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Emotional Labor in Food Service, Burnout, and Solutions for Compensation

The concept of "emotional labor" was first introduced in Arlie Hochschild's *The Managed Heart*, where she detailed how the "human feeling" has essentially become a commercial asset and that this type of labor "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild 7). She delved into how emotional labor, in the form of both surface (superficial expression) and deep acting (conscious mental work), can result in burnout, a state of mental and physical exhaustion, and a disorganized identity (36). While Hochschild explored all levels of service work, it is probably those in restaurant and foodservice work that hold the least prestige and have fewer benefits and protections.

Robert Reich, a co-author of the *Wealth of Nations*, explains that the 21st century brought about a shift from an economy organized around the balance between large corporations and unions to one based on services. The low-end service sector was growing, inviting workers who would accept the low wages as they merely needed a job for sustenance. With inequality rampant and growing more imperative, many customized services could not be outsourced and added to the ever-growing lower-tier service economy (Reich 215-218). Hochschild also credits the prevalence of emotional labor on globalization, and this growing divide between the rich and the poor, which calls for specialized/personalized services (Hochschild 7). However, this means that services prone to impartiality are left for the poor; examples include coffee shop workers and waitresses at fast food establishments. Celine McNicholas and Margaret Poydock's evaluation of essential work during the pandemic concluded the Food and Agriculture sector as the most prevalent in essential work, having 11,398,233 workers in the industry, raking an overwhelming 20.6 percent of essential work (McNicholas and Poydock, "Who are Essential Workers..."). However, Hochschild explains in the "Private Life" chapter of *The Managed Heart*, that "in processing people, the product is a state of

mind" rather than something tangible, something often considered "physical labor" before the prevalence of the service industry (Hochschild 6). So essentially, managing emotions to project the idea that one "loves the job" is part of the job and a leading cause for burnout.

In the restaurant and food industry, perhaps one of the lowest-paid minimum wage jobs, this "additional emotional labor" is often not compensated. This creates an imbalance between the company and the worker, in addition to the worker and customer. Mary Douglas' theory on "The Gift" explains that the United States, and most human civilizations for that matter, revolve around the concept of the "Potlatch," which is a total system of giving in that every gift has to be returned in some specified way, setting up a perpetual cycle of exchange. She touches on the fact that gifts can either be of equal value, creating harmony, or of higher value, for the honor. (Douglas 156). However, when discussing service work, the gift of emotional labor is often more deserving of equal remuneration because offering more would be more typical of tighter emotional bonds for honor, as Douglas further also addresses (157). However, currently, service workers settle for less than equal remuneration, bringing up the issue about where financial disparities come from, how companies are exploiting emotional labor, and what corporations and the customer owe the service worker for equal remuneration? How can we go about repairing this debt?

Part 1: Wage Disparities in Food Service

As a cause of the pandemic, the disparities between skills and expectations of those deemed "essential workers," which more falls explicitly upon restaurant service workers, seems to be once again a topic of importance. With over 8 percent of all private-sector employment amongst both genders, it is not only surprising that they are so ill protected, but that emotional labor remains underpaid (Shierholz, "Low Wages..."). The root of this disparaged and often looked down upon vocation begins with Arlene Daniel's concept on *invisible labor*, which disputes that in the past, women's work was marginalized and undervalued because the characteristics of their work, now

referred to and required in most service work as the repackaged term "emotional labor," was regarded as "natural" and expected. Thus, the gender bias behind emotional intelligence deemed emotional labor as work requiring less skill and deserving of a much smaller reward (Warhurst 214). Over time, these preconceived notions materialized into below-average paying jobs, with minimal workers protection and unionization. Large corporations, especially fast food or restaurant chains, list assistant or below managerial positions as requiring "no experience" and foster spaces that lend to exploitations.

Evasheesh P. Bhave and Theresa M. Glomb, researchers for Concordia University and the University of Minnesota, summarized findings that men and women experience increased financial compensation for cognitive labor, about an 8.8% wage boost, than positions requiring emotional labor (a 5.7% cut in pay) (O'Connell, "Emotional Labor Doesn't Pay"). Likewise, this public bias translates to a median hourly wage of \$13.12 for essential workers in the food and agriculture industry, compared to \$29.55 for those essential workers in finance, rendering 16.7% of restaurant workers to live below the poverty line (Shierholz, "Low Wages..."). Andrew O'Connell, in his Harvard Review article *Emotional Labor Doesn't Pay*, addressed another critical factor in the sublevation of undervaluing emotional work, which is that pursuing a career within this category is often associated with a "calling" or at the least "vocational". Chains, such as Starbucks parade, "We're dedicated to serving ethically sourced coffee, caring for the environment, and giving back to the communities where we do business" as their guidelines for frontline workers (O'Connell, "Emotional Labor Doesn't Pay"). In a utopic world, drive and dedication would be aimed at and expected from management but often is an unreasonable requirement for labor, without the monetary benefits (O'Connell, "Emotional Labor Doesn't Pay"). Thus, a self-sacrificing attitude is often taken up by those who "serve the coffee" and results in a disingenuous performative environment or a result of Hochschild's term, "surface acting." The irony stems from the fact that service work appeals to not only a large portion of undocumented workers, the Hispanic population, women, and other

minorities with the promise that little experience is needed in exchange for what American culture deems as "requiring no skill" (McNicholas and Poydock, "Who are Essential Workers?"). Thus, companies seem charitable in the deal they pose to easily exploitable demographics for even offering them a job, allowing for underpaying waitresses who rely on tips, reducing paid sick leave, and practicing "just in time scheduling" like sending home workers early due to slow business with no notice (Shierholz, "Low Wages...").

Part 2: Causes and Effects of Burnout

A popular, often overused term when discussing service work and emotional labor is emotional *burnout*. Burnout can come in various forms across many aspects of private life; however, once emotional labor moves into the public sector, emotional burnout in the service industry, particularly within foodservice, can result in severe mental health complications and emotional detachment. Burnout, as described in *Emotional Labor and Burnout: A Review of the Literature* can be "a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress and is frequent amongst food service workers (Jeung et al. 188). In a study involving 177 general managers from chain restaurants in Chicago, Boulder, Houston, Indianapolis, Newark, San Francisco, and Washington D.C., over 30 percent of assistance managers fell into the high burnout category opposed to general managers. The distinction between these two categories was the mere fact that assistant managers spend the majority of their shift in direct contact with customers, practically taking on the role of frontline employees (Reynolds and Tabacchi 65-67).

At its core, burnout is often a product of *emotional dissonance*, also described as surface-level acting. Emotional dissonance is when workers outwardly display fake emotion, or in most cases for restaurant service workers, suppress anger or resentment at unequal exchanges with customers (Hochschild 90). The push for emotional dissonance is self-imposed and vigorously enforced by management as the cornerstone for its success. Thus, as theorized in "working in the

service society," the shift from exploitative manual labor to emotional labor entailed that companies gear their policies towards the customer. A customer-centric work environment then ultimately revolves around controlling, managing and shaping the worker's "demeanor, expression, mood and thought" (Macdonald and Sirianni 5). Likewise, as competition increases in the ever-changing climate, the need for sincerity, as posited by Hochschild in her chapter, "The Search for Authenticity," becomes a lucrative tool for a company's advancement in the market. So now, not only are workers required to suppress emotion in the form of surface-level acting but must offer a sincere smile, tapping into the realms of deep acting, which Hochschild exacts the most significant toll from worker's psyche resulting in emotional numbness otherwise described as burnout (Hochschild 135; Macdonald and Sirianni 10). Entry-level service work now requires the worker to be personable and represent the company's objectives and identity while remaining a vehicle to connect the customer to the larger corporations' motives in extracting a profit.

Maintaining this state of falsehood can best be described by the "*dissonance theory of emotional labor*" first coined by J Andrew Morris and Daniel C Feldman at the University of South Carolina, who researched dissonance outcomes and burnout (Jeung et al. 187). The initial effects materialize in the form of physical fatigue and later are channeled through coping mechanisms for emotion regulation that can be negative and cynical towards others. Often, burnout can result in decreased productivity in the workplace, enhancing the individual's dissatisfaction with his/her work. Dissatisfaction can, in turn, trickle into the worker's personal life, self-image, and ideations (189). A maintained activation of the sympathetic nervous system, the body's response to stress, can result in more severe and long-term conditions such as depression or anxiety (189-190). In an expose on fast food employees, written by psychology professor and trauma expert Robert T. Muller introduces McDonald's cashier, Donna Abbot, who describes finding solace in the heavy use of recreational drugs, correlating with the national average of over 17 percent usage for food service workers (Muller, "Fast Food Industry Demands..."). The overwhelming contempt for the health of fast food

service workers not only aggravates the real mountain of debt employers owe their workers but demonstrates a prioritization over financial growth and maintenance of company image. Chains have thus capitalized on the effects of emotional labor to create a neverending posse of disposable workers instead of focusing on ways to reduce burnout, increase wages, benefits, and job security.

A more beneficial approach to bettering worker's environment and leveraging debt, as posited by Cameron Macdonald and Carmen Sirianni in *Working in the Service Society*, would be to initiate a shift in customer-oriented management to a joint one, where there is proportionate attention to both the customer and worker. Accordingly, managers would experience improved authority as they would no longer "just work for the customer" but could lend time to teach workers' defense against mistreatment. It would also decrease the amount of "unofficial supervisors" a modern service worker has, being the customer, manager, and omnipresent regulations of the corporation (Macdonald and Sirianni 10). Additionally, according to the *Society for Human Resource Management*, companies should think about their workers in the long term, which would naturally help enforce mental health days and allow employees to recharge emotionally and physically (Meinert, "How to Prevent Employee..."). In the same ways that physical labor is regulated within the U.S., there should be a priority in the mental toll brought about by a new era of service work.

Conclusion: What We Owe Service Restaurant Workers as a Culture

One of the first things service workers mention when discussing customers is gratitude, or a lack thereof. Ditanya Rosebud, a cook, and hostess at a nursing home, explains that "our situation will be better if we can get appreciation... a thank you... anything" (Van Drie and Reeves, "Many essential workers are in ..."). Arlie Hochschild's initial explanations on emotional labor are the search for authenticity in exchanges, in addition to how often service workers experience an imbalanced exchange (77-88). Service workers must feign or generate emotion and expect a decreased or non-existent reciprocity because of imposed hierarchies. Margaret Atwood further

conceptualizes in her book *Payback* that imbalanced debt is often justified by rigid social hierarchies that have stemmed from years of revisionist history (Atwood 12). At their core, humans function in accordance with the "tit for tat" rule, in that for every gift holding moral, emotional, or monetary value, there should be an exchange of something equal in value (28). However, service work's invisibility and depersonalization, derived from employee obligations to fit the company agenda and the customer-oriented market, enable customer entitlement. Therefore, customers believe in the false notion that their money warrants the employee's emotional labor, which is no longer a gift, but something "deserved." However, in reality, companies use frontline workers as middlemen to settle a debt between customers, so in truth, money from the customer settles their debt with the company, but not the worker.

In *The Managed Heart's* fifth chapter, "Paying Respects with Feeling: The Gift Exchange," Hochschild introduces the concept of "nodding with the heart," which is her way of expressing how one can repay the debt of emotional labor. Payment for emotional labor, which cannot be leveraged by capital alone, can come from facial expressions, word choice, and tone of voice (Hochschild 80). However, Hochschild places a greater emphasis on sincere or at least the attempt at gratitude, which she refers to as straight exchanges instead of improvisational ones (reserved for close bonds) (77). Research studies on the positive effects of emotional labor, as summarized by Dieter Zapf, a Psychology professor at the University of Frankfurt, require positive, balanced interactions, meaning that workers can only reap the benefits of emotional labor if a customer's response to their feigned enthusiasm or joy is reciprocated (262). This can result in the "*facial feedback hypothesis*" and "*emotional contagion*," where the employee's fake smile frequently results in honest feeling, then trickling down to the customer who finds the worker's smile and affects "contagious" (262). However, this exchange would be nullified if a customer were rude and/or emotionally abusive (263). Likewise, in a comparison study between emotional labor across cultures, specifically between Chinese and U.S. service workers, researchers discovered that emotion regulation was a more

common process in collectivist cultures than individualist ones like the United States. In a collectivist culture, emotion regulation is a "normative expectation" that is less dependent on corporate policies/ and or rules, promoting an in-existent divide between how employees treat customers and societal members during work and off-hours (Allen et al. 24). Collectivism values harmony in support of "the group," so that not only is the worker expected through social norms to protect the emotions of the customer, but the customer is socially indebted to do the same and avoid conflict (24). Therefore, in Chinese culture, reciprocated emotional labor is a naturally flourishing concept that expects a degree of surface acting from both parties, framed within the cultivation of mutual respect (25). However, individualist cultures value authenticity, so emotional regulation can feel more taxing on workers who have placed their emotional identity on how genuine their interpersonal exchanges are (25). Ultimately, to reduce the effects of burnout and pay our dues to those who serve us for close to minimum wage, there has to be a semblance of systemic change or the beginnings of a paradigm shift, since most of the regulations, customer malpractice, and worker burnout stem from internalized beliefs tracing back to class, race, and gender assumptions. The United States is recognized for its dedication to social mobility, which has financial remuneration as the ultimate reward, meaning that for the most part, the value we collectively place on money is more significant than worker well being. Entitlement stems from individualism and engenders unreciprocated emotional exchanges. Only once we remove the veil of bias and corporate identity from the worker will customers see the laborer as a person outside of the institutions collecting commercial debt. It seems a simple solution, but is potentially the most difficult to entertain because it requires a complete shift in the thought and principle of years of conditioning in order to transform our thinking to "the customer is *not* always right".

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