

Exploitation Potential of Emotional Labour in Higher Education

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Abstract

Service organizations are encouraged to consider the manner in which employees perform at the customer/front-line employee interface, as a means to gain competitive advantage. The employee's behaviour requires 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) where the front-line employee (academic), has to either conceal or manage actual feelings for the benefit of a successful service delivery. The implication is not necessarily of equality or mutual benefit but of satisfaction for the customer (student) and profit for the management. The paper discusses whether the academic is being exploited in this three-way relationship.

To illustrate this argument, data gathered from in-depth interviews at a higher education institution is used.

The research is of value as an aid for the management and the support of the academic as she performs emotional labour in an age of managerialism, and to the notion of the student as customer.

Key words: Emotional labour, managerialism, academic (teaching).

INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of this paper I accept the notion that higher education, as a workplace, is operating in the managerialism paradigm, and that the present (UK) Government's discourse is that of the market (White Paper, 2003). Within this discourse, academic institutions can be conceptualized as service providers, with customers, means of production and service deliverers (Athiyaman, 1997; Gibbs, 2002; Kotler and Fox, 1995). Consequently, service organizations are encouraged by the literature (Gronroos, 1996, 1997, 2000; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000) to consider the manner in which employees perform at the customer/provider interface, as a means to gain competitive advantage. The employee's behaviour requires 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) where the front-line employee, has to either conceal or manage actual feelings for the benefit of a successful service delivery. The implication is not necessarily of equality or mutual benefit but of satisfaction for the customer and profit for the management.

Within this paradigm performing emotional labour is required, more often and more intensely, both for a successful delivery of service to customers, and also as a strategy for coping with the need to conceal real feelings. The demands made by customers and the management means tensions occur and exploitation potential appears in the unequal distribution of power in the emotional labour triangle (Constanti and Gibbs, 2004). Tensions and weaknesses exist in the provision of equity in the support, expectation and investment issues faced by the front-line employee, manager and customer. Appeals to the dispositional aspects of the emotional labourer do not reduce the risk of exploitation but rather shift it from the crude Marxist notions to the voluntary exploitation proposed by Steiner.

The paper argues that teaching staff, in higher education, is expected to perform emotional labour in order to achieve the dual outcomes of customer (i.e., student[1]) satisfaction, and profit for the management. The results of a pilot study, utilizing in-depth interviews and focus groups, which were conducted in a higher education institution, are presented. The perspectives and expectations of the three participants to emotional labour; the manager, the front-line employee and the customers are revealed, and from which a better understanding of the notion of exploitation is constructed.

The paper begins with an overview of the emotional labour concept and its likely impacts in the workplace, drawing from the emotional labour literature which has been grounded in the traditional service sector. This is then followed by a review of the managerialism paradigm and its encroachment in the sphere of higher education. Finally the connection is made between the emotional labour performance of academics and the potential for its exploitation by those in the management hierarchy.

EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Emotional labour is an under-researched area in higher education. The small number of cases in which it has been researched is in the feminist literature (Bagilhole and Goode, 1998; Sachs and Blackmore, 1998; Bellas, 1999 and Hort et al, 2001). Without ignoring the political issues that this raises, I believe that it has a broader impact. In the absence of such literature, this work has been grounded in emotional labour literature found in the traditional service sector.

Ever since Arlie Hochschild's groundbreaking work, there has been a growth in interest in emotional labour. This is understandable as Mann (1997) estimates that emotional labour is performed in almost two-thirds of workplace communications, (see also Thompson and Warhurst, 1998). This is not surprising, if a display of positive emotion by employees is directly related to customers' positive affect following service encounters, and to their evaluations of service quality.

Emotional labour is typified by the way roles and tasks exert overt control over emotional displays. According to Ashforth and Humphrey (1993), Guerrier and Adib (2003), Noon and Blyton (1997) and Putnam and Mumby (1993) emotional labour reduces the discretion exercised by the workforce in performing their jobs, whereas, empowering employees enables them to manage their emotions so as to enhance organizational effectiveness (Fineman, 2006; Lashley, 1997; Noon and Blyton, 1997; Van Maanen and Kunda, 1989). In addition, performing one's 'role' can lead to negative consequences (Abraham, 1998; Cordes and Doherty, 1993; Fineman, 2000; Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987; Wharton, 1993; Zapf, 2002). Others have highlighted the possible negative implications of emotional labour for women's position in the labour force (Adkins, 1995; Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; James, 1989; Luthans, 2003; Pringle, 1989; Wharton and Erickson 1993). Emotional labour's significant, often unacknowledged component of a service worker's job (Fineman, 2000; Steinberg & Figart, 1999) requires 'skilled, effort-intensive, and productive *labour*.'

Central to the issue of the delivery of the appropriate service expectations is thus the ability of the front-line employee to sometimes (often frequently; see Bryman's *Disneyization of Society*, 1999) 'suspend' her personal inclination to react in favour of a trained response to satisfy both the management, and the customer. Kruml and Geddes (2000) found that companies could successfully train employees to change their emotions.

However, whether emotive effort training is necessary depends on the general nature of the anticipated interactions between the front-line employee and the customer. In order to find people more disposed towards the defined emotion response, organizations need to screen potential employees during recruitment and selection. Morris and Feldman (1997) found that in order to utilize emotional labour effectively for the firm, employees whose expressive style matches the display norms likely to be encountered in the job should be selected. Kruml and Geddes (*ibid*) identified that emotional dissonance could be reduced the more the employee could empathize with the customer. According to Lashley (2001, p. 181):

...more professional service organizations are adopting recruitment practices that involve role playing and psychometric testing in order to recruit the "right sort of person."

However, according to Callaghan and Thomson (2002, p. 233):

...(there can be) tension between the mobilization of employee attitudes, and the deliberate molding and standardization of such competencies is merely part of wider and unresolved tensions concerning the contested nature of emotional labour.

Hochschild (1983) and most recently Warhurst et al (2000) talk in terms of direction and control of how employees present themselves and Wharton (1993), supporting this position, claims that workers who perform emotional labour under conditions of low job autonomy or high job involvement are more at risk of emotional exhaustion than others who do not perform this activity. Morris and Feldman (1996) discuss the dysfunctional consequences of emotional labour although they conclude that this may be a less personally damaging notion of emotional dissonance. Welch (1997) is more concerned, claiming that emotional labour can amount to emotion exploitation and can cause depression, alienation, exhaustion and loss of identity. (See also Mann, 1998; Fineman, 2000 and Zapf 2002). Faced with these potential emotional costs Hayes and Kleiner (2001) suggest that the employee either identifies wholeheartedly with her job, or

exhibits healthy estrangement (a clear separation of self from role) or becomes estranged from acting altogether.

Clearly there are issues here of individual autonomy to the extent that the identified traits are to be extended to satisfy the performance standards of the organization and the degree to which the applicant is able to understand and experience what might amount to the creation of another self (Markus and Nurius, 1986). This may require emotional deceit, thus creating issues of personal dignity, coherence and integrity. Explicitly, the potential exists for management to make recruitment assumptions on the amount of stress that the emotional labour will have on behalf of, and without the consent, of the applicant. The distribution of power and the measure of implicit and explicit performance, places the emotional labourer in the most vulnerable position.

MANAGERIALISM

The growth of managerialism in higher education has been coupled with a growing body of critical literature which attempts to throw light on this issue (Giroux 1999; Mok 1997; Meyer 2002; O'Brien & Down 2002; Simkins 2000; Willmott 1995). In her inaugural lecture, Clegg (2001), made reference to the 'realities of "mass" education,' and the challenges of surviving in these new realities where the issues of power and insecurity are all too common.

Ritzer's (1996) critique underlines the impact of 'McDonaldisation' on education, with the emphasis on standardization and control in higher education. In this instance the university is but a victim of the pervasiveness of bureaucratization and its ensuing implications (1999, p. 17):

...people have certain responsibilities and must act in accord with rules, written regulations, and means of compulsion exercised by those who occupy higher-level positions.

Maaret Wager, in a paper presented at a higher education conference (July 2001) informs us that more and more measures of performance serve to control and coerce academics. While others imply that there is "conflict emanating from the re-badging of the student to that of the customer" (Watson and Crossley 2001, p. 123).

In the view of Willmott (ibid 1995), constituting the student as customer reifies the view that the university has become part of the corporate agenda which has transformed the degree into a commodity or a 'meal ticket' as he puts it, the role of the academic is that of a service provider who treats the student as a customer as she (the academic) aims to receive excellent ratings, and thus continued tenure and research funding (Slaughter and Leslie, 1999; Aronowitz, 2000).

Roger Waterhouse, Vice-Chancellor of University of Derby in the UK (2002) overtly expressed the view that higher education is in fact serving a customer – the student – embracing the inherent characteristics of other service-related industries. According to Rhoades (1998, p. 2):

...social relations on campus are increasingly corporatized, as faculty find their time, work and the products of their labour increasingly controlled by managers, who have extended their discretion at the expense of professional autonomy, and arguably of the public interest.

EXPLOITATION AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR

The acquisition of skills and knowledge is analogous to the accumulation of capital and its exploitation in both cases generates surplus value. (See Becker, 1964 and Bourdieu, 1998). This position views training in skills as the product of labour, whose value is realised in wages. As wage inflation increases the costs of production, so the cost of accumulating capital for the organization also increases. Organizations thus have an incentive to shift related learning costs onto the employees, so as to avoid losing capital invested in those who move to a competitor. Conversely, the property rights of employees in their skills are the source of their incentive to invest and accept a temporary reduction in their wages in anticipation of greater returns. Expecting the employee to perform emotional labour, in order to increase efficiency, may require training and development of the necessary skills. The added value created by the emotional labourer is distributed amongst the owners of the labour, i. e., the institution and their customers, the student. Given this, it is feasible then, that the provider of the emotional labour (the academic), is being exploited. The extent of this exploitation depends on the coercion brought to bear on her to perform emotional labour, and whether or not it is articulated in the contract of employment.

If the employee can evaluate her worth and is satisfied with the return on the labour invested, then she may be satisfied with her condition but still be exploited. Steiner's (1984) liberal model of exploitation might also consider emotional labour.

	Donation	Exchange	Exploitation	Theft
Red to blue		5x	3x	
Red to blue	5x	5x	5x	5x

Figure 1: Steiner's Continuum
(Adapted from Steiner, 1984)

By defining exchanges of value on a continuum beginning with donation and ending with theft, Steiner argues that exploitation is closer to theft if an unfair involuntary exchange of value occurs (in theft there is no exchange, the value is involuntarily taken). For instance if the value of my labour is worth 5X, and both parties recognise it as such, but the purchaser has the power to pay only 3X, then the creator of the labour is being exploited.

In order to consider value we need to clarify whether emotional labour is of the same nature as physical and intellectual labour and can therefore be measured by the same metrics. Each contributes to the effort extended by the employee for the wages, provided each can affect the well-being of the worker beyond the present transactional cost of the labour. However, emotional labour is distinguished in that it may require deceit on behalf of the academic in order to fulfill her obligation to her university, thereby making her susceptible to personal guilt, dysfunctional images of self, exploitable and prone to role ambiguity. It strikes at the heart of academic freedom and assumes that the students know what is best for their well-being as well as for their education; another debatable point.

Further, this emotional labour is often assumed to be an investment on behalf of the employer for which he deserves a return. This return is due either on the costs of recruiting employees with the 'right' disposition and/or in the training so that this disposition, or acceptable variants of it, can be shaped to provide what the management wants and what the customer expects. Customers (the students), want more than pleasant platitudes and competent service, demanding instead authentic caring, otherwise they see the falseness of the false. They know of the deceit but want to feel that they are different and enjoy the empathy of the teacher. This requires more than

role-playing and can make employees vulnerable and exploitable by both the customer, and the management, and because of its nature, emotional labour is more susceptible to both emotional and financial exploitation than other forms of labour.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

How do these ideas relate to those actually rendering services? The research was carried out during Autumn/Spring 2002-2003 at an institution of higher education in Cyprus. In-depth, unstructured interviews allowed for the collection of rich data that the respondents considered important, as well as the opportunity to probe and clarify any ambiguities that arose during the interview process. Four academics were interviewed in order to gain insight regarding their perception of the emotional labour expended while teaching/interacting with students and the impact that this has on the learning/teaching outcomes.

In addition, a focus group of four students set out to gain insight of the students' perception of teacher behaviour during this interaction, when the latter is called upon to perform emotional labour. Finally, a senior executive was interviewed so as to determine management's perspective on this issue.

All of the interviews were recorded using an audio recorder and were later transcribed verbatim, allowing the use of quotes from the interviews in order to both highlight and illustrate the issues under discussion.

The next section of the paper discusses the findings as the argument is developed regarding the link between exploitation and emotional labour in higher education.

DISCUSSION

...somehow I feel that we are not allowed to be stressed, frustrated, it is the job and we have to do it and not complain about it.

(Interview with a faculty member)

This quotation is an expression of a sense of helplessness felt by teachers. Frustration, both with the management of the classroom and with the management of the institution, an emotion frequently felt and concealed in the classroom, concealed for the benefit of both the student and the management. The students expect this but will also accept its display if it is justified:

He could express his dislike of what happened, bad test results or whatever, but in a way that students understand...not throw books on a table or something, I know that I wouldn't like that personally.

What kind of emotion he has about the class, he needs to justify in some way.

These sentiments concur with those of the senior executive:

I don't think there's anything wrong with that as much as what it is and how it comes across...if you try and converse with the students and tell them how you feel about the world and not hide your ideas or feelings...as long as you are doing it to make an educational point.

The opening quote and the general consensus among the teachers interviewed was that management expects them to control their emotions:

...you cannot allow yourself to let anger get out of control...you may put yourself and the college in a position of responsibility if you go too far.

According to the senior executive, and the academics interviewed, emotional labour in an academic setting is pervasive:

...I was giving a performance. I was putting all of myself, all my energy that by the end of it I was exhausted...I had given so much...my energy, my thoughts, so I wanted it to be important...when you are giving lectures to your students you are helping them develop, to understand the subject. You are supposed to be their mentor; you have to give them much more.

A colleague concurred:

I have realized that if I'm not enthusiastic about what I do the students are not enthusiastic about their subject, if I'm down I think it affects their overall performance...

Coupled with this is the issue of the size of the twenty-first century classroom and how the sheer volume of students impacts the emotional labour component, and subsequently the teaching and learning experience:

...in a small group when I am enthusiastic, even the weaker students show more interest.

Contrast the last statement with what was iterated earlier by the senior executive and in particular with Hogan and Kwiatkowski's assertion regarding the complexities of the classroom:

...we contend that there is more to teaching large groups than simply improving personal and administrative technique by individual lecturers...large groups *inevitably* have an emotional impact on lecturers, students and on those who have to administer such an educational system, and that this impact is largely unacknowledged. (Italics theirs)
(1998, p. 1408)

This 'mass' education phenomenon is driven by the institutions' need for survival in what is becoming a highly competitive arena, where they have to adopt business principles and tactics so as to gain and maintain competitive advantage. Faculty members repeatedly addressed their concerns about their effectiveness as educators, who add value to the students' learning experiences. The general feeling to emerge was that, today, management is concerned that the students are happy and that student numbers have to increase:

...very long ago that might have been the concept of universities, now (it's) money, business, competition it's a business now.

And this concept of corporate-like business practices (Aronowitz, 2000) is accompanied by the customer-oriented approach when the institution is dealing with students. The senior executive was explicit in his statement that the students, as far as he was concerned, were 'always customers.' The students in the focus group were unanimous on this issue in regarding themselves as customers, and the faculty in their turn shared

this opinion. One of the students even explicitly expressed the view that they are treated as customers by the institution.

The performance of emotional labour has a non-financial and therefore intangible cost to the emotional labourer. Even the senior executive, speaking from personal recollections remarked at “feeling exhausted, burnt out every day.”

The faculty alluded to the mental exhaustion that accompanies the performance of emotional labour, while another remarked in a very different way about the costs and rewards associated with it:

...the only true reward would be to eliminate the factors that cause the frustration. I need to find ways to alleviate the frustration...small classes, to do my work as I would like to do it; nothing can compensate for that.

Finally, when asked about the qualities of the ideal teacher, the students' responses were indicative, using adjectives such as, enthusiastic; motivated; inspiring; ethical – do what's right, when it's right – don't be intimidating and threatening; professionalism and being able to deliver. These are intangible qualities which cannot be measured and are therefore considered worthless.

It seems that the students and administrators, of this particular higher education institution, expect the academic (teacher) to perform emotional labour during the execution of her duties, thereby adding value to the teaching learning/teaching activity being experienced by the former. The administration, in its promise to deliver a hedonistic experience to the customer, expects the effective academic, as well as being endowed with the appropriate academic qualifications, to possess other qualities which are both difficult to evaluate and reward. Performing emotional labour in the classroom may be counter to her academic authenticity (even if not her teaching role). However, this emotional labour performance is of benefit to the students in the first instance, and consequently for the good of the university in the second (even via the potential for emotional deceit on behalf of the emotional labourer).

CONCLUSION

The paper set out to show that, where the academic (teacher) is required to perform emotional labour, the implication is not necessarily of equality or mutual benefit but of satisfaction for the customer and profit for the management. Performing emotional labour is another dimension of the teacher's armoury which enables the successful delivery of service to customers (students), as well as a strategy for coping with the need to conceal real feelings. The demands made by customers (students) and the administration (management) can cause tensions to occur and exploitation potential to manifest itself via the unequal distribution of power. Subsequently, tensions and weaknesses exist in the provision of equity in the support, expectation and investment issues faced by the academic, administration and customer. Appeals to the dispositional aspects of the emotional labourer may not reduce the risk of exploitation but rather shift it to that of voluntary exploitation. The research is of value as an aid for the management and the support of the academic who is expected to perform emotional labour.

NOTES:

1. This discourse is central to the move to managerialism and the hegemony of the market and its mechanisms. It's acknowledged that in the educational literature this notion is not fully accepted (Gibbs 2002).

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