

BEHAVIOR & SOCIETY

Emotional Labor Is a Store Clerk Confronting a Maskless Customer

The preeminent sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild discusses the control over one's feelings needed to go to work every day during a pandemic

By Gary Stix on September 10, 2020



Credit: Getty Images

Two men walked into a Trader Joe's supermarket in Manhattan near closing time one day in July. When an employee asked them to put on masks, they allegedly proceeded to rip a mask from one worker's face, hit another and pull the hair of a third.

Such physical attacks are less common than a string of expletives when a customer is asked to wear a face covering as a safeguard against COVID-19 transmission. But amid the stress of a dangerous global pandemic, combined with the extreme political polarization of protective measures in the U.S., there have still been an alarming number of outright assaults.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently issued guidance saying employees at retail establishments and other service business should refrain from arguing with a customer when confronted with an attack or threat of violence over a request to put on a mask. If at all possible, they should retreat to a safe, lockable room.

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Since March, anyone who works in a supermarket or other retail business now has a complex job description that goes beyond stocking shelves or running a cash register. It has become necessary to appease the antimask contingent but also to maximize a customer's chances of traversing a store's narrow aisles without testing positive for COVID-19 a few days later.

The emotional balancing act required to juggle fear for one's personal safety with a professional steadiness in the face of a circulating pathogen that can sicken and kill continues to challenge the people who show up on the job each day—whether they be critical care physicians or supermarket cashiers.

Almost 40 years ago, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, now a professor emerita at the University of California, Berkeley, began an examination of the task of keeping emotions in check in service sector jobs. She observed flight attendants—who were taught to keep smiling, no matter how difficult a passenger might get—and authored *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. To describe such required exertions, Hochschild came up with the term “emotional labor”—a concept that now has relevance to the harsh stresses confronted by essential workers. *Scientific American* recently asked her about emotional labor in the time of COVID-19.

[An edited transcript of the interview follows.]

A Google search of “emotional labor” brings up hundreds of thousands of references. But it still seems useful to define the term and perhaps to discuss how it has evolved over the years. Can you give a brief explanation?

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As I defined it in my 1983 book *The Managed Heart*, emotional labor is the work we do to evoke or suppress feeling or emotion in the service of doing paid work—that is, by managing emotion. Usually it goes along with mental work and physical work, but it is, in itself, a singular form of labor. It calls for a distinct kind of skill, offers its own kind of reward and exacts its own kind of costs. The economy was once mainly based on premechanized jobs, such as those of lumberjacks, coal miners, farmers—jobs calling for physical labor. Such workers managed their emotions, too, of course—a farmer cursing a rainless sky, a miner fearing a collapse in his mine—but such feelings are incidental to, and not an intrinsic part of, their work as it is for service sector workers required to conduct face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public.

In *The Managed Heart*, I describe the work of flight attendants—whose job (in some airlines) is to try to be “nicer than natural”—and bill collectors—whose job (in some agencies) is to be nastier than natural. Most of us—teachers, nurses, social workers, sales clerks, tattoo parlor artists, prison guards, nannies, eldercare workers, wedding planners, funeral parlor attendants—do emotional labor that falls somewhere between these two extremes.

Sometimes the job calls for *displaying* the right emotion, as when a funeral parlor attendant feigns sorrow and performs what I call “surface acting.” Other times it calls for trying to *really feel* the feeling appropriate to the moment and the job—what I call “deep acting.”



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Off the job, as friends, parents, siblings, co-parishioners, we are called on to manage our feelings, too, of course. We comfort a frightened child, calm a rageful neighbor, grieve a

lost parent. Here we are called to manage our emotions, but we're not paid for it. So I give this a different name: "emotion work," as opposed to "emotional labor."

The pandemic has brought about an outpouring of gratitude toward frontline workers, whether at the hospital or supermarket. But it has also created an intense amount of stress: The nurse who has to hold it together when telling people they can't see a dying family member. The store employee who receives abuse from customers after they encounter a bare shelf when looking for disinfecting wipes. Do you think that your ideas about emotional labor can help explain what these essential workers are feeling?

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Oh, yes. The demands on first responders are often intense. When I say "first responder," I refer to many workers: doctors and nurses—especially those working in the ICU [intensive care unit]—nurses' aides, EMTs, paramedics and physical therapists, as well as childcare workers, nursing home care givers, security personnel, food service deliverers and servers, janitors, mail carriers, bus, taxi, Uber and Lyft drivers, teachers, hotel and restaurant workers, and others in "essential jobs" maintaining daily contact with the public—some of whom are, or may be, sick.

They do emotional labor of two broad types. One, I would call "bracketing." This refers to the effort to get our own, often extreme, anxieties "behind" us. Emotionally speaking, this calls for the work of temporarily detaching ourselves from a set of feelings that emerge—sadness, anxiety, panic—in response to events, real or imagined, in our own life. An ICU nurse who is intubating an ill patient may be strongly reminded of her own mother who's developed a bad cough. Or she may worry she is exposing her small children to COVID-19 or [she may have] left a pet dog at home for the length of a 10-hour shift. These worries don't arise from the job itself. They are on her mind and require the emotional labor of "setting aside," or bracketing, situations away from work. Bracketing is the work of maintaining focus on an immediate task, of telling oneself again and again, "I can't worry about my own situation now."

You mentioned another type. Can you describe it?

A second type of emotional labor of COVID-19 first responders is “bridging.” It includes a broad category of emotional tasks. In bridging, we’re focusing on the urgent needs of those stricken by COVID-19 and must try to empathize with the victims of it—bridging the differences between self and victim. As one exemplary EMT said, “I try to think of every patient as like a member of my family.”

And circumstances can be dire because COVID-19 adds new danger to preexisting ones. The very poor and homeless, for example—already desperate for warmth and food, comfort—now fear the spread of illness or may be in denial of it. Prisoners, already lonely, some mentally ill, now face fear of contagion. Public hospitals, already facing scarcities, are now overwhelmed with more sick patients than there are beds. Working with populations in these hotspots forces the emotional laborer to confront chaos [and] pandemonium and deal with their own sense of horror, similar to that faced by soldiers in wartime. Many first responders trained as civilians are now faced with the equivalent of war. The internal task for the emotional laborer is to absorb—meaning to manage feelings about—immediate horrors while not feeling overwhelmed by them.

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In bridging to the needs of others, workers may have to deal with their own sense of failure. The EMT mentioned above reported sadly about a patient, “He died on my stretcher.” Workers also have to deal with the anger of family members. Helpless to rescue a loved one, a family member may lash out in anger and displace blame onto the caregiver: “You failed” or “This hospital failed.” A defiant shopper may express outrage at being required to wear a mask, requiring the store worker to mollify, absorb, listen nonreactively to angry talk and threatening gestures. Or a worker may genuinely feel remorse at a failure to rescue a needy patient.

Does having to maintain one’s composure while risking one’s own health raise the possibility of long-lasting psychological consequences?

Yes, frontline workers can become shell-shocked or develop PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] or simply burn out.

Does emotional labor also have relevance to the country's race-related tensions? The Strike for Black Lives on June 10 was partially thought of as a respite from the emotional labor of being Black in academia—having to appear at diversity workshops, mentor Black students, and the like.

Yes, here a person is often addressed in ways that don't correspond with their self-definition. A Black person may be treated as a "representative" of "all black people"—"Tell me how you people feel"—in ways that jar or alienate. Or in other ways, people of color—and, really, minorities of every sort—face the task of peeling off other people's projections onto them: "You must be affirmative action hires." Any member of a minority, whether based on gender, sexuality, religion, disability or personality, is tacitly given the extra emotional task of helping others relate to oneself in a relaxed and accepting way.

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You have also written about the inequities in housework in your book *The Second Shift*. Do you think extended quarantines and lockdowns have exacerbated stresses related to domestic responsibilities—that is, when couples must work at home while tending to children and having to deal with all the tasks of running a household as well?

On the other side of the "brackets" mentioned above is the world of children, parents, lovers, friends. The "second shift" is an additional source of demands because it requires our effort to stay closely attuned to loved ones, address their primal needs while hoping and trying for a parallel attunement to one's own—also sometimes overwhelming—needs. Loved ones may feel abandoned by the preoccupied frontline worker and so feel angry and hurt. One may feel guilty for subtracting attention from needy children or a spouse. And the frontline worker may have to ask preoccupied family members for help in recovering from an overwhelming day.

Is there any other important issue that I'm leaving out linked to emotional labor and the pandemic?

Yes, underlying any task of emotional labor is a prior notion of the “right way” or “wrong way” to feel at a particular moment—in a particular situation at a particular historical period in a particular culture. It is through “feeling rules,” as I call them, that we incorporate culture into our daily lives.

Also, balancing: whether bracketing or bridging, at the heart of emotional labor is the art of balancing the need to “manage” emotion with the need to let go and simply feel emotion. And here, too, we encounter feeling rules in the form of a cultural ideal of balance. But whatever ideal we're aiming for, in balancing, we need to control our emotions enough but also not too much. That is, partly, we have to discipline our feelings—to play them like a piano: If addressed in anger, not to strike back. Or if addressed in grief and depression, not to descend into it oneself. On the other hand, we need to feel our emotions. Emotion is like sight or hearing: it is a sense through which we know the world and our relationship to it. To go numb is to be struck blind. Hence the importance of knowing about what so many of us practice without giving it the name: emotional labor.

Editor's Note: Besides The Managed Heart, there are two other books by Arlie Russell Hochschild that discuss emotional labor: The Outsourced Self: Intimate Life in Market Times (Metropolitan Books, 2012) describes the experiences of nannies, eldercare workers, surrogate mothers, life coaches, wedding and birthday planners, and funeral organizers, such as “the Shiva Sisters.” And So How's the Family and Other Essays (University of California Press, 2013) contains several essays on the topic—including “Can Emotional Labor Be Fun?” “Rent-a-Mom,” “Time Strategies” and “The Surrogate's Womb.”

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