

**Eliciting and analysing the basic assumptions of hospitality employees
about guests, co-workers and competitors**

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore the content and structure of hospitality employees' assumptions about guests, co-workers, and competitors. A qualitative study was conducted whereby twenty hospitality employees were interviewed using repertory grid and laddering. Through content analysis we identified seven assumption dimensions (predictability, control, affect, responsibility, communication, competence, and ethics). The analysis further suggested that different dimensions are emphasised in relation to the hospitality product (e.g. predictability and control), the hospitality organisation (e.g. responsibility and competence), and the hospitality market (e.g. ethics). The findings are discussed in terms of their implications for future research and managerial practice.

Keywords

Basic assumptions; Organisational culture; Shared cognition; Human resource management; Repertory grid; Laddering.

1. Introduction

Recent research has generated increasing awareness of the role employee basic assumptions play as the source of destructive (e.g. Bloisi and Hoel, 2008) or constructive (e.g. Davies, 2008) employee behaviour in the hospitality industry. Basic assumptions are described in the literature as internal knowledge structures: tacit beliefs that exist in the long-term memory and guide information processing and behaviour in various domains (Lord and Maher, 1993; Schein, 2004). Every organisational intervention or management practice—be it a form of incentive compensation, performance management system, or a set of organisational practices—necessarily relies on some implicit model of human behaviour containing a set of basic assumptions. This is why recent advancements in human resource literature offers a strong argument that being able to diagnose employees' basic assumptions about the business is of critical importance for organisational performance and success (Roehling et al., 2005).

Hospitality employees develop basic assumptions about important aspects of their work environment, i.e. guests, co-workers, or competitors, and these assumptions influence employee behaviour at work. For instance, Wood (1997) reported that some employees (e.g. chambermaids) are often spurned by their co-workers, are treated as a cheap and easily replaceable resource by employers, and rank among the lowest of the low in hospitality work. Such a view of co-workers in a hospitality enterprise may result in a deteriorating service, poorer quality of the hospitality and, eventually, lower performance. A recent study from the restaurant sector has suggested that basic assumptions about the nature of work in hospitality venues are related to the occurrence of bullying behaviour (Mathisen et al., 2008). Powell and Watson (2006) observed that some assumptions about hospitality employees and hospitality work indicate "a social stigma" while, in fact, that particular work is essential for the comfort and safety of the guests. Several researchers suggest that there are strong assumptions about a traditional autocratic leadership style within the hospitality industry (Pittaway et al., 1998;

Tracey and Hinkin, 1996), and that if those managers' assumptions about customers and proper customer service are enacted by front-line employees they may in fact put hotel and restaurant staff in danger of being harassed by their guests (Guerrier and Adib, 2000).

Despite the growing recognition that employee assumptions influence the hospitality business' success, the structure and content of the basic assumptions about guests, co-workers, and competitors are under-researched in hospitality management. The tendency in hospitality research has been to focus on the *objectified* knowledge in the enterprise (e.g. systems of rules and routines, or operating procedures), leaving the knowledge about *implicit* structures of employees (e.g. basic assumptions about the working environment) neglected or overlooked by managers (Ingram, 1999). This may partly be explained by the tendency of the hospitality industry to attract employees with highly specific competences, and that management also often have specific competences. On the other hand, a considerable body of work has focused on the objectified aspects of the cultural structure in hospitality organisations, such as the design and organisation of work roles (Guerrier and Deery, 1998), and organisational practices and their patterns (Øgaard et al., 2008). According to Pittaway et al. (1998), the lack of research on the implicit structures of subjective employee knowledge makes it difficult to advance hospitality management beyond the level of operational (transactional) leadership to the level of transformational leadership.

Our present knowledge of employee basic assumptions in hospitality is very limited. The aim of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of employee basic assumptions about guests, co-workers, and competitors in hospitality enterprises. The study is the first to simultaneously investigate employee basic assumptions within the three components of hospitality: (a) co-workers (organisational component); (b) guests (hospitality product component); and (c) competitors (hospitality market component). Specifically, the purpose of

this paper is to explore the empirical content and structure of employee assumptions about guests, co-workers, and competitors in hospitality.

2. Theoretical foundation

Basic assumptions are general beliefs about reality, an individual's or a group's answer to the question of "what explains why things are as they are" (Holland et al., 1993, p. 145). A person's assumptions define what can be known in the environment, and how it can be known; it defines what can be accomplished, and how. In addition to defining what goals *can* be sought in life, basic assumptions define what goals *should* be pursued. Basic assumptions are also the source of values (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Values provide justification for behaviour, while assumptions actually drive behaviour (Lord and Maher, 1993). Values are what people can articulate and will admit to, while basic assumptions are what people actually believe and what determine their patterns of behaviour. Thus, basic assumptions define what types of behaviour and relationships are proper or improper (Koltko-Rivera, 2000). In the organisational context, employees' basic assumptions constitute a company's "theory of the business": they shape employee behaviour, dictate decisions about what to do and what not to do, and define what the management considers as meaningful results (Drucker, 2006).

Basic assumptions can also be seen as social representations, forms of common sense knowledge that refers to what people think they know of social objects or situations (Stewart and Lacassagne, 2005). Social representations comprise organized information with a hierarchical structure that a social group creates with respect to a social objects or situations (Moscovici, 2000). They are constructed in daily life by individuals by communication and behaviour (Penz, 2006). Social representations are context and culture dependent. Due to these kinds of interdependencies social representations are considered dynamic social phenomena, they are shared by people who provide them with specific contents which corresponds to their knowledge, beliefs, images and language (Markova, 2008).

Existing conceptualisations of basic assumptions can be analysed as two broad, although overlapping, categories: assumptions about life in general and more specific assumptions about work life. Assumptions about life in general are studied in general social sciences like applied psychology (e.g. Berzonsky, 1994), or anthropology (e.g. Lawler et al., 2008). In this literature, the dimensions of basic assumptions are identified in relation to human nature, will, behaviour, interpersonal relations, and the world in general. For example, Koltko-Rivera (2000) conceptualised a person's assumptions as a six-dimensional construct, where *Mutability* refers to the possibility of changing human nature; *Agency* is the degree to which behaviour is chosen or determined; *Relation to authority* identifies hierarchical versus egalitarian partnerships; *Relation to group* assesses priority given to individual goals versus reference group goals; *Locus of responsibility* is described as the perceived responsibility for the person's situation in life; and *Metaphysics* refers to the reality or unreality of a spiritual dimension in life.

Work-related assumptions are the product of socialisation in an organisational or a professional culture, and are therefore studied within the framework of human resources management (Deadrick and Gibson, 2009). The content of work-related assumptions has usually been studied within the qualitative framework (Cassell et al., 2000; Yauch and Steudel, 2002). For instance, Håkansson and Snehota (2006, pp. 259-260) described three basic assumptions about the nature of strategic management in business organisations. First assumption: "The environment of an organisation is beyond the influence or control of the organisation". Whatever happens to the firm stems from forces outside the firm itself. Although "networking" with competitors, for example, may provide a way of exerting influence over some part of the environment, the basic assumption is still that the environment cannot be controlled. Consequently, opportunities that exist in the environment are to be identified and exploited, but they cannot be created or enacted. This assumption has been

challenged by research on the collective dependence of organisations (e.g. Hannan and Freeman 1977 in Håkansson and Snehota, 2006). Second assumption: "The strategy of a business organisation results from the deployment of resources controlled hierarchically by the organisation". Controlled resources are allocated in certain combinations, providing services to be exchanged with the environment. In the supposedly competitive and "non-controllable" environment, the effectiveness or exchange potential of an organisation will depend on its efficiency in combining its internal resources. This assumption has been challenged by the theory on the resource dependence of organisations (e.g. Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978 in Håkansson and Snehota, 2006). Third assumption: "Environmental conditions change continuously, so that frequent adaptation is required of the business". It is assumed that managers can and do interpret environmental conditions, after which they formulate and implement a future strategy. They decide and craft the pattern of activities to be executed by the organisation. This assumption has been challenged by research on the ex-post rationality of organisations (e.g. Weick, 1979), and the nature of the leadership and strategy formulation process (e.g. Yukl, 2006).

In human resource management literature, several authors have applied assumptions about life in general to the organisational context (e.g. Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2002). For instance, Schein (1992) adapted a framework of the following six basic assumptions for organisational purposes: *Nature of human nature* (assumptions which define what it means to be human and what human attributes are considered intrinsic and ultimate); *Nature of human activity* (assumptions about the appropriate level of activity or passivity); *Nature of human relationship* (assumptions about what is the right way for people to relate to each other, to distribute power); *Nature of time and space* (assumptions about the appropriate focus of one's activities – future, present or past, how space should be allocated and owned); and *Nature of reality and truth* (assumptions that define what is real and what is not, how truth is ultimately

to be determined, and whether truth is revealed or discovered). According to Schein, it is around these “deeper dimensions” that shared basic assumptions originate in any organisation. For example, organisational missions, primary tasks, and goals reflect the basic assumptions about the nature of human activity and the relationship between the organisation and its environment. Similarly, the measurement of control systems, along with assumptions about how to take corrective action, will reflect assumptions about the nature of the truth and the appropriate psychological contract for employees. Several researchers have called for better integration of existing conceptualisation of basic assumptions into industry-specific contexts (Kekäle and Kekäle, 1995; Nahm et al., 2004; Wendorff, 2002; Yauch and Steudel, 2002). In hospitality management, such integration necessarily implies using the “parameters of hospitality” (Brotherton, 1999), i.e. the hospitality product and the hospitality employees’ interaction with guests and the market. The domains of hospitality management consist of two sides of the hospitality exchange: not only a product offering, a provision of food, beverage, and lodging, but also a human interaction. According to Brotherton (1999), in contemporary hospitality management, concern should be shifted away from an emphasis on the product elements of hospitality towards one more focused on the nature and implications of the hospitality interaction; towards cultural studies of hospitality. In this paper, we are primarily concerned with approaching the construct of basic assumptions from the perspective of hospitality interaction between guests, co-workers, and competitors – people who are involved in the hospitality product delivery and the market.

2.1. Basic assumptions about guests

Assumptions about guests can give researchers and practitioners additional insight into how employees conceptualise host-guest interaction and the process of hospitality product delivery (i.e., external relationships). According to Schein (1992), some basic assumptions are learned responses to problems of survival in the external environment while others are responses to

problems of internal integration. The primary external problems are e.g. the core mission of the enterprise or reason for the organization's existence, the objectives based on this mission, strategies for attaining these objectives, and ways to measure success in attaining these objectives (Yukl, 2006). Recent publications in the hospitality industry journals and daily newsletters show that hospitality practitioners are most concerned with making their guests feel at home in the hospitality environment (e.g. Nedry, 2009). Insight into the basic assumptions about guests can reveal some additional aspects of the hospitality product component to both practitioners and researchers, for instance whether guests are considered to have some intrinsic or innate qualities that make the hospitality interaction and product delivery special or different from interactions in other service contexts.

Another aspect of hospitality work which is relevant to the assessment of basic assumptions about guests is emotional labour. Research in this area has generated a good understanding of the numerous aspects of emotional labour (Johanson and Woods, 2008), and several studies in hospitality have identified links between emotional labour and the quality of guest service (e.g. Guerrier and Adib, 2003). The evidence indicates that a complex combination of strategies is used to manage emotional labour throughout the industry. Most of these strategies are based on introducing employees to the "required emotional rules of the job" through the informal socialization or targeted training (Johanson and Woods, 2008; Seymour, 2000). There is however a lack of research into the source of these "emotional rules of the job", i.e. the basic assumptions about guests and host-guest interactions.

2.2. Basic assumptions about co-workers

Basic assumptions about co-workers deal with the problems of internal integration in the hospitality venue. Internal problems include among other things the criteria for determining membership of the organization, the basis for determining status and power, the criteria and procedures for allocating rewards and punishments, and the ideology used to explain

unpredictable and uncontrollable events (Yukl, 2006). Gaining insight into employee assumptions about other co-workers is important in order to understand how employees conceptualise organisational interactions and the managerial practices associated with the hospitality product delivery (i.e., internal relationships). In a recent study, Martin (2004) described four types of hospitality employees' orientation to work. The instrumentally oriented employees viewed work as a means to an end and they work to support a specific lifestyle outside of the workplace. The craft orientated employees view work as an end in itself; they attached importance to preserving craft skills and maintaining prestige and reputation. The solidarity orientated employees' lives and work are so tightly bound that their out of work existence was based on work relationships. The professionally orientated employees viewed work as a mechanism for self-development and part of a career path, and each job is revised in line with progressive economic and status advancement. This study demonstrates that different types of work orientation among hospitality employees can be found within the same establishment or context. Exploring the content of the basic assumptions about co-workers would expand our understanding of the service organization and service management in general, but especially in the hospitality industry. A lot of hospitality products require joint effort of many employees in order to be delivered properly. Basic assumptions about co-workers serve as basis for role expectations, role divisions and cooperation during complex product deliveries. Previous research has shown that some employees perceive the hospitality industry as obstructive to one's career and personal and professional growth, i.e., the "glass ceiling" effect (Knutson and Schmidgall, 1999). The perceived dimensions of the "glass ceiling" may be rooted in assumptions about what the industry can and cannot provide for its employees, whether the sub-industries of the hospitality sector are lagging behind in retaining, training and developing their own employees' careers and what it takes to turn things around. To date, we know little about the

content or patterning of basic assumptions about co-workers, and the lack of evidence from the industry highlights the need for further research.

2.3. Basic assumptions about competitors

In a theoretical discussion about tourism, Davies (2003) points out that tourism is an industrial activity with particularly strong inter-firm relationships. Hospitality products are often the result of interaction with third-party suppliers or contracts with other establishments within the industry. This specific feature of the hospitality context may have an impact on how hospitality employees view their competitors within the industry. Basic assumptions about competitors might provide new knowledge about how hospitality employees perceive their own business environment, the hospitality market and its potential, competition, and collaboration in the hospitality context. Research has shown that both customer-related and competitor-related knowledge is important for the enterprise in order to successfully manage hospitality operations. However, Dev et al. (2009) found that sometimes customer orientation (acquisition, satisfaction, and retention of customers) alone has a higher payoff than investing resources in competitor orientation (monitoring, managing, and outflanking competitors) in hospitality. Exploring the content of basic assumptions about guests and competitors would allow researchers and practitioners to look for patterns of customer- and competitor-related knowledge that influence the successful implementation of customer or competitor orientation.

2.4. On relations between basic assumptions about guests, co-workers and competitors

Taken together, the three areas of basic assumptions represent the three components of hospitality (cf. Brotherton, 1999). Basic assumptions about guests represent the hospitality product component, i.e. host-guest interaction and hospitality product delivery. Basic assumptions about co-workers provide insight into the organizational component, i.e.

operational, professional and organizational matters in hospitality enterprises. Basic assumptions about competitors give additional knowledge about the hospitality market component, i.e. interactions with other suppliers of hospitality services, or market orientation. These three chosen areas of basic assumptions are related to all parts of service production and delivery, the value generated by the hospitality establishment through the process of transforming input to output. The nature of hospitality input tends to be eclectic in nature and provides a greater diversity of sources than in other industries, with interaction being a vital part of the input. The experiences of pre-consumption as well as post-consumption become part of both the input and output, and inevitably involve interactions between hosts, guests, and other hospitality suppliers. As Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) explained, an organization can and should benefit from knowledge possessed by individual employees in order to become a learning organization. This requires externalization of tacit knowledge, both the knowledge of internal procedures and routines, but also cultural knowledge, i.e. basic assumptions.

Consequently, a more thorough understanding of the basic assumptions in hospitality enables further understanding of the industry and providing frames of reference that have considerable potential for improving operational effectiveness and efficiency. Below we attempt to explore the underlying structure and content of the basic assumptions about guests, co-workers and competitors in the hospitality industry.

3. Methodology

For this early exploratory study of the structure and content of basic assumptions in the hospitality industry we chose to apply the repertory grid (Kelly, 1955) and laddering (Rugg et al., 2002) techniques. Our choice was determined by two factors. First, the repertory grid is well suited to eliciting knowledge about constructs, while laddering contributes largely to revealing how constructs are systematically integrated by each individual. In addition, the

repertory grid and laddering allow researchers to adjust to the context by applying words or images that are inherent in hospitality, and to access and systematise constructs evoked by such stimuli. It also allows and encourages participants to propose their own terms and constructs. The repertory grid method implies that subjects elicit constructs concerning elements in their environment (Kelly, 1955), and the laddering technique is used in conjunction in order to expand on the constructs in the grid. Laddering is a way of exploring a person's understanding in more depth and relates to the notion of constructs having a hierarchical relationship. In the literature, laddering techniques are often distinguished on the basis of the administration method, such as using questionnaires (so-called "hard-laddering") or interviews ("so-called "soft" laddering) (Russell et al., 2004). Soft laddering utilises individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to elicit knowledge.

3.1. Setting and sample

We wanted to gain as broad understanding as possible into the basic assumptions in the hospitality context. We assumed that individual employee's assumptions are related to the general assumptions in hospitality. However, there is a risk that the individual description could be limited to some idiosyncratic views taken by a single employee type (e.g. receptionists) and thus may be of lesser relevance to the exploration of individual-culture relationships in the broader context. To reduce the risk of this reverse ecological fallacy, we varied the general context of the research procedure and selected individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds, in line with Triandis et al. (1984). We expected such variety of informants to yield a rich, if not comprehensive, description of the hospitality context, which, eventually, would lead to models that were characteristic of hospitality basic assumptions.

To secure this degree of variance in the sample, we included (a) employees of various sub-branches of the hospitality sector (accommodation, dining, tourist information services, guides and travel counsellors); and (b) employees with a varying degree of guest contact,

managerial responsibilities and industry experience. The final sample consisted of seven managers and thirteen non-managers; six back line employees and fourteen front line employees; ten hotel employees of different occupations; and ten employees from travel agencies and tourist information services. Although we did not ask our informants about their age directly, we did ensure that people of different ages were represented in the sample. The data collection was carried out in a region of Western Norway with approximately 200,000 inhabitants, which annually receives approximately 150,000 tourists (Region Stavanger, 2008). The sample comprised eleven hospitality enterprises and involved twenty hospitality employees. All interviews were conducted in Norwegian. Individual interviews lasted from forty five minutes up to one hour, while focus grouped interviews took approximately an hour and a half.

The individual profiles of the informants are presented in Table 1, where each of them is given a fictitious name to preserve the offered anonymity guarantee. More female employees than male employees were interviewed for this study, which is a reasonable approximation of the gender mix in the hospitality industry (Knutson and Schmidgall, 1999). There was a fair variance in the industry experience as reported in the number of years people had been employed in hospitality companies. Most informants had either vocational training (e.g. chefs, receptionists) or higher education in hospitality or tourism management (e.g. tourist hosts, sales executives).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

The data collection process was rounded off when the interviews did not provide additional information. The data constituted the foundation of the emerging theory and provided a background for future refinements of the ideas.

3.2. Data collection

The data collection comprised three different steps. First, we asked a set of informants to freely discuss the three components of hospitality management (i.e. guests, co-workers, competitors). Three persons were included in this step and the following list of verbal trait labels was generated: (1) satisfied, (2) demanding, (3) attractive, (4) difficult, (5) tiresome, (6) one everybody in our firm likes, (7) one everybody in our firm dislikes, (8) easy, (9) profitable. Then we used these descriptions as elements in the individual repertory grid interviews. We produced paper cards (elements) combining each of the three components (guest, co-worker, or competitor) with each of the nine verbal trait labels (e.g. difficult competitor, demanding guest, or a co-worker everybody in our firm likes). This resulted in three sets of cards; nine cards each for guests, co-workers, and competitors. The three topics were treated separately during the interviews. Finally, we conducted two repertory grid-based focus group interviews to check for constructs that are common not only to one individual, but also to other members of the organisation. For the focus group interviews, we recruited a mix of managers and regular employees, as well as of front line and back line employees. To secure a maximum of variance between the groups, each had a different majority of employee type. For this study, use of the same verbal trait labels for all three topics was decided for two reasons. First, it allowed us to investigate whether a set of verbal traits accessed the different aspects of basic assumptions across informants. Second, it provided us with a common platform for comparing and analysing the responses.

The interviews were carried out as follows: the informants were asked to randomly select three cards and explain how two are similar and yet different from the third. Initially this provided one (i.e. based on similarity) or two (i.e. based on both similarity and difference) constructs. Laddering was then used to elicit other constructs that were the antecedents and/or consequences of the initial constructs. According to Rugg et al. (2002), the use of laddering

involves the systematic generation of domain superordinates and subordinates by the informant through answers to specific questions. Laddering down (also called pyramiding) is where you explore the person's understanding of a particular construct. Laddering up is where you ask the person to elaborate why a particular construct is important. While "why" questions lead to superordinate connections, questions like "how" and "what" lead to subordinate connections. To expand the graph at a single level, the informant can be asked to generate alternative examples from those already generated. The result of this technique is taxonomy of domain concepts.

Although basic assumptions were the main phenomenon of interest, the use of laddering questions avoided mentioning the word "assumptions". Instead, informants were asked either to elaborate on the first construct by giving an example ("What do you mean by that?") or to explain how that particular construct was related to others ("Why is this important?"). In this way, any a priori theory about the content of assumptions was "bracketed" and the model that emerged was derived from the informants' voice and perception of reality. The process of laddering of the constructs continued until the constructs that emerged became redundant. In addition, we used non-verbal stimuli, i.e. photographs of hotels as triads to elicit constructs. The types of hotels used as elements included the full range of chain and independent local hotels familiar to the informants.

3.3. Data analysis

Upon completion of each grid interview, the data containing a list of elicited constructs were transferred onto a spreadsheet where table-supported data displays were created. All unique constructs, the type of label applied during the interview, construct and informant number were registered in a database. By the end of the data collection procedures, the database contained 384 unique constructs.

Grid-data analysis may be done in different ways. In this study, content analysis was used to identify content categories, and this process was performed using several steps. First, we searched for the most frequent constructs or multiple examples of similar constructs to link them into construct clusters. This was done using the database of all registered constructs, where information on construct cluster affiliation was added to the spreadsheet as an additional column. Further into the analysis, we searched for higher levels of abstraction and grouped construct clusters first into sub-categories, and then into major dimensions on the basis of content themes.

To ensure validity, all constructs were carefully checked for adequacy of interpretation with the informants. To improve the reliability of the emerging patterns, we also included a frequency count of elicited constructs in our data analysis. To establish validity, quotes of elicited constructs are presented below. Also, the main results of the analysis are summarised in Tables 1-3 and Figure 1 to ensure transparency of our analysis procedures.

3.4. Validity and reliability

According to Marsden and Littler (2000), the repertory grid technique, being an interpretive method, should be judged by its credibility, which is the ability of the researcher to understand and to refer to the informants' meaning. To make sure this criterion was met, the informants were always asked whether they agreed with the constructs and whether the constructs registered in the grid actually reflected their initial opinion. Yorke (1985) argued that one of the key determinants of the validity of the grid is the goodness of fit between the grid's context and its elements. The study meets this criterion by using industry-relevant content in both verbal and picture elements. Moreover, in order to strengthen the validity and reliability of the study, we introduced triangulation to (a) stimuli type (verbal and picture elements applied for construct elicitation), (b) type of interview setting (individual and focus group), and (c) type of data analysis conducted (content analysis and frequency count). The

data collection process revealed that informants verbalised constructs in a very similar manner (e.g. “to have or not to have control”, “predictable behaviour vs. unpredictable behaviour”). Thus, it is reasonable to believe that the established categories were not something highly idiosyncratic, but a reflection of the employee’s basic assumptions that are inherent to the hospitality industry. The results of the focus group grid interviews showed a great overlap with the constructs derived from individual interviews, thus ensuring the reliability of the data retrieved from the individual employees.

4. Findings

Seven major dimensions – predictability, affect, control, responsibility, competence, communication, and ethics – emerged as a result of content analysis of the elicited constructs. The dimensions are presented below. The empirical citations of the elicited constructs are presented in quotation marks.

4.1. Predictability

Informants described predictability very directly through a vast number of constructs (i.e. “predictable – unpredictable”, “foreseeable – unforeseeable”). These, along with the constructs describing uncertainty (e.g. “certain – uncertain”), security (“safe – unsafe”), and stability (“provides stability – undermines stability”) formed the “foreseeability” sub-category.

Interaction with guests was perceived as a powerful source of unpredictability. Thus, constructs describing guests in terms of random judgement (e.g. “outgoing – introvert”), visibility (e.g. “visible – anonymous”), or frequency of encounters (e.g. “a regular – a no-show”) were grouped into a sub-category named “profiling”.

Informants also attempted to differentiate between short-term and long-term relations with guests, co-workers, and competitors (e.g. “short-term – long-term relationship”) in order

to increase the predictability of their own working routines. In relation to guests, the estimation of relationship length was often combined with profitability forecasting (e.g. “will bring us income – will drain us of resources”). In relation to co-workers, constructs describing the level of anticipated workload and expected work pressure (e.g. “huge workload – minimal workload”) emerged into a sub-category named “forecasting”.

In general terms, different employees assumed different levels of predictability in hospitality interactions. For some employees, a high predictability of interaction was assumed to generate the most successful performance outcomes. For others, a high degree of predictability was seen as a hindrance to creating a unique experience for the people involved in the interaction.

4.2. Control

Issues of perceived control were expressed quite directly through constructs such as “to have control – not to have control”, “being in charge – not being in charge”, “gaining a grip – losing grip”, and constructs describing risk (e.g. “taking a risk – playing it safe”). Similarly, the issues of having or not having power to execute decisions (e.g. “powerful – powerless”) were explicitly connected to the issues of gaining or losing control by the majority of informants. Furthermore, informants saw control and power as a means of increasing feelings of security and predictability, because one can better protect oneself from the power incursions of others. Decreasing power was seen as a cause of anxiety and insecurity because others were viewed as having a greater ability to compel the employee to do something they didn’t want to do, in other words, losing control.

The assumed degree of control over the interaction varied greatly from informant to informant. For some employees, having as much control over the interaction as possible was seen as the best way to deliver reliable hospitality products. For others, letting guests take more control over the interaction was considered a more viable strategy.

4.3. Affect

A number of constructs were related to emotions. Informants described situations when feelings were considered appropriate (e.g. “feelings are allowed – no place for feelings”), or even prestigious (e.g. “feeling of prestige – feeling of being outdated”), along with constructs depicting the degree of emotional control (e.g. “emotions turned on – emotions turned off”) and empathy (e.g. “compassion – indifference”). The elicited constructs revealed that some, but far from all, employees assumed that emotional involvement was a natural and salient part of hospitality work. Further, some constructs exposed assumed differences between the cognitive and the affective aspects of the hospitality interaction (e.g. “related to business – related to emotions”, “work – feelings”). In addition, constructs such as “full control over feelings – no control over feelings”, “emotions on display – emotions hidden” revealed employee assumptions about expected emotional behaviour.

4.4. Responsibility

This dimension reflects various aspects of responsibility. Direct expressions of responsibility emerged through constructs such as “responsible – irresponsible”, “taking over responsibility – leaving responsibility to others”. Constructs describing accountability (e.g. “accountable – unaccountable”), initiative (e.g. “taking the initiative – avoiding taking the initiative”), demands (e.g. “unreasonable demands on others – low demands on others”), and blame (e.g. “taking the blame – blaming others”) constitute the accountability sub-category.

Matters of independence (e.g. “self-driven – dependent”), and trust (e.g. “reliable – unreliable”) were also mentioned in close relation to responsibility. Employees clearly revealed a range of different assumptions about the domains of responsibility. Some simply assumed that the nature of hospitality work implies taking responsibility for other people. Others claimed that independence, not accountability, is the key to a successful hospitality encounter.

4.5. Competence

Constructs describing competence were grouped into three sub-categories: knowledge, development, and information processing. Knowledge comprised constructs such as “superficial – exhaustive”, “tacit – explicit”, “unilateral – reciprocal”. Constructs concerning development included such themes as motivation (e.g. “driven by the pay-cheque – driven by the joy of it”), feedback (e.g. “feedback-averse – feedback-driven”), mentoring (e.g. “mentor – competitor”) and support (e.g. “supportive – reserved”). Information processing emerged through constructs such as “go by stereotypes – go by insight”, “comes automatically – comes with effort”. In general, employees revealed differences in their assumptions concerning competence in hospitality. Some assumed that in order to deliver better hospitality products, employees should have specific competences and their knowledge about the product and the industry has to be exhaustive. Others insisted that general competences and common knowledge are enough to run a successful hospitality business.

4.6. Communication

The communication dimension comprised such sub-categories as message (e.g. “clearly defined message – vague message”), accessibility (e.g. “dialogue – monologue”, “active – passive”, “accessible – inaccessible”), and communication strategy (e.g. “playing with content – playing with presentation methodology”). Some employees assumed that in order to perform well in the highly competitive market, the hospitality enterprise should be as accessible and open as possible in its communication to the customers, the market, and its own co-workers. Other employees rather assumed that active and open communication could give the competitors an upper hand in making marketing decisions and even harm the enterprise.

4.7. Ethics

The foundation for the ethical dimension rests upon construct poles describing both the *intentions* (e.g. “selfishness - altruism”) and the *moral consequences* (e.g. “gives us moral benefits - gives us moral costs”) of behaviour. In relation to co-workers, professional ethics were expressed through constructs such as “collegial – authoritarian”, “individual-collective”. Business ethics in the hospitality context were discussed using constructs “free riders – team players”, “network altruism – egocentrism”. Interestingly enough, some employees assumed that high ethical standards might represent an obstacle to gaining a solid market share. Others, on the contrary, assumed that high professional ethics are the only way to succeed in the hospitality business on a long-term basis.

5. Discussion and implications

Based on the findings, we will first present a collated model of the basic assumptions in hospitality. Then we will explain how the different assumptions are related to the different components of hospitality, i.e. hospitality product (guests), hospitality organisation (co-workers), and the market (competitors). Subsequently, we will integrate our findings into a broader theoretical perspective and point out the implications of the study.

5.1. *A collated model of basic assumptions: Basic assumptions, basic issues and basic options*

We used the empirical findings presented in the previous chapter to develop a model of the basic assumptions in hospitality, see Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The model depicts seven dimensions or domains of basic assumptions, each of which collects two or more basic issues which in turn includes two or more options, that is, positions that a person may take on the topic. Many of the basic issues noted are truly bi-polar in nature; that is, the options reflected in the poles are relatively mutually exclusive (i.e. the more a person's assumption reflects position on option X, the less it reflects position on option Y). For other basic issues, the options are not mutually exclusive. In that case, each option is thus a sub-issue, a monopolarity of the form "A" versus "not A" or "opposite of A".

For example, the predictability dimension reflects the employees' basic assumption about the need to predict their work environment. This dimension contains three basic issues: forecasting, foreseeability, and profiling. The forecasting issue reflects beliefs about whether or not reality and human relationships can be subjected to quantification and prediction. The options are "profitable – non-profitable", "short-term – long-term". The profiling issue describes other people in terms of recognisable traits and refers to a belief about whether or not other people can be easily categorised into types. The options here are "visible – invisible", "complex – simple", "frequent – infrequent", "back stage – front stage". The foreseeability issue reflects beliefs about the extent to which future behaviour can be foreseen, and includes options such as "certain – uncertain", "stable – unstable", "secure – insecure". Similarly, the basic assumptions about control, affect, responsibility, competence, communication and ethics are depicted in Figure 1 with their respective basic issues and basic options.

5.2. Who is most concerned about what?

Although each of the seven dimensions of the basic assumptions is valid for both guests, co-workers and competitors, they do not need to be equally vital for all areas. According to Rokeach (1972), not all beliefs may count equally to the individual; they usually vary along a

central-peripheral dimension. The same rule would probably apply for the employee assumptions as well. The more central the assumption, the more it will resist being challenged. As a result, the more central the assumptions challenged, the more widespread the repercussions on the rest of the assumptions' system. To explore more closely the relative proximity of basic assumptions in this study, we performed a frequency count of all the elicited constructs. The results are presented in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Our findings suggest that assumptions about predictability, control, and affect were more central in relation to guests; assumptions about responsibility and competence were more central in relation to co-workers; and assumptions about ethics were more central in relation to competitors. In the following sections, we elaborate more on the findings and how these apply to guests, co-workers and competitors in the hospitality.

5.2.1. Guest-related assumptions: Control, predictability, affect, communication

This means that for guests, the largest group of constructs was related to predictability. The second largest category appeared to be control. The topics about gaining or losing control over the interaction, or the level of the product delivery's predictability were often brought up by the informants as the focal theme of the hospitality product discussion. In our view, this is not coincidental. The hospitality context with its frequent guest encounters requires employees to be flexible. At the same time, flexibility can hardly be maintained by rules or routines. Clearly, drawing the line between flexibility and consistency is an issue that is addressed differently across hospitality enterprises. Assumptions about predictability and control provide guidelines for hospitality employees' behaviour when no other support in the form of rules is available.

Separating informants into groups according to whether or not they had managerial functions, whether they were employed in the travel or the hotel sector of hospitality, or whether they worked as frontline or back stage employees, gave some interesting results. Non-managers were much more concerned with the predictability of guest interaction than managers (37 constructs vs. 11 constructs). Managers, on the other hand, were more concerned with issues of guest control than regular employees (19 construct vs. 9). Informants employed in hotels showed more concern regarding issues of control in relation to both guests (17 constructs) and co-workers (10 constructs) than informants employed in the travel sector (11 constructs and 3 constructs, respectively). The same goes for predictability of the guest encounter (33 constructs vs. 15 constructs). Previous research found that hospitality operations are dependent on a certain degree of standardisation, formalisation and rules to achieve efficiency (Hwang and Lockwood, 2006). There has been a tendency to focus on the unpredictability of guest interaction or customer needs as an argument for employee empowerment and less strict rules (Ford and Heaton, 2001). Our study shows that assumptions about control and predictability in relation to guests might be an important influence of employee behaviour during the service encounter. The findings also indicate that managers are aware of the delicate balance that exists between staying in control during the guest-host encounter on the one hand, and empowerment on the other.

Assumptions about affect provide guidelines for feelings with the affect dimension mostly brought up in relation to guests. Previous research suggests that the amount of emotional labour of frontline employees in the hospitality industry is influenced by cultural difference (Morris, 2003). In this respect, assessing assumptions about how much (and what kind of) emotion employees should display during hospitality interaction might help hospitality managers to tackle the problem of emotional burnout. Frontline employees produced more constructs in the predictability and affect dimensions than back stage employees (35 construct

vs. 13 constructs and 10 constructs vs. 5 constructs, respectively). Back stage employees, on the other hand, were more explicitly concerned with issues of guest communication than frontline staff (14 constructs vs. 4 constructs). This is interesting, because back stage employees are traditionally seen as those who do not engage in direct interaction with customers. Back stage employees differentiated between guests who communicate with back stage personnel and guests who do not wish to see behind the scenes or be involved in any interaction with employees other than the frontline staff.

5.2.2. *Co-worker-related assumptions: Responsibility and competence*

When the informants were addressing their view of co-workers, they most often mentioned different aspects of responsibility and competence, i.e. the type of knowledge co-workers should acquire as hosts. Variance in these basic assumptions provides the framework for differing managerial practices. Conflicts can arise when assumptions about co-worker responsibility and co-worker competence are unrecognised and not taken into consideration. On the other hand, when employees become aware of their basic differences, they can begin to appreciate the assumptions of others, or do something to challenge them, resulting in positive organizational development. In relation to co-workers, both managers and non-managers were more or less equally concerned with competence and responsibility. For managers, however, competence was equally important than for non-managers (18 constructs vs. 12 constructs), while non-managers were more concerned with responsibility (17 constructs vs. 15 constructs). Both managers and non-managers also expressed some interest in the ethical issues (10 constructs vs. 5 constructs). Recent research (Hetland and Sandal, 2003) suggests that operational and transformational leadership might rest on different basic assumptions in organisational cultures. For instance, in a culture dominated by control, leader sensitivity might be interpreted as weak, whereas in a culture with a more nurturing, affective assumption, the same sensitivity may prove essential for effective transformational leadership.

In relation to co-workers, frontline employees were much more concerned with both responsibility (22 constructs vs. 10 constructs), and competence (24 constructs vs. 6 constructs) than back line employees. Previous studies indicate that support from co-workers is crucial in order to deliver reliable services to guests (Susskind et al., 2007), and that co-worker support impacts on service providers' guest interaction. Our results indicate that different assumptions about responsibility and competence might influence the amount of support and cooperation co-workers give each other during the service delivery, which inevitably will impact on the quality of the product provided to guests.

5.2.3. Competitor-related assumptions: Ethics

The hospitality market component, or competitor element, was most frequently described in terms of ethics. The "rules of the game", along with the question of what constitutes market ethics in hospitality were of major concern when addressing competitors. According to Minett et al. (2009), ethical issues in hospitality are often discussed in relation to the non-economic impact of organisations on the environment, i.e. social responsibility and corporate governance. Assumptions about ethics seem to reflect the balance between competition and cooperation, and what forms of relations are most appropriate in a highly competitive environment. Frontline personnel seemed to be more occupied by the issues of controlling competitors (19 constructs vs. 0 constructs) than back stage employees. Informants employed in the travel sector were more concerned with the issues of competence in relation to competitors than informants employed in hotels (11 constructs vs. 4 constructs).

With the limited sample size and the explorative nature of this study, these findings should not be discussed as general tendencies. The findings can however serve other important purposes, i.e. forming hypotheses for further research.

5.3. Managerial Implications

The mapping of basic assumptions offers a roadmap for hospitality managers who want to make informed decisions about the services they are providing and some of the management tasks they are facing. There are two areas where basic assumptions of hospitality employees are critical to a property's success. One is attitudinal (that is, what the employee thinks of the guests, co-workers, and competitors) and the other is operational (that is, making daily decisions regarding the hotel's functioning towards guests, co-workers and competitors). Although these two areas are highly intertwined, the distinction can be central to the application of our results in practice.

Proper assessment of basic assumptions will assist the hotel management in making employees aware of the attitudinal aspect of their service work. Owing to intangibility and frequent guest contact, it is nearly impossible to directly monitor or control the service delivery process through the use of supervisory personnel. In addition, much of the labour in service delivery is emotional rather than physical. Both these and other related factors make it very difficult to develop and effectively implement formal measurement systems for hospitality firm employees (Siehl, 1992). One appropriate means of control is through culture, by reinforcing and developing basic assumptions.

Assessment of basic assumptions can further help to improve operational matters, like improving cooperation between housekeepers and receptionists regarding accommodation of early arrivals (*predictability, responsibility, communication*), paying more attention to the needs of a returning guest (*control, affect*), creating opportunities for co-workers to work on new and challenging assignments (*competence, responsibility*), and handling competitors' queries (*ethics*).

Our data indicate that hospitality employees vary in their assumptions about guests, co-workers, and competitors. Hence, the ability to identify and help others discover their basic assumptions, and the capability to challenge those if necessary, are possibly among the most

critical capabilities a human resource manager can possess (Pfeffer, 2005). Assumptions are learned responses, and as such are subject to change over time. However, once established they are enduring and may be resilient to change (Hofstede, 2003). Sometimes collective assumptions can have a negative impact on the organization (Dixon, 1999). In a rapidly changing environment, collective meaning that was advantageous at one time may have become obsolete, and an organization may maintain collective meaning that is dysfunctional without realizing it. On this basis, precise knowledge of the basic assumptions of hospitality employees will help managers to facilitate organizational learning, which is considered dependent on the collective cognitive processes of individuals (Yeo, 2005). In order to challenge employees' basic assumptions, the hospitality managers need to make assumptions available for examination. In order to do this, they need proper assessment tools. Currently, there is a lack of an adequate framework to assess basic assumptions in hospitality firms. The results of our research should therefore be considered as one of the necessary steps towards creating a new measure of basic assumptions in hospitality.

From a marketing standpoint, basic assumptions reveal how employees of hospitality firms perceive competition in the industry, and by what standards they judge their own position in that competitive market and their own hospitality product. Thus, knowledge of hospitality employees' assumptions might be used to guide the designing of proper hospitality practices, and, if needed, corrective actions. This knowledge might also be used strategically when developing the enterprise's marketing strategy.

5.4. Limitations of the study and implications for theory building and theory testing

This study has attempted to expand the understanding of the content and structure of basic assumptions in hospitality. However, several major limitations of the study should be recognised. First, this study does not allow generalisations to be drawn outside the design

employed in this research. This is basically an emic study, which means that the framework generated is provided by the informants themselves. In addition, the empirical investigation of the assumptions is at the individual level. We have not provided any evidence for aggregation of assumptions from the individual to the departmental or organisational level. Although it seems reasonable to assume that the elicited dimensions are correlated to each other, it is impossible to conclude any multi-correlate or predictive relationship without additional research.

The sample and setting of the study may also limit the generality of the findings. Perhaps the most reasonable stance towards the issue of generalizing findings from a qualitative study would be the “naturalistic generalization” of Stake (1990). He suggests that generalizations across people, settings, and times are viable to the degree that people, settings and times are similar to the focal study. Although we cannot be certain about what type of basic assumptions are most influenced by the sample and setting of the study, we have, in line with Johnson (1997) carefully and accurately tried to report descriptive information about the participants, times and places to increase the intersubjective verifiability of the results.

The external validity of the findings may also be enhanced by the degree to which the findings fit into known theoretical networks. Some of the dimensions of the found basic assumptions relate well to general dimensions of social- and organizational theories as discussed above, thus strengthening the external validity.

The most important documentation of external validity will however be in the replication of the study and findings: the more time a research finding is shown to be true with different sets of people, the more confidence can be placed in the finding and conclusions that the finding generalizes beyond the people in the original research study (Cook and Campbell, 1976). Apparently, more research is needed to see whether or not the same pattern of basic

assumptions could be found in different sets of hospitality employees (other national cultures, and other socioeconomic backgrounds).

Further research is therefore needed to study the validity of the elicited constructs, the relationship between them, as well as their relationship to the employees' and organisational functioning and performance in general. In our view, future studies of employee basic assumptions should focus on a) the extent to which assumptions are shared within a unit or an organisation, b) the strength of relationships along the dimensions and their relative importance, and c) how these shared assumptions relate to the performance of the unit or organisation. In order to do that, quantitative designs are required. A natural step in this direction would be to develop a scale assessing employee assumptions about guests, co-workers, and competitors in hospitality, and to put it to the test in a quantitative study. Additionally, we know little about how to induce influence on basic assumptions. Further research should investigate ways to challenge and influence assumptions in the hospitality context once they are assessed.

This study also has several methodological implications. Our investigation confirms that the repertory grid and laddering are useful tools for gaining a deeper understanding of hospitality-related phenomena. However, recent findings in other research field have indicated that the output of elicitation interviews might be influenced by the choice of elicitation technique (Breivik and Supphellen, 2003). In our case, using picture elements, for example, turned out to be far less productive than using verbal labels. On average, informants who were asked to compare triads of picture elements managed to come up with far fewer constructs than those who were asked to work with verbal trait cards, see Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Few of the hotel employees were able to verbalise comparisons between these elements due to their limited knowledge of other hotels, short working experience, or a combination of both. To obtain patterns of basic assumptions with a higher validity, future research should attempt to combine different elicitation techniques. Our study also showed that a focus-group interview with two to three informants is highly effective in determining constructs of collective importance to hospitality employees. Focus group grid interviews not only clarified the agreement patterns among the employees; they also clarified the meaning of this agreement.

The purpose of this research was to explore, among hospitality employees, the content of the basic assumptions about guests, co-workers and competitors. Based on our empirical findings, we developed a collated model comprising basic options, basic issues and basic assumptions in hospitality within seven dimensions. Although there are limitations of such general theorizing about underlying structure and content of assumptions both from a theoretical and a methodological point of view, we believe that this work provides a useful start point for understanding the nature of employee basic assumptions in hospitality firms. Many questions merit further investigation. Now that some important dimensions of basic assumptions have been identified empirically and discussed theoretically, researchers can go on and test the collated model of basic assumptions in several independent and preferably larger samples. At this point, researchers would be able to see whether the structure and dimensionality discovered in this study can be repeated in other samples and other hospitality enterprises, or whether aggregating responses of hospitality employees by some criteria important in hospitality (e.g. frontline-back stage) would add to the explanatory power of the construct. As for practitioners, our study offers an insight into how hospitality employees conceptualize their guests, co-workers and competitors. This is vital knowledge for managers

who want to understand factors that impact upon employees' behavior during interactions with guest, co-workers and competitors.

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Figure 1. The collated model of employee basic assumptions in hospitality.

Note. * Specific to guests. ** Specific to co-workers. *** Specific to competitors.

Table 1. Informants' profiles.

Table 2. Constructs by dimension and group of informants (manager–non-manager; frontline–back stage; hotel–travel; exposed to verbal or picture cards).

Table 3. The results of the frequency count of constructs elicited by different types of stimuli and from different informants.

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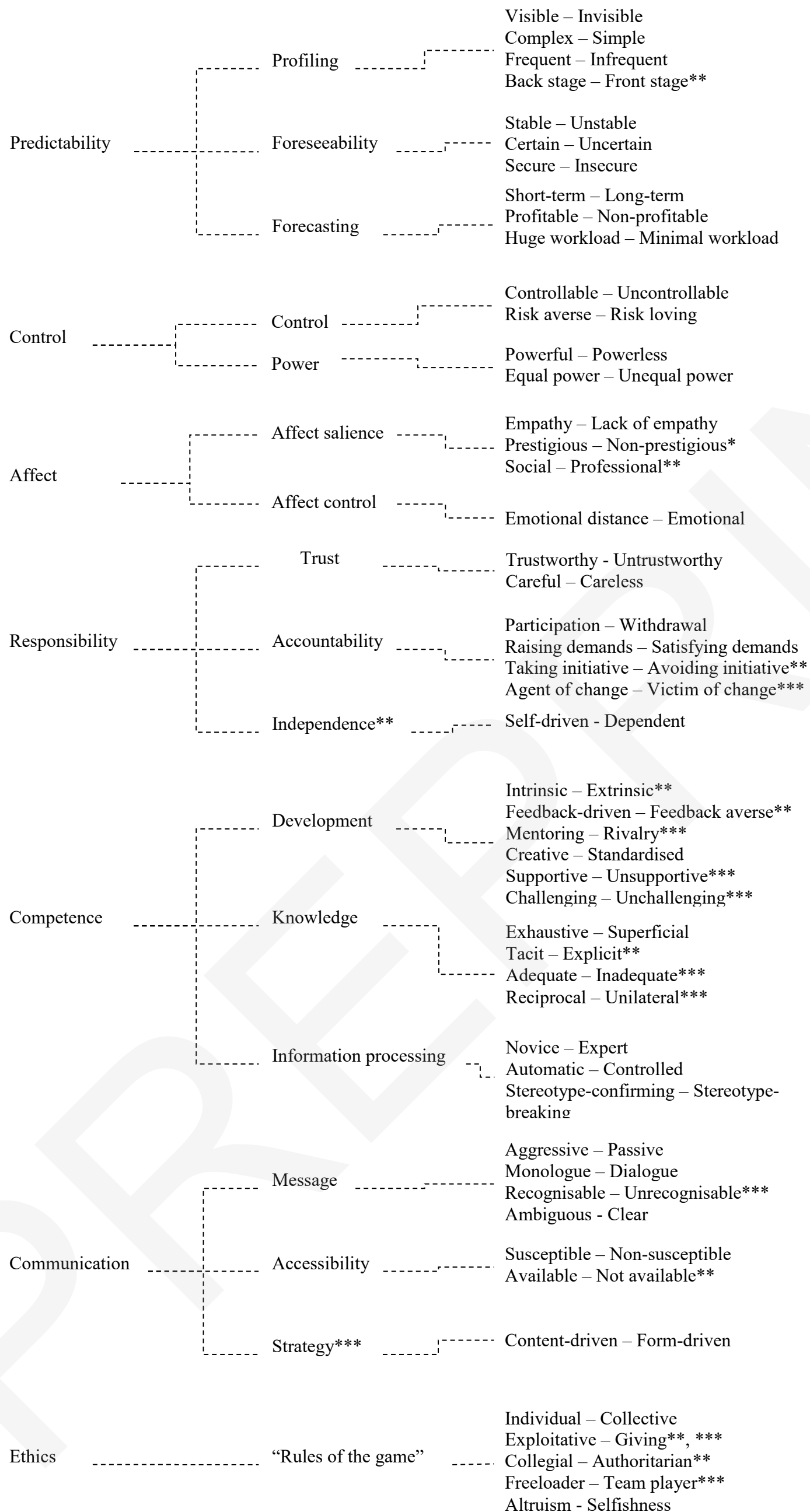
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No.	Fictitious name	Work affiliation in hospitality	Guest contact	Managerial functions	Years of industry experience
1	Connie	Hotel receptionist	Primary	No	2
2	Linda	Hotel housekeeper	Secondary	No	4
3	Eric	Hotel security guard	Secondary	No	1/2
4	Nadine	Hotel restaurant chef	Secondary	Yes	5
5	Ann	Hotel receptionist	Primary	No	5
6	Marie	Hotel receptionist	Primary	No	6
7	Lisa	Hotel restaurant chef	Secondary	No	8
8	Amy	Travel consultant	Primary	Yes	9
9	Jenny	Travel consultant	Primary	Yes	32
10	Camilla	Travel consultant	Primary	No	6
11	Ellen	Travel consultant	Primary	Yes	16
12	Robert	Tourist guide	Primary	No	5
13	Eva	Tourist information host	Primary	No	1
14	Mary	Travel consultant	Primary	No	1
15	Lily	Hotel booking executive	Primary	Yes	4
16	Natalie	Hotel sales and marketing executive	Secondary	Yes	25
17	Laura	Hotel receptionist	Primary	No	2
18	Mark	Tourist guide	Primary	No	2
19	Celeste	Tourist guide	Primary	No	20
20	Heather	Tourist services host	Secondary	Yes	9

Guests	Constructs	Manager	Non-manager	Frontline	Back stage	Hotel	Travel	Verbal	Picture
Predictability	48	11	37	35	13	33	15	41	7
Control	28	19	9	16	12	17	11	15	13
Affect	21	8	13	16	5	11	10	15	6
Responsibility	14	5	9	10	4	4	10	13	1
Competence	23	8	15	20	3	4	19	20	3
Communication	18	10	8	4	14	9	9	11	7
Ethics	4	4	0	4	0	0	4	4	0
Total	156	65	91	105	51	78	78	119	37
Co-workers	Constructs	Manager	Non-manager	Frontline	Back stage	Hotel	Travel	Verbal	Picture
Predictability	25	10	15	17	8	13	12	21	4
Control	13	5	8	6	7	10	3	6	7
Affect	12	7	5	11	1	3	9	11	1
Responsibility	32	17	15	22	10	13	19	28	4
Competence	30	12	18	24	6	9	21	30	0
Communication	14	3	11	11	3	5	9	14	0
Ethics	15	5	10	9	6	9	6	13	2
Total	141	59	82	100	41	62	79	123	18
Competitors	Constructs	Manager	Non-manager	Frontline	Back stage	Hotel	Travel	Verbal	Picture
Predictability	12	4	8	9	3	4	8	11	1
Control	19	7	12	19	0	8	11	18	1
Affect	2	1	1	2	0	1	1	2	0
Responsibility	5	0	5	5	0	3	2	5	0
Competence	15	10	5	10	5	4	11	13	2
Communication	11	4	7	7	4	7	4	7	4
Ethics	23	11	12	16	7	12	11	19	4
Total	87	37	50	68	19	39	48	75	12
Sum	384	161	223	273	111	179	205	317	67

Informants	Type of stimuli (grid elements)	Number of constructs elicited	Percentage of total
Laura	Picture	11	2.9 %
Nadine	Picture	12	3.1 %
Natalie	Picture	14	3.6 %
Lisa	Picture	15	3.9 %
Linda	Picture	16	4.2 %
Lily	Verbal	17	4.4 %
Ann	Verbal	22	5.7 %
Eric	Verbal	23	6.0 %
Marie	Verbal	23	6.0 %
Connie	Verbal	28	7.3 %
Mary	Verbal	30	7.8 %
Jenny, Camilla, Ellen	Verbal	30	7.8 %
Eva	Verbal	32	8.3 %
Amy	Verbal	33	8.6 %
Tom	Verbal	35	9.1 %
Mark, Celeste, Heather	Verbal	43	11.2 %
Total	Verbal and picture	384	100 %



Note. * Specific to guests. ** Specific to co-workers. *** Specific to competitors.