



Looking Neat on the Street. Aesthetic Labor in Public Parking Patrol

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ABSTRACT

Research on aesthetic labor has been confined to service encounters in private sector industries. Aesthetic labor theory is critical of the commercialism that drives management of service labor and points to the discrimination of employees on the grounds of their "looks" that this entails. Considering the common conception today of the public sector as a service provider, application of the theory of aesthetic labor is relevant to public sector service work. But the public sector has many other purposes and mechanisms than those pertaining to increased revenues that may influence the use of aesthetic labor. This paper analyzes the aesthetic labor of Danish parking attendants in an organizational ethnography. A change management process in this organization has applied the principles of aesthetic labor actively for the purposes of diversity and health and safety. The paper shows how managers apply aesthetic labor principles to promote health and safety and workforce diversity, but also that the use of aesthetics has ambivalent purposes. Aesthetic labor is not as unequivocally applied for commercial purposes as hitherto assumed.

KEY WORDS

Aesthetic labor / Diversity management / Health and Safety / patrol work / parking attendants

Introduction

In 1992, a new type of public employee entered street life in Denmark. Originally titled "parking service assistant" (*parkeringsserviceassistent*), but in everyday language referred to as parking attendants (*parkeringsvagter*)¹, these uniformed representatives of the municipality patrol the streets and enforce parking law. They punish car drivers who park illegally or with no license by issuing fines, which they place on the windshield. Representing a public service that is not particularly popular, those who perform the job of parking attendant face a high risk of being subjected to verbal and physical assaults in encounters with people on the street. At the beginning of the 2000s, one municipal center responsible for parking patrol was experiencing the highest assault rate ever. In 2002, about 100 parking attendants reported a total of 65 assaults. In 2003, however, the number dropped to 28 and it has been around or well below 30 since. Managers and employees attribute this very steep decline in assaults to new management initiatives at this time. They particularly attribute the decline in assaults to a change of uniforms from green uniforms signaling environmental friendliness to dark uniforms resembling police uniforms in 2002. With regard to the long-term situation, organization members explain

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the consistently lower assault rate with two managerial initiatives: managerial attention to improving the attendants' self-esteem and therewith their attitude in street encounters and the introduction of diversity management so that the parking attendants representing the municipality mirror people on the street. These three elements of a change management strategy—uniforms, self-esteem, and diversity—all manage the attitude and appearance of the parking attendants, that is, their aesthetic labor (Witz, Warhurst, & Nickson, 2003). This strategy appears to have been successful with regard to lowering the assault rate and the rate of absence due to illness. However, the use of aesthetics in organization and management has been criticized on the basis of recent studies of service work. This makes it relevant to ask at what costs this aesthetic professionalization of the job as public parking service assistant has been carried out.

Previous studies show that the downsides to aesthetic labor lie in potential discrimination of workers on the grounds of their appearance (Nickson & Warhurst, 2007; Spiess & Waring, 2005; Williams & Connell, 2010). This has given rise to discussions about the discriminatory aspects of "lookism" and whether these should and can be legally regulated (Warhurst, Broek, Hall, & Nickson, 2009; Waring, 2011). However, studies of aesthetic labor have been confined to the private sector. This is perhaps due to the understanding that aesthetic labor is applied by managers for commercial benefit (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007a), to manage the customer-server relation. But considering the focus on the citizen as consumer associated with New Public Management (Clarke, Newman, Smith, Vidler, & Westmarland, 2007), it appears likely that the concept of aesthetic labor has explanatory power with regard to the working conditions in this sector. By applying the concept of aesthetic labor to the field of public sector research, this paper contributes to a new understanding of service work in public organizations and to the theory of aesthetic labor by applying it in an organization that is in many respects quite different from those industries.

Through an ethnographic case study of one Danish municipal department responsible for parking law enforcement, this paper investigates the content, purposes, and consequences of aesthetic labor as a component of the "matrix of skills" (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007a) demanded of frontline public sector workers. The first section accounts for and discusses the theory of aesthetic labor and the critical perspectives it generates. The second section accounts for the study's methodology and how it can provide a fruitful analysis of aesthetic labor in the public sector. The third section introduces the case. The fourth section analyzes recruitment, training, and work in the perspective of aesthetic labor, while sections five and six discuss implications, present conclusions, and identify possible new perspectives in research.

Service work and aesthetic labor

Critical service work research draws attention to how service workers' selves and self-presentation are an object of management, because managers perceive commercial outcome as resting on the customer-server encounter. This situation has often been analyzed through the lens of Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labor (Hochschild, 2003 (1983)), which draws attention to how employees' emotional selves become objects of management. In the last decade, however, a theory of aesthetic labor, which was developed by the so-called Strathclyde group, has challenged and complemented this analysis.

The Strathclyde group's interest in aesthetics was fueled by an increased amount of jobs in clothing retail in Glasgow, Scotland. In this sector, employees with customer contact were expected to dress and act in a particular style, matching the product and appealing to the customers (Nickson, Warhurst, Witz, & Cullen, 2001). The researchers were concerned about a mismatch between the skills of a growing group of unemployed and the skills requested by employers in this growing pool of jobs, which at one and the same time were "McJobs" that required a fast pace of service encounters (Leidner, 1993; Ritzer, 1997) and "style jobs" requiring that employees dress in a particular fashion. Questioning the common theoretical understanding that such jobs required no skills, the researchers wanted to investigate what type of unacknowledged skills the jobs required (Thompson, Warhurst, & Callaghan, 2001). Through interviews and fieldwork in the hospitality and retail industries, the researchers found that managers expect a *matrix of skills* consisting of technical, social, and aesthetic skills for these jobs. The technical and social skills were quite developed, appreciated, and articulated, while the last category of aesthetic skills was not. They identified aesthetic labor as:

...a supply of "embodied capacities and attributes" possessed by the workers at the point of entry to employment. Employers then mobilize, develop and commodify these capacities through processes of recruitment, selection and training, transforming them into competencies or skills, which are then aesthetically geared to produce a style of service encounter. By "aesthetically geared" we mean deliberately intended to appeal to the senses of customers most obviously in a visual or aural way. (Warhurst, Nickson, Witz, & Cullen, 2000, p. 4)

Developing the notion of aesthetic labor, they drew on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of distinction (Bourdieu, 1998 (1986)), which explains how the individual "habitus" embodies social distinction. Aesthetic dispositions are indeed about class, but our habitus also provides us with a "practical sense" that enables our ongoing engagement in the social and alignment with the demands of sociality" (Witz et al., 2003, p. 40). In that sense, aesthetics contributes to explain what holds society together. By taking Bourdieu's theory into the workplace, Witz et al. find that they can show how employers mobilize these individual embodiments of class distinction for commercial purposes (Witz et al., 2003, pp. 40–41). The Strathclyde group differentiates between the aesthetics *of* organization, *in* organization, and *as* organization (Witz et al., 2003). The latter concerns the application of aesthetic theory directly on the "art" of management and will not be taken up in this article. Aesthetics *of* the organization concerns the aesthetics of the "hardware" of the organization: the architecture of a building, furniture, or a logo. The aesthetics *in* the organization concerns the "software" of the organization. This is about the mobilization of employees for aesthetic purposes: presenting the organization to customers in a particular way. At times, employees are transformed into organizational hardware, for example, through the use of uniforms, which they do not just wear, but also are trained in *how* to wear (Witz et al., 2003, p. 48).

Since the Strathclyde group provided these conceptualizations of aesthetic labor, the notion has been nuanced and developed through many case studies and some quantitative surveys. Common to these studies is their focus on the private service sector, particularly on the hospitality and retail industries (Pettinger, 2004; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007a; Williams & Connell, 2010), but also on the airline industry (Spiess & Waring, 2005), call centers (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002), and fashion (Entwistle & Wissinger,



2006; Wissinger, 2012). The existence of aesthetic labor in the private service sector is thus well established. Nevertheless, there seems to be agreement among these researchers that aesthetics also has a role to play in other types of work and organization. As Williams and Connell write: “It is probably the case that every interactive service job has an aesthetic component, that is, a set of normative expectations regarding appropriate appearance and demeanor” (Williams & Connell, 2010, pp. 352–353).

Another opening for new aspects of aesthetic labor comes from Warhurst and Nickson (2007b), who, reflecting on the nuances of aesthetic labor in service work, emphasize that the typical image of the service worker is of being in a servile position in relation to the customer: “workers can remain servile, but there can also be interactions with equivalence between worker and customer, and there can also be interactions in which the worker is superordinate” (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007b, p. 793). For example, as Robyn Leidner has shown, insurance workers have to assert themselves in relation to the customers (Leidner, 1993).

Thus, we can expect aesthetic labor in other than commercial settings, and we can expect that the content of the aesthetic labor depends on the “genre” of service encounter. These acknowledgements probe the question of whether there might be reasons other than commercial benefit for applying the principles of aesthetic labor. In a recent contribution, Huzell and Larsson (2012) question whether managers only use aesthetic labor for commercial purposes. They suggest that “the demand for certain aspects of aesthetic labor might be driven by the employers’ need to be politically correct, to comply with hygiene and safety policies and legislation or as a means of reducing costs” (Huzell & Larsson, 2012, p. 109). Having acknowledged the possibilities of other rationalities behind aesthetic labor, Huzell and Larsson focus on cost reduction, when they suggest that employers’ interest in reducing future expenses for sickness leave and rehabilitation may influence their recruitment and selection. In a survey in Swedish service companies, Huzell and Larsson show that employers seek to employ healthy looking staff, which in the employers’ view affords a low risk of costs for sickness absence. Suggesting the notion of “athletic labor” as a subcategory of aesthetic labor, Huzell and Larsson thereby bring workers’ health into the field of aesthetic labor. This contribution is important, because it suggests the development of a more nuanced theory of aesthetic labor.

Following up on Huzell and Larsson, Karlsson (2012) suggests that aesthetic and athletic labor are subjected under an umbrella of “Corporeal Labor” and that the economic purposes of corporeal labor determine the content of corporeal labor: The more focus on cost containment, the more athletic labor, and the more focus on “selling services,” the more aesthetic labor. The notion of corporeal labor will be discussed at the end of this paper, but until then aesthetic labor is referred to as the umbrella term for different types of aesthetics, including athletic skills.

Although Huzell and Larsson and Karlsson open for new interpretations of aesthetics in work, they stay empirically in the private sector and within the logics of economy. In order to further nuance the theory of aesthetic labor, it should be applied in other types of organizations, and to nuance the purposes of aesthetic labor, the public sector’s role as spender, rather than income generator, provides an interesting contrast.

While New Public Management has contributed to commercialization of the public sector, which in itself qualifies for a study of aesthetic labor, the public sector is also characterized by having multiple, contested, and ambivalent purposes (Hoggett, 2006). Provision of service to citizen-consumers, cost containment, and income generation are

but a few of these (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Clarke et al., 2007). The managers and street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) who deliver the public service continuously balance different purposes, such as flexible high-quality service delivery, equal treatment of all employees and citizens while responding to diversity, bringing down costly absence due to illness, and partnerships with external actors (Newman, 1996). Frontline public sector workers are at the center of these issues in their everyday encounters with citizens. Moreover, although the public sector shares the role of service provider and a strong focus on cost containment with the organizations hitherto studied in aesthetic labor research, in the public sector these issues are combined with the politically guided role as bureaucratic rule enforcer. In such a setting, we should question whether the purposes of aesthetic labor are more or other than commercial and/or cost containing.

Finally, research on and theory of aesthetic labor does not stop at conceptualizing aesthetic labor and documenting the existence of the phenomenon. Aesthetic labor is criticized for the discriminatory effects of weighting the looks and appearance of workers, particularly because this approach excludes other equally or more suitable candidates for the jobs. In designer retail, young, white, upper-middle-class employees are preferred to other formally unskilled workers who might need the jobs more (Nickson & Warhurst, 2007; Williams & Connell, 2010); the aesthetic and sexualized labor of flight attendants may exclude people who do not have “the looks” (Spiess & Waring, 2005); and the athletic labor demanded in the Swedish service industries excludes potentially unhealthy workers in the recruitment phase (Huzell & Larsson, 2012). The identification of aesthetic labor has also led to discussions about the pros and cons of legislating to forbid this “lookism” (Warhurst et al., 2009; Waring, 2011).

To sum up, aesthetic labor can exist in practically any service organization, and to investigate it, we need to ask 1) what the identity of the organization is, 2) what style of service it delivers, 3) for which purposes aesthetic labor is used, and 4) what the consequences are. While the public sector in line with New Public Management has a strong focus on generating income and reducing costs, the public sector also represents an antithesis to the typical aesthetic labor research context. The public sector involves a range of styles of service encounters that, due to the role of the employee as street-level bureaucrat can be expected to require aesthetic resources that differ from those usually found in aesthetic labor research, such as a particular class-specific fashion style in clothing retail. Likewise, we may expect that the purposes of using aesthetics are different from those in the private service sector, perhaps mirroring the general ambivalent purposes in the public sector. And finally the consequences of aesthetics may also differ from what we have seen above, given the inherent need to be politically correct not only in regard to public spending but also in regard to diversity, equality, health, and safety.

In the Danish (and surely also other) public sector organizations today, there is a close HR monitoring of the composition of the workforce in terms of diversity in regard to age, gender, and ethnicity. Mirroring the citizenry by employing principles of diversity has been a common public policy during the past decade in Denmark. As opposed to those organizations typically in the spotlight in discourses regarding aesthetic labor, there is at least formally quite a strong focus on not discriminating on these issues when it comes to access to the jobs. However, the role played by aesthetics is not reflected in formal statistics, and the question is how aesthetics actually plays out in a context where managers already have a strong focus on avoiding discrimination in general.



By investigating aesthetic labor in this context, this paper can contribute to the development of the theory of aesthetic labor which recent contributions encourage (Huzell & Larsson, 2012; Karlsson, 2012). For these reasons, I turn to the study of aesthetic labor in a public center responsible for parking law enforcement.

Methodology

The fieldwork consisted of participant observation, interviews, and collection of relevant written material. I approached the organization “bottom-up,” by doing participant observation among the parking attendants (Goffman, 2002 (1989)). The observations were conducted as shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007) of parking attendants one or two at a time during a workday and interviewing the attendant or attendants on the job. Field notes of observations were taken and on-the-job interviews carried out after shadowing. The purpose of shadowing was to achieve a practical understanding of their work tasks and work day, knowledge of informal networks among the employees, and an appreciation of the importance on a day-to-day basis of diversity management. Next, I interviewed the direct managers of the parking attendants. These interviews were semi-structured (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) around three common basic themes: expectations of people holding the job as a parking attendant, current managerial challenges, and the tackling of inclusion and diversity. In the second week of my fieldwork, I was a participant observer on three days of job interviews at which I also took notes. Finally, I was a participant observer at selected days of a three-week introduction course with the newly hired parking attendants. The days were selected so as to provide material about all the different themes that were introduced to the attendants. The total empirical material consists of field notes from 15 one-day shadowings of different parking attendants and transcripts of 15 interviews with five managers in the center, a shop steward, and two of the newly hired, six months after their hiring. Recorded interviews with managers lasted 45 minutes to 1.5 hours and recorded interviews with employees lasted 15 to 45 minutes. Other material, such as relevant information from the Intranet, HR and balanced scorecard policy documents, consultancy reports, and newspaper articles, was also collected. Field notes, interview transcripts, and other written material were imported into the qualitative data processing program Nvivo, in which it was possible to code, analyze, and explore the material.

The reflective analysis that followed identified the framework of aesthetic labor as an appropriate way to approach the importance that the managers attributed to the parking attendants’ appearance. Studies of aesthetic labor have shown that the recruitment situation is particularly important in relation to aesthetic labor (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007a), particularly because many employers do not wish to spend resources training employees for aesthetics (Williams & Connell, 2010), and for this reason, aesthetic labor in training and daily work is also an important area to include in the study in the context of an investigation into the extent to which employers train employees in aesthetics (Thompson et al., 2001). The collected material provides the opportunity to analyze these three areas of the organization.

Coding of the material was according to references to aesthetics—observations and utterances about looks, gestures, and uniforms. The theme of aesthetics was particularly in evidence in relation to issues of diversity and safety. To investigate these

instances further, I focused on the places in the material where people referred directly or indirectly to aesthetics. I wrote up ethnographic tales (Van Maanen, 2011) of situations where aesthetic labor was a theme—situations where references were made to the “appearance” of the parking attendant. This article presents vignettes from interviews and field notes, which illustrate the content and use of aesthetic skills.

The case

This case description, which relies on the collective story (Elliot, 2005) of the history of the parking center, traces the identity of the organization, what style of service it delivers, and the collective understanding of the purposes of aesthetic labor.

This municipal center is part of a large Danish municipality. The official purpose of the organization is to undertake parking patrol in order to secure safety and passability in town. This makes the center one of the few municipal activities that creates more money than it spends. It is, however, politically incorrect for the parking attendants and for the organization as such to give the impression that they want to increase municipal incomes by fining car drivers.

The collective story is a story in three phases. In the first period, from 1992 to 2002, the parking attendants' reputation was tainted, not only by the character of the job—often characterized as being a form of de facto tax collection from car owners—but also by the common understanding that the job as a parking attendant in effect served as a retention project for worn-out elderly bus drivers. This reputation lowered public esteem for the parking attendants, who frequently experienced harassment and assaults and had a very high rate of absence due to illness. When the managing director retired in 2002, the municipality hired a consultancy firm to evaluate the organization. The consultants identified the aforementioned high rate of absence due to illness and high frequency of assaults. The second phase (2002–2009) of the “collective story” began when a new managing director was hired. The manager was assigned the task of improving the bad scores for absence due to illness, which caused high budget costs in the municipality and in general was and is a very central political focus in Denmark. The new managing director immediately did three things as part of his change management strategy: 1) changed the parking attendants' uniforms from green uniforms signaling environmental friendliness to dark uniforms resembling police uniforms, 2) set up a project focusing on improving the parking attendants' self-esteem and thereby their appearance on the street, and 3) set up diversity management, following municipal diversity policies by giving the mid-level manager of the operations department the following message: “If you have two applicants with different ethnic backgrounds, but the same qualifications, then you should hire the one with another ethnic background than Danish.” Following a national (and European) trend after the turn of the millennium (Boxenbaum, 2006; Holvino & Kamp, 2009), the municipality's goal was that 15% of all employees should have another ethnic background than Danish, thereby mirroring the ethnic composition of Danish society. With about 30 different nationalities employed today, this center contributes to the fulfillment of this diversity goal. All these debates and issues were part of everyday life and management in this center. Phase three of the collective story began in 2009 when a new organizational structure was introduced in the administration at large and a balanced scorecard was introduced, comparing each of the administration's



different centers' performance on the basis of a citizen panel, employee satisfaction, and economic performance. Not surprisingly, given the nature of the tasks in this center, the parking center's performance is typically given lower scores by the citizen panel than other centers in the municipal service. In relation to the balanced scorecard, an internal assessment of and individual feedback on the quality of the officers' work was set up. The administrative focus on absence due to illness is still high. During the fieldwork in 2010–2012, the absence due to illness had decreased from 40 days per attendant per year to around 12. The diversity of the workforce in terms of ethnicity, gender, and age is still obvious to the casual observer, but the new managers in the operations department no longer hire by the principle of positive action used in phase two. The managing director describes the goal of the work they do as keeping the city's traffic safe and passable and wants to couple this to the municipality's environmental agenda. The external image is continuously worked on through the media, who often write critical stories about the organization.

As this story tells us, the *identity* of this organization has been very directly targeted in a change management process in these three phases. Phase two was a period of professionalizing the employees by directly targeting their self-esteem, thereby providing them with training in the right attitude and appearance in street encounters, and it was about sending a politically correct message presenting the municipality as a tolerant and diverse organization. Today, the organization still consists of a diverse workforce, but the politically correct message is cost containment, through a strong focus on absence due to illness.

The *style of service* is a combination of authority and service. If the parking attendants act too servile, they become weak targets to possible offenders. The uniform underlines the authority and by wearing the uniform, employees become organizational *hardware*. The *purpose* of this style of service is found in the fact that uniforms can provide a shield against attacks and unpleasant encounters (Craik, 2005). But also in that the focus on diversity transforms the attendants into organizational hardware: they represent the citizens of the municipality among the crowd and thereby collectively blend in, as a total corps. The *software* consists of acting with an air of service, trustworthiness, and confidence while punishing people. The managers are evaluated by their employers in the administration on the grounds of the absence due to illness among their employees, which indirectly comes down to the management of health and safety. Diversity in the workforce is monitored and regarded as important, but the managers are not directly evaluated on these grounds. Having thus outlined the identity of the organization, the style of service, and the purposes of aesthetic labor, we can turn to investigating when, where, and how aesthetic labor is applied and analyze the consequences. As Thompson et al. (2001) suggest, the required skills for a job are best investigated in the recruitment, training, and everyday work. In the following vignettes, I present some of the perspectives on aesthetics afforded along the way in these situations.

Aesthetics in recruiting

The analysis first takes up an example from phase two, at the time when diversity management and positive action in recruitment were at its high, where a manager looked back at the way she recruited. Next, the aesthetic content of the skills that the hiring

committee valued is analyzed, and one particular instance is highlighted to show how the managers work with aesthetics to change the image of the organization. Throughout the analysis, the managers' and hiring committees' motives to act and reasons to choose on the basis of aesthetics are analyzed.

Recruiting in Phase Two: The Aesthetics of Diversity

Looking back at experiences with diversity management, this manager explained how she began to consider whether it was possible to hire a Muslim woman with a head-scarf. In Denmark, Muslim women's head-scarves acquired great symbolic significance during the 2000s in public debates about whether or not women could and should wear them at work. Discussions about head-scarves were often fueled by arguments about head-scarves being a symbol of gender discrimination and "oppressed Muslim women" (Andreassen, 2012). The scarf discussion epitomizes the dilemma that managers are in, when they try to accommodate a discourse of equality while also accommodating a discourse of diversity: treating everyone the same, but different. This is how the manager describes how she approached the issue after giving it a lot of thought:

"... finally I thought: I am ready! And I talked to my middle managers about it, asked them how they felt about it. They thought it was an excellent idea to employ people with scarves. And then we talked with the employees. We talked with each of the teams and said: an employee with a scarf—how would you respond to that? ... Let's hear all the prejudice so that we can have a discussion about it ... and I said [to the employees]: now I have had this opportunity to hear you out and I have decided, that wearing a scarf is no barrier to work in this parking center ... what I have heard you say is that you don't see any problems in people wearing scarves, but you *do* see a problem if we hire a woman with a scarf who doesn't speak proper Danish and who doesn't look neat. You have been honest and I appreciate that."

The references to language and looking neat have to do with health and safety. It was a recurrent theme that an important issue for parking attendants was that their colleagues were respected on the streets and gave a good impression of the workplace. Generally, the risk of any bad talk about them was perceived as a risk to the health and safety of all parking attendants. Moreover, it could be risky to walk the streets with a colleague who attracted negative attention. So, if this type of diversity was to be introduced in the service work and encounters, the person would have to represent something other than a stereotypical image of a Muslim housewife, who the officers expected would provoke hostility and racist behavior on the street. Thus, health and safety set the limits to the degree of diversity. To counter the employees' reservations, the manager decided to look for a good-looking Muslim woman with a scarf through one of the attendants' networks:

"I was lucky that one of the officers came to me and said: I know someone, who fits that description. Because we wanted a real ice-breaker—it is all right to think a bit, isn't it? She came for a job interview. She was—she looked damn good, her Danish was beautiful—still with a bit of dialect, though. And she came in with a head-scarf—everything was just perfect. She was employed and after two days she was uniformed and we provided the most beautiful, beautiful silk scarf. She was so elegant!"



The manager took in other employees' opinions about aesthetics in a recruitment process, and the underlying argument for the employees' preference for a beautiful co-employee is: health and safety. However, we cannot conclude that aesthetics serves as an ice-breaker, promoting diversity and inclusion. The purpose of using aesthetic labor is more ambiguous here: The newly hired woman resigned after only a couple of days, when the manager denied her request to be allowed to wear a long skirt, after the attendant had met private acquaintances on the street who did not approve of her wearing trousers. The manager described the situation as follows:

"Then I said: do you know what? I really cannot accommodate you there, because it wouldn't look like a parking attendant. You have to blend in, that is why we are uniformed—we are a corps. Then, she [said she] couldn't work here and I said, then there is nothing else to do, you have to resign. Then give me a piece of paper [she said], and she put down her signature and left."

The manager argued that to be a parking attendant, the employee would have to blend in and look the part although the manager had actively sought—a woman with a scarf. In the interview, the manager explained that she was provoked by the strength of the woman's Muslim community. She argued along the lines of the strong societal image of the "oppressed Muslim woman." But when recalling the situation above, she argued that the exit of the scarf-wearing woman was a consequence of the woman's own choice to not blend in with the organizational aesthetics by wearing a proper uniform. The manager's ambition of diversity was challenged by her other political ambitions in regard to gender equality, but she manifested this political ambition in the form of an aesthetic judgment. In this case, aesthetics serves as what the manager regards as the proper argument for setting this limit to diversity. The aesthetic tools that the manager in the first instance used for the purpose of furthering diversity ended up being used as an argument against diversity. Either way, both ways of applying aesthetics serve political purposes.

Recruiting in phase three: looking too much like a parking attendant

The recruitment procedures can show us more detail about which aesthetic attributes the hiring committee approved and disapproved of. The hiring committee consisted of two managers—one with long experience in the organization, including experience as a parking attendant, and one recently hired manager who was also head of the center's health and safety committee—and one shop steward. The experienced manager led most of the conversation with the applicants. Typical questions from the experienced manager were: How do you feel about having to punish people? What did your family and friends say when you told them you were going to an interview here? How do you think you would react if someone said something unfriendly to you in the street? How do you feel about wearing a uniform? And a more practical question: How do you feel about working evening shifts? Apart from the last, these questions were formulated with a view to considering how the applicant would tackle street encounters. They all addressed the gray area between aesthetic and emotional labor, illustrating what Warhurst and Nickson pointed out: that in practical life the differences between these issues are difficult to disentangle (Warhurst & Nickson, 2009). By the end of the interview,

the shop steward would ask about the applicant's physical condition: Do you have any problems with your legs? Are you prepared to ride a bike? Thus, there were some very direct questions regarding the applicant's athletic abilities. Finally, the other manager would take over and ask questions he wanted to ask. While two of the skill categories identified by Thompson et al. as belonging to a matrix of social, aesthetic, and technical skills required by employers were treated extensively in the interviews, the third category, technical skills, only came up in the interviews when applicants asked about what type of training they would get, and the experienced manager would typically explain to them that there was a three-week course with a test at the end and that there was nothing to worry about because usually everyone passed the test.

Between the interviews, each of the three members of the committee rated the last interviewee by assigning him or her a number from one to four. The shop steward, who saw his role as imagining how it would be to work together with the applicant, would often give higher ratings than the managers. The rating process often involved discussions about the applicant's suitability for the job and what type of employees the applicant would approve of. The committee tried to imagine the applicant on the street: How would the applicant interact with people on the street? Would the applicant be able to tackle harassments? Were the applicant's Danish language skills good enough? Technical skills were seldom mentioned in these discussions or given much weight in the assessments. Much discussion was about the external image the applicant would create. Questions were posed regarding how "people on the street" would react to this person.

The health and safety manager would focus a great deal on the risk of a high rate of absence due to illness, referring to a demand from "above" in the administration that this should be brought down. The questions about athletic skills were usually quite short and none of the informants said that they would have any problems walking or riding a bike. However, one applicant stated on his own initiative that he suffered from a very bad back injury and that one of the reasons he would like this job was that the doctor advised him to walk a lot. In spite of the fact that this man stated that he had lost another job due to these back problems, he got the job. In this case, lacking athletic skills were compensated by other aesthetic skills: the managers found him very calm and sympathetic. This willingness to take in an effectively disabled person and employ him under ordinary conditions tells us that the pressure for cost containment in relation to illness may not be as heavy as what Huzell and Larsson saw in the Swedish private service industry and that athletic abilities were weighed against aesthetic factors.

Language has previously been treated indirectly in aesthetic labor research in the context of call center employees "sounding right." Linguistic skills here are about speaking the Danish language so that people on the street will not misunderstand the explanations the attendant gives them.

Disqualifying issues could, for example, be too great an interest in the uniform and exercise of authority, which the assessment committee found to be a sign that the person would "think he was a cop." But the committee also found that smaller aesthetic markers such as visible tattoos were expected to signal an inappropriate aggressive attitude. The following story gives us a better idea of the image that the managers were trying to move away from.

One applicant, experienced from work as a bartender, answered readily that he would tackle harassments calmly, but was given only one point by the experienced



manager, who said “he looked too much like what people expect a parking attendant to look like.” In an interview, the manager explained what he meant by this:

“People have this image of parking attendants, oh yes: they are lowlifes, they typically smoke 30-40 cigarettes a day and at least half of them have a drinking problem, or else, they don’t have a life at home and again, you know: if you can’t do anything else, well you can always become a parking attendant. And then, you know, there are some types who—I have been in this trade for a long time—when you look at them, you think: yes, this is exactly the stereotype who people would love to look at and say: hey yes! I just met one of those we were talking about at dinner yesterday. And of course, I—and my colleagues—we are very conscious about this ... well, he or she might be a nice person, but we have to look at the workplace as a whole and say: It won’t work, because we don’t have the time and resources to change this person ... we simply have to look at: how do we want to be viewed—and then employ according to that.”

As this story illustrates, the manager found this applicant to be representative of the image of the “worn-out and replaced” parking attendant from phase one of the collective story. Moreover, the manager explains that the aesthetic qualities cannot be built up after admittance to the job, because they do not have the time and resources for this.

What type of skills, then, will make one qualified for the job of parking attendant? Spiess and Waring argue that “firms may seek employees with a certain look that is not necessarily about beauty. For instance, some firms may seek out particular racial types or a look which is consistent with a social class that managers believe their customers will identify with” (Waring, 2011, p. 196). The vignettes above show exactly this: that aesthetics is not necessarily about beauty, but about “looking the part.” When the manager in phase two chooses not to accommodate the woman’s wish for a modified uniform, her underlying grounds for this are political, but she uses aesthetics as the legitimate explanation. Aesthetics here is about displaying uniformity in diversity, but the uniformity will disappear if an employee wears a skirt—or if the employee is not willing to perform the aesthetic labor required for the job. The purpose of aesthetic labor here is political.

In the recruitment procedures in phase three, the ability to tackle encounters on the street is very central. But what does it take to be able to tackle street encounters? The matrix of skills here, besides demonstrating seriously wanting the job by being willing to work the evening shift, is a matrix of aesthetic skills, which this analysis suggests that we can divide into 1) *athletic skills*: being able to walk far, ride a bike, and skills that pertain to having a certain neat appearance, 2) *acting calm* and nonaggressive and perhaps more difficult: not looking like people’s negative image of a parking attendant, 3) *avoiding stigma*: i.e., tattoos, and finally 4) having good *language skills*, so there is little risk of sending confusing signals in street encounters.

The observations showed that compromises could be accepted with regard to some of these qualities if other qualities were as the committee wanted them: compromises were accepted with regard to language and athletic ability, while compromises could not be accepted with regard to calm and nonaggressive appearance. The purpose of aesthetic labor here was cost containment, health and safety, and a professional image.

Training

Newly hired parking attendants went through a three-week training course. The course was scheduled as a mix of lessons about the organization: personnel policies, the role as law enforcer, cooperation with other departments, introduction to the safety organization and employee representatives, and lessons in parking law. The organizational lessons were given by managers and people from the different departments in the center. In the parking law lessons, caseworkers from the complaints department took the new attendants systematically through the 32 points of Danish parking law. Every afternoon the new attendants went on the street together with their mentors, experienced attendants, whom they were to follow for the first three months of their employment. After three weeks, the new attendants took a written examination which tested their knowledge of parking law. Finally, on the last day, an external psychologist gave a lesson in basic psychology and conflict resolution. The formal training before the examination did not contain references to appearance or aesthetics. The session focused on giving the officers a very basic psychological understanding of themselves and street encounters. The session focused primarily on empathy and understanding different psychological types and reactions. In the tools proposed to tackle people on the street, some aesthetic issues came up. It was emphasized that people usually react to the sight of a uniform and less to the sight of the person in the uniform. It was also emphasized that the attendants themselves were prejudiced against people based on their looks. Advice was given with regard to various ways of reacting and acting on the street: do not turn your back on anyone; people become more aggressive if you don't listen to them; if someone becomes aggressive, stand with your hands in front of your body and withdraw slowly.

The training first and foremost focused on the technical skills of parking patrol, but there was also a lot of emphasis on explaining to the employees the type of role they were in as enforcers of not only law but also policy. Some time was devoted to the gray zone of emotional and aesthetic skills, but these were not covered by the exam. Compared with the great importance attributed to aesthetics in the recruitment procedures and the balancing of aesthetics with diversity and health and safety on the same occasion, these themes were not very prominent in the training situation.

Everyday work and management: looking neat on the street

The third and final area in which we should consider aesthetic labor is in relation to everyday work. In connection with my analysis of this everyday work, I first exemplify the managers' everyday attention to aesthetics and present a characterization of how managers and employees see the role of the uniform. Finally, I account for parking attendants' everyday aesthetic appearance on the street.

It was important for the managers to underscore that the parking attendants should look "neat" on an everyday basis. A practical example of this came up during a final interview with two managers only a few days after their physical headquarters had moved to new premises, while a lot of equipment was still in boxes. During the interview, another manager came into the room to ask the interviewers, "Where is the mirror?" The two interviewees answered that they didn't know and laughed a bit and the manager who had interrupted said: "Well yes! So they can look at themselves before they go on



the streets. They have to look neat on the street!” After the interview, a large mirror had been placed right beside the elevator. The parking attendants’ opportunity to check their looks before they hit the streets had a high priority.

The center of attention in regard to the parking attendants’ appearance at work is, not surprisingly, their uniform. The managing director explained how he, in the process of transforming the organization, had to explain to the employees how to wear a uniform. Recall that this manager decided to replace green uniforms with dark uniforms:

“In my opinion, the problem was not only that they were green. What was wrong was that, well for one thing the attendants had very low self-esteem. But that was *inside* the uniform. And then, the *design* of that uniform was wrong. They looked like they were on their way to go fishing, when they walked down the pavement, right? That was not very good when you were going out to exercise authority. It gave a totally wrong impression for those who sort of stood on the other side, and this was perhaps why some people became more aggressive or that they got aggressive at all, which they wouldn’t have been if they had sort of got the right expectation from the beginning”

Quite in accordance with other studies (Craik, 2005), the uniforms had to be worn in a particular manner:

“I also sometimes had to set an example. Not because I, well..., I am not a uniform guy in that sense, but my opinion is that if you have chosen to wear a uniform, which you do when you are a parking attendant, well *uniform* of course means (laughing) that you look the same, and then you shouldn’t drive around with different colors and with yellow t-shirts and red t-shirts and what not. There were still some who did that.”

The managing director tells me how he handled two attendants who came to talk to him in his office one day: “I said: ‘Try having a look at yourselves, the two of you,’ and then I said, ‘How the hell do you think that people on the streets should guess that the two of you come from the same place?’”

The parking attendants typically find the uniform a central and attractive part of the job. Making sure that the equipment is up-to-standard and that the shoes are polished but also that the clothes are practical to wear, e.g., during the cold winter or the hot summer, is a common theme in talk about work among colleagues, and caring for the uniform takes some time, as is illustrated by one parking attendant who goes through his typical work day in an interview:

“... my work day actually started at home. Because this uniform was on a hanger, and it was creased so I had to iron it, and you can say: When you iron, you are already in action mentally and physically, so in that way I was preparing myself from 12 o’clock [90 minutes before the shift starts].”

Another officer says: “... I had no idea about parking rules, or about how the motorist reacts to parking attendants—I had no idea. But from the day I got the uniform I was absolutely excited! (Laughing.)” The same attendant shows me how the uniform serves as a working tool, providing status on the street as a way of communicating to the general public. Also internally, it joins the employees in a common identity and

perhaps even fend off some internal conflicts, as she suggests when she contrasts this work with her previous work in fashion retail. In the job interview, she emphasized her background in the hospitality and retail industries as qualifications for the job and had a light-hearted, smiling appearance. When asked how she felt about having to wear a uniform, she said: *that is so cool!* In a later interview with this employee, she told me about how happy she was about moving from retail to parking patrol: She—an immigrant—had felt bullied by Danish female colleagues in the clothing retail store she used to work in. The Danish girls were very preoccupied with fashion and they did not like her way of dressing.

Turning to the parking attendants' street appearances: On the street, the attendants walked calmly, never hurrying, while looking at windshields to check parking tickets or licenses. While writing a fine, the parking attendants would typically act in a very firm manner. If the car was fined because it needed a ticket, the parking attendants' handheld computer did not print the ticket before a fixed number of minutes had passed, giving the car drivers the chance of getting to their car, but also providing the attendants with evidence that they, in accordance with the style of service they were intended to provide, were not too keen on fining people, but would give people a fair chance. While waiting the fixed number of minutes for the bill to be printed automatically, the attendants stood straight and visible beside the car. This impression management was carried out knowing that all eyes are watching on the street and that in case the car driver came and was upset, they would have given him or her the chance to have his or her say, signaling availability and a neat and tidy piece of work: measuring the distance from the car to the corner correctly, taking pictures, documenting the violated regulations. In the rougher areas of town, some attendants chose to walk through the street very visibly, perhaps chatting to a few people on their way, to make sure that potentially rough car drivers got notice before the attendant turned round and walked back down the street and began to write fines. This gave people the chance to signal or call each other to warn about the parking attendant's presence. Putting on this act of being very visible was both an act of showing the style of service and the image of the organization as not directly aiming at earning money and an act of self-protection. The parking attendant's appearance signaled: available and kind, but although many would meet personal acquaintances on the street, their role was also to keep a distance and not get personally involved with people. Asked about how the attendants handled unpleasant street encounters, one attendant explains how she controls her display of emotions:

“If you go over to a car driver, if you have just issued him a fine, you know he will be angry and unpleasant ... If you go to him with a smile on your face, he just looks at you and says, ‘Why is she smiling, goddammit? She just charged me and she is smiling at me. I am angry and she is smiling at me?’ But it helps, it really helps a lot I really mean it, I smile all the time. It doesn't matter if he says: ‘you are a fucking parking attendant or fucking bastard’—I have heard stuff like that. Yes, I just smile and say ‘thank you.’ I know you are angry, because you just got charged 500 kroner and that is a lot of money ... I just do my job, and of course I know that car drivers don't look at me personally. They just look at the uniform and it is the uniform they hate. But I love my uniform, and I really like it. So I try to explain to them that I am just doing my job, but I do remember how it was when I was a car driver and got charged (laughing).”



Like Robyn Leidner's McDonalds workers (Leidner, 1993), this attendant finds that the uniform shields her from physical attacks. Looking neat—and looking neat in a uniform—is about having an appearance that does not attract attention and therefore does not attract attention away from the uniform and the status of authority that the uniform provides. This raises the question of whether the diversity of the attendants sometimes compromised their safety. One of the reasons for using diversity management is described by the managers as the expectation that the organization will be more trustworthy if its image is that of representing the differences within the population—this is the organizational aesthetics. However, while they represent diversity at a collective level, as a pool of ambassadors for the municipality, the attendants usually walk one by one or two by two on the street, making the diversity of the corps invisible in the isolated encounter between the parking attendants and people on the street. Discriminatory harassment on the street was common and based on judgments from the parking attendant's looks. Verbal assaults referred for instance to stereotypes related to race, religion, gender, and status judged on the basis of looks: “you fucking Muslim!” (to an attendant with dark skin), or “you fucking whore” (to a blonde female attendant), or “you just took that job because you weren't able to get any other job” (the job is quite difficult to get).

Discussion

Having evaluated the role of aesthetics in the recruitment, training, and service encounters in the vignettes above, we can now consider how the theory of aesthetic labor contributes to our understanding of work in a public sector organization and critically assess the consequences of aesthetic labor in this type of job. Finally, we can consider the implications and significance of this analysis for the theory of aesthetic labor.

As was to be expected, there is widespread use of aesthetic labor in this public sector organization. This study confirms other studies that show that employers primarily focus on aesthetic labor in the recruitment process, although some aesthetic training is given in the introduction course and small corrections are made along the way. The question is how it works in this “genre” of service: a public service/authority role, associated with a high risk of assaults, in an organization with an external image of being politically correct in terms of exercising justice, an internal image of prioritizing health and safety and cost containment, and both an external and internal image of diversity. The expectations were that the aesthetic resources differed from those seen in private service sector jobs, that aesthetic labor had other than commercial purposes, which contained ambivalence. Finally, the analysis was expected to show that the consequences in terms of discrimination differed from the discriminatory consequences seen in private service occupations given the large focus on diversity and equality in this organization.

The analysis showed that the aesthetic resources mobilized from employees in relation to the aesthetics *of* the organization were wearing the uniform correctly and “looking diverse in a way that should not attract negative attention.” Aesthetic resources mobilized in relation to the aesthetics *in* the organization were athletic skills, calmness, avoiding stigma, and Danish language skills. In relation to these public service workers, a different *kind* of aesthetics from the one described in previous aesthetic labor research

is valued. While the managers in high-end retail industries described in aesthetic labor research that they would typically look for employees who matched their customers' social class, the aesthetics of diversity applied here in this parking center has to meet the broad public. The employees here have to look *neat*, not class. Their uniforms have to be clean and tidy, but as a corps they have to mirror different groups in society. The employees take pride from wearing and caring for these uniforms which work as a shield against assaults and "soften" the image of diversity.

In regard to the purposes of mobilizing these resources, there was indeed a great deal of ambivalence and ambiguity. However, the question is then for what other purposes this all-important argument is applied. As we saw, aesthetics was applied by one manager to divert attention from some uncomfortable issues related to diversity. The manager's political ambition to on the one hand show that it is possible to work in this organization as a Muslim scarf-wearing woman conflicted with her political notions of gender equality. This situation and perceived dilemma arising from treating everyone differently while pursuing equality are well known in the Danish context, but what is new here is that in this case aesthetics—not looking the part, not blending in with the corps—is used as the final argument to explain to the woman why she cannot keep her job. Aesthetics is a legitimate cause in this organization for dismissing people, which is why the manager can use it despite the fact that a scarf-wearing Muslim woman in trousers—which the manager preferred—is indeed a very seldom sight, which might attract a lot of negative attention on the street.

What is interesting here, concerning aesthetics, is that it trumps all arguments because it is closely tied to health and safety, something which the employees have a very direct interest in, and the managers also have due to the large focus on absence due to illness and cost containment in the administration. There is broad consensus in the collective story of the organization, that aesthetic labor can fend off potential conflict on the street and thus be used to improve health and safety. "Looking neat on the street" means accommodating the citizen-consumer's taste. The more uncomfortable a citizen-consumer is about the looks and appearance of a parking attendant, the more likely the citizen-consumer is to attack the attendant verbally or physically. The strong relation between aesthetics and health and safety, however, also makes a very strong case for mobilizing aesthetics.

Returning to the model of corporeal labor proposed by Karlsson (2012), organizations with large focus on cost containment mobilize athletic skills and organizations with a large focus on "selling services" mobilize aesthetic skills. This study to some extent supports this model, because the managers are under pressure to reduce costs on sickness absence, and they do discuss it during the job interviews. However, this purpose is also ambiguous: One person was hired in spite of the fact that he openly spoke of his high risk of illness, but his other aesthetic skills weighed higher in the final assessment, taking focus from cost containment. While this exception to the rule may indeed only be an exception, this difference may also be explained by the differing labor market systems in Denmark and Sweden. In the Swedish context, employers cannot fire employees on sick leave, whereas this is easier in the Danish "flexicurity" model (Lund et al., 2009). Either way, the example draws attention to the process of weighing different types of athletic skills against each other and to how an individual's aesthetic skills can be of a kind that impresses the managers so much that they dispense of other principles of cost containment.



Conclusions

This paper applied the concept of aesthetic labor, which has been studied primarily in private retail and hospitality industries and only in commercial settings, to a new setting: the public service job of parking attendant in a Danish municipality. In the context of New Public Management, we expected that the frontline public worker's aesthetic labor takes shape from the image of a citizen-consumer, but also from the contested and noncommercial purposes that characterize public organizations. In this case, the critical issue proved to be how to balance low-status authority work with the citizen-consumer's desire to have pleasant service encounters.

Going through the three themes of recruiting for the job, training for the job, and doing the job, the analysis showed that the job as parking attendant requires a complex set of aesthetic skills, which balance authority with a pleasant and neat appearance. The study particularly contributes to the theory of aesthetic labor by showing the ambivalent purposes of aesthetic labor: The requirements for these aesthetic skills are perceived as legitimate by managers and employees, who relate them to health and safety and professional pride. However, and more critically, the strong consensus about the legitimacy of aesthetics in this organization opens up for using aesthetics for political purposes, in this case to further and/or restrain diversity.

The study supports recent suggestions to nuance the theory of aesthetic labor by showing that managers work with not only a matrix of technical, social, and aesthetic skills but also a matrix of aesthetic skills consisting of many different aspects of appearance.

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End notes

- ¹ The Danish term *parkeringsvagt* contains the component *parkering*, corresponding to the English *parking*, and the English term *parking attendant* is therefore a close approximation of *parkeringsvagt*. Another common term used in Britain is “traffic warden.” In addition to being used (both in British and in American English) in the same sense as British “traffic warden,” *parking attendant* is frequently used to refer to persons whose job is to park cars belonging to others. In this paper, the term *parking attendant* is used solely to refer to persons whose primary responsibility it is to check parked cars for compliance with parking laws.