

Emotional Labour in a Production Setting?

Keith Townsend
Department of Industrial Relations
Griffith Business School
Griffith University
K.Townsend@griffith.edu.au

Abstract

In 1983, Airlie Hochschild published a 'classic' "The Managed Heart". Since this publication, scores of articles have been produced to explore the various manifestations of emotional labour across a range of service industries. However, there is a substantial absence when it comes to emotional labour when face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions with customers are not present. This article presents data collected from a food-processing plant that has seen a strong managerial attempt to develop a unitarist culture. Employees face a significant level of emotional labour in their interactions within this culture. As has been found in the service industry literature, employees react differently to the emotional labour that they face, and indeed, not all emotional labour is negative for employees.

Introduction

Perhaps the best measure of the true impact of published research is the level of debate it entices. In 1983, Airlie Hochschild published a 'classic' "The Managed Heart". At the centre of Hochschild's argument was that employee's emotions were being commercialised and incorporated into the labour process. It was the expectations of managers and customers in service enterprises that employees display particular emotions throughout the service interaction.

Jobs that involve voice-to-voice (for example, call centres) or face-to-face (for example, retail customer service) interactions often involve emotional labour (Hochschild 1983; Sturdy and Fineman 2001). The reason being that employees in such environments must manage and at times modify their own emotions, while considering and quite often attempting to manage the emotions of the customer or client (Hochschild 1983).

Much of the research performed on the topic of emotional labour has been within the context of service industries. However, this paper will argue that when managers implement strong unitarist cultures within production settings, employees are faced

with managing their emotions on a daily basis. While it is important conceptually to understand that if emotional labour is defined as any emotion present while performing the labour process, then it likely to be found everywhere, in every job. This paper is not suggesting such a broad use of the term is relevant, or indeed useful in any way. However, when strong unitarist cultures are developed and maintained by management, then the management of emotions is relevant to employees.

This paper is structured as follows. There is an analysis of the relevant literature, firstly that literature which explores emotional labour, followed by the literature that considers organisational culture. An explanation of the methodology for this study is followed by the introduction of the FoodWorks case study. Relevant aspects of the organisation and the managerial imposed culture are outlined. Finally, the workers are given a voice. The way the culture imposes emotional labour on the workforce is explored through the comments and actions of the workers.

Linking Emotional Labour and Corporate Cultures

In many modern service organisations employers expect employees to ensure that the customer's contact with the organisation is positive, or indeed exceeds the customer's satisfaction level (Steinberg and Figart 1999). Many scholars have developed the notion further to consider other aspects such as looking attractive (Gutek 1985), tone of voice and other efforts that are expressed through behaviours (Rafaeli and Sutton 1987). However, Bolton (2000) argues that a tendency to describe all sorts of emotionality in workplaces as emotional labour makes it more difficult to define what productive emotion is.

Much of the literature examining emotional labour has focussed upon jobs that require obviously high levels of emotional labour. Bolton (2003) provides a useful framework with four different types of emotion in the workplace: presentational (emotion management according to general social 'rules'), philanthropic (emotion management given as a 'gift'), prescriptive (emotion management according to organisation / professional rules of conduct), and pecuniary (emotion management for commercial gain).

Typically, emotional labour has focussed on the requirement of an employee to have contact with people external to their organisation, usually through face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions (Steinberg and Figart 1999). Another aspect of emotional labour requires a “worker to produce an emotional state in another person while at the same time managing one’s own emotions” (Steinberg and Figart 1999: 13). However, it is also recognised that emotional labour is expressed among co-workers, subordinates and supervisors. Erickson and Wharton (1997) recognise that it is not the volume of interactions with people or contact with the public but the managerial requirement that workers perform well in their interactions with others that increases the deleterious feelings of inauthenticity. A ‘managed’ corporate culture can result in high levels of presentational emotions in the workplace. This paper argues that within processing or manufacturing organisations with a highly managed culture, presentational emotional labour can be deleterious, but also beneficial to the employees.

Altering and managing an organisation’s culture was not commonly utilised as a managerial tool until Peters and Waterman (1982) suggested that organisational performance can be linked to the organisation’s culture. In subsequent years there has been much written about the role of organisational or corporate culture and the role that culture can play in developing a cooperative and committed workforce. The culture of an organisation is influenced by a number of factors; importantly culture is by definition very contextually specific (Eldridge and Crombie 1974). An organisation’s culture includes (but is not limited to) aspects of coded instructions, systems of meanings, conventions, prevailing logic and a way of thinking and proceeding (Schien 1996).

Organisations in general have expectations over the way their employees behave in the workplace. However, it is becoming more common for organisations to actively progress corporate cultures. These organisations actively engage employees in ‘team-building’ activities in an attempt to portray their organisations as a ‘fun’ place to work, while instilling an expectation in employees that they do not simply ‘do their job’ but to go beyond what is expected.

The pre-establishing of a corporate culture has been described as “...the death of reason” (Anthony 1993: 164) as it hides the nature of the labour process. This is while the labour process continues to maintain a level of dehumanisation. Waring describes this process of developing a corporate culture as “masking reason” (Waring 1998: 429) as it aims to have employees ‘mask’ their true character while at work, similar to the notion of ‘surface’ or ‘deep’ acting developed by Hochschild (1983).

The data for this research was collected over an eight month period of ethnographic job observation. The observation was a mix of participant and non-participant observation, and extensive discussions could be held with employees. Furthermore, substantial amounts of data were collected outside of formal work time, in breaks and before and after shifts. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper.

Food Works, Creating a Culture

Food Works is a food processing plant on a greenfield site in Australia. A significant part of the motivation for establishing the new plant was to move away from the adversarial culture present in the seven brownfield sites operating within the food processing industry. Food Works prepares complete frozen meals for a variety of organisations, including transport and retail organisations, with a desire to break into healthcare and hospitality markets.

The new entity was to become “...a business that while a wholly owned subsidiary ... would be as far removed from the parent company as possible. The goal was to create a culturally unique business...” (Management Team Member, 19 March 2003). It was the intention of the management team to implement semi-autonomous work teams as a means to enhance productivity and employee involvement, particularly when compared to the brownfield sites. The General Manager states that with teams “...you create ownership from the word ‘go’. It’s their ideas, their designs and we are there to guide them in a sense.” The rhetoric of empowerment and self-responsibility comes straight from the pages of Peters and Waterman’s (1982: 55) original work, when they suggest that to achieve the values “...employees must take responsibility, become empowered...”

In keeping with the idea of motivating employees to behave in a manner that is consistent with the managerially advanced culture, the canteen is adorned with photographs of the 'team' and individual team members who have achieved success in reaching KPIs (key performance indicators). Posters are spread across one wall of the canteen, developed in a 'whole of team' meeting or 'teambuilding activity'.

Processing Emotions

The presence of emotional labour at the FoodWorks plant is unquestionably different to that present in workplaces with face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions with customers. Service work requires a majority of interactions with customers and hence, pecuniary and prescriptive emotional labour is required throughout much of the employee's working day. However, at the processing plant, much of the employee's time is spent placing marinated chicken fillets on a grill belt or pouring pasta into an industrial sized vat. One would think that neither piece of machinery would complain to management if the employee was not being particularly 'nice' while performing their tasks. Rather, the emotional labour comes about as a consequence of the managerially initiated 'monoculture' in the workplace. Hence, the emotions in this workplace are presentational, or occasionally prescriptive.

There are three main areas of employment at FoodWorks that requires presentational emotions so that workers can "produce an emotional state in another person while at the same time managing one's own emotions" (Steinberg and Figart 1999). These are team meetings, team building activities and general interactions with fellow employees. The following paragraphs explore the responses of employees in such situations.

The general interaction between employees gains another dimension when the employees are organised into teams. There is a range of literature that considers the potentially coercive nature of work teams (see for example, Barker 1993; Willmott 1993). Employee responses to the potentially coercive nature can require emotional labour. Undeniably, there is a mixed response from operators when they consider the 'flat structure' and the expectation that they ensure an appropriate level of output from their peers.

...the choice is either work at 130 per cent or tell these guys to get their shit together. So what do you think? How would you like to have to tell people to get moving all the time. It's not good mate (9 April 2003).

Sure, maybe they'll work a bit harder, but they'll also be pissed off at me and when you work with these people every day, that's not fun (3 June 2003).

You have to get on to them... We're all in this together and to pretend any different means your not really a team player and probably don't fit our culture (3 June 2003).

Employees recognise that there can be various responses to the situations that confront them. Not all employees manage their emotions well, and as such, find some difficulty engaging with their fellow employees in a fashion that is suitable to management. However, the ability to manage one's emotions is not enough; an employee must also engage in such a way that they produce a particular response from their team mates. The intended response is increased output and if the interaction is not managed by the employees then interpersonal conflict can flare within the organisation.

We're supposed to have this culture where we can say things no matter what and be honest but it's not the case. We can have a look at the schedule and say 'that's not going to work' and we're told that's tough (11 June 2003).

The worst part is the things you have to do to get a job here and then they say you're really good because you succeeded and they still treat you like idiots (18 June 2003).

When the job gets you down you can get a bit snappy, but that's a big no-no in here, so I know a few of the girls that are always biting their tongue (18 June 2003).

It is no surprise that organisations that implement a team structure commonly have team meetings of some description. These team meetings can take various forms, quality circles, product information updates, off-line committees and so on. At FoodWorks, production meetings were held before each shift to cover the expected workload for the day. In addition, team meetings would be held on a fortnightly basis, rotating between the day shift and the afternoon shift. These meetings covered a range of issues, including product updates, quality issues and general staff information

issues. Finally, 'whole of team' meetings would be held as the need arose to cover infrequent issues such as enterprise bargaining.

Some employees do not appreciate the expectations in team meetings.

...I certainly feel pressure to be nice to people, but at the same time to be honest. Sometimes you just can't do both at once (laughing)... I'm exhausted after every team meeting (2 July 2003).

There's constant pressure at team meetings to say how much you like the place. I lie, I have to (2 July 2003).

Food Works employees are also provided with opportunities to play organised games and activities throughout work hours as a means to develop a culture of fun. A number of such activities have occurred, for example, building 'plasticine' models to represent "what Food Works means to me". Employees have mixed feelings about such activities. The models were left on display in the canteen for weeks afterward. The winning team moulded a plasticine chain and an open padlock. The explanation written below the display was that "Snap Fresh is where all areas are linked and the open lock portrays that we are open to ideas". However, there were some more subversive entrants. For example one entrant entitled "The Bottle" with the explanation to the organisation "The answers are in the bottle. Find your way to the bottom and you'll find your answers". An employee within "The Bottle group" provided an alternate explanation:

What it really means is this place is fucked and it is making me an alcoholic, basically. The only way to get up on a Monday morning and face it again is to wipe yourself out each weekend (18 June 2003).

Certainly, many employees enjoy the opportunity to engage in such activities. However, there is also a substantial number of employees who do not, some going so far as to call the managerial approach of using such games as "manipulative and childish" (18 June 2003). Comments regarding other such activities include:

We had this day where we were supposed to carry on in the carpark; having races with balloons between our knees and that sort of crap. I hate it, but you have to play along don't you? (18 June 2003).

It annoys me. I've got real work to do, I don't want to play games. Besides, games may be fine now, but what about when we're behind schedule. They'll be breathing down our necks then, won't they? And I hate pretending I like it. But what else can you do? (18 June 2003).

As mentioned, there are three main situations when the employees are faced with the requirement to produce presentational and prescriptive emotional labour in the food processing setting: team meetings, team building activities and general interactions with fellow employees. These face-to-face interactions require employees to manage their own emotions and seek to produce an emotional effect in others. In this case study, the 'others' are actually fellow employees rather than customers. This is an important point. Key to the 'service economy' use of emotional labour is the commodification of labour takes place in an unequal relationship with the customer (Korczynski 2002). In this workplace, the 'smile' is not produced as a tool of selling a product, but emotions are managed through the production process to ensure 'team harmony' and 'the FoodWorks culture'.

The potential costs and benefits of emotional labour in this setting can be compared to that for employees in the service sector. Importantly, emotional labour is not consistently negative for employees, nor is it uniformly negative on the employee's job satisfaction (Wharton and Erickson 1995). Certainly, in this workplace many employees find benefits in their emotional labour. Many employees suggest that the attitude of their colleagues means that they are more likely to go home happy. It appears that just as we find in many subjective aspects of the employment experience, when it comes to emotional labour in a production setting, employees are affected in different ways.

Conclusion

Emotional labour is a concept that has developed over the last couple decades. This paper adds to our knowledge of emotional labour by taking the concept of presentational emotions into a food processing plant. In this greenfield site, the culture was pre-determined by management and employees were selected in part, for their capacity to 'fit' the culture.

This paper has demonstrated that even within a food processing plant, where interactions with customers are absent, there can be substantial levels of emotional labour for the employees. This presentational and prescriptive emotional labour is the result of interactions with other employees that are expected to meet the organisation's vague guidelines of the culture. There were three main areas of interaction where employees are confronted with situations where they must engage in substantial levels of emotional labour. These are: team meetings, team building activities and general interactions with fellow employees. The employees throughout the plant display different reactions to the need for emotional labour. This is certainly reflective of previous research in the service sector. Emotional labour does not have a uniform negative or positive impact on employees.

References:

- Anthony, P. (1993) *Managing Culture* Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Barker, J. (1993) 'Tightening the Iron Cage: Concertive Control in Self-Managing Teams' *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38: 408-437.
- Bolton, S. (2000) 'Emotion Here, Emotion There, Emotional Organisations Everywhere' *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 11: 155-171.
- Bolton, S. (2003) 'Introducing a Typology of Workplace Emotion' *Lancaster University Management School Working Paper* Lancaster: Lancaster University.
- Eldridge, J. and A. Crombie (1974) *A Sociology of Organisations* London: Allen and Unwin.
- Erickson, R. and A. Wharton (1997) 'Inauthenticity and Depression: Assessing the Consequences of Interactive Service Work' *Work and Occupations* 24: 188-213.
- Gutek, B. (1985) *Sex and the workplace* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hochschild, A. (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling* Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Korzynski, M. (2002) *Human Resource Management in Service Work* Hampshire: Palgrave.
- Peters, T. and R. Waterman (1982) *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies* New York: Harper and Rowe.

- Rafaeli, A. and R. Sutton (1987) 'Expression of Emotion as Part of the Work Role' *Academy of Management Review* 12(1): 23-37.
- Schien, E. (1996) 'Culture: The Missing Concept in Organisation Studies' *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41(2): 229-240.
- Steinberg, R. and D. Figart (1999) 'Emotional Labour Since The Managed Heart' *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 561: 8-26.
- Sturdy, A. and S. Fineman (2001) 'Struggles for the Control of Affect - Resistance as Politics and Emotion', pp. 135-156 in A. Sturdy, I. Grugulis and D. Willmott *Customer Service: Empowerment and Entrapment* New York: Palgrave
- Waring, P. (1998) 'The Paradox of Prerogative in Participative Organisations: The Manipulation of Corporate Culture?' *Current Research in Industrial Relations* Proceedings of the 12th AIRAANZ Conference, Wellington.
- Wharton, A. and R. Erickson (1995) 'The Consequences of Caring: Exploring the Link Between Women's Job and Family Emotion Work' *Sociology Quarterly* 36(2): 273-296.
- Willmott, H. (1993) 'Strength is Ignorance; Slavery is Freedom: Managing Culture in Modern Organisations' *Journal of Management Studies* 30(4): 515-552.