

Emotional labor in the hospitality industry

[Health & Medicine](#), [Hospital](#)



Introduction

In the field of hospitality and tourism, emotional labour is a controversial but increasingly common factor in the management of working environments. It was first described by Hochschild (1983) as “management of feeling to create a publicly facial and bodily display” (Hochschild, 1983: 15). In other words, it is the idea that employees should behave in certain ways and display certain emotions that contribute to a certain perception of the company for which they are working. At a basic level, someone who works in a business where they have to interact with customers a lot might be expected to act as if they are happy all the time, even if they are feeling sad. This would give the company a level of consistency across all its employees and would, in theory, encourage customers to believe not only that the company is more friendly and well-meaning, but also that the employees are genuinely happy to be working there.

However, some critics believe that emotional labour is fundamentally dishonest and unethical. For one thing, emotional labour demands that employees ‘act out’ false emotions and even entirely false personalities. As Williams (2002) points out, this can “not only make the hospitality environment seem strained and unusual, it can also have a negative impact upon the psychological well-being of the employee” (Williams, 2002: 50). In other words, although emotional labour is designed to strengthen the relationship between an employee and a customer, it can in fact have the opposite effect. Meanwhile, there are also concerns over the extent to which emotional labour destabilises relationships in the service

sector and encourages falseness and insincerity. For these reasons and others, many critics have suggested that emotional labour cannot be considered to be ethical.

Emotional labour is based on the ability of a company to dictate a certain 'emotional palette' that employees can use when interacting with customers. In the service industry this is particularly important, because employees are often helping customers to enjoy themselves. It is clear that employees in this industry need to be friendly and helpful, and that a rude or arrogant employee could cause problems. But some critics believe that the concept of emotional labour has taken that basic assumption and expanded it " to a quite absurd degree so that it is a caricature of common sense" (Baum, 2006: 108). In other words, emotional labour is " the ritualisation of courtesy" (Nickson, 2006: 130) and will in many cases create a false environment. Many critics also note that this is ultimately pointless because " most customers are capable of detecting falseness and insincerity" (Baum, 2006: 110). If this is the case, emotional labour can be seen to be a kind of ' subconscious contract', where both employee and consumer are aware of this artificiality but value it nonetheless.

In the hospitality industry, for example, an employee must reflect cleanliness and professionalism. For example, someone working for a caterer must appear not only happy but also meticulous, careful and clean. In effect, then, the employees become a collective personification of the company's identity, and they are a key way in which the company can project an external image of itself to its customers. Many companies therefore try to project a strong,

positive and forward-thinking image in order to impress customers, even though this impression might be far removed from the reality of working for the company and from the company's overall philosophy. Over the past few decades, emotional labour has become an increasingly controversial and influential aspect of the ways in which companies encourage employees to behave, but as Sandiford and Seymour (2002) point out, this can be both a positive and a negative factor (Sandiford & Seymour, 2002: 160). It is important to note that emotional labour is not seen by most critics as an entirely negative concept. The debate is over the application of that concept.

These principles are a basic part of any people management strategy, but some critics argue that emotional labour goes too far and encourages a level of dishonesty that is unethical. In order for people management to be ethical, it has to ensure that employees are not persuaded to lie. Critics of emotional labour argue that it is a form of deception and that it encourages people to view corporations as if they are people rather than businesses. This, according to Burchill (2009), "creates an unequal and unbalanced relationship between consumer and company, one that the company can manipulate" (Burchill, 2009: 71). Although consumers should in theory be able to get past such perceptions, in reality they often cannot and will instead treat the company as if it is a manifestation of its employees. James (1998) notes that "considerable amounts of research have shown, time and again, that employees who are smiley and happy will give an overall better impression of the company than employees who are dour" (James, 1998: 25) and that perceptions of employees can transfer to perceptions of products and services.

Similarly, Korczynski (2003) argues that “ consumers prefer to interact with corporations on a human level and so will be particularly receptive to any opportunity that they might have to deal with a company as if it is a person” (Korczynski, 2003: 56). Korczynski goes on to suggest that this is a form of “ coping mechanism” (Korczynski, 2003: 57) that is embraced willingly by consumers so that they can more easily navigate the commercial environment. This argument would seem to suggest that consumers are more than happy to submit to the benefits of emotional labour, and that any negative aspects are perceived to be more than made up for by the fact that they are able to interact with ‘ actors’ who seem to be happy. Some critics also argue that this approach helps consumers to get over any feelings of ‘ guilt’ that they may have due to their position in the commercial relationship.

Ethical people management should not place undue stress on employees. Sharpe (2005) notes that stress can harm both the employee and the business (Sharpe, 2005). Although any workplace is likely to feature some degree of stress, most critics agree that there is a limit, although not necessarily the extent of that limit. Kasavana (2005) points out that “ ethical people management has to include some element of stress management, in order that employees are able to operate in a way that reflects their personality” (Kasavana, 2005: 16). He goes on to note that “ research has shown consistently that customers tend to relax when they perceive that the employee is professional yet also personable” (Kasavana, 2005: 19), i. e. artificiality can be a strong negative factor. For employees themselves, emotional labour can be a difficult concept to fully grasp. James (1998)

argues that “ different people respond in different ways to the fundamental demands placed on them by the ethos of emotional labour” (James, 1998: 28). Responses from employees can range all the way along the spectrum, from complete acceptance and willing participation, to a grudging willingness to comply. Some researchers have questioned the degree to which this can lead to emotional problems, including depression, especially if someone is forced to maintain a happy facade for long hours when that facade is strongly contrary to how they are really feeling.

Fennell and Malloy (2007) suggest that the theory of emotional labour “ focuses on obvious forms of interpersonal communication and ignores the subtle” (Fennell & Malloy, 2007: 15). There is no definitive study of this emotional impact, but Korczynski (2003) notes that “ there is substantial anecdotal evidence to support the idea that many employees have to develop their own personal coping mechanisms in order that they can deal with the requirement to be happy and friendly at all times” (Korczynski, 2003: 59). The emotional toll that this places on employees can be measured in the short, medium or long term, but is likely to become more apparent as time passes. Critics argue that employees can develop not only depression but also stress, emotional exhaustion and feelings of inauthenticity, and that in some cases pre-existing emotional or mental problems can be significantly exacerbated by the need to conform to the demands of emotional labour. Since employers have a duty of care when it comes to their employees (Sharpe, 2005), it is important that they do not add to the stress that employees feel.

Emotional regulation in the workplace takes two key forms. Each form is subtly different from the other and is perceived as having advantages and disadvantages:

Antecedent-focused emotion regulation involves the modification of emotional responses on an ongoing basis, determined by changing the situation or changing the ways in which the situation is represented.

Response-focused emotion regulation involves making constant changes to emotional regulation based on how a relationship is developing and how a customer seems to be responding.

Both approaches are widely used. The antecedent-based method allows employees in the service sector, in particular, to find new ways in which they might be able to best manage the presentation of emotions in the workplace. In fact, Fineman (2003) argues that one of the core aspects of emotional labour is the ability of an individual to regulate and manage his or her emotions in a way that reflects the different demands of a particular situation. It can be argued that this is especially difficult in the service sector because “employees might find that they are constantly encountering new individuals and having to re-interpret their own emotions in order to fit a constantly changing need” (Fineman, 2003: 105).

For example, an employee might work with a happy customer one moment, then a demanding customer, then a customer who is angry, and so on. In some cases, there might be multiple customers to deal with and, in the service sector especially, it might be virtually impossible to find a way to

satisfy everyone at once. As Fineman goes on to argue, “ it would be simplistic to accept that emotional labour can be restricted to a simple one-to-one dynamic when in fact an employee has multiple relationships to deal with simultaneously” (Fineman, 2003: 108). For example, an employee might have to deal with multiple customers, plus colleagues, plus employers, plus self-perception, and might struggle if unable to find some way to draw all these perceptions together and create a single perception of self that can be presented to others.

Some critics see emotional labour as a particularly western phenomenon and, as a result, view it as part of a deeply unethical hegemonic control system. For example, Crofts and McNeill (2005) argue that “ as western companies expand across the globe, they seek to control the emotional labour of employees in very different, non-western cultures” (Crofts & McNeill, 2005: 280). This, the authors suggest, results in westernisation of many workers around the world, which in turn reduces the cultural specificity of work in particular locations and leads to an inability for different cultural standards to co-exist. This damages not only the culture that is forced to conform in this way, but also the tourists who are unable to engage with true representations of other cultures. Many critics believe that this will, over time, have a significant negative impact on the ways in which different cultures are able to co-exist. However, it is also clear that in this context emotional labour is a strong profit-driver for western companies, which in turn are extremely unlikely to want to give up this lucrative trade.

Therefore, it can be argued that emotional labour is perpetuated because it increases profits, and that any arguments over the ethics of the practice are unlikely to succeed. This is not necessarily a rational approach to the relationship, nor is it necessarily an approach that has any basis in logic, but as Fineman (2003) points out “rationality is not really a factor in many service-orientated relationships” (Fineman, 2003: 147) and there is “an unspoken contract between the various ‘actors’ in any given situation” (Fineman, 2003: 150). If this unspoken contract is broken, the result can be feelings of awkwardness and uncertainty, and this can negatively impact any purchasing decisions that are made. Furthermore, the results can be that the customer develops a negative perception of the entire company based purely on the perception of one particular employee. In this way, it is clearly extremely important that every employee maintains a certain minimum level of behaviour. A number of critics point out that some expectations are perfectly reasonable (Grandey et al., 2005), but that in some cases these are taken too far. In some companies, there are additional requirements that are linked to the identities of those particular companies. If an employee is unable to comply with these demands, he or she might be seen as a disruptive element.

Emotional labour can cause more harm, however, when it is applied in a way that damages the ability of workers to present the kind of persona that company’s desire. Lieberman & Nissen (2008) suggest that there is a danger that “emotional labour will put impossible pressure on employees, to the extent that they are bound to fail” (Lieberman & Nussen, 2008: 20). If workers are forced to do something that is strongly against either their

principles or their personal feelings, the result can be a strong sense of inauthenticity. Burhcill (2009) points out that “ there is a thin and almost imperceptible line between a convincing and an unconvincing display of emotion in the workplace” (Burchill, 2009: 190), and while the former can be positive and helpful, the latter can be disconcerting in some cases extremely negative. Burchill goes on to note that poorly implemented emotional labour can in many cases be worse than a complete lack of the same approach, since “ poor implementation can give rise to strong perceptions of artificiality and can emphasise, rather than disguise, the commercial nature of the relationship between customer and employee” (Burchill, 2009: 193). This highlights the fact that in many ways, emotional labour can be seen as a form of untruth or falsehood that encourages unreal relationships to develop, and which might ultimately have a strong negative impact.

Clearly, therefore, emotional labour has both positive and negative aspects. In the tourism and hospitality industries, emotional labour can enhance the experience for some customers while damaging it for others; it can also improve the working conditions for some employees, while harming it for others. The ethics of emotional labour are clearly quite contentious, and the issue is highly subjective. Although there are clearly some downsides to emotional labour, especially if it is pushed too far and ends up causing a sense of inauthenticity, this should not be taken to mean that emotional labour is not effective as a concept when it is properly implemented. In fact, when emotional labour is implemented with care and precision, it can be a very powerful business tool, especially within the tourism and hospitality industries.

References

Baum, T. (2006). Human Resource Management for the Tourism, Hospitality and Leisure Industries. London: Cengage Learning

Burchill, F. (2009). Labour Relations. London: Palgrave Macmillan

Crotts, J. C. & R. G. McNeill (2005). Selling Hospitality: A Situational Approach. London: Delmar Cengage Learning

Fennell, D. A. & D. C. Malloy (2007). Codes of Ethics in Tourism. Brighton: Channel View Publications

Fineman, S. (2003). Understanding Emotion at Work. London, New Delhi & Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications

Grandey, A. & Fisk, G. & Steiner, D. (2005). Must service with a smile be stressful? The moderating role of personal control for American and French employees. *The Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90 (5), pp. 893-904

Hochschild, A. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press

James, N. (1998). *Emotional Labour: Skill and Work in the Social Regulation of Feelings*. London: Routledge

Lieberman, K. & B. Nissen (2008). *Ethics in Hospitality and Tourism*. Washington DC: American Hotel and Motel Association

Kassavana, M. L. (2005). *Managing Front Office Operations*. New York: The Educational Institute of American Hotels

<https://assignbuster.com/emotional-labor-in-the-hospitality-industry/>

Korczynski, M. (2003). Communities of coping: collective emotional labour in service work. *Organisation*, 10 (1), pp. 55-79

Nickson, D. (2006). *Human Resource Management for the Hospitality and Tourism Industries*. London: Butterworth-Heinemann

Sandiford, P. & Seymour, D. (2002). Emotional labour in public houses; reflections on a pilot study. *The International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 19 (2), pp. 159-171

Sharpe, E. (2005). Going above and beyond: the emotional labour of adventure guides. *The Journal of Leisure Research*, 37 (1), pp. 29-50

Williams, A. (2009). *Understanding the Hospitality Industry*. London: Butterworth-Heinemann