

## 'Experiences of front desk workers on board cruise ships'

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Heinrich, Miriam, "Experiences of front desk workers on board cruise ships" (2021). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 16.  
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## **‘Experiences of front desk workers on board cruise ships’**

### **Introduction**

Every year people are attracted to working in the cruise industry. Before COVID-19, in 2019, the industry employed more than 1.17 million cruise workers paying \$50.53 billion in wages and salaries (CLIA 2020). Factors motivating people to work in this industry include traveling the world and saving money at the same time (Matuszewski and Blenkinsopp 2011; Dennett 2018). However, once on board, the ship can be experienced as ‘an authoritarian institution’ (Klein 2008, p. 140) with workers’ timetable being tightly controlled by the management (Oyogoa 2016). Working conditions on board cruise ships have been much criticized. Strategies such as the flags of convenience (FOC) (Terry 2017) enable cruise companies to escape stringent environmental, taxation and human resources legislation (Terry 2011). This allows companies to have a ‘flexible’ work force (Dennett et al. 2010), reduces operating costs (Chin 2008) thereby decreasing cruises’ purchasing prices for customers. For the crew, this means having ‘poorly enforced [...] labor standards’ (DeSombre 2006, p. 3), resulting in limited rights or no minimum wage on board (Klein 2002, 2008). Work often means working 10 months’ contracts, with no days off, no holidays and up to 100 hours of work per week (Terry 2011), making it ethically questionable and physically demanding. In respect to their private lives, frequently cruise workers need to endure a lot such as being separated from their families for a long time (Thomas 2003), sharing cabins and substituting colleagues for friends and family (Gibson 2008). Besides these factors, work on board can be challenging. Within the workforce, hotel services make up 85% (Gibson and Parkman 2018), meaning that many work in customer-facing roles. Further pressure is put on employees as a result of the high competitiveness within the industry (Testa et al. 1998), where workers, especially those dealing with passengers directly, need to perform at a high level (Dennett et al. 2010). Despite this stress, employees on board are expected to deal with complaints in a prompt and friendly manner and regulate their emotions accordingly, which is also known as emotional labour (Hochschild 1983). The front desk department, especially, is the hub of the ship where complaints from customers accumulate, therefore work is stressful and multitasking essential. Empirical research on the emotional stresses faced by this department is scarce, and many scholars argue the cruise industry lacks transparency, especially regarding working conditions (Grosbois 2016). Thus, the aim of this on-going research is to address this gap and explore front desk workers’ experiences of working and living on board an ocean cruising vessel.

### **Literature Review**

Cruise ships have been viewed as unique worlds, and, from a customer perspective, described as ‘cathedrals of consumption’ (Ritzer 2010, p. 16) or ‘spaces of containment’ (Weaver 2005b, p. 165). A particularity of a cruise ship is that it can be viewed as being closed-off (Turner 1967 cited in Thomas et al. 2013), akin to a prison (Klein 2008), the navy (Zurcher 1967; Barrett 1996) or the military (Jenning and Markus 1977; Higate 2001). In research, the cruise ship has also been compared to Goffman’s (1961) total institution (Tracy 2000; Weaver 2005b; Artini et al. 2011; Lyu et al. 2017) where people follow a tight schedule, live and work together and are cut off from

society for a specific amount of time (Goffman 1961). Furthermore, even in closed-off institutions a certain permeability exists (Baer and Ravneberg 2008), e.g. staff or passenger movement, and should be further investigated. Also, the liminal character of a cruise ship should be noted here, as a state of being ‘neither here nor there, but in between’ (Gibson and Perkins 2015, p. 257). Thus, also the state of liminality should be explored within the study as it has not been considered fully within the cruise ship domain (Rink 2020). As mentioned, while scarce, working conditions on board cruise ships have been the focus of some research (see Zhao 2002, 2002; Klein 2008, 2002; Bolt and Lashley 2015). Thomas (2003) studied seafarers and how they cope with the working environment whilst being away for several months from home. Gibson (2008) looked at how cruise workers experienced work and life on board. Similarly, Chin (2008) discussed working conditions, focusing on labour flexibilization on board due to Flags of convenience. More recently, research into working conditions on board has addressed the physical work environment (Österman et al. 2017), organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Larsen et al. 2012), employee motivation and satisfaction (Sehkaran and Sevcikova 2011), behaviour at work (Dennett et al. 2014), sustainable cruise ship employment (Adams 2017), crew work experience (Bolt and Lashley 2015) and work engagement and well-being (Radic et al. 2020). As far as living conditions are concerned, focus in the literature has been on the organisation or infrastructure of cruise ships as well as health and safety issues. Rarely has ‘social life and human behaviour’ (Papathanassis and Beckmann 2011, p. 164) been studied, highlighting a gap in research. Matuszewski and Blenkinsopp (2011, p. 85) suggest further research needs to focus on ‘how employees construct their own worldliness’ with more attention given to their environment (Larsen et al. 2012). Within hotel services and thus service-oriented job roles, regulating emotions for a wage is common, and called emotional labour (Hochschild 1983). On a cruise ship, passengers expect positive rather than negative emotions from workers (Salariosa Llangco 2017). In order to achieve this, cruise companies have the display rules in place, in form of manuals, training or handbooks. To ensure that employees follow the rules, cruise companies monitor employee performance (Brownell 2014; Weaver 2005a). Outcomes of emotional labour such as burnout (Larner et al. 2017), emotional exhaustion (Alola et al. 2019) and staff turnover (Han et al. 2016) are common. Although research has been undertaken to understand what influence emotions have on outcomes in organizations (Conroy et al. 2017), little is known and offers room for further investigation. Studies on emotional labour on board, in particular, is small. Research in this area often focuses on workers in service-facing roles such as cruise staff (e.g. Tracy 2000) or workers in restaurants, bars etc. (Johansson and Näslund 2009; Weaver 2005a), but less research exists on front desk workers, generating a further gap in the literature. Examining the conditions of such a liminal space more closely and what influence this has on the experience and the ability of workers to perform, also emotionally, is worth exploring.

## **Methodology**

This research takes a constructivist view where emphasis is laid upon the ‘production of reconstructed understandings of the social world’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2018, p. 169). The target population for this study consists of front desk workers of cruise ships, as they regulate emotions on a daily basis and experience high intensity. The research design chosen is that of phenomenology which is beneficial in order to gain a deep understanding of a person’s experience (Fendt 2018). Data collection in phenomenology is commonly done via interviews with only a few participants (Fendt 2018). Thus, it is anticipated that between 20 to 25 participants will be interviewed during late 2021 and early 2022. Sampling will be done by utilising a non-probability

technique (Saunders et al. 2012). This sampling method will not allow generalisations to be made afterwards (Bryman 2012; Fendt 2018) but will be most helpful within this research as access to cruise workers is highly challenging. Previous colleagues of the researcher will be contacted, for example via the social networks of Facebook or LinkedIn. Also, snowball sampling (Bryman 2012) will be used so that participants suggest further potential respondents (Saunders et al. 2012). Additional methods such as object elicitation including artefacts, as well as image elicitation through pictures (Fendt 2018) will be used. The data will be analysed using the technique of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Likewise, reflexivity and positionality of the researcher will infuse the research reflecting the researcher's own experience of working and living on board.

## **Study Contributions**

Academically, this study will contribute to knowledge about the experiences of front desk workers' work and life on board cruise ships. In more general terms, it will also offer insight into the experiences of front desk workers in hospitality and tourism, and other service roles. It will also enhance understanding of the emotional constraints a job at the front desk on board entails. This study may lead to a deeper understanding of the cruise ship as a total institution thus adding to the literature on total institutions, such as military or naval ships, where people are closed-off from the outside world for a specific amount of time. It will also offer a unique insight into emotion management and the nature of precarious work in the cruise industry, an area of research that is under-researched. From a practical angle, this research will also contribute to a greater understanding of how the experience of workers in the shipboard environment impacts on their well-being and ultimately on their ability to perform emotionally. This knowledge might further help other shipboard employees to understand and better take care of their well-being on board in the future. This might also assist newcomers on board to better comprehend the stressors of, and feel more prepared for, life on board.

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