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Where is the Critical Employment Relations Research in Hospitality and Tourism?

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Title: Where is the Critical Employment Relations Research in Hospitality and Tourism?

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Abstract:

This paper questions the lack of ‘traditional’ employment relations research in the hospitality and tourism sectors. Based on recent doctoral research into New Zealand hotels, the paper presents theoretical approaches that could bring a more critical and insightful focus to employment in these industries.

Recent government reports in Australia and New Zealand have highlighted escalating problems in the hospitality and tourism labour markets (Deloitte, 2015; New Zealand Tourism Industry Association, 2015). The reports contrast the rapid growth and economic success of the sectors (both being among the largest export-earning sectors for their countries) with longstanding, yet steadily worsening, labour market problems. These problems include major skills shortages, high labour turnover, low pay, lack of full-time work, and poor career path information (Cropp, 2016; Deloitte, 2015; New Zealand Tourism Industry Association, 2015). This contemporary data highlights the intensification of long-identified problems around human resource management, employment relations, and labour markets in the international hospitality and tourism literature (Baum, 2007, 2008; Deery, 2002; Enz, 2009; Lucas, 2004).

Despite its crucial economic importance and the fact that the hospitality and tourism sector is demonstrating all the symptoms of a labour market in dire crisis, traditional employment relations research in this field remains scant. There is copious international research on the problematic nature of work in international hospitality and tourism, highlighting the well-trodden themes of high labour turnover, poor career progression, low pay, poor work conditions, poor work-life balance, and weak occupation and safety systems (Ancheri & Kandasamy, 2009; Baum, 2007, 2008; Chen, Cheung, & Law, 2012; Davidson, McPhail, & Barry, 2011; Deery, 2002; Enz, 2009; Harkison, Poulston, & Jung-Hee, 2011; McGing & Connolly, 2007; Mooney, 2007; Mooney & Ryan, 2009; Poulston, 2008; Richardson, 2009; Wickramasekara, 2011; Williamson, 2009; Williamson, Harris, & Parker, 2008; Wong & Ko, 2009; Wood, 1997). However, little of the above research focusses on power, gender, and class relations between the tri-partite stakeholders in the employment relationship.

The paper will argue that, despite calls to liberate hospitality and tourism research from ‘presentist’, positivist, unitarist paradigms (Lashley, 2007; Lashley, Lynch, & Morrison, 2006; Lashley & Morrison, 2000; Lynch, Molz, McIntosh, Lugosi, & Lashley, 2011; O’Gorman, 2005; Walton, 2012; Zampoukos & Ioannides, 2011), there remains little in the way of contemporary critical employment relations research in the field. Based on recently completed research in the New Zealand hotel industry, the paper will call for a re-engagement with multi-level employment relations analysis of hospitality and tourism. The paper concludes by highlighting a number of valuable areas of research that resulted from the application of a critical employment relations approach, including a re-analysis of the role of unions in hospitality and tourism and the historical origins of managerial attitudes towards collective bargaining.