

## **Aesthetic Labour**

If emotions have been discovered to be here, there and everywhere in the workplace (Bolton 2000), the same might now be said for aesthetics (see Felstead et al. 2005: 78-96). Postrell (2003) even argues that we are at a tipping point into an 'aesthetic economy', heralding the age of look and feel. Employee appearance is an integral feature of this economy. 'When style is strategy,' Postrell states, 'how employees look can be as much a part of the atmosphere [of companies] as the grain of the furniture or the beat of the background music' (p.127).

Employee appearance has long been an important consideration for employers. Hopfl (2000) unearths evidence that in the sixteenth century the Society of Jesus – the Jesuits – selected priests with 'a pleasing manner of speech and verbal facility, and also good appearance in the absence of any notable ugliness, disfigurement or deformity' (pp.203-4). In the nineteenth century hiring of the 'model' bank clerk, McKinlay reveals that management appraisal entries refer repeatedly to potential employees' looks. In one, the ideal senior banker is described as being 'handsome' with 'hazel eyes, aquiline nose, iron-grey hair, firm moustache, oval chin [and] cheeks slightly tinged with red' (2002: 607). In the 1950s, C. Wright Mills' classic account of white-collar workers notes a female department store worker who 'focuses the customer less upon her stock of goods than upon herself ... attract[ing] the customer with modulated voice, artful attire and stance' (1951: 175).

This particular worker, termed 'the charmer' by Mills, claims to earn more money through her particular sales technique: 'It's really marvellous what you can do in this world with a streamlined torso and a brilliant smile. ... I spend most of my salary on dresses which accentuate my goods points. After all a girl should capitalize on what she has, shouldn't she? And you'll find the answer in my commission total each week' (p.175). She is astute. Longitudinal research from both the US (Hammermersh and Biddle 1994) and the UK (Harper 2000) indicates that employment, career and pay are influenced by employees' appearance. Although in the UK this outcome exists across all sectors, it is more pronounced in services.

What is noteworthy from these historical accounts is that, whilst employers appreciated the importance of employee appearance, managerial intervention to shape this appearance was absent. The desired appearance was simply bought and not organisationally manipulated. What is different now, as services have come to dominate the advanced economies, is an increasing willingness by organisations to intervene in employee appearance. As Wolkowitz (2006: 96) notes, 'In customer services ... there seems to be a new, or at least more explicit, emphasis on bodily discipline and appearance.'

As first conceived by Warhurst et al. (2000), aesthetic labour refers to employees bodies being organizationally produced or 'made up' to embody the

desired aesthetic of the organization and intended to provide for organizational benefit. Embodied capacities and attributes are, to some extent, possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment. However, and a key point, employers then mobilize, develop, and commodify these embodied dispositions through processes of recruitment, selection, training and management, *transforming* them into 'skills' which are geared towards producing a 'style' of service encounter that appeals to the senses of the customer (see also Nickson et al. 2001). As such, aesthetic labour is a key feature of such employees' wage-effort bargain. And, as with emotional labour (see Hochschild 1983), different 'looks' can be required of employees through their aesthetic labouring by different organisations targeting different market segments (see for example Pettinger 2004; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). Indeed it is not just 'good looking' employees but also employees with the 'right look'.

In a survey of UK retail employers reported in Nickson et al. (2005), 90 per cent rated employee appearance as critical or important in recruitment and selection. Significantly, 61 per cent thereafter offered training in dress sense and style, 56 per cent provided other appearance training including in employee body language and 34 per cent provide training in personal grooming. Other UK surveys as well as those from the US and Australia reveal that retail and hospitality employers want customer-facing employees with the right attitude and good appearance, both of which employers perceive of as skills to be employed and then deployed at work (HtF 2000; Martin and Grove 2002; Jackson and Briggs 2003).

Ironically, embodiment is continually evoked in the emotional labour literature. Hochschild's (1983: 7) core definition of emotional labour as 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display,' exemplifies this point. The problem, Witz *et al.* (2003) point out, is that this embodiment is empirically and conceptually retired in subsequent research and debate. Aesthetic labour foregrounds embodiment, revealing how employee appearance, not just feelings, are organizationally appropriated, transmuted and controlled for commercial benefit. As an emergent field of research, aesthetic labour is opening up new doors of analysis as well as re-opening many doors that were prematurely slammed shut as services displaced manufacturing. It may be, for example, that a new form of discrimination is emerging with aesthetic labour, as some workers are included or excluded from jobs on the basis of their looks. As Oaff (2003: 7) states bluntly, 'If your gender and your race haven't kept you off the short list, your physical appearance still might.' Two further but related issues are whether or not aesthetic 'skills' are skills and if so, how they are acquired. Bourdieu's (1984) analysis would suggest families create particular and differentiated embodied dispositions through socialisation. If this is true, and employers are seeking middle classness with aesthetic labour, as they also do with emotional labour Hochschild (1983) claims in a much ignored comment, then the issue of class needs to be brought back into analysis of work and employment. It is for these reasons that Nickson and Warhurst (2007) refer

to aesthetic labour as a 'Pandora's box', opening up uncomfortable demands upon researchers interested in interactive service jobs.

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