevators, bed type, level, layout)</li> <li>• Offer room choices, if available</li> <li>• Offer choice of newspaper</li> <li>• Inform guest of the evening lounge hours</li> <li>• Inform guest of the OPENING time of the breakfast bar</li> </ul>

**Table 5.2: Room staging adjusted based on distinct classes**

	Amenities offered based on room class
Common to all rooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ice bucket</li> <li>• Gourmet coffee (two regular, one decaf)</li> <li>• Sweetener, stir stick, soy-based cream</li> <li>• 42” Flat screen TV</li> <li>• Full length mirror</li> <li>• Two bathrobes</li> <li>• Hangers, laundry bags</li> <li>• Safe</li> <li>• Luggage rack</li> <li>• Ironing board and iron</li> </ul>
TRADITIONAL Rooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No bottom or fitted sheet</li> <li>• Two foam and two feather pillows (foam on top)</li> <li>• Metal frame beds</li> <li>• Charger for iPhone</li> <li>• 3 bottles of shampoo, conditioner, lotion</li> <li>• 3 face cloths, hand and bath towels</li> </ul>
EXECUTIVE Rooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flat sheets</li> <li>• Extra blankets and synthetic dawn duvets</li> <li>• Triple sheet, high-quality thread count (some are silk bedclothes)</li> <li>• Free local and 1-800 calls</li> <li>• Tear-shaped Evian water bottles</li> <li>• Cooler, instead of a fridge</li> <li>• Minibar</li> <li>• Shower gels</li> <li>• Vanity kits</li> <li>• Exclusive brands (spa lines) of organic toiletries with natural ingredients</li> </ul>

### 5.6.1 Categories as backstage sign-vehicles

In the sections above, I described HotelCo managers’ employment of category labels as cues that frame the frontstage interactions scenes. The category labels indicate and emphasize what matters in the interactions with the guests, and help the HotelCo employee choose an appropriate repertoire of actions. In addition, category labels are also



employed at the backstage, to frame the interactions and to indicate and emphasize what matters at the backstage. For example, in the daily operations meetings, in which the members of the operations committee “set up their day,” I observed that the director of Front Desk often opens her remarks with statements such as:

“Last night we were 98% sold, mostly SINGLES and BIZ. So today we shouldn’t be too busy with them. Tonight, however, we are crazy as we have 4 AIRLINES and 3 GROUPS checking in. To make things worse we are expecting 12 VIPs.”

In these remarks, the director employs the BIZ label to signify the similarity of those guests on business and to frame the backstage scenes (the meeting, in particular) with an emphasis on the BIZ guests’ check-out behavior. The stereotype of a guest labeled as BIZ is one often pressed for time who prefers to use the self-checkout option (using the in-room check-out system, for instance) rather than queuing in line to check out at the reception counters. Similarly, by employing the AIRLINE, GROUPS, and VIP category labels, the manager is characterizing and typifying that day’s HotelCo-guest interactions into these stereotypes: Airline guests often require more complex paper work; group guests usually share rooms and therefore require split accounts, multiple payments and individual room keys; VIP guests often by-pass the reception counters and are often received by hotel manager or the director of Front Desk services.<sup>31</sup> Given these labels, i.e., linguistic resources, the backstage audience (meeting attendees) would have a stylized account and understanding of the day ahead.

Managers not only use category labels as verbal resources, but also as durable artifacts and symbolic re-presentations in backstage reports, forms, computer systems, and signage or postings. For instance, every midnight, managers generate a computer report on existing reservations whose rate schedule has, for some reason, been changed to zero.

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<sup>31</sup> Recall the check-in scenes of the senior executive of the South Korean automobile manufacturing, as described in Act 2.

The report, titled “Complimentary Rooms,” is organized by room categories displayed in vertical columns, in abbreviations, such as NDB for nonsmoking double bed, NK for nonsmoking king bed, SS for spa suite, etc. For an illustration of another example, recall the guests’ profile screen on the computer system as explained in Act 2 at the reception scene. On the profile screen of individual guests not only is displayed the labels of the categories of which that particular guest is a member, but also a list of all available guest categories. In backstage activities, category labels also appear as material resources and artifacts in their classified arrangements. In the high-traffic back area of the reception, where managers reside and duty employees return for supplies, two 5 x 6 foot posters (see Figure 5.3 for an illustration) are installed that re-present in a tabular comparative form the distinct HotelCo offerings based on guests’ loyalty classes.

**Figure 5.3: Snapshot of a poster showing distinct HotelCo offerings**

BENEFITS AT A GLANCE			
	BRONZE	SILVER	GOLD
Late check-out	If available	✓	✓
Welcome gift at check-in			✓
Enhanced rooms at check-in (when available)		✓	✓
Upgrade at check-in (when available)			✓
Complimentary high speed		✓	✓
Complimentary access to club lounge			✓
Dedicated check-in lines		✓	✓

### 5.6.2 Categories and classes as relational resources

Another characterization of category labels is that as sign-vehicles and symbols they cue meanings in relation to the roles and activities they are involved in. For instance, since at the work of the Front Desk manager is to provide and maintain guest relationships, and provide memorable experiences, to them the room labelled SPA SUITES signals and

cues meanings of aromatherapy, bubble bath, and romance. A manager on duty at the Front Desk explained how she makes one guest feel special:

“I have got one lady that checks in and always does it [checks in] with somebody else. She’s a regular now. I always try to upgrade her... sometimes to a SPA SUITE, you know, so she could have some romance.”

The same category label of rooms, however, cues and signals different meanings for Housekeeping staff. As their role mandate is to stage, clean and make rooms ready for the next occupants, the label SPA SUITES signifies meanings of sanitizing chemicals and clogged bathtubs. In a conversation about the challenges of the Housekeeping department, one room attendant asked me:

“Do you find that people are taking baths nowadays? Like, I don’t. I have a bathtub in my house but I never use it... People come to these SPA rooms. They see a large Jacuzzi tub and they want to use it. It requires a lot more work for me. They [pointing to the Jacuzzi tubs] don’t drain quickly. We then have to scrub them good and use chemicals.”

In a similar case, while the PREMIUM SUITES are considered the highest class of rooms, for Housekeeping they are the most cumbersome class. During a room-walk, the director of Housekeeping was insisting, almost ordering, the Front Desk director not to assign guests to rooms in the PREMIUM SUITES categories:

“It takes two and a half hours for a room attendant to go and clean it, or that is the average that it takes. So, don’t sell it. Only if you have to, but if you have that real VIP guest or whatever. Because this is ideally used as a show room. So that the sales team, they can come up here and they can say, ‘this is where your president or prime

minister can stay. This is where your CEO can stay when your group chooses to stay with us.’”

To emphasize, the meaning signified by category labels, as managerial resources, is relative to the activities in which these resources are employed. In essence, category labels as organizing elements have material properties that afford different possibilities for action. That is so the framing effect of category labels, to signify particular commonalities and similarities in relation to other elements, are contextually bound and relative to the activities at hand. Dramaturgically speaking, the role of category labels (including both aspects, relational and non-relational) in organizing the realities of the interactions are themselves framed by a larger structure. In the example above, the same category label SPA SUITE cues a different reality at the Front Desk than it does in Housekeeping. Yet it also must be kept in mind that the realities of the larger structures (Front Desk or Housekeeping) are themselves constructed by the meanings bestowed by their respective interaction scenes as enabled by the category labels.

## 5.7 Backstage drama

I began this chapter with the notion of backstage, and highlighted the activities occurring in this region that were about the production of frontstage scenes. From a dramaturgical perspective, I wrote that part of the backstage activities was about stage and scene directions. I further detailed backstage activities related to defining, scripting and structuring the frontstage roles. I then described similar backstage activities that defined, staged and structured the physical arena on which the frontstage interactions took place; physical spaces were bracketed and labeled, staged, and maintained as part of backstage organizing activities. Lastly, I shed light on another set of backstage activities, those of categorizing and classifying.

There are several common themes running through these backstage activities. First, such organizing activities involve some form of categorizing (grouping together) of individual things — and I use the term “things” in its most liberal meaning. For instance, behaviours or tasks are categorized into distinct roles (e.g. bellhops, doormen, Housekeeping

attendants); bracketed physical spaces are grouped, and categorized, as “rooms;” and customers are segmented and categorized as distinct identities (e.g., “business,” or “leisure”). In a way, this categorizing, as backstage organizing activity, emphasizes a social dimension of Weberian ideal-types (Weber, 1968, 1922) or a model for creating schemas and typifications that guide frontstage actors during their routinized interactions. Such categorizing, or typifying, produces abstractions that capture, and thus signal, similar attributes or family resemblances. It is important to note that such ideal types capture *apparent similarities*; that is, what appears as similar, i.e., not identical, among the individual phenomena. In a way, such ideal types produced as part of backstage organizing activities generate an abstract caricature that portrays some aspects of reality in an exaggerated way to make those aspects salient.

The second theme running through the backstage activities concerns the status of the categorized things. Any grouping involves splitting (Zerubavel, 1996). By the virtue of grouping some elements together, an act of splitting occurs that marks a distinction of the grouped elements from those outside. Categorizing or grouping a bunch of guests as VIP splits all guests into VIP and non-VIP; while categorizing guests as VIP captures apparent similarities among those guests, it simultaneously highlights their distinction from other, non-VIP, guests. Consequently, categorizing or typifying generates sets of distinct ideal-types between which differences matter. Therefore, a relational structure between the ideal-types is also socially organized to signify the status differences (i.e., order, rank, hierarchy, etc.).

The third theme that runs through the backstage organizing activities is about labelling the ideal-types. For instance, typified physical spaces are categorized, and labeled, as “ROOMS;” typified guests are labeled as VIP;” typified roles are labeled as “AGENTS,” or “AMBASSADORS;” etc. These labels, as artifacts or material resources, are sign-vehicles or status symbols that guide actors during their frontstage interactions. Such artifacts or resources not only grant meaning to the instances of interactions, but also themselves take their meaning from a larger context assembled through the patterns of interactions. As noted earlier, the category label SPA SUITE, as a material resource (the sign), signifies romance (the signifier) in daily interactions (the signified) to the Front

Desk. Meanwhile, the same sign signifies sanitizing chemicals and clogged bathtubs to Housekeeping.

These three themes in general depict a simple image of backstage organizing activities at HotelCo. Yet this simplified image presumes a sense of stability, a one-time production or a single show. That is, as part of backstage activities, various phenomena (tasks, physical spaces, artifacts, customers, etc.) are abstracted and typified into relational categories; the categories are labeled to signify the status distinction of their members; subsequently, the labels and signs are used as resources to frame — and to guide — the frontstage interactions. But the reality of backstage organizing differs in part because it is a constant organizing of ongoing performances. To that end, as part of backstage organizing activities, managers at HotelCo assess the ongoing status of frontstage performances (plural), and respond accordingly.

There is an ongoing dynamic between what occurs on the frontstage and what gets organized at the back. What follows next is an account of backstage re-organizing activities at HotelCo. To highlight this dynamic, I show how HotelCo's backstage managers account for the realities of the frontstage performances, and re-organize accordingly. In doing so, I expose how the drama at the backstage is about the status of the frontstage performance. As part of the drama, the backstage actors use sign-vehicles and status symbols to identify the status of HotelCo's performance. In response, the managers return to grouping and splitting phenomenon as part of their re-organizing activities.

## 5.8 The status of frontstage performances

What occurs at the backstage can be seen as organizing a structure that produces relationships between actors and governs their actions as well as their interactions with the guests (Giddens, 1984). The employment of category labels (as artifacts and material resources) in frontstage activities of HotelCo actors creates and develops a recursive relationship that further substantiates their use, and influence, on the actors' performance. Such created order, mediated by the material resources, generates a horizon of

expectations of ongoing interactions. That is, embedded in structure of categories exists inherent expectations of future behaviour. Once categories of guests are created and labeled, and their relative statuses are classified (e.g. BRONZE, SILVER, and GOLD), and once frontstage performances are equipped with these artifacts (for instance, category labels used in reports, signage, computer systems, etc.), an expectation of an organized frontstage performance is realized.

However, these structured expectations are not always realized. As I have observed, at times there are discrepancies between the expected frontstage performance (according to the rules and schema directed by the backstage) and the realities of the HotelCo-guest interactions. For instance, as organized at the backstage, the frontstage interactions schemas attached to the GOLD category of guests create expectations such as, as shown in the reception scenes of Act 2, Front Desk agents ought to offer complimentary room upgrades. It is also expected that the agents inquire about, record and accommodate any special requests this category of guests might have. For various reasons, however, these managerial expectations are not always met in reality. As an example, a Front Desk agent might search the computer system at the time of check-in for available room inventories and not be able to find a room in the assigned category of the guest. As I observed, and as the agents themselves informed me, several factors could contribute to this. For instance, it is possible that the guests occupying these room categories at that time had not already checked out. It is also possible that while the previous guests might have checked out, the Housekeeping attendants had not yet made the room available for new arrivals. In any case, it may not be possible — as the agents claim — for the Front Desk agents to ascertain the status of the rooms in the chosen categories. Consequently, upgrading the guest at the time of check-in would not meet the set expectations of the GOLD guest.

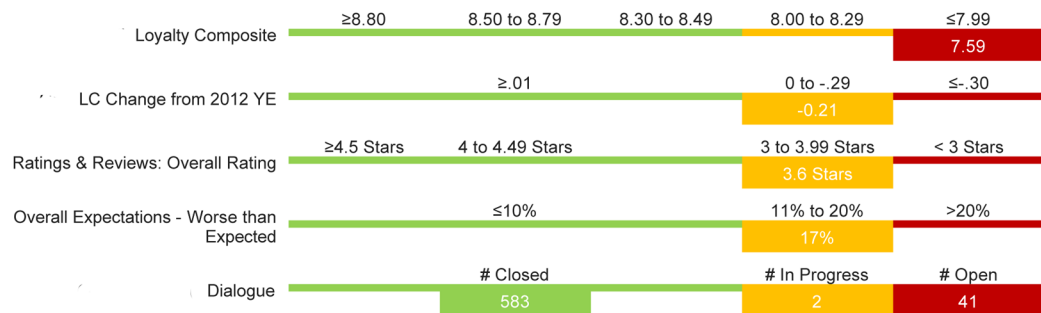
In other instances, as seen in Act 2 in Chapter 4, the failure to accommodate guest requests (e.g., preferences on room location, bedding, newspaper, etc.) has to do with failing to ascertain the status of the guest. In order to adjust HotelCo offerings according to the guest's category, the Front Desk agents rely on the computer systems as well as their own memories of past interactions with individual guests. In many cases, the recollection of that previous interaction may not match information recorded in the

computer system; e.g., an individual guest might have previously stayed at HotelCo for LEISURE (hence, categorized as such) and now is returning for BUSINESS; or the guest might have requested a change of pillows at night, which did not get recorded in the system, and now the assigned room is not made up to the guest's preferences.

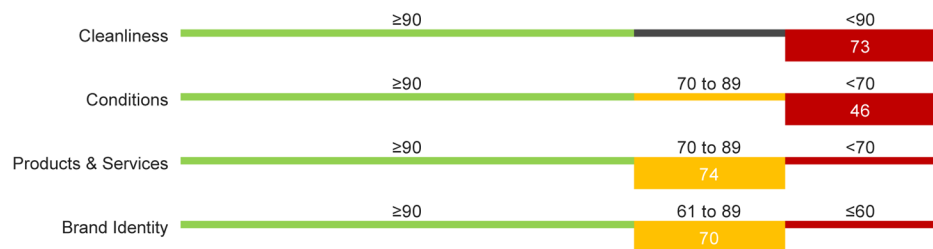
Recall the cases in which the expectations are recovered by HotelCo actors. For example, failing to find an upgrade room for the GOLD guest, Front Desk agents may instead offer a price adjustment, a rebate or a gift. Failing to have the room made up to the guest's preferences, the Housekeeping attendants would re-stage the room and offer gifts, amenities or even rebates. In many cases, however, the discrepancy between the expected and the experienced performances would result in guests' critique of the performance or complaints, most notably captured in the Guest Experience Survey.

**Figure 5.4: Snapshot of measures of performance at HotelCo**

#### Outcomes



#### Quality Assurance - 90 is compliant



Also recall the Guest Experience Survey (Chapter 4: Act 4) is a backstage activity organized to measure the frontstage performances. Beyond categorizing and classifying roles, physical spaces, and guests, HotelCo managers also cluster, categorize and classify the responses to the Guest Experience Survey, in particular, the measured complaints (see



Figure 5.4). During my time at HotelCo, at two different times approximately three months apart, two typified “issues” were characterized as problems with “status of the rooms,” and those with “status of the guests.” I next outline four backstage events highlighting how the managers re-organized frontstage productions in light of these two signs of [poor] performance.

## 5.8.1 Four reorganizing events

### 5.8.1.1 Event 1 - Housekeeping’s read of the “Status of Rooms” problem

The results of the Guest Experience Surveys abstracted the realities of frontstage performances into clusters of “issues” or “problems.” The main<sup>32</sup> issue category was identified as those relating to the “status of the rooms,” or the inability to ascertain the real status of rooms as vacant or occupied. It is quite cumbersome and difficult to know exactly the current status of a particular room. Some guests would prefer to check out in person at the reception counters, some exercise the self-checkout option through in-room TV screens, and some simply exit their rooms, leaving (or not leaving) the keys behind. It is not always known whether the room is still occupied or vacated. This is further exacerbated whenever GOLD guests are offered the “late check-out” option. Accordingly, many rooms are categorized as “pending status,” or labeled as “PS.” On the check-out date, if the guest has not already checked out either in person or on the system, Housekeeping attendants are often deployed to enter the room to look for signs of occupancy (e.g. luggage, personal belongs, etc.) or vacancy (e.g. keys). As a result, the time to convert the room status from occupied to vacant (referred to as the turnaround time) is both long and variant. Consequently, when arriving guests are checking in, it has become increasingly difficult to ascertain the status of rooms and to assign the reserved room type to the guest. The result is a dramatic increase in the number of guest complains related to room availability, as captured by the Guest Experience Survey.

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<sup>32</sup> The notion of “main” depicts the status (or the class) of the category.

To respond to this [poor] performance, the director of Housekeeping requested holding a three-day workshop. Several employees from various areas of Housekeeping, Front Desk and Finance were invited to participate in the workshop. At the beginning of each day of the workshop, however, the facilitators would report their progress to a larger group of managers including the director of Front Desk, the hotel manager, and the general manager. On the first day, one workshop facilitator – a manager from the Housekeeping department – opened the event by stating the workshop objectives:

“The primary focus of this project is to decrease the time the room in pending status. With this project, we only focus on individual reservations and not on [the category of] engineering issues because it’s a whole different matter if you include engineering issues; it’s like totally different whole area there. So, the process for this project, it starts when reservation is placed in PENDING [status], the moment it hits the system, hits PENDING and ends when Housekeeping changes status to VACANT CLEAN on the system. So, step one was Front Desk puts room in PENDING. So the guest comes to the desk, pulls out the reservation, and it goes into pending for whatever reason. Maybe we didn’t have a room ready for them, the guest had special requirements, special requests were added to the room. It goes into pending. The next step is when the Front Desk agent communicates the rush [request] for the rooms, that would be when Front Desk, agent contacts Housekeeping office to say, ‘We need the room rushed.’ Then the Housekeeping manager communicates the room number to the room attendant. Room attendant checks the room status. So, he opens up the room, visually inspects the room. Once they’re in the room, the room attendant prioritizes the pending room. Because once they get a call to rush a room, they have to determine, well, this is my

priority... they review the daily assignment sheet. So as opposed to doing the others [rooms], they might have to do this one. The next step is when the room attendant begins to clean. Once it is done, the room attendant changes the status to VACANT CLEAN. They punch in the code into the system, and the status is changed. At that point, we can then give out the keys to the room.”

Evident in the description of the project, as presented by the Housekeeping manager, is the moment when the room attendant ought to categorize (inspect and determine its status) the room, and then classify its priority in comparison to the assignment sheet or the expected structure. Prior to this event, Housekeeping would classify rooms in order of highest priority for cleaning: STAY-OVERS > SPECIAL REQUESTS > VIP > RUSH > VACANT DIRTY. That is, the established rules and schema would order the room attendants to clean STAY-OVER rooms (those occupied by guests who were not checking out that day) first and attend the VACANT DIRTY rooms (those vacated by guests but not yet cleaned) last. In between, if there were RUSH (requested by Front Desk), VIP (“important,” or picky guests), or SPECIAL REQUESTS (special set up of pillows, bedding, etc.), the attendants were to ascertain the priority and act accordingly.

After three full days of the workshop, the Housekeeping management’s response to the frontstage performance issue was to re-order how the room cleaning priorities were determined. The response was to maintain the room categories, but to change the class order of the categories. The new rules would order the attendants to clean RUSH and VIP first, followed by SPECIAL REQUESTS, and VACANT DIRTY, leaving the STAY-OVERS to the last.

“There was an explanation in the past for the cleaning order of the rooms: we need to take care of the customers in house. But now, if you take care of the VACANT-DIRTY [rooms] first, then you will have enough inventory to provide guests the room they need. Inventory to sell to the

guest, right? Otherwise you will be, a lot of people we call it rush, rush, rush, rush, rush, so that is what we [managers] found out. We believe to attend to vacant-dirty first takes care of this inventory and RUSH and VIPs won't happen 80 percent of the time anymore. So our final solution would be to stick this note on the cork board of each Housekeeping or put it up in the Housekeeping department's standardized room priority."

In this backstage event, the Housekeeping managers' response to the performances on the frontstage was to re-order the priority of rooms. In essence, the managers maintained the existing categories, but changed the relational hierarchy of the categories, i.e., the classification system. Responding to their read of the status of the performance, Housekeeping managers reorganized by repairing the existing structure.

#### 5.8.1.2 Event 2 - Front Desk's read of the "Status of Rooms" problem

Facing the same sign — that is the measures of the frontstage performance — the Front Desk managers, however, reacted differently. While the senior Front Desk managers were also present in the same above-mentioned workshop, to them the reality of the "status of rooms" problem, and thus its reorganization, was different. During the concluding report-out meeting on the last day, the director of Front Desk services expressed astonishment that the workshop participants [led by Housekeeping] had not looked at guest check-out behaviors and instead the focus had been fixed on of the "status of the rooms" problem.

"I don't get why we give out these late check-out [options] to them [guests]. Most are here in town for business anyway. Maybe they are here for a conference. They leave their room first thing in the morning. I don't know why we have to let them keep the room until 4 or 5 PM. We should revisit these rules and figure out a way of getting the rooms

back, early in the day, so you guys can start flipping [cleaning] them first thing in the morning.”

While in the previous event, the Housekeeping managers were seeking reorganizations in room readiness, the Front Desk director’s read of the status of the problem was keyed in her role as the director of “guest experience.” A few days after the workshop, the Front Desk director delivered her own solution to the problem to the general manager:

“[During the day] guests only use the room to store their luggage or to use the bathroom or shower quickly before check-out. Only a small group would actually use the room to sleep. Why are we holding up all these spaces as luggage stores or as bathing places? I suggest we carve out a space on the second floor as a large comfortable ‘day lounge,’ with spa-like facilities, private showers, lockers, and all that stuff. I’m even going to have reclining chairs for anyone who wants to rest quietly. Or maybe serve drinks, not sure. That way I will be able to give the GOLDS the option of early check-out with access to this lounge.”

Compared to Housekeeping’s re-classification response, the director of Front Desk sought a solution in re-categorizing space. Facing the same sign as signaled by the results of the Guest Experience Survey, her reaction involved breaking down the existing clustering of physical space (i.e. guest rooms), into STORAGE, SHOWERS, and REST AREAS, and re-bracketing them accordingly. While her response does not necessarily change the physical layout of the existing guest “rooms,” it does, however, detach their existing categorical meaning. That is, a bracketed space labeled as ROOM, to her, is an assembly of other frontstages, i.e., storage, showers and rest areas. These spaces are just not yet grouped or labeled as such. Subsequently, her response attaches new meanings, and a new label, to the second floor DAY LOUNGE – a category that previously did not have material existence at HotelCo. In short, the Front Desk manager’s reorganizing, in this event, was to create new clusters (i.e., new category) of spaces. Rather than repairing

the order of categories, her reorganization activities replaces the existing frontstage space clustering and labels.

### 5.8.1.3 Event 3 - Front Desk's read of the "Status of Guests" problem:

The other sign of [poor] performance of frontstage, as seen at the backstage, was related to recognizing the status of guests. While clustering guests into various categories (e.g. BUSINESS or LEISURE) and classes (GOLD, SILVER and BRONZE) helps bring an order, there still remain idiosyncratic behaviors of guests that are not identical to the categorical typifications or ideal-types. For instances, the existing structure is set to acknowledge GOLD guests and to offer "personal" services to this category of guests. Part of the drama at the reception stage is about the check-in agents' identification of the status of the guests. They rely on sign-vehicles and status symbols, such as formal identification (government ID) or computer profiles, to identify the status of the guests. Once the status has been ascertained, the agents then coordinate the interactions accordingly. Although the computer profile maintains records of guest interactions, not all nuances of those interactions are recorded. To that end, a "Comment" section at the bottom of the profile screen is designed to capture some idiosyncratic preferences of guests. For instance, a profile of a guest reads:

SITUATION: gst doesn't like when he is asked if he is been at the hotel before

RECOVERY: welcome him back all the time when he arrives/do not ask if it is first time at the hotel/ include comment on reservation so agents are informed

SITUATION: Guest prefers room near lounge or near 11th floor (so he can have wireless access from his room)

Although Front Desk agents are instructed to attend to these nuances for high-status guests, for various reasons, it has increasingly become difficult to identify the status of guests to accommodate their personal preferences. The result is a dramatic increase in the

number of guest complaints, as measured by the survey, on “Guest Status” not recognized during arrival.

To respond to this sign of frontstage performance, Front Desk managers launched a backstage project to reorganize the interactions. The result of the project included a two-step solution. First, the managers sought a new mechanism to identify the status of the guests in advance of their arrival at the check-in counter. It involved the doormen and the bellhops trying to identify the guest by [discreetly] reading the luggage name tags, or by tactfully getting the guest’s name. If an identification was not possible, the doormen and the bellhops would rely on other status identifiers (such as the clothing, the form of dress, a branded luggage, etc.) to ascertain the social status of the guest. If successful, they would use some means of communication (e.g. telephone, radio, or even in person) to announce the arrival of the guest to the reception desks. In the second step of the solution, the Front Desk managers established a new schema, a new order of importance to interact with guests. Previously, the Front Desk agents were instructed to carefully attend to the GOLD and the SILVER guests. The new order would make SPECIAL ATTENTION and VIP the top priorities. With this new rule, the Front Desk agents were to run and distribute a new computerized report called the “Expectation Report,” with a list of expected guests with sensitive needs requiring special attention. In summary, the Front Desk managers’ response to the “status of guest” issue involved repairing the existing structure with the same categories, but re-classifying the order of guests.

#### **5.8.1.4 Event 4 - Housekeeping’s read of the “Status of Guests” problem:**

Facing the same sign as in Event 3, Housekeeping managers, however, responded differently. When the senior managers of Housekeeping were involved, and informed of the new “early detection” of the guests’ special needs, to them the solution needed to be found in the realities of Housekeeping. Reacting to the Front Desk’s solutions, the director of Housekeeping insisted that the problem of special requests needed to be solved differently:

“Foam pillows! So any time that you have a guest who is requesting it, you need to remember that, and not just put in the request for foam pillows because the

blanket needs to be changed too. But to let us know way before we have made up that room. Because if we have made it as clean, and then you give us the request, we have to go and tear off the entire bed and make it up brand new with a synthetic pillow or whatever the guest wants.

“You call these guests the VIPs right? Why don’t you break down the guest based on what they want? Many times you have a request for foam pillows. And that is, I will say, 95% of the time that there is difference between foam pillow requests and feather ones. Get your staff to give us a breakdown of the guests, the number of NORMAL, FOAM, or FEATHER guests.”

As opposed to Front Desk’s re-classification solution to the status of guest problem, the director of Housekeeping sought a solution in re-categorizing the guests. Again, facing the same identical sign, his response involved re-categorizing guests based on their allergic needs, and on how his role would be affected. Instead of employing the existing categories of guests (SPECIAL ATTENTION, VIP, GOLD and SILVER), his solution involved re-grouping and re-clustering guests into new categories of NORMAL, FOAM ONLY, and FEATHER. This re-categorization changes the existing categorical meaning of guests; it detaches them from “guests with a history of interactions” to “individuals/customers with allergic reactions,” i.e., a category system that did not have a previous material existence at HotelCo. In short, the Housekeeping manager’s response in this event was to create a new structure. Rather than repairing the existing categories and classifications, it aimed at replacing them with new clustering and labels.

### 5.8.2 Abstractions, labels, and the re-organizing of the frontstage performance

As illustrated in these four events, in response to performance signs, backstage managers either replaced or repaired the established frontstage organization. While the former implies a new way of grouping or splitting, the latter is about establishing a new order of arrangement within the existing category system. Facing the signified problems of “status of rooms,” Housekeeping managers re-classified hotel rooms based on their cleaning order as it was material to their cleaning roles. Responding to the same sign, as it mattered to their accommodating roles, the Front Desk managers re-grouped existing physical spaces into new categories. Conversely, facing the signified problems of “status



of guests,” while the Front Desk aimed at repairing the category structure by changing the priority of attending to the guests, the Housekeeping managers responded by re-categorizing customers<sup>33</sup> according to their allergic needs.

The managers’ reactions to signs of [poor] frontstage performance are not trivial actions between repairing or replacing the existing organizing structure. Rather, their actions rely on their read of the situation, and their read of the realities of frontstage as seen from the back stage and as signified by the status-vehicles (e.g., results of the guest surveys or red alerts). The managers’ backstage actions also rely on the level of abstraction of the established structure as seen in their own clustered roles. Facing the same performance status symbols, managers dealing with categories in their abstract form respond with re-categorization of the referent elements (i.e. structural replacement). For the Housekeeping managers, the guests are abstract ideal-type entities. Guests appear, in reality, as representations in documents and reports, and occasionally in conversations as abstract identifies such as “*Joe Schmo* occupying 2418.” In turn, in Housekeeping, rooms are real entities. Rooms are interacted with, have specific individual identifiers (e.g. 2418), and are thus material. Conversely, for Front Desk managers, rooms are abstract ideal-type categories. There, rooms are interacted with in aggregate, in categories, and in reports or in computer systems. Even in Front Desk conversations, rooms appear as general identifiers or according to their labeled category: “Mr. Williams occupying a KING.” Yet, here, guests are real entities, with specific identifiers (Mr. Williams, and not “Joe Schmo”), who are interacted with in material presence.

In addition, for Housekeeping the mandate of their clustered role is to “clean rooms;” therefore, the structure that is established is aimed at supporting the work mandate. Likewise, at the Front Desk, the mandate of their clustered role is to “accommodate,” and to provide a memorable “guest experience.” Accordingly, there is a structure there in place to support such work mandate. Given the identical signs as faced by both clusters of backstage managers (Housekeeping and Front Desk), each re-organized frontstage

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<sup>33</sup> My point in shifting between “guests” and “customers” is to highlight the relative meaning of the individual interacting with HotelCo.

performances in accordance with their respected role mandates. However, their re-organization was influenced by the level of abstraction of the structures already in place. As a final thought, it appears that the level of abstraction of the realities of frontstage moderates the backstage organizing activities.

## Chapter 6

### 6 Discussions & implications

This dissertation began with a quest to understand the provision of accommodation as it relates to managers' organizing activities. By focusing on the intangible aspects of accommodation, I showed that to provide accommodation is to arrange for the realizations of phenomenological experiences. As evident at HotelCo, accommodation as a phenomenological experience is manifested as different places (e.g., "home away from home," a place to "crash," a party room, a shelter, a dormitory, etc.), as various activities (resting, dining, entertaining, working, etc.), and in different locations with different means. Subsequently, I showed that the provision of accommodation — arranging for the realization of such experiences — is to set the stages on which accommodation can both be performed by the service providers and experienced by the customers.

Given this conceptualization of accommodation, or the *thing* that is exchanged for money, I showed the dramaturgy involved in the provision of it. Managers bracket spaces at HotelCo to craft the physical stages (e.g., the lobby, the rooms, the lounge, etc.) on which accommodation is experienced. In addition, to set the stage and to set the context for the phenomenon that is experienced by the customers, managers employ and arrange symbols and artifacts that impress and frame the experience of the customers with intended meanings. For instance, to impress the meaning of romance onto the experience of customers in hotel rooms, managers at HotelCo employ towels folded into swan shapes and heart-shaped boxes filled with red rose petals. Moreover, as part of organizing activities, managers also give directions to the service providers (HotelCo actors) by creating ideal-type roles with scripted rules of interactions with customers.

Together, these organizing activities set the stage for the provision of accommodation. However, since accommodation is in essence a phenomenological experience, the provision of accommodation also means accommodating various instances (realizations) of the phenomenon. To that end, I showed how managers, as part of organizing activities, arrange multiple instantiations of accommodation targeted for specific groups of

customers. At HotelCo, managers arrange different setting of physical stages for customers in different groups. A clear example is the setting (the arrangement) of the Royal Suite intended for high-status guests. In another example, the lounge (a bracketed physical space) is arranged just for high-status customers. As illustrated, multiple staging for accommodation also involves organizing distinct role performances for distinct guest groups. Hotel employees interact with business guests differently than they do with leisure ones. When the check-in agent elects to provide Wi-Fi information to the business guests and swimming pool information to the leisure ones, that shows the distinct role performances for distinct guest groups. By arranging and configuring spaces, artifacts, and role performances, managers arrange for the possibility of multiple instances of accommodation. To put it differently, with different arrangements of symbols, things and people, managers help produce different instantiations of the phenomenon.

Based on the above, in this dissertation I showed three aspects of organizing for provision of accommodation. First, there is a form of abstraction involved in grouping and categorizing phenomena at HotelCo. To craft the stages on which customers experience accommodation, managers group physical spaces and categorize them based on similar characteristics. For instance, different physical spaces are grouped into room categories based on attributes such as floor level, size, bed type, etc. Managers also group and cluster employee actions into ideal-typical roles. For instance, actions related to welcoming customers are clustered into a role to be performed by the employees (the doormen) stationed at the entrance to the hotel. Actions related to check-in are grouped as a role to be performed by employees (the agents) stationed behind a counter staged in a bracketed area (the reception desk). Likewise, managers also group and categorize the customers into distinct segments (e.g. business vs. leisure, high status, transient, etc.).

Second, these abstract groups are then marked and labelled (e.g., room types such as KING or QUEEN, roles such as AGENT or LOBBY AMBASSADOR, and customer segments such as GOLD or BRONZE). These labels are used as linguistic resources in communication, and as organizational artifacts such as symbols in organizational documents, forms and computer systems. The labels signify salient attributes of the categorized phenomena in order to shape the reality of the service interactions. The third

aspect of organizing involves classifying, i.e., setting status relationships between abstract categories and, by association, between real phenomena. At HotelCo, managers classify, prioritize, and organize status positions between grouped things (e.g., customers) in order to create interaction schema or rules of behaviour. For instance, while the check-in agents interact differently with a TRANSIENT customer than they do with a VIP one, the difference in the interactions is ruled by the difference in the [class] status of the two categories. Similarly, Housekeeping attendants prioritize cleaning the rooms based on a classification scheme. The difference in cleaning order is ruled by the difference in the class status of the room categories. In essence, while classifications are intended to create ordered arrangements, they also generate orders and rules. These rules of engagement are further enabled by the category labels (as material resources) that signify the status of the interaction with the customers.

The above images of the provision of service suggest an instance of an organized system (an organization, an orderly society) configured with a structure of classified categories—as abstract concepts with associated symbols and labels—that represent real phenomena. Such an organized system produces sets of distinct possibilities of accommodation that are experienced by customers. This image, in a sense, is akin to the existing views of orderly, systematic, routinized, or McDonaldized productions of services as portrayed by strategy and management scholars (Leidner, 1993; Ritzer, 1996; Skaggs & Huffman, 2003). The attention is on the system—on the configured arrangements of symbols, things, and people’s actions—that produce sets of distinct possibilities of customer experiences.

In my dissertation, I showed that what is missing from this image is the organizing (a verb) work of managers. By focusing on interactions between various actors, rather than merely actions of HotelCo employees, I highlighted the situated and the interpretive aspects of the encounters between HotelCo and the customers. In addition, the relational aspects of the roles, and the material and interpretive aspects of the artifacts (including the category labels) influence the realities of the service encounters. As a result, the produced experiences are not always perfectly aligned with the expected or the imagined accommodations. Yet since the produced phenomena (instances of accommodation) are

at the core of the exchange with the customers, customers evaluate their experiences as produced by HotelCo. Subsequently, at times and in some instances, customers' evaluations result in infelicities with HotelCo's performance to which the managers respond.

I showed that to identify the status of HotelCo-customer exchanges, managers measure customers' experiences. Measuring the phenomenological experiences also involved abstractions into classified categories that represent customers' experiences. For instance, the guest experience survey reduces the infinite variability of customer experiences into categorized groupings of experience (e.g. "experience with check-in" or "room cleanliness"). Given the managers' read of the situation and their interpretation of the status of HotelCo's performance, as signaled by the classified categories of customers' experiences, managers respond by re-organizing and re-arranging the symbols, the things and people's actions. This dynamic animates the organized system into a perpetual organizing entity, and thus it resonates with accounts of structuration as the conditions governing the continuity and transformation of structures, and therefore the reproduction of systems (Giddens, 1979, p. 66). Given these, the results of my study speak to several literatures, including organizing structures, managers' work, service work and occupation, and categories. What I outline next is a brief account of the implications of my findings on the above-noted fields, all of which form the basis of my future studies following this dissertation.

## 6.1 Implications on theory

### 6.1.1 Structures of service organizations

There has been a long tradition in management and organizational theory of examining organizational structures (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Thompson, 1967), and with the growth of the service industries, scholars and practitioners are increasingly interested in understanding how service firms organize themselves (Blois, 1983; Schneider & White, 2004; Skaggs & Huffman, 2003). Structures are conceived as inter-subjective schemas and resources that when put in practice, tend to govern, shape and influence organizational actions. While traditional notions of organizational structure depict rigid

and deterministic views of rules that enforce order on organizational activities, more recent instances of organizational structure — e.g., configurations (Fiss, 2009), complementarity and interdependence of elements (Siggelkow, 2002), or coordination mechanisms (Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009)— are less rigid or deterministic in their conceptualizations.

Nevertheless, our conceptualization of organizational structure still remains problematic as it views structure in an abstract way. Barley and his colleagues suggest that part of this problem in the literature is rooted in earlier works of contingency theorists (Hickson, Pugh, & Pheysey, 1969; Thompson, 1967; Woodward, 1958) who studied production systems in organizations, comprising people, processes, and machines — all of which must be organized to transform inputs into outputs (Barley, 1986; Orlikowski & Barley, 2001). These studies essentially split the organization into two distinct components: the material aspect, i.e., the technology or the production system, and the social aspect, i.e., the organizational structure. Leonardi and Barley (2008) further argue that although scholars recognize the importance of the material and social factors, due to the perceived dualism, most studies of organizations have a tendency to favour one or the other. As a result, our conceptualization of organizations, and their structure, remains abstract in nature. To overcome this problem, as a starting point, Barley and colleagues call for the reconciliation of the two aspects of organizing, the material and the social.

The findings of my dissertation join this call for a reconciliatory view of organizations. My findings expose categorization and classification as organizing principles at HotelCo. As discussed earlier, managers organize the production of accommodation by categorizing *things* such as customers, rooms, and actions, and with situating them in a classification schema that governs interactions between HotelCo and the customers. The findings of this study further show the social and material aspects of categories. While managers employ categories as organizational elements, the meaning of categories, and thus their organizing effect, is relational to the social setting, in particular, to the work of the employees. For instance, the category SPA SUITE cues a different reality in the social setting of Front Desk than does in Housekeeping. The findings of my dissertation

show that categories, as organizing elements, have material aspects as they appear as linguistic resources or symbols in organizational artifacts.

The dual aspect of categories (material and social elements of organizing) helps reconcile the split in the conceptualization of organizations as production systems on the one hand and coordinating structures on the other. Such findings are consistent with recent conceptualizations of structure in sociology. Structures are no longer regarded as abstract exogenous rules, but instead as the duality of schemas and resources, social and material, that mutually constitute one another (Giddens, 1979; Latour, 2005; Sewell, 1992). Rules are applied norms and procedures that govern and regulate organizational life, whereas resources (human and non-human) empower actions. For Giddens (1984) resources are both authoritative and allocative, which are necessary for any coordination of action. As shown in this dissertation, categories, symbols and artifacts, as well as people in the embodied sense, are material resources in an authoritative and allocative sense that are necessary for coordinating of the provision of accommodation.

While structural properties make action possible, structures themselves have no reality beyond their instantiation in resources and interactions. According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices they recursively organize (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). Given these conceptualizations, future research can explore managers' organizing actions for the provision of accommodation beyond merely establishing a production system of rules or coordinating mechanisms. Rather, it could investigate instantiations of these rules and schemata in authoritative and allocative resources that both influence actions and themselves are re-produced in interactions.

### **6.1.2 Managerial work and work of managers**

With the growing importance of service organizations in the economy, organization theorist and management scholars have shown concerns with changes to the nature of organizations. However, there remains a large gap between the theories and the realities of organizations (Bechky, 2011). Part of this problem is that our theories are not well grounded and do not successfully capture the realities of organizations, in particular what



the inhabitants actually do. Related to this, Barley and his colleagues further suggest that “organization theory’s efforts to make sense of postbureaucratic organizing is hampered by a dearth of detailed studies of work.” (Barley & Kunda, 2001, p. 76) Accordingly, the literature has mostly shown concern with abstract concepts such as strategies, structures, and environments as the central and salient aspect of organizations. As a result, studies of what organizational inhabitants actually do have either been pushed to the background or found a home in associated fields of research such as the sociology of work and industrial psychology.

To overcome these shortcomings, a few scholars in recent years have either returned to practice — to the focus on what people in organizations do (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, & Yanow, 2009; Nicolini, 2012) — or to the studies of work and occupation (Barley, 1996; Bechky, 2003, 2010; Orr, 1996). Because of the interdependence of work and organization, and since work is the primary activity of people within organizations, examining everyday practices of people grounds our conceptualizations of organizations. Given these, and given the focus on the organizing work of managers, the findings of my dissertation speak to the literature that intersects work and organizing (Barley, 1996; Barley & Kunda, 2001; Bechky, 2006). By employing dramaturgy as an analytical lens, the findings of this study help conceptualize new images of managers’ work.

One way to do this is by considering managers working at an empirical interface: a point at which a “system” of provision of service meets with the vagaries of the real world. Given this view, future research could investigate managers work in re-arranging the “system” of provision of service by manipulating symbols, things and people. These, in essence and in form, are similar to Barley’s sketch of the work of technicians (cf. Barley, 1996). Much like those of the technicians, the managers’ work in bridging the real and the representational aspects of the organization pivots around two complementary work of repairing (caretaking) or replacing (transforming) the organization. This is particularly evident in the outlined four events at the backstage when, given the same performance issues as signaled by the results of guest experience surveys (status of the guests, and

status of the room), the managers respond by either repairing the existing classification schemata, or replacing the category system.

### 6.1.3 Service Work

In addition to contributing to studies of work, and in particular managers' work, the results of this dissertation also speak to the literature of sociology of service work. Most of the studies in the sociology of work have largely focused on explaining the impact of customers to the activities, or to the work, of service providers. In the introductory essay to the special issue of service work in the *Journal of Work and Occupation*, Lopez (2010) argues that some core questions related to service work have been neglected. The materiality of service work, in particular, is a concern of the author, and as he notes, most studies of the materiality of service work have been trapped by the strong influence, yet a narrow focus, of embodied feelings as advanced by Arlie Hochschild (1983).

Taking the dramaturgy of service work seriously I show the role of material entities — beyond the embodied actors — in framing the realities of the service encounter. In particular, by focusing on the moments of interaction between the service provider and the customers, the findings of my research show the re-presentational role of symbols and artifacts in cuing and directing the actions of the service provider. For instance, recall the work of the check-in agent in relying on material clues such as the guests' credit cards, straw hats or plaid pants, to direct the interactions in a particular way. Or recall the work of Housekeeping attendants in negotiating their work order by reading the status of the room as signaled by the presence or absence of the customers or their belongings. Such findings help push our understanding of service work beyond the traditions of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) or service triangle (Leidner, 1993), and bring attention to the drama involved in the service workers' negotiation with the material world. Research that further investigates materiality of service work could add interesting insights into the tangible aspects of the often conventionally considered intangible service work.

### 6.1.4 Categories

Management scholars are paying growing attention to categories as sociological approaches to understanding organizational phenomena. However, in a recent analysis of

the literature, Vergne & Wry (2014) discovered that researchers studying categories tend to focus on two concepts of categories: either the self-categorization of organizations (Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989) or the categories of organizations imposed by external audience (Zuckerman, 1999). Put differently, scholars' attention has mostly been given to products or organizational outcomes or to organizations as unified whole entities. Subsequently, categories are often considered to be components of the external environment, as observed by consumers or the audience of organizations. As a result, categories are taken-for-granted forces of isomorphism (Hsu & Hannan, 2005).

While management and organizational scholars continue with studies of categories *between* organizations, little attention has been given to the role of categories *inside* organizations. As shown in this dissertation, the term category implies organizing in its transitive verb sense, i.e., categorization. Therefore, categories as principles of organizing inside organizations have largely been underexplored. Such an oversight implies that management scholars interested in categories might continue to overemphasize the isomorphic aspect of categories. By taking a dramaturgical approach to studying the provision of service, the findings of my dissertation highlight the social aspects of categories-in-action and how categories cue meanings in relation to the roles and activities in which they are employed. The findings expose how the same categories (e.g. SPA SUITE) signal different meanings given different occupational groups. The category SPA SUITE implies the meaning of romance at the Front Desk, while in Housekeeping it invokes meanings of clogged bathtubs, chemical cleanings, etc. As a result, one opportunity for future research would be to investigate the isomorphic aspect of categories by exploring the meaning of categories in relation to the activities at hand.

The findings also contribute to our understanding of categories in two other ways. First, current studies of category durability, change and emergence are mostly occupied with the political dynamics and power relations of the category members (Lounsbury & Rao, 2004; Negro, Koçak, & Hsu, 2010). The findings of this dissertation bring focus to the dynamics of categorical durability and change as employed and used and interpreted in managers' work. In this dissertation I showed how backstage activities of managers involves reorganizing the frontstage performances. As part of their reorganizing

activities, managers change existing groupings and categorization of phenomena. As an example, the Housekeeping group re-arranged the existing categorization of guests based on the guests' status with the loyalty club to one with based on the guests' allergic requirements. In another example, I showed how the Front Desk services group re-arranged the existing categorization of physical space and changed the underlying meaning of the category "hotel rooms." In part, these re-categorizations are contingent upon the degree of abstraction of the entities they re-present. Therefore, to understand the dynamics of categories, category durability and change, the result of my dissertation suggest the need for understanding the dynamics between the social and the material aspects of categories. One way to do this is by considering categories as boundary objects and empirically treating categories as least common denominators of organizing work thus investigating their use, meaning, and impact, across communities of practice.

Lastly, related to the above, citing the work of Roch et al, (1978) on category hierarchies, Vergne and Wry (2014) suggest that future research in category evolution ought to consider the relational position of categories with respect to one another. By considering the relational aspect of categories, the findings of this dissertation also illuminate a nuanced conceptualization between categories and classes. While seemingly similar yet materially different, categories are clusters of entities with familiar resemblances, whereas classes are a socially imposed normative order between categories themselves. Such a distinction can help bring new light onto the social and relational dynamics involved in category evolution.

### 6.1.5 Constructive role of the customer

This study began with the quest to investigate the provision of accommodation as it relates to the managers' organizing activities. In doing so, I traced various moments of service interactions, in various stages, at HotelCo. The analysis focused on accommodation as a phenomenological experience, thus the findings showed that to provide accommodation is to arrange for the realization of phenomenological experiences. I further exposed the role of things, symbols, and people, in shaping the realities of service interactions and therefore in the realization of phenomenological experiences. In particular, I focused on the constructive role of HotelCo actors—from

check-in agents and housekeeping attendants, to managers and directors of departments— in shaping the realities of accommodation. In short, this study primarily took on the perspective of the service providers, HotelCo, and the actors involved in constructing the provision of accommodation.

What is largely missing is an analysis of the constructive role of the customer in shaping the realities of service interactions and consequently in the realization of accommodation. As mentioned above, the findings of this study expose the role of things, symbols and people in shaping the realities of service interactions from the perspective of the provider. It is likely that the customers also play a role in shaping the realities of the interactions by manipulating things, symbols, and people.

While this study does not extensively explore this, there are three moments in the data from which one could consider such possibilities. First, recall that in Chapter Three I illustrated various images of accommodation at HotelCo; customers use the setting as a home-away-from-home, a place to rest, a party room, a dormitory, a private space to do private business, a public space to socialize with other patrons, a care facility, a working space, and even a place to commit suicide. This is not an exhaustive list, of course. What customers choose to do at HotelCo, under the umbrella of accommodation, sets the backdrop for the set of relationships they have with HotelCo actors. The fact that accommodation is a phenomenological experience, that there is no predefined set nor an apparent limit to the experiences of accommodation, suggests that customers influence the meaning of it and hence the definition of service interactions.

Second, customers also interact with the social structures, such as norms, rituals and ceremonies, in which the exchanges with the hotel are embedded. For instance, at HotelCo a doorman described how some customers do not perform the rituals surrounding the handshake tipping [when the customer tips the doorman with during handshake with a folded bill in their palms]. Arguably, the way that customers perform such societal norms or adhere to ceremonies has an influence on the service interactions and consequently in the way the service is provided.

Lastly, customers also interact with the structure installed by the organization, such as the imposed categories and classes. The fact that some guest categories, such as VIP, GOLD, SILVER, and BRONZE or some room categories such as KING, QUEEN and DOUBLE are used by both parties (HotelCo and customers) suggests that customers also employ these categories to influence the meaning of the interactions and likely the boundary of their experiences. Recall how Ms. Michelle uses the ascribed VIP status to remain largely anonymous despite her frequent presence at HotelCo. Alternatively, consider how an airline crew uses the classification of KING versus QUEEN room to maintain a social status distinction between the captain and the cabin crew. By the request of the airline, the cabin crew are assigned QUEEN rooms on a floor below the captain who gets a KING room instead.

Future work could explore the role of customers in constructing the realities of service interactions and the influence they have in the provision of service. One could potentially investigate how customers interact with the phenomenon, accommodation, and the larger context in which the phenomenon is experienced (e.g., the social and organizational setting). In addition, one could explore how customers manipulate symbols, things and people in influencing the meanings or the realities accommodation. Lastly, it would be interesting to investigate how these two distinct perspectives—the providers' and the customer's—create order, or disorder, in exchanges between them.

## 6.2 Implications on practice

Beyond the theoretical implications listed above, the findings of this study have significant managerial implications as well. While the study is focused on the phenomenon of hotel accommodation, the implications go beyond hotels and are transferrable to other service settings. With this study, the traditional view of the provision of service as the design followed by the delivery of intended consistent services no longer makes sense. Based on conventional managerial wisdom, given the firm's strategy and the competitive landscape of the focal firm, managers design (or choose) a portfolio of services and then organize the firm to deliver such services. As part of organizing to deliver consistent services managers make a series of decisions about the

definition of behavioural norms, the physical environment of the service, and the employment of human and non-human resources.

This study also recognizes that the customers interpret and evaluate the meanings embedded in the provided services and such interpretations and evaluations may not align with the meanings as intended by the provider. The findings show how such evaluations are varied among customers, and are dependent on the social or cultural background of the customers. Take for example the story of the bellhop at HotelCo when he, as an intended courtesy on behalf of the customer pressed the floor-button in the elevator. As the bellhop recalls the customer reacted with anger saying, “I am not handicapped, I am quite capable of reaching the button.” Evidently, the customer had not interpreted the bellhop’s action as it was intended by the bellhop. This implies that services—the firm’s outputs—may not be evaluated by customers as they are intended by the firm. In some instances, such as in the example above, the customers might under-value the actions resulting in dissatisfactions with the firm’s services. In some other cases, the customers might interpret the actions in a way that might over-value the actions. Either way there are moments of misalignment between what the managers (and service providers) intend as the firm’s outputs and what is received by the customers.

One way that managers have traditionally aimed at overcoming these misalignments is by segmenting the market to re-align categories of outputs with the targeted classes of customers. Within each market segment, the customers (in theory) evaluate the category of outputs nearly equally and as intended by the firm. However, the findings of this study show that the managers’ use of categorization and classification create their own set of problems within the service firm. As highlighted in the study, in service interactions ascertaining the category to which the customer belongs is dependent on identification symbols that are themselves open to interpretation by the service providers. In a way, miscategorising or misidentifying the customer—an event that becomes more likely as the firm further segments the customers and the outputs—yields its own set of problems in the provision of service.

Therefore, inherent in the nature of the provision of service lies a tension between the moments of misaligned values and the moments of misidentification of the customer. On the one hand tilting the firm towards more ‘standard’ outputs (i.e. few generic service) would generate either dissatisfied customers or extremely satisfied ones. This would result in a top line challenge for managers: there are either revenue losses or losses of revenue opportunities. On the other hand, tilting the firm toward more ‘customized’ outputs would generate the operational risks of misidentifying the customers. This would result in bottom line challenges for managers. The costs of organizing, coordinating, monitoring, and controlling increase. In short, the findings of this study suggest that, by recognizing the inherent tensions in the provision of service, managers need to consider a balance between routinization and customization of services, between intended and improvised services.

### 6.3 Implications on research approach

In Chapter 2, as part of a discussion on this dissertation’s approach to research, I built on the arguments of Barley and Kunda’s (2001) and Bechky’s (2011) that organizational theorists’ efforts to make sense of organizations fall short as they fail to take into account the situated aspects of organization. This point was further stressed by the authors’ critique of the literature’s preoccupation with abstract organizational concepts as they appear to scholar’s from a distance. What these authors suggest is that the approach in studying organizations has predominantly focused on investigating the dramaturgical front of the organization, i.e., aspects of the organization that *appear* to organizational scholars as audience members observing the performance of the organization. These authors further suggest that to understand the realities of organizations, scholars ought to go behind the staged performance of organizations and enter the dramaturgical backstage as investigators.

Given these, in my dissertation, the research method of choice was ethnography, an approach that purports to cross this chasm through bridging between emic and etic understanding of the organization. To put differently, as an ethnographer I entered the “world” of a group (HotelCo) to investigate the backstage behaviours, and the norms and structure of organizing, in the daily lives of the inhabitants. The goal of ethnographer, as



stressed by Malinowski, is "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world" (1922, p. 25). In a way, the goal of ethnography is to study the lives of organizational members from a backstage perspective, behind the apparent front of the performance. But at the same time, the goal of ethnographer is to re-present these to an outside world (the etic approach) for those who eventually use the product of the ethnography.

To present this point differently, my goal as ethnographer is to present the backstage findings in the framework of a dissertation. Taking the dramaturgy of research seriously, there is a show involved in presenting the organization to the audience (the readers). Therefore, although I, as an ethnographer, might have had access that allowed me to observe closely the daily lives of organizational inhabitants, writing and presenting the results is a performance in itself, a dramaturgical show. In conclusion, this dissertation, a re-presentation of the accounts of HotelCo's backstage, becomes an artifact that frames for the reader a sense of the realities of HotelCo, as performed in my act of presenting.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A: UWO Ethics Approval



Richard Ivey School of Business  
The University of Western Ontario

Richard Ivey School of  
Business  
The University of Western  
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### Use of Human Subjects - Ethics Approval Notice

**Principal Investigator:** Mark Zbaracki

**Re PhD Candidate:** Maziar Raz

**Review Number:** 009/12 BREB

**Protocol Title:** A Sociomaterial Perspective on Dynamic Capabilities:  
Comparative Case Analysis of Four Hoteliers

**Ethics Approval Date:** November 9, 2012

**Expiry Date:** November 9, 2013

**Documents Reviewed and Approved:** Ethics Protocol, Letter of Information and Consent Form, Recruitment  
Email, Company Letter, interview Questions, Research Brief

This is to notify you that The Ivey School of Business Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (NMREB) which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above named research study on the approval date noted above.

This approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the NMREB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information. If you require an updated approval notice prior to that time you must request it using the UWO Updated Approval Request Form.

During the course of the research, no deviations from, or changes to, the study or consent form may be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to the subject or when the change(s) involve only logistical or administrative aspects of the study (e.g. change of monitor, telephone number). Expedited review of minor change(s) in ongoing studies will be considered. Subjects must receive a copy of the signed information/consent documentation.

Investigators must promptly also report to the NMREB:

- a) changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
- b) all adverse and unexpected experiences or events that are both serious and unexpected;
- c) new information that may adversely affect the safety of the subjects or the conduct of the study.

If these changes/adverse events require a change to the information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment advertisement, the newly revised information/consent documentation, and/or advertisement, must be submitted to this office for approval.

Members of the NMREB who are named as investigators in research studies, or declare a conflict of interest, do not participate in discussion related to, nor vote on, such studies when they are presented to the NMREB.

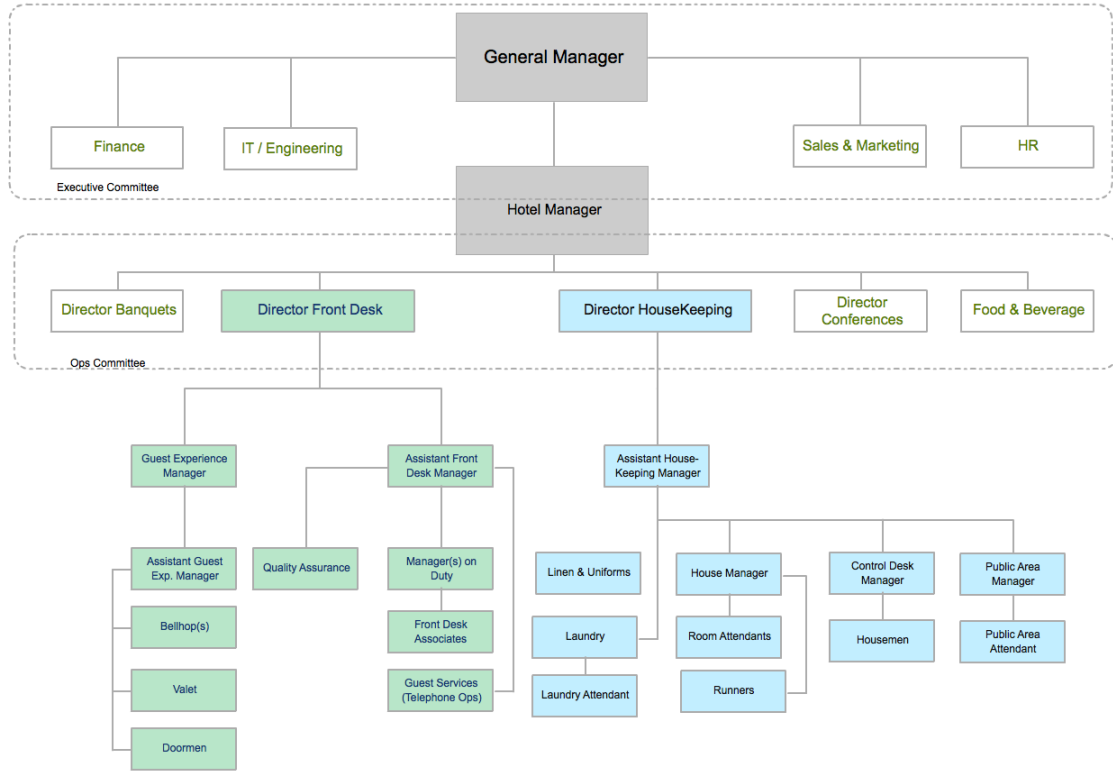
Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Roderick White

Associate Dean - Faculty Development & Research

*This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files.*

**Appendix B: Snapshot of HotelCo's organization chart**



**Appendix C: Quantitative details of interview and observation data**

<i>Informant</i>	2012-2013	Interview	Observation
Divisional Manager (HQ)	1	x	
Regional Manager (HQ)	1	x	
General Manager	2	x	
Hotel Manager	1	x	
Director of Banquets	1	x	
Director of Security	1	x	
Director of HR	1	x	x
Director of Engineering	1	x	
Director of Finance	1		x
Director of Food & Beverage	1		x
Front Desk Services			
Director of Front Desk Services	1	x	x
Manager, Guest Experience	2	x	x
Manager, Guest Services	1	x	x
Manager-on-duty, Front Desk	8	x	x
Front Desk associates	23	x	x
Bellhops	4	x	x
Concierge	2	x	x
Doormen	4		x
Valet & Parking	3		x
Telephone operators	4	x	x
Housekeeping			
Direct of Housekeeping	1	x	x
Manager, Housekeeping supplies	4		x
Manager, Housekeeping Operations	1	x	x
House Manager, Housekeeping	7	x	
Room attendants	19	x	x
Runners	7		x
Supply room	2		x
Laundry	2		x
Security	3		x
<b>Total</b>	<b>109</b>		

**Appendix D: Categories of guest preferences as appear in HotelCo's computer system****Room Preferences**

SMK Smoking  
NON Non Smoking

**Bed Preferences**

2Q 2 Queen  
S Single  
K King  
Q Queen  
2D 2 Double  
2S 2 Single  
DIS Wheelchair Access

**Floor Preferences**

UPR Upper Floor  
LWR Lower Floor

**Pillow Preferences**

DPL Down/Feather Pillow  
FPL Foam Pillow

**Newspaper Preferences**

LOC Local Newspaper  
WSJ Wall Street Journal  
FIN Financial Times  
USA USA Today

## Appendix E Curriculum Vitae

### CURRICULUM VITAE

#### MAZIAR RAZ

#### EDUCATION

- 204            Ph.D. Candidate in General Management & Strategy 2014 (anticipated)  
(anticipated) Ivey Business School, Western University
- 2005            Master of Business Administration  
Ivey Business School, Western University
- 2002            Bachelor of Science in Physics and Applied Mathematics

#### ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

- 2012-2014      Lecturer, Ivey Business School, Western University  
Strategy Implementation (HBA)  
Strategy Implementation (MBA)
- 2012            Guest Instructor, Concordia University  
Entrepreneurial Management
- 2011-2012      TA, Ivey Business School, Western University  
Transcendent Leadership (MBA)

#### RESEARCH

Raz, M., Zbaracki, M (2014). Re-categorizing and re-classifying; an ethnographic study of a hotel managers' organizing and re-organizing work. *European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS)*, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Raz, M., Zbaracki, M (2014). Dynamic Capabilities: Maintaining The Distinction Between Practices And Possibilities. *Academy of Management (AoM)*, Philadelphia, PA.

Raz, M. (2013). Reconfiguring capabilities: the role of sociomaterial arrangements in extending front desk services of a hotel. *European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS)*, Montreal, Canada.

Raz, M. (2012). Locus of agency in improvisation: a phenomenological perspective on structured playfulness. *Academy of Management (AoM)*, Boston, MA.

Raz, M. (2011). Theatrical improvisation revisited: balancing the tension between inner arrangements and outer settings, *European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS)*, Gothenburg, Sweden.

Raz, M. (2010). Identity rigidity and its relationship with improvisation, *Academy of Management (AoM)*, Montreal, Canada.

### **AWARDS AND HONOURS**

2012            Al Mikalachki PhD Research Fund, Spring Competition

2008-2012     Richard Ivey School of Business Plan for Excellence

2009-2010     2009-2010     John F. Rankin Doctoral Scholarship

### **PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS & SERVICE**

Organizer: Ontario Qualitative Methods Working Group

Ad Hoc Referee: Academy of Management (BPS, MOC, OMT)

Professional Affiliations: Academy of Management, Strategic Management Society, European Group for Organizational Studies