Emotional Labour – the invisibility of ‘value’ creation by nurse managers –
keeping calm and carrying on

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the emotional labour of nurse managers as a value creating exercise for the organisation. Using case study method, it explores how organisations subtly direct emotional display through organisational processes. We find evidence that organisations do attempt to prescribe the emotional display of nurse managers through formal and informal organisational processes and, consistent with contemporary organisational practices, these create value for the organisation. The implications of these findings are then discussed.

Key words
Emotional labour, Display Rules, Health Leadership, Not-for-profits, Health Professionals

It is now 30 years since sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) coined the term ‘emotional labour’ (EL). She defined emotional labour as labour “which requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance” as part of the work role (Hochschild). Hochschild’s seminal work has stimulated numerous streams of inquiry. In an early review of the concept, Stienberg and Figart (1999) summarised emotional labour as emphasising the relational rather than the task-based aspect of work found primarily, but not exclusively in the service economy. Emotional labour was understood to be a key part of the front line service encounter and thus face to face or voice to voice. They state “It [emotional labour] creates value, affects productivity, and generates profit” (Stienberg and Figart, 1999). This stream of research emphasized that the labour demanded by service sector jobs was often regarded as lowly skilled and lowly rewarded, with MacDonald and Sirianni (1996) referring to service workers, often concentrated in female dominated occupations, as the ‘emotional proletariat’. From a labour process perspective organisational rules of emotional display represent a form of...
worker control. (see Bolton 2005, for a critique). A major concern of this approach has been the invisibility of emotional labour as a job requirement and its lack of acknowledgement and reward as creating value for the organisation.

Iszatt-White (2013) proposes that the nature of emotional labour for leaders is significantly different from that of service workers in terms of the range of emotional displays required and the complexity of performing them. Also, researchers have begun to acknowledge the embedding of EL in Human Resource Management (HRM) organisational development (OD) practices that shape employees behaviour (Pugh, Diefendorff and Moran, 2013). Although, there are decades of research that imply that effective people management and engagement of employees are value creating exercises (Pfeffer, 1994; Harel and Tzafrer, 1999), little attention has been paid to the value creation of emotions management including EL. This paper uses a case study method to explore EL within the complex managerial setting of nurse managers. It also examines the extent to which the emotional displays of nurse managers are regulated and directed by organisational processes. The value adding potential of these processes is also discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW – ORGANISATIONS AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Hochschild differentiated EL from ‘emotion work’ or ‘emotion management’ which she referred to as the same acts done in a private context where they have ‘use value’ (Hochschild 1983). The assertion that workers’ emotional labour creates value for the organisation has prompted some debate in the literature. The points of contention include whether the capitalist assumptions of emotional labour applies outside the for profit sector, for example in the public sector (Bolton, 2001, 2009; Brook, 2009; Hunter and Smith, 2007) and how the value of emotional labour can be measured given that it is largely invisible (Bone, 2002; Meier et al, 2006).

In an early article in this debate, Bolton (2001) argued that EL was not an appropriate term to describe the emotion work performed by nurses in the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK, partly
because there is more to the caring role of the nurse than performing emotional labour and partly because the emotional displays of nurses in the NHS do not generate revenue for the organisation, in the Marxist sense of ‘surplus value’ that was utilised by Hochschild. However, Hunter and Smith (2007) note the shift of the NHS from a benevolent public institution to a business operating with a commercial ethos and structured around financial incentives. Following further debate, Bolton (2009) acknowledged that she was not discounting the alienation experienced by workers, but rather that her approach is to recognise exploitation which results from gender and socio-political social structures.

Given the acceptance of EL in the not-for-profit context, two other issues specifically relevant to the nursing profession and the recognition of EL have emerged in the literature. Bone (2002) describes the impact of the introduction of managed care in the Unites States of America upon the ability of nurses to provide their patients with emotional support. Bone reports that nurses were recognising the commodification and intensification of their work with the changes in the health care system to address rising health care costs. The main concern for Bone was that it was the emotion work of nurses that was being compromised in the process because there is little recognition by hospital administration, of this part of nurses’ work.

Benner (2001) explained this process in her book “From Novice to Expert” and concluded that at the highest level nursing practice is an automatic response performed by expert nurses. Benner’s premise was essentially that novice nurses compartmentalise nursing practice and perform each of the tasks separately and somewhat disjointedly. As the nurse gains experience with EL, the process is not recognised as separate or different from what they normally do and therefore the nurse loses the sense that this is part of their work. Emotional labour becomes invisible in nursing. Given the lack of recognition for and invisibility of EL in nursing the first research question is:
Do health care organisations expect that the emotions displayed by nurse managers at work, create value for the organisation?

The study of EL suggests that the organisation can prescribe the emotional displays it expects of its employees – display rules. These display rules form part of the emotional climate of the organisation which is in itself part of the organisational culture of the organisation. These two can form part of the business strategy of the organisation and contribute to the wealth of the organisation (Pugh, Diefendorf and Moran 2013). Scholarly investigation of emotions as an organisational level phenomena has been slow to take off. Pugh, Diefendorff and Morgan have recently reviewed research into informal and formal norms (e.g. culture and climate) and formal (Human Resource Management practices such as selection, training and performance management) and conclude that all have the potential to guide requirements for EL.

Although, Ashforth and Tomiuk (2000) contend that few organisations make their display rules explicit, Rafaeli and Sutton (1987) argue that EL is stated or evident in the organisational context through Human Resource Management policies, procedures and practices. Diefendorff and Richard (2003) describe these methods of conveying organisational expectations regarding appropriate emotional displays as less formal and include interpersonal interactions within the organisation. Diefendorff, Richard and Croyle (2006) go on to say that where display rules are not explicit; there is a degree of variability in the display rules, depending upon the perceptions of the employee.

With regard to the organisation’s rules about how nurse managers are to behave emotionally. Diefendorff and Richard (2003) explain that the interpersonal requirements of the job and the extent to which supervisors demand employees to express positive emotions and suppress negative emotions are the key measures of display rules. Diefendorff, Richard and Croyle (2006) explain that there are a number of jobs which require employees to display neutral or negative emotions and the case of the nurse manager is one of those. There are instances where the nurse manager is required to undertake emotional masking, that is, the suppression of both positive and negative emotions, for example,
during the selection process of a subordinate. Nurse managers are also required to display controlled negative emotions at work particularly, to demonstrate unsatisfactory subordinate performance. This is compounded by the lack of clarity regarding these rules when organisations do not make these display rules clear to nurse managers and the variability of the nurse manager’s commitment to displaying these emotions. In addition, the Code of Professional Conduct for Nurses in Australia (ANMC, 2008) and to a lesser extent the Australasian College of Health Service Management Code of Conduct, provide a framework of expectations of work performance for nurse managers. Although these documents do not refer to specific emotions and how they are to be displayed in the workplace, they refer to outcomes of interpersonal interactions and provide general principles to guide behaviour.

Mark (2005) summarises the nature of emotions in healthcare as being pervasive throughout organisations and makes particular mention that emotional labour is evident across the organisation as a whole. Given that health care organisations are quite prescriptive about the ways they require staff to respond in terms of customer service interactions, the second research question is:

*What are the display rules that guide nurse managers to display the required emotions and how are these communicated?*

**THE CASE STUDY – DATA AND METHODS**

This case study involved a large not-for-profit community nursing organisation which, for the purpose of this paper, we shall call St Fabiola’s Nursing Service (SFNS). The organisation is managed centrally with a decentralised service delivery structure. Each branch is managed by a service (nurse) manager who is responsible for the interface between staff, clients, senior management and sponsoring government departments. Based on the approach advocated by Yin (2009), the corporate documents of the organisation have been analysed to identify the display rules for service managers’ EL as well as any evidence of expectation of organisational benefit which could be attributed to that EL. This analysis is supported by examination of the physical artifacts and a conversation with a senior executive. The first author collected numerous HRM documents and training and development reports over 10 site visits. An interview was conducted with the Director of Corporate Services.
Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Queensland and the SFNS’s ethics committee. SFNS’s ethical requirements prohibited copying of the documents so a database of references to emotional display was assembled from notes taken on site.

In searching the documents for evidence of display rules and the value created by the emotional displays of service manager, there was little evidence of scripts or specific directions to the nurse managers about the emotions they were to display. The documents contained more general guidelines about the emotional environment that the nurse managers needed to create. These guidelines could be grouped into three themes – to portray the organisation’s values; to create a positive work climate and to stay calm. Examples of these three groupings are provided below.

**FINDINGS – COMMUNICATING EMOTIONAL LABOUR AND VALUE CREATION**

**Portray the organisation’s values**

As could be expected, the organisation champions its mission and values as its central driving force and these sentiments are then reflected throughout the organisation in many forms. The values include Teamwork, Social Justice, Respect and Compassion and the staff are recognised and acknowledged as dedicated committed and skilled in providing community care. St Fabiola’s Code of Conduct makes specific reference to the way employees are expected to behave in order to reflect the values and reflect the emotional responses associated with caring. For example:

> Treat people fairly, honestly, be responsible, and show compassion and Always being responsive, courteous and truthful when communicating and dealing with client, their families, other staff and volunteers or visitors.

This context of a strong corporate culture focussed on care delivery also provides specific direction to service managers within its HRM documents. The organisation consistently refers to staff enacting its mission and values and this is reinforced as part of the purpose of the position of the service manager.
Further in the document leadership and teamwork capabilities list the behaviour expected of a person in the service manager position. This way of acting is incorporated into the organization's definition of professionalism.

In terms of the value expected of the emotional labour of nurse managers, the Director of Corporate Services clearly articulated the organization's expectations during the interview. She had no reservations in confirming that the service manager’s work involved appropriate emotional display and that this added value for the organization. She stated:

“Yes, we see the service managers as the voice of the organization expressing the emotions and values every day”

In summary, this organization is quite specific about how they want their employees to act out their values. Although they don’t provide scripts for emotional displays, they openly describe the outcome that they expect of their service managers’ interactions with staff, clients and others external to the organization.

**Create a positive work climate**

St Fabiola’s has made a deliberate attempt to create a positive emotional climate at work through the introduction of an organisational development intervention known as the FISH! Philosophy. The FISH! philosophy is a strategy used by organizations to enhance productivity and create a positive workplace culture that originated in the Seattle’s Pike Place Fish Market as they attempted to combat their smelly and cold working conditions (Lundin, 2000). There are four tenets to FISH! aimed at enhancing teamwork – play; be there; choose your attitude and make their day.

The idea originated with the employees at the Seattle’s Pike Place Fish Market as they attempted to combat their smelly and cold working conditions. They decided to engage in fun activities (which included the customers) focusing on the impact that their emotions have on others. They became renowned for engaging with their customers and making an extra effort to help their customers enjoy their experience in the fish market. This approach was observed and analysed by a film maker who
converted the idea into the FISH! Philosophy and they have successfully marketed the concept to many organisations around the world. The creator now sells a myriad of merchandise as well as training and organisational development tools to assist organisations to introduce and embed the approach.

It was evident through examination of documents and site visits, that the FISH! Philosophy had been introduced and was flourishing at SNFS. The staff had been provided with a training day to introduce the concept of FISH! and staff had decorated their workspace with pictures of fish and aquariums. Fish metaphors were used in a variety ways in corporate communication and key staff were invited to join the starfish group to facilitate the next level of implementation of the FISH! Philosophy (ChartHouse Learning 2007). The service managers were seen as having a pivotal role in the successful transformation of the organisation to the FISH! Philosophy and this was reflected in a notice written by the CEO which was sent out to all staff.

In summary, although the FISH! Philosophy was introduced as a general approach to workplace culture, the organisation expected that the service managers would take the lead in demonstrating the happy emotions and incorporate FISH! into day to day practices.

**Stay calm**

Quite apart from the positive and professional expectations which were related to the corporate values and FISH!, was a very clear direction to service managers in many of the documents to stay calm when dealing with grievances and problems. The management development education for service managers included the specific response expected when a service manager was confronted by a staff member with a grievance. This display rule recognises that the service manager may be experiencing a range of emotions as they have to contend with an aggrieved worker, but in that instance the organisation expects that the manager needs to control their own emotions and to “listen and empathise”, “be calm” as well as “be informed and fair”. This was also explicitly communicated in the training
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The literature suggested that the EL of managers would be more complex than that of service workers and that it would be unlikely that organisations would be overt about their display rules for managers. The questions for this case study were around evidence of display rules and whether the organisation believed that this EL created value. It would seem from a review of the organisational documents and a discussion with one of the senior executives that, despite any formal acknowledgement that the service managers perform EL in a prescribed and controlled manner, this organisation does provide nurse managers with some guidance about their emotional displays. This study supports Pugh et al’s (2013) argument that the requirements for EL can be embedded in formal and informal organizational processes. Although display rules might not be in the form of Hochschild’s (1983) flight attendants’ scripts and ‘smile’ instructions, the maintaining of a calm demeanor when dealing with a grievances, and often emotionally charged situation, is never-the-less a display rule. Similarly, the informal intervention of the FISH! program which prescribes the encouragement of ‘fun’ indirectly demands an emotional display on the part-of managers.

It is also apparent that this organisation holds the view that service managers do create value for the organisation and that the emotions they display and the emotional climate they help create is part of this value adding process. It would seem that in this environment, the EL of nurses is not invisible, but is observed into management activities and the professional ‘caring’ culture of nursing which means that it is not acknowledged as a distinct form of ‘labour. This paper also reinforces critiques of Bolton’s (2001) early work that the absence of profit motive means an absence of EL. Rather it adds support that objective-driven not-for-profit organizations can also carry EL requirements. Finally, like Turnbull (2013) and Pugh et al (2013) we suggest that further research into the embedding of EL in formal and informal organisational practices and the EL of managers and leaders is warranted.
REFERENCES

ChartHouse Learning. FISH! Culture Facilitator's Guide. 2007. p. 29-30


