Culture, Work and Emotion

By Can-Seng Ooi & Richard Ek

The pursuit of work-life balance alludes to how work and everyday life have become entangled. The demarcation of one's private emotional life against one's professional work no longer holds true as companies want workers to be part of a corporate family and emotional expressions are (selectively) welcomed in the work place. Yet another demarcation is being challenged; as promoted by proponents of the experience economy, consumption has become an act of co-creation or co-production (Pine & Gilmore 1999). Many products are experiential or have experiential components, such as in thrill rides and leading a branded lifestyle. Today, being emotionally demonstrative can be expected at work and a consumer can expect to generate consumption experiences of her/his own. This special section of *Culture Unbound* – Culture, Work and Emotion – is dedicated to some of these boundary-crossing debates.

Let's take a step back. When *The Managed Heart* by Arlie Russell Hochschild was published in 1983, no one expected its impact 30 years later. The concept "emotional labour" is so entrenched in the social sciences that it hardly needs a reference. It is difficult to overestimate its enduring influence (Brook 2009a). It is also impossible to do an exhaustive overview of the concept because the concept has dispersed into a myriad of research streams and adopted in different academic disciplines.[1] One may say that this special section of *Culture Unbound* is yet another example of Hochschild's work being discussed, criticised and advanced.

For some scholars, the emotional labour concept is too close to Marx's alienation theory and therefore absolutist in character (Korczynski 2002; Bolton 2005 & 2009) while others have argued that the concept needs to be more integrated within Marxian Labour Process Analysis (Brook 2009a & 2009b). The concept has influenced additional concepts, primarily "aesthetic labour". This is a concept that highlights management's utilisation of employees' embodied looks, competencies and skills (Warhurst et al. 2000; Witz et al. 2003; Nickson et al. 2005) and raises questions regarding employment discrimination (Warhurst et al. 2009) and segmentation in the routine interactive service sector (Warhurst & Nickson 2007a & 2007b). Of course, the emotional labour concept has also opened up for a gender conscious scrutinisation of the social reproduction and commodification of gender and sexuality (Warhurst & Nickson 2009) in workplace contexts.

Emotional labour, as a stream of research, integrates two themes: the rise of a service economy and an attention towards the investment, and personal management of emotions in workplace situations (Wharton 2009). Acting in relation to

workplace-bound social and cultural norms requires self-aware intentions among the employees, a process that Hochschild refers to as taking place on the "surface" of personality and subjectivity as well as "deep" within the person in question. Especially in service work, in the service encounter (Hochschild uses the case of flight attendants), the employee is normally obliged to show a predestined register of emotional display. For the employer, it is crucial that the employee does not only show these emotional registers on the surface, but really "means it" (deep within him- or herself) in order to optimise customer satisfaction (see also Gilmore & Pine 2007). To Hochschild (1983: 90), if the service workers who are required to display a certain set of emotions do not feel congruent with their feelings, "emotive dissonance" is developed over time. In order to minimise this dissonance, the service worker adjusts one's "deep feelings". In this process, the service workers' feelings are commoditised, and in the continuation, estranged and alienated (Korczynski 2002: 142).

In a recent overview, Amy Wharton (2009) points to two strands of work based on the emotional labour concept, primarily within sociological research. The first line of work pivots around emotional labour as a cipher to understand organizational contexts and the nature of interpersonal interaction in particular kinds of service occupations. The dynamic character of the service encounter in different servicescape settings is here investigated through keywords like power, control, resistance and empowerment (for a recent compilation, see Korczynski & Macdonald 2009). Subsequently, studies of emotional labour extend to a wider collection of interactive but less reutilised occupations like teachers and doctors (Wharton 2009: 152). The second strand of work of emotional labour research focuses more directly on the management of emotions and especially on emotional display across public-private work-family boundaries (also reflecting later work by Hochschild (2003)). Within this area of research, attempts to operationalize and measure emotive dissonance and emotional management as well as pin down tenable consequences of emotional labour are made.

With the advent of the various so-called service, experience and creative economies, human emotions are in the gambit of wealth creation. This dedicated section of *Culture Unbound* shows how the debates have moved even further. We aim at addressing service work in general and the emotional labour concept in particular to the assumption that emotion management and emotion display are not limited to the front-desk or service employee. Rather it is a process that permeates and characterises the service encounter and its physical environment, its servicescape, in its entirety. Many of our discussions are painted into the stitches of the dualistic couplet of culturalisation and economisation, that is, a take on the cultural economy. Here, the economy is increasingly inflected with cultural performances and cultural tropes at the same time as culture is being used in instrumental ways, for instance in the promotion of cities. Thematic areas of investigation have been the new economy, creativity and consumption (Pratt 2004 &

2009). The economy in all its spheres is regarded as an act with many different kinds of goals (e.g. material, symbolic, power-related), and theorised as a hybrid organized around a life-world of emotional register (Amin & Thrift 2007).[2] In this force field of intertwined cultural and economic processes a number of empirical changes have been attended to. What is especially interesting in this context is the nature of employment and work, like "the rise of flexible work and self-employment, the concentration of freelancing, and causalization of labour, plus the degree of serial contracting and project working, found in the cultural economy" (Pratt 2009: 410).

The concern with culture, work and emotion transcends national boundaries. In this section of *Culture Unbound*, we have examples from Denmark, Sweden, Singapore, the Netherlands and cyberspace. One salient theme here is on service workers. The service industry is highly dependent on its service staff to provide satisfying experiences for customers. Attempts are made not only to make customers feel good, attempts are also made to make employees embody the good feelings they demonstrate to sell services. In other words, when demonstrating their positive emotions in their jobs, workers must also be authentic to themselves. Governing the emotions of employees is not easy, but, indeed, there are ways of doing so. Hing looks at how various employers in Singapore motivate their service workers. These workers are socialised to be excellent service employees by reminding them to have the "right attitude", that is, they must be willing to be flexible in accomplishing their work. The workers must also be professional, that is, they must be friendly, appear unhurried and be positive towards customers and bosses. Parallel observations are seen in Denmark, in Gyimóthy and Rygaard Jonas' study of workers in the "Best Butcher in Town", a project tagline that the supermarket chain Kvickly has adopted for its meats section. Service workers in Kvickly are encouraged to be the shop's brand ambassadors. Employees should use their initiative and common sense to boost the customer experience. But the new demands on the butchers to relate directly with customers and to appear positive at all times in their job can be emotionally draining and intrusive. The studies by Hing and Gyimóthy and Rygaard Jonas show that workers have to manage their own sense of identity through the demands of their work. With work demanding how they should behave and feel, their own private emotional space is now also being invaded and commodified.

Another salient theme in this collection also deals with services, but in the context of independent business persons providing the extra authentic experience to their customers. Ooi followed an art-loving Dutch couple in Singapore. They visited the workspaces of artists in order to go beyond the staged glitz of commercial art galleries. The encounters between artists and art buyers in the art studios are awkward because the aesthetic and the commercial spheres clash during their encounters. As an established practice, aesthetic value transcends economic value but when artists and art buyers meet to trade, art mixes with commerce. Similarly,

art buyers may be uncomfortable when witnessing the less than glossy, but yet authentic, art practices in artist workspaces. Artists are precarious to reveal too much about themselves, since it might put their glamorous artist image at risk. In sum, artists and art buyers are emotionally ambivalent of such meetings. The awkward moments discourage art buyers and artists to trade directly with each other. The running of a Bed and Breakfast (B & B) requires emotional work too. Hultman and Andersson Cederholm look into the emotional work of a B & B owner. Similar to Ooi's study of artists and art buyers, guests and B & B host find the need to cultivate their friendship during their brief encounters. They must jointly create the friendly and homely atmosphere. Separating the boundary between economic and private activities is a constant nag for guests and host. The quest for the more intimate and authentic experience by guests can result in both emotional satisfaction and ambivalence.

It is natural that colleagues and business partners become friends. But friendship does not necessarily bring about higher productivity in the work place. The subject of managing emotions amongst colleagues has become a business. In the context of increasing productivity and effectiveness, mediators are now at hand to provide guidance on how colleagues and business partners should meet and solve problems. Andersson Cederholm looks at the advent of "effective emotions" in the business world, particularly when people hold meetings. Colleagues, customers and business partners are provided with the tools to bring about higher productivity through more effective ways of emotional demonstration when gathering. The engineering of a corporate meeting culture entails the definition of the right moments to allow for selected emotions to be expressed amongst colleagues, partners and clients.

A new emotional culture is evolving on the Internet. Technology is also affecting how we communicate and express our emotions. Munar examines the practices in the ever increasingly popular social media, such as Facebook and Tripadvisor. The popularity of social media indicates that humans are intrinsically social. Today, millions of people use the Internet to befriend and to keep friends updated. Using Munar's terms, digital voyeurs and exhibitionists complement each other in cyberspace. Strangers become friends, for instance, as they offer advice, suggestions and travel tips through Tripadvisor. Bits and bytes can be a medium for emotional work. Munar's study show how people open up and express themselves emotionally in order to construct their own digital identities. Nonetheless, how one expresses oneself and one's emotions are also guided in cyberspace. Advice is given on how people should write and present themselves. The emergence of digital biographies poses ethical issues. Expressions on the Internet tend to be spontaneous but the ephemeral nature of emotion become permanent and digitalised when expressed on the Internet. It remains uncertain if such records can be deleted! Nonetheless, the encouragement of emotive expression in social media like Facebook and Tripadvisor has a commercial motive. While people can keep in

touch with their friends on Facebook and others tell their travel stories on Tripad-visor, these expressions are the commercial contents of the websites. The public is doing the work for these Internet firms.

In the epilogue, Ek brings the collection of six papers together by revisiting the emotional labour concept. The articles point to the diverse research directions Culture, Work and Emotion can take. More importantly, they also point to the direction in which modern society is heading, where the logic of customer satis-faction, co-production and productivity have made emotions part of work, con-sumption and wealth creation.

Acknowledgement

Can-Seng Ooi (www.ooi.dk) is an Associate Professor at Copenhagen Business School. His research interests include comparative art worlds, place branding, cultural tourism and cross-cultural management. He leads the research stream on *Place Branding, Art and Culture* in the multi-disciplinary research project ©rea-tive Encounters, a project supported by the Danish Strategic Research Council. E-mail: ooi@cbs.dk.

Richard Ek is Associate Professor at the Department of Service Management, Lund University. His research interests include critical geopolitics, biopolitics, postpolitics and place branding. He currently works on a project on the visualiza-tion of the postpolitical citizen in urban renewal projects and in city management. E-mail: richard.ek@ism.lu.se.

Notes

1 By just having a look at some articles from 2007 to 2009, we see how emotional labour is a referential starting point in management (Townsend 2008; van Dijk & Kirk 2008; Rupp et al. 2009), business (D'Cruz & Noronha 2008), leadership (Gardner et al. 2009; Iszatt-White 2009, Newman et al. 2009), sociology (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2008), medical care and

nursing (Yang & Chang 2008; Gray 2009; Gray & Smith 2009), psychology (Austin et al. 2007; Diefendorff et al. 2008; Humphrey et al. 2008), human geography (Dyer et al. 2008), social work and social policy (Seery et al. 2008; Cheung & Tang 2009), media and communication (Richardson et al. 2008; Zhang & Zhu 2008) and tourism and hospitality (Kim 2008; Wong & Wang 2009).

2   For general overviews, see Callon 1998; Ray & Sayer 1999; du Gay & Pryke 2002; Amin & Thrift 2004; O'Dell & Billing 2005; Löfgren & Willim 2005.

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