Emotional Work: A Psychological View

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Emotional Work: A Psychological Perspective

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Thank you my dear, darling Tim – I promise I’ll never do a PhD again.
Abstract

At work and in the family, people do emotional work to meet other people’s emotional needs, improve their wellbeing, and maintain social harmony. Emotional work is unique and skilled work – it involves handling emotions and social relationships and its product is the change of feeling in others.

The thesis extends the work of Erickson and Wharton (1993, 1997) and England (1992, England & Farkas, 1986) by adding a psychological perspective. Emotional work is defined in terms of behaviours. Three dimensions, companionship, help and regulation, distinguish whether positive or negative emotions in other people are the target of emotional work. Companionship builds positive emotions, whereas help and regulation repairs and regulates negative emotions.

Two studies, the Public Service Study (n=448) and the Health Care Study (n=261), sample different work and family role contexts (spouse, parent, kinkeeper and friendship, manager, workmate and service roles). The Integrative Emotional Work (IEW) Inventory was developed to assess emotional work in these roles.

Emotional work is not just women’s work. Younger people and those from ethnic minority backgrounds also do more emotional work. In contexts where it is not rewarded, emotional work is done by those with lower status. Emotional work is responsive and increases when other people are distressed. It is an aspect of the domestic division of labour, and influenced by workplace climate. Although personality is a factor, some determinants are modifiable. People do more emotional work when they have the skills, when it is saliently prescribed, and when it is rewarded and recognised.
Emotional work is costly to those who do it and combines in its effects across work and family roles. When people do emotional work they ‘catch’ emotions from others (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). Handling positive emotions in others improves wellbeing. However, handling negative emotions in others relates to a wide range of psychological health problems. These health costs are mitigated when emotional work is rewarded. Emotional work’s devaluation sets in train social group differences in its performance, and confers both material (England & Folbre, 1999) and health disadvantages on those who do it.
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