

The over-managed heart?

The concept of ‘emotional labour’ is an important contribution to an understanding of every-day organisational life. It offers valuable insights into the contemporary workplace and into capital’s awareness of the value of employees’ emotion management skills. There can be little doubt, for example, that emotion work in organisations can be demanding, boring, exhausting, tedious, arduous, and stressful. It is often exploited as an ‘invisible’ skill and poorly rewarded – it is very well documented how poorly paid front line service workers tend to be. The ‘culture of the customer’ bestows a superior status to the consumer and the interaction between service provider and customer is an unequal exchange, often leading to service providers having to smilingly endure rude and abusive customers. And management invents ever more imaginative ways to extract the maximum, and most sincere, performances from emotion workers – smiling *and* meaning it is the aim. The term ‘emotional labour’ captures all of these insights and opens the emotional labour process up to critical scrutiny.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to confuse aspiration for outcome. We should be wary of assuming that capital’s attempts to control ‘emotion work’ will be so successful that our feelings simply become commodities. To do so offers a view of organisations as flat, lifeless landscapes. Indeed, important questions arise if we adopt this approach:

- Where is any sense of the satisfaction, enjoyment and reward that can be gained from various forms of emotion work?
- Where is the space for innuendo and humour and for the imperfections in customer service?
- Where *are* the highly competent social actors and multi-skilled emotion managers?

We need to address these questions concerning the richness of organisational life and present people in organisations as knowledgeable social actors and multi-skilled emotion managers who are able to be many things to many different people according to many different motivations – not just according to rules dictated by the organisation or its customers. We only need to look around us and reflect on our own experiences of giving and receiving emotion work in an organisational context to recognise that emotion work continually crosses boundaries – self and society, private and public, formal and informal – creating organisations full of mixed feelings involving: the provision of customer care *and* neglect; friendships formed *and* disrupted; and kindnesses and cruelties exchanged *and* rebuffed. This suggests a much more complex picture of working with feeling that is worthy of further research and debate.

Sharon C. Bolton
Professor of Organisational Analysis
Strathclyde University Business School
Sharon.bolton@gsb.strath.ac.uk

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