Cultures of Service and Intersubjective Struggles

The Quest for Meaningful Interactive Service Work

Kushagra Bhatnagar
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Abstract

This dissertation brings to fore the challenges and stresses that service employees engaged in interactive service work deal with as they go about providing good service. Service marketing and management have rarely explored the subjective experience of service workers as they interact with customers and managers. Existing services research conceptualizes interactive service work primarily as a form of emotional labour and conceives of the worker primarily as a customer-oriented organizational resource. In contrast, the essays in this dissertation explicate struggles for control, symbolic power and meaning as well as the culturally-situated and socially-embedded nature of interactive service work.

This dissertation comprises three interlinked essays that draw on ethnographic studies of interactive service work taking place in fitness gyms, coffee shops and luxury hotels in urban India. Each of these contexts had relatively distinct interactive scripts, rhythms and norms which provided opportunities for studying complementary aspects of the co-operation and conflict, value production and destruction, the local and the international in service interactions.

Interactive service workers in non-professional occupations are amongst the most stressed occupational groups in the world. Existing explanations of high levels of stress hinge on the presence of emotional labour and role conflicts materialized in dyadic interactions with customers and managers. This explanation privileges the more formal-organizational aspects of interactive service work and recommends interventions that lessen emotional burdens. This dissertation complements these accounts of interactive service work and makes visible the presence of interconnected terrains of intersubjective struggle. With a theoretical repertoire sensitive to the management of class and caste identity, the striving for intersubjective recognition and the construction of meaningfulness, the essays in this dissertation develop a culturally-sensitive account of what goes on in interactive service work. Such an account holds transformational promise for the organization of interactive service work and generative potential for its analyses.

Keywords Interactive service work, cultures of service, power, language, recognition


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Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................... ...... 4
   1.1 Background ................................................................................................................ .................. 4
   1.2 Research Objective – Interactive Service Work as an Intersubjective Struggle ....................... 6
   1.3 Research Questions and Reflections ...................................................................................... 6

2. THEORETICAL BUILDING BLOCKS .......................................................................................... 12
   2.1 Interactive Service Work .................................................................................................. ........... 13
   2.2 Intersubjectivity ......................................................................................................... ................ 15
   2.3 Recognition Dynamics ...................................................................................................... .......... 17
   2.4 Culture and Services ...................................................................................................... ............. 19
   2.5 Language (and Power) ...................................................................................................... .......... 21
   2.6 Dynamics of Meaning in, at & of Work ...................................................................................... .. 24

3. RESEARCH CONTEXT (OF CONTEXT): Interactive Service Work in Urban India ....................... 26
   3.1 Research Context: “New” Servicescapes in Shining India (Essay 2) ........................................... 30
   3.2 Research Context: Luxury Hospitality in Affluent India (Essay 3) ................................................ 31

4. METHODOLOGY ................................................................................................................ ... 32
   4.1 Ethnographic Interviews – Reflection and Immersion .......................................................... 32
   4.2 Ethnography Phase II – Thick-ish Inscription, Pseudo-Nativity, Critical Ethnography ............ 33

5. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS ...................................................................................................... 3 6
   5.1 Essay 1: Interactive Service Work: A Critical Review and Future Directions ......................... 36
   5.2 Essay 2: Language and Power in India’s “New” Services ......................................................... 38
   5.3 Essay 3: The Struggle for Recognition in Interactive Service Work ........................................... 39
   5.4 Emergent Themes ........................................................................................................... ............ 41

6. DISCUSSION, FUTURE DIRECTIONS & LIMITATIONS ............................................................... 43
   6.1 Interactive Service Work as a paradoxical endeavour ......................................................... 46

REFERENCES .................................................................................................................... ........ 48

Essay 1: Interactive Service Work: A Critical Review and Future Directions

Essay 2: Language and Power in India’s New Services

Essay 3: The Struggle for Recognition in Interactive Service Work
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

A Dutch supermarket recently introduced a special “Chat-n-Check-Out” service to counter loneliness and lack of human contact amongst the town’s elderly population (De Gooijer 2019). Cashiers in this lane will engage elderly customers in non-transactional conversations, build long-term non-commercial relationships and construct a more humane customer experience. In these special lanes, empathy will trump efficiency and workers will not be under time-pressure. Almost at the same time as the Dutch chain announced empathic check-out counters, Uber, one of the world’s biggest service firms filed a legal argument in the United States, its biggest market, that it should not be seen and judged as a customer-service company, and that its usual business is not transporting customers with the help of human drivers. In fact, Uber’s Chief Legal Officer claimed that Uber drivers “operated outside the usual course of Uber’s business” and that a recent government ruling on service employees does not provide its drivers with benefits, nor gives them any rights (Hawkins 2019). Each of these cases represents quite divergent models of serving customers and managing employees. Concomitantly, they also involve two different sets of interactive challenges and work roles, responsibilities and benefits. Both kinds of work involve interaction and would be categorized as customer service work, yet there would be almost nothing in common between how workers manage customers and their jobs.

Services have been the single largest employment avenue in the world for more than a decade (ILO 2020). GDPs of most of the biggest economies of the world are largely made up of monies accrued from the provision and consumption of services. The biggest companies in the world now see themselves as service companies pursuing the holy grail of customer delight (Curtin 2013). Amazon, Uber, Airbnb and many other such unicorns are the heroes of the “service society” (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996, p.1), extolled by the popular business-press as role-models for their unwavering focus on customer delight no matter the expense (Morgan 2018). At the very same
time, public intellectuals, social activist groups and governmental organizations subject these very organizations to stringent critique (Bulajewski 2018). The criticism is not for their inability to provide good customer service or any lack of customer orientation. On the contrary, it is these organizations’ very obsession with providing great customer service, in the process taking their eyes off the human element in service provision – the interactive service workers – that has attracted complaints and rebukes. In an increasingly services-dominant marketplace and society (Vargo and Lusch 2008), a better understanding of the serving experience of interactive service workers can be key to profitable service operations as well as a source of strategic advantage and high levels of customer satisfaction (Bitner, Booms, and Mohr 1994; Rust 2004; Schlesinger and Heskett 1994).

In the focus on customer and organizational advantages, what gets often forgotten is that interactive service workers struggle with extremely high levels of stress and negative well-being (Chan and Wan 2012). Interactive service workers can be victims of physical or symbolic violence (Grandey, Dickter and Sin 2004), and be emotionally stressed and physically drained (Dormann and Zapf 2004; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006). Some scholars have gone so far as labeling this group of people as the “emotional proletariat” (Hochschild 1983; Macdonald and Sirianni 1996, p. 3). Any insights on how interactive service workers understand, experience and deal with everyday challenges and stresses, into how workers can be constrained or empowered by particular organizational relations, and into how they manage customer interactions laden with inequality and asymmetry at multiple levels can enhance the well-being of a group accelerating rapidly in size and economic importance (CIA 2015). Thus, being sensitive to service employees’ subjective experience of interactive service work can be a significant contributor to societal well-being (Anderson et al. 2013; Anderson and Ostrom 2015).
1.2 Research Objective – Interactive Service Work as an Intersubjective Struggle

This dissertation takes inspiration from recent strands of research that investigate the provision of interactive services from a critical perspective (Korczynski 2003; McDowell 2011; Sturdy, Gurgulis & Wilmott 2001; Ustuner & Thompson 2012). A critical perspective is one that contests “traditional imperatives of mainstream …research and practice” (Tadajewski et al., 2011, p. 1). A common definition of interactive services is the application of competence for another party as part of a dyadic, market-mediated, economic-exchange-oriented role-play (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault 1990; Czepiel 1990; Deighton 1992; Gronroos & Voima 2013; Vargo and Lusch 2008). The implicit assumption in such an understanding is that interactive service work would largely be a co-operative, co-creative, mutually value-creating endeavour (Vargo & Lusch 2008). Customers and managers become essential and positive elements of interactive service workers’ labour process.

However, interactive service work can also be conflictual, reproduce power asymmetries and be a value-destroying endeavour (Echeverri & Skalen 2011; Korczynski 2003; Ustuner & Thompson 2012). Interactive service work can also be symbolically violent and disempowering for workers (Boussebaa et al., 2014; Macdonald and Korczynski 2008). Such negative experiences can degrade worker well-being and induce intersubjective struggles for respect, recognition, identity and meaningfulness (Hancock 2013). Together, the essays in this dissertation advance a conceptualization of interactive service work that is sensitive to interpersonal, cultural, ideological struggles and conflicts that workers engage in as part of their work.

1.3 Research Questions and Reflections

The broad research question that motivates this dissertation is “How do frontline service workers experience and navigate often intersecting challenges of doing good interactive service work?
work?” I will explicate the key concepts in this broad research question in depth later on in the theoretical background section. In brief, first I understand frontline service workers as that occupational group whose primary responsibility lies in providing interactive labour to customers (Hochschild 1983). In this group, I do not include elite ‘professionals’ such as doctors, lawyers, management consultants or others who are partly-engaged in interactive labour but are also infused with notions of technical competence and educational excellence (Leidner 1991). I discount these groups, because the customer/service recipient is not always part of the labour process for these groups of professionals. I am then left with a significant pool of occupations waitresses and nurses, cashiers and store helpers, doormen and burger-servers, gym trainers and baristas, check-in clerks and bartenders that this critical inquiry speaks to. Second, I focus on the intersecting nature of challenges and struggles that they deal with in a particular geographically bounded, socio-historically connected context. The challenges intersect as inequalities and power struggles with and over language, gender, class, caste come together in the interaction between service workers and customers. They also intersect as employees have to manage different spheres of life that are not easily disentangled (Leidner 1993) – the more formal, organizational aspects of understanding and producing good service, and the more informal, interpersonal aspects, for instance producing legitimate and respectable accounts of their work to friends and family. Third, I focus on the way in which interactive service workers understand and accomplish the doing of ‘good’ work. The appreciation of what constitutes good interactive work and appropriate ways of carrying it out is culturally-informed and intersubjectively understood (Otis 2008).

The research question was inspired partly by personal experience, and partly a response to an empirical phenomenon. First, the autobiographical experience aspect emerged from uncomfortable memories I carry from my first foray into formal employment as a call-center agent in an inbound call-centre. It was located in the recently developed technopolis of Gurgaon in the National Capital Region of India. At age 21, every night for about 7 hours I was Steve from
Birmingham. I was a phone clone (Mirchandani 2012). I underwent more than a month of ‘accent training’ where I would unlearn the Indian accent and try to approximate a ‘Brummy’ one. I learned about the history of Birmingham, its sights and sounds, local landmarks, in an effort to produce a more local service experience for British customers who had problems with their printers or computer operating systems. I felt first-hand the alienation, the erasure of one identity/personality and the imposition of another, the furtive looks offered by neighbours as my company-cab dropped me back home early morning just as others around me went to their respectable 9-to-5 jobs. I felt the full brunt of the illegitimacy that seemed to follow interactive service work (Noronha & D’Cruz 2009). Friends and classmates from my engineering college kept on asking when I would get a real job. Family members kept my job a secret from neighbours and relatives. And this was before the challenges thrown up by competing demands of work. My floor manager wanted every call to be resolved within 20 mins. Most of my customers, primarily elderly men and women from small British towns, would often take that much time to figure out how to do Ctrl-Alt-Del on their Windows ME keyboards. They would also belittle and demean me as soon as they figured out I was not calling from Birmingham but from Gurgaon (Harris & Reynolds 2003; Van Jarsweld & Poster 2013). Safe to say, that my serving experience was not always an experience of co-creation or mutual value creation, even though both were present to some degree in the service interaction (Vargo & Lusch 2008). I learned first-hand that interactive service work could be dehumanizing and lead to a loss of positive identity (Macdonald & Sirianni 1996). It was also one of the most emotionally stressful kinds of work available in the contemporary economic landscape, where I had to deal with emotional abuse from customers and yet adhere to emotional display rules set in place by managers (Grandey et al., 2004; Chan and Wan 2012). To make matters worse, the work process had been organized in a way that was quite routine and repetitive and did not require any specialized computer science skills that I had acquired in my engineering degree (Leidner 1993; Ritzer and Lair 2008). This first-hand knowledge of the challenges of one kind of interactive
service work helped me retain an amount of healthy suspicion of celebratory accounts of interactive services and workers that I encountered in the books and articles engaging with services marketing or management. To be sure, call centre work was only one kind of interactive service work and things might have been different in other kinds of service work. Yet, there was nothing naturally different about call centre work and say hotel work, that would have made one much worse than the other in terms of the subjective experience of service work. This dissertation is an attempt at ‘denaturalizing’ and questioning the taken-for-granted-ness of some of these challenging aspects (Fournier & Grey 2000).

The empirical puzzle part is a response to the explosive proliferation of service-centric jobs, employers, educational institutions and vocational training schools in contemporary urban India (Dixit and Mawroh 2019). What made it even more interesting was that this proliferation took place in a rapidly-neoliberalized socio-economic-cultural context (Derne 2008; Fernandes 2006; Loomba 2015; Poster 2007; Ray & Qayum 2009). Educational and vocational institutions that educate and train service workers of the future have mushroomed all over urban India. These institutes cater to the almost-endless demand for a particular kind of worker, well-groomed, reasonably fluent in English and possessing a ‘service disposition’ (Noronha & D’Cruz 2009; Platz 2012; Rowe, Malhotra & Perez 2013). The emphasis on English fluency was very much a part of the post-colonial influences on the linguistic landscape and was a feature of contemporary urban servicescapes such as urban malls (Varman and Belk 2012).

One of the biggest employers of these newly trained service workers was the hospitality sector. One in 10 employable adults in India currently works in hospitality and allied sectors (Nandwani 2019). The sector showed approximately 20 percent year-on-year growth and expanded geographically (Sood 2019). This impressive growth masked, and in some ways contributed to challenges for employees and customers alike. Hotels, restaurants, coffee shops all promised the highest levels of customer experience and simultaneously a glamorous and engaging work
environment with the pre-requisite that potential applicants be fluent in English and be delighted to serve the customer (Asia Hospitality Careers 2018; India Today 2019). In short, urban India’s service provision landscape had undergone a transformation and I was interested in how the change was produced and what it implied for service workers.

Each of the essays/articles builds up towards asking a slightly different but inter-related sub-research question, that together go a long way in answering the above overall question. Essay 1 is motivated by my desire to provide a conceptual framework that helps situate and explain the lack of critical perspectives in analysis of the ‘doing’ of interactive service work. The research question I ask is: How are challenges and advantages of interactive service work portrayed within recent service research? Asking this relatively broad-brush question early on in the dissertation has helped in problematizing current assumptions of services scholarship (Alvesson & Sandberg 2011). Contemporary services research has almost completely disregarded the service employee as a potential source of customer value in favour of focusing on automation and technological innovation (Ostrom et al., 2015; Rafaeli et al., 2017; van Doom et al., 2017). This has resulted in a lack of insight and recommendations that could positively contribute to interactive service workers’ often challenging experiences of service work or foreground the tactics and strategies workers draw on as they deal with different but often intersecting challenges. Empirical material for this essay primarily came from services-focused journals in the fields of marketing and management, as well as foundational scholarship in other relevant disciplinary domains such as the sociology of work.

Essay 2 is an empirical investigation of the intersection of language-use and power in interactive service work. My co-author and I asked three inter-related research questions: 1) What role does language play in India’s new servicescapes; 2) How do Indian service workers view having to interact with customers in English?; What role does English play in their lives? and 3) How do language dynamics vary across organizational contexts? Does language play a different role in coffee shops versus modern gyms? My co-author and I investigated how language use
intersected with issues of class and caste as service workers interacted with often-high-class customers. We focused on the management of class and caste through skilled language-use in a post-colonial linguistic landscape, where English was clearly marked as the language of economic progress and at times, even caste mobility (Froystad 2003; Mankekar 2015; Varman and Belk 2012). We designed empirical research in a way that was sensitive to the implicit and explicit politics of language-use, especially language’s ability to mark out group identity. In a rapidly globalizing context, we focus on the presence of language hierarchies and how these hierarchies shape interactive power dynamics between service providers and customers.

Essay 3 investigates the intersection of power struggles and the dynamics of intersubjective recognition within the context of luxury hospitality. Interactive service work in luxury hospitality is often marked by stark differences in class and economic power between customers and employees (Otis 2012; Sherman 2007). The research question I ask in this essay is: How do service employees understand and cope with the “king customer”? Language-use was an important building block of asymmetric interaction dynamics, as well as the presence of a more explicit managerial emphasis on customer-centricity and sovereignty (Korczynski 2003). Customers were also more trans-nationally mobile while by-and-large service workers were more constrained and immobile, a state not uncommon in many other cultural contexts (Sassen 1998). Interactive service workers in luxury contexts have to deal with often unmanageable customer actions (Gabriel and Lang 2005) as well as ever more invasive managerial control of different aspects of their self (Leidner 1993; Nickson and Warhurst 2007). The sovereign customer makes his presence felt in much more entrenched and widespread ways than other kinds of servicescapes such as gyms and coffee shops (Sherman 2007). In addition, recent ICT intermediations such as online review sites and technobureaucratic measures collecting much more granular and detailed guest feedback further reinforce and propagate the enchanting myth of customer sovereignty (Korczynski and Ott 2004). This essay
is interested in how service workers deal with the challenge of managerial control and customer sovereignty and the resources that workers draw on to surmount these challenges.

Together, the three sub-research questions bring different challenges of interactive service work to light. The first essay sets the stage up and problematizes the lack of critical reflection on interactive service work. The second essay investigates a specific challenge - the presence of linguistic imbalances and their tight coupling with class and caste boundaries. The third essay investigates another challenge – the rapidly-diffused myth of customer sovereignty coupled with invasive organizational control – and foregrounds how service workers forge valorized identities even as they provide good luxury services to their customers.

In the next section, I will outline the theoretical building blocks for the arguments made in each of the essays.

2. THEORETICAL BUILDING BLOCKS

Through much of its evolutionary trajectory, “service research has focused mainly on practical issues with managerial relevance” (Tronvoll et al., 2011, p. 561). Service research was initially dominated by theoretical/conceptual accounts that highlighted the ways in which services differed from goods (Bitner 1990; Rust 2004; Shostack 1977). These differences were made real through research instruments such as the SERVQUAL measure that differentiated subjective service quality from objective goods quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1988). These differences were also captured in the IHIP understanding of service – intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, perishability (Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004).

Powerful as these foundational breakthroughs were, leading scholars have felt for some time that services research should be more inter-disciplinary or else it stood to “lose its bearings” (Berry 2000, p. 10; Rust 2004). Contemporary customer-centric services research seems to prefer reliable, predictable, branded and routinized customer interactions offered to the sovereign service customer rather than messy social interactions (Rafaeli et al., 2017). Methodological and paradigmatic
choices have reinforced the static approach, with a vast majority of influential, highly-cited services research mobilizing a quantitative, experimental design (Rust 2005; for an exception see Price & Arnould 1999). Recent reviews have also discovered that “a large percentage of service articles focus on transactions rather than processes and relationships, have a static rather than dynamic (process-oriented) approach, and are dominated by the positivistic paradigm” even though “service phenomena by nature are complex, interactive, and relational.” (Tronvoll et al., 2011, p. 575).

One kind of complexity and relationality that services research has overlooked is the worker’s subjective experience of interactive service work (Subramony & Pugh 2015). In much contemporary services research, there exists an implicit assumption of the interactive service worker being an organizational resource (Pettersen 2019; Witz, Warhurst & Nickson 2003; Wouters 1989). The service provider is supposed to embody the service organization, bring the brand and its values to life (Sirianni et al 2013). The typical service interaction would take place within a strictly bounded and asymmetric set of constraints where the customer was often always right (Bryman 1999; Sherman 2011). In addition, much of existing research naturalizes the demand for different kinds of labour, for instance emotional (Bolton & Houlihan 2005) and aesthetic (Warhurst & Nickson 2007) labour from interactive service workers. Workers are expected to bring organizational brands to life, deliver ever better service quality and be more customer oriented (Hochschild 1983, Leidner 1993, Sherman 2007, Warhurst and Nickson 2007).

In such a landscape, the job of a critical investigation into interactive service work is to “find the language to contest an action which is justified in terms of it helping to serve the customer” (Korczynski, 2003: 48–9). In the next subsections, I will briefly explain the key conceptual building blocks of theoretical and empirical arguments made in the essays in this dissertation and synthesize possible avenues of contribution.

2.1 Interactive Service Work
Services scholarship has been one of the most dynamic streams of research in recent times, with three dedicated journals, a significant uptick in research output and close connections with industry (Ostrom et al. 2015; Rafaeli et al. 2017; Rust 2005). Much of contemporary services research works with the understanding that service involves one party applying its competence for another as part of economic exchange (Vargo and Lusch 2016) or a “process or performance rather than a thing” (Lovelock 1991, p. 13). From this large-tent conceptualization, an investment advisor, a university lecturer, a plumber, a sales associate and a fast food clerk – are all service providers.

In the interest of more analytical bounded-ness and clarity, as well as more concrete categorization, this dissertation focuses on the analytical construct of interactive service work (Leidner 1991). I focus on those types of interactive service work where typical compensation remains below those at a professional level (lawyers, consultants, doctors for instance) and the customer is a key part of the labour process (Korczynski & Evans, 2013). What also makes interactive service work differ substantially from ‘professional service work’ professions such as doctors, lawyers, or consultants is that in professional service work, workers’ intellectual work carried out without the customer present in the labour process is part of the service offering. Other researchers have mobilized different metaphors such as frontline service work or customer service work to draw boundaries and contrast from expertise-oriented or intellectual service work (Sturdy and Gurgulis 2001). I find interactive service work an appropriate construct for what I study, because some of the occupational groups I study, such as housekeepers and room-service personnel who do not strictly fall with the ambit of typical ‘frontline’ jobs (Sherman 2011).

In conceptualizing what I study as interactive service work, I am also able to complement existing services research that predominantly focuses on customer-related issues and outcomes and often conceives the provision and consumption through a static, transactional lens (Edvardsson et al., 2005; Lovelock and Gummesson 2004). I still study the provision of services, but not only from a managerially-relevant, quality-of-service lens developed within mainstream service research.
(Berry 2000). Recent services research that engages with employee level challenges of doing interactive service work cites role conflict and the presence of emotional labour as the primary sources of worker stress (Wirtz and Jerger 2016). Instead, I am able to draw on work in other disciplines such as the sociology of work (Hanser 2008; Otis 2012; Watson 2012) and critical management studies (Boussebaa et al., 2014) and construct narratives that shed light on the struggles and challenges of producing high-quality interactions and how service works find ways to deal with these challenges.

### 2.2 Intersubjectivity

Intersubjectivity refers to the relations between people which shape the way they make sense of themselves and each other (Crossley 1996). At its most fundamental, intersubjectivity implies that meaning, understanding and reflection are not solipsistic endeavours. They are always constructed and (re-)interpreted in interaction (Anderson 2012) and that meanings and interpretations “lie along a continuum of mutual intelligibility” (Anderson 2012, p. 468). In other words, these constructions and interpretations of meaning are rarely final but can be understood more accurately as impermanent working arrangements.

Language is the key medium for social interactions and “central to the constitution of intersubjectivity” (Crossley 1996, p. 38). What a word, a phrase, a bodily gesture means and is intended for is very much driven by the context, by their taken-for-granted uses and conventions within a given social setting.

Intersubjectivity is not independent of existing institutional structures and inequalities. Because social understanding “arises in the moment to moment interaction” (Fuchs and de Jaegher 2009, p. 466), of two or more subjects, an intersubjectivity-sensitive analytical approach can deepen the understanding of power relations in interaction (Crossley 1996). For instance, an intersubjective understanding of language-use can shed light on how interactants employ language in exercising symbolic power (Austin 1962; Bourdieu 1992; Wacquant 1993).
Intersubjectivity is a significant aspect of much of what goes on in servicescapes (Mars & Nicod 1984; Sherman 2007). For this dissertation, intersubjectivity became an insightful conceptual tool because of the necessarily shared understanding of work and identity in the spaces in which I have conducted empirical inquiry. There is an emancipatory force in analysing services from an intersubjective approach, rather than the static approaches discussed above (Tronvoll et al 2011). To be able to surface the mutual influence of managers, customers and workers in interactive service work. Methodologically, an intersubjective approach helps question aspects of interactive service work that that are indeed socially constructed but have become naturalized over time through unequal institutions and social hierarchies. My analysis helps uncover the taken-for-granted-ness of certain interactive power relations and potentially opens an empowering dialogue for service workers. Drawing on intersubjectivity also had the potential for a more politicized understanding of service interactions (e.g. Honneth and Margalit 2001).

In addition to highlighting relations of power, an intersubjective approach can also shed light on the emancipatory potential of genuine emotional connections with interacting others, a point I will come back to when explaining recognition. Emotions are dialogically constructed, revealed in embodied interaction. In other words, emotion “shapes and is shaped by our interactions with others” (Crossley 1996, p. 46).

In the essays in this dissertation, I (and my co-author) approach intersubjectivity from the point of view of the interaction process. In this way, we are able to complement the mainstream cognitive approaches that focus on solipsistic evaluations of service quality, customer satisfaction or delight (Holtgrewe 2001). I was also able to incorporate a more embodied analysis of interactive service work in essay 3, as I analyzed taken-for-granted repertoires of embodied interaction – for instance ways of comportment – in the production of luxury service interactions.

To see interactive service work as an intersubjective accomplishment is to be sensitive to the centrality of interaction and the process of manufacturing reasonable intersubjective agreement.
(Bourdieu 1992). To account for who is able to speak, to gesture, to make truth-claims and who is necessarily subjected to those truth claims can be an enlightening approach to understand what goes on in interactive service work (Dion & Borraz 2017; Mirchandani 2012). For instance, I was able to distinguish what ways of taking up shared space had become incorporated into workers’ bodily rhythms, and what ways were still problematic and resisted incorporation. Through an intersubjectively-sensitive approach to study interactive service work, I was able to analyze what understandings flow smoothly and what jar, what permeate and what fall through the cracks, what are impositions from above and what helped constitute consensus.

2.3 Recognition Dynamics

In contemporary social-theory, recognition has been discussed and debated most vigorously in the political philosophy of Honneth (1996, 2014) and Fraser (2003). At its most fundamental, recognition is the “basic medium of social integration and of the constitution of subjectivity” (Holtgrewe 2001, p. 38). It is vital to the way that the self is constituted in contemporary societies (Honneth 1996; Fraser and Honneth 2003). However, this is not to say that recognition is always a positive experience. On the contrary, the work of Fraser and Honneth explicitly points to the conflictual nature of recognition, its asymmetric apportioning in social relations and its dynamism (Fraser and Honneth 2003; Honneth and Margalit 2001). Each approaches recognition from their own, often diverse, ontological and teleological perspectives. For Honneth and colleagues (2001; 2004), recognition can be sought at multiple levels – for the individual, for a social group, even for an action.

There can be no recognition without intersubjectivity. The intersubjective nature of recognition and the conflictual nature of the struggle for recognition makes it an especially fruitful concept to analyze interactive service work. Specifically, essay 3 in this dissertation conceptualises interactive service work as a kind of recognition game being played out between service workers, managers and customers.
Essay 3 takes inspiration from three previous studies of interactive service work that engage with intersubjective recognition in its different modalities. First, an ethnography of a French post-office finds customers and employees locked in a zero-sum game of recognition (Jeantet 2003). Middle-class visitors to the post office want to be recognized as members of the high-status group ‘sovereign customers’ instead of the relatively low-status group ‘users’. On the other side, postal workers want to be recognized as bureaucrats and government servants, rather than as customer service providers. They want be ‘of’ service, rather than be ‘at’ the customer’s service.

Another study investigates Santa Claus performers, a slightly more precarious kind of service work, but one that is more explicitly performative in nature (Hancock 2013). Santa Claus performers find meaning in the way, children, their primary intended audience, shower affective intersubjective recognition on performers. The performers reinterpret their jobs as a pursuit of non-romantic love from children and are able to suture significant meaning into their work as a consequence.

A third study investigates interactive episodes, stresses and anxieties of security guards in an Indian metropolis (Gooptu 2013). In most parts of Urban India, the profession of security guards is marked by low wages, precarious work-contracts, a significant socio-economic and power imbalance between workers and patrons and physically demanding work conditions. Yet, what the security guards highlight as the chief source of stress, anxiety and degraded well-being are the episodes of disrespect and humiliation, that inhibit their ability to accumulate intersubjective recognition in the form of rights or self-esteem.

Much of mainstream service research does not mobilize the analytical construct of intersubjective recognition in analysis of interactive service work. In contrast, sociologists of work have utilized recognition theory to explain inequality in workplace interactions and workers’ tactics of dealing with it (Hancock 2013, 2016; Holtgrewe 2001; Smith 2009). In the essays in this dissertation, I was cognizant of how the intersubjective struggle for recognition contributed to the
reproduction of social norms, while at the same time opened up spaces of conflict and resistance. Especially in the empirical essays, I am able to showcase the “subtle notions of respect and disrespect” in interaction that don’t always have to end in organized, political action (Holmgrenwe 2001, p. 38).

2.4 Culture and Services

For a significant period of time, any discussions about the connections between culture and services were limited to investigating “possible impact of cultural differences” in the way customers’ standards of service expectations varied across cultures (Donthu & Yoo 1998, p. 178; Furrer, Liu and Sudarshan 2000; Mattila 1999). The aim of much of this research was to find relationships between customer expectations of service and aspects of national culture often mapped on certain measures of the Hofstede scale (Nakata 2009). Hofstede (1980, p. 13) produced a theoretical model of culture with a particular ontological trait. Culture was cognitive, a “collective programming of the mind”. One of the most popular models of culture used in services research primarily saw culture as what large populations of people think are their values, norms, attitudes, desired states, or beliefs (Crane 1994). While this viewpoint of culture did explain cognitive similarities between large sub-groups of people, it tended to undersell how habits, practices, language-use, symbolic meaning, and emotions impacted social lives (Nakata 2009). In addition, a cognition-centric view of culture also over-stated the geographical homogeneity of culture, as Hofstede and others abstracted to the level of ‘national culture’ when they defined or applied the notion of culture to explain other social phenomena (Hofstede 1980, 2001).

This geographically-homogenous national-culture view is problematic because it glosses over intra-cultural differences which in many cases may exceed inter-cultural differences and because it rarely traces the work-in-progress nature of national cultural projects (Wilk 1996). Homogenous national cultures are a problematic construct at the best of times, but in the
contemporary globalized world, an emphasis on national culture did not take into account that “culture changes as a consequence of globalization processes” (Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard 2009, p. 102). The presence of a homogenous national culture was itself a cultural production, not a mediator of cultural repertoires of action and interpretation (Wilk 1996).

Much of the cognition-oriented, geographically-bounded, relatively-immutable, and causal-mechanism like understanding of culture is also to be found in services research (Donthu & Yoo 1998; Mattila 1999; Stauss 2016; Stauss & Meng 1999). The only difference being that in addition to national cultures, the services literature emphasized a ‘service culture’, with its own norms and ways of life as the normative standard to be achieved (Edvardsson and Enqvist 2002; Hyken 2020). Existing services research has repeatedly exhorted service managers to institutionalize a service culture within service organizations, a service culture built upon North American norms of customer and worker subjectivity and exported to the rest of the world (Tronvoll et al., 2011). The cognitive, software-of-the-mind view of culture was also much more suited to the study of customer attitudes, expectations, values and evaluations - research themes that have been dominant in services literature (Furrer et al., 2000; Mattila 1999; Patterson and Smith 2003). In some ways, this has also to do with methodological and research design choices that dominate analysis of interactive service work, with researchers trying to find ever newer antecedent variables to customer satisfaction using close-ended surveys and lab experiments (Tronvoll et al., 2011).

Critical services scholars have problematized this conceptualization of culture and highlighted implicit ethnocentrism within services scholarship (Hanser 2008; Otis 2008; Skalen 2009) because much of this research does not take into account that “coherence lies in the circuits, in the connections forged...a shared political and moral contest” (Wilk 1996, p. 117). In the essays in this dissertation, I take inspiration from scholars who problematize and critique existing research where “culture has mainly played the role of an externally given antecedent variable” (Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard 2009, p. 101). I approach culture from a more embodied, habitual, locally-
situated and dynamic perspective, more appropriate and fruitful for the study of interactive service work. I understand interactive service work as first and foremost as a skilled cultural accomplishment. To do interactive service work, customers and workers have to be culturally competent, attuned to each other’s’ actions and interpretations, and their own culturally-dynamic habits, desires and ways of being (Otis 2008).

In addition, a research context situated outside North America, the undisputed centre of academic services research (Tronvoll et al., 2011) can help in understanding the way some of the seemingly trans-national norms of service culture have been exported to and contested by other cultural groups, and to bring to light the agent-provocateurs and processes of such contested cultural export. Thus, focusing on cultures of service (Otis 2008) as an analytical construct can provide insights on intersubjective experiences and culturally-circumscribed norms and challenges of interactive service work. Another benefit of analysing interactive service work through a culturally-informed research design is to be able to make visible the contests and conflicts within the particular cultural site being investigated.

2.5 Language (and Power)

The essays in this dissertation understand language use as a mechanism for the exercise of symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991; Wacquant 1993). In other words, everyday language use can be involved in reproducing, intensifying or resisting social hierarchies of ethnicity, race or class (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012). Language is the raw material through which different interacting parties reify or struggle over identities and subjectivity in interaction (Bourdieu 1992). Language-use is how interactants engage in a whole host of language games – some for status, some for legitimacy, some for recognition, some for protection. And just as in most games there are teammates and opponents, rules and resources, constraints and cheat codes, winners and losers, all of these are present in everyday linguistic struggles as well (Caillois 2001).
Power cannot simply be “exercised in its brutality in an arbitrary manner ... it must dissimulate itself, cloak itself, justify itself for being what it is – it must make itself be recognized as legitimate” (1993: 25). Interested actors can use language as a resource to dominate or resist power relations, for instance call center agents switch languages as a means to resist customer abuse (Mirchandani 2012). Words, gestures, signals – any interactive act “can be used as instruments of coercion and constraint, as tools of intimidation and abuse, as signs of politeness, condescension and contempt” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 1).

It is also worth noting that symbolic power does not always prevent one from doing something. Power is how the “normalcy of the normal” is achieved (Clegg, Courpasson and Philips 2006). Workers and customers bring to bear metaphors, registers and vocabularies on the service interaction that shape and are shaped by class, caste and consumption rhythms (Boussebaa et al 2014; Mirchandani 2012; Üstüner and Thompson 2012).

Such an understanding of language-use helps complement existing analyses of interactive service work that often conceptualize language as a tool for accurate information processing or as a means of customer orientation (Bittner, Booms, and Tetreault, 1990; Gummesson, 1991; Holmqvist 2011; Holmqvist et al 2019; Holmqvist & Gronroos 2012; Schmitt, Pan & Tavassoli 1994; Stiles, 1985; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist 2014). These studies of services interactions conceptualized language predominantly in terms of its communicative potential, also connecting it to conceptions of national or sovereign consumer identity (Holmqvist et al., 2019). Clarity in service communication leads to better quality perceptions, increased intentions to diffuse positive word of mouth and higher customer satisfaction, (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012; Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist 2014).

Another way in which workers, customers and managers engage in power struggles is through regulating body language (Kang 2003; Lan 2001). Managers recommend certain repertoires of embodied action, customers come to expect them, and workers have to enact them (McDowell
Service workers have to do things with their bodies that can be interpreted by managers and customers as expressive of good service within a particular interactive context. This happens through the process of enregisterment (Agha 2007) – where bodily comportment, styles of movement and gestures together produce intelligible social stereotypes. Particular socio-historical patterns have constituted certain styles of bodily movement such as bowing and greeting, with the registers of servility and deference dependent on large part in how managers, customers and employees interpret each other’s bodies (Goffman 1956). Scripts and rhythms of interactive service work, in the research contexts studied as part of this dissertation, seem deliberately theatrical and excessive. The deliberate humility and honorific registers employed in service talk are often reproduced with straightforward sincerity, without ever testing the underlying assumptions of this kind of register or language-use.

Language-use was important in the specific linguistic landscape of urban India. As part of the colonizing process, the British created a class of English-speaking local intermediaries, “Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect” (Macaulay 2005), who served as the instruments of British control. Language-use was how “segments of the middle class that have historically had access to English education” would “convert this capital into new forms of mobility in a liberalizing labour market” (Fernandes 2006, p. 209). This linguistic mobility could help whole generation of middle-class Indians form a new, more legitimate trans-national identity (Derné 2008). Members of the middle classes employed skilled English-use to police class boundaries, excluding those without the necessary linguistic competence (Fernandes 2006; Loomba 2012). To paraphrase Chakravarty-Spivak (1988), “Could the service provider speak?” and if she could indeed speak, then what linguistic and interactive skills and permissions did she have to use language. Language-use was how the metropolitan and provincial, the secular and fundamentalist, the civil and aboriginal were distinguished in the years after India’s independence from British rule (Varman & Belk 2012).
Studying service encounters with the understanding that language is a mechanism of symbolic power was especially insightful in the context of urban Indian service interactions, especially in the context of gym training and coffee shops (Essay 2). English has long been an instrument of domination in India, portrayed as a marker of cultural distinction and sophistication while regional Indian languages were devalued and vernacular literature portrayed as un-modern (Ambedkar 2005; Chatterjee 1993). Service interactions are marked by post-colonialism and often include a newly trans-national middle class (Chand 2011; Derne 2008; Mankekar 2006; Varman & Belk 2012). To consider language-use and symbolic power in interactive service work also contributed to a better understanding of the close and constitutive connection between language-use (speaking English) and middle-class respectability. Skilled use of English is tightly interwoven with the project of the “ideal post-colonial citizen” (Srivastava 1998, p.2). Even as we noted the importance of language as a tool for effective communication in service interactions, especially in essay 2 we were able to bring out the way language structures and influences power dynamics.

2.6 Dynamics of Meaning in, at & of Work

Meaningfulness is a multilevel concept, with continuing debates about what constitutes meaningfulness and how is it different from similar constructs such as purpose and calling (Bailey et al., 2019). Like a few other foundational social-scientific constructs, meaning and meaningfulness are contested concepts. In contemporary societies, work is a central avenue for the pursuit of meaning, a building block for a positive (inter-)subjective experience (Bailey, et al., 2018; Pratt & Ashforth 2003). Employees spend a substantial portion of waking time at their workplaces, which can serve as significant avenues of purpose, self-esteem, self-worth and positive, socially-valorised identities (Holtgrewe 2001). Work provides significant opportunities for the experience of agency, community, belongingness, and often recognition – all of which can contribute to work’s meaningfulness.
There are several aspects that can influence meaningfulness of and at work, for instance the specific characteristics, roles, responsibilities of work, the legitimacy such work has garnered in broader social relations, the identity projects that employees embark on. In keeping with this dissertation’s emphasis on cultural-sensitivity and intersubjectivity, I focus on relational, institutional and processual qualities of the pursuit and struggle for meaning at work. Intersubjective-acknowledgement in and of one’s work, can be a crucial building block in the accrual of meaning, but is only possible some of the time for some of the workers (Holtgrewe 2001; Michaelson et al 2014). That is, meaningfulness at work is not a natural, universal outcome of certain tasks, but it “must be interpreted and constructed” into being (Lepisto & Pratt 2017, p. 108). For instance, where one social group sees dirty work, the other sees the noble and meaningful pursuit of cleanliness and hygiene (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999, 2014).

In fact, a continuing critique of most forms of formal organisations, organising and organisational interactions is that they don’t provide necessary resources and infrastructure to help with self-realisation and meaning-accrual of employees. In most instances, work becomes a space where they need to accept authority imbalances and constrained autonomy (Leidner 1993; Ritzer & Lair 2008). Some forms of work have evolved in a way that people are able to extract more meaning than other forms. For instance, creative work has become ever more meaningful and employers make it a point to highlight creative aspects of work profiles to potential employees (Florida 2000).

Being sensitive to the intersubjectivity present in processes of meaning-making is to treat meaningfulness “as an emergent feature of the social scene at work” (Wrzesniewski, Dutton & Debebe 2003, p. 129). In addition, there are meaning-politics being played out in day-to-day lives of workers – their organizational lives but also their broader social, interpersonal lives. Interpersonal dynamics unfold at work, but also in homes and third-spaces (Rosenbaum 2006; Rosenbaum et al., 2007) where work meanings can be constructed, revised, protected, or contested.
According to some accounts, interactive service work has undergone rapid de-skilling, homogenization, routinization and scripting (Bryman 1999; Leidner 1993; Mirchandani 2012; Otis 2012; Ritzer & Lair 2008). Any autonomy frontline staff are given seems to be in pursuit of service recovery or customer delight. Managers are encouraged to orchestrate a service culture in their firms, keeping in mind the customer occupying a sovereign subject position. All of these managerial choices makes it difficult for interactive service workers to see their work as meaningful. A culturally-sensitive account of meaningfulness in, at & of work would be able to shed new light on the challenges and advantages of forms of interactive service work for employers, customers and employees alike.

Together, the six theoretical building blocks have the possibility to offer an account of interactive service work that is culturally-sensitive, attuned to the presence of power relations, conceives of service work as a work-in-progress intersubjective accomplishment, and open to possibilities of struggles over recognition and meaningfulness. Each of the building blocks shines light on a different challenge of doing interactive service work and opens up avenues of contribution and critique of the mainstream dyadic model of interactive service work.

3. RESEARCH CONTEXT (OF CONTEXT): Interactive Service Work in Urban India

*Kehne ko hum pass hai par* (We are seemingly close to each other, yet)

*Kitni doori hai* (We’re so far away)

*Yeh bhi kaisi majboori hai* (What kind of helplessness is this)

*Tumse humdardi bhi nahi kar sakta main* (I can’t even sympathise with you)

*Mere bas ki baat nahi hai* (It is beyond my reach)

*Main yeh bahte aansu pochun* (To wipe these tears off your face)
Utni meri aukaat nahi hai (I don’t have the right social status)

Main bhi yahin hoon (I am also here)

Tum bhi yahin ho (You are also here)

Par sach ye hai (But the truth is)

Main hoon kahin (I am somewhere else)

Tum aur kahin (And you are too)

The above lines are from a poignant vignette in one of India’s most successful recent movies, the 2019 film *Gully Boy* (Boy of the Street). The movie is set in the contemporary socio-temporal milieu of Mumbai, India’s financial capital, colloquially known as the city of dreams. In the accompanying visuals, viewers can see the male protagonist chauffeuring his young female master home from a party. The party has not been nice to the young lady being chauffeured and she is silently sobbing in the back seat of the car. The chauffeur, a college-going young man with aspirations of the good middle-class life, is also a budding rapper on the verge of a career breakthrough. The lines above are a way for the viewers to peer into the male protagonist’s thought process, to understand his lack of autonomy, his inability to bridge across socio-cultural boundaries that have much to do with class and social status, and his distinct emasculation as a result of being born on the other side of the tracks. But this scene has as much to do with interactive service work as it has to do with class. It is in becoming a chauffeur, in being given clear direction by his masters’ security guard to never look the young lady in the eye, in being physically co-present yet emotionally, socially, culturally at a disjuncture, in being constrained by the norms, codes and rules of becoming a ‘good’ interactive service worker, that he experiences servitude most clearly. He does not have agency as a service worker to engage a different regime of intersubjective recognition with his passenger. His work, chauffeuring, seems like it has nothing to do with skill, expertise, pride, or any such thing. Instead, it is a distinctly almost de-emotionalized, de-humanized, automated kind of work.
He is not alone. South Asia in general and India in particular have had a very particular genealogy of interactive service work, one that muddies the seemingly clear-cut differences between professional service and servitude (Ray & Qayum, 2009). India is a particularly relevant site to study the complicated and multinomial evolutionary trajectory of interactive service work given the rapid expansion of its service sector and the surge of new services as the main engine of India’s economic growth (Gordon and Gupta 2004). There has been a boom in ‘new’ service jobs such as gym trainers, coffee shop baristas, app-centric delivery people and cab-drivers (Cayla and Baas 2019), but also a significant expansion in the number of security guards (Gooptu 2013), cooks, waiters (Deb 2011) and cleaners who work in the usual theaters of consumption – the hotels, restaurants, banks and taxis. India has now one of the largest contingents of service workers in the world (Chatterjee et al., 2015) and all manners of new service-scapes and jobs have mushroomed in Indian metropolises, making it an especially fertile context to study service interactions.

Most developing countries have experienced a similar ‘service-dominant’ economic configuration (Rust 1998); so what is it that makes India such an interesting culture in which to study what goes on in service interactions. First, interactive service work is infused by historical notions of purity and pollution and has a specific caste-infused history within the Indian context (DuMont 1980). While caste has lost many of its old characteristics and connotations, its traces can still be found in contemporary Indian society (Dirks 2001). In fact, “caste has showed an amazing resilience. It has survived feudalism, capitalist industrialization, a republican constitution, and today, despite all denial, is alive under neoliberal globalization” (Teltumbde 2010). As recently as 2019, there have been caste-based movements and protests in India that have crippled entire cities with their scale and ferocity. The caste discourse also makes a seasonal return at the time of university admissions. The central government’s affirmative-action plans provide a separate reserved admission quota for lower caste students which comes under attack from high caste students and their parents (Karangutkar 2019; Koyari 2019). These traces were present in the
empirical material collected as part of Essay 2 ("Language and Power") where restaurant workers struggled to justify or deal with the stigma associated with picking up the saliva-laden ‘refuse’ of restaurant patrons. Colloquial English words for such refuse, for instance waste food or leftovers, are fairly secular. In contrast, the Hindi vernacular, joothan, references all sorts of symbolic and spiritual danger, stigma and dirt (Douglas 2003). While the essay itself underplays caste and focuses on class, caste casts a shadow over interactive service work in large parts of India, especially in work that cannot be explained and understood as white-collar or more accurately ‘brahminical work’ that is marked by an absence of sweat and a focus on mental labour (Srinivas 1976).

A second cultural characteristic which makes India a fruitful site to study interactive service work has also to do with the history of service work, but more recent history. This is the relatively widespread practice of having, or rather ‘owning’ domestic servants. Owning domestic servants has been a prevalent tradition in the affluent sections of India. This practice contributed to a widespread culture of servitude, “one in which social relations of domination/subordination, ordination, dependency, and inequality are normalized and permeate both the domestic and public spheres” (Lokesh 2015; Raghuram 2001; Ray and Qayum 2009, p. 3). Affluent patrons regulated domestic work and workers through pseudo-feudal relations characterized by informal work contracts, little governmental protection of workers’ interests and limited regulation on working hours, roles or responsibilities (Raghuram 2001). As the Indian economy underwent economic and cultural liberalization (Mankekar 2006), the traditional culture of servitude came into conflict with the increasing professionalization and internationalization of certain kinds of interactive service work (Poster 2007).

A third characteristic that makes urban India a fruitful context to study how service workers deal with stresses and challenges involved in doing interactive service work is the acute socio-economic distance that marks most worker-client interactions (Gooptu 2013; Ray and Qayum
2009). It is one of the few arenas of social life in India where different classes, genders, castes or religions breathe the same air.

3.1 Research Context: “New” Servicescapes in Shining India (Essay 2)

Empirical material for essay 2 was collected from two ‘new’ kinds of servicescapes – coffee shops and fitness gym chains that were part of international or national chains. These contemporary spaces had almost nothing in common with the traditional roadside tea shops and coffee houses, or the wrestling-oriented exercise places that dotted the consumption landscape a few years ago. These spaces were organized differently, had a different vibe and norms of interactions that had nothing in common with more traditional instances of these servicescapes. The materiality of servicescapes, and the interactive rhythm of service interactions in the ‘new’ spaces we studies would be unrecognizable to customers and service workers. For instance, older wrestling-oriented exercise spaces worked on the pseudo-religious notion of the gurukul, where a single patriarchal elderly figure chose to include a potential new entrant into his teaching regimen. Interactive relations in these traditional akharas (wrestling places) was driven by the principle of guru-shishya (teacher-pupil) where the primary duty of the pupil (the ostensible equivalent of the modern sovereign body-building customer) was to practice obedience.

However, in contemporary national or international chain gyms, the kinds investigated in this dissertation, traditional notions of obedience and apprenticeships have been complicated by more recent notions of customer orientation and sovereignty. In much the same way, intersubjective rhythms and expectations have become more complex when it comes to coffee shops. The traditional Indian tea stall and coffee shops were very different spaces, often populated by regular patrons who shared an embedded relationship with owners and servers (Varman 2009).

Both of these servicecapes, and the workers that produced interactive services in these sites, have characteristics in common, and a few that contrast. Both are part of the “new milieu of interactive service sector work” (Gooptu 2009, 45) that enables consumption in its mass-elite
modality (Sassen 2006). One of the key characteristics in common is that both of these spaces are examples of the privatization of public space. In many Indian cities, new chain-style coffee shops have become “privatized spaces that masquerade as public spaces, where entry is ostensibly open but in reality, regulated through various subtle and overt acts of (intentional and unintentional) intimidation and exclusion” (Phadke 2007, 1514). Chain gyms have also followed a similar privatized trajectory, where a certain cohort of affluent, urban Indians feel at home, and the others feel out of place.

This is not to say that there weren’t significant contrasts between the two sites. A key contrast between the sites was the relatively tightly-scripted and commodified nature of interactions in chain coffee shops when compared to the long-term, boundary-open relationships necessitated in much of gym training work. Together, the two research sites provided significant potential for drawing a set of commonalities and contrasts between two different genealogies of interactive service work and point to new conflicts and co-operations between workers and their customers.

If the shopping mall was a distinctly post-colonial artefact in urban India, then service workers who inhabit service-scapes such as restaurants, gyms, and hotels are post-colonial artefacts par excellence.

3.2 Research Context: Luxury Hospitality in Affluent India (Essay 3)

This research project involved an ethnography of two luxury hotels in India, part of a larger cross-cultural project on the linkages between cultures and services. The hotels belong to two different hospitality groups. The hotels had a few characteristics in common, in that both were instances high-end luxury hospitality. They were flagship hotels of their respective hospitality groups in their cities. They had similar hiring practices and recruited entry-level workers from the same set of elite hotel management schools. They had similar HR tracks for managerial and non-managerial employees and laid emphasis on training and development.
This is not to say that there weren’t contrasts and complementarities between the two sites chosen for their contrasting genealogies & service ideologies. One of the hotels is part of an international conglomerate of luxury hotels. It stresses and highlights its foreign roots in everything from the décor, uniforms to the service scripts. The other hotel is part of a home-grown business enterprise and champions a specific pseudo-religious and idealized version of Indian-ness and Indian hospitality.

4. METHODOLOGY

I collected empirical material for this dissertation during three research visits to India between 2015 and 2018. As I became more familiar and immersed myself in the existing services literature in the field of marketing, two aspects of existing literature became salient. First, the predominance of experimental and survey-based methodologies, and second, the emphasis on understanding, theorizing and ultimately bettering the sovereign customer’s service experience.

My intention was to understand what was going on in service encounters in different industry and professional settings, but within the broad domain of interactive service work. The broad research question that motivates this dissertation is “How do frontline service workers experience and navigate often intersecting challenges of doing good interactive service work?”

4.1 Ethnographic Interviews – Reflection and Immersion

To conduct an ethnography is to participate and observe, to watch, to hear, to immerse, but also to interrogate and listen. To ask informants and gatekeepers to elaborate and explain. The ethnographic interview is a “socially and linguistically complex situation” (Alvesson 2003, p. 14). It is a liminal event that exists in a kind of no man’s land between competing logics of politics, impression management, identity work, symbolic interaction and communication of some social truth. In this dissertation, I have attempted to be as reflexive about interviews as possible, especially
given that the focus of one of the essays was language-use. I also reflected on the linguistic imbalance that existed between me as a highly-educated, linguistically-skilled interviewer and most of my informants, whether they were gym trainers, coffee shop workers, hotel bell boys or housekeeping staff. I took care to not foreground my English-ability, and summon a more upcountry, vernacular linguistic-register and verbal tics to help make less English-savvy informants at ease.

4.2 Ethnography Phase II – Thick-ish Inscription, Pseudo-Nativity, Critical Ethnography

For essay 3, I decided to approach luxury service more ethnographically than I had approached gyms and coffee shops for essay 2. Luxury hospitality was a much more experientially-oriented endeavour than the gyms and coffee shops I had visited (Chadha and Husband 2010; Sherman 2007). Additionally, luxury hotels had many more working parts. Employees and guests spent a significant amount of time without going out of the institution into the outside world. If a guest wanted, he could dine-in, choose from the 4 or 5 restaurants inside the hotel, each of which changed its lunch and dinner menus daily. Similarly, if a worker wanted, he could live on-site, and avail of the air-conditioned sleeping rooms, lockers and other facilities without going back home for a significant period. The hotels also provided breakfast, lunch, an evening snack, and dinner to all employees. There really was a lot going on in the hotels at any given time. Luxury hotels also afforded the formation of long-term service relationships, some of which could become boundary-open commercial friendships (Arnould and Price 1993).

Ethnographic fieldwork also seemed a more insightful approach in this particular research context because of the co-presence of many kinds of service work being carried out in the hotels. There was the boundary between “dirty” and “non-dirty” work that was being transgressed and
maintained (Ashforth & Kreiner 2014). There was the boundary between visible and invisible labour, that housekeeping, support functions and front office struggled with almost daily (Hochschild 1983). There were competing and complementary folk-understandings of the service customer between employees of different ages, professions and organizational hierarchy. This socio-cultural complexity became intensified as fieldwork happened at two different hotels, that belonged to different hospitality groups.

I worked as a management trainee at both hotels between December 2016 and June 2017, shadowing staff as well as working in different guest-facing departments of each hotel – bussing tables, carrying luggage, attending to guests and at times helping to brainstorm new strategies and tactics for achieving guest satisfaction. I spent almost 600 hours at the hotels actually wearing their uniforms and many more hours interacting with hotel workers outside hotel settings. I visited residential enclaves that housed management trainees, went on team-dinners and parties with the departments/restaurants to whom I was assigned in rotation. I also worked closely with L&D managers at both hotels. I became facebook-friends with a large number of people from both hotels and also connected to them on linkedIn, to build rapport and to get a better sense of their thoughts and actions. This ‘almost-native’ fieldwork design helped me focus on direct interactions with other guests and hotel staff as well as accessing a level of insider knowledge and embodied experience of luxury service work that would have been difficult to get at exclusively through interviews or participant observations.

However, my ethnographic fieldwork should not be confused with a mystery-manager or covert approach to research. I had indeed been able to gain ethnographic access to both hotels through engagement with senior C-suite level managers. Yet, I was not in any way predisposed to specific managerial questions and inquiries. I made it a point to make my researcher-status public to hospitality colleagues in the very first orientation meeting at every department where I worked.
Initial observations and interviews yielded little new insight, as employees toed the organizational line as best as they could, considering that I had been given access to the hotel by top management at both research sites. I had to re-negotiate access to interactive service workers and their work through personal hard work, my lower-middle-class upbringing and befriending key informants. For the first few days in both hotels, F&B teams that I was embedded in, gave me early morning shifts beginning at 6:00 AM and often finishing more than 12 hours later. These were the most excruciating shifts in terms of time and effort required. They covered breakfast, traditionally the busiest meal of the day at both hotels, and lunch, the second busiest meal. It was only when I religiously arrived at the right time, did my fair share of serving and reasonably demonstrated to interactive workers that I was not a management flunkey, that they began to open up to me about different aspects of their lives at the hotels.

The study, at least in part, reflects my lived experience in a phenomenological sense, a “thick description” of the empirical context (Geertz 1973). But at the same time, there were also hints of “thick inscription” (Arnould 1998) as I brought to bear implicit knowledge of the practices, meanings and collective imaginary of interactive service work to bear on fieldwork accounts and interpretations. The unit of analysis was meso-level interactions with a focus on guest interactions of service workers, as they interacted with hotel guests, other service workers, and managers.

Ethnographies are rarely neutral endeavours, even when they explicitly claim to be (O’Reilly 2008). For reasons described elsewhere in this introduction, I did not approach both ethnographic sites with a managerialist approach. Instead, I approached both sites as critical ethnographies (Thomas 1993). My intention from the very beginning had been to highlight everyday acts of symbolic violence that pervade many aspects of social interaction and that almost all cultural insiders take for granted (Bourdieu 1977). Critical ethnographers have a duty to report and explain everyday events “in a way that exposes broader social processes of control, taming,
power imbalance, and the symbolic mechanisms that impose one set of preferred meanings or
behaviours over others.” (Thomas 1993, p. 9)

The choice of the two hotels had been driven by what made the hotels similar to each other,
but also what made them distinct from each other i.e. their complementarity. At the simplest level,
both hotels traced their ideological roots to very different socio-spatio-temporal sources. One hotel
had existed from the days of the Raj (British Rule), and the other was one of the most recent
entrants to metropolitan India’s hospitality landscape. One hotel was explicitly sanskritized
(Srinivas 1989) and delved into Hindu religiosity for its interactive idiom. The other did not leave
any stone unturned to highlight its foreign-ness, its cultural and gastronomic sophistication. One
was the envy of the whole hospitality industry for its low attrition rates. The other was setting the
record for employee and management turnover.

5. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

5.1 Essay 1: Interactive Service Work: A Critical Review and Future Directions

The first essay critically reviews recent employee-centric services research in marketing
journals and lays the conceptual groundwork for some of the arguments in Essays 2 & 3. A critical
review is an interpretive exercise, where one of the key aims is to problematize taken for granted
assumptions of a particular stream of literature (Alvesson and Sandberg 2011). As I immersed
myself in services literature in marketing but also in management, the lack of discussions of
conflict, domination, resistance, inequality were conspicuous by their absence. As the essay
demonstrates these absences had to do with the ethnocentric, North-American view of service as a
co-operative endeavour that is potentially value-generating for all parties involved, a win:win:win
model (Korczynski 2003). The win:win:win approach becomes easily discernible in seminal stock-
taking exercises debating the future of the discipline that the global services research community
carried out in the recent past (Ostrom et al., 2010, 2015; Rafaeli et al., 2017).
I find that most employee-centric services research employs metaphors of dramaturgy/theatre and views interactive service work as an instance of organizationally mandated emotional labor. The performance of such labour is made difficult or easier by the absence or presence of a service climate. I also find that instead of looking at culture as the medium in which interactive service work is embedded, culture is reduced to an independent variable in multi-dimensional analyses of customer satisfaction and organizational success (Hofstede 1980; Mattila 1999). The predominant research objective is to give customers a predictable and pleasant emotional experience.

This conceptualization presents a somewhat under-socialized account of interactive service work, where questions of intersubjective struggles, workers’ search for meaningful work, challenges arising from power imbalances, asymmetric opportunities for intersubjective recognition and the presence of specific cultures of service that circumscribe all of the above, rarely inform theoretical explanations (Hanser 2012; Holtgrewe 2001; Macdonald and Korczynski 2008; Otis 2010; Ustuner and Thompson 2012). An under-socialized account of interactive service work also becomes problematic as it can rarely account for the pleasures and emotional succour, workers’ strategies and tactics of dealing with the challenges outlined above, and for the transformative potential of successfully taking on these challenges (Anderson 2013; Hancock 2012; Otis 2008; Sherman 2007; Sturdy & Gurgulis 2000; Warhurst & Nickson 1999).

I argue for the theoretical generativity of a more socialized and contextualized conception of interactive service work, especially given the cross-cultural nature of an increasing number of service firms and interactions. For instance, an understanding of different ‘cultures of service’ (Otis 2008) can shed light on how norms coincide, combine or conflict as service providers and customers bring their own culturally-informed understandings to the interaction (Otis 2012). A focus on meaningfulness can open up insights that contribute to employee well-being and the transformative potential implicit in interactive service work (Anderson 2013; Leidner 2016). Being
sensitive to conceptions of (dis-)respect & (mis-)recognition can foreground avenues of coping with stress that mainstream dyadic conceptions of interactive service work overlook (Hancock 2013; Holtgrewe 2001). Lastly, a focus on intersubjective power struggles, especially the connection between language-use and power highlights interactive service work as an “interclass status game in which both parties vie for relative authority and control” (Üstüner and Thompson 2012, p. 811).

In essays 2 & 3 together, I (and my co-authors) mobilize these conceptual building blocks and present a more critically-attuned and culturally-circumscribed account of interactive service work.

5.2 Essay 2: Language and Power in India’s “New” Services

Essay 2 is an ethnographic investigation of interactive service work in two of India’s “new services” (Cayla and Bhatnagar 2017), branded fitness gyms and coffee-shops. These two contexts were appropriate for theory building as most service firms in these domains were large multinational chains that imported interactive scripts from their ‘home’ offices to India. Additionally, almost all service firms in these sectors enforced a strict linguistic policy of interacting with customers only in English.

As stated earlier, we wanted to investigate how language use in a specific linguistic landscape impacts workers’ experience of interactive service work. Complementing much of the previous research on language use in services that utilizes surveys, lab experiments or field experiments we mobilized an ethnographic research design. Drawing on participant observation and phenomenological interviews and drawing on secondary sources to build theoretical explanations from different scales of observation (Desjeux 1996), we could gain a rich, contextualized understanding of our informants’ subjective experiences as they participated in interactive service work. We focused on workers’ subjective meaning making as they attempt to interact with customers in English, and how these interactions play out within the broader linguistic politics to do
with English and middle-class subjectivity (Chand 2011; Mankekar 2017). We found to our surprise, that in some cases the service provider could indeed speak (Spivak 1988).

Workers and customers alike struggled to locate themselves within a socio-cultural landscape where English-use is tightly coupled with class and caste boundaries. Our analysis demonstrates that interactive service work is a power struggle and that language-use is a critical dimension of that struggle. In the very first instance, service landscapes, both in the coffee shops and gyms was conceived of in English. To participate in any way in this service landscape, employees and customers alike would need to have an Englishized way of life (Boussebaa et al 2014). When it came to actual service interactions, workers who could not accumulate enough linguistic competence or master the appropriate nomenclature or linguistic register experienced service work as the application of symbolic power (Bourdieu 1992). Those who could master the appropriate linguistic registers experienced service work as mechanism of upward social mobility and in some cases can even upend the “sovereign” position that many service recipients have to come to expect and enjoy. Language-use in service interactions enacted a violent boundary that policed entry to high-status social groups such as the trans-national middle class (Derne 2008).

This essay shows the fruitfulness of conceptualizing service interactions as language-based power struggles. A sensitivity to interactive language-use and its link with symbolic power foreground intersubjective struggles for recognition and respect. We also show that cultural specificity and organizational context matter to employee and customer experience of of interactive service work and contrast the two empirical contexts as indexical of different cultural repertoires of interaction. Analysing service interactions as power struggles also sheds light on how “new” services mediate processes of globalization and localization, and how they variously reproduce or bridge existing class boundaries (Fernandes 2006; Phadke 2007).

5.3 Essay 3: The Struggle for Recognition in Interactive Service Work
Essay 3 is an ethnographic investigation of interactive service work carried out in two of India’s premier luxury hotels. The context of luxury hospitality was especially appropriate for theorizing the constraints and advantages of interactive service work due to significant class differences between service workers and recipients. In addition, the specific genealogy of ‘hotel work’ in Hindu religious traditions, i.e., the cultural context, came to bear on workers’ struggles for broader legitimacy and professional identity. My research questions involve understanding how workers managed the stress of customer interactions, institutionalized inequality and invisibility that had become characteristics of interactive service work in luxury hospitality (Boon Chuan 2016; Hanser 2012; Sherman 2007, 2011; Otis 2008). I mobilize recognition theory, especially Honneth’s (1996, 2014) conception of different spheres of recognition to conceptualize workers’ attempts to make meaning out of their work, to attenuate work stress and to accrue emotional succour. Specific aspects of intersubjective understanding are foregrounded. I find that workers want customers to honour their rights (sphere of rights), acknowledge their personal skills and abilities (sphere of achievement) and view them as emotional beings (sphere of affective recognition). Further, interactive service workers draw upon culturally-salient notions to make their work meaningful. For instance, some workers interpret interactive service work in the hotel as *seva* – a notion of serving that is infused with religious symbolism and that invokes Hindu Vedic myths and scriptures. However, workers suffer from degraded well-being and admit to high turnover intentions when customers mis-recognize them in a way that leaves their hard-earned personal and professional selves at imminent risk of symbolic and at times even physical violence.

While hotel managers and executive committee members at both hotels often invoke the army as a metaphor for the experience of luxury service work, actual interpersonal interactions are less routinized and more improvisational than managers imply. It is precisely moments where the service workers exceed the remit of the brand standard that become etched in the minds of the
guest. Jaded customers have become accustomed to being pampered and so have come to expect luxury rather than to be delighted by it.

Intersubjectively agreed upon rules of conduct “transform both action and inaction into expression.” (Goffman 1956). However, luxury customers increasingly expect service providers to go above and beyond their call of their duty, especially when it comes to the display of emotions and the production of authentic care (Sherman 2007). For example, a Maharashtrian manager, whose mother tongue is Marathi, could switch to broken Punjabi, the customer’s mother tongue, when talking on the phone to a guest, even though this is not a hotel obligation. Workers could often be caught in an emotional conflict between rising expectations as some luxury customer expectations contradict workers’ cultural repertoires.

The fundamental turn-taking structure of communicative interaction is itself upended in extreme cases as some guests do not acknowledge the presence of the interaction order at all, seemingly oblivious to the attempts made by service workers to hail them. It is up to the service worker then to improvise an interactive repertoire on the spot. I interpret these ethnographic vignettes through the politico-philosophical lens of recognition (Honneth 1995). I use Honneth’s rich conceptual vocabulary plus the subtle distinctions he makes between different spheres of recognition, to explain luxury service interactions as recognition games.

5.4 Emergent Themes

One of the virtues of inductive, ethnographic research is generating insights not envisioned in the original research design (Charmaz 2000). In addition to the three research questions that I have engaged with in the above essays, two more questions have become salient in the course of this dissertation project. I will briefly discuss each of these questions and their proximate answers. The first question has to do with the importance of worker embodiment to the production, management and consumption of interactive service work. That is, How does embodiment matter to interactive service work? I understand embodiment as the “connection between subjectivity and the
body’s socio-materiality” (Hancock, Sullivan and Tyler 2015). I found four ways in which service employees, managers and customers understand and experience embodiment. I drew on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with experts in the field but also on auto-ethnographic accounts of my own apprenticeship journeys at the two hotels. My brief yet alienating personal experience of becoming an interactive service worker resonated with many other employees, especially the ones who came in from more professionalized avenues such as hospitality management schools. I found two different but interconnected sets of body-oriented practices and ideologies in the context of luxury hospitality that contributed to the production of good interactive service work and worker. First, working bodies were broken down into their constituent parts in a way that they became sites for inscribing power relations and social control (Foucault 1977). Managers decomposed whole bodies into a collection of embodied attributes such as body-type, skin-type, weight, height, length and colour of hair, tone of voice etc. (Warhurst & Nickson 2001). Much of this deconstruction happened at the time of recruitment and selection. Once deconstructed, managers could tinker with these attributes much as one would tinker with a piece of hardware. The second set of managerial interventions involved reimagining the moving, working body as a tool engaged in expressive action carried out between two parties (Deighton 1992, Goffman 1959). Managers and senior colleagues reconfigured frontline workers into collections of intelligible movements – for instances ways of smiling, ways of walking, emotional gestures, regulation of hand movements, comportment, ways of speaking etc. This set of actions was intended to produce the appropriately branded service worker who literally embodied the brand (Sirianni et al 2013). I found that these body-centric interventions were powerful managerial tools of managerial oversight and control. To do interactive service work in a luxury setting needed a particular kind of body and body-oriented work. Frontline employees had little agency to resist organizational control by working on and through their bodies.
The second emergent research question had to do with workers’ attempts to manage stigmatization associated with interactive service work (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999; Goffman 1963). Workers struggled with a lack of status and prestige. Work is tainted by associations of low morality (Paules, 1991), marked by high levels of perceived sexualization (Otis, 2008) and is seen by many as lacking professionalism and expertise (Otis, 2011). Goffman (1963) theorizes that the fear of stigmatization often leads an individual to manage the “information about his failing” (p. 42). Interactive service workers had to resist physical, social and moral stigmatization associated with their lifestyles, work rhythms and nature of work (Ashforth & Kreiner 2014). I found that workers drew on the organizational brand as a sort of ‘status shield’ for interactive service workers (Hochschild 1983). Service workers draw on the organizational master-brand to distance themselves from the stigmatized occupational group of ‘hotel-workers’. Workers also draw on brand activation events such as employee recognition events to bridge the social and power distance between customers and workers. Thirdly, workers draw on codified brand values and essence to re-frame customer interactions as socially-embedded people-work.

6. DISCUSSION, FUTURE DIRECTIONS & LIMITATIONS

This dissertation carries forward the recent research program that problematizes the interpretation of marketplace performances as seamless, cooperative, co-creative endeavours (Dion & Borraz 2017; Ustuner & Thompson 2012; Varman et al 2020). Essays in this dissertation build on research that conceptualizes the performance and experience of interactive service work from a more critical perspective (Sturdy, Grugulis and Wilmott 2001). They highlight inequalities of language, power, class and intersubjective recognition show how these inequalities intersect with culturally taken-for-granted norms and conventions of different forms of interactive service work.

Services research has hesitated to ask questions related to the “sociological disparities that arise when marketplace performances forge relationships between affluent consumers and
underclass” (Üstuner & Thompson 212, p. 796). In some ways, this hesitation is a function of the theoretical, methodological, and contextual choices that are dominant in the field. A recent review finds that “regardless of discipline, a customer-centric view of services still dominates much of the empirical literature and continues to shape our understanding of the service experience.” (Groth et al 2019, p. 90). An emphasis on viewing interactive service work as a dramaturgical enterprise, focusing on quantitative measures of customer satisfaction and service quality, and empirical work concentrated in North American contexts, have all contributed to the current focus on a singular stakeholder – the sovereign service-customer. In addition, research that does engage with the experience of interactive service workers does so primarily through the lens of emotional labour and misses the complexity as well as multiple and intersecting struggles of producing interactive service work.

While there is no doubt that in many cases customers and interactive service workers do pursue “a shared objective of co-creating value added experiences” (Üstuner & Thompson 2012, 1116), in many other instances a co-creative, dramaturgical account does not accurately explain what goes on in interactive service work. In contrast, the conceptual and empirical essays in this dissertation treat interactive service work as a culturally-informed intersubjective accomplishment between two parties that might collaborate or conflict with each other. Taken together, the essays in this dissertation attempt to question the predominance of sovereign-customer oriented genealogies and mythologies of interactive service work.

Indian hospitality industry veterans repeatedly invoked the notion of “Bhartiya/Hindustani” (Hindi and Urdu predecessors to the English notion of Indian-ness) tradition of hospitality, a perspective seemingly a world away from the cosmopolitan, trans-national and globally-connected New India. We can see similar contests and conflicts in many other cultures and contexts, whether it is service provision in smaller Chinese cities that sparks a revision of moral and sexual habits and discourse (Otis 2008), the glocalization of Greenlandic consumer culture (Kjeldgaard and
Askegaard 2008), or novel forms of consumer identity politics that had to be navigated by Turkish consumers (Üstüner & Holt 2010).

Insights from this dissertation also complement past research that focuses on class-based status games or normalization of class inequalities when it comes to interactive service work (Sherman 2007; Üstüner & Thompson 2012). Instead of thinking of the service recipient as an infantile individual in need of care (Sherman 2007) or engaging with her as an opponent in status-games (Üstüner & Thompson 2012), the service workers in the Indian cafes, gyms and luxury hotels studied as part of this dissertation seem to think of their patrons as examples to emulate, as opportunities for socio-cultural-economic mobility. In contrast to dominant streams of theorizing service encounters as sites only of domination or inequality, we find luxury service encounters to be sites for social mobility and upgrading social repertoires. Service workers recount stories of personal transformation, of experiencing guest interaction as a cultural masterclass that osmotically changes them habit by habit, to the extent that they claim to be unrecognizable from what they were two or three years ago. Workers experience this shift in inter-corporeal encounters with guests, as guests shake hands, pat, hug or invite workers to click selfies.

Essays 2 and 3 taken together also point to another insight about the production of globality/locality through interactive service work, given its significance as a source of employment for vast swathes of Indian youth (Appadurai 1999). As certain service businesses claim to provide an authentic “Indian” experience, and a certain cohort of luxury service workers lay claim to providing “Indian” service, there is a jostling between different social groups, institutions and generations as to what ideas and actions constitute Indian-ness. One can see in this jostling that culture is indeed a negotiated set of interactive and cognitive repertoires. Interactive service workers and managers have worked long and hard to discredit repertoires of servitude and tried to replace them with repertoires of skill and professionalism. We can see the ebb and flow of cultural
homogenization and cultural heterogenization in the aspirations and idealizations of interactive service workers in luxury hotels, cafes and chain gyms (Appadurai 1996).

6.1 Interactive Service Work as a paradoxical endeavour

The burgeoning services sector in India and other developing countries has opened up new opportunities in terms of gainful employment and social mobility for vast swathes of urban and peri-urban populations. Yet, the experience and performance of work in many kinds of service work seems paradoxical. Existing imaginaries of interactive service work, and its experience are caught between competing, incommensurable notions. Interactive service work is now professional, in that new employees come from a particular disciplinary and pedagogical background yet is considered unskilled work by many in the Indian context (others?). Service employees speak of the allure of such work being about meeting new people, yet their lived experience often turns out to be alienating and dehumanizing. It is about scripting, codification and standardization, and yet workers are encouraged to break these rules as part and parcel of being good service workers. It is part of the formal economy and goes a long way towards equipping workers with a middle-class habitus, yet does not guarantee middle-class legitimacy and status.

Future research should engage with the ways in which the post-sovereign service customer is coming into being in different cultures of service. The sovereign service customer was a socially constructed consumer subject (Karababa & Ger 2010) and was in no way ‘natural’. Customers all over the world have begun to seek more responsible, ethical and moral ways to consume, and given that the production and consumption of services has been a major driver of economic growth in almost all the major economies, it is time that research sheds light on the ways in which service firms and customers can institutionalize a more just and meaningful imagination of interactive service work.

Future research can also pay more attention to the embodied, incarnated nature of interactive service work, especially how embodiment is implicated in producing new or luxury service.
experiences. “New” services involve new ways in which service workers experience and manage embodiment in interactive body work (McDowell 2011). While this dissertation attempts to engage with how bodies matter to the production, management and consumption of service interactions and market performances, there is much more to be said about the embodied and visceral nature of interactive service work (Csordas 2009). I have taken care not to treat workers’ embodiment as a taken for granted incidental background but it rarely moves beyond an implicit, latent notion in the essays that are part of this dissertation.

There is also the question of generalizability of the findings or their implications, given the particular socio-historical-material contexts in which I collected empirical material. To the best of my ability, I have taken care not to exoticize or Orientalize research contexts, whether they were gyms and coffee shops in Mumbai and Jamshedpur, or 5-star luxury hotels in Mumbai and Delhi. Each of these sites is caught up in a negotiation between the old and the new, between logics of duty and aspiration, between embeddedness and displacement. Conflicts and negotiations, between more or less similar poles, are happening in large parts of the world, especially in a consumption-scape marked by geographical, social and cultural mobility. Yet, there may be peculiarities, culturally-specific idiosyncrasies, and the particular socio-religious genealogy of interactive service work in India, that make the analysis less generalizable to other contexts.

Another boundary condition of the analysis and implication has to do with the specific methodological and epistemological choices I made in conceptualizing and writing this dissertation. This dissertation is but one step from a singular epistemological and methodological perspective that focused on the micro-social aspects of interactive service work. I did try to engage with the popular representational idioms to do with interactive service work, but most of these engagements became building blocks for informal conversation with service workers, rather than empirical source material to be investigated and analyzed by itself. Other research designs, that engage a macro scale of observation (Desjeux 1996) could better highlight the ‘national ideology’ or the
cultural imaginary (Castoriadis 1987) of interactive service work. For instance, future research could conduct a critical discourse analysis to understand the way in which service work and workers are represented in popular culture and how such representations have changed over the years.

Overall, this dissertation argues for the fruitfulness of socially-embedded and culturally-informed analytic approach to the study of services and service work. I also call on service researchers to re-situate the interactive service worker as a focus of research. To understand interactive service workers as manoeuvring between different and at-times intersecting structural constraints, and to investigate “the links between structural inequality and interactive work” (Sherman 2007, p. 294) would open up a complementary set of insights to those focused on the creation and enhancement of customer value. Interactive service workers, especially in mass and mass-customized service domains will have to manage ever more work-stress, given the rapid globalization of interactive service firms, and the intensive technologizing of interactive service work. In such a potentially high stress scenario, I hope that this dissertation goes some way towards humanizing the research and practice of interactive service work.

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Cultures of Service and Intersubjective Struggles

The Quest for Meaningful Interactive Service Work

Kushagra Bhatnagar