

**TOURISM POLICY-MAKING IN
THE CONTEXT OF CONTESTED
WICKED PROBLEMS**

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ADVANCES IN CULTURE, TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY
RESEARCH VOLUME 17B

**TOURISM POLICY-MAKING IN
THE CONTEXT OF CONTESTED
WICKED PROBLEMS: POLITICS,
PARADIGM SHIFTS AND
TRANSFORMATION PROCESSES**

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CHAPTER 1

INTERROGATING TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY'S WICKED EMPLOYMENT ISSUES THROUGH THE LENS OF PARADOX THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Tourism and hospitality employment have long faced widely recognised challenges with regard to employment, its workforce and the workplace environment, issues that have been addressed by generations of policymakers and practitioners without evident success or solution. These wicked problems are frequently characterised by inherent paradoxes and, therefore, accepting the tenets of paradox theory provides the basis for recognising the need to accept contradictions as a reality which a search for solutions will not resolve. This chapter presents six examples of wicked problems in tourism and hospitality employment, which are underpinned by paradoxes as proxies for the much

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Politics, Paradigm Shifts and Transformation Processes

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wider range of intractable problems that beset policy-making and practice in this vital area of tourism and hospitality. The chapter concludes by suggesting ways in which wicked problems can be accommodated, and stakeholders can learn to understand and live with paradoxes.

Keywords: Tourism and hospitality employment; workforce; paradox theory; wicked problems; policy; practice

1. INTRODUCTION

Employment in the tourism and hospitality sectors has long been beset with seemingly intractable challenges that appear to belie organisational solutions. Neither stakeholder engagement (Solnet et al., 2014) nor the outcomes of academic research appear to have contributed to their resolution in a meaningful and sustainable way. Notwithstanding glaring evidence of such failure, post-COVID-19 attempts to find ‘solutions’ to these challenges continue through both industry and public-sector led reports and recommendations (see, e.g., UK Hospitality, 2022, and the Irish Government Report – Working Conditions and Skills Shortages in Ireland’s Tourism and Hospitality Sector, 2022).

While COVID-19 undoubtedly exaggerated some of these issues, we contend that it did not cause them (Baum et al., 2020). Work in tourism and hospitality faces a myriad of such wicked problems which are generally addressed through the promulgation of ‘wicked solutions’, quick fixes that do not address the root causes of the issues. Historical debates on these wicked issues have invariably focussed on short-term, fracture-filling managerialist solutions. Instead, we will argue that a seismic shift in tourism and hospitality employment policy and practice is needed to provide genuine progress. Tourism and hospitality is an industry where operations are, primarily, located in the private sector with some policy oversight, support, and marketing leadership framed by and located within public sector agencies. Employment is a good case in point that illustrates this private–public interface. Attempts to resolve ‘problems’ identified as ‘wicked’ in this area have, historically, been addressed through policy and practice-driven initiatives that combine inputs from both stakeholders. Wicked problems in tourism and hospitality employment, therefore, may not wholly resonate with Head’s (2022) interpretation of the seven public policy governance strategies that he identifies as characteristic responses at a policy level namely: problem avoidance; authoritative imposition of a ‘solution’; micro-management of the perceived causes and consequences of the problem; the application of scientific or technocratic processes; collaborative dialogue; and longer-term coping or prevention strategies. At the same time, Head (2022, p. 2) rightly opines that ‘Good social science research does not promote ready-made solutions and magical cures’, a view strongly endorsed by Baum et al. (2016) in relation to tourism and hospitality employment and their critique of a widespread (arguably futile) search for managerial solutions to problems such as those illustrated in this chapter.

As this chapter will illustrate, stakeholder attempts at response to wicked problems in the context of tourism and hospitality employment illustrate aspects of the Head's strategies but are frequently sterile and repetitive over time (frequently based on stakeholder dialogue through the formation of stakeholder working groups), with few new ideas or evidence of progress towards resolution; such being the nature of wicked problems!

Our discussion, in engaging with these wicked issues, is informed by paradox theory and what this offers by way of accommodating and living with apparent paradox. Paradox theory highlights the irreconcilable nature of key tensions in society and, in our case, the workplace and that acceptance, rather than resolution, of the consequences of these tensions is a requirement for all actors. We challenge this by arguing that actors (workers but also society in a wider sense) do not merely accept these tensions/paradoxes but contest and challenge them. So, the resolution of tourism and hospitality's wicked employment problems is a matter of how the various stakeholders resolve the paradoxes through decent and fair work.

Paradox is socially constructed and lies at the heart of our social systems through, *inter alia*, our language, discourse, and behaviour (Lewis & Smith, 2014). Paradox lies at the heart of wicked problems. Paradoxes can be defined as contradictory, often interrelated, attributes of social systems that are structurally embedded. Organisations commonly respond to their challenges in a defensive (avoidance-based) rather than proactive manner (Aust et al., 2015; Lewis & Smith, 2014). Engaging with paradox theory enables us to accept these contradictory yet interrelated elements in many everyday situations. Elements may seem logical in isolation, but they emerge as absurd when they co-exist (Lewis & Smith, 2014). Paradoxes can be seen to be widespread and inevitable when we consider tourism and hospitality work. Responses, therefore, need to be based on acceptance rather than the futile search for answers that do not exist. Tourism employment research that aspires to identify 'managed' solutions (as many studies appear to do) with a search for clear answers to intractable problems points to an inability or unwillingness to handle paradox. Living with paradox enables us to accept its inevitability in organisational life, in the same way as researchers have sought to incorporate 'green' environmentally sustainable principles into organisations (Guerci & Carollo, 2016).

In this chapter, an international network of researchers, whose work focusses on the lived experience of tourism and hospitality workers, presents an informed discussion of the inherent paradoxes that underpin a sample of these wicked issues which we have styled the six Cs, all of which have long pervaded debate about employment in this industry and where the application of one or more of Head's strategic or operational responses has failed to 'solve' the problem. The wicked issues addressed in this chapter were identified through collective discussions and reflections among the members of an international research network who represent varying national contexts and academic approaches to studying tourism and hospitality employment. They, in a sense, represent proxies for the myriad of issues that beset this space in both conceptual and practical senses. There are clear intersections between these categories (Aust et al., 2015; Smith & Lewis, 2011)

and there is a myriad of other paradoxes that we could have selected, but the six Cs serve to illustrate our arguments. Each of the wicked issues is elaborated on below, drawing on academic and industry evidence in order to illustrate their wicked nature.

2. ADDRESSING PARADOXES IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY EMPLOYMENT

2.1. Commodification of Labour

Paradox: Necessity/shortage of labour and treating labour as a dispensable commodity.

Building on Kant's moral case for the non-commodification of humans in which people are being treated as ends in themselves rather than objects (Kant, 2002 [1785]), Marx argued that in neoliberal market systems workers are turned into replaceable commodities, affecting their life experiences and leading to alienation and dehumanisation (Marx, 1971 [1844]). Since then, however, McNally (2006) notes that, '[s]o imbued is a modern society with the commodification of labour, so normalised even 'naturalized' has it become, that few bother to question it' (p. 43). This section will indeed 'bother' to discuss the wicked issue and paradox of commodified work, vis-à-vis the currently severe tourism and hospitality worker shortage globally.

Hospitality and tourism employment hold many of the features that are characteristic of wider moves in globalisation where human services are increasingly commodified (Cole, 2018). Negative examples that are often integral to a neo-liberal labour structure in hospitality work, and therefore relate to commodified labour, including overwork and underpayment (Piso, 2022), agency work (Knox, 2014), emotional (Hochschild, 1983) and sexualised labour (Smith et al., 2021; Wijesinghe, 2009), human trafficking and slavery (Wen et al., 2020), as well as a broader concern for decent, and sustainable work (Mooney et al., 2022; Winchenbach et al., 2019). Further, as service provision is integral to hospitality work and often includes human interaction, additional pressure rests on employees to meet customer expectations, often leading to self-commodification (Ryzik & Kissoon, 2022). However, most of the rewards derived from such services go towards business owners, with Robinson (2013) arguing that the labour requirements of commercial tourism transactions are structurally connected to human exploitation. For example, Unions and MPs accused British Airways of taking calculated advantage of the pandemic by taking a 'fire and rehire' approach, intending to lay off most of their 42,000 employees while planning to rehire some of them under downgraded terms and conditions (BBC, 2020). Such practice highlights the fragile and fragmented workforce and unequal power dynamics in favour of the employer that is notorious in the industry (Baum et al., 2020). As a consequence, employees are feeling devalued, disrespected, and not recognised for their contribution and experience identity issues at work (Faulkner & Patiar,

1997; Kensbock et al., 2016), ultimately affecting their physical and mental health and well-being, leading to withdrawal, increased absenteeism, and ultimately resignation (Winchenbach et al., 2019).

Baum et al. (2020) highlight the extent to which COVID-19 only amplified pre-existing vulnerabilities for hospitality workers. However, labour power dynamics have somewhat shifted post-COVID-19, with the current global staff shortages across tourism and hospitality predicted to last for the coming years, resulting in £21 billion in lost revenue in the UK alone (Banham, 2022). While not the primary cause, COVID-19 acted as a catalyst for the 'Great Resignation' (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023), where employees are reluctant to return to an industry that treated them as easily replaceable commodities and new recruits are difficult to find. As such, the industry's labour shortage crisis is to some extent self-inflicted (Sperance, 2022). It becomes clear that the paradox between the commodification of labour and staff shortages cannot be solved through traditional 'management' approaches or by increased monetary payments alone but requires a real reconsideration of how tourism and hospitality workers are being valued. For example, despite increased salaries of up to 30%, attracting chefs to a workplace that involves working long and unsociable hours and has often been described as hostile, remains a challenge (Wallace, 2022). Indeed, several authors (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Winchenbach et al., 2019) have argued that the current neoliberal system is not fit for purpose, and that practice and policy need to shift towards fairer work relationships where people receive ample exchange value for their contribution and are not made to feel easily dispensable. Unless significant changes are implemented through concerted efforts from policymakers, international agencies, trade unions, and employers, the commodification and staffing crisis are likely to continue. There are several solutions in relation to this paradox that derive from this.

First, government and workplace policies and actions should be guided by humanistic management approaches (Pirson, 2017) and clear indicators need to be developed in order to tackle the exploitation of labour in the tourism and hospitality industry. A useful starting point is offered by Winchenbach et al. (2019), who identified dignity-promoting features at organisational and policy level, including respect, equal opportunities, safe and healthy workplaces, flexible work arrangements, fair remuneration, and having employees' voices considered in decision-making, to ensure people are feeling heard and valued. Trade unions can play an important role in mediating and supporting employees as well as employers in the implementation of such changes. At the macro level, a shift towards a moral economy is needed for tackling the root cause of labour commodification within the paradigm. Alternative economic systems such as Doughnut Economics (Raworth, 2017) and the Economy for the Common Good (Felber, 2019) offer solutions, the latter explicitly including human dignity, solidarity and social justice, and transparency and co-determination as guiding values. Such new economic paradigms offer real opportunities towards a fairer economy, society, and workplaces, to create 'economies that enable us to thrive, whether or not they are growing' (Raworth, 2017, p. 287).

In conclusion, to solve the paradox of commodified work and the current labour shortage requires a major shift towards a moral economy in which employers and policymakers, supported by unions and wider society, create the conditions for people to feel valued as humans, rather than being treated as replaceable commodities. This in turn might lead to renewed trust in the industry with people considering tourism and hospitality work as a career of choice.

2.2. Consumer Demands

Paradox: *Customers expectations with respect to both the price and availability of service and aspirations of better pay and conditions.*

‘The customer is king’ or ‘the customer is always right’ often feature in the representation of service offered by organisations in tourism and hospitality (Choi et al., 2014). At the same time, these same organisations frequently claim that their staff are their greatest asset. While not necessarily paradoxical in all circumstances, in practice the first of these propositions can fuel customer misbehaviour and abuse of the power that is inherent while demeaning the role and status of the employee (Booyens et al., 2022). Evidence suggests that managers frequently fail to protect and support their staff in such situations (Gupta et al., 2020; Hadjisolomou, 2019; Madera et al., 2018) and certainly behave in ways that place the second of our propositions in a subservient position to that of the first.

In other words, staff are important but only as long as the wishes of the customer are not compromised. Challenging the consequences of this paradox requires businesses and their management to stand up to customer misbehaviour, to recognise that ‘he who pays the piper’ cannot always be permitted to ‘call the tune’ (Özekici & Ünlüönen, 2021). Few businesses in tourism and hospitality are willing and able to do this on a consistent basis in the interests of their workforce.

Secondly, customers also bring heightened expectations of low-cost and ever-cheaper services to their engagement with tourism and hospitality, both at the point of purchase and during their stay or journey (Bigne et al., 2018; Provenzano & Baggio, 2020). For key segments of the tourism and hospitality market, price is a key determinant in consumer decision-making and booking, often mediated by technology (Kim et al., 2022). Paradoxically, however, demands relating to price do not necessarily moderate expectations of products and services and that, in turn, can place considerable pressure on businesses to deliver according to brand reputation (Kim et al., 2022; Yacouel & Fleischer, 2012). This leaves labour costs as the main area where businesses seek to reduce costs in order to accommodate the low-cost demands of their customers. In other words, customers are a major driver of the low wages, challenging working conditions and precariousness of much work in tourism and hospitality.

2.3. Culture – Industry Pervasiveness and Acceptance of Ill-treatment

Paradox: *An industry that thrives on selling hospitality to its customers while offering very inhospitable employment conditions to its workforce.*

Gordon Ramsay, the famous chef and TV persona, known for his offensive attitude, once said: 'Swearing is industry language. For as long as we're alive, it's not going to change'. Sadly, such statements and positions are found rooted in the hospitality workplace culture, a culture of abuse, fear, and mistreatment. Being 'hospitable', and focussed on the customer experience, is fundamental to the business model of the hospitality sector (Booyens et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). This contributes to the aforementioned service culture within which the 'customer is king' to ensure customer satisfaction and return business. However, it also leads to an unequal and imbalanced relationship between service providers and customers, promoting perceived customer superiority (Booyens et al., 2022; Özekici & Ünlüönen, 2021; Wang et al., 2022; Yagil, 2017; Zampoukos, 2021). This perception implies that customers may abuse and even sexually harass workers without evident penalties, while employees are expected to tolerate misbehaviour and remain silent (Kim et al., 2014; Ram et al., 2016) or even accept it 'as part of the job' (Poulston, 2008).

Page et al. (2018) note that abuse is often portrayed as a necessary part of the job with hospitality workers being exposed to violent environments (Jung & Yoon, 2020), mistreatment (Boukis et al., 2020), verbal and physical abuse (Booyens et al., 2022), bullying (Bloisi, 2021), and sexual harassment (Hadjisolomou et al., 2022; Morgan & Pritchard, 2019). Indeed, recent research confirms widespread abuse and sexual harassment by customers (Booyens et al., 2022) revealing a general view that abuse by customers (verbal, physical, and/or sexual) is acceptable and attached to the hospitality workplace culture. The findings show that abusive behaviours from customers are frequent with over 80% of respondents reporting that they experienced verbal abuse, and 64% reported sexual harassment. Furthermore, half of the participants had witnessed physical abuse towards other employees and 77% reported having witnessed sexual harassment towards their colleagues. Alarming, the same study highlights that customer misbehaviour worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, raising important questions on how workers continue to experience mistreatment in the sector and the role of management, and policymakers in protecting workers.

This situation represents a wider uncomfortable reality in the service economy which we need to confront as a society. Academics and trade unions have challenged this truth and have flagged the necessity to introduce measures to address this. This has led to calls for legislation to classify assaulting, threatening, abusing, and/or obstructing a worker as a specific criminal offence. For example, the union representing retail employees in the UK, USDAW, has recently urged the government to protect retail workers, especially during the pandemic, where front-line workers face health-threatening conditions and abuse. These calls however focus only on retail and neglect extensive customer misbehaviour in the wider service economy and particularly in hospitality, which employs over three million workers in the UK (ONS, 2024). Evidence shows that the inclusion of hospitality workers in regulations and/or legislation is necessary, especially in the post-COVID-19 period where employees, similar to other periods of socio-economic instability and increasing cost of living, might tolerate or accept abusive behaviour from customers (Baum et al., 2020; Booyens et al., 2022; Ram, 2018; Sönmez et al., 2020).

Additionally, organisations need to develop policies and procedures for abuse and harassment, and these should include customer abuse. What constitutes abuse, harassment, and sexual harassment need to be clearly defined so that individuals are clear as to what actions are to be taken when exposed to unwanted behaviour and/or the consequences of engaging in such behaviour (Bloisi, 2021). Scholars highlight the crucial role of proactive and supportive management to tackle abuse and sexual harassment, suggesting the need for training managers on steps and tools to keep the workplace free from abuse and harassment and training for employees on how to protect themselves. Finally, as Bloisi (2021) notes training should also focus on changing the social norms of the organisation and managers taking responsibility and showing leadership initiatives in changing organisational norms and developing cultures within which abuse and misbehaviours become unacceptable.

Overall, evidence shows that hospitality workers remain exposed to a culture of tolerance and acceptance of workplace violence (i.e. abuse and harassment), an issue that is imprinted on the sector's culture. Employers and management, however, remain socially responsible for workers' health and safety, as well as taking on a duty of care for their staff (Booyens et al., 2022). Only when this responsibility is taken seriously, and enforced by policymakers, will workplaces become free from violence and abuse.

2.4. Constraints Placed on Industry, For Example, Seasonality

Paradox: Treating workers as a valued commodity and having to let most of the workforce go when the season ends.

The issue of seasonality is well documented in the tourism literature (Baum & Hagen, 1999), and there exist various definitions of seasonality (Baum, 1999; Butler, 2001; Koenig & Bischoff, 2003). According to Butler (1994), seasonality is 'a temporal imbalance in the phenomenon of tourism, [which] may be expressed in terms of dimensions of such elements as numbers of visitors, expenditure of visitors, traffic on highways and other forms of transportation, employment, and admissions to attractions' (p. 332).

Seasonal changes have important impacts on the labour market. Seasonality has a widespread economic and social impact on the sustainability of tourism employment and careers (Baum, 2019; Cassel et al., 2018). The impact of seasonality can be seen to operate with special severity in peripheral locations (Baum, 2012). Some peripheral destinations depend heavily on specific labour markets and their situation restricts flexible access to these sources outside of defined time parameters. Location acts as a barrier to the importation of alternative sources of labour outside the main tourism season (Baum & Hagen, 1999).

Nevertheless, seasonality is still, paradoxically, one of the least understood aspects of the tourism research field (Jang, 2004). Despite the high number of published studies, responses to seasonality management in tourism remain 'a somewhat limited area within tourism and hospitality research' (Connell et al., 2015, p. 284).