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‘It’s A Guesthouse Not a Brothel’: Policing Sex in The Home-Workplace

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## **‘It’s a guesthouse not a brothel’: Policing sex in the home-workplace**

### **Abstract**

This paper aims to explain why guesthouse or ‘Bed & Breakfast’ proprietors in the UK attempt to police sex among guests. Unlike interactive service situations that take place in more neutral locations, guesthouse proprietors open their homes to customers. We propose that they attempt to regulate sexual conduct (as well as other behaviours) in an attempt to delineate their homes as a traditional sphere of family values and purity. Sex is ‘useful’ in this regard for defining what their home is not – a ‘seedy’ hotel or even a brothel. The paper presents evidence of the specific regulatory mechanisms deployed by proprietors and the rationale behind them. The research contributes to the interactive service work literature by illustrating the unique tensions experienced by this subset of home-workers, and the organizational sexuality literature, by exploring its importance in settings where the putative private/public dichotomy is overtly undermined.

**KEYWORDS:** guesthouse, home/work boundary, service work, sex, space

## **Introduction**

Interactive service work is now a key occupational category (Sturdy *et al.*, 2001). While most service workers conduct their labour in a relatively neutral setting, this paper concentrates on a unique subset, that of the guesthouse proprietor whose home and workplace are co-located. More specifically, we seek to explain a curious phenomenon – their attempt to regulate and/or prohibit sexual relations among customers in the realm of their workplace, a space that is simultaneously their home. Drawing on a UK-based qualitative empirical study of guesthouses located in Scotland, we propose that the control of sexuality outside prescribed norms (in addition to other behaviour deemed ‘inappropriate’ by proprietors) is indicative of the tensions experienced in this type of service work. On the one hand, the space is akin to a hotel where customers can expect to engage in private enjoyments, including sexual relations. Guesthouse providers too understand this expectation, but simultaneously struggle to maintain a traditional notion of the home, a space that is respectful, stable and predictable. We argue that the tension around sexuality is partly informed by ambivalent spatial norms regarding where and what kind of sex can occur in the home-workplace. The traditional and rather heterosexual assumption that the domicile represents a pure and sanctified space of ‘legitimate’ sex appears to exacerbate guesthouse proprietors’ concern with the intimate practices of customers.

In order to give our proposition theoretical weight, insights can be drawn from the organizational sexuality literature. Although there are instances where sexualized elements may be co-opted for organizational purposes (Brewis & Linstead, 2000; Filby, 1992), much of the research exploring sex and employment has highlighted the strong boundary prohibiting the open expression of libidinal energy in many

organizations (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Burrell, 1984; Fleming, 2007). This is driven by the managerial fear that sex might confound administrative rationality and the productive use of time (Riach & Wilson, 2007). Although sex still persists in the form of office affairs, sex games, fantasy and sexual misbehaviour, its legitimacy at work remains vague and controversial, particularly in the wake of legislative initiatives around sexual harassment (Kakabadse & Kakabadse, 2004). When at work one must refrain from those intimate practices that usually take place in the privacy of the home. However, this desexualization thesis is problematic with respect to guesthouse proprietors. They do not want to only enforce in a managerial way the prohibition of certain expressions of sex in their workplaces but to extend this to their homes as well. Indeed, as Foucault (1979) and Donzelot (1997) remind us, sexuality in the domicile is also highly regulated and policed. This is symptomatic of the power of the normalizing gaze used to regulate and organize our [sexual] behaviours in society. These are engendered through various techniques including spatial design practices, moral discipline, and the power of interpersonal relationships within the family and community to effect collective norms. The normalization of family relations within the home is thus situated within such regulative practices around sexuality and labour. Both Foucault (1979) and Donzelot (1997) provide a lens through which we can make sense of power and regulative forces even within the more 'hidden', private sphere of the home. We thus locate our analysis within this theoretical tradition. Given the ingrained and complex spatial norms regarding sex and the home, it is no wonder guesthouse proprietors struggle with sex. Research has noted that those who work at home often (unsuccessfully) attempt to maintain a boundary via time and props, in which the 'workplace' becomes a home space at the end of the day (Felstead *et al.*, 2005; Surman, 2002). The guesthouse proves doubly

complex in this regard. The home is also a place of work, but with the added dynamic of customers occupying areas of the home that defy time-based boundaries since they sleep there too. Building on both the interactive service work and organizational sexuality literature, the paper explains the reasons why guesthouse proprietors attempt to police sex among paying guests. We propose that it stems from the unusual confluence of spatial norms that typically define the home (and work) in terms of sexual desire. Sex is a means for maintaining a particular notion of the domicile. The empirical part of the study will identify the kinds of strategies that hosts use to regulate sexual relations among guests.

The article is organized as follows. In the following section we discuss service-based employment, focusing on those occupations where home and work are co-located, before discussing the guesthouse proprietor as a special case. Then we explore sexuality in relation to work, home and family. Our method and analysis is then discussed. In order to understand why and how proprietors police sex, we present our empirical findings, identifying the evident complex spatial struggle over the sexualization of the home/work space and the regulatory mechanisms used by guesthouse proprietors when negotiating these tensions. The final part of the paper discusses the implications of our findings for both interactive service work and organizational sexuality.

### **Interactive service work and the guesthouse**

While the home still tends to be regarded as a sphere largely distinct from paid employment (Rybczynski, 1988), there are now many sites where domicile, customer service, leisure and consumption naturally converge. As such, there are different forms

of home-based employment where tensions between the home/work divide are manifest (Hennon *et al.*, 2000) such as white-collar home teleworking (Shumate & Fulk, 2004; Sullivan & Lewis, 2001; Wilson & Greenhill, 2004), the employment of domestic labour for cleaning or childcare (Meagher, 1997; Moss, 1997) and even prostitution carried out in the sex worker's own domestic premises (O'Connell, 1995; 1996). However, there is a dearth of research examining the conversion of the home into a micro enterprise for the provision and consumption of commercial hospitality, whereby the home itself is part of the hospitality product being consumed by paying guests. Paid home-based work in its various guises significantly blurs the boundaries that have typically divided the domicile and the sphere of labour. As Felstead *et al.* (2005) and Surman (2002) indicate, most types of home-based workers attempt to maintain the boundary between business and pleasure through time management. With the aid of props, the space of work becomes a normal household space again when the workday is done. Alternatively, spatial demarcation is used whereby particular areas or rooms in the home are used either for work-related or domestic-oriented concerns. Thus, devising clear and workable temporal routines, spatial zones, props, and parameters demarcating the working day often present an ongoing challenge as the pressures of work become physically omnipresent (Allen & Wolkowitz, 1987; Perrons, 2003).

#### *The guesthouse or 'bed and breakfast'*

The case of the small guesthouse proves to be more complex in this regard. This subset of interactive service employment is not new, of course, and in many ways represents a 'pre-modern' space reminiscent of inns and taverns of yesteryear. The guesthouse is a family residence that has been explicitly altered to encompass



economic enterprise and on-site customer interaction. This private space has been converted into a public site of production whilst retaining its inherent function of familial habitation. It embodies pre-existing structures of family and private life whilst promoting capitalist enterprise.

There are many other studies of interactive service workers (e.g. Adler & Adler, 2004; Leidner, 1993; Sherman, 2007). However, they examine them in large, formal, bureaucratic work settings as opposed to the small, informal, and intensely personal businesses, where family, home, and work converge as in the case of the present study of the guesthouse. Sex is a concern in the guesthouse for different reasons to that of other feminized service occupations such as waitressing (e.g. Guerrier & Adib, 2000; Lerum, 2004) and flight attending (Hochschild, 1983; Tyler & Abbott, 1998). The literature on service work and feminized roles demonstrates how these occupations typically carry with them heightened sexualized imagery. This may result in some individuals deploying strategies to reduce such role ambiguity and stress professionalism due to the potential connotations of certain service roles (e.g. housekeeping, therapeutic massage) with sex work (e.g. Oerton, 2004; Otis, 2008). In the case of the home-based guesthouse, although the role of the proprietor may be subject to sexual ambiguity, it is further complicated by the space in which the service encounter takes place. Given the guesthouse is often also the home of the proprietor, actual or imagined sexual relations among customers become a problem in terms of the conflicting norms about the meaning of the space and what are deemed appropriate and inappropriate activities.

We propose that the guesthouse represents a contradictory space: it is a hotel and a home, a commodified service situation and a domestic retreat, a normalized family space and a realm expectant of sexual adventure. In this context of overlapping and uncertain spatial scripts, proprietors attempt to retain a sense of home by controlling the type of guests they have and what their guests do when they stay. The target of this control is not only of the sexual kind - alcohol consumption, noisy or boisterous behaviour and other potentially disruptive or disrespectful practices are also a concern. Sex and romantic intimacy is particularly significant here, however, because it is so redolent with meaning and symbolism, especially *apropos* the morality of guesthouse proprietors themselves and the meanings they ascribe to their homes. Why is this so? In order to better understand how sex plays out in guesthouse work environments, we turn to the literature exploring sex at work and in the domicile.

### **The odd bedfellows of sex, work and the home**

The home/work distinction also plays out in the realm of sexuality. A good deal of literature points to how historical forces have sought to desexualize the realm of work and suppress its expression in the formal organization (Burrell, 1984; Riach & Wilson, 2007). According to Burrell's classic article (1984) on the topic, a paramount objective of modern managerial practice was the eradication or at least control of the libidinal energies of employees, since sex could easily undermine the formal processes of efficiency in the capitalist enterprise (Burrell, 1992, also see Brewis & Grey, 1994; Thompson, 1967 and Weber, 1948). Sex obviously persisted in various guises, from sexual harassment, to illicit affairs and joking banter (Pringle, 1989). In addition, occupational roles now may co-opt more personalized elements in relation to sexual identity to enhance the customer service experience (Brewis & Linstead, 2000;

Filby, 1992; Giddens, 1991; 1992). As Fleming (2007) indicates, intimacy and sexual relations are still considered activities that ought to take place in the private sphere of the home rather than the workplace. This is illustrated by the recent case of Wal-Mart Germany where the company has attempted to ban all romantic relations between employees. However, if the home is the legislated realm of sexual exchange, then the phenomenon of home working (and for us, guesthouse customer service) poses an interesting problem in relation to typical conceptions of the sex/work boundary.

### *Sex and the home*

As guesthouses are homes as much as places of work, we must gain a better understanding of the relationship between sex and the domicile. The Western home is a complex physical and emotional space, the historical result of changing social and political regimes (Mallett, 2004). Research has highlighted the subjective significance of the home as an embodiment of identity (Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995), reflection of the self (Cooper Marcus, 1995; Rybczynski, 1988), and the gendered outcome of the family construct (Darke, 1994; Gurney, 1997). The home is also a curiously sexualized space. As opposed to work or public places, traditional heterosexual ideology prescribes the home as the most appropriate space for sex. Yet this meaning of the home conflicts with another dominant discourse in which the domicile is associated with purity, sanctity and wholesomeness (Donzelot, 1997). This sentiment often echoes 'family values', constructing the home as a sanctuary in a troubled world. This idea of the home obviously sits uneasily with what sex may actually entail, especially in relation to the erotic, playful and perverse superfluity of libidinal desire.

According to Donzelot's (1997) historical analysis of the emergence of the familial domicile within the industrial frame, the tension between the home as a sexualized space and one of purity led to an attempt to control how and when sex made an appearance. This controlling mechanism has two elements. First was a focus on the work ethic of the industrial masses. In reproducing the labour power for factories and vast office complexes, sex became an important feature of state policy. Its morality was one that promoted conservative sexual relations for the purpose of procreation specifically, and thus carried an implicit religious message. As Foucault (1979) also argued in relation to 'bio-power', sex between a husband and wife within the confines of the home was a problem that required governance. Indeed, the Western family matrix represents a particularly powerful disciplinary institution in which space and power unite to form a normalizing gaze we innocuously call 'the home'. The family is a repository of moral discipline and behavioural conditioning, a feature perhaps best illustrated by his discussion of the Mettray reformatory (Foucault, 1975). This disciplinary structure was modelled on a 'family' system, with family hierarchies, each organised into different homes within a well-arranged village. The logic was borne out of a belief in the moral disciplines of family life and the power of family and community to provide a constant regime of surveillance. Normalizing judgements were geared towards the socialization of procreative behaviour and the functional use of the home for this purpose - legitimating the heterosexual couple. Domestic spaces, and their internal ordering, make up a hub of regulatory practices, wherein the family acts as a reservoir of normality.

The second area of policing noted by Donzelot (1997) concerned relations among family members themselves. The problem of controlling sexual energy in the

household was underscored by an unacknowledgeable fear of incest and sexual misconduct among siblings, parents and children. Donzelot (1997) refers to Foucault's (1986) analysis of heterotopias, or spaces that are simultaneously sacred and forbidden such as the site of the bride's 'deflowering'. The home is a place of purity represented by the bride and inviolability of marriage, but also a place where potentially dangerous desires must be evoked and expressed. With the advent of the industrial age, the home becomes a sacred zone in which the profane is always near.

This ideological aspect of the bourgeois way of life also informs spatial design where sexual relations are rendered amenable to internal policing, observation and control. Bachelard's 'poetics of space' (1994) focuses on the house and its internal ordering in order to explicate one's relationship with a domicile. Although it can be a place of protection and intimacy, the home is also imbued with secrets and hiding places. Communal spaces such as hallways, corridors, living rooms and kitchens are transparent and open, whereas the bedroom, a place of rest and sex, separates family members from each other, usually on a gendered basis (Bachelard, 1994). However, such a division means that the threat of illegitimate sexual relations is ever present. This is the case with bedrooms that provide additional privacy and are thus subject to suspicion. We are thus reminded that the architecture of the home is inherently sensual, evoking both desire and transgression (Colomina, 1997). Certain rooms and spaces prohibit sexual desire while others tolerate or even encourage its expression. Hence the importance of codes and norms of access/exclusion for its occupants, be they children, parents or guests (Donzelot, 1997).

We can build upon these theoretical threads in order to propose a tentative explanation of why guesthouse proprietors attempt to control sex among guests. These interactive service workers struggle to reclaim their homes by attempting to regulate the behaviours of guests. While sex is not the only target, it is especially important here for two reasons. Unwanted sexual practices potentially spoil the traditional norming of the home as a place of purity, safety and sanctity. The home itself has traditionally played a significant role in crafting and regulating sex via the family matrix. When a stranger enters, they must be policed. The empirical section will now explore the nuances of this proposition.

## **Field study and method**

### *Data collection/ analysis*

The study involved site visits and interviews with proprietors of guesthouses located in a number of Scottish urban areas. Qualitative methods were used to gain a concentrated situational understanding of proprietors' perceptions. As no comprehensive database of such businesses existed, a sample was devised by combining local business listings with those of local area tourist boards. Letters of introduction were sent to 106 guesthouses identified as likely home-based businesses. These were followed by telephone calls to ascertain the proprietor's readiness to participate in the research. 55 agreed to take part in the research but 22 of these were necessarily excluded as they did not fulfil the criterion of being home-based businesses since hosts lived 'off site' in a separate property. The final group of interviewees was thus comprised of 33 proprietors. As such, it is important to note that our arguments are based upon the empirical evidence gathered from a particular group

of guesthouse proprietors and do not necessarily reflect the views and behaviours of all guesthouse proprietors. Further reflections are offered on this issue in the conclusion.

The interviews were in-depth, lasting approximately one and a half hours with each participant. 23 women and 10 men were interviewed. This is a typical gender distribution in the home-based industry (Lynch & MacWhannell, 2000; Walton, 1978). All participants were aged between 40 and 69, a typical age profile within an occupational sector where home ownership is necessary. All were self-employed homeowners defining themselves as 'white' Scottish/British, and part of heterosexual married/cohabiting couples. 15 ran the business jointly with a spouse as copreneurs, and 18 (2 men, 16 women) had a spouse who held full-time paid employment outside the home. Among the participants, 6 had children still residing at home, 3 had no children, and the remaining had children resident away from home, as a result of their age/life-stage.

All interviews were carried out in the business as 'home' and permanent residence of the participants. This also allowed the researcher greater firsthand observation of the spatial overlap and integration of home and work environments. The researcher was thus permitted access to all areas of the property, including those normally reserved for guests and those retained for use by the proprietors and their family members. All interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken as soon as possible after leaving the research setting. To ensure adequate respect for privacy, the names of participants and businesses are either omitted or anonymized. Interview data and field notes were subject to data reduction and interpretation by means of thematic coding and cross-case comparison, a process facilitated by the use

of MaxQDA, a qualitative analysis software package for data management, coding and retrieval.

It was during the process of data familiarization and re-reading early interviews that the emergent theme of sex and sexuality was noticed as a significant analytic sub-category. It is important to state that the interview schedule had not been initially designed with this specific focus. As Fleming (2007) also argues in relation to his study of sex at work, this can actually be an advantage if one desires relatively unprompted data regarding a sensitive topic like sex. The overall focus of the original interview schedule was to ascertain how proprietors manage or negotiate host/guest interactions on a day-to-day basis. This involved vivid descriptions of their home, business and family. The intention was to discover the nature of spatial, temporal and emotional boundaries enacted by the proprietor. After the first few interviews and observations in the field, the theme of sex came to the fore when the researcher asked questions under the broad thematic topic of host/guest interactions and notions of space. It is here that references to sex were a common occurrence. Therefore, although the policing of sex is only one of a number of issues raised by proprietors, it emerged as a significant one that required explanation. As a result, it became evident that the sexual activity within their home/work context was an important concern for hosts, and that they attempted to regulate it, and thus this issue was subsequently pursued as an important part of the study.

### *Sex, data and reflexivity*

The findings are based on emergent interpretations grounded in the data itself and a rejection of *a priori* classifications (Warren, 2002). Initial references to sex were



unprompted, but were probed when they did arise. Our approach seeks to remain as true as possible to the self-expressed opinions of the proprietors allowing their voices to be heard. The norms emanating from a largely heterosexual ethos appeared to frame and dominate proprietors' accounts. However, research can never be completely value-free and indeed it may not be desirable for it to be so. This is especially so with sensitive topics, such as sex and sexuality (Brewis, 2005). Silverman (2000) advocates aiming for the achievement of an 'empathic neutrality', where the researcher uses personal insight whilst taking a non-judgmental stance. This is achieved by avoiding overt personal judgements and opinions on the part of the researchers. For example, this was the case in relation to the overt homophobia of some participants, which the researchers privately found distasteful. Our relationship with the data is thus complex as we found much of it interesting, whilst some of it is manifestly controversial. In this respect, 'empathic neutrality' involved a certain level of discomfort for the interviewer. We purposefully take a step back in order to theoretically appraise their accounts and do not seek to impose our attitudes towards sexuality, or our reactions to the views of the proprietors. Of course, this does not mean that our views may not affect readings of the data, as this is an inherent feature of this type of research. However, our aim is to present, as accurately as possible, the views of the proprietors themselves in order to derive a plausible theoretical explanation for their actions.

In what follows, we present the original words of the proprietors in an attempt to reflect their views appropriately, using verbatim excerpts. This provides the reader a window into their worlds and thus an appreciation of how we have come to the interpretations and conclusions that we make. We have selected excerpts across the range of interviews which, during the analysis, were coded and assigned to analytical

categories. These categories that sort the data allow us to best provide an explanation for why and how proprietors attempt to police sex and its expression in their home-workplaces. The data chosen thus reflects the spectrum of views across the interviews in relation to the policing of sex.

### **Policing the sexual: Domestic ambiguities and regulatory mechanisms**

As our theoretical frame also proposed, sexual relations among customers become a concern for proprietors because they have difficulty detaching their sense of home from the commodified space. Sexuality is not the only aspect of the customer they wish to control – but its significance relates to the powerful meaning it has in the home. These interactive service workers realize that some guests may expect to use the space as a ‘sexual playground’ and therefore police their guests (through the regulations explored below) in order to either dissuade such activity, or at least ensure it fits ideal notions of ‘normal’ sexuality (e.g., traditional, conventional, heterosexual, understated). This is underscored by their notion of the ideal home (e.g. friendly, cosy, comfortable, familiar, safe, pure and wholesome), which is linked to a personification of the owner’s sense of self as its custodian and creator:

I’ve lived here ... my family has lived here for more than twenty years. I love the place. I’ve made it what it is. My kids grew up in this area. This is my home and a pretty good little business too even if I do say so myself. It’s much more than a place to live, it’s my home. Of course home is what you make it and I’ve invested a lot of myself into it. I think you know straight away what kind people are by taking a wee peek into their homes. I want people to come here and feel a

sense of family and goodness and the type of people that live here (Female, sole proprietor).

The highly personal nature of this service work is evident in the spatial and temporal overlap between home and work, and where the intangible 'product' being consumed is the home itself. This allows for the creation of closer relationships with customers than would be the norm in a larger hotel. This is a great source of pride for the owner:

I have stayed in large hotels but I've always said that people want to stay somewhere where they're not just a number. You know number 523. That's your key and your room number and you're a person sitting down for breakfast. Thank you, goodbye. That's all you get. Here at least you get a bit of conversation. There they are not being talked to and that's the basic problem because with a hotel you are basically a number. Room number so and so has had his breakfast. We say Richard has come down or Joe has come down. This is all on a personal level this business. You are opening your house to somebody so you make them welcome basically (Female, sole proprietor).

This perceived level of intimacy, however, has the potential to create tensions in the service encounter. This occurs particularly when the customer does not conform to the notions of home and family desired by the proprietor of their ideal guest. The latter fits the stereotypical and traditional 'family next door' image. A proprietor describes such guests during his fond recollection of a family who had recently stayed in the family room of his guesthouse:

I remember the Simpsons. They had a lovely little daughter. So polite and well behaved. They stayed here a few times. We got quite friendly and would chat with them over a cup of tea. It's as it should be really...They were ideal guests. Such a nice family (Male, sole proprietor).

The 'ideal' guest is highly conventional and desexualized, as the Simpsons are depicted above – the child is especially important for conveying this message. The behaviour of customers, and by implication their sexual expression, becomes a concern when it threatens the legitimacy of desired notions of the home business. The proprietor's definition of the home dominates the space and transactions therein, as it reflects their own sense of self. The business is thus subject to the same type of social graces as the typical home. This is shown by one proprietor's reflections in relation to lewd behaviour;

I'm not a prude or anything so don't get me wrong. I just won't have behaviour that's unacceptable. I don't care a hoot what they do in their own homes ... I couldn't care less. But I don't want a load of nonsense paraded in front of my nose and my family. It's not right and I won't put up with it. I'm not one to pry into other people's concerns but whilst they're staying here then they become my concern whether they like it or not. If they are like us, then I want them here and I want them to come back again ... That's good for business. But business is not all that's important. If it's not working out and they're not my cup of tea, then they can stay somewhere else (Male, copreneur).

The proprietor emphasises a certain definition of the home as a traditional zone. This definition is then transferred to the business sphere and used to condition facets of the service encounter, inscribing it with conventional, family-oriented ideals. Hosts attempt to control those customers whom they perceive as threatening or subverting their ideal notions of home and, by extension, the self. This is especially so in relation to perceived 'deviant' sexual activity, since it is viewed as a challenge to the purity and purpose of the home and its long-term inhabitants:

We've thrown people out before. You get the odd one coming with a supposed wife and all they're wanting is a room for a couple of hours. Well, it's my home. It's a guesthouse not a brothel (Male, copreneur).

There's the type that just gives you the creeps, you know what I mean? You can usually sense it straight away. I once had this man who booked in on his own and later on that night brought a girl back with him. And she wasn't his daughter if you get my meaning... But she looked quite young anyhow. Look, we've a reputation to uphold. What kind of place do they think this is? I'm not some kind of Madame or whatever. It's a respectable business and *not* a house of ill repute you know (interviewee emphasis) (Female, sole proprietor).

Yeah and I think it can be downright unpleasant when people treat the place shabbily. Like when you go to make up the room and you find condom packet wrappers on the floor or under the bed. It's horrible. I don't want to see that. And people can come across all normal and nice when you check them in. You know, and you think "oh, what a lovely couple" and then something happens to

prove you wrong. It's staggering. You know, I once found a condom in the toilet and it took me ages to get it to flush away. *Honestly. Some people!* (interviewee emphasis) If they wouldn't do that in their own homes why would they think of doing it here? (Female, sole proprietor)

At one level the condom is merely a question of hygiene, but it is also deeply emblematic of sexual desire that disturbs the spatial norming owners are endeavouring to achieve. We now turn to the specific policing mechanisms used by proprietors to regulate sexual activity. Three regulatory mechanisms were evident, namely screening, etiquette/rules and aesthetics. While these mechanisms apply to a wide range of 'inappropriate' behaviours, we focus on sex given its importance for the meaning ascribed to the home.

### *Screening*

All proprietors implemented a process of customer 'screening' whereby guests would be vetted via crude judgements. The first stage of this screening process would occur upon initial interaction with potential customers either when they arrived at the establishment or when bookings were made over the phone. At this point the proprietor forms views on their suitability and whether they wish to continue with the encounter. For example, it was the norm for proprietors to enquire about the marital status of couples booking rooms over the phone. Similarly, vetting took place of potential customers who arrived without a prior phone booking. They were known as 'passing trade'. For example, one proprietor described how she made a rapid assessment of the potential for such customers to fit into the ethos of her home:

You're not as gullible in this business ... It might be your business but it's also your home ... you learn right from the beginning and you try and assess somebody. You could be totally wrong when there's somebody at your door. I mean, that's one of the things when you've never done this before ... it's quite scary at the beginning because you've got to trust your judgement and hope that you're right kind of thing. So if you're in a bit of doubt you don't take a chance. I make my own impression of a person and if they're in any way dodgy or anything, then I'll just say no. I just tell them there are no vacancies, that I've got no rooms available (Female, copreneur).

The screening process proceeds after arrival and checking-in and continues throughout the duration of the service encounter. Although it was unlikely that customers would be turned away where a prior booking had been agreed, there were instances when the proprietor would modify the nature of the arrangement or even end the service encounter by requiring the customer to leave the premises if they did not wish to continue to host that particular guest. These decisions appeared to be based upon an unwillingness to accept certain modes of behaviour where these were seen to cross specific social boundary norms. For instance, several gave examples of unwanted guests, showing disapproval of their sexual behaviour/ orientation. The following descriptions exemplify this:

There was this man a short while back who rang up to book a double room. Now, I had no idea until he arrived that he was (pause), well, you know, *gay* (interviewee emphasis). Anyway, he wanted to stay with his man friend in the double room. I really didn't want that sort of thing. Call me old fashioned but I

just couldn't let that happen with my consent as it were. So I just told him when he got here that I was terribly sorry but we had no doubles that night as there had been a terrible mix up and would he mind taking the two single rooms instead. I think I handled that in the best way I could, considering the situation. It was the easiest thing to do. Well, it's hard when you're put in that kind of an awkward position, you just have to cope the best way you know how (Female, copreneur).

Of course some do fall through the net. Like that man I was telling you about just now who seemed ok when he checked in and then brought a girl back with him later that night. Who knows where he picked her up but that was dodgy...So you can't always tell straight away. But I'm usually a good judge of character (Female, sole proprietor).

### *Etiquette rules*

Rules and codes of conduct or etiquette are enforced in order to ensure that any failures in the screening process discussed above are subsequently resolved. Thus, the proprietors consistently regard themselves as having ultimate control over the encounter, especially when the service relationship has begun and the customer has been permitted entry.

A number of spatial zones had signs and notices for the attention of customers. Some of these provided information on checkout times and mealtimes, while others were more akin to 'house rules'. Sometimes humour was used to communicate these rules in a less austere way whilst still conveying the desired norms of behaviour. The



following sign was noted in a guesthouse where rooms did not have en-suite bathrooms and guests would have to cross the hallway to use these facilities:

‘Dearest guest, all and sundry  
Cover up we ask you humbly  
A towel might slip which just won’t do  
Even when popping to the loo  
Please don’t reveal a twinkling bum  
For that would really upset mum!’

This shows views on nakedness and body exposure and in this respect the challenges of boundary maintenance in the home/ business when guests, moving from one relatively private space to another, have to cross through a more communal zone. A proprietor explained the need to overtly communicate rules of guesthouse conduct:

I am trying to run it with a kind of company policy. I have signs up with dos and don’ts of the place so we don’t fall into the trap of people not knowing (Male, sole proprietor).

Behaviour departing from or contravening expected social norms, as inscribed in the sexualized etiquette rules, is regarded as taboo. Defining the overtly sexual as taboo denotes the use of social norms as a spontaneous device for protecting distinctive categories and boundaries. As one proprietor said:

I mean it's your home at the end of the day. This is where I live and have raised my family. If people want to come and stay here of course that's fine and dandy but they can't treat it any old how. I'll not tolerate disrespectful behaviour or any nasty sexual goings on. Not under my roof (Female, copreneur).

You get a couple of eye openers though ... It makes you wonder what they're up to, you know. In my day you wouldn't stay in a room together unless you were married ... Well, you wouldn't admit to it in any case. Now I'm as liberal as the next person but you have to raise an eyebrow at that kind of thing. If I discover those sorts of goings on, I won't have it. Initially I'd have a quiet word and be polite. Polite but firm, you know? But at the end of the day, I won't have it. I've got neighbours and we're quite a close community in the area. They have to show a bit of respect for the place, you know, at least be a bit discreet (Female, sole proprietor).

The voyeuristic nature of the encounter is particularly evident in this type of customer service environment where surveillance is used to police the etiquette rules:

You know, I had a couple once who stayed up in their room all day. I didn't say anything but that's just odd behaviour to me. What on earth were they doing? And don't you tell me they were *sleeping* (interviewee emphasis) (laughs). Yes, well, I think that's a bit much to be honest. Not that I want to tell people what to do with their time (Male, sole proprietor).

We've had problems with loud voices and strange noises in the night. You know, with people who aren't our sort...our cup of tea. I'm basically having to keep my finger on the pulse. I can see what goes on and when it goes on and I can rectify things if I think there's going to be a problem. I keep an eye on things, I always have an eye on the goings on of the place (Male, copreneur).

The sexual behaviour of guests is thus an issue that requires policing as it can threaten the proprietor's notions of home and family values:

We don't want that kind of lark here. After all, I have kids in the house. If I can hear rumpy pumpy going on then it means the kids can too. I'll knock on the door and have a word. We're a decent family and I have to watch out for what's in the interests of my kids at the end of the day. We're not a big hotel where people can do whatever they want. We're different. We're a *real* family (interviewee emphasis) (Female, copreneur).

Proprietors acknowledge that the customer may not be comfortable with the lack of privacy afforded to them as paying customers. Nevertheless, this monitoring of customer profiles and activity is deemed a necessary measure:

Some people don't like it. They feel exposed or uncomfortable. But I think others really take to it. They like being part of a surrogate family. I'm not going to change how I am. They'll have to take me how they find me. I see that as a strength of the business not a weakness. It's a home from home and that's not just a silly marketing slogan, it really is the case. They've got the full thing. It's

a bit more friendly than the big boys; you know those large anonymous hotels...I want to know who stays here, what type of people they are. I'll give them space, but I'll not hold back in saying what I think and letting them know what type of place this is (Female, sole proprietor).

Indeed, the degree of intimacy and friendliness can also be a difficult issue for the proprietor to negotiate. The following female proprietor, for example, explained difficulties she had had in dealing with single men and the risk of being sexually propositioned. She worried that her desire to be friendly might be misinterpreted especially as her husband worked away from home for long periods of time:

My husband is away a lot as he works with the merchant navy. So it's nice having people in the house so I'm not all alone. But you do have to be careful and not take any chances. I want to chat to the guests and have a cup of tea with them but with the single men or those staying here for work during the week I don't as I have to be careful as I'm afraid they'll get the wrong idea, what with my husband being away and everything. So I make sure that they know there's a line that cannot be crossed (Female, sole proprietor).

### *Aesthetics*

Another way in which the personal conduct of guests is regulated was through spatial aesthetics. This was observed first hand in the research process. The aim here, according to many hosts, was to create a certain type of personal and emotional ambience in the house as a whole, including the areas reserved for guests:

I like to give a personal touch to the whole house, including the guest bedrooms. I put up pictures and personal things. You know, like paintings my daughter gave me so guests can see the kind of home and family we are. I have photographs of the family in the guest lounge. I won't let the house seem sterile or unwelcoming. I think it's important they see who we are and the type of home we have wherever they go in the house (Male, copreneur).

While the above quote does not pertain to sex specifically, such aesthetic 'staging' connects strongly with the previously discussed regulation mechanisms associated with screening and etiquette rules. The sanctity of the home space may be sullied by the presence of polluting behaviours. These may be sexually related such as the use of sexually explicit language or the evidence of other unpleasant activities such as lewd or pornographic reading material, which would be regarded as contravening the existing social order or normative framework of the home. The owner thus attempts to communicate notions of the ideal home through contrasting physical aesthetics involving tidiness and family oriented or religious artefacts which reflect the traditional ambience of the home:

If you're going to have a place that is shoddy then they'll treat it that way. They'll treat it shoddily. And I mean ... if you do think you're going to have a problem then you just say "look, this is my *home* (interviewee emphasis) as well as being a guesthouse. It's the kids' home you know? It's not *just* (interviewee emphasis) a guesthouse." (Female, copreneur)

The display of personal belongings and family memorabilia in areas to be frequented by guests such as hallways, dining areas and reception rooms was observed. Religious and other personally significant iconography was also observed. Hosts were seen to use symbols of Christianity to further emphasise their traditional values and the fact that their guesthouse was a 'good Christian home'. While hosts realise that these artefacts may create some consternation among guests, they justify their position:

You'll have noticed the crucifix in the hall. I don't see why that would be an issue but some people are just funny that way. But it astounded me when this one gentleman objected. I also put a little Bible in every guest bedroom. Well you get that in large hotels even don't you? I think it's nice. (pause) Yes, a nasty sort. He can have his opinions but this is our home at the end of the day (Female, copreneur).

Aesthetic symbolism entails a particular concept of domesticity that is laden with notions of purity and wholesomeness. Symbols and artefacts were explicitly used by hosts in this endeavour in order to assert the personal relationships the proprietor has in their family home and business. This obviously resonates significantly with the uncertainty around sex in this customer service space.

## **Discussion**

In the context of the guesthouse, the empirical study has revealed that sex becomes a special issue when work and home are co-located. Sex is not the only concern proprietors have regarding customers. They may seek to control a range of other behaviours, but sex is potentially the most threatening to themselves, their homes and

their identities. A key finding is that the domicile as a site of paid (service) work is essentially an ambivalent space with respect to sex. This ambivalence is linked to persistent vestiges of the cultural distinction between work/home and the ever-expanding processes of commodification. The guesthouse becomes essentially a contested space as hosts provide customer service to the visitor *en passant* and occupy the same living space as the guest. The guest can be seen as a kind of temporary interloper (Stringer, 1981). In this sense, the customer is distinct from *la vie quotidienne* (Lefebvre, 1991) of the proprietor and kin as they remain strangers by virtue of the commercial transaction. Nevertheless, for the proprietor and family, the presence of paying customers in the home space is subsumed into everyday life (Seymour, 2007). From the proprietors' perspective, then, a contradictory double-bind is evident: 'we are selling the idea of a home. Sex can happen in the home, but we will only sanction certain forms of sex – discreet, heterosexual, understated, conjugal – anything outside these prescribed norms would spoil the very idea of the home. Even if we are not to treat guests as strangers, they have to be like us and reflect our familial norms in order to occupy our home'. In relation to sexual desire, the simple guesthouse proves to be a very complex space indeed.

The guest is expected to conform to the behavioural codes of the resident family and as such is subject to processes of screening, monitoring and social control via normalizing practices (Donzelot, 1997; Foucault, 1986). The surveillance practices of the proprietor are wielded as an expression of their ultimate control over who occupies the home space. The spatialization of social power relations are thus constantly negotiated and enacted (Foucault, 1984) as evidenced by these regulatory practices. The guest is expected to 'fit in' and not upset the pre-existing norms

relating to sexual conduct within the home. This may not be a problem, and indeed may be an attraction, for the customer who may actively seek out such establishments, as opposed to the larger more impersonal hotel, in order to have a ‘home away from home’ experience (Lynch & MacWhannell, 2000). Despite this, ambiguity persists as the very fact that monetary exchange forms the basis of the encounter creates friction between friendliness/hospitableness and intrusion. The exchange of payment in return for sustenance and accommodation raises tensions and uncertainties including the necessity to maintain boundaries and barriers as to where customer service must stop. The guesthouse proprietors actively resist this ambiguity and seek to re-establish the traditional ethos of the home and elevate their own status by controlling the encounter and defining the overtly sexual as taboo (Douglas, 1966). We now unpack two implications of such regulation in relation to guesthouse interactive service work.

### *The usefulness of sex*

Sex is actually quite useful for proprietors. It provides a means to define their home by stating *what it is not*. As some proprietors emphasized, it certainly is not like some ‘homes’ that are more aligned to ‘houses of ill repute’ or brothels. Moreover, the ‘seedy’ connotations of the cheap hotel are spurned which a well positioned crucifix clearly demonstrates. From the perspective of the hosts, the issue is one of self-identity and maintaining control over the meaning of the home by closely observing how its internal spaces are used by its occupants (Bachelard, 1994). It may even have the use from a straightforward business perspective of differentiating their service from those of competitors. While both the domicile and hotel are inherently imbued with sexual meaning due to their practical provisions for coupling, the larger hotel has normalized sex as an acceptable part of the commercial transaction. Some hotels even



use sex as part of their marketing or promotions such as in the case of pay-per-view television channels and other services like the addition of sex toys to the mini-bars of certain hotels (Gunn, 2003). Privacy and indifference denote good service, although broad limits are still necessary in order to protect corporate reputation and to avoid complaints from other paying customers (Freedman, 1997). Guesthouse proprietors do not want their homes to be considered in such a manner, as reflected in their attempts to screen or police the sexual conduct of customers. This leads to uncertainty and ambiguity around expectations regarding the function of the space. Is the guesthouse a hotel where paying *customers* can expect to engage in sexual adventures if they choose, or is it someone's home in which *guests* must display courtesy and restraint? It is this symbolic ambivalence evoked by the co-habitation of home and work that appears to underlie the considerable anxiety around sexual activity in the guesthouse as expressed by the hosts.

#### *Power and normalization*

As a unique subset of interactive service workers, proprietors view themselves as the arbiters of power and as ultimately controlling the service transaction. Again, sex is a useful means for asserting control since proprietors consider their dominion over this facet of the home beyond question. Labelling someone 'boisterous' hardly compares to calling him or her a 'pervert' when the desire is to establish one's dominance over a space. This power is effective in as much as it is relatively invisible and subtle, whereby disciplinary judgement of sexual expression is regulated through a set of standards and values associated with 'normality' (McNay, 1994) which in the context of the guesthouse are prescribed by the proprietor. Yet their position of strength in relation to the customer is perhaps compromised by their basic role as service provider

and their responsibility for providing the guest with ‘good’ service. They are also limited in their ability to ensure that they receive into their homes/ guesthouses only those who approximate closely to their ideal guest. Hence, the regulatory mechanisms of screening, etiquette rules and aesthetics are used to allay anxiety around undesirable definitions of the home. These mechanisms can, of course, be found in other service sector settings where there is close staff-customer contact and codes of behaviour orient the interaction (such as restaurants or sports clubs where dress codes or other evidence of membership status are employed). However, we found that the home/work overlap in guesthouses, and the inherently intimate size and scale of the business concern, cause the personal presence of the proprietor and their particular projection of self to be highly pronounced. This is illustrated by the way the business is operated, involving close observation of the customer whereby any performed (sexual) transgressions can be scrutinized. This engenders a highly value-driven encounter, the basis and nature of which is largely dictated by the service providers and their desire to run a commercial entity on the model of a private domicile.

## **Conclusion**

The objective of this paper has been to explain why sex is a concern for guesthouse proprietors. The empirical study indicates that the policing of sex is driven by the owners’ desire to define their homes as a space of traditional family values. This is a direct result of the ambivalent spatial norming inherent in work situations where the very home is the heart of the customer service interaction. While it is not only sexuality that is a concern for these interactive service workers, it is an especially important target given the potentially disruptive connotations sex has for norming the home. Moreover, sex is a useful means for establishing the owners’ dominion more

broadly over the guesthouse space. Certain limitations of the study are revealing in and of themselves. There is a cultural element to the type of conservatism displayed by proprietors regarding their home/businesses. A definite Scottish traditionalism is evident here that possibly accentuates the policing behaviour of the hosts. Whether this conservatism in its various manifestations is present in other contexts within the United Kingdom is an empirical question. With changing values around sexuality, some permutations are certainly visible. There are gay-oriented guesthouses in cities like Brighton, for example, that are much more amenable to 'alternative' displays of romantic desire. These may be indicative of the proprietor's own sexual orientation and/or values and the acceptance of guests who reflect these. Moreover, the various ways in which the customer/guest negotiates the norming of sexuality found in the guesthouse would perhaps shed more light on the dynamic tension our study has revealed. While our intention was to understand the issue of the sexual behaviour of guests from the proprietor's point of view, an additional investigation of customers would probably surface a range of responses, including capitulation, indifference, anger and even resistance. While the guesthouse is certainly not new, it is perhaps emblematic of a 'new' situation in which the temporal-spatial presence of work is increasingly universal. Finally, and echoing Sturdy and Fineman (2001), when the nightmare of the omnipresent customer becomes the guiding metaphor of the service society, questions of privacy, intimacy, sex and sexuality will inevitably become germane concerns.

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