

Love's Labours Redressed: Reframing Emotional Labour as an interactive process within Service Work

Audrey Tang

Northamptonshire Healthcare Trust (Learning and Development), Newland House,
Northamptonshire, NN1 3EB, UK
audrey.tang@nght.nhs.uk; audrey@clickproductions.co.uk

Keywords: Emotional Labour, Service work, Teacher training, Teacher management

Abstract. Emotional labour was conceptualised by Hochschild [1] as a form of oppression on the service worker devised by a capitalist society; where workers' physical actions *and* emotions were managed by their organisation. Although persuasive and revealing, there is a clear need for a more updated approach. It will be suggested that there has been little investigation into understanding the *interactive nature* of emotional labour eg. The emotions of the manager and the recipient and their effect on the emotional labourer and their performance. Moreover, there needs to be a distinction between the different types of emotional labourer, the waitress being different type of service worker to the nurse. (While this distinction is discussed in detail by Tang [2], for the purposes of this paper, the emotional labourers are the teacher or the nurse¹ rather than the waitress or sales assistant.) This paper reviews the literature surrounding the effect of interaction on emotional labour performance and proposes that reframing emotional labour as an interactive concept has implications for emotional labour performance and design within nursing and teaching.²

Content

The two main standpoints within emotional labour to date are Hochschild's [1] broadly Marxian view that emotional labour represents the oppression of a service worker imposed by a capitalist organisation – where the worker's personality, feelings and displays of emotion are subject to regulation and rule by the management. The second influential standpoint is that of Bolton [3] who proposes that workers who performed emotional labour were not “organisational puppets”, but emotional beings whose behaviours, even though subjected to emotional rules and regulations, transcended them.

As emotional labour research also seeks to advise service organisations with regards to the design of the service, as well as the training and support of the workers, and as services are still a source of disappointment and complaint, it would suggest that either academic findings do not translate well in practice, or that they are misdirected. Emotional labour research (from both standpoints) remains largely centred on the performance of the labourer alone. However, the process of emotional labour

¹ The Nurse and teacher are identified as the research participants whose findings formed the basis of this paper were mainly teachers, however, the findings apply as much to nurses, junior doctors, healthcare and teaching assistants using both the distinction employed by Harris [4] of “Professional” and “Occupational” (in this case the workers fall within the “Professional” definition) as well as qualitative similarities of the job within the professional hierarchy which the researcher has established through working within the teaching profession for 12 years and currently supporting various departments within a hospital.

² The paper is summarised in the following video submitted for the 2013 International “Dance your PhD” competition and the author is performing as one of the pupil: <http://vimeo.com/75050863>

necessitates an emotional exchange between labourer and recipient. Due to the *transient nature of emotions* (eg. Theodosius; Hennig-Thurau et al; Rupp and Spencer [5,6,7]) recipients and managers may have an effect on the exchange either directly or remotely due to previous interactions. As such, investigation into the effect of the emotional labour interactions as they pertain to the worker and manager, *as well as* the recipient would be pertinent to fully understanding emotional labour performance.

Emotional labour was defined by Arlie Russell Hochschild [1] as a socially constructed behaviour where a service worker manages his or her "...feeling to create a publically observable facial and bodily display...This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honour as deep and integral to our individuality." [1,p7] Emotional labour is thus constructed as a uni-directional pressure from the organisation upon the labourer via "display rules". One of Hochschild's strongest claims is that emotional labour causes emotional strain for workers who perform it, because an organisation's display rules may be at variance with one's true feelings, for example, an educational behavioural unit demanding that the staff "...be warm and loving toward a child who kicks, screams, and insults you – a child whose problem is unlovability..." [1,p52]. Taking a Marxist standpoint, for Hochschild, this public, organisational, demand can lead to the worker feeling emotionally exhausted, or even (borrowing a Marxist term) "alienated" from their feelings. In the same way as "The factory boy's arm [functions] like a piece of machinery to produce wall-paper...we can become alienated from service [or "feeling"] in a service-producing society." [1,p7]. Hochschild's treatise made a damning statement on what she called the "Commercialization of human feeling" [1, title] and was an empirical and theoretical catalyst within sociological and organisational research.

The most prominent argument throughout Hochschild's work is the negative consequences of emotional labour performance: "...the human cost of becoming an 'instrument of labor'" [1,p3] which was alienating the worker from their own feelings. For example, as clinicians were "taught to feel properly" [1,p52]; or flight attendants were told to "Really smile. Really lay it on." [1,p4]; this resulted in a difficulty to "...release [themselves] from an artificially created exhaustion..." [1,p4]. This, she related to the growing (capitalist) "...market for emotional labour" [1, p91] where "...control over a worker's physical appearance [is] backed by continuous reference to the need to be "professional"" [1,p103]. Within the current capitalist labour market with a constant growth of the tertiary (services) sector of the economy, Hochschild impressed that even personality could be commoditised.

However, Sharon Bolton [3] proposed emotional labour had a more complex, personal dimension – caring. She recognised that it was more than just "emotionally crippled" actors [6,p290] performing highly regulated occupational "display roles" that Hochschild [1] and others had defined, stating that within certain emotional labour services (in her case, nursing) Hochschild's [1] definition "...undervalued aspects of a nurse's caring role." [3,p582]. For Bolton, instead of the conceptualisation of emotional labour as "...the 'degree of control which employers are able to exercise over employees' emotion management performances..." [3,p582], the professional carer is able to "...move beyond these rules and at their own discretion choose to add something extra to the patient/carer relationship" [3,p582]. Bolton's nurses reported "...desperately wanting to help [a] grieving woman" or having to "...'mask' feelings of abhorrence in order to help [a] mother come to terms with the decision to terminate her pregnancy" [3,p584] which caused them emotional strain, but they too mentioned the value of "...having a laugh" with each other [3,p585], and enjoy offering "...extra emotion work as a gift in the form of authentic caring behaviour." [3,p586]. The nurses were not "ordered" to display caring, they actually cared.

Although an under-developed finding, Ashforth and Humphrey, Morris and Feldman [16,15], and Bolton identified that emotional labour had a positive, and even motivational, draw for workers. Bolton further highlighted the importance of camaraderie within the profession and how this was

particular to emotional labour compared to other professions. Bolton and Boyd impressed that emotional labourers were not “emotionally crippled actors” [8,p290], but rather autonomous professionals as keen to promote their own impression management as offer emotion work altruistically to the recipient of their service, whether authorised by their managers or not.

Bolton and Boyd [8] conducted semi-structured and structured interviews with flight attendants and found that emotional labour performance could be framed as arising through four distinct motivators - 1. Pecuniary emotion management; 2. Prescriptive emotion management; 3. Presentational emotion management; 4. Philanthropic emotional management. While typology 1 and 2 fall within Hochschild’s [1] original approach, 3 and 4 clearly extend it, going some way to consolidate evidence that emotional labourers use personal emotional skills in their job (in the absence of display rules), and that there is an element of emotional work that is offered without request – or approval – from the organisation. In limited research, emotional support provided for the emotional labourer has been found to mediate the negative effects of service work [9] and as such, managers have been encouraged to “...extend more fair treatment towards them [the workers]” [7,p977]; or support the physician through encouraging patients to “...provide clear information about symptoms and outcome expectations during office visits [which] can improve patient-physician reciprocity and lower physician burnout.” [10,p220], however, these examples are few.

Emotional labour, especially for the nurse or teacher can be thankless on the side of the recipient. This is arguably understandable, as in both cases the professional meets the recipient during a time where they (the recipient) are vulnerable and/or afraid. People do not tend to go to hospitals through choice, and learning can be very frightening for the pupil [11]. This means that even a positive response may be less out of gratitude than out of relief (ie. if they are made to feel better, or they pass an exam). More often, it can be negative:

“They just don’t want to be there. You’ve spent all the term planning and you are working in your holidays and they come in and just sit there.” (Teacher, 2013)

“They are just unpleasant. It’s like a lion’s den when you go in. They are testing you all the time, they’ll pick you to pieces if you slip up.” (Teacher, 2013)

Theodosius [5] drew attention to Hochschild’s lack of recognition of the interactive process of the emotional labour encounter. Applying psychodynamic terminology and citing Bion [12] Theodosius reminds readers that in an emotional labour encounter is a relational social action “...when two characters or personalities meet, an emotional storm is created. If they make a sufficient contact to be aware of each other, an emotional state is produced by the conjunction of these two individuals” [12].

While it is not the aim of this paper to pursue a psychoanalytical approach to emotional labour, Theodosius nonetheless contributes to thinking about the effect of the recipient on the emotional labour interaction. In her study of healthcare professionals Theodosius [5] also finds that they are often frustrated by the display rules imposed on them, but also that “hidden” emotional processes affected emotional labour, especially in a long term relationship as on a ward – notably “transference”. “Klein, who substantially develops Freud’s notion of transference as an interactive process of exchange between two people suggests that...transference involved one person unconsciously getting rid of parts of the self, such as destructive emotions like anger and hate, into others” [5,p905]. This may offer an explanation for the importance of support from supervisors or colleagues – so employees can “get rid” of their negative emotions onto them, but also an explanation of why rapport with colleagues can be so helpful to the labourer (ie. because good humour can also be transferred), and once again repeat the notion that the recipient may also have some influence within emotional labour.

Shuler and Sypher [13] conducted a case study on the 911 dispatchers in a US call centre finding that “Although the 911 dispatchers featured...recognize the downside of their jobs, they seem to enjoy and even benefit from some of their emotional interaction with callers.” [13,p52]. This reflects Bolton’s [3] acknowledgment that the choice to care beyond the display rules is akin to the capacity to “gift” emotion as considered by Hochschild [1], but states “...what the nurses offer to patients is ‘special’ because, unlike the concept of ‘gift exchange’, it carries with it no explicit or implicit demand for a return gift. [3,p582]; and Smith [14] takes up this mantle of interaction in emotional labour in his review paper “Emotional Labor and the Pursuit of Happiness”. Smith [14] considers that emotional labour is often a product of common interest between Client and Provider (or recipient and labourer).

It is recognised that Shuler and Sypher’s [13] study features a singular call centre which has implications for its generalisability to other call centres, let alone other emotional labour professions – ie. those requiring face-to-face interaction (as voice-to-voice would seem to demand less (eg. Ashforth and Humphrey; Morris and Feldman, [16,15]). However, the findings nonetheless throw down a bold challenge to the dominance of the previously negative approach to emotional labour that grew out of Hochschild’s [1] work, as well as precipitate a new claim that grew in prominence – emotional experiences make work more fun!...or more difficult.

Alice Grandey [17] emphasised the value of supervisor support to emotional labour performance. Grandey [17] reviewed the literature on the negative effects of emotional labour and proposed that the worker’s affectivity played a role in emotional labour success – in particular, someone who had a positive disposition often performed emotional labour better than one without. She felt that the worker’s own baseline of emotional intelligence, and sometimes their gender (ie. being female) made adherence to display rules easier, and, with the finding that autonomy also mediated performance, urged organisations to encourage a higher level of autonomy over display. She also reiterated the importance of supervisor and co-worker support finding that similarly to Morris and Stuart [18], and Bakker et al’s [19] research into burnout, that this could be applied as well to emotional labour, encouraging further research into this application “The stress literature shows fairly clearly that disclosure of emotional events helps individuals cope with stress and buffer against health risks...Social support in service settings seems to help protect individuals from stress...Only one known study has tested support as a moderator of emotional labour and outcomes” [17,p107].

Thus, the interactive nature of emotional labour, although considered, is not formalised, and yet may offer an insight into the complexity of the emotional labour interaction. Because of the transient nature of emotions, managers, colleagues and service recipients themselves can affect the performance and emotions of those performing. In general, previous research suggests that interactions can be largely negative – eg. customer hostility, or a lack of management support or recognition; but three key pieces of research say otherwise – Bolton [3]; Shuler and Sypher [13] and Bolton and Boyd [8]. These indicate that both colleagues and customers can be a source of enjoyment within emotional labour and is a finding worth investigating further – as, one may argue, people are not forced to work in an emotional labour job role.

It is the conclusion of this paper to agree with Hoschschild [1] that emotional labour is foremostly a social construct. It is shaped by the organisational demand, and recipient expectation – which in turn has been shaped by the culture common to both, and any model of emotional labour, must be understood in the same manner, and by virtue of the nature of “performance”, 1 this also means that emotional labour is an interactive one. Simply, put, emotion begets emotion – if the emotional labourer receives a positive response from the recipient, this promotes a virtuous cycle of emotion, so too from the manager. However, the recipient is not always going to respond positively, in which case the response of the manager is important.

As such, it is recommended that future research pursue a deeper understanding of the complexity of emotional labour *interactions*, and the outcomes of these interactions, such as “gift giving” to the recipient or “resistance” to demand from recipient and manager. Research might focus in particular on the emotional exchanges between manager, the colleagues and the recipients within an emotional labour interaction. It might also look at the *effect of that interaction on emotional labour performance* – both in terms of emotional labourer behaviour that exists beyond the display rules as well as the general effect of interaction on performance. Further, through listening, *carefully*, to the voice of the recipient, it may be found that services which focus on “customer sovereignty” need to re-direct their services design. This understanding of recipient requirement within the emotional labour interaction may pose a challenge to the current position of the sovereignty of the customer and have implications for the focus of service design, display rules and targets; and by exploring these gaps will more adequately address the complexities of emotional labour beyond its original conception. Future results may thus enable a better structure for service design, considering the view of the customer, as well as have implications for service organisations (professional and occupational) in the construction of display rules; the management and support and the training of emotional labourers in occupational and professional roles, and offer more specifically directed and differentiated implications than research has previously produced.

References

- [1] Hochschild, A.R., (1983) *The Managed Heart*, University of California Press
- [2] Tang, A., (2012) *Love’s Labours Redressed: Reconstructing emotional labour as an interactive process within service work*, Brunel University Archives <http://bura.brunel.ac.uk/handle/2438/7038>
- [3] Bolton, S.C., (2000) Who cares? Offering Emotion work as a "gift" in the nursing labour process, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 32 (3), 580-586
- [4] Harris, L. C. (2002), *The Emotional labour of Barristers: An Exploration of Emotional labour By Status Professionals*. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39, 553–58
- [5] Theodosius, C., (2006) *Recovering Emotion from Emotion Management*, *Sociology*, 40, 893-910
- [6] Hennig-Thurau, T., Groth, M., Paul, M., & Gremler, D.D., (2006) Are All Smiles Created Equal? How Emotional Contagion and Emotional Labor Affect Service Relationships, *Journal of Marketing*, 70 (July), 58-73
- [7] Rupp, D.E., & Spencer, S., (2006) When customers lash out: The effects of customer interactional injustice on Emotional Labor and the Mediating Role of Discrete Emotions, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91 (4), 971-978
- [8] Bolton, S.C., & Boyd, C., (2003) Trolley Dolly or Skilled Emotion Manager. Moving on from Hochschild’s *Managed Heart*, *Work Employment & Society*, 17 (2), 289-308
- [9] Verbeke, W., (1997) cited in Hennig-Thurau, T., Groth, M., Paul, M., & Gremler, D.D., (2006) Are All Smiles Created Equal? How Emotional Contagion and Emotional Labor Affect Service Relationships, *Journal of Marketing*, 70 (July), 58-73
- [10] Halbesleben, J.R.B., (2006) Patient Reciprocity and physician burnout: what do patients bring to the patient-physician relationship, *Health Services Management Research*, 19, 215-222
- [11] Hargreaves, A., (2000), *Mixed Emotions: teachers’ perceptions of their interactions with students*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16, 811-826
- [12] Bion (1979) cited in Theodosius, C., (2006) *Recovering Emotion from Emotion Management*, *Sociology*, 40, 893-910

- [13] Shuler, S., & Davenport Sypher, B. (2000) Seeking Emotional labour: When Managing the Heart Enhances the Work Experience, *Management Communication Quarterly*, 14, 50-89
- [14] Smith, S.L., (2008) Emotional Labor and the Pursuit of Happiness, *Soundings*, Issue 11, Spring (draft copy given to the author in 2007 from Dr Smith)
- [15] Ashforth, B. E. & Humphrey, R.H., (1993). Emotional labor in service roles: The influence of identity, *Academy of Management Review*, 18, 1, 88-115. Cited in Kinman, G (2008). Emotional labour and wellbeing in the front line: does mode of delivery matter? (Unpublished)
- [16] Morris, J. A., & Feldman, D.C., (1996) The dimensions, antecedents, and consequences of emotional labor, *Academy of Management Review*, 21, 4, 986-1010, Cited in Kinman, G (2008). Emotional labour and wellbeing in the front line: does mode of delivery matter? (unpublished)
- [17] Grandey, A., (2000) Emotional Regulation in the Workplace: A New Way to Conceptualise Emotional Labor, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 5 (7), 95-110
- [18] Morris, J.A., Stuart, G.W., (2002) Training and education needs of consumers, families, and front-line staff in behavioral health
- [19] Bakker, A.B., Killmer, C.H., Siegest, J., & Schaufeli, W.H. (2000) Effort-Reward imbalance and burnout among nurses, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 31 (4), 884-891