

ONE ‘Better Than Your Mother’

THE LUXURY PRODUCT

Then I pick up the telephone
and call Room Service.
Oooooooooo I absolutely love Room Service.
They always know it’s me
and they say “Yes, Eloise?”

Kay Thompson, *Eloise* (1955)

One of my first interviewees was Martha, a white woman in her early fifties who frequently stayed in luxury hotels with her husband, the chair and CEO of a large recycling company. Asked to describe “incredible service,” she mentioned a particular hotel, calling it “great” for the following reasons:

Well, their linens, and the services, and they bring things, they’re just so accommodating. They go out of their way to make you feel, y’know, like you matter. “If you weren’t here, we would be very unhappy about

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it.” . . . They zero in on you, and they make you feel like you’re not lost in this huge crowd. And I think that’s really the nicest thing, because all of us, when we’re traveling, we’re not home. And to be taken care of and to have somebody who’s gonna do things for you in a way that’s, like, better than your mother! . . . It makes you feel good.

Martha starts by mentioning material items—the linens—but she quickly shifts to identifying the workers’ treatment of guests as the main element of luxury service. She describes personalized, genuine attention, the exertion of extra effort, and the legitimation of needs. She is talking about a sense of being cared for and made to feel special in a way beyond what she might expect even from her mother.

Though they usually use a different language, managers’ comments in my interviews with them echoed Martha’s intuitive emphasis on “positive human interactions” as the crucial feature of luxury.¹ Although they mentioned the physical aspects of the hotels—sophisticated, distinctive design; unusual, high-quality amenities; and comfortable rooms—managers saw distinctive service as the key to separating luxury from non-luxury hotels and to distinguishing luxury properties from one another. For instance, Isadore Sharp, chair and CEO of the Four Seasons chain, stated that luxury “isn’t just building a different kind of building and adding more amenities; it comes through the service element.”²

This chapter explores the defining elements of luxury service as they emerged implicitly and explicitly in interviews with guests and managers, in industry literature, and in ethnographic observation. These aspects include personalization; anticipation, legitimation, and resolution of guests’ needs; unlimited available physical labor; and a deferential, sincere demeanor on the part of workers. Interactive luxury service entails more than broadly conceived “emotional labor,” which Hochschild defines as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” that is sold for a wage.³ It is, in fact, akin to intersubjective “recognition,” which Jessica Benjamin terms “that response from the other which makes meaningful the feelings, actions, and intentions of the self.” Luxury service entails recognizing a person’s “acts, her feelings, her intentions, her existence, her independence.”⁴

Guests prefer to interpret luxury service as care, akin to that provided

by the idealized mother Martha invokes. But this service is also similar to the labor of another kind of reproductive worker: the domestic servant, who provides both physical labor and deference while lacking authority. I explore the twin issues of care and subordination in the context of structural inequality. I also describe the organization of luxury service, showing how its production is divided up among workers with radically different jobs and personal characteristics and analyze what this division of labor means for worker consent and the normalization of inequality. I begin with a short history of the luxury hotel.

THE RISE OF LUXURY HOTELS

The word *hotel* came into use in the United States in the late eighteenth century to designate taverns and inns that served upper-class clients, a new distinction in hospitality practices.⁵ The upscale Tremont Hotel, which opened in Boston in 1829, has long been considered the first “modern” hotel in the United States.⁶ The Tremont and other hotels that followed it during the nineteenth century demonstrated impressive technical achievements in architecture, services, and amenities. In the early years, these included gas lighting, private rooms, and indoor plumbing; later, hotels introduced electricity and elevators to marveling guests. Luxury hotels were defined by their large size, tasteful aesthetics, cleanliness, high-quality food, and prime location, as well as the privacy and security they afforded and service marked by “faultless personal attention.”⁷ The “highest achievement of the first class hotel” was that “each guest may easily fancy himself a prince surrounded by a flock of courtiers.”⁸ These “public” institutions were seen to represent modernity, technological innovation, and progress.⁹ Important social and political figures frequented or even lived in these hotels.¹⁰

By the 1930s, personalized service, replacing the earlier obsequious, racialized servitude, had surpassed technological innovation as the key selling point for and main managerial concern in grand hotels such as the Waldorf-Astoria.¹¹ But after midcentury, palace hotels declined in importance. In the 1950s, development of the “motor hotel,” spurred by the

growth of the national highway system and suburbanization, as well as the increasing importance of chain hotels and franchising, shifted the focus of the industry to midrange hotels in cities and on the road.¹² In the 1960s, convention hotels boomed; in the 1970s, limited-service and budget hotels emerged. Although luxury hotels did not disappear during this period, they were not especially prominent in the industry.

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, upscale hotels returned to visibility and growth. Rising international travel, for both business and pleasure, spurred demand. Intense competitive pressures in this period led to diversification of the whole industry through segmentation and branding, which further codified the luxury segment.¹³ Favorable tax laws led to the building or acquisition of upscale "trophy hotels," even when they might not have been profitable. In the 1980s, a period of increasing income inequality, demand for "high-priced" lodging, including luxury, outpaced that for lower-priced hotel rooms.¹⁴

New ideas of luxury came to the fore, including innovations in design and available services. One general manager I interviewed attributed the "invention" of the "perfect luxury bathroom" to a particular hotelier in the 1980s, for example. Concierge services, twenty-four-hour room, laundry, and business services, flexible arrival and departure arrangements, fitness centers and spas, and a range of upgraded room amenities became widespread.¹⁵ International luxury chains expanded in this period. The Ritz-Carlton company, for example, had closed all but one of its six properties by 1940. This Boston hotel and the rights to the Ritz-Carlton name were sold in 1982, and the company (owned by Marriott since 1998) now operates over sixty hotels globally. The Four Seasons chain likewise began with one nonluxury property in Toronto in 1960 and has expanded, especially since the 1980s, to over sixty-five hotels and resorts worldwide.

The national recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s and the savings and loan debacle brought crisis to the highly cyclical hotel industry. Like other segments, however, luxury rebounded by middecade when the industry reorganized itself to increase profitability and efficiency.¹⁶ Developers began again to build luxury hotels.¹⁷ Thanks to Internet startup millionaires and stock market high rollers, these hotels reaped record profits during the boom of the late 1990s, gaining more value than

other industry segments.¹⁸ In 1998, 5 percent of newly opened hotels were classified as upscale. Demand led to rate inflation; in 1999 hotel rooms with rates of five hundred dollars or more per night had increased threefold since 1994, and upscale hotel rates had risen by 31 percent since 1996.¹⁹ Rates and occupancy declined in luxury hotels in the economic downturn after 2000, but luxury suffered less than other segments and has largely recovered.²⁰ For example, both occupancy and room rates in the Ritz-Carlton and the Four Seasons increased significantly during 2004, and luxurious concierge floors were increasingly in demand.²¹

LUXURY SERVICE

Since the crisis of the late 1980s, *service* has become the watchword of the hotel industry as a whole, as a significant source of distinction and profits. Rejecting the old philosophy of “heads in beds,” according to which the objective was simply to sell room nights to any client, hotels now devote significant attention to who is sleeping in the bed and how the hotel can maximize its profit from that particular customer over the long term. Yet service is defined differently in distinct industry segments. In luxury, it takes the form of extensive personalization; needs anticipation, legitimation, and resolution, including a willingness to break rules; unlimited physical labor; and deferential, sincere workers.

“They Zero in on You”: Personalization

Consistent with the luxury hotel’s emphasis on distinctiveness, service in these hotels is highly personalized.²² First and foremost, managers and workers literally recognize the guest; consistent name use is one of the main tenets of service at any luxury hotel. The Luxury Garden’s first service standard, for example, was “recognize guests personally through the use of their name, naturally and appropriately.”²³ Management in both my sites encouraged workers to learn not only guests’ names but also the names of their children or pets. (Another dimension of luxury service, of course, is to know when the guest prefers *not* to be recognized, at

moments when he might want privacy or would be embarrassed at being acknowledged by staff.)²⁴

Workers customize contact in other ways as well. To individualize their conversations with first-time guests, workers use information they already have or whatever they can glean. They might remember where the guest dined the previous night or that he is in the city for the first time. Or they might wish him a happy birthday or a happy anniversary. Luxury hotels also mark special occasions by providing complimentary champagne or other amenities.

For frequent guests, personalization goes even further. Workers greet returning guests on arrival with "welcome back." They remember details about guests' lives, families, and preferences. Upscale hotels devote significant energy to gathering and acting on information about the desires of repeat guests, including the type of room they want, particular services they require (such as ionizing the room to purify the air or not using chemicals when cleaning), special requests for blankets or pillows, favorite newspapers, and food preferences. These hotels also keep track of guest conditions such as alcoholism and diabetes in order to avoid offering inappropriate amenities.

Beyond customizing these basic elements of the guest's stay (some of which are also noted in nonluxury hotels),²⁵ the staff of upscale hotels observe preferences spanning a wide and unpredictable range. At the Mandarin Oriental hotel in Hong Kong, for example, a frequent guest's toy monkey always awaits her on the bed; in another Hong Kong hotel, workers iron one guest's shirt near his door "because he likes the feeling of warm cloth when dressing in the morning."²⁶ One repeat guest at the Royal Court required that a rented red Jaguar convertible be waiting when he checked in; another guest insisted on always being addressed as "Doctor." A guest at the Luxury Garden insisted that laundry workers avoid putting starch in his clothes; another demanded that the head of his bed be elevated six inches off the ground; still another thought of a particular chair as "his" (he had reportedly carved his initials on it) and requested that it always be in his room when he was staying in the hotel.

Sometimes preferences are observed as a result of the guest's explicit request, as in the examples above. Yet luxury service also means fulfilling

preferences when the guest has not explicitly articulated them. One manager at the Luxury Garden said that for him, luxury service was exemplified by a housekeeper's noticing that a guest had eaten a peanut butter cookie provided for him one evening but had left the chocolate chip one untouched; the next night she left him two peanut butter cookies. In fact, workers there were given forms to record any guest preferences they became aware of, to keep them on file for future stays. A Royal Court standard of the week exhorted workers hotelwide to "please tell the front desk anything you know to put in the guest history."

Many luxury hotels use additional strategies to recognize repeat customers. Some offer frequent guests gifts to mark significant stays (such as the fifth, tenth, twentieth, and so on). Often these emphasize the guest's individuality, such as personally monogrammed stationery at the Luxury Garden and monogrammed pillowcases at the Ritz-Carlton and the Peninsula Beverly Hills.²⁷ These hotels even make major structural modifications in order to meet the needs of repeat guests. For example, one Ritz-Carlton hotel installed a wood floor in a room for a frequent guest who was allergic to carpeting.²⁸ The Royal Court provided a shower curtain for Ms. Parker, a frequent visitor who did not like the open shower in the recently renovated bathrooms.

Research suggests that personalized attention is indeed an important element of creating customer loyalty. One industry study found four factors related to recognition, personal attention, and customized service to be among the top eight factors (of eighteen) that clients said engendered loyalty to a particular hotel; 87.5 percent of clients surveyed rated "the hotel uses information from your prior stays to customize services for you" as either 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale of important factors (with a mean rating of 6.4). The factors "the staff recognizes you by name" and "the staff recognizes you when you arrive" achieved a mean score of 5.6.²⁹ Other research has identified personal attention and recognition as two of the three factors determining the choice of a hotel brand.³⁰ Marketing research reveals that affluent frequent travelers in particular look for recognition by name and, in making reservations, "a direct line to the general manager, who inquires about a recent family triumph or tragedy, as an old friend would do."³¹

Most guests I interviewed likewise described personal attention as important to them. Many enjoyed being called by name; Christina, a young leisure traveler, appreciatively told me that at a Four Seasons hotel the staff had remembered not only her name and her husband's but also the names of her two dogs. Tom, a business traveler, had been "dumbfounded" when his preferences were observed at another Four Seasons hotel; upon arrival, he had received plain strawberries instead of chocolate-covered ones, because on an earlier visit he had mentioned that he was "a low-fat eater."

Guests appreciated being distinguished from others and having their personhood acknowledged, often describing this treatment in terms of "care" and feeling "at home." Betty, a training consultant, preferred luxury hotels because, she said, "they treat you like you're a person" and "they respect me as a person." Adam, a retired businessman, said of himself and his wife, "We feel [being called by name is] more a guest relationship and a human thing, that you're not simply a number or a unit. You're a person who is recognized and you can have a little conversation." Andrew, the president of a major manufacturing firm, echoed these ideas: "I think that that changes the whole equation for the entire hotel, when somebody who's at the door in the lobby—there's at least a sense of recognition. If he doesn't know your name he might say—like if you are coming back from dinner, he says, 'Did you have a nice evening this evening,' like he really cares, 'I care about you as a person.'"

By the same token, guests frequently complained if they did not get the personalized attention to which they felt they were entitled. On several occasions at both the Royal Court and the Luxury Garden, guests lamented, "No one here knows me anymore," or asked, "What happened to everyone that knew me?" A frequent guest at the Royal Court complained that during the recent renovation "they destroyed my room." One return guest at the Luxury Garden mentioned on a comment card that she felt "ignored" because the personalized stationery she and her husband received was always in his name.

A few guests I interviewed, all women, said they did not care if the staff used their names or appeared interested in their lives. They spoke of being "embarrassed" when they were treated this way, and they sus-

pected that recognition was not authentic. These guests were more likely to consider recognition facilitated by technology as less meaningful, saying, for example, "I'm sure they have it in the computer or something." These guests cared more about the design and décor of the hotel and that the service be efficient rather than personalized. Some of them also mentioned a sense of surveillance or intrusion associated with recognition; one woman told me of a friend who was shocked when hotel staff knew something about her that she felt they could have found out only by listening in on her private conversations. Nonetheless, most of these women also said they would notice if the staff failed to provide this kind of attention, indicating that recognition was still part of their expectation of luxury service.³² (I discuss these guests further in chapter 6.)

*"They Go Out of Their Way":
Anticipation and Legitimation of Needs*

In Robert Altman's 2001 film *Gosford Park*, Helen Mirren's character, the head housekeeper in an English country mansion in the 1930s, says to a young lady's maid: "What gift do you think a good servant has that separates him from the others? It's the gift of anticipation. I'm a good servant. I'm better than good; I'm the best. I'm the perfect servant. I know when they'll be hungry, and the food is ready. I know when they'll be tired, and the bed is turned down. I know it before they know it themselves."

Workers in the luxury hotel are likewise expected to anticipate guests' needs, a process in which the definition of "needs" expands to include what might otherwise be considered "desires." The Ritz-Carlton's credo, for example, includes the commitment to fulfill even the guest's "unexpressed wishes and needs." The general manager of the Peninsula Beverly Hills, Ali Kasikci, told a reporter, "Waiting for customers to tell you what they need is like driving your car by looking in the rearview mirror."³³ Workers must be on the lookout for needs the guest might not articulate or even be aware of. Concierges, for example, stood armed with umbrellas for guests who were on their way out and might not know that it was raining. Antonio, a guest services manager at the

Luxury Garden, advised me always to offer soup to guests who mentioned they were not feeling well, thereby actually creating a need rather than anticipating an existing need. Needs anticipation may also include withholding information or refraining from taking some kind of action; for example, I was cautioned not to tell a guest that he had been upgraded when the person he was traveling with had not been.

Needs anticipation also entails reading the guest's demeanor, picking up subtle cues to predict her needs and desires. Sydney, a guest services manager at the Luxury Garden, told me, "You have to know what they want that they aren't telling you, because if you don't they won't like what you get them." When a guest asks the concierge to recommend a restaurant, the concierge must (in addition to asking the guest about his tastes, of course) take into account factors such as where he is from, how old he is, and how sophisticated he appears, in order to increase the chances of making an appropriate choice. If the guest is older and appears unschooled in upscale dining, he may receive a reservation at a chain steakhouse; if a visitor from New York requests information on local entertainment, the concierge will not recommend the traveling version of the latest Broadway hit. In employee training sessions at the Luxury Garden, Alice, the human resources manager, encouraged workers to use visual clues to offer the guests something they might need. On one occasion she role-played a woman massaging her neck and seeming tired and another guest arriving with a crying baby, then asked what we would do to meet the needs they were not expressing verbally (the answers: offer the tired guest a place to sit down and give the mother a private space even if her room is not ready).

Guests appreciate needs anticipation. One visitor to the Luxury Garden wrote on a comment card: "Housekeeper apparently saw cold medicine next to the rollaway bed for our 10 year old daughter and thoughtfully left an extra box of tissues! Great attention to detail!!" Herbert, a businessman in food manufacturing, recounted approvingly that after hearing that his young son was going to a baseball game, workers at an upscale hotel left cookies, milk, and a baseball hat in the room for him. Shirley, a leisure traveler, was amazed when tea was delivered unexpectedly upon her arrival at one fancy hotel:

We'd checked into our room, and there was a knock on the door, and they brought chamomile tea and cookies. It was just those sorts of things, those unanticipated, delightful little things. You didn't even know you wanted chamomile tea, and it was the perfect thing. . . . I think it's a combination of anticipating your needs but doing it in a way that's sort of invisible, that doesn't draw attention to itself, that it sort of magically happens without you seeing how it happens, but it's as if they knew what you were thinking two seconds before you thought of it.

Although these practices are known in the industry as *needs* anticipation, these examples demonstrate that the process also creates *desires*, by providing things "you didn't even know you wanted," and then codes them as needs.

Workers also recognize clients by responding to the individual needs and problems they express. Managers in training sessions and in industry literature stress that the guest must be able to get whatever she wants, including having prescriptions picked up, salon shampoo delivered to the room, and a cell phone retrieved from the restaurant where she had lunch. But more extreme examples abound. At one Four Seasons property, for instance, the maitre d' lent his tuxedo to a guest who did not have one for a black tie event, and even had the trousers altered for him.³⁴ As I have mentioned, on two separate occasions, Max, the Luxury Garden concierge, convinced the manager of a local department store to open early for guests with urgent needs for clothing. Another concierge, Alec, literally lent the shoes off his feet to a guest whose own shoes had been misplaced by the housekeeping department. When a group of incoming guests at the Royal Court wanted to rent two new-model Mercedes SUVs, front desk workers found a rental agency that could provide them, though it entailed having the vehicles delivered from several hundred miles away. At the same hotel, I was asked to find a gauze bandage for a woman who had recently undergone knee surgery and then to assist her in dressing her leaky wound.

In both hotels, my coworkers and I were asked to perform many services for guests. A partial list, culled from my field notes, illustrates the broad range: "Find doctor; find live crab, feathers, balloons; find white

truffles; take shoes to be fixed; take luggage to be fixed; find gown; reserve spa for six, rental van, all-day limo; obtain video of local performance; arrange babysitting; get cell phones, Japanese furniture, cigars; find sheet music; find blue roses; find jade jewelry; plan out-of-town day trip; find pediatrician; give directions to local farmer's market; find out about tea set used in hotel's restaurant; arrange for local golf; get kosher takeout menu; find Greek Orthodox church; arrange camera equipment rental; open package arriving for departed guest and send back to him; arrange for spa, watsu treatment, shiatsu; get symphony tickets; find yoga clothes, particular designer furniture; find computer equipment; find map store; arrange helicopter tour; find and make appointment with German-speaking dentist; get shoelaces; find tailor; make hotel reservations in New Orleans; get coat left at restaurant and send to guest; get birthday cake for tonight; find Catholic church; place T-shirts and welcome packages in incoming guests' rooms; get ginger root for tea; send Champagne to incoming guests on behalf of a friend; find out about lobby furniture; find out about duvet cover in room; find artificial orchids; get baseball tickets; mail knife; put rose petals on bed; find lost child."

The list for one especially demanding Luxury Garden guest, Dr. Kramer, compiled over several visits, included "get electronics; get cotton jogging clothes; make hotel reservation; make copies; get stapler; get sushi; fix e-mail access; find battery for cell phone; get luggage fixed; get rental car exchanged; find access to Internet for his computer; fix luggage; get temps; get more temps; find Indian food; change room; fix cell phone; find CDs; get newspaper; give message to models waiting for him in lobby; find cell phone help; rent convertible; find directions to state park; make laptop work."

Recognition work also entails that the worker legitimate these needs by responding sympathetically. Workers are expected to show concern about any situation the guest finds difficult, from a missed flight to a cloudy day. This standard extends to moments when the guest is unsatisfied with the hotel service itself. Alice, the Luxury Garden human resources manager, emphasized five elements of responding to guest complaints, the second of which was "apologize first." She said that when she

studied guest complaints, most guests claimed, “All I wanted was someone to listen and care,” or said, “No one apologized.” She said the appropriate emotional response was especially important in the luxury hotel because “we don’t have clientele that count pennies,” so monetary compensation when something went wrong was less meaningful to them. Sebastian, the general manager, told me in an interview that guests were most likely to complain that “their needs weren’t met” and that “they weren’t heard.”

Guests value worker responsiveness to their needs and problems, seeing it as a key dimension of luxury service. For example, one guest at the Luxury Garden wrote in a letter to the general manager, “Antonio [the guest services manager] and his staff were extremely courteous and helpful when we needed to locate our lost luggage. I am sure that we seemed very high maintenance at one point when several calamities occurred at once. But Antonio and his people never complained nor seemed in any way reticent to attack each challenge as it arose.” Asked in an interview what he meant by “caring service,” Herbert invoked both recognition of needs and their legitimation, as well as personalization:

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

Guests also see it as a failure of service when workers do not acknowledge their problems. Christina described a stay at a hotel where “everything” had gone wrong; among other things, she and her husband were given a room much smaller than the suite they had reserved. She said, “If they had put flowers in the small room or a fruit basket or whatever, all would have been forgiven, but we were totally ignored.”³⁵ Shirley described a bad experience in which the staff upgraded her but did not respond to her complaint that the room smelled musty: “They kind of

pooh-pooed my concern and acted as if I wasn't being appreciative enough of the upgrade." Here staff failed to legitimate the guest's need, assuming that the bigger room would be more important to her than the odor.

Legitimation of guests' needs carries another dimension: a sense of unlimitedness. The imperative to "never say no to a guest" is a mantra in luxury hotels. Check-in and check-out times were rarely enforced at the Luxury Garden, for example; if a guest decided to stay another night, he was not refused, even if that meant overbooking the hotel. One manager told me that imposing these rules would violate "five-star service," especially given the rates guests were paying. The general manager at the Royal Court stressed several times in an all-employee meeting that "the guest needs to be able to get anything he wants." He said, "We can't let rules get in the way," berating the staff for turning a guest away from the restaurant because he had arrived five minutes late for breakfast. "For four hundred dollars," he said sarcastically, "we should be able to find a piece of bacon somewhere in this building."

Guests approved of this idea that rules could be bent or broken for them, and they often saw a willingness to transgress as a defining feature of luxury establishments in contrast to midrange hotels. One couple wrote a comment card to the Luxury Garden praising the hotel for providing breakfast at 10:30 P.M. On comment cards, several guests at both hotels lauded the chef for making vegetarian meals available. Tom, after citing an instance in which a Four Seasons had accommodated his request for a special meeting room, said of luxury hotels, "You just don't have problems. You just don't hear about rules and stuff—you know, they solve [problems]. They basically do everything humanly possible in these nicer hotels to meet whatever you want and make it a wonderful stay for you and your family." Betty, the consultant, described her experience:

If I ask—like the Ritz-Carlton in Boston is one of my favorite hotels, and if I ask for something there they'll do whatever they need to do to fix it, to accommodate me. But if I would go to, say—I was staying in some [nonluxury] place in Washington about four months ago and all I needed was some pens for my room and I got an argument at the desk. . . . You know they're not going to go out of their way for anything

unless you have an argument with them, and that bothers me. . . . [In luxury hotels] you don't hear, "We don't do it that way," or "We can't do it that way," or "We don't have that here," that kind of thing.

Again, the guest is given the sense of unlimited entitlement in the fulfillment of her needs.

"Pampering": Displays of Labor

Another key element of luxury service, though it is not explicitly acknowledged as such either in the industry or among hotel guests, is the guest's entitlement to workers' physical labor—what some guests refer to as "pampering." Thorstein Veblen saw both abstention from labor and consumption of the labor of others as markers of the leisure class.³⁶ He would not have been surprised to find that guests in the luxury hotel are entitled both to avoid working themselves and to benefit from the unlimited labor of workers. But this available labor is not only physical; it also has an emotional dimension, indicating "care" to guests, just as a mother's preparation of dinner indicates love for her family.³⁷ I call these offerings "displays of labor"; they can involve visible human work or simply markers of labor.

Many of the available services and explicit standards of the luxury hotel involve lavishing visible labor upon the guest. Both the Luxury Garden and the Royal Court, for example, offered packing and unpacking services on request. One of the service basics at the Luxury Garden insisted that all guests receive an amenity upon arrival, which "must be personally presented and not simply pre-set in the room." Standards at both the Luxury Garden and the Royal Court demanded that workers "escort guests" to their destinations within the hotel. (At hotels such as the Four Seasons, even animals are entitled to consume human labor; room service is offered to guests' dogs.) Available labor also inheres in the speedy service that characterizes the luxury hotel. The timely delivery of food or freshly pressed laundry indicates that plenty of people are ready and willing to meet the guest's needs.

Managers encourage workers to use "proper verbiage" regarding their

efforts, such as "my pleasure" or "I'd be happy to," which minimizes guest perception that human labor is being exerted. They must respond enthusiastically when asked to run any kind of errand, from renting camera equipment to picking up chocolates for a guest's wife. They must be willing to wait on the telephone while the guest ponders the room service menu, for example, or confers with her husband about what type of restaurant strikes his fancy for the evening. Workers are exhorted to respond personally and immediately to any guest complaints; even if these are not the worker's responsibility, she should never tell the guest to call some other department. More than once in employee training at the Luxury Garden, Alice recounted a cautionary tale of sitting in another luxury hotel's lobby and listening in horror as a caller looking for a lost briefcase was bounced around from front desk to concierge to bell desk to housekeeping.

When management praises workers it is often for "going the extra mile." Managers at the Luxury Garden, for example, on separate occasions rewarded a doorman who called a taxi company after a guest left something in a cab, a front desk worker who taped a basketball game on her home VCR for a guest, and a business center worker who ran with a guest's package to the Federal Express office late one afternoon so it could be sent that day. Management at the Royal Court lauded a bellman for assisting a guest with her luggage when she moved to another hotel several blocks away.

A corresponding luxury service convention dictates that the guest himself should never exert any labor. At the Luxury Garden, for example, a manager who was training me said, "Never let guests fill out their own forms." Workers checking guests in at both hotels often requested a business card to save guests the labor of filling out the registration card by hand. One of the service standards at the Luxury Garden dictated that employees should pass on information about guest problems to their coworkers, so that "the guests will not have to repeat themselves." I was also told that "a guest should never touch a door." And, of course, guests should never carry their own bags, and the time they wait for any service must be minimized. The prohibition on guest labor is another way to acknowledge the guest's high status and limited time, thus recognizing his entitled personhood.

Tasks associated with certain jobs involve extreme amounts of visible labor. In my sites, bellmen not only escorted guests to their rooms but also carried their bags, set up luggage racks, and got ice for them if they wanted it. In the restaurants in both hotels, busers (often older immigrant men, known as “back servers”) not only offered bread at each table every few minutes (rather than simply leave a basket) but also served it using the complicated method of manipulating two spoons or two forks with one hand rather than employ a simple pair of tongs. Concierges at the Luxury Garden were required to handwrite elegant cards giving guests pertinent information about their dinner reservations; at the Royal Court, all messages were delivered to the guests’ rooms, so they did not have to call the operator. Inspired by the St. Regis in New York, some hotels offer the service of butlers, who will tidy guests’ rooms during the day, run their errands, and draw them a bath, among other tasks.³⁸ Even some standard jobs, such as door attendant, function partly to indicate available human labor; automated technology is available, but the human touch is more luxurious. (Elevator operators and restroom attendants in other venues serve a similar function.)

Labor can also be demonstrated in the absence of workers. It is present in a variety of touches in the guest’s room, in displays of labor that go beyond the typical folding of the toilet paper. At both the Royal Court and the Luxury Garden, for example, the guest’s morning newspaper not only arrived in a fancy cloth bag that announced “Good Morning!” but was also hung carefully on the guest’s door handle. The personalized stationery that awaited frequent guests in their rooms demonstrated labor, as well as serving the aforementioned purpose of customization. Andrew recalled that at a luxury resort, he and his wife had returned to their room to find a package adorned with an orchid awaiting them. Thinking it was a gift, they were surprised to find it was their laundry. Even objects in the room are indicators of labor, giving the sense that an invisible (caring) hand is constantly replacing bathrobes, slippers, ten or more different bathroom amenities, mountains of towels, fruit, fresh flowers, and so on.

Turndown service is an especially striking display of labor. Literally folding the corner of the bedding down, of course, serves no useful purpose; the gesture indicates, rather, that an invisible hand has been at

work. Other elements of the elaborate turndown service in luxury hotels include switching on lights, turning on the radio, closing drapes, emptying trash baskets, cleaning the bathroom, replacing used towels, arranging the laundry bag and room service menu on the bed, and filling the ice bucket. At both hotels guests received, with their evening cookies, a card predicting the following day's weather; at the Royal Court, these were filled out by hand. These gestures primarily let the guest know that someone has been laboring on his or her behalf. As a butler at the St. Regis hotel in New York told a reporter, "It's nice for the guest to see that the butler's been in."³⁹

Although they did not refer to it explicitly as such, guests I interviewed saw labor, both visible and invisible, as a key element of luxury service. Asked what they thought constitutes luxury service, they often invoked indicators of labor, speed, and eagerness to serve. Herbert defined luxury hotels in part as places where someone will "pop up to help unload your car and offer to put it away for you." Bob, a young management consultant, said, "It's the little touches they do that impress me. . . . There's always a circle of people around you, and depending on how good the hotel is, it's either further away or closer to you and doing more or less for you." Linda, a leisure traveler, was impressed that little boys were available outside her room all night at an Asian resort hotel if she and her husband wanted anything.

Many guests, in interviews and on comment cards to the hotel, approved of workers' speed in tasks such as checking in, delivering room service or luggage to the room, or bringing their car from the garage. Mike, a businessman in his late thirties, mentioned speed of service as a difference between luxury and nonluxury hotels: "[Nonluxury hotels] are very bureaucratic in their handling. You know, you have to wait in line when you are checking in, even if you are a super-preferred kind of customer. The one that drives me completely nuts but is characteristic, particularly of the big convention [hotels], is that it takes twenty minutes to set up a wake-up call. . . . You know, room service takes an hour and a half to get there."

Workers' attitude about providing labor was considered important. Guests enjoyed getting the sense from them that "nothing is too much

trouble,” characterizing luxury service as “can-do.” Virginia, who had stayed in a luxury hotel for three months because of damage to her home, described asking a worker for more dishes in her kitchenette: “If we were running low I would just ask her for—you know, ‘We need more glasses’ or something. In about three minutes we had an entire cabinet full of glasses. I wonder if we are demanding. But they never made you feel like you were asking them anything more than what they could willingly do for you. . . . They never batted an eye.” Kim told me, “It’s nice when you forget your toothbrush or something. Just to call up and say, can I get one, and they bring it to you. . . . Like when they ask you, can they take your bags, whether you want it or not. . . . ‘I’ll be happy to get that for you.’ If you need some aspirin or you need some—just really anything, they’ll just bring it to your room as opposed to you having to get it.”

When workers withheld labor, guests often reacted unfavorably. Several people I interviewed and many hotel comment cards characterized as “bad experiences” episodes when they had to wait for staff or when dishes were not picked up around the hotel, and negative comment cards were full of criticism about failures of labor. One irate Luxury Garden guest wrote a letter complaining that the hotel’s staff had disappointed him by, among other things, not providing the American cheese he preferred with his eggs and not offering to go out and buy him cigarettes when the hotel’s gift shop did not carry his brand. (This was a failure of personalization and legitimation as well as one of labor, because his individual needs were not acknowledged.) I violated the code of unlimited labor when a couple staying at the Royal Court asked me to wrap flowers they had ordered for their room so they could take them home; I responded, “I’ll deal with it,” prompting the man to comment to his wife (right in front of me), “‘Deal with it’—that makes it sound like a problem.”

Clients could also be extremely sensitive to transgressions of their own entitlement *not* to perform labor. For example, in 1999, the Luxury Garden placed cards in the bathrooms suggesting that clients who did not want their towels changed every day for environmental reasons hang them up, whereas if they did want them changed to leave them on the floor. The hotel received “a flood” of negative comment cards in protest,

according to the general manager. He described the attitude that they communicated: "I pay top dollar, I shouldn't have to worry about this." Andrew associated his own exertion of labor with a lack of intimacy: "When you're standing in line, I mean, it's a little colder, a little more matter of fact."

Guests also interpreted labor exerted on their behalf as "personal" service. In telling me about a luxury resort in Asia, Andrew said:

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

Even objects communicate to the guests a sense of personalization, though they are also demonstrations of labor. Kim, a young business traveler, said of the bowl of fruit in the room, "It's as if they're saying, 'Oh, we knew you were coming.'" To Mike, room amenities associated with frequent stays communicated, "We're glad you're back." A guest of the Luxury Garden wrote on a comment card, "I am very impressed. . . . Very nice *personal* touches with the fruit and the bathroom facilities" (emphasis added).

While guests often appreciated the small touches in the hotel, they never described these as involving work. For example, Shirley liked a hotel where "apples *would appear* at one o'clock in the afternoon" (emphasis added). Instead, guests (like managers) often referred to these efforts as "attention to detail." Asked what he liked about luxury service, Herbert responded: "Attentiveness to detail. They pay attention to small things. If you went into the dining room to get a newspaper at breakfast, they would all be lined up in a nice little straight row. There would be no crumpled ones, you know. The flowers are going to be real flowers, and there aren't going to be a bunch of petals lying on the table next to it."

Everything this guest mentions involves labor, but he does not acknowledge that. Instead, he perceives these practices as indicators of *aesthetic attentiveness*.

Labor involving interaction, as we have seen, is supposed to appear voluntary on the part of the worker; noninteractive labor is supposed to remain invisible. When a guest at the Royal Court requested that red rose petals be strewn about his room as a surprise for his girlfriend, for example, he probably did not imagine that Ginger and Inga would spend an hour or so methodically yanking the heads off the long-stemmed flowers. When “invisible” labor was made apparent, guests often became uncomfortable. As one guest I interviewed, Sally, said, “I expect not to be bothered . . . if they want to turn down the beds, just make sure I’m not there.” Here she indicates not only that labor must remain invisible but also that she prefers to imagine that the workers turned down the beds because they desired to rather than because it was their job. If the occupants were in the room when the turndown attendant knocked on the door, they almost always requested that she come back later or refused the service altogether. On the couple of occasions I witnessed in which the guests allowed the housekeeper (and me) into the room, they stood around awkwardly waiting for her to finish the service. (These were also the only occasions when I saw turndown attendants receive tips.) As I wrote in my notes after one of my first turndown shifts, “Most people were pretty nice but a tiny bit irritated at being interrupted. It’s weird because it’s a fine line—we are trying to do something nice for them, but it only works if it’s done in kind of a mysterious way—if not, then we are just bothering them.”

“They Really Care”: Deference and Sincerity

Luxury service is not only about what workers do; it is also about how they do it. As the examples I have given indicate, workers in my research sites were required to demonstrate a range of emotions in their demeanor. First, they had to display deference to guests. They had to call guests “Mr. X,” for example, while guests used workers’ first names. Workers were also required to smile at guests, regulate their own appear-

ance, and allow guests to initiate and terminate interactions, thereby occupying a "subordinate service role."⁴⁰ The deference imperative also inheres in the more elaborate strategies of legitimation and unlimitedness I have mentioned. Managers told workers, "There is no right or wrong, only the guest's perspective." Second, as I have shown, workers were required to display enthusiasm, appearing eager to exert labor on guests' behalf. As Arlie Hochschild wrote of flight attendants, "Seeming to love the job becomes part of the job."⁴¹

Most important, however, was that workers appear sincere in their concern for guests. The Royal Court's service handbook directed workers to "show genuine care and concern for guests' needs." One Luxury Garden service standard instructed workers to "engage guests with eye contact and a warm, sincere smile." Alice, the training manager at the Luxury Garden, told workers that guests need to perceive "that you care, that you care I [the guest] am here, and you're going to do your best to make sure I'm happy. . . . [Guests] need to know they can trust you to do what they need." Managers also encouraged workers to see guests as dependent, casting them as tired after traveling or as disoriented in a new city and therefore deserving of sympathy.

Guests also identified genuine care as a central part of luxury service.⁴² Betty said, "I guess the biggest thing is, people want your stay to be comfortable, and they don't just say that. They really do." She immediately gave the example of doormen allowing her to leave her car at the curb instead of parking in the garage, as would have been required in a less upscale hotel; for her, genuine care was related to the sense of breaking rules and accommodating needs. As he approached the front desk, an older guest at the Royal Court said to Jasmine and me, "What perfect smiles! That's a real smile, right?"

Some guests contrasted sincerity to routinized interaction, which they viewed with distaste. As Adam put it, "I think good service begins at the front desk. . . . With a welcome that seems sincere . . . where people look at you, look you in the eye, instead of looking down at the computer and handing you a card without even looking at you. That ticks me off." Herbert commented, "In a first-class hotel, the staff that works there generally looks you in the eye when they walk by you in the hall. And when

someone comes up and asks you, 'Is there anything I can get for you?' or 'Are you enjoying your stay?' they look you right in the eye, and they're really asking that question as opposed to saying that 'I have to walk into the lobby at an eighteen-minute interval and see if anybody wants anything.'" Martha, whose computer had been stolen at a midrange hotel, compared the distant reaction of the workers there with the more genuine response she imagined she would have had at a luxury property:

It was really sort of an upsetting event. And I thought the difference, in retrospect, between if my computer had been stolen in the lobby of the Four Seasons as opposed to the Hotel X, the people at the Four Seasons would have been, like, slashing their wrists! [Laughs.] You know? And the people at the Hotel X were like, "Well, our insurance is five hundred dollars, and that's it." So, it's a difference.

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

MOTHER OR SERVANT? CARE AND SUBORDINATION

Horst Schulze, president and COO of Ritz-Carlton, described the findings of a study his company had conducted on guest desires: "The first results that came back said that the guests wanted to feel at home, but I didn't believe that. So we did a further study and found out that what they really wanted was to feel like they did when they were in their mother's house." Gilbert explains, "This meant that they wanted an environment where nothing went wrong: light bulbs didn't blow out and food wasn't burnt."⁴³ Schulze might more accurately have spoken of a *fantasy* mother's house, of course, as few real mothers can provide an environment where nothing goes wrong. Like an idealized mother, the luxury hotel provides a sense of nurture, noting all individual prefer-

ences and quirks, anticipating and fulfilling needs, and showering the guest with genuine care and unlimited labor. As we have seen, this is largely what guests value in their hotel experience.

By the same token, luxury service also involves some of the elements of paid "care work" as it is defined in the literature on socially necessary work, such as child, health, and elder care.⁴⁴ As a home health care aide defined good care, for example, "It's not always the clean bed, it's not always some food or medication, but it's a smile or I'll get that for you or I'll do that for you."⁴⁵ In fact, many of the intangible components of care that compose luxury service are precisely those that are eliminated in the rationalization of other kinds of care, especially elder and health care.⁴⁶ In the hotel, however, these components are a primary source of profit—they differentiate a hundred-dollar room from a four-hundred-dollar room—and management thus emphasizes them through standards and rewards. Using standards, managers make explicit the components of care that are mystified in family settings or characterized as an intuitive "mother's wit" in nursing homes.⁴⁷ They also encourage workers to develop ongoing relationships, often seen to characterize care, with frequent guests.⁴⁸

But there is, of course, a crucial difference between hotel workers and these other kinds of workers. Mothers have power over children, and even workers in traditional caring occupations exert some authority over their physically or emotionally dependent charges, who are usually children or elderly or infirm adults. But hotel workers lack this power, at least explicitly. Indeed, their relation to guests is in many ways more analogous to that between domestic servants and their employers than to the relation between mothers and children or paid caregivers and other kinds of dependents. Two kinds of racialized, gendered domestic servant tropes are relevant here: the female servant of color who typically does housework and sometimes child care, and the butler (or valet), usually a white man performing personal and household services.

The image of the butler connotes professional, skilled, unobtrusive service, while the female domestic brings to mind overtly subordinated labor; both of these dimensions are visible in luxury service. Furthermore, the deference, willingness to serve, and needs anticipation that are implicit in the work of both types of servants are codified and empha-

sized in the hotel.⁴⁹ Also like household servants, workers in hotels are required to create client entitlement by subordinating themselves. By drawing on images of maternal care, guests interpret workers as exerting power over them (and, as we shall see in later chapters, they are sometimes afraid of workers). But, of course, guests are entitled to more personal attention, more legitimation of self, and more labor than those who serve them. Guests are entitled to recast all desires as needs, to consume the unlimited labor of others while not performing labor themselves, and to be recognized in their individuality while not reciprocally recognizing that of workers. And, like domestic servitude, luxury service depends on unequal allocation of resources, for its consumers can afford it while its producers cannot.

However, the hotel is not like the private home, in which the caring mother, the obedient and deferential female servant, and the professionalized male butler labor. In the hotel, no single person (mother or servant) produces the service. The client is not the employer, which is usually the case among domestic servants.⁵⁰ Rather, this intangible feeling of having someone to care for and wait on the consumer is bureaucratized, emerging from a formal organization comprising layers of workers and managers doing a range of different jobs. The self-subordination required of workers is formally codified by managers, and in some cases their tasks are more limited than those of household workers.⁵¹ In the remainder of the chapter, I look at the complex division of labor in the hotel that underlies the provision of luxury service, including job characteristics, worker demographics, and the possibilities for managers to control workers and routinize work.⁵² I then analyze workers' experience of self-subordination, which differs according to their placement in the hotel, setting up the rest of the book's focus on interactive workers.

PRODUCING SERVICE: AUTONOMY, CONSTRAINT, AND INEQUALITY

The service theater of the hotel comprises a wide range of workers and jobs, a variation that is mirrored in the hotel's complex topography. Front desk agents and concierges stand all day behind a desk in the lobby,

checking guests in and out and attending to their dinner reservations and unpredictable requests. Door attendants govern a narrow outdoor space between the hotel's front doors and the curb, loading and unloading guests' luggage and keeping an eye out for meter readers. Valet parkers run or drive from the door to the garage and back, rarely entering the hotel. Bellpersons roam around the building, guiding brass carts piled high with guests' bags through hallways and into elevators. Telephone operators and reservationists outfitted with headsets sit in windowless offices, staring at computers as they connect callers or discuss room availability. Housekeepers alternate between the small housekeeping offices, where their assignments and supplies are kept, and the floors where the rooms they clean are located, as they labor to finish their assigned quota. Restaurant servers shuttle between the hushed, intimate dining room and the loud, chaotic kitchen, while sweaty cooks and kitchen staff are confined behind the cooking line or next to the steamy dishwasher.

How do managers organize all these labor processes? They first split them into two categories: interactive and noninteractive positions. In the industry, the public areas of the hotel are known as the "front of the house" and are home to concierges, front desk agents, bellpersons, door attendants, valets, and restaurant servers. The private areas of the hotel are known as the "back of the house." Here we find workers who rarely have contact with guests, such as room cleaners, turndown attendants, and laundry workers. In a gray area between the front and back of the house, we find what I call "semivisible" workers, who have limited face-to-face or exclusively telephonic contact with guests, including reservationists, telephone operators, room service workers, and housemen or runners.⁵³ This division of labor is defined in terms of worker visibility to guests.

Less obviously, these jobs also vary according to the tangibility of the product. Workers in the front of the house provide most of the elements of interactive service, which consists mainly of intangible emotional labor (personalization, needs anticipation and compliance, and deference) as well as visible physical labor. Workers in the back of the house, in contrast, primarily produce the noninteractive elements of recognition, mainly invisible physical labor. Their products—clean rooms, turned-down beds, hot food, and so on—are tangible (though usually not portable, as most material goods are, because they cannot be taken off the premises).

TABLE 1 Comparison of Front and Back of House Work Characteristics

	<i>Front of House Work (Visible)^a</i>	<i>Back of House Work (Invisible)^b</i>	<i>Front and Back of House Work (Semivisible)^c</i>
Client contact (visibility)	High	Low	High (telephonic) or low (face-to-face)
Tangibility of product	Low	High	Low (reservations and telephone) High (runners and room service)
Customization	High	Low	Some
Emotional labor	High	Low	Some
Physical labor	Low (high at front door)	High	Low in reservations and telephone High for runners and room service workers
Discretion	High	Low	Some
Routinization	Low	High	High
Monitoring	Low	High	Some
Worker demographics	More often white Almost always men at front door	More often people of color Almost always women in housekeeping	Both white and people of color Women and men in reservations and telephone; mostly men as runners and in room service
Remuneration	Higher wage, tips, commissions (concierge)	Lower wage, few tips	Higher wage, some commissions (reservations)

^a Concierge, front desk worker, door attendant, bellperson, valet.

^b Room cleaner, turndown attendant, laundry worker.

^c Reservationist, telephone operator, runner, room service server and order taker.

Wages and working conditions vary between these two groups, as we will see in more detail in subsequent chapters (also see appendix C for wages in my sites). Back of house workers are paid less than front of house workers as a rule (one or two dollars less per hour in my sites). Many interactive workers received tips (and sometimes commissions) on a regular basis, which was less common for back of house workers (except for room service servers). All of these differences have consequences for workers' experience of work: As we have seen, back of house workers are more highly regulated and tightly supervised, while front of house workers have more autonomy and control over their work. At the same time, invisible workers are not required to interact often with guests, while interactive workers must offer more self-subordination.⁵⁴ Table 1 summarizes the key characteristics of these areas.

This division of labor maps onto demographic distinctions.⁵⁵ (See appendix C.) Front of house workers are usually white (though bellpersons and door attendants, who perform more physical labor, are often men of color). Workers in the back of the house are generally people of color, often immigrants from a wide range of countries. These distinctions held at the Royal Court, though the norm for front of house workers did not hold at the Luxury Garden; there, those workers were more diverse, many of them Asian and Asian American. Back of house jobs are usually stratified by gender (turndown attendants and room cleaners are always women), and certain front of house positions—bellpersons, valets, and door attendants—are almost always men. However, both men and women perform front desk and concierge work.⁵⁶

The Back of the House: Invisible Workers

Workers in the back of the house provide few of the interactive elements of service, for their primary role is to furnish invisible physical labor. Room cleaners and turndown attendants display labor by doing the myriad tasks involved in both morning and evening maid service. As I have suggested, the maintenance of the room's aesthetic, particular to luxury service, indicates labor. Luxurious appointments create extra work for housekeepers not found in nonluxury hotels; they change the covers of

down duvets every day, replace ten towels, tie sashes of bathrobes, and so on.⁵⁷ These workers also implemented guest preferences by leaving special amenities or objects in the rooms, but they did this on the order of managers.

Hence, as I have said, the product these workers provide is tangible. As a result, their work is easily routinized. Room cleaners and turndown attendants are given a certain number of rooms to clean or turn down each day, which for room cleaners rarely varies. Management gives workers extremely detailed specifications on what the room should look like, including how many hangers are in the closet, how to tie the sashes of bathrobes, and where to place amenities and towels in the bathroom or items on the desk and bedside table. Room cleaners often train one another and over time develop their own preferences as to when to do different tasks and which implements to use. Once they find the fastest individual system, however, most do not vary it much from day to day or room to room. They do make some small choices, such as whether to replace a bedsheet when they notice a tiny hole or a stain. And guest behavior, which determines the time housekeepers can enter the room as well as the effort necessary to clean it, does introduce variation into their work. But in general these workers exercise very little discretion.

As a consequence of this tangibility and quantifiable “output,” room cleaners are also easily monitored. Although room cleaners generally work alone, supervisors examine the rooms they have cleaned, holding glasses up to the light to look for spots or running a finger along the windowsills checking for dust. Supervisors are inconsistent about this task, because the amount of time they have to inspect rooms varies daily. However, room cleaners do not know when their rooms will be checked, and clear standards make measurement of performance very simple.

Furthermore, tangibility makes back of house workers vulnerable to guest complaints. Guests frequently call the housekeeping office or the front desk to complain about problems in the room or services they have failed to receive. Housekeepers (and even supervisors) in my sites lived in fear of guest dissatisfaction and remembered seemingly small incidents for years afterward. Socorro, a room cleaner with whom I worked at the Royal Court, was especially anxious about guest complaints. She

worried about acquiring a "bad reputation" when there was a mark on the wall in one room, though she had reported it to the supervisor. She put extra soap in one room, even though there was some in the shower, because she said it was the kind of thing guests might complain about. Workers sometimes feared misunderstanding guests because of the language barrier.⁵⁸ It is notable that these housekeeping workers, who had least contact with guests, were most afraid of their complaints.

In addition to their highly regulated work, these workers were especially dependent on their employment at the hotel, because they had few labor market options. Housekeeping workers spoke little English, usually lacked higher education, and frequently told me they had "no choice" when I asked them if they enjoyed their jobs. They primarily liked working at the hotel, not for the content of the work, but because they had good benefits and consistent days off, which was crucial to organizing their child care. Some of them had also suffered much worse in their home countries or as recent immigrants.⁵⁹ For all of these reasons, these workers were fairly easily controlled by managers.

Semivisible Workers

Some work is neither exactly visible nor invisible. Room reservationists, telephone operators, room service workers, and housekeeping runners have frequent guest contact, but it is either fleeting (for runners and room service delivery people) or telephonic (for telephone operators, room reservationists, and room service order takers). In my sites, these workers were housed in different departments and not generally thought of as all belonging to the same category. Room reservationists and telephone operators have more in common with front of house workers in terms of their race (they are primarily white) and the intangibility of their work.⁶⁰ Runners and room service workers in both hotels were more akin to housekeepers, in that their work involved a tangible product and they were almost all immigrants of color. However, the labor processes of all these workers share some common elements and differ from either "pure" front of house or back of house work. Hence I call them semivisible workers.

These jobs are most similar to those Leidner discusses in her study of fast food.⁶¹ Although the McDonald's employees she focuses on worked in the "front of the house" at the counter, their jobs were similarly routine and involved only brief contact with clients. Also, both semivisible hotel workers and fast food workers are constrained by the technology that supports them: computers in the case of reservationists, telephone operators, and room service order takers and computerized cash registers in the case of counter workers at McDonald's.

Thanks to the brevity and routine nature of their contact with guests, semivisible hotel workers must observe the interactive elements of luxury service more than housekeepers but less than front of house workers. They must, of course, appear deferential and sincere; Royal Court managers counseled telephone operators to answer the phone "with a smile," for example. Workers customize interactions by using the guest's name and title of address as they appear on the computer screen. Reservationists and telephone operators are sometimes expected to anticipate guests' needs on the basis of information they glean in conversation. Runners and room service workers provide speedy physical labor as well and some interactive customization, such as using the guest's name. They must take cues from guests about how much interaction they want, lingering in the room to chat if the guest desires it or responding to unpredictable guest requests.

Semivisible jobs can also be routinized (though not as thoroughly as housekeeping work as a result of customers' unpredictability). Room service servers at the Royal Court, for instance, had a prescribed way of setting up the tray or table. They had been trained very specifically on details of the presentation (and they vigorously defended putting the knife to the right of the plate if I unwittingly moved it to the left, for example). They did have some discretion over charging guests for extras or giving them special treats. Telephonic encounters are also fairly routine. The telephone operator's contact with the caller is short and varies little; rarely does she exchange more than a sentence or two with the person calling. The questions the reservation agent asks the caller never vary, and she types the answers into prescribed spaces on her screen. After many shifts in reservations, I wrote in my notes, "It is starting to feel kind of like a factory."

Semivisible workers in my sites used scripts to some extent, some of which were imposed by managers. Royal Court management posted exactly what the telephone operator was supposed to say to callers, which differed according to whether they were inside or outside the hotel. In reservations, I was trained to say "fully committed" instead of "sold out" or "booked." Instead of saying "no" to callers, I was supposed to say "I can put you on the waitlist" or "I can check other dates for you." Yet interactions were rarely fully scripted and usually involved some spontaneous conversation; management certainly made no attempt to eliminate improvisation, as it made the interaction seem more genuine. Workers were expected to respond to cues from guests in customizing their interactions. Routinization, however, sometimes serves to insulate hotel workers, because it controls the client, just as it does for McDonald's employees in Leidner's argument. Scripts protect reservationists from insistent callers, for example, allowing workers simply to repeat "May I check another date for you?"

Supervision of semivisible jobs varies but in general is minimal. Reservationists, telephone operators, and room service order takers are subject to the de facto supervision of coworkers and managers who can hear their interactions with callers, and of course the callers themselves can complain about these workers' behavior. These checks may prevent them from being overtly rude, but they do not give these workers particular incentives to go out of their way to offer extra care or labor to guests; these extra elements of service are by definition unexpected, so guests are likely to be impressed when they are forthcoming but not notice when they are not. Runners and room service servers interacted with guests completely out of sight of managers, though housekeeping supervisors occasionally complained that runners did not respond to pages, and guests might grumble that room service delivery was not fast enough. The tangibility of the product in these cases ensures that guests know when they have (or have not) received it, so it is easier for them to complain.

The Front of the House

Front of house work contrasts strikingly with both invisible and semi-visible work. The workers in front of house positions provide the highest

level of intangible, recognizing service. Workers at the desk and at the front door greet guests by name, anticipate their needs, chat with them, and provide deference and legitimation. Front desk workers and concierges especially remember guest preferences and offer emotional labor. Front door workers not only make conversation and personalize interactions but also carry bags, open doors, and retrieve cars, exerting physical labor on the guest's behalf. Managers in the front of the house also provide a fair amount of luxury service.⁶²

As Leidner acknowledges, complex jobs in which customers resist routines and in which customization is a key element of the product are more challenging to routinize.⁶³ These factors, plus unpredictable guest demands and behaviors, make front of house work in the hotel difficult to routinize. Hotel workers must often respond to highly specific and unpredictable situations. Furthermore, to anticipate and fulfill guests' needs, workers must discern clients' immediate desires on the basis of their self-presentation as well as their explicit requests. Because guests value authentic interactions with workers, these must not appear scripted or routine. Thus the challenge for managers in the front of the house is to elicit nonroutine behavior from workers on a routine basis.⁶⁴

Recognition of guests may be what I call "engineered," meaning that it is supported by technology that allows workers to call guests by name and acknowledge their VIP or repeat visitor status and their preferences even when workers do not know them personally. In my sites, these mechanisms included the phone display, computer databases, credit cards, and luggage tags. Nonetheless, most interactive work must be personalized in the moment, not scripted in advance. Mechanisms that help to engineer this recognition must be employed at the worker's discretion, in terms of both using the guest's name and collecting information useful for future standardization. Thus, the customization imperative means workers enjoy a high level of discretion in their work.

Front of house workers in my sites were subject to less surveillance, especially in terms of the content of their interactions with guests. Video cameras in public areas of the hotel (the loading dock, elevator, and so on) recorded workers' movements, although this was not their only purpose. Also, workers often had to initial their job tasks and use their names to log

onto computers; thus, mistakes they made could return in the future to haunt them. These mechanisms of surveillance, however, did not facilitate supervisors' evaluation of the extra effort and genuine interaction workers were expected to offer. And supervisors did not have time to oversee the worker's interaction with guests. They witnessed these interactions only if they happened to be present at the time, which was rare.

Of course, clients also monitor interactive workers, as other researchers have pointed out.⁶⁵ They make their views known through conversations with managers, comment cards, and letters to upper management. Both my sites also employed "mystery shoppers," who knew the standards of the hotel and reported on workers' behavior, but these visits were rare. As we will see, comment cards in my sites were overwhelmingly positive. The potential surveillance inherent in any customer interaction certainly prevented workers from being rude to guests, but it did not force them to make the special efforts that luxury service is supposed to entail, because these efforts by definition go beyond the guest's expectations. Interactive workers, unlike the more vulnerable housekeepers, rarely articulated fear of guest wrath.

Interactive workers also had more choices on the labor market than their back of house counterparts. They spoke good (if not always native) English, were usually white, and often had some higher education. They were also harder to replace, especially when workers were scarce. Thus, both their personal characteristics and the differences in their work meant these workers could not be subjected to routinization and close monitoring, as back of house workers were. Eliciting the consent of interactive workers to care about and serve guests was further complicated by the self-subordination required in this work and the higher visibility of stratification for these workers.

OBSCURING AND NORMALIZING INEQUALITY

As I have suggested, inequality takes two forms in the hotel: the structural asymmetry between workers and guests and the interactive self-subordination of workers to guests. Interactive workers in my sites were

more aware of the structural asymmetry than their invisible counterparts and much more responsible for the self-subordination.

Back of house workers, most of whom were immigrants from developing countries, were more disadvantaged structurally in relation to guests than their front of house counterparts, who earned more money, enjoyed greater job opportunities, and usually did not face racial discrimination. But these back of house workers had less direct contact with either structural or interactive inequality in the course of their work. They knew that the guests were wealthy, of course, but they were not constantly confronted with evidence of that wealth. In both hotels, housekeepers I worked with were unaware of the room rates or believed them to be lower than they actually were. It is unlikely that these workers were cognizant of the expense of the belongings they found in the rooms, if they even had time to notice them, which in my experience they did not.⁶⁶ They rarely commented on guests' wealth. Also, because they had little contact with guests, these workers did not have to enact the self-subordination characteristic of luxury interactions. For back of house workers, then, inequality was obscured.

Some semivisible workers, such as telephone operators and runners, were likewise rarely confronted with either structural or interactive inequality. Others, however, did know about guest spending. Room service workers knew how much the meals cost, and they occasionally commented on the exorbitant prices of the food or wine that guests ordered. Reservationists were well aware of the hotel's high room rates. But because they performed little interactive recognition work, most semivisible workers were insulated from the subordination characteristic of visible work. The scope of guest requests was usually quite narrow. Furthermore, routines protected these workers from having to manifest extreme deference, giving them some power in the interaction. They rarely had to legitimate outrageous behavior or demands. Reservationists also tended to interact with travel agents or guests' assistants at least as often as with the guests themselves and thus could withhold deferential treatment.

In the front of the house, in contrast, interaction required workers to face disparities in wealth between themselves and the guests more

directly. Front desk workers, who handled guests' accounts, knew how much the guests often spent on their rooms, their food, and other services in the hotel. Concierges procured extremely expensive products and services outside the hotel; guests in my sites spent hundreds of dollars on tickets to the theater, symphony, or sporting events, as well as on meals, flowers, massages, and travel. Concierges knew where guests ate, shopped, and pursued expensive recreational pastimes such as golfing. They sent cars to pick up guests from their private planes or directed them to restaurants where they could buy three-hundred-dollar bottles of Cristal. Doormen and bellmen also saw the guests' expensive cars and luggage and were familiar with the high price of the car-and-driver services guests often used. Thus, guest wealth was by no means obscured to front of house workers and some semivisible ones.

Front of house workers also enacted interactive self-subordination to a much greater degree than other workers, deferring to guests, anticipating and responding to their every need, customizing interactions, and transgressing limits for them. Workers in these jobs must subordinate their own selves to those of the guests and restrain impulses to say what they really think.

But despite this increased knowledge and experience of unequal entitlements, inequality was normalized for most of these workers. In their conversations about guests and their desires, demands, and behaviors, workers constantly invoked guests' wealth. They bandied about numbers in the hundreds and thousands of dollars without batting an eye. However, they rarely critiqued or voiced discomfort with either the material inequalities between themselves and guests or the subordinating imperatives of their jobs (although workers sometimes judged *individual* guests for behaviors related to their wealth, as we will see in chapter 4). Indeed, in coding my field notes I became frustrated with the lack of explicit mentions of the guests' wealth in a critical vein.

Interactive workers discussed disparity and subordination only because I mentioned it in answering their questions about my research. Joel, a Royal Court doorman in his early forties, asked about my project, and I mentioned that I was interested in the disparity between workers and guests. He seemed confused, so I asked, "Do you ever think about

that black Jag parked at the curb and wonder why you don't have one?" He responded, "That has never crossed my mind." He told me, "Sometimes people can be rich and think they're entitled to anything they want, and I know that's not true." But otherwise, he said, he did not think about it.

Contrast that experience to a conversation I had in the Royal Court locker room with Millie, a young woman who had just been hired as a hostess in the restaurant. I asked how she liked it. She responded that, in comparison to her last restaurant job, "here, you have to kiss a lot of ass." I was surprised, because I had never heard anyone voice this imperative so openly.

It was not coincidental that Millie was struck by this during her first few days of working in the hotel. I came to see that many workers went through a process in which guests' wealth and the imperatives of luxury service came to seem normal; it was apparent without being problematic. The restaurant manager at the Luxury Garden told me, "It's interesting to watch how the staff evolve over time. At first they worry about nickel-and-diming the guests, until they realize that the guest doesn't even look." I asked Sarah, a reservationist who had held her job for thirteen years, if she thought about how much the clients were spending. She said, "I used to think about how these people are spending my monthly rent to stay for one night." But, she said, "they can afford it, so it doesn't matter."

Other longtime workers also invoked this kind of relativism, saying, "It's not a lot of money to them." Annie, a part-time college student in her early twenties, told me one evening over drinks that she did not think about the high rates guests paid. She said, "It's all relative. To them it's not that much; to me it would be a lot." In this way they constituted guests as members of another universe, where money has different meanings. This was one kind of discourse I heard in the hotel about wealth acquired over time. I, too, went through a similar process. I had been fascinated by managers' stories of wealthy guests and outrageous demands, but soon after actually beginning work, I ceased to notice them.

Elena, a young, well-liked assistant manager who had studied hospi-

tality management in college and had worked at the Luxury Garden for about a year, was the only person in either hotel who articulated the critical stance that I had expected to be more common. One day in the locker room she told me she was thinking seriously of leaving the industry. She said she was tired of her work and that it seemed meaningless. She commented that guests "put so much energy into getting an upgrade," oblivious to an earthquake in India or homeless people in the United States. She described them as "clueless" and told me she didn't want her job to be to "make sure that assholes enjoy their stay." At one time, she said, she had been committed to providing good service, but "now I don't care." She made fun of the idea of "wowing" guests. A couple of weeks later, Elena told me again that she thought it was "silly to care about rich people getting everything they want." In these comments, she linked the consumption of luxury service to larger social concerns and to individual entitlement associated with class inequality. The process of normalization had stopped working for her. As she began to question the inequality inherent in her work, Elena's investment in her job diminished. She became more and more unhappy and eventually left the hotel and the hospitality industry. Thus, the breakdown of normalization and the withdrawal of consent were closely intertwined. The question I will address in much of the rest of this book is why this breakdown and withdrawal happened so rarely.

This question is especially salient for interactive workers. It is not hard to see why back of house workers rarely contested their working conditions or left their jobs, given their unfavorable labor market position and limited skills. And for them, structural inequality was obscured, and self-subordination to guests was virtually nonexistent. Better-educated front of house workers, on the other hand, had more options, especially in the tight labor market that existed at the time of this research. Why did they choose to stay in jobs that exposed them incessantly to class inequality and required them to subordinate themselves to—and to appear to care for—hotel guests? How did this inequality come to seem normal?

The answers to these questions lie partly in the characteristics of the interactive work I have laid out here. After all, front of house work is autonomous, varied, often challenging, and fairly well paid, at least rel-

ative to back of house work. But a more complete answer lurks in Joel's comment above, that rich people are *not* "entitled to anything they want." As we will see, despite the hotel's call to provide unlimited labor, workers symbolically constituted guest entitlement as limited. They also constructed themselves as entitled in a variety of ways—to skill, to status, and to equal treatment. These constructions, as we will see, helped workers to reframe their own subordination while at the same time normalizing it. They also facilitated workers' active investment in their work. And they often depended on the use of back of house workers as a foil. Throughout my discussion of these processes, I will highlight workers, like Elena, who withdrew consent when their strategies for managing their own subordination proved inadequate.

The characteristics of the hotels themselves and their managerial regimes helped to shape workers' visions of themselves and others. Chapter 2 offers a more detailed discussion of both.