Using focus groups as a tool to develop a hospitality work-life research study

John W. O'Neill

*School of Hospitality Management, The Pennsylvania State University,
University Park, Pennsylvania, USA*

Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to describe how the results of the qualitative research method of focus groups may be used as conceptual data at the onset of a research study to inform researchers regarding relevant issues for future more in-depth quantitative study.

Design/methodology/approach – Seven focus group sessions with a total of 50 participants were conducted, each focus group with six to eight participants. All focus groups included the homogeneous participants of new entrants to the hospitality industry. Focus group questions were inductive and naturalistic and centered on career expectations and work-life issues. Sessions averaged 1 hour and 15 minutes and were conducted by trained graduate students.

Findings – The paper suggests that long, unpredictable hours create both work-related and non-work stress. Further, there is general agreement regarding the stressors and benefits associated with working in the hospitality industry.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations include the use of senior, hospitality management majors, all of whom had hospitality industry employment experience, but some of whom had fewer than 1,000 hours of such experience.

Originality/value – This work illustrates how focus groups may fit into a larger research study involving the hospitality industry. This work also explores the common issue, but understudied topic of work-life balance in the hotel industry. In so doing, it provides greater understanding of the issue to researchers.

Keywords Focus groups, Hospitality, Work-life balance, Qualitative research, Work-related stress, Non-work stress, Stress, Hospitality management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Some of the most significant and robust contributions to the hospitality literature have been made by studies employing qualitative methods (Cohen, 1988), and more qualitative methods are needed in hospitality research (Mehmetoglu and Altinay, 2006). At the commencement of a large-scale research study regarding work and life issues in the hospitality industry, a qualitative, conceptual, exploratory understanding of the work and life issues of entrants to the hospitality industry can be obtained through focus groups. The focus group method provides data in a social context, and it is an appropriate method for use in the initial development of a larger research

program (Bojlen and Lunde, 1995). The present work portrays outcomes of the initial conceptual step in a program of research regarding work and life issues in the hotel industry. This work aimed to obtain first-hand information from senior hospitality management majors by conducting focus groups. This work further aimed to analyze all of the data and identify areas of similarities and differences across the focus groups.

According to Bojlen and Lunde (1995), focus group research is a qualitative method with interesting properties. It is performed by planned discussion and interview with a small group of people conducted by a moderator. The participants are sampled from the study population. The aim is to obtain knowledge of the participant's considerations and ideas regarding a relatively specific topic. The method is feasible in illuminating the variation of viewpoints held in a population. It is used as a single source of data or in combination with other methods. As the method provides data in a social context, it is used as an alternative to individual interviews, when appropriate, or in the initial development of a research program (Bojlen and Lunde, 1995). The method typically provides the researcher with with more surprises than other research methods (Grudens-Schuck *et al.*, 2004).

Focus groups have emerged as a popular technique for gathering qualitative data, both among sociologists and across a wide range of academic and applied research areas (Morgan, 1996). Focus groups are currently used as both a self-contained method and in combination with surveys and other research methods, most notably individual, in-depth interviews. Comparisons between focus groups and both surveys and individual interviews help to show the specific advantages of focus groups in producing interaction among participants (Morgan, 1996).

Focus groups have challenges. Measuring strength of opinion from focus group data is problematic (Sim, 1998). The indicators used to measure attitudes in orthodox survey research are largely inapplicable to the context of focus groups. When comparing data from different focus groups, inferences may be drawn as to the presence of absence of certain views or issues across groups, but not in terms of their relative strength. Also, both methodological and epistemological objections can be raised against attempts to generalize from focus group data. Theoretical generalization is likely to be more feasible than empirical generalization, and if the latter is considered fruitful, it is likely to be of a provisional nature (Sim, 1998). The subject work accounts for these relevant considerations.

Krueger and Casey (2000) summarize that focus groups tend to be an effective research methodology when researchers are seeking to identify a range of ideas or feelings that people have about something, to uncover factors influencing multifaceted concepts, to have ideas emerge from the group, and to later design a larger quantitative study. On the other hand, they indicate that focus groups tend to be ineffective when researchers want participants to arrive at a consensus, want participants to be educated, are seeking sensitive information that should not be shared in a group, or need statistical projections (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Since in the subject work, the researchers sought to identify a range of ideas, to identify factors influencing multifaceted concepts, to have ideas emerge from groups, and to design a larger quantitative study, focus groups are deemed an appropriate method for this work. Further, since the researchers did not want participants to arrive at a consensus, to be educated, to share sensitive information, or need statistical projections, focus groups are deemed an appropriate method for this work.

It should be noted that in the subject study, focus groups were one of two qualitative methods initially implemented to inform the researchers regarding relevant issues of

work and life in the hotel industry. The results from this conceptual stage were employed for future, more in-depth quantitative study, including for the development of survey instruments. The other method used for this purpose was in-person interviews with hotel managers taking place in the managers' homes. This paper, however, concentrates on the focus groups.

Work and life issues
The hotel industry is a large and important segment of the economy, providing continuous service 24 hours per day, seven days per week (O'Neill *et al.*, 2009). A review of the academic literature shows that work and family issues have received limited attention in hospitality and tourism journals, and there is no evidence that focus groups have been employed to study this multifaceted issue. While other literature in hospitality has focused on new entrants' perceptions of issues related to work-related job characteristics (e.g. Weaver, 2009), there is a dearth of literature regarding work-family-related issues. Many of the characteristics of jobs in the hospitality field (e.g. long hours scheduled at nonstandard times, on-call hours, emphasis on face time, and geographic mobility as a prerequisite for career advancement), however, have long been associated with work-family concerns in other literatures. There are also undoubtedly important ways in which people's lives off the job shape their job choices and their experiences on the job in the hospitality industry.

Turnover is one of the most prevalent concerns in the hotel industry, which has been characterized as having a "turnover culture" (Deery and Shaw, 1997, p. 377; O'Neill *et al.*, 2009). Wasmuth and Davis (1983a,b,c) were two of the first researchers to investigate turnover in the hotel industry. They found that annual turnover among European and North American hotel employees averaged 60 percent, and was disproportionately high in the food and beverage, front office, and housekeeping departments. Annual turnover rates have been estimated to be 50 percent for hourly and 21 percent for management positions (Smith Travel Research, 2003). During the first decade of the 2000s, annual employee turnover rates were estimated to range between 17 and 28 percent on average throughout the US, with the hospitality industry recording the highest annual turnover rates, ranging from 49 to 60 percent (Hauknecht and Trevor, 2011). Marriott estimated that with each one percent increase in its employee turnover rate, the company loses between $5 and $15 million in revenues (Schlesinger and Heskett, 1991).

Low pay, difficult work, and irregular (often unpredictable) work hours have been identified as the three primary obstacles in the recruitment and retention of managers in the hotel industry (Dermody and Holloway, 1998). Work schedules seem to be a particularly critical issue in the hotel industry. In particular, participants in Stalcup's and Pearson's (2001) study indicated long hours and the necessity of relocating regularly were key reasons for turnover. In almost every case, when long hours were mentioned as a reason for turnover, the complaint was not regarding working too much, but about not having enough time to spend with families.

Recent declines in business travel and tourism forced hotel organizations to critically examine operations and performance and to reassess strategies for gaining competitive advantage in this highly competitive sector of the economy. Given the challenges and difficulties the hospitality industry historically has faced with work-family conflict (e.g. Dermody and Holloway, 1998; Stalcup and Pearson, 2001), hotel organizations may be able to gain strategic advantage over their competitors by effectively addressing work-life issues that affect their employees' productivity.

Specifically, attention to the work and family interface, an increasingly popular issue in contemporary organizational research, may reveal new ways in which hotel companies can position themselves to attract and retain valued employees, improve performance and guest satisfaction, and reduce industry problems such as employee turnover.

The subject research tapped the views of entrants to the hospitality industry using focus groups to obtain untainted information regarding work and life expectations. The importance of an individual's expectations regarding the work experience is noted in research regarding employee turnover. According to the met-expectation hypothesis, an individual is more likely to be dissatisfied or absent from work and leave an organization or an industry when their work experience violates their expectations (Wanuous *et al.*, 1992). Gaining the perspectives of work and life issues of individuals months before their entering the workforce, provides an interesting perspective into factors that predict negative outcomes. Realistic job previews and expectation-lowering procedures have been found to reduce turnover by providing information about both rewards and challenges associated with the job (Buckley *et al.*, 1998).

Work and family issues need to be examined to better understand the turnover problem. Cohen (1997) noted that non-work factors play a significant role in predicting employee turnover. Additionally, conflict between work and non-work roles explained significant variance in predicting job dissatisfaction and turnover cognitions of work factors alone (Hom and Kinicki, 2001). The unfolding model of turnover (Lee et al., 1996) suggests that individuals experience a "shock to the system," often due to non-work factors in which they evaluate their job and make a decision to leave.

Method
Krueger and Casey (2000) indicate that focus groups should be comprised of a relatively homogeneous group of people. An earlier study in the *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* that polled 21 participants concluded that future research of new entrants to the hospitality industry would benefit from a larger and more homogeneous sample (Weaver, 2009). This work involved conducting focus groups with a total of 50 students majoring in hospitality management at a large, US university, a relatively homogeneous group. A total of 93 percent of participants who were contacted agreed to participate in the study. There were a total of seven focus groups, ranging in size between six and eight participants each. Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest that focus groups should contain between six and eight participants. All of the participants had experience inside the hospitality industry either professionally and/or through internships. Most of the participants planned to work in hotels, and most planned to become managers in either the rooms or food and beverage areas.

Focus group interview questions should be both inductive and naturalistic (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Thus, the subject work did not employ the rigid, a priori approach tyical of a quantitative study. The focus group question instrument for the subject work included a series of relevant questions, many of which were intended to compel participants to consider both the positives and negatives of work in the hotel industry, and some of which asked the participants to consider the issues from different vantage points. Since effective focus group research is intended to illuminate viewpoints regarding a relatively specific topic (Bojlen and Lunde, 1995), the majority of questions focused on work and life in the hotel industry. The questions in the subject work were categorized into four related topic areas:

(1) Immediate career expectations and plans, including expectations about the types of positions they would like to hold, skills needed to succeed, and career mobility. Similarly, participants were asked to identify what positive features of the industry or hotels attracted them to the field, and the features they believe present challenges.

(2) Family planning and expectations of partner/spouse, number and timing of children, delaying or sequencing of work and family commitments and expectations regarding the division of labor in the home.

(3) Work and family life concerns.

(4) Suggestions regarding corporate human resource innovations within the hospitality industry.

The instructions clearly stated that responses would be anonymous, that respondents did not need to answer any particular question, and that they were free to leave at any time, consistent with the university's institutional review board requirements. These protections were designed to increase the participants' comfort level when discussing the issues. In addition, to prevent less vocal respondents from being excluded from the discussion, each participant was asked to introduce him or herself at the beginning, and all participants responded to at least some of the questions.

Focus group administration
Each facilitator for the focus groups was trained for one hour regarding the protocols. The facilitators were graduate students who were not affiliated with the hospitality school to enhance confidentiality and to help create the comfortable, permissive environment that tends to make focus groups effective (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Facilitators commenced each focus group by making the same statements, requested that subjects read a statement regarding the purpose and intent of the study, and to sign their name to that statement if they agreed to participate. Consistent with recommendations by Morgan (1996), moderators encouraged interaction among participants. The focus groups were conducted in a private meeting room located on the university campus. Participants were recruited from the capstone course for the hospitality major, ensuring that most were seniors and hence were in reasonably close proximity to career if not family issues. Participation in the sessions was voluntary. Each focus group session lasted approximately one hour and 15 minutes. This method was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Focus group data analyses
All focus group discussions were audio-taped and then transcribed by the trained graduate students. The transcribed data were archived in the QSR NVivo 7.0 software program for subsequent analyses. Triangulation of the data revealed significant similarity of the responses among the different focus groups as described in depth in the Results section of this paper.

Results
Sample characteristics
Of the 50 focus group participants whose responses were taped and used in the qualitative analyses, there were 31 females and 18 males (plus one of unidentified gender) and 45 White, four non-White, and one of unknown ethnic background. Given

the small number of non-white respondents, information is reported regarding the gender of those responsible for specific quotations, but ethnic information is not reported.

In general, results from the focus groups paint a consistent picture regarding how life and work operate, blend, and often conflict for hospitality employees. However, the picture is seen from different angles by different participants, so unique contributions are provided by each group of participants, as well. This article continues with the common themes, and then focuses on specific and unique themes provided by each group.

Common themes

Focus group analysis tends to be based on pattern identification (Krueger and Casey, 2000). The subject work found a pattern that there is something about careers in the hotel industry that attracts certain types of individuals. The focus groups all suggest that working in the hospitality industry is very social, service-oriented, fast-paced, and varied. Many of the participants had weighed alternative career options, and decided on hospitality careers precisely because of these factors.

Many participants liked the task variety, while others felt the rapid pace made the work shift pass by quickly. Effective reporting of focus group results includes quotes (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Multiple quotes follow. For example, a female participant claimed, "I like the fast paced world ... You're always dealing with different things" while another female participant mentioned, "I need a job where it's going to be something completely different every day, and it's going to challenge me to walk into the door. [That's] the only thing that's going to get me out of bed". Some participants liked the idea of service and helping others, and almost all were very socially-oriented. For example, a female participant stated, "[For] any position in this industry, you have to be a people person. You have to like people and you have to not be bothered by them." One male participant cited:

> What would normally be a slower period for the hotel over a quarter and you'd have two really crazy busy weeks and the rest of the time really slow. So it really depends. I mean, that's one of the things that I like about the industry, it's not just flat line, steady the whole time. Every day is different, every week is different ... They're all open 24/7.

Related to the nature of hotels themselves was the notion that, for employees, hotels are often family like. Many participants mentioned hotel events that were held for the employees and their families, that they had friends both on the job and in the industry, and that expressing family concerns and bringing family members to the workplace were welcome, particularly in well-run hotels. For example, a female participant stated:

> Another good thing about working at a hotel is that there's a support structure ... So whether it's myself or another employee in the hotel, there's always somebody who can take up or finish or do whatever you do to get through that day. So there's always that support that anybody can leave and take care of a family.

Similarly, the participants mentioned hotels as having a quality almost like family, with friendliness and support as positive aspects of the jobs.

Working time arrangements in the industry often involve hours that are long, unpredictable, and non-standard. For entry-level managers, the jobs may effectively demand almost all of one's time, and participants were aware of this. For instance, one female participant stated, "[E]very single person I tell them about my major [responds], 'Do you know the hours?' 'You don't wanna get involved with that ... ' And I say 'Yeah, I know'" Similarly, participants understood that, as managers, they often will be

on call 24/7 and may need to drop everything else at a moment's notice to solve a crisis at the hotel. The participants also were aware that managerial positions in the industry commonly require work at night, on weekends, and during holidays due to the 24/7 nature of the industry.

These working time arrangements may improve as one advances in a career. For example, a male participant noted, "If you work hard in the beginning . . . and you build yourself up to that management position, then you're the one making the decisions when your vacation time is, what day you want off . . . " The participants also generally reported that the total number of hours worked generally reduced with advancement. This point should not be overstated. There is no reason to believe that the participants thought that senior managers were working 40-hour weeks. Something like a reduction from a 60 to a 50 (or 55) hour workweek is probably more accurate.

Geographic mobility and willingness to relocate are important in the early stages of hotel industry careers. Akin to high levels of time commitment, successful hotel managers must be willing to relocate to advance in the industry. The participants all were aware of this issue. Generally, all focus groups tended to view job-related relocations positively prior to taking on family commitments, but viewed them as more negatively once family responsibilities emerged.

Time arrangements and related high levels of time commitment and geographic mobility early in the career are linked to a strong belief in the meritocratic nature of the industry, and existence of fast-track careers. The participants indicated that "paying dues" early in the career, through long hours and willingness to do anything for the job including relocation, would facilitate quick movement up the career ladder to where hours would become more manageable and relocation less frequent. One female participant stated, "If you're willing to move around, you can advance a lot more quickly than if someone did not . . . ".

Control over hours and reduced relocation as one advances are linked to the job structure of the industry. The participants felt that the perks of advancement came with and in large part were due to differences between the types of jobs available in the industry. For those who moved straight up the career ladder to a corporate office position, hours were expected to become more manageable because corporate offices do not typically operate at night, on weekends, or on holidays. And once in a corporate office job, the need to relocate is less likely. Most participants believed that jobs could be taken later in human resources, marketing, or accounting to escape the 24/7 character of hotel operations.

Across all focus groups, concerns were expressed regarding negative outcomes of positions in the hotel industry, including stress and burnout. The high levels of time commitment, energy required, emotion control and task variety, while seen as positive in some sense, were also viewed as problematic in the long-term. Participants worried about stress and burnout, and felt that the demands of a hotel career would eventually decrease over time. One female participant expressed this concern during the focus groups and said, "I worry a lot just about being burned out after eight to ten years . . . You just really invest a lot of yourself and . . . I think it's very easy to just burn out and just be so tired of working . . . ".

All focus groups felt that delayed childrearing is associated with hotel careers. Whether expressed positively as a way to "have fun" when one is young, or negatively as a cost required by a hotel career; participants felt that delayed childrearing is common among hotel managers. One female participant cited an example of a couple she knew, "They're in their early 30s and they both were working in the hospitality

industry and then whenever they were 28, they decided that they wanted to have kids and they knew they couldn't do it."

Although there are no hard data regarding the phenomenon, its existence seems very likely given the intense demands of hotel careers on employees in their 20s and even beyond.

The intense demands of careers in hotel management were also linked to a belief that marital conflict and dissolution are common in the industry. The participants believed that the demands of the careers would eventually lessen, but also wondered how senior managers held their family lives together in the face of these tough careers. The participants also were aware of the frequency of divorce among hotel managers. One female participant recalled:

> My general manager was the most amazing person you'll ever meet, the sweetest guy in the world. He wasn't married. I thought, "Hmmm ... that's weird because he's such a nice guy." You just totally think he'd be the best husband ever. Come to find out he was divorced because his job just totally consumed him. I mean, he's (a general manager) amazing but he sacrifice[d] a wife and two kids for it. They said, "You're not ever here."

Finally and relatedly, all of the focus groups expressed a belief in the prevalence and advantages of assortive mating. The participants believed that the practice of hoteliers meeting and marrying other hoteliers is common. They did not express the view that assortive mating occurred because it was easy to meet others in the industry. Instead, they believed that only other employees in the industry could understand the often relentless demands of hotel careers. A female participant reflected such a view by saying, "... I think that helps a lot sometimes ... when your spouse is somebody who also works in the industry because they understand. They understand like when you get called in ...".

In part, assortive mating may serve to inhibit marital conflict and dissolution.

Different themes

Also, themes emerged regarding the hospitality industry that either appeared in only a minority of focus groups, or that cast a different light on a theme reported from other groups.

Among these differences was the way that the social and service aspects of the industry were viewed. On the one hand, some participants viewed service as almost noble. For example, one female participant stated, "I'm always concerned with other people's feelings ... making sure everyone's happy all the time" Others were more likely, however, to view "caring" as part of the job, and one which, because it involved high levels of emotion control, was difficult to maintain over the course of a career.

Another difference between participants surrounded issues of childcare. Many participants frequently expressed a fear of strangers caring for their children, and presumed that either they or their partner would perform most childcare. For example, one male participant relayed his experience with a summer camp and said, "I don't like childcare. I've worked in camps, and the parents drop them off as early as they could and pick them up as late as they can. And that just made me mad. I would never do that to my kids." For other participants, it was not fear of strangers that concerned them, but rather the high cost of quality child care (particularly relative to the relatively low incomes associated with hotel employment, at least during years of employment), and not being available for their children, particularly over holidays or during important events in a child's life. The time demands of the

industry were also viewed differently across different groups of participants. Although most of the participants devoted much of their discussions to time demands, a few discussed the issue of the ebbs and flows of time demands. The up and down nature of the jobs, with some days of the week being busier than others, and some weeks and months of the year being more demanding, was explicitly mentioned by a few participants. For example, a male participant characterized such demands as, "Seasonally driven certainly, conventions especially on the catering side there is truly an ebb and flow." There is no doubt that such ebbs and flows exist, and perhaps most of the participants simply took their existence for granted, and not worth mentioning. Absent further data or sheer speculation, this difference is a puzzle for exploration in future research. Finally, some of the participants discussed childhood experiences through family employment in the industry as a pathway into the industry, but this topic did not arise in most groups.

In part, these differences may be attributed to the divergent perspectives of participants in this work. Some participants might view emotion control as noble because it enhances the experiences of and often helps guests. Other participants may find emotion control more of a burden. Similarly, some participants may believe that childcare should be avoided, but could end up using formal or informal care once a child is born.

Especially in light of the fact that the subject work included seven different focus groups, however, it is remarkable how many themes were commonly expressed by most groups of participants. Such agreement on similar themes provides reason to believe that this qualitative data have shed light on relevant issues for future quantitative research regarding these issues.

Discussion and conclusions

The present research provided an opportunity to obtain a targeted, magnified look at the work and family issues associated with future managers in the hotel industry based on the results of focus groups. Focus groups appear to have been effective as a methodology to employ in this work because ideas emerged from the focus groups, and the study identified a range of multifaceted ideas and feelings that participants have regarding work and life in the hotel industry, each of which tend to be the types of outcomes of successful focus groups (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Because the problems of interest span both work and non-work domains, it was useful to have several different focus groups. From a macro-industry view, a unique characteristic of the hospitality industry may be the almost "theater-like" quality of the workplace. Many participants also cited the beautiful settings, the good food and accommodations as benefits, and that interactions with guests were often in a party-like atmosphere. Further, each hotel employee has his or her own role to perform and arrive at work dressed formally (e.g. suits, jackets, ties, etc) or in a uniform (e.g. hourly employees) when interacting with the public. Good performance and success at work are defined as displaying positive affect, being responsive to guest requests (or demands), generally creating a pleasant environment and delivering excellent service.

On the other hand, like many occupations today, long and unpredictable hours within hospitality are cited as a major source of stress. One thing that sets the industry apart from other occupations with long and unpredictable hours is that hotel managers must model emotional restraint and regulation and positive affect throughout the day with both external paying guests and internal personnel. Interestingly, it is one of the

most positive features of the hotel industry (e.g. the party atmosphere) coupled with one of the industry challenges, the long hours, that provides the basis for this unique characteristic. From the results of the focus groups, it appears that this unique characteristic may be a predictor of hotel industry turnover. As previously discussed, turnover is known to be a significant problem in the hotel industry.

Implications
According to most participants, the long, unpredictable hours, the norm to be infinitely accessible to employees and guests, and the requirement to consistently show positive affect in social interactions pose significant potential physical, mental and emotional burdens for hotel managers and their families. These burdens may underlie problems such as substance use, infidelity, and divorce. There is a need for researchers in future studies to more fully explore these emotionally arousing interactions from a number of perspectives and research levels. Specifically, there is a need to more closely examine the daily work experiences of hotel managers and understand the relationship between such occupational conditions and their daily experiences on and off the job. For example, a daily diary study that examines managers' emotional well-being, quality of interpersonal interaction, and work performance in more depth may be informative.

One significant contribution of this project is that it tapped the work and life perceptions and expectations of entrants into the hospitality industry. The work psychology and management research consistently demonstrates that employees' violated expectations (and possibly spousal expectations) are critical predictors of intentions to turnover or voluntarily leave an organization. Therefore, it was important to determine the initial expectations of newly educated hotel industry entrants. The knowledge of work-related expectations for college seniors in focus groups was similar to the realities of work provided by quantitative surveys of hospitality managers in other research (e.g. O'Neill *et al.*, 2009). However, hotel management seniors did not have specific ideas regarding how they would handle family issues and how work and family demands may influence each other. Although they wanted to have children (most after approximately 10 years of employment), they generally did not know how they would manage childcare and maintain a marital relationship while working in the hospitality industry. An implication for the practice of hospitality management education may be for faculty to provide hospitality management seniors with a more complete and realistic preview regarding not only the benefits of working in the industry, but also challenges regarding the management and balance of both work in the hospitality industry and simultaneous family demands from both spouses and children. An implication for the practice of hospitality management is that such realistic job previews could become a component of new employee orientations programs.

It is plausible that during the first ten years in the hospitality industry, greater formation and development of family expectations may occur among hotel managers. During this time period, individuals may examine their personal life priorities, and reassess and revise their work and life expectations. Also during this time, work and family issues (and possible violated expectations or perceived mismatches) may significantly contribute to managerial voluntary turnover. It is necessary for future research projects to more carefully study hotel managers to assess the development of family formation expectations, the integration of work and family, and the perceptions of possible work-family mismatch or violations of expectations, work strain and voluntary turnover.

Finally, like most industries, the labor force of the hotel industry has a pyramidal structure. At the top of the pyramid are corporate executives who oversee hotel operations, plan and develop new hotels, and build strategies to competitively position themselves among their industry competitors. At the bottom of the pyramid are hourly employees: the housekeepers, front desk clerks, and food service workers who are primarily response for the daily operations of hotels. In the middle of the pyramid are hotel-level managers who act as liaisons between the top and bottom of the organization as well as outside the organization. That is, managers are responsible for connecting with hourly employees, guests, vendors, and corporate headquarters. The long and unpredictable hours that seem to unbalance hotel managers' lives may result from juggling the strategic goals of top-level corporate strategists and the needs of hourly employees. Future research should involve more detailed studies to determine whether and how corporate executives in the hotel industry conceptualize the quality of hotel managers' and hourly employees' work lives as a strategic issue, one that, if handled innovatively and well, could help the organization to recruit and retain strong, talented employees, save recruitment, training, and health care costs, and help the organization compete. In other words, hospitality organizations proactively addressing work and life balance issues could in doing so obtain competitive advantage. In addition, there is a need to interview incumbents of hourly jobs in the hotel industry. Often these jobs require little education or training, offer relatively low compensation and minimal benefits or flexibility, and are frequently characterized by high levels of turnover, which creates costs and other challenges for hotel managers, organizations, and the industry.

Limitations
As with all research, strengths and weaknesses are present in the sampling and methodology of the present study. The inclusion of hotel management students provided a unique understanding of issues that novices to the industry face, which was enriched by interactive group discussion in a focus group setting (Morgan, 1997). This approach also may have systematically contributed to biased responses (Maxwell, 1992). Further, the results may not be entirely applicable to practicing managers. Future research, such as conducting exit interviews, is necessary to fully explore this possible sampling bias and better understand the role family or life issues may play in turnover. Also, as previously discussed, while the study reported in this paper concentrates on focus groups, a simultaneous project involving in-person, in-home interviews with hotel managers was conducted to improve the generalizability of the findings. It should be noted that there was general agreement between these two groups of participants regarding issues and concerns pertaining to working in the hospitality industry and managing/balancing family and home demands. Again, though the subject of this paper is on focus groups, both the focus groups and the managerial interviews assisted the researchers with forming a larger, quantitative study regarding work and life in the hotel industry, including the development of survey instruments, a typical use of focus groups.

A large percentage of potential participants who were contacted agreed to participate in the study. However, a small percentage did not participate, indicating the possibility that those truly experiencing serious time burdens and conflict may not have believed they had the time or resources to commit to a 1.25-hour focus group. Additionally, such individuals may not have desired to discuss work-life issues. Of those who agreed to participate, social desirability (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003) may have

biased their responses. Although various attempts were made to create a safe, secure, comfortable, and permissive environment as recommended by previous research involving focus groups (Krueger and Casey, 2000), and guarantee confidentiality of responses, some individuals may have been unwilling to disclose sensitive negative information that they may have believed would reflect poorly on their character or abilities.

Although qualitative methods such as focus groups with open-ended, semi-structured interviewing allow researchers to gain a deep and rich sense of how the work and life domains interact in the hospitality industry (Lee, 1999), drawbacks cannot be overlooked. The quality of responses are still subject to participant recollection of events and what they deemed to be worthy of mentioning (Silverman, 2000). While interview techniques may not be the optimal method of gathering objective information surrounding an event, indicating decreased descriptive validity, more relevant to this work is what specific events actually mean to those engaged in them, indicating high interpretative validity (Maxwell, 1992). Additionally, gathering several focus groups provided an opportunity to generate multiple perspectives regarding the same events or issues. In the subject work, the focus group results can be used to later design a larger quantitative study regarding work and life in the hotel industry, which is a typical use of focus group results (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

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Corresponding author
John W. O'Neill can be contacted at: jwo3@psu.edu