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## Cultural Upbringings and Jobs

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*This paper looks at the multicultural front-of-house employees at Rusacks Hotel and how work ethics, emotional labour and ties to hierarchy are shaped by culturally embedded moral economies. Based on auto-ethnographic reflection and interviews, it makes the case that conceptions of commitment, limits and professional behaviour are heavily influenced by inherited culture narratives rather than just personal preference. While UK standards emphasise balance, personal development and critical contact with management, precarious experiences in Eastern Europe encourage diligence, obedience and self-sacrifice. These competing viewpoints give light on how employees in the hospitality business negotiate, reinterpret or disobey cultural conventions on a regular basis. By bringing theory and lived experience into the dialogue, the paper demonstrates that work is a culturally rooted habit, and it highlights the importance of management strategies that respect multiple moral worlds rather than enforcing a single normative paradigm.*

**W**ork consumes much more than just our hours but also takes up our thoughts, anxieties and perceptions of self. This is especially apparent in multicultural work environments such as hotels, in which staff members from all over the world add not only their professional skills but also deeply rooted cultural perceptions of what it takes to work well, be an accountable employee, exhibit dedication, and preserve personal time. This paper will focus on the front-of-house staff at the Rusacks Hotel. Through an incorporation of auto-ethnographic reflections and interviews, this paper illustrates moral economies of labour with cultural roots, the shaping of relationships to hierarchy, and the effect this has on emotional labour experiences in day-to-day professional duties. The objective of this research is to continuously examine how lived experiences both support and challenge

dominant academic explanations, rather than merely integrating personal or ethnographic findings into theoretical frameworks. In doing so, this research solidifies the case that we can only fully comprehend the nuanced ways that culturally inherited ideas of work impact modern hospitality environments by maintaining theory and ethnography in an evolving, constructive tension.

Every oversimplified idea that employment is a universal economic activity pursued in a culturally neutral setting is vitally refuted by the anthropology of labour. Instead, academics have consistently maintained that work is morally and socially significant. Barley and Kunda (2001) assert that

*“Work is not merely instrumental; it is a socially situated practice imbued with cultural*

*meanings”*,

such understanding, as per Barley and Kunda, sets the stage for investigating how various upbringings produce unique moral and affective connections to work (2001:82). In certain cultures, hard effort is associated with family honour or heavenly approval. In others, it is linked to the values of personal fulfilment and independence. This indicates that opinions regarding long hours, overtime, hierarchy and leisure are moral decisions influenced by shared histories rather than being simplified to individual preferences or pressing financial need. Growing up with a mother and a father with a highly materialistic outlook on life paved a way for an unspoken pressure to have a similar work ethic, beginning in primary school academia and proceeding into GCSEs, A-Levels, University and work. With mum and dad, it was not as simple as work and home as separate entities; instead, only work existed above family dinners, trips, Christmases, birthdays etc. After moving from Ukraine to the UK at a young age, there was a notable cultural difference observed which started off with the way my friends’ parents would react to a bad grade or a need for a break, and then continued to the simplicity of the way my work colleagues treat the responsibilities at work and the ability to let work be just work. Thus, the original hypothesis was reframed. The more perceptive inquiry is how different moral economies of work manifest themselves in the common area of a hotel, and what conflicts or alliances result from these interactions, rather than why certain coworkers “work harder” or “draw stricter boundaries”.

The preservation of strong work ethics in many Eastern European contexts is persuasively explained by Hann (2002). Through looking at post-socialist culture, the consensus established was that although the fall of state socialism

created new political and economic opportunities, it also left people concerned that the only surefire way to protect themselves from precarity was to work hard – “The collapse of state socialism left behind a legacy where hard work is often tied to survival instincts, not individual self-realisation” (Hann 2002, p.57). Such practice spreads throughout Europe with migrants who are employed in the hotel industry. It may manifest as a hesitancy to decline overtime, an almost instinctive compliance with orders from superiors, or a propensity to gauge one’s own value by measurable output. These patterns are historically charged reactions to social insecurity rather than just habits.

One of my colleagues from Rusacks has showcased much of Hann’s notion. Klaudia joined the reception team in 2022 and opted to change to the concierge team a few months later. Klaudia and I, despite having 15 years between us, have found many similarities in our opinions on work responsibilities, with many, if not all, of our views originating from an Eastern European upbringing. Last winter Klaudia was appointed as acting concierge supervisor, however she realised not long after how inhumanely demanding the position would be with late hours and unmanageable responsibilities that Klaudia just did not feel like she signed up for, despite working within the team for three years. Upon having a discussion with her about it – more so what made her resist openly speaking to management about her concerns – Klaudia’s response was as follows:

*“Well you know how it is, it is a job and despite not signing up for the bad of it, even if the bad can easily be resolved, only if someone listens, it comes hand in hand. I do not have the ability to let work be work, I only know work as a way of life and even more so a way to survival. Sometimes it does take life*

*out of me, but I also would not have a life without this job. I also just do not want to whine, sometimes I sit there and think “you have got to be kidding me” but at the end of the day, that is just how these things go.”*

Klaudia’s viewpoint directly ties in with Hann’s statement surrounding hard work being tied to survival instincts as opposed to individual self-realisation (Hann 2002). Hann’s narrative, however, runs the risk of solidifying post-socialist labourers as mired in the past. This is made more difficult by the anthropological glances from Rusacks, which reveal instances in which employees deliberately defy or reframe these ingrained moral logics. One may come across Eastern Europe workers who actively foster leisure activities as a subliminal protest against family stories of unrelenting labour. This emphasises how crucial it is to view cultural upbringings as a resource that people negotiate, sometimes by embracing it and other times by slightly challenging it, rather than as an unchangeable script.

A distinct constellation of moral and structural influences on attitudes towards employment may be seen when looking at the UK setting. Holmes contends that, especially for recent graduates, work in the UK is strongly related to concepts of personal growth (Holmes 2001). Many people develop their sense of self, demonstrate their ability and act on adult identities through their employment. This does not, however, always equate to a culture of unrelenting sacrifice. In their analysis of over-qualification and under-employment trends, Lloyd and Payne<sup>1</sup> (2016) note that British workers are increasingly navigating the job market with a form of guarded ambivalence (2016). A more ambiguous attitude towards the workplace is shaped by “a growing tension between over-qualification and under-utilisation, which shapes

a more ambivalent attitude to the workplace” (Lloyd and Payne). To put it another way, many Brits, in part as a safeguard against systemic disappointments, want their employment to be meaningful and respectable, but they also refuse to let work take over their lives. This is not to imply that British workers have a less moral or serious attitude towards their jobs. Rather, their work ethic is intertwined with cultural norms that value emotional health and work-life balance in addition to hard effort.

Another notable individual within the Rusacks front-of-house team is Alisha. Alisha started working within the housekeeping team when she was 16, later being recruited into the concierge team, moving onto being part of the reception team with a promotion to supervisor at 21, a position that she later stepped down from. In addition to working within Rusacks, Alisha has a nail and hair business that has picked up dramatically over the last year which led to her requesting a 0-hour contract from the hotel to balance out work pressures. Alisha is admirable not only because of her passion and her work ethic, but because of her ability to maintain a work-life balance. With a very open approach, Alisha says no to shifts as opposed to sacrificing days off, time with family and friends, nights out, trips abroad, etc. and at no point has she ever come up with an intricate excuse for saying no, just a simple ‘cannot work here’. Unlike Klaudia and I, Alisha grew up with the UK outlooks on work, and she is not afraid to emphasise her personal needs and push for a work environment that supports those.

This changed the way I perceived what could otherwise look to be a straightforward lack of “hustle”. It demonstrated how historical and structural factors, such as welfare state and rising educational costs, produce new moral economies where preserving one’s own time is

seen as morally right.

Another essential theoretical framework for examining work attitudes in the hotel industry is Hochschild's groundbreaking idea of "emotional labour". According to Hochschild, emotional labour is the process by which workers control their emotions to elicit specific emotional states from clients, thereby marketing emotional performance in addition to intellectual or physical services (2012). The quintessential venues for this kind of emotional business are hotels. The role requires the ability to smile at visitors, diffuse concerns, and remain composed under pressure. However, comparing Hochschild to anthropological findings implies that the way employees respond to this emotional control is also influenced by culture. Working with people gives room for every bad day reflecting in every interaction with a guest, making it that much more difficult. For example, Isla tends to cry when dealing with a difficult guest and whilst it is by no means an absurd reaction, is it the right one to have? Contrary to Isla, I lean towards answering attitude with attitude, but is that a better reaction to have? It is difficult to establish 'right' and 'wrong' when it comes to working with people whilst being a human yourself. In line with Hochschild's theory of deep acting, employees from cultures that value stoicism, for instance, might view grievances as personal affairs that should never interfere with the professional façade. Employees from environments that value emotional authenticity, on the other hand, may participate in surface acting combined with a lot of backstage venting, viewing shared frustration as crucial form of self-care. This demonstrates how local norms regarding emotional display, poise, and what it means to be appropriately "professional" inevitably filter Hochschild's universal theory.

Deep cultural conditioning is also reflected in

attitudes towards workplace hierarchy. Questioning a superior might contain moral implications of disrespect or even danger in some post-socialist or post-authoritarian contexts, evoking past histories where speaking up could have disastrous effects (Hann 2002). This influences modern reactions to managerial orders in ways that go beyond simple confidence or charisma. Holmes (2001), on the other hand, emphasises how being open to criticism, questioning, and suggesting changes is a component of professional identity in the UK, especially among recent graduates (2011). It is frequently regarded as proof of critical thinking and participation rather than insubordination. In the Eastern European culture that I grew up with and later, most obviously observed through Klaudia, there is an evident hesitation when discussing concerns with a manager. Both of my parents are Ukrainian business owners, and as a child I would hear their complaints about whiny employees. Thus, I was brought up with and work with my mother's voice in my head – "It's a job, it's not going to be easy, but you do not take days off and you do not whine, you simply get on with it. You can cry when you are home but is there any point in that?". My mother always told me I attempted to revolutionise what does not need to be and that is an aspect of my personality I have put aside in work, but I do wonder how many promotions I missed out on or how many difficult days I forced onto myself by not openly speaking to management about any concerns. A crucial finding from the anthropology of work is shown by this discrepancy: what constitutes "good professional conduct" is never completely impartial or objective. It is usually intertwined with historical legacies and local moral economies. When workers move across borders, these residues don't just disappear but instead accompany them and subtly but significantly influence

workplace relations.

One of this study's more profound conclusions is that ethnographic material frequently challenges theoretical ideas rather than just illuminating them. For example, the lived data indicates that people continuously negotiate local moral systems, even if previous research persuasively demonstrates how work is integrated in these worlds. Employees selectively support, modify or challenge cultural scripts in light of shifting contexts and individual goals rather than passively enacting them. Similarly, the hospitality setting both validates and complicates Hochschild's (2012) notion of emotional labour as a commercialisation that threatens estrangement (2012). A more intricate connection than simple exploitation is shown by the fact that, whereas some employees certainly portray emotions for compensation, some also find true fulfilment and pride in perfecting their duties. In Isla's case, she was denied a duty manager position for her professional inability to remain unbothered whereas in the case of my managers, their career growth was rooted in emotional control and surrender to commodification. Yet again, it is a difficult concept to establish a 'right' and 'wrong' with. Such situations necessitate a more complex theoretical framework that acknowledges both agency and constraint. Instead of being viewed as inflexible determinants, cultural inheritances seem to be variable repertoires, collections of dispositions that people can use, modify or even reject based on the situation. This deep comprehension enhances discussions of managing diverse hospitality workplaces in practice as well as in anthropological theory.

These observations have real-world ramifications for hospitality administration. With the hospitality industry being one of the most inherently multicultural ones where the diversity

of employees brings varied cultural attitudes towards service, hierarchy and customer interactions are crucial. Thus, successful management calls for more than just general leadership abilities and cultural literacy. Management could prevent misinterpreting these actions by acknowledging that some employees may feel morally obligated to take on every extra shift while others see work-life balance as a sign of professionalism. The goal is to promote nuanced, courteous behaviours that can avoid unintentional exploitation or misunderstanding, not to indulge cultural preconceptions. Throughout my research, from both auto-ethnography and interviews, my opinions on work ethic have most certainly changed. What I grew up with and up until now believed to my core has been altered by taking an objective stance. The concept of being "better than" and the unspoken competition such mindsets bring has been reshaped through this work. Conversations with Klaudia have validated my upbringing, however, the conversations with Alisha and other team members shined a light on how much more open a work environment can be. Within a hospitality job, the option of not liking your colleagues does not exist; Rusacks has seen its employees through their best and worst days, often being the reason why the bad days were more manageable. With that level of openness in private life, there is room for improvement to have the same level of openness in work life too. While the inability to raise concerns with management is often an internal hesitation, management may also aim to create workplaces where a variety of work ethics are recognised and balanced rather than reduced to a single normative model by realising that people are navigating complicated moral economies that are the result of histories much larger than themselves.

Labour is never just a contractual agreement between an employer and an employee, as this investigation of how cultural upbringings influence attitudes towards labour and ethics within the hospitality industry has attempted to demonstrate. History, social anxieties, individual aspirations and ethical systems all converge there. While the theoretical works of scholars offer invaluable resources for observing these complexities, the complete picture of these dynamics only becomes apparent through ethnographic engagement which involves attentive listening and critical reflection on lived experiences. A fuller, more complex picture of work ethics is the outcome, one in which employees from various backgrounds embody deeply engrained moral economies, perhaps subtly altering and occasionally reaffirming them, rather than just 'having different attitudes' in a superficial sense. In addition to advancing anthropological discussions, these revelations pave the way for more equitable, culturally aware and successful hospitality management. To conclude, this study aims to make the case that in order to fully comprehend work in multicultural environments, it must be viewed as a profound cultural practice that is influenced by individual and personal narratives which should be approached with nuance, empathy and care, rather than merely as an economic necessity or personal preference.

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