

---

## SERVITUDE WITH A SMILE: A RE-EXAMINATION OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Patricia Chong  
 M.A. Graduate,  
 Labour Policies and Globalisation,  
 The Global Labour University,  
 University of Kassel & the Berlin School of Economics and Law,  
 Germany

---

### INTRODUCTION

*But most of us have jobs that require some handling of other people's feelings and our own . . . The secretary who creates a cheerful office . . . the social worker whose look of solicitous concern makes the client feel cared for . . . the bill collector who inspires fear . . . all of them must confront in some way or another the requirements of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983: 11).*

Hochschild (1983) explored emotional labour through a study of flight attendants in the groundbreaking book: *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Understood as work that involves “produc[ing] the proper state of mind in others,” emotional labour requires the production and consumption of the worker’s identity as part of the customer service experience (1983:7). With the rise of the interactive service society, emotional labour’s prevalence is undeniable. This makes Hochschild’s observation “that we are all partly flight attendants” all the more true nearly thirty years later.

However, what form one’s behaviour should take is not the same for everyone. What is considered one’s appropriate or moral role is determined by our social location within interlocking race, gender and class hierarchies. Hence, there are *different* behavioural expectations depending on *who* is doing the emotional labour. These different expectations are based on social norms, which construct identities that privilege some at the expense of subordinating others. At the individual level, these manufactured performances of “differences in personality, interests, character, appearance, manner and competence” demanded by emotional labour have the effect of making these differences appear ‘natural’ (Leidner, 1991:155). These performances then serve as ‘proof’ of innate differences in “nature and capabilities,” and thus justify and reinforce hierarchies (1991:175). As will be addressed, such beliefs naturalize, for example,

gender-segregated jobs and the continued undervaluing of what is considered to be 'women's work'. Thus, emotional labour is not a neutral act since it has the effect of naturalizing inequalities on an individual level and justifying inequality at large.

While much work has been done on exploring the gendered aspect (albeit a limited one) of emotional labour, less work has been done on understanding how gender, along with race *and* class processes, is central to the social construction of emotional labour. This limitation can be overcome by using an analysis of intersectionality in the study of emotional labour. Intersectionality challenges essentialist beliefs by exposing how the interaction of multiple identities impacts social reality and how hierarchies "intersect and overlap" (Mirchandani, 2003: 728). Instead of "bracketing" and isolating identities, which results in an "additive model" (where for example a woman is oppressed, a racialized woman suffers from "double oppression" and so forth), intersectionality exposes how identities are "linked" within interlocking systems of oppression (Glenn, 2002:7,13). Intersectionality is important to this analysis because emotional labour is based on identity, as interpreted in relation to constructed hierarchies, and what is seen to be one's 'natural' or moral behaviour. Since identity is predicated on a creation of meaning in *opposition* to the 'other', intersectionality is important in breaking down these false dichotomies which position one identity as the 'norm' and all else as 'other'. For example, men are without gender, Whites without race and all are heterosexual.

This article seeks to apply an approach of intersectionality in examining two areas that emotional labour was initially ill-equipped to analyze. First, while emotional labour involves the overt shaping of the worker's identity to match perceived social norms via uniforms, scripts, etc., the more covert forms of reinforced social hierarchies need to be recognized. At the level of the individual organization, work is itself gendered, racialized and classed. As such, there are important unpaid aspects of work that demand identity-based performance that are linked to race, gender and class hierarchies. Second, without using an approach of intersectionality, the examination of emotional labour's racialized dimensions is limited. On a broader scale, the performance of emotional labour must also be situated within the global division of labour and how global power relations affects the local, regional and international execution of emotional labour.

## LITERATURE REVIEW: RACIAL SILENCES

Much of the academic literature on emotional labour has focused on its gendered aspects. This typically involves exploring how gender norms are reinforced via men and women acting out their 'appropriate' roles in performing emotional labour. However, there is little work done in addressing the *interaction*

of race, gender and class in the social construction of emotional labour. Mirchandani notes:

I document the fact that little or no attention has been paid to the racialized dimensions of emotion work. I argue that the exclusion of racial analyses is symptomatic of a unidimensional understanding of gender based on universalized conceptions of 'men' and 'women' underlying many studies of emotion work. While theorists illuminate the different forms of emotion work required in various professions, there is little understanding of the relationship between the occupation of workers and their social location within interactive race, class and gender hierarchies. A number of theorists have highlighted the difference which the gender or class characteristics of workers engaged in emotion work makes, yet there has been little analysis of how workers do emotion work in relation to *simultaneously occurring* gendered, class-based and racialized hierarchies (2003:721-722).

For example, researchers display a bias in selecting from groups that are predominately White, or are *assumed* White when no racial breakdown is provided. This has the effect of "normaliz[ing] Whiteness" and produces "racial silences" (2003:727). Thus, the 'universal' man and woman in the study of emotional labour is constructed as being White.

In *The Managed Heart* Hochschild fleetingly addresses race. For example, she discusses the manufactured ideal of the flight attendant being a "Southern white woman" but only mentions Black flight attendants as a footnote (1983:93). While in Hochschild's more recent work an approach of intersectionality is evident, the lack of such an approach in *The Managed Heart* was echoed by others and set the foundation for the racial silence in the research. This also makes the study of gender itself incomplete as gender performances are also shaped by race and class differences. This is the focus of the next section.

## THE UNIVERSAL BODY AT WORK?

While emotional labour in the service sector involves overt displays of control over the individual, there are also more covert forms of control taking place at the institutional level of the organization. The seemingly neutral way that organizations operate masks the subordination inherent within the system and naturalizes these inequalities. Moving from the individual to the institutional level, the organization of work itself is constructed around identity and relationships of privilege and subordination. The theory of gendered organizations adds a feminist analysis to the study of organizations by exploring how bureaucracies in their culture, processes and structures are themselves *gendered*. For example, the paid versus unpaid division of labour, gender segregated jobs in practice, pay gaps, etc. are reinforced by seemingly neutral organizational operations and policies. As Acker argues:

The concept 'a job' is thus implicitly a gendered concept, even though organizational logic presents it as gender neutral. 'A job' already contains the gender-based division of labor and the separation between the public and the private sphere. The concept of 'a job' assumes a particular gendered organization of domestic life and social production. It is an example of . . . 'the gender subtext of the rational and impersonal' (1990:149).

In other words, while organizational theory deals with a disembodied worker (one that is not male or female and in this sense, it is a universal body at work), it is a body that is universally male in organizational practice.

Along the same line, Ferguson argues that bureaucracy is a system that hides and perpetuates social inequalities because the

formal legal equality of the citizens masks underlying inequities and disguises the pressure to conform. As both a structure and a process, bureaucracy must be located within its social context; in our society, that is a context in which social relations between classes, races, and sexes are fundamentally unequal. Bureaucracy, as the 'scientific organization of inequality,' serves as a filter for these other forms of domination, projecting them into an institutional arena that both rationalizes and maintains them (1984:7).

Hence, bureaucracy must be understood in relation to social inequalities based on race, gender, class, etc. For the organization to operate "smoothly," the worker must play their appropriate role in a relationship of unequal power, in terms of both organizational and social hierarchies.

Sexuality --or more specifically, heterosexual accessibility-- comes to the forefront in understanding how race and class affect gender performance. Thus, *heteronormativity* needs to be included in an analysis of organizations. Part of women's oppression includes their sexual exploitation, which demands the performance of heterosexuality; in other words, women experience *heterosexism* (Oerton, 1996). Thus, women are not only exploited in terms of their labour, but are sexualized as part of their jobs. Again, the supposed objectivity of bureaucracy hides the sexualizing of female workers and its impact within the workplace:

The way male managers typically relate to women colleagues and subordinates thus depends more often upon their understanding of heterosexual relations than upon, for example, managerial science --although the latter is only superficially gender-neutral and for the most part it too is infused by unacknowledged gender power relations (Oerton, 1996:27).

Hence, sexuality is part of the oppression and “conformity” of women within bureaucracy. This performance of sexuality caters to men and legitimizes their power within organizations. For example, the ideal leader brings to mind “[i]mages of male sexual function and patriarchal paternalism” which is linked to the celebrated “masculine ethic” of “rationality and reason” (Acker, 1990:153, 143).

In understanding what type of femininity is to be performed, again, it is key to recognize the race and class processes involved. In her study of exotic dance clubs, Trautner (2007) argues that organizations are classed (and raced) in that it is the targeted clientele’s *class* that determines the *kind* of sexuality, as a form of emotional labour, to be performed by workers. For example, the exotic dance club that targets a working-class clientele displays a “cheap-thrills” sexuality that caters to “pure physical pleasure and lust.” This is made material via the employment of racialized women, explicit sexual performances, the ‘choice’ of make-up, costumes, etc. This is contrasted to the exotic dance club that caters to a middle-class clientele that displays a “voyeuristic” sexuality. This type of sexuality is about “gazing at the female from a distance, constructed to appear as admiration and respect,” sheltering the customers from everyday hassles and allowing the men to act as “gentlemen” (2007: 776). The women employed here are White and their performances are more sexually subdued in that the women are “presenting a sensual and delicate image of sexuality” (2007: 781). Clearly, using an analysis of intersectionality we see how the performance of gender and the type of sexuality displayed, as demanded by emotional labour, are tied to class and race processes (2007: 786).

While I might be accused of including a literal example of performance with limited applicability, Trautner’s observations can be applied to other organizations:

This study of exotic dance clubs, in which gender and sexuality are explicit and exaggerated features of organizational life, provides a rich context in which to view the organizational performance and construction of class. But these processes are at play in other organizational contexts as well, just perhaps more hidden (as class often is) (2007: 786).

Returning to *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild did astutely recognize this in the context of airline stewardesses’ displayed sexuality:

United Airlines . . . is ‘the girl-next-door,’ the neighborhood babysitter grown up. Pan Am is upper class, sophisticated, and slightly reserved in its graciousness. PSA is brassy, fun-loving, and sexy. Some flight attendants could see a connection between the personality they were supposed to project and the market segment the company wants to attract. One United worker explained: ‘United wants to appeal to Ma and Pa Kettle. So it wants Caucasian girls – not so

beautiful that Ma feels fat, and not so plain that Pa feels unsatisfied . . . they use the girl-next-door image to appeal to that market . . . They weed out busty women because they don't fit the image, as they see it' (1983: 97-98).

The mention of race (e.g. "Caucasian") while not explored further, points to an initial recognition that race is also a part of the corporate image. Using an approach of intersectionality, next I turn to an examination of the racialized dimensions of service work within the context of the global division of labour.

### THE COLOUR OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR?

An intersectional approach reveals that gender, race and class processes are central to emotional labour. However, in situating emotional labour within the global division of labour, there must be a recognition that these processes occur on multiple levels (the local, national and international) and are shaped by global power relations (Young, 2005). In other words, gendered performances are "enacted" at the local level but they also need to be understood within "racialized transnational regimes" (Mirchandani, 2003: 107). For example, Chang and Ling argue in relation to domestic workers that "the global economy casts Filipinas and other Asian women as the very embodiment of 'service'" (2000: 36-37). Filipinas are stereotyped as being "sexually subservient" which is a legacy born out of a "history of colonialism, sexism, and poverty" (2000: 37). Filipinas find that they have "limited options" outside of being service workers because the Filipino economy itself is largely serviced-based within the global division of labour.

Another example of the racialized dimensions of emotional labour within this context are call centre workers in India who serve customers in the United States of America. Not only do they perform emotional labour in terms of handling their emotions when dealing with rude and sometimes outright racist customers, but part of their emotional labour involves what is euphemistically called "national identity management" (Poster, 2007: 273). This term refers to how employees "subsume different national identities" (2007: 271) but more specifically, it involves pretending to be a certain *type* of American:

The particular form of 'American identity' that workers display is a key element of the managerial strategy in Indian call centers. Very often, these firms rely upon consumer-driven images of citizenship in the United States that they draw from the dominant entertainment industry and popular media. Such images, in turn, typically reflect white, middle class, heterosexual, Christian communities, more so than those of people of color, immigrants, working-class communities, etc. Moreover, they often gloss over the contested and plural identities of U.S. citizenship (2007: 280-281).

This example illustrates that identity remains important in both *face-to-face* and *voice-to-voice* forms of emotional labour.

Poster explains that 'national identity management' involves the following four aspects: trying to 'speak' American which includes "diction, voice modulation, rhythm"; having an American name or "alias," conducting "small talk" in terms of being knowledgeable about popular culture and current events; and lastly, sticking to the script. The script is explicit in terms of answering the dreaded customer question: "'Where are you calling from?'" Indian workers respond in the following manner: "First, we say we are calling from an 'outbound call center.' If they ask again, then we say we are 'in Asia.' If they ask again, then we change the subject'" (2007: 272).

Call centre work in the North American context is considered to be deskilled feminized work, as employees are expected to be deferential which is considered to be feminine behaviour. This is somewhat true in the Indian situation as evidenced by the discourses used in training such as the "mother/son" and "master/slave" language used to elicit active listening, "empathy" and the "complete deference to authority of the customer" respectively (Mirchandani, 2005: 111). Yet, this 'feminine' aspect within the call centre work of India is recast in the historically masculine concept of nation-building:

This servitude is often contextualized within the rhetoric of national responsibility, whereby India's attractiveness as a location for subcontracting is said to depend on workers' ability to satisfy the demands of foreign clients . . . (2005: 112).

Again, varying and sometimes contradicting articulations of appropriate behaviours are apparent at different levels (local, national, international) and speak to its social construction. Thus, as Mirchandani notes in another study of Indian call centre workers who serve customers in the United States, gender norms are "eclipsed" in the sense that they are heavily embedded in racialized gender norms at the transnational level.

Clearly, emotional labour must be addressed within a framework that takes into consideration the global division of labour. This becomes even more important as services continue to be outsourced to other countries. Thus, we see how

[g]lobalization is changing the form of relations between groups, such that the communication in service work is being infused with discourses of nation and citizenship. Scholars have revealed the crucial ways that gender is embedded in the relations of interactive service work . . . race becomes a critical element as well. Nation enters the service interaction . . . through consumer discourses that service is best rendered by workers of their own nationality, and through explicit racial and nationalized hostility (Poster, 2007: 296).

While the racialized call centre workers' emotional labour involves hiding their national identity as best as they can, the 'colour-coding' of service work in general is well documented in the North American context and also involves the issue of visibility/invisibility:

This includes the cooks and dishwasher who work the back of the restaurant while we sit in the front; the maids who clean our homes while we leave in the daytime, and the janitors who clean our offices after we leave in the night; the shelf stockers at Walmart who work when the store is closed; the office workers filing claims and processing bank records, whom we never see at all, etc. There may be a racial component to this invisibility as well: with increasing levels of 'invisibility' in service work, the greater chance the worker is a person of color (Poster, 2007: 297).

## CONCLUSION

In arguing that gender, race and class processes are central to the social construction of emotional labour as based on interlocking hierarchies, this article applied an analysis of intersectionality to two areas underexamined by emotional labour. The first area involved an examination of how at the institutional level, the organization of work itself is fundamentally gendered, racialized and classed. As such, work demands identity-based performance in relation to these interlocking social hierarchies. Second, what is considered to be one's moral role as demanded by emotional labour needs to be understood at the level of the global division of labour. This is because global power relations affects the social norms that are the foundation of gendered, racialized and classed performances of emotional labour. These differing and sometimes contradicting articulations of social norms speak to their social construction.

While there are countless other areas of emotional labour that could benefit from using an approach of intersectionality, I will conclude with one such area of potential research. The growth in non-standard work in Canada has also included a growth in self-employed workers. This takes the informalization of the traditional boss-worker relationship to new heights and it provides a glimpse of a larger service sector transformation. The "entrepreneur self-definition" is already occurring in gendered service employment such as domestic work and waitressing (Bruckert, 2002: 106). If this transformation occurs in the service sector on a mass scale, who is doing the exploiting in terms of emotional labour? Already, the use of commission-based incentive systems is 'normal' and is clearly about getting workers to self-exploit. Might the market, as the ultimate disembodied disciplinarian, be enough to compel us to perform emotional labour? Workers already consent to the exploitation of their labour in general. As emotional labourers, we may internalize this exploitation, acting out our



appropriate roles for monetary gain and in the end, naturalizing and legitimizing the very hierarchies that keep us in 'our place' (Trautner, 2005).

## REFERENCES

- Acker, J. (1990). 'Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations'. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139-158.
- Bruckert, C. (2002). *Taking It Off, Putting It On: Women in the Strip Trade*. Toronto, Ontario: Women's Press.
- Chang, K. A., and Ling, L. H. M. (2000). 'Globalization and its Intimate Other: Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong', in: M. Marchand, A. Sussan Runyan (Eds.), *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites and Resistances*. (pp. 27-43). London: Routledge.
- Ferguson, K.E. (1984). *The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Glenn, E.N. (2002). *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor*. USA: Harvard University Press.
- Hochschild, A.R. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. London: University of California Press.
- Kweli, T. (2007). 'Hot Thing'. Eardrum. Warner Bros. Records Inc.
- Leidner, R. (1991). 'Selling Hamburgers and Selling Insurance: Gender, Work, and Identity in Interactive Service Jobs'. *Gender & Society*, 5(2), 154-177.
- Mirchandani, K. (2003). 'Challenging Racial Silences in Studies of Emotion Work: Contributions from Anti-Racist Feminist Theory'. *Organizational Studies*, 24(5), 721-742.
- (2005). 'Gender Eclipsed? Racial Hierarchies in Transnational Call Center Work'. *Social Justice*, 32(4), 105-119.
- Oerton, S. (1996). 'Sexualizing the Organization, Lesbianizing the Women: Gender, Sexuality and 'Flat' Organizations'. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 3(1), 26-37.
- Poster, W.R. (2007). 'Who's on the Line? Indian Call Center Agents Pose As Americans for U.S.-Outsourced Firms'. *Industrial Relations*, 46(2), 271-304.
- Trautner, M.N. (2007). 'Doing Gender, Doing Class: The Performance of Sexuality in Exotic Dance Clubs'. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 6:771-788.
- Young, B. (2005). "Globalization and Shifting Gender Governance Order(s)". *SoWi-Online Journal*, 2005(2). Retrieved from [http://www.sowi-onlinejournal.de/2005-2/globalization\\_young.htm](http://www.sowi-onlinejournal.de/2005-2/globalization_young.htm)