

Aesthetic labour and discrimination

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Introduction

Aesthetic labour is an original area of enquiry and has become an important concept in the sociology of work, particularly in analyses of interactive service work in the hospitality and retail industries. Aesthetic labour highlights how employees are hired because of the way that they look and talk – and, once employed, how they are instructed on body language, appearance standards, dress codes and even speech to produce a desired style of service intended to create an organizational brand and market differentiation. Thus with aesthetic labour organizations look to create ‘ideal’ workers through first recruiting potential employees who fit their brand image and then subsequently further moulding employees, through elements such as appearance standards and dress codes. First identified in the hospitality and retail industries it has expanded into a range of other service sector settings, such as hairdressing (Barber, 2016), recruitment consulting (Caven, Lawley and Baker, 2013) and the fitness industry (Harvey, Vachhani and Williams, 2014), though the focus of this chapter will remain the hospitality and retail industries. With ever more prescriptive attempts by service organizations to create a particular brand image the potential for discrimination based on an individual’s personal characteristics, including their appearance, is obvious. In this regard, aesthetic labour is also a way to maintain and amplify inequality in the workplace along aspects such as gender, race, class, age and disability. This chapter, then, considers the manner in which, with aesthetic labour, organizations can signal who is likely to fit the brand image and the consequences of this with regard to inclusion and exclusion based on personal characteristics. The chapter initially offers a definition of aesthetic labour before moving on to consider the usefulness of intersectionality as a means to consider the multiple ways in which people may face disadvantage in the labour market. In recognising the importance of intersectionality the chapter initially considers gender, race, class, weight and disability individually before returning to the idea of how these elements may intersect to lead to discrimination resulting in unfair and unequal treatment. Finally, the chapter will briefly consider how the subtle and not so subtle societal norms and prejudices which exist to exclude people or create discriminatory behaviour in the workplace can potentially be addressed.

Understanding aesthetic labour through intersectionality

The concept of aesthetic labour seeks to understand how the process of appearance-centred discrimination operates at the organizational level. In this regard hospitality and retail organizations increasingly seek to appeal to customers through the ‘look’ of their employees. The definition of aesthetic labour offered in Warhurst, Nickson, Witz and Cullen (2000) notes the importance of the embodied capacities and attributes’ possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment, which are then mobilized, developed and commodified by employers through processes of recruitment, selection, training and monitoring, to transform them into ‘competencies’ or ‘skills’ which are then aesthetically geared towards producing a ‘style’ of service encounter. Importantly, customer expectations of the service encounter and

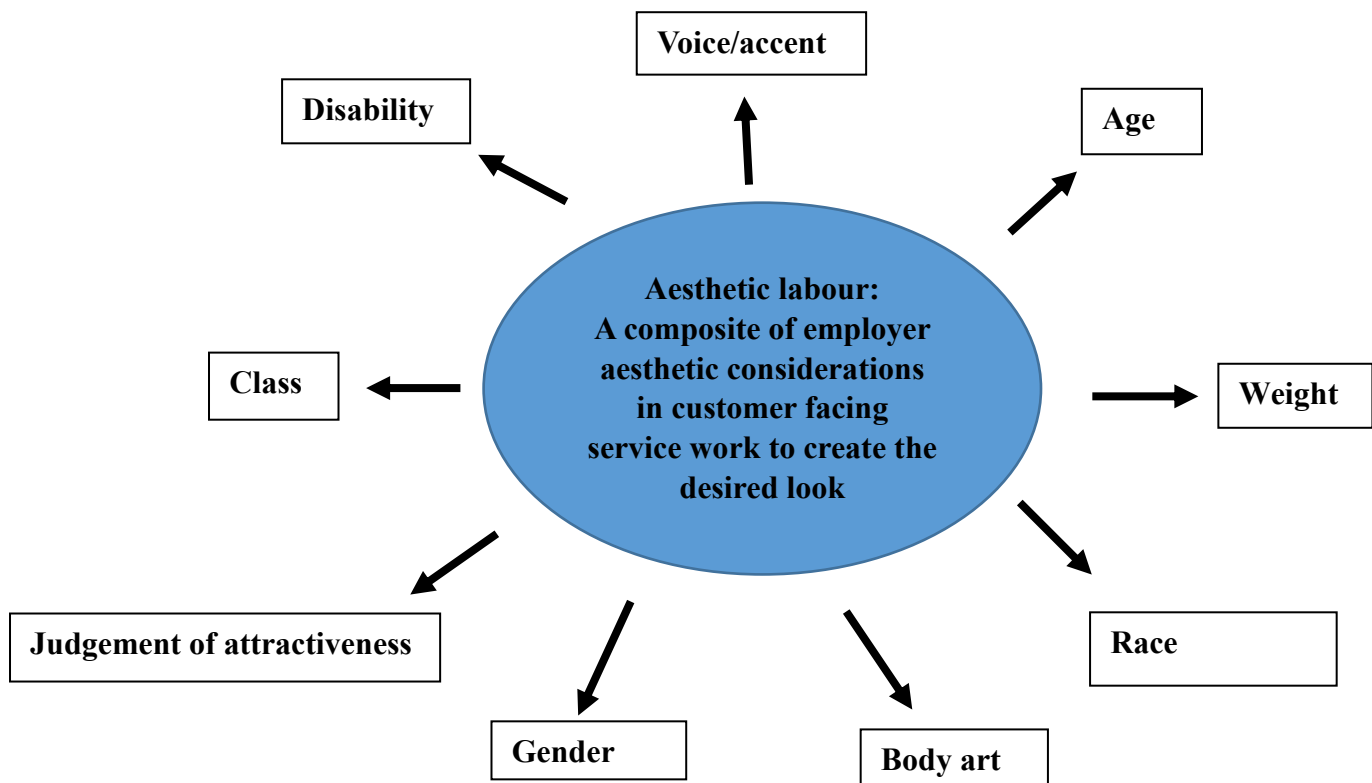
its attendant 'good service' will, of course, vary, thus impacting on who is likely to be deemed appropriate by the organization to offer such service. Consequently, as Nickson, Warhurst, Cullen and Watt (2003: 190) suggest, 'it is important to note that all organizations have an aesthetic appeal but the form of aesthetic being offered may vary from one type of service organization to another'. This attempt to 'match' the employee with the brand image (Nickson, Warhurst, Witz and Cullen, 2001; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Witz, Warhurst and Nickson 2003) can then vary from a heightened emphasis on aesthetics and the appearance of employees to more prosaic expectations that front-line, customer-facing staff simply look neat and tidy. Thus there may be differences between what is termed the 'style' labour market, consisting of upmarket retailers, boutique hotels and trendy restaurants and bars and less overtly style-driven hospitality and retail organizations (Warhurst et al., 2000). It is, then, within the style labour market where organizational aesthetic demands of employers are most pronounced. Related to the discussion above it is clear that the view of who best represents any given organizational look will impact inclusion and exclusion in the labour market with regard to how individual characteristics may be viewed by service organizations.

It is not only individual characteristics, such as one's gender, that will impact on an individual's experience in the labour market. Often several individual characteristics may come together to multiply the potential for discrimination and exclusion. Here we can draw on the concept of intersectionality as a means to appreciate the manner in which people can be characterized by their membership of multiple social categories (Atewologun, 2018). Historically, the concept of intersectionality was originally focussed on the intersection of race and sex and how this could influence labour marking 'sorting' and discrimination. (Crenshaw, 1989) Over time, however, in addition to race and sex intersectionality can now include other elements such as sexual orientation, class and able-bodiedness (Atewologun, 2018). In essence, then, intersectionality highlights the manner in which individuals can not only experience discrimination based on one single characteristic but instead this discrimination may be further magnified through the intersection of several characteristics. For example, a black, older woman facing discrimination in the labour market due to her race, gender and age. This point becomes important when we consider the manner in which many service jobs are 'typed' through aesthetic labour. MacDonald and Merrill (2009: 123) note the manner in which within customer service jobs, '... race, gender, class and age coalesce in different job settings to create a norm of the worker who will "look the part" given a particular service'. Consequently many employees are expected 'do ethnicity' or 'do gender' in interactive service work and as MacDonald and Merrill (2009: 114) note, 'labour market segmentation and gender and ethnic "niches" within interactive services are hardly accidental – ethnicity and gender shape hiring decisions because they shape service interactions'. Consequently, based on their research examining the experiences of migrant workers in a large multinational chain hotel in London, McDowell, Batnitzky and Dyer (2007: 2) recognize that:

Questions about gender, nationality, personal style, embodiment, skin colour, weight, bodily hygiene, and language abilities (especially when there is an international client base) are crucial parts both of the decision to hire categorically distinctive workers and of the performativity of workplace identities to produce a particular experience of 'hospitality' for the guests'.

Clearly, then, many hospitality and retail organizations are making decisions about who will be deemed appropriate for working in their organization with regard to their look and, importantly, further moulding the performativity of service workers through elements such as appearance standards and dress codes. In simple terms in considering the potential for discrimination and bias, aesthetic labour exemplifies how such processes are manifest at the point of entry into an organization through recruitment and selection, but equally how a person's individual characteristics can also impact on their actual employment experience once employed. Indeed, whilst the concept of intersectionality is useful in highlighting how discrimination may occur due to numerous individual characteristics in Warhurst and Nickson (2020) we highlighted additional elements such as body art and weight as being important too (and see Figure 1). Thus depending on the nature of the service offering all or some of these elements in Figure 1 are likely to be important in determining who will be fit the desired look.

Figure 1: A composite of employer' aesthetic considerations in customer-facing work



Clearly, then, aesthetic labour and bodily capital has the potential to produce and re-produce social cleavages around elements such as gender, race, age and class (Mears, 2014). Thus, for the purposes of this chapter the remainder of the discussion will concentrate on gender, race, class, weight and disability in recognising how with aesthetic labour both individually and through intersecting these characteristics can often lead to discrimination and a differentiated employment experience.

Gender and front-line service work

In considering gender in front-line service work it is important to acknowledge that, at one level, aesthetic labour is gender neutral. In that sense, the research reported in Warhurst and Nickson (2020) highlights how both women and men would often face prescriptions as to how they should look at the point of entry to the organization and then through subsequent moulding of their appearance once employed. For example, in one of the style-driven hotels in Glasgow where we interviewed managers and employees there were expectations that male employees would have a neat appearance, be clean shaven and make an effort to ensure that they looked tidy and presentable. However, whilst recognising that men can also be aestheticized it is equally important to acknowledge the reality that women are more likely to face stricter prescriptions and be more deeply impacted by aesthetic labour. As Mears (2014: 1338) notes 'because gender structures the social world in ways that make appearance more central to women's lives than men's, beauty is typically a more valuable kind of capital for women than for men, or at least, the convertibility of this capital varies by gender'. Simply put, 'norms regarding physical appearance are primarily gendered, so women and men face different expectations when it comes to physical appearance' (Aberg, Kukkonen and Sarpila, 2020: 2). In this manner women are likely to be held to a different aesthetic standard than men, which in turn will impact on who gets jobs and furthermore what happens once employed. For example, Warhurst and Nickson (2020) relay the story of a focus group participant who was working in a stylish city centre restaurant and saw first-hand the discrimination against a potential applicant:

A girl came in for an application form and he [the restaurant manager] said 'Sorry, we don't have anything'. Later I said, 'Yes we do' and he said, 'She's too ugly to work here'. I said, 'You can't say something like that, that's terrible' and he goes 'Yeah, I can, this is the industry, that girl can't work here'. I was shocked. (Quoted on p. 136)

It is difficult to imagine a similar scenario with a potential male employee being treated in the same manner because he was not handsome enough. It is important to note, as well, that research on aesthetic labour which highlights the gendered expectations for front line staff in hospitality shows how the process is seen globally, including in the burgeoning service economies in China (Otis, 2008; 2011; 2021) and India (Maitra and Maitra, 2018). For example, Otis considers the manner in which many interactive service jobs in China are filled by young and attractive women, especially in the absence of labour law preventing gender discrimination. For example, she reports research undertaken in two luxury hotels who were part of the same group (called by the pseudonym Transluxury) in China. The first hotel was located in Beijing and the second in the regional city of Kunming. In both hotels most front line workers were female high school graduates ranging from 17-27. Otis notes the manner in which these workers, who usually came from working class backgrounds, would undergo intensive training in expected standards around how to present themselves in the workplace

to ensure they could confirm with the hotels exacting grooming requirements. This would include prescriptions on the length of their nails colour and length of hair, types of jewellery and even the type of shoes they should wear to ensure that they did not make too much noise and disturb guests. Her work also details the rigorous enforcement of these standards by managers to ensure that the employees appropriately interacted with guests.

It is not, then, just at the point of entry that women are likely to be held to a different aesthetic standard and as highlighted above a further obvious manifestation of the gendered nature of aesthetic labour can be seen in the imposition of dress codes, which highlights gender inequality in managing appearance in the workplace. Writing in the context of Australia Eastael, O'Neill and Ryan (2018) note that both female and male employees in the service industry may experience explicit and implicit gendered dress codes in the workplace. However, for women such dress codes are much more likely to 'emphasize femininity, beauty, fashion and appearance' (pp. 66-7). Indeed, Eastael et al. (2018) found in their research that the prescriptions for women working in hospitality were much more stringent than for men including expectations for wearing make-up. Furthermore the same research also found that the exploitation of female sexuality would often be built into appearance standards with elements such as cleavage revealing shirts to make female employees look 'sexy'.

In Warhurst and Nickson (2020) we discuss this process of sexualizing women through appearance standards and dress codes as being a reflection of the 'dark side' of aesthetic labour in which women are much more likely to find themselves sexualized in the service encounter. McDowell (2009: 56) for example notes how 'some organizations make the requirement of an idealized, typically white, clear, slim and young, and often sexualized body an explicit part of the recruitment process'. Similarly Gherardi (1995: 43) notes that:

Sexual skills are acquired and incorporated into the organizational role. The organization acquires command over the sexuality of its employees, within certain limits. Women with jobs that require, implicitly or explicitly, an attractive appearance – hostesses, saleswomen, receptionists, secretaries – are duty bound to be agreeable or seductive, and must be or pretend to be 'sexy' in their dealings with the public.

Gherardi's recognition of the limitations of sexualization in employees dealings with customer is important as it highlights that there may be degrees to which organizations overtly sexualize their employees as a key organizational strategy or instead enact such sexualization in a more tacit manner. In an overt sense Hooters are perhaps the best known, and infamous, example of what Moffitt and Szymanski (2011) describe as a 'sexually objectifying environment' or more straightforwardly 'breastraunts' (Avery, 2016) or 'sextraunts' (Gumin, 2012). Whilst Hooters are overt in their sexualization of young women, as noted above it is commonplace for many hospitality organizations to sexualize their female employees, albeit in a less openly manner and often with deleterious outcomes such as widespread reporting of sexual harassment from customers in the hospitality industry (and see for example, Dawson, Russen, Lee and Madera, 2021; Minnotte and Legerski, 2019; Hall, 1993; Waudby and Poulston, 2017). As we have already noted above this process of sexualization may be through things such as dress codes. For example, ostensibly neutral dress codes can be enforced by owners or managers of hospitality businesses in a manner which creates discrimination towards women. The BBC (2016) reports an Employment

Tribunal case in which a restaurant's dress code specified that staff should wear all black. One young female employee working as a waitress consequently wore trousers to be comfortable, as well as using minimal make-up and keeping her hair up. In response the owner of the restaurant asked the waitress to wear her hair down, apply a 'full face of make-up' and wear a skirt to she would be 'easy on eye'. Unsurprisingly in this case the waitress won her case against the owner.

As a final point in considering the gendered nature of aesthetic labour and the clear potential to create discrimination, bias and inequality for women it is also important to recognize our earlier discussion of intersectionality and the manner in which elements such as gender may intersect other personal characteristics such as age and race and the consequences of this process for how service organizations view their 'ideal' worker which they are seeking. For example, discrimination faced by women is different than that experienced by men, with women more likely to experience negative age stereotyping at a younger age than men. In this regard women suffer from a 'double standard' of ageism and sexism, highlighting the manner which age discrimination is not gender neutral (Aberg et al., 2020). In particular, older women seeking employment in customer facing roles in hospitality and retail are much more likely to experience discrimination based on their appearance (McGann, Ong, Bowman, Duncan, Kimberley and Biggs, 2016).

Race and front-line service work

As we have discussed above much of the existing research on aesthetic labour has particularly emphasized the gendered expectations of this work and there is less research which has specifically considered the manner in which aesthetic labour can be gendered and raced. Thus it is suggested that there is a need to more explicitly consider the racialized dimensions of aesthetic labour (Misra and Walters, 2022; see also Walters, 2018). What the work of Misra and Walters shows is the manner in which the visibility or otherwise of customer facing staff will often be influenced by their skin colour. In their work on the clothing retail industry they discovered a racialized three tiered hierarchy or what they describe as 'tri-racial aesthetic labour', which saw managers particularly favouring white beauty standards in their front-line employees. Thus they recognize the manner in which trendy clothing retailers such as American Eagle or Abercrombie and Fitch prefer to staff their stores with slender women and muscular men, who are usually white. The second tier in the hierarchy are lighter skinned and racially ambiguous looking Asian, Black, Hispanic and multiracial employees, who are employed as a means to diversify brand representations. The third tier at the bottom of the hierarchy are darker skinned Black women, who are devalued and consequently are more likely to face discrimination, thus being unlikely to get a job or if they are employed likely to find themselves working backstage and not in contact with customers. This process of strict segmentation on racial and ethnic grounds is also found in the work of Wilson (2016; 2018a; 2018b). Wilson's research on two upscale restaurants in Los Angeles highlights the manner in which there are distinct niches in many restaurants, hotels, and other service workplaces in which the majority of the 'back-of-the-house' jobs like cleaning for example will often be filled by people from minority ethnic backgrounds. On the other hand, front-of-the-house jobs involving interaction with customers will often be filled with class privileged white employees. Thus, his research found that the majority of serving staff in the restaurants he studied were well educated young, white or mixed white.

Only a very small number of front-line staff were African Americans, again reflecting Misra and Walters' notion of 'tri-racial aesthetic labour'.

It is not just in America however where the process of establishing a racial hierarchy is seen. McDowell et al. (2007) in their case study of a large hotel in London, which was part of a global multinational chain, recognize how there are very different requirements for the different departments in the hotel, in terms of distinctive gender, ethnic, and national divisions of labour. In particular for front office positions, such as the reception area of the hotel, 'There is an immediately visible distinction ... that is based, it seems, officially on nationality and associated language skills, but is correlated with skin colour' (p. 12). Thus, although the front office is recognized as being the most ethnically diverse department in the hotel with at least 10 nationalities it is suggested that a hierarchy still exists, based on ethnicity and skin colour. For example, McDowell et al cite an assistant manager in the front office, who suggested that 'sometimes guests get a little bit strange when it's perhaps, how can I say, international colleagues, so if you are not European, sometimes they can be a bit strange, especially Asians or if you are black or something.' (quoted on p. 14). This quote highlights the manner in which the bias of at least some customers is likely to influence the hiring decisions of the managers in the hotel with regard to staffing customer facing front office positions. Here Misra and Walters (2022) point about how race is embedded in aesthetic labour in terms of being both hypervisible and invisible is important. In this sense, the visibility of often good looking, white skinned employees' in front line positions serves to signal very clearly the expected type of employee in at least some service settings. At the same time many workers of colour who do not 'fit' the organization's brand image find themselves marginalized or invisible, either not employed or if employed likely to be in a back office role.

It is easy to see, then, how organizations and managers responsible for recruitment and selection decisions in hospitality and retail organizations may, either consciously or unconsciously, make decisions which are discriminatory. Indeed, given the prevalence of informal recruitment methods in these industries the scope for such discrimination is worryingly high. In this sense Gatta (2011) characterizes the recruitment process used by many service organizations as relying on instantaneous 'blink' decisions based on recruiting managers' first impressions of prospective workers. As Gatta notes, 'in many ways the blink moment can indeed be code for race and class bias' (p. 62). Often, of course, this discrimination will pass unnoticed, though there have been some high profile instances of discrimination and none more so than the egregious case of the self-proclaimed trendy hotel, the Mondrian Hotel, which is located on Sunset Strip in West Hollywood. This case came to prominence in the late 1990s when Ian Schrager, a well know American entrepreneur, hotelier and real estate developer, purchased the Mondrian hotel. Credited with co-creating the idea of boutique hotels, which are characterized by their upmarket, style driven nature, Schrager was well known for telling interviewers that employing cute, stylish staff was important to attract customers (Chocano, 2000). After Schrager bought the hotel in 1995 it was redesigned, with the designer noting how the redesign was driven by the idea of 'mystery in Los Angeles'. More specifically, it was suggested that 'Because of the climate and the fog, white stands out. One can therefore arrive at the idea that Los Angeles is a white mystery' (quoted in Chocano, 2000). Thus, the previously red, black and white painted facade was replaced by an ethereal white one. Moreover, within the hotel the 'elevator bank in the lobby was wrapped in translucent cotton and encased in an illuminated glass cube' (quoted in

Chocano, 2000). However, it was not just the hotel that was redesigned it was also some of the workforce. More specifically, nine bellmen and valets, eight of whom were minorities were dismissed to be replaced by, what the *Los Angeles Times* described as, ‘cool-looking white guys’ (quoted in Prewitt, 2003). Importantly, though, the company left a very obvious ‘smoking gun’ in the form of a memo from Schrager that outlined the underlying reasons for replacing the employees. In the memo from Schrager to the management of the hotel it was suggested that some employees were ‘too ethnic.’, though Schrager later explained he was talking about their tattoos. Despite this defence as Prewitt notes ‘In most cases a memo with racist-sounding overtones may never surface when it comes to prosecuting employees who fire workers because of the way they look’ (p.6). Consequently, the hotel paid over \$1 million to settle the discrimination suit brought by the bellmen and valet.

Class and front-line service work

Hanser (2012) argues that whilst gender has been extensively researched in service work, the classed nature of service work remains under-researched. In answer to the question of the value of analysing the classed nature of service work she suggests that ‘the value of class-focussed approaches lies in the recognition of power relations in the service encounter’ with regard to the roles of customer, manager and worker’ (p. 295). She further argues that studying class and service work also offers insight into how the often asymmetric status encounters in service interactions reflect broader socio-economic hierarchies. In this sense the interactive service workplace becomes a place where people from different social classes may regularly encounter each other, at the reception desk of the hotel or when eating or drinking in a bar or restaurant (Bell, 2012). Consequently, these encounters between people from different social classes raises a number of issues, as highlighted by Hanser (2012: 294), and from this work two of the more interesting questions are:

- How are service work settings and service work a means through which class divisions and differences are expressed?
- If service interactions operate as social encounters through which class inequalities are acted out, what are the larger implications of these performances of unequal social position?

These questions chime with Mears (2014: 1337) recognition that ‘though aesthetic labour typically characterizes entry level jobs with working class conditions (low pay, no benefits, insecure employment, etc.), managers expect, screen for, and train a middle class habitus among its workforce’ or in other words many service employers are seeking ‘middle classness’ in their front-line employees (Warhurst and Nickson, 2020).

This point about many front-line service jobs being filled by those presenting a middle class habitus is particularly true of the style labour market discussed earlier in the chapter. For example, Williams and Connell (2010) argue that employers in high end retail recruit class privileged workers, noting how these workers are ‘middle class, conventionally gendered, and typically white’ (p. 350). This situation poses potential challenges for those from working class backgrounds in seeking to compete against, for example, students for front line service work. In particular, these challenges are particularly acute for young working class men whose embodiment may be seen as inappropriate to potential employers. Thus, as McDowell (2009: 194) notes ‘fit and healthy young [working class] men may now be counted among the culturally oppressed, as their embodiment, their looks, their stance, their embodied hexis, seem threatening to potential employers and customers’. That said, the same author does

recognize that some working class men were prepared to ‘knuckle down and produce the sort of deferential performance and servile docility essential to holding on to their jobs’ (p. 196).

Indeed, as a further point there is some evidence that class disadvantage can potentially be overcome by potential employees recognising how they need to offer the required emotional and aesthetic labour increasingly demanded by employees’. For example, Bell (2012) considers the example of the TV programme, *Michel Roux’s Service*, which aired in the UK in 2011. In this series eight young people were given the opportunity to compete in a reality TV series in which three of the eight contestants were awarded scholarships to work in a high end restaurants. During the programmes eight episodes the contestants, almost all young working class people, who were felt to represent a variety of social problems in ‘Broken Britain’, were exposed to a variety of service encounters which sought to teach them how to do hospitality in formal dining settings. Like most reality TV the idea was that the contestants would go on a transformative journey, which would take contestants, who to that point in their lives were considered directionless, to becoming proficient in serving in high end restaurants, which was considered to be ‘good work’. In undergoing this transformation participants were expected to understand and appreciate the required emotional and aesthetic labour to work in a high end restaurant (see also Nickson et al., 2003 for a discussion of a training programme which sought to equip long term unemployed people with appropriate emotional and aesthetic labour skills to access front-line service jobs). As a further extension of this point, and again reflecting the discussion above, there is also an important role to be played by either HR managers or line managers in recruiting staff. Bolton, Laaser, McGuire and Duncan (2018) report research on four upper market hotels in Glasgow considering the extent to which ‘the observed recruitment and selection processes offer opportunities for social mobility for those from working class backgrounds and the role managers play in furthering or restricting opportunities’ (pp. 567-68). Ultimately, their research highlighted rather mixed practices with regard to the extent to which those responsible for recruitment genuinely encouraged social mobility. In this sense, even if hotels have a broad commitment to social mobility there is still a need to ensure that clear policies are enacted to ensure that all managers responsible for recruitment are committed to key values around inclusivity on the basis of social class.

Weight and front-line service work

The issue of discrimination in the labour market towards people who are overweight or obese is well established. This point is thrown into sharp relief when it is recognized that within the UK over two-thirds of adults are either overweight or obese, with around a third obese, whilst in the US nearly 40 per cent of Americans are classified as obese (Baker, 2021; Waters and Graf, 2018). As early as 1979 Larkin and Pines experimental study found clear evidence of discrimination towards overweight job applicants. Whilst recognising this discrimination and the obvious potential for deleterious outcomes for those who are overweight the authors nevertheless concluded that:

A normal weight preference in hiring might not be viewed as discriminatory at all; an employer might very well feel that he could easily justify (even to himself) hiring a normal weight person in preference to an objectively overweight applicant ... hiring the overweight might be bad for business since the potential clients or customers either find the overweight person distasteful or associate the condition with deficient performance’ (p. 325).

Nearly 20 years later Finkelstein, Frautschy, Demuth and Sweeney (2007) similarly found evidence that, compared to average weight applicants, overweight applicants are likely to fare poorer in the labour market. The same authors also noted the importance of the type of job and unsurprisingly found people who are overweight are seen to have a poor fit with certain types of jobs, such as those jobs with a high degree of contact with the public. Indeed, recent research by Bajorek and Bevan (2020) notes the particular prevalence of discrimination against overweight and obese job seekers in the service sector where terms such as ‘outgoing’, ‘attractive’ and ‘smart appearance’ are commonly used to signal the desired look. The same authors, whilst acknowledging this discrimination, also recognize that negative stereotypical attitudes towards overweight employees were even found among HR professionals. This discrimination exists despite the training and experience of HR professionals in working to ensure fairness in recruitment and selection processes to avoid making decisions based on discriminatory thinking.

As we have already noted in this chapter aspects such as race, gender, class and age create a norm of the worker who will best fit the required look for a particular service. Clearly, though, a further key aspect of ‘looking the part’ is concerned with customer perceptions around appropriate body shape, size and weight leading Gruys (2012: 484) to note that ‘workers’ body size is an important trait to consider when examining aesthetic labour’ (p. 484). In considering employees’ body size and aesthetic labour, much of the extant research highlights that many hospitality organizations will often seek to employ people for customer-facing jobs who are considered to be of ‘normal’ weight or have a slim build (Warhurst and Nickson, 2020). For example, Harris and Small (2013) in their analysis of online promotional videos used by hotels showed they were unlikely to portray an overtly overweight or obese person (and see Chapter 4 for further discussion of this research). A further and important issue in considering the discrimination to those who are overweight or obese is the need to recognize the gendered nature of this process. In simple terms, women suffer significantly more prejudice than men when it comes to employment discrimination around their body shape and size (Bajorek and Bevan, 2020; Smith, Martinez and Sabat, 2016). Nickson, Timming, Re and Perrett (2016) in their experimental study found that for customer-facing roles in the service sector overweight and obese people are likely to face discrimination. Importantly, though, the research also found that this discrimination was highly gendered, with women, even when they were still within a healthy BMI, much more likely to face discrimination than overtly overweight men. Moreover, a number of recent cases in the US have offered support for the idea that employers in hospitality can legitimately refuse to employ either potential employees or fire existing ones who are considered overweight. For example, Frey (2015) describes the recruitment process and working environment in a trendy, ultra-modern casino where cocktail waitresses were expected to maintain an ‘hourglass’ figure. Despite the protestations of a number of employees who took the casino to court arguing such an approach was discriminatory, the court found in favour of the company in their expectation that the waitresses should remain in a certain weight requirement to maintain the desired ‘sexy’ image sought by the casino.

Disability and front-line service work

Work by Gröschl (2007; 2013) has highlighted the manner in which people with disabilities will often face significant challenges in accessing front-line, customer facing work in

hospitality. For example in his 2007 study Gröschl considered over 40 hotels in Canada and found that of the more than 11,000 employees employed by the hotels less than 60 were people with disabilities. When managers were asked as to why there were so few people with disabilities employed in the hotel they suggested that people with disabilities were more likely to be inflexible, lack mobility and would be costly to accommodate with regard to adjustments to their work spaces. A further issue though highlighted by managers beyond perceived issues around the practicalities of employing people with a disability was strong preference held by the hotels for young, fit and attractive employees, reflecting aesthetic considerations were key as well in recruiting employees, thus potentially excluding people with disabilities. Bluntly, as Gröschl notes, ‘Some of the interviewees perceived the hotel industry as image conscious fearing that employees with disabilities could destroy hotels’ aesthetics’ (p. 680). In a similar vein, Houtenville and Karaglyrou (2015) drawing on large scale survey data comparing managerial hiring intentions and attitudes toward people with disabilities between service businesses and goods-producing industries found that service-producing companies requiring direct customer–employee interactions were more likely to identify customer attitudes as a challenge to hiring people with disabilities than other companies. These concerns were attributed to concerns arising from the high contact of customers with front-line hospitality employees in which judgements of attractiveness are likely to influence the views about the suitability of people with disabilities for such roles. More specifically, their research found that these concerns were most common among companies in leisure and hospitality and companies in retail.

What can be done to address this discrimination?

Here the chapter will very briefly consider the obvious question raised by the foregoing discussion, what can be done to address the discrimination reported here? As Rodriguez, Holvino, Fletcher and Nkomo (2016: 207) note, ‘the ultimate aim of intersectionality is to challenge inequality and enact change to eliminate it’. In this sense this chapter has highlighted the manner in which many people in the labour market may face discrimination in seeking to access front-line service jobs or once employed in these jobs have a significantly different, and often worse, employment experience based on their personal characteristics. Moreover, the disadvantage that this may entail will often be magnified by dint of the intersection of several of these individual characteristics, such as gender, race and class. Indeed, as Mears (2014: 1330) notes, ‘aesthetic labour teeters on illegal job discrimination, given the close coupling between appearance and protected categories’ such as race, sex, and age. This point about the indivisibility or otherwise of appearance and characteristics like race, gender and age is important as in most jurisdictions appearance discrimination, per se, is not illegal, with the notable exception of France and some states and cities in Australia and America (and see Warhurst and Nickson, 2020 pp. 136-141 for a review of debates about the introduction of legislation outlawing appearance discrimination and consideration of the relative lack of impact in jurisdictions where it has been introduced; and relatedly for the first real discussion of introducing appearance discrimination to the UK’s 2010 Equality Act see the arguments in support of this proposition offered by Mason and Minevra, 2020 in their excellent overview of the debate).

Thus, if we return to our earlier noted example of a potential female employee being told there were no opportunities available in the restaurant she was intent on applying to then the manager’s view that they were ‘too ugly’ would be defensible in law, though morally we

might be appalled. It is only when appearance is tied to a protected characteristic that this becomes illegal, as in the earlier reported case of the Mondrian hotel in Los Angeles. However, as much of this chapter has outlined the lack of an obvious 'smoking gun' means that the appearance discrimination tied to aesthetic labour, and which will often be underpinned by prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes towards one or more of the personal characteristics discussed above remains covert and subtle. Whilst the debate about including appearance as a protected characteristic in law continues and concerns remain about the extent to which even the existing legislation picks up on potentially discriminatory decisions for who best represents desired look for service organisations, at the very least HR and line managers should be encouraged to think about potential biases they are taking into employment decisions, particularly at the point of entry into an organization. Thus, whilst HR professionals are likely to have training to ensure that recruitment and selection processes are not discriminatory and too reliant on common judgemental errors that could negatively impact potential employees, this may not be the case for line managers, as the Bolton et al. (2018) research noted earlier highlights. This more proactive approach to diversity and inclusion is nicely illustrated by the work of Smith et al. (2016) considering the issue of overweight or obese employees. They support the notion that employers can educate both co-workers and customers by seeking to promote positive images of capable and competent heavy employees through presenting counter-stereotypic information to counter discrimination and stigmatization. This idea of presenting counter-stereotypic information can equally be applied to a number of the other individual characteristics noted above and may be especially important when, through intersectionality, people face multiple disadvantage in the labour market.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how many hospitality and retail companies, and especially those operating in the style labour market, continue to perpetuate inequalities based on individual characteristics such as gender, race, class, able-bodiedness and weight through their focus on aesthetic labour. In this way, women are more likely to be judged based on their appearance and much more likely to be sexualized in the workplace once employed. People who are overweight and obese, and particularly women, are more likely to face often overt discrimination in the labour market with little protection. People with a disability and from minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to find themselves being denied opportunities to work directly in contact with employees. Finally, working class men will often find that their opportunities for accessing certain types of service jobs will be impacted by not having the requisite aesthetic and cultural capital. Whilst these individual characteristics all have the potential for unfair and unequal treatment the concept of intersectionality also allows us to appreciate the manner in which disadvantage can be further multiplied with deleterious outcomes in the labour market. It should go without saying that people in front-line service work should be judged on their ability to offer high quality customer service and not by their appearance. Within the context of a society increasingly obsessed with appearance the continuing reliance on often , sexist, racist, sexist, ableist, classist and sizeist beauty hierarchies is one that demands questioning and challenge both legally and morally and this chapter has sought to shine a light on how these outcomes arise and why we need to address them.

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