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What's Emotional Labour Got to Do With It?

On the Indefensibility of a Sociological Concept

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In 1983, the US sociologist [Arlie Russell Hochschild](#) published what would become a highly influential book, [The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling](#). Coming out of a tradition inflected by Marxism, as well as the thought of [Erving Goffman on social interaction](#), and [C. Wright Mills on how social processes are reflected in private life](#), Hochschild introduced to sociology what appeared to be a new conceptual dimension: “emotional labour”. Undertaken in the context of wage labour, it is the “management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display”. She explored this through case studies of flight attendants at Delta Airlines, taught not just to smile at customers, but to internalize positive feelings towards them, and on the other hand of bill collectors, who had, if anything, to internalize the opposite types of emotions.

Hochschild constructed in this context [a distinction that has echoed ever since](#) between *surface acting*, in which “we deceive others about what we really feel, but we do not deceive ourselves” and *deep acting*, which “involves deceiving oneself as much as deceiving others” (which she likened to Stanislavski and method acting). She also distinguished emotional *labour*, undertaken in work contexts, thus having *exchange value* and underpinned by supervision, sanctions and wage relations, from *emotion work* (introduced in [an earlier article of hers](#)), or *emotion management*: “these same acts done in a private context where they have *use value*”.

These terms have been hugely influential in both scholarship and in wider discursive contexts. However, in light of the huge range of meanings they have come to carry—not all of these consistent with Hochschild’s original formulations—they deserve some rethinking.

Hochschild was right in identifying that much service work involves not only the execution of tasks, but also regulation of expression: remaining calm, reassuring strangers, absorbing hostility, signalling that one can be trusted. She was also right in seeing this as a non-trivial dimension of work—it can be exhausting, disciplined, unevenly distributed, and sometimes “gendered”. But between the recognition of this as a real and important component of work deserving serious consideration, and a portrayal of it as alienation and theft of the soul, there is a wide leap.

A False Dichotomy of the Self

Hochschild contrasted the idea of a *real self*, “an inner jewel that remains our unique possession no matter whose billboard is on our back or whose smile is on our face”, which had to be at least partially repressed in particular jobs, in favour of the presentation of some *false self* (at one point she uses the term *service self*). This is not only melodramatic but constantly at odds with a range of sociological work from Goffman and others in the subsequent field of “[performance studies](#)”, which emphasize how selective expression, calibration, suppression, tact, ritual and role-play all play significant roles in social interactions, whether or not related to employment.

The urge to defend an “authentic” real self only truly makes sense if one lives in a state of isolation akin to that of a hermit. Accordingly, a range of sociologists have criticized Hochschild’s dichotomy between the “real” and “false” selves (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

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If all forms of adaptation are a form of alienation (in the sense defined in [Marx’s 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*](#), to which Hochschild alludes) or estrangement, then most forms of adult life can be framed as oppressive. Grievance can then be switched on at a whim, with a smile rendered as coercion, patience as exploitation, and professional demeanour as evidence of systemic violence.

The Rewards of Emotional Labour and Management

Sociologists Sharon C. Bolton and Paul Brook undertook a lively debate on some of these issues. [Bolton argued for more nuanced categories of emotion management](#): *pecuniary* (relating to commercial values), *prescriptive* (according to organizational/professional codes of conduct), *presentational* and *philanthropic* (according to social rules). [Brook worried](#) that Bolton's formulation might neutralize Hochschild's concept of emotional labour, neutering it into harmless vibes language, and marginalizing issues of power, control, discipline and commodification.

Bolton was right to insist upon distinctions, and a reasonable position to be drawn from this exchange is to insist upon analysis of *which* conditions generate harm, but not assume harm from performance itself. Emotional display required by one's work can be meaningful, skilled and professionally fulfilling; that sometimes demands for it can also be coercive and poorly remunerated (as with other types of labour) should not be viewed as an absolute condemnation.

I am a professional pianist. Much of what I play in live concerts involves conveying intense emotional experiences. This is achieved primarily through sound, but it is also a form of theater. I am not an especially gesturally demonstrative player, as I try to economize physical motion, so as to conserve and marshal energy and maximize control. Yet wider demeanour still communicates, and I know from personal experience that I am not good at hiding emotional states as express themselves through body language. To perform convincingly, I need some distance in order to retain control, but I also try to enter mentally the emotional world of the music I am playing, whether it be the impassioned but morbid sensibility of Chopin, or the wrenched volatility of Janáček, or the unhinged energy and vehemence of Michael Finnissy. This is an exacting process, and at the end of a performance I can feel drained, exposed, and vulnerable, as do many in other performing arts (theatre, dance, performance art). But it is worth it.

Yet I would never dream of calling this "emotional labour" in a pejorative sense, even though it is work done in a professional context. My outpouring of emotion comes from commitment to the music, and pride in making it vivid on stage. This leads me

to the obvious question: why should many other professions be treated as fundamentally different? Why assume that role-performance in service work is inherently degrading and a burden, rather than often a source of craft, dignity, and satisfaction?

Hochschild's Economic Model

Hochschild's framework owes a fair amount to Marx's [labour theory of value](#). For her, labour remains a primary measure of value, rather than consumer demand, subjective valuation, scarcity and willingness to pay. [Since the late nineteenth-century, many mainstream economists have entertained theories of value which include some of the latter measures](#). However Hochschild's moral energy, in line with Marx, rests heavily upon a labour-centered view of what is being extracted.

Why assume that role-performance in service work is inherently degrading and a burden, rather than often a source of craft, dignity, and satisfaction?

For a range of services, customers do not pay solely for e.g. transport, information, or an abstract legal transaction; they equally pay for reduced uncertainty, reassurance, tact, confidence cues, de-escalation, and other aspects of an emotional atmosphere. This is no less true if it is unromantic and moves beyond various classical Marxist models founded upon manufacturing. In my own country, the UK, I frequently find the quality of personal service provided at restaurants, hotels, retail outlets or performance venues quite lacklustre and casual compared to what I encounter in other countries, and I feel justified in then resenting higher prices, or even in sometimes registering complaints.

None of this justifies abuse in the workplace: sexual harassment, underpayment, forced emotions under harassment, punitive surveillance, or near-impossible performance metrics designed to legitimize dismissals. But the mere fact of a job involving emotional display is not proof of exploitation. Exploitation must be demonstrated through conditions—pay, power, sanctions, substitution, exit barriers—rather than theorized as an inevitable condition.

Camille Paglia, [at her most caustic](#), attacked what she saw as bourgeois grievance feminism, with “the infantilizing assurances of external supports like trauma counsellors, grievance committees, and law courts” as an elite politics of complaint for white-collar professionals, in which inconvenience is rendered as persecution, and [status anxiety is converted into moral theatre](#). Personally, I feel that if some find the emotional demands of some service roles intolerable, they do have the option of leaving those roles and finding other work. There are other jobs that require heavy lifting, mathematical precision, heavy-duty document and spreadsheet analysis, night work, or simple emotional composure under pressure. Different forms of work come with different burdens. This is not a scandal, but simply the nature of the labour market under an increasingly fine-tuned division of labour.

The Popularization of the Concept

A range of mostly non-academic writers from the 1990s onwards, and especially in the last couple of decades, have expanded the use of emotional labour and emotional work considerably, sometimes using them interchangeably, sometimes simply rendering the latter as [“unpaid emotional labour”](#). Nowadays the term can be used for remembering birthdays, checking in with family members and friends, discussing relationship problems, helping a friend or partner suffering stress or low moods, listening when tired, and managing or undertaking housework. Some of this can be a real burden, can be unevenly distributed, can act as manipulation, or can unfairly force partners, family members and friends into a role of de facto therapist. But much of it is simply an ordinary part of interacting with other human beings.

When the majority of this is rendered as exploitative labour, intimacy turns into a form of accounting, and friendship and romance resemble invoicing departments: one person performed this number of hours of validation, another under-delivered on affective support; one carried a mental load, another therefore owes some emotional arrears. Despite the espousal of such views by some who would view themselves as on the side of “progressive” politics, they amount to a commodification of care, so that it can be measured, priced and billed.

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One can find this sort of rhetoric in various grievance-fuelled writings by members of both sexes, often those unsuccessful in relationships, and who cannot conceive that the issue might be with them, but need to make blanket assertions about the other sex as a form of self-validation. One view says that men are emotionally stunted and women do all the emotional labour, therefore [the singleness of the female columnist is evidence of structural male failure](#) (see also [here](#) and [here](#)). The mirror image from the [manosphere claims that women demand endless attention and validation and men do all the emotional adjustment](#) (see also [here](#) and [here](#)); therefore their failure to find a partner is to be blamed on womanhood as a whole.

Despite the different costumes, these two forms of narcissism and entitlement are very similar in nature. Both attempt to displace personal disappointment into moral superiority, avoid self-criticism, and equate “I did a lot” with “I am owed desire”. Both treat refusal as an offence and think attraction should obey. But attraction does not. No-one is obliged to love someone because of their theory or stay because their spreadsheet is complete. When someone no longer wants a relationship, this is not anything intrinsically wrong on their part. Of course long-term relationships, if they are to succeed, frequently need effort and commitment through bad times as well as good, but that commitment cannot be forced. Some can lie, evade, string along, demean, exploit in the process of leaving, but that leaving is not in itself a civil offence.

In my own extensive relationship history prior to a very happy marriage since 2009, I have experienced partners who have left over twenty screaming and tearful voicemails in the middle of the night, then threatening to come banging on my door (forcing me in turn to have to threaten to call the police), have maintained a passive-aggressive silence and a disdain for the company of all but a few people, erupting into rage at the sound of trivial chit-chat from strangers, have lived continuously on the verge of almost incoherent despair and screaming in response to the tiniest sleights and inconveniences, or who, after a long pattern of love-bombing, gaslighting, guilt-

tripping and controlling tactics, have not been able to accept a dignified separation and have attempted (unsuccessfully) everything in their power to demean and undermine me in the process, even when the decision to leave was theirs. And conversely, I have known a greater number of partners with whom there was plentiful mutual joy, stimulation, comfort, mutual happiness, tenderness, excitement, and who have often been very patient during my own periods of high-level stress, low moods and disillusionment, or anger, as I have been through their more difficult periods. In my own 16-year marriage, there have been harder moments (as surely in the vast majority of such extended commitments), but an attitude of mutual respect and care, rather than an accounting form, has made these manageable. No single model ever fits the extreme diversity of human romantic interaction.

It is reasonable to want care to be reciprocal, not unilateral crisis management. Empathy is a fine quality but can be exploited and turned into compelled containment. Support can be licence for volatility, and listening can mean absorbing abuse. These are all places where it is right to draw the line. Mutual emotional presence, involving listening, tact, patience, encouragement, willingness to apologize and repair, is healthy; chronic one-way management or instrumentalized intimacy come closer to pathology. When all three (mutual presence, one-way management, instrumentalized intimacy) are labelled “emotional labour”, these crucial distinctions are lost to language, and the net result is increased anger and diminished understanding.

Hochschild’s original precision, whereby emotional labour belongs to waged relations, managerial practices and paid rules of emotional display, is valuable, as are Bolton’s insistence on multiple sub-categories and Brook’s refusal to overlook power and commodification. But the term emotional labour, even in Hochschild’s formulation, is too often enlisted within a melodrama of authenticity, in which almost every performance is a form of enforced self-betrayal. Commodification of intimacy is the worst encroachment of capitalist accounting into personal life, whilst weaponized victimhood may reward grievance, but equally punishes responsibility.

Exploitation at work should be fought where it exists—in pay, working conditions, unreasonable demands, sanctions, abuse, bullying and mobbing, surveillance, insecurity. At home, or between friends, or indeed often between work colleagues,

reciprocity can be practised, and demanded, without bookkeeping. Entitled narratives with regard to sex and partnership, whether from the manosphere or from some claiming the mantle of feminism, mostly reveal all too vividly exactly why the writers in question remain single.

Care can be uneven. Desire cannot be guaranteed, nor always maintained. Rejection is commonplace, and a right. Compromise is a constant in many human interactions.

None of these are intrinsically evidence of wrongs having been committed.

Unwillingness to recognize this, and the use of language such as that of emotional labour to attempt to demonstrate otherwise, are mostly a sign that the user should grow up. It is time to give this term a rest at least for a while.

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