SOC 201 - Power and Paychecks
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Emotional labor, for better or for worse

I've spent the majority of my thirteen years in the labor force working in kitchens, delis, grocery stores, and cafeterias. In this way my personal experience mirrors a general trend in the American labor market, which has skewed increasingly towards service jobs since the 1980s[1]. Much concern surrounds this trend, especially since one possible implication of the shift to a services-heavy economy is an increase in workers holding bad jobs. But as Kalleberg (2011) puts it, the popular equation of service jobs with 'bad' jobs (nicknamed 'McJobs') is inaccurate. It's more true that the labor market is becoming starkly polarized. The service jobs on offer tend to be either bad, precarious positions, or highly desirable. My own experience as a service worker has traversed these poles. Here, I contrast the quality of one former position as a deli clerk with my current position as a writing tutor, focusing specifically on the dimension of emotional labor required by both of these entry-level service positions—dehumanizing in the first case, but rewarding, meaningful and satisfying in the context of my tutoring job. While Hochschild (1983) seems to suggest that emotional labor is uniformly alienating, I argue (following Ezzy, 1997) that the subjective experience of performing emotional labor is important, and allows us to make a distinction between humanizing and dehumanizing forms thereof.

I spent nearly two years working as a deli clerk in a small Italian specialty grocery. For the stagnant former steel town of Scranton, Pennsylvania, it was an upscale establishment, catering to a local niche market of doctor's offices, pharmaceutical reps and the like. It was my job to 'plate' the foods prepared by the kitchen for the deli display case, and to slice meats and cheeses to order—pounds of paper-thin, gummy and pink prosciutto; fresh mozzarella, cold and treacherously slimy; massive cylinders of plasticky provolone; large slippery hunks of ham, chicken, turkey, and roast beef wedges dripping with vivid blood. (By no coincidence, shortly after starting this job I became a vegetarian for the next five years.) In addition to tending the deli case, my other major duty was to make sandwiches. I learned to make hoagies with ingredients perfectly distributed across the bread, achieving an even blend of flavor that left no segment of the sandwich a disappointment. I made wraps with the ends tucked flawlessly, no danger of falling apart in the customer's hands. This part of my job I enjoyed. I felt skillful because I became extremely quick at putting sandwiches together, and I relished the minorly creative aspect of building all the items on our menu, tweaking them to suit myriad customer requests and even inventing new items for lunch specials.

After a day in the deli I would go home and manufacture sandwiches in my sleep, then roll out of bed at 6 am to resume the task in real life. I was on an assembly line of sorts. The repetitive motions of slicing meats and assembling sandwiches became habitual. My feet always hurt, my legs would get numb from standing all day, and I would get dizzy when my blood sugar plunged due to a missed lunch break.

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[1] Kalleberg (2011) credits privatization and globalization as major factors behind this shift. First, as the labor force participation of women has climbed, services formerly done in the home have been increasingly commercialized, bought and sold and performed for wages. Second, in efforts to outpace the razor edge of the global market, manufacturing companies have rushed abroad, abandoning U.S. labor markets in favor of cheaper workers toiling under less adequate safety protections. In the wake of this manufacturing flight, the domestic economy has held on to low-end service jobs that cannot be outsourced as well as high-end service jobs that require a well-educated workforce.

Overall, though, I found the physical toll of the job less onerous than the customer interactions. For our client demographic, my boss was sure that good food and polite service weren't enough; the standard he set was one of cheerfully deferential service. At one point I was withheld a raise because, in his estimation, I didn't smile enough. Though my interactions with customers were always efficient and respectful (on my end!) my boss wanted me to adopt a charming, upbeat persona that I could hardly muster; it was exhausting. It hurt to have to fake a cheerfulness and sociability that wasn't part of my personality and was not reciprocated by customers.

The downsides of my deli job were completely ordinary for foodservice work (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2001), perhaps fewer in fact because I worked at a small family-owned restaurant where management and employees regularly worked shoulder to shoulder in a lunch rush, and could form friendships of a sort without interventions by corporate upper management. On a scale of good to bad jobs, it was a solidly 'decent' bad job. So I don't want to make a case that I suffered extraordinarily; I only want to use my experience to echo Hochschild's (1983) point that the "emotional labor" component of service work, though easy to overlook or minimize, can in fact be a site of significant stress and exploitation. As a deli worker, I was acutely aware of both the physical and social costs of my job, and it was these social aspects—the various slights and affronts and signs of disrespect; the requirement to act out only positive emotions, despite these offenses; the inability to be myself on the job—that hurt me the most.

Hochschild groups this strict emotional self-control and related tasks under the wide umbrella of "emotional labor", which she defines most generally as efforts to "sustain [an] outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (1983, p. 7). First and foremost, Hochschild calls emotional labor the *management* of one's own feelings—a fundamental human capacity[2]. She goes further to claim that we can differentiate between emotional management done for the sake of self and others, and emotional labor done for the market. Exercised in service of the first two audiences, she asserts, the capacity for emotional management has a "use value" and is often beneficial[3]. But once this human skill is harnessed for market purposes—once "advertisements, training, notions of professionalism, and dollar bills have intervened between the smiler and the smiled upon" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 5)—its ability to fulfill the other two vital functions is supposedly impaired. As an example, Hochschild describes a flight attendant giggling without control and without pleasure at the end of her shift. In this case the flight attendant's emotions have become tools that function for her employer, but no longer serve the needs or wishes of the worker herself. Since emotions are a fundamental part of our humanity and identity, this loss of control is dehumanizing in a deep sense. To Marx's critique of the material alienation caused by industrial labor arrangements, Hochschild adds her concern that the emotional labor required in much service work distances workers from their feelings and thereby alienates them from their selves[4].

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[2] Hochschild supports this claim by noting that people commonly speak of "'getting in touch with' [a] feeling and … 'trying to' feel" (1983, p. 17); emotions are not effortless, and our vocabulary shows it.

[3] Often useful, but not always; even when done for nonmarket audiences, people may overly manage their emotions to detrimental effect. With respect to oneself, chronic overmanagement can lead to automatic, unwanted suppression of emotions that are then difficult to regain (e.g. Kovacs, 2011); with respect to others, excessive emotional labor may cross the line into manipulation and/or abuse.

[4] Since by "selves" she means dynamic and plural "modern" selves (not fixed or singular selves), the role of emotions becomes even more important. Emotions, as Hochschild conceives of them, have an absolutely indispensable role as a stream of information, permitting navigation of the turns and twists of modern selfhood (1983, p. 22). Since self is not static, in other words, emotions are an invaluable clue as to who our self 'is' in any given context at a point in time.

My background as a foodservice worker makes me instantly sympathetic to Hochschild's point, which might otherwise strike me as overstated. It is true, though, in my experience and in the opinion of epidemiologists such as Michael Marmot (2004) that relative social status has a major impact on human well-being and health. Especially, then, in the context of the unequal relationship between server and customer, emotional labor has a taxing effect that should not be brushed aside to focus on merely the physical strains of the job. I'm quite willing to believe that emotional labor is an underacknowledged cost of many service positions, one that is not fully accounted for in public debates (e.g. over minimum wage) or in private discussions. I can readily see this labor as exploitative and alienating, perhaps on par with the physical toll of the job.

But I'm also a writing tutor, which leads me to think through the issue from another angle.

The nature of my tutoring work requires some preliminary clarification, since writing centers are perpetually beset by the unfortunate image of "some sort of skills center" or "fix-it shop" that specializes in remediating writers with "special problems in composition" (North, 1995, pp. 434-435). Writers entering the writing center for the first time usually expect a tutor who will take and breeze through their paper in silence, leaving a trail of politely corrective comments. These images and expectations are far from the reality and ideals of many writing centers, who see themselves as carrying the tradition of Socrates or the more recent tradition of Kenneth Bruffee, namely: we facilitate writing sessions by asking questions, conversing and promoting the [sic] "conversation of mankind" (Bruffee, 1995). Writing centers in this tradition are an institutional haven for the ideals of education as a collective endeavor, learning as social, knowledge as socially produced, thinking as conversational, writing as thinking, writing as conversational, and conversation as democratic. We resist the model of the lonely author who cranks out a magnum opus, and the model of the expert tutor and 'good writer' who rescues the hapless student, necessarily a 'bad writer'. Instead we conceptualize our work as talking with writers as peers about their writing choices and their scholarly ideas. Through this conversation, we put our attention at the disposal of writers in a way that supports them in reflecting on their own writing and learning process, which opens the door to the development of long-term, flexible learning and writing strategies.

Rooted in conversation as it is, our tutoring work is highly interpersonal and emotional, something that comes as a surprise to people who imagine tutoring to be mainly cognitive work where tutors impart their own knowledge as a stream of information to receptive writers. But writers who I work with are tackling—alongside whatever cognitive tasks their instructor meant to assign—issues of self-doubt, fear, insecurity, reputation, work-life balance, and sense of professional direction, to merely scratch the surface. Welcoming writers and building rapport, upsetting their expectations for writer/tutor roles in the writing session, asking them to share their unfolding, tentative thoughts with us when they are used to competitive, performative learning contexts that demand a polished product—these are all emotionally fraught exchanges. Not to mention that the writer might be an English Language Learner who is used to working inside a monolinguist, English-only context that disregards and disrespects their other language/s as an asset (Canagarajah, 2006). Or the writer might be writing a personal statement, burdened by the pressure to get into a 'good major' while tackling one of the rare reflective writing assignments to arise within an academic context, an assignment asking them to answer questions about their sense of self, their past, their purpose, their values. Or the writer might be a self-identified 'bad writer', angry about general education requirements that have forced them into an English classroom and upset that the tutor won't just 'tell them how to do it'. The list goes on. Many emotionally-intense conversations happen in the writing center. But, of course, they don't just "happen"; tutors have a role in making them happen, and we do it because we believe these sorts of holistic conversations are vital to people's academic (or otherwise) success.

In my capacity as a writing tutor, this emotional labor has not been alienating. It has been fulfilling even as it is tiring, intense and challenging. Perhaps this is because there are some protections in place. For instance, shift lengths are capped at 3 consecutive hours; anything longer than that we jokingly call "power tutoring", and in the few abnormal occasions when someone ends up doing it, their fatigue confirms both the challenging nature of the work and the wisdom of the shift-length policy. In addition, our organizational culture is very collaborative and flexible, with lots of autonomy regarding conduct within sessions and generous accommodations for tutors' needs as they arise (like sickness and personal days). These factors probably buffer against the alienating effects of emotional labor identified by Hochschild.

But alongside these factors is another one, a distinction that I'd like to draw between emotional labor done as *manipulation* and emotional labor that takes the form of genuine emotional *presence*. In either case, there is emotional labor performed, with workers required to direct some of their efforts towards registering, engaging with and perhaps transforming their own emotions. But in the case of the alienating emotional labor described by Hochschild, the goal is for employees to exhibit and consequently inspire only positive emotions: "part of the job is to disguise fatigue and irritation, for otherwise the labor would show in an unseemly way, and the product … would be damaged" (1983, p. 8)[5,6]. Restriction to the realm of positive emotions marks this form of emotional labor as manipulation. Neither workers nor customers are meant to have genuine emotional reactions. The customers are meant to be coaxed into liking and buying products by employees who are coerced into smiling and selling products.

Tutors, in contrast, are asked to work at being emotionally *present,* which entails tuning in to even their and the writer's negative, upsetting, unwelcome and uncomfortable emotions as valuable material for the tutoring session (Geller et al., 2007). Though it is still paid labor, this approach restores a full(er) range of emotions to their "signal function", precisely what Hochschild fears is lost by the marketization of feeling (1985, p. 17). That is, tutors are asked (in training, and thereafter via our organizational culture) to honor the informational content of their own emotions even when those emotions threaten to disrupt the smooth flow of a 'good' session[7]. Emotional presence is a form of emotional labor that allows tutoring

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[5] This restriction of emotional labor to the display of positive emotions is true, at any rate, for the first chapter of her study that I draw on here. Later in the book she also deals with bill collectors, the fear-inspiring counterparts of the cheerful flight attendants. But my distinction still holds. In both cases dealt with by Hochschild, there is a narrow 'target' state of emotion that the service worker manipulates the customers into feeling.

[6] The labor needs to remain hidden from the consumer because, Hochschild asserts, employers think that what consumers want from service employees is an emotional experience mimicking those in private life—experiences that are genuinely sincere, uncoerced, and natural. But employers may be incorrect in this belief. Restaurateur Jay Porter ran a tipless restaurant in San Diego and noted the astonishing, disproportionate anger of customers who under a tipless policy were deprived of their chance to punish individual waitstaff for perceived poor service (Porter, 2013). This suggests that, far from needing the self-deception that service work is done with a spirit of genuine cheer and caring, some customers delight in its coerced nature and relish the chance to play a more active role in that coercion, via the mechanism of tipping. Their experience, in other words, is *not* damaged when the labor "shows". Porter points to the gendered nature of many tipping transactions and suggests that, in fact, it is precisely the "rush of having [their] needs attended to by young, attractive, female servers" with the financial ability to compel that attention that makes his male customers noticeably angrier at entering a customer/server relationship on tipless terms (2013a).

[7] This is a luxury that we have as student workers. Our work is primarily funded by the college because they believe that it's valuable to the writers that visit us; however, in the event that something goes horribly awry in a session due to tutor error, the fact that we are students ourselves gives our boss room to plead for the learning value of our mistakes (even though it may have hurt the writer's experience). Our errors are allowed to be part of our learning process, in other words, which is a safety net afforded to few service workers.

sessions to take place on more genuine and humanized grounds than the circumscribed plane of positive feelings within which much service work is 'suppose to' happen. Tutors and hopefully writers as well experience rewards of this type of interaction, rather than experiencing the alienation described by Hochschild. The consequence of doing this kind of work on the job is a skill set that carries back to our personal lives, enabling us to have more thoughtful and caring exchanges with friends, family members and classmates. Rather than constituting a hidden 'cost' of our job (Hochschild, 1983, p. 17), our emotional labor represents a positive externality that carries back into the realm of our private lives.

Hochschild gestures towards a similar distinction of her own when she qualifies her diagnosis of emotional labor as alienating with the comment that

> Any functioning society makes effective use of its members' emotional labor. We do not think twice about the use of feeling in theater, or in psychotherapy, or in forms of group life we admire. It is when we come to speak of the *exploitation* of the bottom by the top in any society that we become morally concerned … It is not emotional labor itself, therefore, but the underlying system of recompense that raises the question of what the cost of it is (1983, p. 12).

Emotional labor is not uniformly alienating, in other words; and while it is not wrong to call attention to the real dehumanizing effects of some emotional labor, it is possible to overstate the negative effects of commercialized feelings as such.

But judging between exploitative and non-exploitative emotional labor through reference to a "system of recompense" strikes me as undermining the very point of Hochschild's argument. If all exploitation can be diagnosed from material conditions, then it is a distraction to talk about emotional labor as a unique site of exploitation; it seems sufficient to talk only about income, wealth, and workplace conditions, ignoring the affective dimension of service work. On the other hand if there *is* exploitation uniquely associated with emotional labor, then it makes sense to distinguish between exploitative and non-exploitative emotional labor solely with respect to the quality and nature of that labor, not the "underlying system of recompense". Ezzy (1997) is useful here, as he makes a case for the importance of subjectivity in determining what is 'good' versus 'bad', alienating versus non-alienating work. In short, the alienating impact of emotional labor should be judged according to qualitatively different forms of emotional labor, not traced back and attributed to material conditions as Hochschild does above.

In short, my experience with emotional labor in entry-level service positions has been more nuanced and mixed than the picture that Hochschild paints. As a deli clerk I experienced something similar to what she describes when I was required to act out the part of cheerful deli clerk for an audience of elite consumers. As a writing tutor, though, I find my emotional labor a source of professional satisfaction and personal growth. The possibility for emotional labor to be humanizing—even when paid—seems to escape Hochschild's analysis (at least in this first excerpted chapter). I believe that emotional labor can be humanizing when it does not seek to limit the worker/customer interaction to some narrowly-defined emotional turf—when, instead, it takes the form of emotional *presence* that pays attention to the actual emotional grain of an interaction. Allowing this form of labor can imbue even entry-level service jobs with the kind of professional and personal rewards usually restricted to upper-level service jobs.

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