

TEARS AT WORK: GENDER, INTERACTION, AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR

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For a long time we believed it was possible to leave our emotions at the threshold of the workplace. Rooted in western culture, this vision sees an opposition between emotion and reason and suppresses emotions in order to achieve efficiency and productivity at work. This Cartesian rationality also manifests itself in analyses of work. The “body“ and the “soul“ of the worker are separated, simplifying the complexity and heterogeneity of work processes and causes an underestimation of the effects of work on emotional and physical well-being.

As in all other human activity, work sets the stage for the (re)production of different emotions: one is afraid of having an accident; of being ill because of work; or of losing one’s job. We are satisfied and proud of work well done, angry in the face of injustices at work, and elated upon getting a promotion. This emotional dimension certainly introduces complexity in the analysis of work and its relation to physical and mental health. It also provides the possibility of a more accurate and just understanding of

work, its organisation, and its effects on health.

Over the course of the last decade, there has been growing interest in emotions at work. The concept of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) was the starting point of this type of research. In this article, our objective is to understand a particular form of emotional expression by workers: tears at work. A strong and intense emotional expression, crying is an essential and integral aspect of human identity. It is therefore astonishing that so little has been published on the subject of tears and, more specifically, on tears at work. Do individuals cry at work? For what reasons? Do men and women cry at work or because of work?

To understand this problem, we use a qualitative approach based on 77 individual interviews with workers of different profession in the service sector. We interviewed them over the last five years, in Montreal, within the context of different research projects. In all interviews, we posed questions concerning crying at work. In the

sample, different jobs in the service sector are represented, including supermarket cashiers, hairdressers, nurses, and office employees. It is a preliminary analysis using elements of the sociology of emotions and the sociology of work in an effort to understand and reveal the motivations and effects of tears at work.

EXPRESSING AND GENDERING EMOTIONS AT WORK

Work frequently demands the management of emotions. Hochschild defined this management of emotions as “emotional labour”, that is, the understanding, assessment, and management of one’s own emotions and the emotions of others (Hochschild, 1983 and 1993). For instance, it is often necessary to smile at work even though it may not be genuine and one may not want to. The smile constitutes an important part of many service workers. This management requires a co-ordination of the self and of one’s emotions so that work appears to be accomplished effortlessly (Hochschild, 1983).

An important aspect that must be considered is that emotional labour is gendered, in the sense that there clearly exists a sexual division of emotional labour (Heller, 1980). Men are generally confided to tasks that demand aggressiveness and curtness. Men frequently find themselves in jobs where they must

be aggressive towards those that transgress rules, while women are more likely to accomplish tasks while restraining aggression and anger toward others. Women generally are given tasks that demand nurturing, tenderness, sensitivity, and intuition. They are supposedly afraid of things that men are not supposed to fear and are often described as compassionate, charitable, agreeable, and kind.

Furthermore, this sexual division of emotional labour exists between jobs and between workers in the same occupation:

“The male hairdresser need only make a few compliments to the customer and she is happy, while the [female] hairdresser cannot make these same compliments. Therefore, it’s more difficult for her. She must work harder. While the male hairdresser, he goes to work simply with his compliments. The words that he says will be half his work, it is half of his success. While the success of the hairdresser is 80% physical work, and just 20% of what she says is sufficient” (Pierre, hairdresser).

Undoubtedly men and women don’t have the same workload in this case. Through the management of the emotions of the other, the male hairdresser can save a lot of physical work. Thus the possible effects of work on health will be different according to sex, even in the same occupation.

Another important aspect is the intersection of social relations other

than gender, such as race, ethnicity, social class and status, in the achievement of emotional labour. For example, a black worker must frequently face racist remarks that demand a heavier emotional load, something which a white worker would not face.

TALKING ABOUT TEARS

In the literature on emotions at work, crying is a topic that has rarely been discussed. Frey and Langseth (1985) differentiate two types of tears: the tears of irritation, secreted under chemical or physical irritation, and emotional tears that are a response to emotional stress.

Emotional tears may be classified according to the type of emotion that triggers them: tears of joy and tears of sadness. Far from being a sign of weakness or immaturity, tears are a manner of expressing oneself, of communicating emotions that are beyond words. Thus, to cry can be considered a form of non-verbal communication that expresses helplessness and a need for comfort or sympathy.

According to several authors, tears possess a cathartic effect that frees stress and emotion in the individual, thus producing an effect of relief. Effectively, in spite of the fact that some authors contest this idea (Lutz, 1999), the perception of individuals is that a feeling of relief is produced after crying.

In the literature on tears, one can also find associations established

between tears and mental and physical health. Crepeau (1980) maintains that men and women in good health have a more positive attitude towards crying, while individuals enduring ulcers and colitis - two conditions frequently associated to stress - have an opposite attitude toward tears. The act of crying occurs in emotionally charged contexts, and being frequently exposed to these contexts at work can bring on professional exhaustion (Wagner *et al*, 1997).

Tears mark the impossibility of managing emotions completely. While crying, the worker is in fact expressing the impossibility of accomplishing emotional labour, except in the case where tears would not be genuinely felt. In this case we speak of "crocodile tears". It is interesting to note that this management of emotions didn't always exist. For example, it has been found that in the 12th and 13th centuries, "the moral code didn't yet impose on upstanding people the obligation to repress their tears" (Bloch, 1989, p.117).

GENDERING TEARS

Crying is also a gendered process. On the one hand, men are socialised not to cry. Male children often hear that "big boys don't cry" and are ridiculed when they do cry. In the world of virility, tears are associated to weakness, femininity, and cowardice. In concealing their emotions so well in order to

eliminate emotional dissonance, they risk hiding their emotions from themselves (Frey & Langseth, 1985).

On the other hand, it is accepted that women cry. This has often been associated to the stereotypes described by Heller mentioned earlier. One associates tears to menstruation, to feminine hormones, and to other essentialist notions based on the “biological” nature of women. In doing a review of the literature on the sexual differences in crying, Vingerhoets & Scheirs (2000) conclude that women are more inclined to cry and do so more frequently than men.

Certainly, biology can have an influence and can contribute to differences between women and men in relation to crying. However, culture and socialisation play a crucial role in the determination of who cries and why. For example, if differences between male and female crying are attributed to the presence and/or absence of certain hormones, how can explain one that in the 17th century, men could cry in public, and that in the 18th century, both men and women could do so? Men cried out of admiration, pity, or joy, and made themselves noticed through their public displays of crying. In this period, there was no equation between crying and femininity. This only occurs in the second half of the 19th century, when tears become a symbol of femininity, immaturity, and weakness (Vincent-Buffault, 1986).

Furthermore, one finds similar

behaviours between men and women with regard to tears. For instance, it is more likely that men and women “cry alone when they are in the company of people, and are more susceptible to cry in the presence of close friends than with people that they don’t know well” (Williams and Morris, 1996, p. 481).

According to Plas and Hoover-Dempsey (1988), women cry more when they are angry. In this case, it is necessary to make the distinction between the anger triggered by aggressiveness in the need to control a situation and the anger resulting from being treated unjustly, humiliated, or misunderstood. According to Williams and Morris (1996), tears are especially elicited by this latter type of anger.

In studies on the gender of emotions, a promising line of inquiry would be to question stereotypes of masculinity and femininity in relation to emotions (Shields, 2000). Thus, it would be more interesting to break some of the popular conceptions on tears at work by changing the question of “who cries more at work?” to a larger conception of gendered emotion, so as to understand how and why we cry at work.

TEARS AT WORK

Tears are very present at work and they are not always sad ones. Sometimes, someone cries because they received positive feedback in relation to accomplished work, such

as when a patient recovers from illness, or at the moment of a child's birth:

"We cry in joy at births...nearly all of us are moved to tears" (Daniele, nurse).

However, most often crying at work, like crying in general, is more frequently due to sad events (Labott, 1987). The reasons for these tears of sadness vary. First, we find work conditions in which workers face a particular situation as an example of a personal failure, a direct attack on their self-esteem:

"He had this thick crust covering his head, at least a good centimetre thick. So the girl comes to the sink, and she starts to wash his head, but she just couldn't do it. Then she starts feeling queasy. So now the hair is wet and it starts to stink. There she is at the sink but she leaves to get some gloves because she is disgusted...so she tried to continue... but she is not able to, she is not able to at all. She leaves the customer at the sink, goes to the back, and starts to cry. And she is a very tough girl usually. She must have been really discouraged to not be able to continue. She just started to cry" (Annie, hairdresser).

"At one point I had accepted a supervisor's position, that I regretted bitterly. It was not my style to manage a group of people. It was the worst experience in my life when I was manager: my heart would beat like crazy! I would arrive home...and cry all the time" (Eduardo, office worker).

The impossibility of accomplishing work is, in the majority of cases, associated with excessive workload, due to policies that aim to either "do more with less" to obtain total performance, to the precarisation of work, and to the difficult conciliation of work and family:

"I returned to work after a maternity leave that was too short. I had been obliged to return to work; my youngest was one month and a few weeks old. I had sent them to a new nanny that I didn't know... It was difficult. Then, when I would arrive home in the evening, I would be discouraged. I told myself that it couldn't be this way, I couldn't have this over and over again for who knows how many years...send them to the nanny each day...the first day had not gone very well. You feel guilty inside, you know it's more because of that. I cried for those reasons, to be tired, discouraged to live through that situation" (Annie, hairdresser).

Workers also cry because of intense stress, as in the case of a supermarket cashier who experienced an armed robbery at her cash register without anyone noticing it, or Claudette, who was overwhelmed by a young sports team at the restaurant where she worked:

"I had invoices on me. Then, the youngsters all rose all then they all came to see me because they wanted to have their bills and were going to pay at the cash. But me, the bills...like

a chicken breast with a sundae without walnuts, a Pepsi no ice, to who does it belong? Do you understand? They are all around me yelling. Then I said: You will have to remain seated so that I know where to put each bill, because they are almost all the same. Do you understand? It was crazy. So that finally I was able to figure it all out. Everybody told me what they had ordered, I gave them all their invoices and they all began going to pay at the cash. But then, I had...it was frightening. I went to the toilet. I went into the toilet, I leaned over like this, and I started crying; it was hell. I cried and cried, shaking, I couldn't take it anymore. It was crazy, I swear to you. (...) I had succeeded in keeping control but it was over my limit and I did it anyway. So for sure I exploded after, do you understand?" (Claudette, waitress).

Sometimes stress is intense and chronic, and arises in conjunction with feelings of helplessness and being at the end of one's strength:

"I went to see my boss at one point, and he answered me rudely, I left to go cry. I said: I can't do any more than I am doing now. I am so tired, exhausted... I don't know what to tell you anymore. (...) I just started to cry because I said: You don't listen me. It's not a joke, I came in today, and I wasn't even supposed to according to my doctor. I wanted to tell you what needed to be done, and give you the keys if you needed to go into my office. And you...you talk as if I was joking. What I am saying is not a joke. I am burnt out, I can't take it anymore" (Esther, office worker).

In such cases, tears appear at work because of feelings of helplessness in the workplace associated to intense chronic stress, which pushes individuals to the limit where emotions are beyond words. Tears then become a way of communication, a way of asking for help and support.

In cases where decisions taken by management are perceived to be unfair or unjust, anger inhibits emotional labour:

"I had cried that afternoon because I told myself that is was so unjust, it is so unjust what happens, it is... it is an absolutely terrible injustice. That there was such a situation and I had arrived at that point, that afternoon...after that confrontation with that person, I cried, I cried two or three times at least that afternoon" (Marie-Eve, office clerk)

People also cry because of physical pain or suffering at work:

"But then, I returned, as I told your, to light work. The more I did supposedly light work, the more I was in pain. There were days where I cried like a baby, I could only work two hours. I wasn't able. I told myself, come on Nicole, you must continue, don't let yourself go like that, so I continued anyway" (Nicole, supermarket cashier).

It is interesting to note that even at work, crying remains a private activity. In addition, men and women who cry at work use the same place to hide their tears, the bathroom, since it is generally the

most private place in the organisation. Otherwise, one cries at home, because of work:

“When I want to talk about my problems, I go to see them in the small corner in the back, there I can cry and take out my frustrations a bit more. But not with customers, I tell myself that it isn’t their fault if such or such a thing happens to me” (Chantal, hairdresser).

“We were in the bathroom, and I cried with her about it, then I shut my mouth and went back to work” (Diane, nurse).

It is also interesting to note that when the individual cries at work, and was unable to do so in private, the interaction will be interrupted and a feelings of shame and embarrassment will surface.

Finally, another example explaining why individuals cry at work is exposure to different forms of violence. The violence can vary from a simple conflict with a colleague or superior, to verbal and even physical abuse:

“He literally attacked me. Because he knew my private life well, a bit too well. I was friends with him, and I went out with him sometimes. Not a romantic friend but a buddy. And the guy was homosexual, and I am a lesbian. So he knew my life and I knew his. He had a psychosis and then... at one point he started shouting in the department that I didn’t like men. That disturbed me a lot. Then I started to cry. He attacked my personal life...

because he didn’t like getting orders. But it was like that with everybody. He fought with everyone. I was not the only one” (Laura, nurse).

“Customers should change demeanour in front of us too. You know, we are not supposed to get pushed around by them. We don’t want to get punched in the face and be told: “Ah! You can’t touch the customer now”. I mean, we are not supposed to do anything. That’s the bad part. We should also be able to answer back sometimes, because we can’t get insulted in front of everybody. Some girls are called whores by customers. Sometimes some say it. Oh yes! We had one here once and the cashier cried” (Mélanie, supermarket cashier).

“The time he said: you will speak only when I speak to you, I cried. And then when he said: remove your jacket; the next time, if you are cold, stay at home” (Karen, kitchen help).

Bullying is perhaps the most insidious form of violence at work. Bullying is a series of hostile verbal aggressions and physical acts demonstrated by one or several people toward another (the target) at work (Leymann, 1996; Soares, 2002). It is a destructive process, constituted of hostile acts whose constant repetition has devastating effects, and whose aim is to anguish, to destabilise, to break the chosen victim, to exclude the victim from the workplace. In this case, individuals experience intense stress, coupled with feelings of

injustice, helplessness, shame and fear.

“Because I felt injured, because I felt humiliated, because I felt menaced. Because they said things that were grossly untrue about me. And I didn’t have the impression that I had the power to fight them, to justify them. I often cried. (...) Then, I cried a lot because I felt caught in that situation. (...) I felt discouraged, yes, when I cried, when I was not able to take anymore. (Daniel, counsellor-educator)

"I felt so upset. It destroyed me, I would arrive at home crying every evening. I told myself that they were making me go through the same thing that they did to her. It was really very difficult “(Elise, nursery educator) .

FUTURE RESEARCH ISSUES

Understanding tears at work, this exceptional but frequent situation, permits us to identify several components of emotional overload in the workplace. Following this preliminary analysis of tears at work, we can question ourselves on several aspects: What are the consequences of working in an environment increasingly filled with attacks on the self? What are the effects of these repeated attacks on mental health at work? These are some of the issues that will be explored in future research.

It is necessary to point out that the classification of the different reasons for crying at work doesn’t

follow a hierarchical order of importance. It is necessary to also underline that our sample imposes certain limitations. First, we are dealing here only with the service sector. Furthermore, it is composed mostly of workers that occupy jobs that have little social prestige. Finally, there are not enough workers of minority background in our sample.

Tears at work are bound, at least in the analysed cases, either to an overload of emotional labour, or to the impossibility of its achievement. Differences in crying between women and men, at least at work, can be explained not only by the gendered socialisation of individuals, but by the sexual division of emotional labour that imposes a more pronounced emotional overload on women and demand a more intensive management of their emotions at work.

Finally, with regard to health at work, it is important to recall that tears at work are an indicator emotional overload in the workplace. In several cases, this overload comes from emotional labour or emotions experienced at work. In order to understand this emotional overload, one must understand different facets of work and its effects on the health of workers. In this way, tears at work may be an important indicator of sufferings at work, and an understanding of this non-verbal form of communication certainly

may help us to improve mental health at the workplace.

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