

# ***Rethinking service work and employment: The Pandora's box of aesthetic labour***

Chris Warhurst and Dennis Nickson  
University of Strathclyde, UK

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## **ABSTRACT**

Using aesthetic labour as a springboard, this paper argues that a rethinking of the understanding of work and employment in interactive services. The term 'aesthetic labour' is analytically complex (Witz *et al.*, 2003). Here it is enough to note that it refers to the employment by companies of people with certain capacities and attributes that favourably appeal to customers and which are then developed through training and/or monitoring. It has become translated in the popular imagination as those people who are employed on the basis of 'looking good' and/or 'sounding right'. In its tabloidised form, along with sexism, racism and ageism, 'lookism' is now offered as one of the key issues of the contemporary workplace (Oaff, 2003). Glasgow-based research has highlighted the demand for and supply of aesthetic labour in retail and hospitality (SCER 2004; Warhurst *et al.* 2004).

Rather like Pandora's Box, once aesthetic labour is recognised and accepted as a feature of work and employment in interactive services, many issues, some of which might be uncomfortable, are opened for debate and discussion. This paper seeks to outline and explore these issues. Some of these issues are conceptual, others practical but all not only extend understating of aesthetic labour but also raise a number of related issues more generally about work and employment in an area of the economy with most jobs growth (Futureskills Scotland 2003).

The paper first defines aesthetic labour and, drawing upon a recent employers' survey, also demonstrates its importance to these employers. It then explores some of the key issues that emerge from aesthetic labour demand and supply, specifically issues of skill and skill formation, training policy and provision, and discrimination in the labour market. To these existing issues, commentary is added on further issues, focusing on class and social status and the need for further research on the conceptual and empirical boundaries of aesthetic labour. The paper concludes by arguing that on the basis of an awareness of these issues a reconceptualisation of interactive services' work and employment is needed, especially the composition of 'service', and, moreover, a rethink is also needed of the study of this work and employment.

## **References**

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