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Feeling in Sociology and the World

Feelings are social. Joy, sadness, anger, elation, jealousy, envy, despair, anguish, grief – all these feelings are partly social. Erving Goffman once wrote, “When they issue uniforms, they issue skins.” And we can add, two inches of flesh.

So in what ways is feeling social? For one thing, feeling is elicited by interactions that we experience, remember or imagine having with people in our lives. Feelings are social in that sense. For another thing, each culture provides its members with prototypes of feeling, which, like differently toned keys on a piano, attune us to different inner “notes.” For example, the Tahitians have one word, “sick” for what in other cultures might correspond to ennui, depression, grief or sadness. According to the Czech novelist Milan Kundera, the Czech word “Litost” – referring to an indefinable longing, mixed with remorse and grief – has no equivalent in any other language. Cultures lay out the possibilities for subjectivity and in that way guide the act of recognizing a feeling. Apart from what we think a feeling is, we also have ideas about what it *should* be. We say, “you should be thrilled at winning the prize” or “you should be furious at what he did.” We evaluate the fit between a particular feeling and context in light of what I call “feeling rules,” which are themselves rooted in culture. Given such feeling rules, we may then try to manage our feelings. We try to be happy at a party, or grief-stricken at a funeral. In short, it is through our apprehension of an interaction, our definition of feeling, our appraisal of feeling and our management of feeling that feeling is social. If, as C. Wright Mills said, the job of sociology is to trace the links between private troubles and public issues, the sociology of emotion is – or should be -- at the heart of sociology.

This approach to feeling offers us a way of looking at work. When we are paid to do certain jobs, we do what I call “emotional labor” – the effort to *seem* to feel and to *try to really* feel the “right” feeling for the job, and to try to induce the “right” feeling in certain others. For example, the flight attendant is trained to manage fear at turbulence and anger at cranky or abusive passengers. A bill collector is trained to manage compassion or liking for debtors. Wedding planners, (one of the kind of para-familial service workers I’m interviewing these days,) often try to help clients symbolize the special moment of falling in love, deal with jealous mothers, quarreling parents or what one planner called “grooms jitters.” Over the last 40 years, the number of service sector jobs has grown. By my estimate, some six out of ten of those service jobs call for substantial amounts of emotional labor. This work does not fall equally upon the two genders; roughly a quarter of men but half of women work in jobs heavy in emotional labor. Emotional labor has hidden costs, and these fall more heavily on women.

Increasingly, emotional labor is going global – through two doors. Through one

door, clients living in the industrial North hire service workers who reside in the South. No one moves, but the service – and the emotional labor it sometimes calls for – is itself internationalized. Through telephone and email, service providers in Bangalore, India, for example, tutor American children with math homework, make long-distance purchases of personal gifts, and even scan romantic dating service internet sites for busy professionals. What we see here are the paradoxes – and sometimes estrangements – involved in commodifying even the smallest, most personal acts.

Through a second door, immigrants from the poor South travel to take up jobs as care workers in the rich countries of the North. In my latest work, I have written about a South-to-North “heart transplant.” Here, a growing number of care workers leave the young and elderly of their families and communities in the poor South to take up paid jobs caring for the young and elderly in families and communities in the affluent North.

Many women migrant workers have children. The average age of women migrants into the U.S. is 29 and most come from societies – such as the Philippines and Sri Lanka – in which maternity is the centerpiece of female identity and the birth rate is high. By one estimate, 30% of Filipino children live in households in which at least one parent has worked over seas. Often it is impossible for migrants, especially undocumented migrants, to bring children along or even to pay visits back to their homeland.

Such jobs therefore call on workers to manage grief, depression, and anguish *Vis a Vis* their own long-separated children, spouses, and elderly parents, even as they genuinely feel – and try to feel – joyful attachment to the children and elders they daily care for in the North.

If working mothers of the First World are caught in clockwork of male careers, putting long hours into demanding jobs, their nannies suffer an exaggerated version of the same thing. Both First and Third world women are bit players in a larger gender and economic game whose rules they have not written.

But feeling – that on which we would “work” -- is itself social in yet more complex way. I interviewed one Philippina nanny, Maria Gutierrez, whose story offers us some sense of this. A warm, 42-year-old nanny for an eight-month-old baby of two long-hour professionals – a lawyer and doctor, also from the Philippines, Maria said this:

“I love the baby I care for more than my own two children. Yes, more! It’s strange I know. But I have time to be with them. I’m paid. Then, I am lonely here. I work 10 hours a day at my nanny job with one day off. I don’t know any neighbors on the block. And so this child gives me what I need.”

Maria said nothing about “trying” to love the eight-month-old baby. That she said she did with ease. Her effort was to manage a sense of anguish and sadness that came over her from time to time when she thought or dreamt about her children, spouse, parents and friends.

How shall we understand Maria’s love of the American child? Is this a diversion of

time and energy from her own children to that of another, or as Maria describes it, something more – love. And if love, what kind of love? Is her love a “resource” which has been extracted, like gold, from a poor country and transferred to a rich one? If so, we must also acknowledge that Maria herself, like others in her situation, is the author of this extraction, though not of the circumstances that led to it. And surely we oversimplify to think of love as a resource, for the more we *are* loved, the more we’re *able* to love; so to the degree love resembles a resource, it is a renewable one.

But a further conversation with Maria forces us to challenge the metaphor of “extracted resource” further still. I asked Maria: “How are you different with Ana (the child) than you were with your two children when they were small?” and she answered: “I’m more patient. More relaxed. I put the child first. My kids, I treated them the way my mother treated me.”

When I asked her how her own mother had treated her back in a small village in the Philippines, she replied:

“My mother grew up in a farming family. It was a hard life. My mother wasn’t warm to me. She didn’t touch me or say ‘I love you.’ She didn’t think she should do that. Before I was born she had lost four babies – two in miscarriage and two died as babies. I think she was afraid to love me as a baby because she thought I might die too. Then she put me to work as a ‘little mother’ caring for my four younger brothers and sisters. I didn’t have time to play.”

Maria also described an older woman who lived next door and who took an affectionate interest in her often fed and took her in overnight when she was sick. She described this woman’s relatives as “closer to me than her biological aunts and cousins. This was a form, perhaps, of informal adoption, very common in the countryside and fairly common, she said, in Pilipino towns of the 1960s and 70s.

In a sense Maria Gutierrez experienced a pre-modern childhood of high infant mortality, child labor, an absence of sentimentality, set in a culture of strong family commitment and community support. It was a childhood not unlike that of children in 15th century France so well described in Philippe Ariès’ *Centuries of Childhood*. It was a childhood before the romanticization of the child, before the modern ideology of intensive mothering. Sentiment wasn’t the point; commitment was.

Maria’s mother and father didn’t hug her but they took responsibility for her. And through all the anger and tears of her own 12- and 13-year-old children when she left to work abroad, she has sent remittances and calls without fail. Maria was -- and is -- deeply committed. It is the sentiment she’s had to work at. During calls home to her teenage daughter now, Maria recounts; “I tell my daughter ‘I love you.’ At first it sounded fake. But after a while it became natural. And now she says it back. It’s strange, but I think I learned that it was okay to say that from being in the U.S.” (laughs.)

Maria’s story points to an extraordinary paradox. On one hand, First World countries are “extracting” love from the Third World in the broad sense that they are taking caregivers away from the South and transferring them to the North. But what

is being “extracted” is a transfer of feeling, a displacement in the psychoanalytic sense, from one object to another. And that displaced love is then further “produced” and “assembled” in the rich northern country in which she now works:— with the leisure, the money, the ideology of the child, the intense loneliness and the intense sense of missing her own children.

Love is gold. But the gold is created through alchemy, a blending of a pre-modern Philippina childhood, a post-modern American ideology of mothering and childhood, and the loneliness and separation of migration. Ironically, it is also a product of freedom from the time pressure and school anxiety parents of the North feel in a culture in which both parent and child have to “make it” at work because little else — state policies, communities, marriage — are reliable enough to hold them up. In a sense, Maria’s “nanny love” does not suffer from the disabling effects of late capitalism. In all of this, the concept of emotional labor offers us a vantage point from which to explore the complex ways in which a feeling becomes social.

The idea of emotional labor — and of sociology of emotions in general — helps illuminate the “hidden injuries,” to quote Richard Sennett, of modern capitalism. It helps us re-evaluate the social costs of commodification, and to link feeling — because it is so social — to the issue of social justice.

References

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