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Emotional labour and skill: a re-appraisal

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Summary

A number of commentators have recently begun to ask whether many low waged service jobs, traditionally thought of as being low skilled in terms of their technical aspects, may actually constitute a form of highly skilled labour, since they require their holders to perform 'skilled emotional labour' in their dealings with customers. Such discourses hold out the possibility of progress not only in intellectual terms but also in terms of improving the status and pay of many low waged service workers. This issues paper critically reviews these arguments.

Introduction

Today, one only has to walk into a supermarket, phone a call centre or check into a hotel to realise that for many people who work in the service economy managing their emotions as well as those of the customer is an integral part of what they do for a living. This kind of emotion management - what Hochschild termed 'the work of trying to feel the appropriate feeling for the job' - is now commonly referred to as 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983, 1989: 440, Noon and Blyton 1999 ch.7, Korczynski 2002 ch.8). For many service organisations, the ability of their staff to perform 'emotion work', whether it takes the form of enthusiasm, politeness or remaining calm under pressure, is seen as key to customer satisfaction and competitive advantage (Heskett et al 1997). At the same time, a number of commentators have argued that emotion work is a form of highly skilled labour which often remains unrecognised and under-

rewarded (see, for example, Bolton 2004, Korczynski 2005).1 This issues paper reviews these arguments and considers whether applying the label 'skill' to all jobs involving emotion work is really helpful.

Emotional labour as skilled labour

Bolton (2004: 20) has argued that 'emotion work can be viewed as a distinctive form of skilled work and employees as multi-skilled emotion managers.' The crux of her argument is that emotion work shares many of the common features - complexity, discretion and worker control - that have often been used to distinguish skilled jobs. The claim that emotion work is complex derives in part from Goffman's arguments that everyday social interaction requires sophisticated actors who are capable of navigating their way through a myriad of rituals and 'feeling rules'. In the same way, Bolton argues that service workers must develop an awareness of their emotional management skills as they select from a variety of strategies for dealing with customers and learn to recognise the form of emotional display that is appropriate for any given service interaction. In some cases, this may involve building rapport with the customer or defusing customer aggression through the use of humour. Furthermore, emotion workers must skilfully manage these interactions in the context of an 'unequal' exchange where the customer assumes the mantle of sovereign and has rights to display dissatisfaction and resentment that are not available to the worker.

Emotion workers are considered to be 'an active and controlling force in the labour process' who often defy or subvert the organisational feeling rules imposed upon them by management (Bolton 2004: 32, 29-30). An example might be the Disneyland ride operator who gets their own back on difficult customers by separating pairs onto different rides (despite there being room available on the same ride) or resorts to an over-tightening of their seat belt. However, customers can also benefit from employees' acts of resistance, for example when the call centre worker ignores the pressure of management-imposed targets and, out of sympathy, takes time to chat with a lonely pensioner.

In this way, emotion work is seen to tick all the requisite boxes for being skilled work. Indeed, Bolton (2004: 27) argues that this observation applies to all emotion workers including the 'emotional proletariat' who, although engaged in the delivery of a relatively standardised service, are 'frequently the only contact a customer has with an organisation making the quality of the interaction a major criterion on which the organisation is judged.' Furthermore, the essential variability and unpredictability of the service interaction means that there are limits to how far management can routinise and control a process that requires at least some flexibility on the part of the worker.

The implications of Bolton's argument are serious, for as Korczynski (2005: 7) observes, 'we are left with the potentially important observation that many service work jobs may be low paid and low status, but they may not be low skilled.' This then provides the basis for the claim that such jobs might be re-categorised as 'skilled' with their holders duly compensated for their emotional labour. Achieving such recognition is not considered to be easy however. First, emotion work skills are not easy to measure or quantify and are difficult to capture within traditional systems of certification. Second, because they are embodied in the worker as a result of previous socialisation, there is a tendency to dismiss them as personality traits or personal attributes. Third, the majority of those engaged in interactive service work, below the level of the professions, are women. Feminist writers have long argued that 'skill definitions are saturated with sexual bias' (Phillips and Taylor 1986: 55). Because emotion work involves elements of 'people work' and 'caring for others' it tends be seen as an innate feminine quality - something that women are naturally good at - rather than as a complex and learnt skill in its own right. Challenging such positions therefore becomes essential, with the issue of recognition seen as the vital first step towards a 'proper debate on the rewarding of service work skills...' (Korczynski 2005: 12).

Interrogating the emotional-labour-as-skilled-labour view

As Korcyznski (2005: 5) notes, 'It is rare to find writers explicitly denying that social skills in service work are not real skills', although the use of inverted commas around terms like soft and interpersonal 'skills', he suggests, is perhaps indicative of a more widespread scepticism. Some commentators have, however, openly expressed reservations about depicting all emotional labour as skilled work. Filby (1992: 39fn), for instance, in his study of the emotional labour performed by women workers in off-course betting shops, warned of 'a danger of romanticising such work and ascribing it the status of "skilled" by fiat', adding that 'much emotional labour whether in the private and public spheres, is untutored and probably poor.'

Is emotion work, then, necessarily and in the vast bulk of instances highly skilled work? A number of important caveats need to be borne in mind (for a fuller discussion, see Payne 2006). First, let us take the idea that emotion work is complex. Consider the examples that are sometimes used to illustrate the skills of the emotion worker - the retail worker who bids a cheery hello or remains calm and polite in the face of customer aggression, the call handler who uses humour to defuse a difficult situation or out of sympathy takes time to talk with a lonely pensioner. Even if one accepts that such forms of behaviour are 'skills' as opposed to personality traits or dispositions (see Keep and Mayhew 1999), the problem is that the examples afforded are often of such an apparently ordinary nature that one is left wondering about the relative level of complexity or skill involved.

Of course, it is possible to argue that virtually all human activity, such as walking, riding a bike or holding a conversation, involves the use of quite complex skills or abilities but this does not alter the fact that most people can do these things. Similarly, one might consider to what extent the kind of emotional labour skills required in the bulk of low end service jobs may be fairly widely distributed among the general population. If, as some commentators suggest, most of us are, in our wider lives, skilled social actors and emotion managers, then does it not follow that most of us are also potentially skilled emotion workers?

Bolton's claim that a successful service interaction is a 'fragile accomplishment requiring high levels of skilled emotion work' (Bolton 2004: 33) must also be read in the context of today's 'mass' service economy. Here the vast bulk of interactions are often highly routinized affairs that may last only a matter of minutes or even seconds and where a 'perfunctory politeness' will often suffice. Indeed, one question that might be posed is where does the basic requirement for politeness in an advanced western industrial society end and skilled emotion work begin?

Furthermore, even if one accepts that service workers exercise a degree of control and discretion over their emotional displays, this does not alter the fact that this usually takes place within tight limits prescribed by management and that these selfsame elements are all too often visibly absent from the rest of the job.

Does the fact that workers 'misbehave' in various ways or subvert managerial rules and targets, thereby retaining an element of task control, necessarily mean that they are engaged in a highly skilled activity? After all no job is totally devoid of discretion, while individual acts of worker resistance, of one form or another, are a perennial feature of the capitalist labour process.

Perhaps one of the central problems, however, with the argument that 'emotion work is indeed skilled work' (Bolton 2004: 32) is that much of the heterogeneity of emotional labour across different jobs and occupations tends to become lost: all emotion workers and all jobs involving emotional labour are swept together under the banner of 'skill'. There is little discussion as to whether individual workers may be more or less skilled in this respect or whether some jobs (e.g. a supermarket checkout operator) might make more limited demands on a worker's emotional labour than others (e.g. a nurse caring for the terminally ill).

Furthermore, attaching the label 'skill' to emotion work may not itself bring improved status and pay for many front-line service workers. If certain 'skills' or abilities are to secure higher material rewards for their holders then it matters how many of those in the labour market actually possess those skills and

whether the group concerned can exercise control over the labour supply and achieve what is termed 'social closure'. As noted above, however, there may be no real shortage of persons in the labour market able to perform the kind of 'skilled emotion work' required for many low-end service jobs.

Employers are, of course, apt to complain that there is a shortage of 'social skills' and frequently indicate they would like a better class of person to be available but this is rather different to saying that there is a shortage of persons capable of doing that job. Furthermore, the empirical evidence suggests that non-certified social skills or emotional labour do not attract any wage premium (see Felstead et al 2002). If such 'skills' were in short supply, might we not expect the market to solve the problem by bidding up the price of labour? The problem, then, with applying the label 'skill' to emotion work as a means to obtaining improved status and pay is that such re-labelling can quickly degenerate into merely a 'rhetorical device that carries with it no material benefits' (Grugulis et al 2004: 12)

It might be argued that there is nothing particularly harmful about ascribing emotion work with skilled status. Yet, on closer inspection, it would appear that such an exercise does, in fact, carry with it certain dangers. The 'emotion-work-as-skilled-work' view - with its absolutist tendency to treat all jobs involving emotion work as highly skilled - is part of a universalistic discourse of 'up-skilling' which forces us to relinquish the category of 'low skilled' across vast swathes of the mass service sector including many jobs that remain highly routinized and monotonous and which require little or no training to perform them. This may inadvertently offer policy makers a convenient smokescreen for obscuring such realities, while also moving the UK one step closer to being a high skill economy simply through an act of redefinition and without any real changes or improvements to the actual jobs themselves.

Final Thoughts

There is no denying that many organisations today see the ability of their front-line staff to manage their feelings as well as those of the customer as key to competitive success. Indeed, the concept of 'emotional labour' continues to shed valuable light on a once hidden aspect of service work. However, for the reasons outlined above, we would do well to be cautious about depicting all emotion work as highly skilled work and of applying the label 'skill' to jobs which, when measured against any other criteria, often look anything but highly skilled. If the central question is what can be done to improve the pay and conditions of many low waged service workers then perhaps skill is not the best place to start. Rather than seeing emotional labour as a way of re-valorising such work, we might ask a different question. Why is it that low skilled service workers in the UK generally get paid less and have fewer social

and labour market rights than their counterparts in Sweden or Denmark for example?

Endnote:

1 A similar discussion is beginning to develop around the concept of 'aesthetic labour' which has been used to capture the idea that many service sector employers are seeking to recruit (and mould) employees who 'look good' and 'sound right' and embody a particular corporate image or style (see Warhurst and Nickson 2001).

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