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Article

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Zeitschrift für Personalforschung (ZfP)

Provided in Cooperation with:

Rainer Hampp Verlag

Suggested Citation: Sieben, Barbara; Haunschild, Axel (2012) : Paradoxes of luxury work, Zeitschrift für Personalforschung (ZfP), ISSN 1862-0000, Rainer Hampp Verlag, Mering, Vol. 26, Iss. 2, pp. 189-194,
https://doi.org/10.1688/1862-0000_ZfP_2012_02_Sieben

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/93019>

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Research Note

Barbara Sieben, Axel Haunschild*

Paradoxes of Luxury Work**

This article conceptually explores the dark side of luxury work, i.e. service work in the luxury segment, by using the analytical perspective of ‘paradoxes’. We identify three paradoxes arising from the dark side of luxury work which are interrelated, affect different actors (managers, customers and workers), and are embedded in broader societal structures. We discuss the contribution of our paper to the literatures on service work and organizational paradoxes and outline starting points for future empirical research.

Paradoxien von Luxusarbeit

Dienstleistungsarbeit im Luxussegment ist durch eine schillernde Vorderseite und eine im Hinblick auf Arbeitsbedingungen und Beschäftigungsverhältnisse i.d.R. für Kunden/innen nicht sichtbare Rückseite geprägt. Der Beitrag führt für diese Art der Dienstleistungsarbeit den Begriff der Luxusarbeit ein und untersucht die mit deren verborgener Rückseite verbundenen Paradoxien. Wir identifizieren drei solcher Paradoxien, die eng miteinander verwoben sind, verschiedene Akteure betreffen – Manager/innen, Kund/innen und Beschäftigte – und die nur vor dem Hintergrund ihrer Einbettung in gesellschaftliche Strukturen zu verstehen sind. Abschließend diskutieren wir den Beitrag unserer konzeptionellen Analyse für die Forschungsfelder Dienstleistungsarbeit und organisationale Paradoxien und zeigen Ansatzpunkte für zukünftige empirische Studien auf.

Key words: **organizational paradoxes, luxury services, emotional labor, precarious work, consumption, identity**
(JEL: J24, L23, L80, M12, M54)

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** Artikel eingegangen: 26.2.2012
revidierte Fassung akzeptiert: 23.4.2012.

Introduction

Along with a general growth of the service sector in advanced economies we observe an increasing scholarly interest in service work. One specific area of the service sector in general, and person-related services in particular, is luxury services where high price leisure and similar services are provided through paid labor and where consumption is marked by (perceived) extravagance, opulence or comfort. Examples of such services can be found in hotels, restaurants cruise ships or in fashion retail. We use the term luxury work to subsume person-related service work in this luxury segment of the service sector. A number of studies as well as recent media coverage show that luxury work regularly involves precarious work arrangements. This is in sharp contrast with employers' and customers' expectations regarding the quality of luxury services and also the high emotional and aesthetic demands towards luxury workers. Luxury work is thus supposed to present its bright side to customers, and at the same time it reveals a dark side when working conditions and work demands are investigated. Our basic assumption is that in order to understand the (paradoxical) coexistence of these two sides of luxury work, not just managerial logics and practices but also workers' identities and broader societal consumption practices have to be taken into account. It is the aim of this article to propose a conceptual framework for analysing the link between management's, workers' and customers' practices in luxury services. This framework will draw upon the organizational paradoxes literature.

In the following, we briefly summarize extant studies on what we term luxury work and outline some of its main characteristics. We then introduce our conceptual framework and sketch three paradoxes of luxury work. Finally, we outline routes for future research on this topic.

Characteristics of luxury work

The service sector covers a broad range of activities or products such as professional services, research and development, consulting, transport, communication, retailing, education, financial services, entertainment and tourism, to name just a few. Many services are produced through work "on the front line" (Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire, & Tam, 1999) where service workers directly interact with clients. Our analysis focuses on luxury work as a specific form of person-related service work that by and large puts high emotional and aesthetic demands on service workers. Emotional and, more recently, aesthetic labor are established concepts to describe and analyse work situations or processes in which emotions and embodied capacities and attributes are part of the product or services an organization provides and where workers are required to purposefully manage and control their emotions and appearance in a way that their employer and/or their clients expect (Hochschild, 1983; Witz, Warhurst, & Nickson, 2003). These processes can be regarded as a form of identity regulation producing "appropriate individuals" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Studies on service work in the luxury sector consistently emphasize the importance of emotional work, comprising constant friendliness, care and empathy, but also coolness, smiling or flirting, as well as of employees' dresses, physical ap-

pearance, bodily movements, facial expressions and accents (Johanson & Näslund, 2009; Tracy, 2000). Such organizational demands make employees appear as “branded workers” (Pettinger, 2004) and aim to produce an “enchantment” of the customer (Ritzer, 1999).

Against this background it is striking that the production of luxury services is mainly accomplished by relatively low qualified employees with low wages and often contingent work arrangements, moreover often by women and members of ethnic minorities as e.g. in luxury hotels (Adler & Adler, 2004; Davidson, Guildinga, & Timo, 2006; Sherman, 2007). The frontline service workers we are focusing on are not the worst off in luxury service production: at the lowest end as regards working conditions and wages are, for example, jobs in stewarding and room cleaning which are jobs often done by immigrants (ILO, 2001; EU, 2004). These jobs are an integral part of the luxury service and disclose an obscene disparity between the luxury provided to solvent customers and staff's working conditions. Yet, this also applies to frontline service workers, who are more often than not bound to seasonal and contingent contractual arrangements, earn low end wages, depend on tips from benevolent customers, and suffer from long and disagreeable working times, high work pressure and physical strain (EU, 2004; Schmidt, 1985).

It could be argued that the discrepancy between the expected service quality (the “bright side” of a luxury service) and working conditions and wages (its “dark side”) is one case of the basic tension between product quality and input costs. However, we argue that a closer look at luxury workers' self-perceptions and work identities as well as customer attitudes and behaviors can contribute to a deeper understanding of luxury work and its societal embeddedness. For this purpose, we propose an analytical framework that refers to the organizational paradoxes literature and that seeks to integrate management, worker and customer perspectives.

Conceptual analysis: Three paradoxes of luxury work

We ground the following analysis in a widely accepted notion of paradox as the simultaneous presence of opposites (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Instead of e.g. logical or moral paradoxes we are interested in contradictory tensions that occur in organizational practice, in opposing demands and dilemmas that (intra- and extra-) organizational actors are confronted with, and their mutual interwovenness. Hence, with this notion of paradox we refer to socially constructed opposites that actors become aware of through reflection and interaction. These opposites denote a broad variety of contradictory, yet interwoven, “elements” such as demands, interests, feelings or practices (e.g. Lewis, 2000). A paradox in this sense becomes apparent when actors behave against social expectancies, are confronted with conflicting demands or impose contradictory rules and norms to others. A further characteristic is that paradoxes are not ephemeral phenomena, but may be understood as perceived tensions that are perpetuated and reinforced in social interaction.

What is perceived as a tension in the first place is very much subject to the socio-cultural embedding of organizational incidents, to historically grown and shifting meanings attached to phenomena such as “decent work” or “luxury” as well as to

social structures and relations. Correspondingly, our analysis on paradoxes of luxury work seeks to highlight the importance of the societal embedding of related paradoxes, and to broaden the analysis of organizational paradoxes by loosening the prevalent restriction in the literature on how paradoxes affect management and organizations.

By re-reading and re-interpreting studies on the production and/or consumption of luxury services through a paradox lens, we identify three paradoxes of luxury work which all reside in the tensions between the bright side of the luxury service and the dark side of luxury work, the underlying conditions of work. The latter are first and foremost the result of management decisions. It seems contradictory that in the luxury industries service workers have to work under such problematic conditions while management at the same time expects them to instil positive emotions in demanding customers. It is particularly striking that emotional labor, which is so crucial for satisfying customers, is not adequately recompensed in job evaluations. This *first* paradox may be framed as a typical management tension between cost saving and service quality. However, the way this paradox is managed in service organizations is strongly connected with the question how service takers and service workers deal with the two sides of luxury. As we will show now, two other paradoxes show up when broadening the analysis by taking into account the perspectives of customers and service workers.

The *second* paradox attends to the paradoxical consumption experience of customers who perceive a discrepancy between luxury and its dark side. Although previous research has stressed the co-existence of, and the interaction between, (luxury) service work and consumption (e.g. Pettinger, 2004), service customers' own perceptions and attitudes have been neglected so far. However, customers might actually be aware of the dark side of luxury work; and this might be inconsistent with their attitudes or values regarding fairness, justice or equality. Consequently, a tension arises: as consumers of the luxury service, the clients expect the positive emotional experience they pay for; at the same time, they realize that their positive emotions are the result of emotion work performed under poor working conditions. This tension constitutes a paradoxical consumption experience. Whether the dark side of luxury work is likely to affect luxury consumers' self-image and comfort depends on societally defined roles of luxury providers and consumers.

The *third* paradox addresses the service workers' own perception of the luxury work they do, in particular their work identities that are often related to lifestyles. By re-interpreting empirical studies on luxury work we can find the paradoxical effect that, despite the problematic aspects of their work, luxury workers can regard their work as luxury. The mere fact that the service they offer is consumed by certain (interesting, well-off, famous) consumers and/or in a luxurious environment seems to function as a compensation for the negative sides of work. This effect is enhanced by the relevance of aesthetic norms in the provision of a luxury service. In her ethnographic study of service and inequality in luxury hotels, Sherman (2005) describes that the luxury hotel workers she studied engaged in producing a superior self by drawing (partly contradictory) symbolic boundaries. In strategic comparisons with peers they used their relatedness to the luxury hotel and its clients as a source

of prestige. In comparison with their guests they tended to use contradictory strategies, perceiving and constructing the guest as needy and dependent. Another source of distinction could be workers' perceived (financial or cultural) value of and feelings towards the product they sell, that is, the production of luxury goods appears as a "celebration of distinction, in which workers are actively engaged" (Wright, 2005, p. 302).

The extant paradox literature is for the most part concentrated on the *management* of paradoxes, namely on how to diminish related tensions or, alternatively, to use the paradoxes' "energizing potential" for change (e.g. Eisenhardt, 2000). However, the interwoven paradoxes of luxury work we identified seem to constitute a stable arrangement embedded in and reproduced by broader societal patterns of consumption and societal stratification that apparently do not entail a need for change for the involved actors. Service organizations may afford to offer unfavorable working conditions if these are blended out or legitimized both by the clients and the service workers themselves.

Further research

Our starting point of analysis was the observed tension between the bright and the dark side of luxury work. We propose an analytical framework that sheds light on the paradoxes of luxury work at three different levels, manager, customer and worker, and that incorporates the interrelatedness and the societal embeddedness of (nested) paradoxes. Our aim is, first, to contribute to the literature on service work by introducing and systematically focusing on luxury work, by integrating managers', customers' and workers' perspectives and by linking the workplace with societal patterns of consumption and distinction. Second, we seek to contribute to the organizational paradoxes literature that has so far neglected the link between organizational and societal structures and practices. The example of luxury work clearly reveals that taking into account the societal context is essential for understanding the dynamics of organizational paradoxes.

The framework and the three paradoxes presented in this article are based on deductive reasoning and a re-reading of the literature on service work in the luxury sector. This first phase of analysis has to be followed by empirical studies on how luxury service workers perceive their working conditions and enact distinction from other service workers, and on whether or how luxury service customers recognize, perceive and legitimize the disparity between their service expectations and the underlying demands and conditions of work. The analysis of historical and topical debates about this disparity (see cruise ships as a recent example) can also be an important source of evidence. The empirical findings on luxury work resulting from, for example, case studies, interviews, observational data or discourse analyses could then be compared to findings on other types of service work, in particular those where both, service interaction (onstage) and a concealed backstage, exist. At a theoretical level, such findings should also allow for elaborating more on the interrelatedness and social embeddedness of related paradoxes and could thus strengthen the theoretical links between social theory, labor and consumer studies, and organizational paradoxes.

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