

Precarious *Morality*

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The Private Face of Privatization

How do immigrants interface with other social actors?

- >> Through stigma and hostile boundary work
- >> By being reduced to pure need
- >> As "bare life"

Immigrant caretakers for the old

The public pairing of society's old with the figure of the immigrant is to them a frightening incongruity, a powerful sign that gestures toward the loneliness that threatens to tear the body politic apart and that raises the question of how solidarity and collective moral order can be reproduced and maintained. The image of the old woman and her immigrant caretaker is an index of society capitulating to its own estrangement; of letting "the enemy into the house," as one Italian woman put it to me. (2 – n.b. pages from PDF pagination)

Came into conflict with volunteers

I show that it is somewhat less problematic for volunteers to distinguish their relational labor from the professional and paid labor of, say, doctors and nurses. In contrast, the distinctions that volunteers attempted to draw between themselves and immigrant caretakers were much harder to maintain. (6)

Volunteer boundary work

It was relatively easy for Chiara, the angel, to differentiate her work from that of doctors and nurses. Hers was not “specialized” in the same way. Rather than perform professional services based on scientific knowledge, she stressed that her work and knowledge were rooted in her capacity to patiently listen and to participate emotionally in the lives of others. Rather than involving “specific” tasks, her work was “capillary” in that it performed the vital work of bonding and connection. (7)

Relational work

Relational labor does the integrative work lacking in today's society. It functions as a mediator and symbolic core (Bourdieu 1998:102) that allows for fragmented realities to cohere. (8)

Volunteers rehearsed to me the fact that their labor was purely affective (it was love, compassion, and human relations they specialized in, after all) and thus clearly distinguishable from professional labor—even of that of a (poorly) paid part-time hospital aid. (8)

Ambiguity of intimacy

The most intimate material acts could thus signify exactly the opposite depending on who performed them. If performed by immigrants (“Would you like to come and clean my parents’ bum?”), Italians read these acts as proof of the inherent materiality not only of immigrant labor but of their very motivations (“they do it for the money or out of desperation”). If volunteers performed the very same task, these tasks came to signify the transcendence of pure materiality and were read as pertaining to the kingdom of pure love, solidarity, and gifting (“she works with the heart”). (19)

Sad politics of care

The concomitant rise of a regime of compassionate relational labor has put pity at the center of social life; a life now structured around inequality, not equality. (26)

There is yet another kind of cruelty inherent to ethical citizenship, one that I alluded to above. It consists of the scrambling taking place at the bottom of the social ladder among poorly paid hospital staff who fear that unpaid workers will one day take away their jobs. Ethical citizens unwittingly (and sometimes wittingly, if we think of the volunteer trainee who protested that she did not want to replace those who ought to be

When is precarity
about existential
vulnerability?

Haitian earthquake, 2010

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XP2V-oWqcgM>

"Al Jazeera Correspondent - Haiti: After the Quake."

Marikana strike, 2012

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ssPrxvgePsc>

"The best MARIKANA documentary on YouTube: MINERS SHOT DOWN."