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From Emotional Suppression to Regulated Empathy: The Changing Face of Control in the CES

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Abstract

Between the 1970s and the 1990s the level and type of emotionality in the Commonwealth Employment Service (the Australian national employment service) altered. Within a context of changing economic conditions and concomitant work intensification, it is argued that untenable working conditions resulted in new recruits adopting a coping strategy that led to the use rather than the suppression of emotions. The use of emotions provided workers with job satisfaction and greater control over service interactions. Management subsequently commandeered the use of emotions to complement the introduction of private sector management techniques and service delivery reforms, regaining control over worker-client interactions.

Managers of organisations, especially bureaucracies, have traditionally argued that organisational life is rational, and that emotions have no role to play (Putnam & Mumby 1993). Increasingly though, emotions are acquiring an overwhelming importance as service quality becomes a competitive differentiator. It is not only private industry that is reacting to a perceived need to be more customer oriented. Governments have also begun to foster these ideas within the public sector. Du Gay and Salaman (1992: 620), Heery (1993: 286) and Ryan (1994) point to competitive tendering, to service level agreements, customer charters, and service standards as increasing the marketisation of the public sector and emphasising the sovereignty of the customer.

The introduction of private sector management practices has had implications for the "considerable revision [of] working practices and employment contracts for public sector workers" (Heery 1993: 286). One implication of the focus on customer service is in relation to skills required by employees. Halford and Savage (1995: 101) have noted that the "quality of service provision is intimately related to the characteristics of the service providers, with the result that it is not that restructuring has an impact on people, but that the very process of restructuring is bound up with redefining the workforce." In redefining workforces to obtain a "customer culture," emotional labour (Hochschild 1979; 1983) gains significance, with workers' "demeanor, expression, mood and thought" (Leidner 1993: 9) key factors in maximising customer satisfaction.

This paper examines the introduction of emotional expression into the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) by workers in the 1970s and changes to the both the use and purpose of emotional expression in that organisation over the next two decades. The paper briefly outlines some issues related to emotional labor before providing a context to the operations of the CES. The following sections outline the substance of changes in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s and their impacts upon the levels of emotionality, control and customer service. The paper concludes that emotional suppression was replaced by emotional expression, which was itself replaced by regulated empathy controlled by management. The associated worker-client relationship changed from formal to informal, and then reverted to a more formal model within an ethos of professional service delivery, and privatisation of services.

Emotional Labour

Emotional labor, defined "as the effort, planning and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions" (Morris & Feldman 1996: 987), has been identified in numerous occupations particularly those in the service sector (for example Hochschild 1983; Van Maanen & Kunda 1989; Fineman 1993; Taylor & Tyler 2000). Hochschild (1983) contends that jobs involving emotional labour possess three characteristics: voice or facial contact with the public; workers required to produce an emotional state in their clients; and employers with an opportunity to exert some control over the emotional activities of workers.

Emotional labour is performed through surface acting, deep acting or the expression of genuine emotion (Ashforth & Humphrey 1995). Surface acting requires the worker to conform to "display rules," standards of behaviour about appropriate emotional expression, that indicate not only which emotions *ought* to be expressed in a particular situation, but also *how* those emotions should be conveyed or publicly expressed (Ekman 1973). The presentation of verbal and non-verbal cues such as facial expression, gestures and voice tone, and the use of scripted vocal responses may be required (Leidner 1993).

Deep acting involves the worker attempting to actually experience or feel the emotion they wish (or others expect them) to display. Thus while workers may experience and express genuine feelings, they may also present feelings to others which may be designed to act as "control moves" (Goffman 1959). He noted that "regardless of the particular objective an individual has in mind and of his motive for having the objective, it will be in his best interests to control the conduct of others especially their response treatment of him" (1959: 4).

The provision of quality service delivery as a competitive differentiator may require the service worker to "perform" in a manner that attempts to develop customer loyalty and long-term business. The manner and content of that performance is often managerially regulated and monitored. Ashforth and Humphrey (1995: 104-109) outline four overlapping means by which emotions may be regulated in the workplace. The first, a *neutralising* technique, is used to prevent the emergence of organisationally unacceptable emotions. Diamond (1984) and Hummel (1987) suggest that by rigorously structuring roles, relationships and language, organisations provide a substitute for interpersonal relations.

However, where emotions are an unavoidable by-product of role performance, or when emotional expression or experience is inherent or desired, three methods for regulating that emotion have been observed.
Buffering consists of procedures that attempt to compartmentalise emotionality and rationality. Goffman (1959) observed "frontstage" personnel (receptionists, service representatives and so forth) managing the often affectively charged demands of the public, enabling the "backstage" staff to perform the tasks necessary to fulfil those demands.

Where emotional expression is a desired element of role performance, the manner in which emotions are expressed tends to be more or less prescribed. This *prescription* results in "feeling rules" which are often institutionalised in organisationally sanctioned scripts (Humphrey & Ashforth 1995). Expressive norms are often learned through socialisation, observation, instruction, feedback, reinforcement and punishment, with role occupants taught to feel and display the desired emotions. Van Maanen and Kunda (1989) note that Walt Disney World used classes, handbooks and billboards to instill the particular emotions to be conveyed to "guests" at Disneyland. Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) see the suppression of emotions as a critical subset of prescribed emotions. This involves the socialisation of role occupants "to maintain the organisationally prescribed demeanour or mask" (Fineman 1993: 3) instead of allowing felt emotions to disrupt role performance.

The fourth category is the *normalising* of emotions. This category refers to the methods of maintaining or restoring the status quo after disruptive or socially unacceptable emotions arise. This occurs through either diffusion of the unacceptable emotions, or reframing the meaning of the emotion. Goffman (1963) noted how stigmatising the behaviour of individuals reduced their social status so that their behaviour was ignored, while others observed that unacceptable emotional outbursts are often followed by apology, or by humor (Ashforth and Lee 1990; Pogrebin & Pool 1988).

The CES Context

The CES was Australia's national employment agency from 1946 to 1998. Its primary purpose was the provision of placement services to employers and jobseekers. The CES traditionally segregated workers through classification and function. Two internal labour markets, one for clerical administrative staff and the other for clerical assistant/support staff, created separate task structures.

From establishment until the early 1970s Employment Officers (EOs), the primary operational staff, had two major functions. The first, servicing the needs of a diverse jobseeker client population, entailed the processes of registration, referral to job interviews or specialist officers and agencies, and the provision of advice regarding CES facilities and services (Department of Employment and Youth Affairs [DEYA] 1973). The second major function of EOs was to act on behalf of employers by receiving, matching and making referrals to vacancies (CES 1981).

CES offices were divided into three interdependent sections: jobseeker services (reception, interviewing and registration, canvassing for work and referral of clients to interviews); employer services (vacancy receipt and the matching and referral of jobseekers to those vacancies); and special services (services to school-leavers, youths, the disabled, migrants and aborigines). EOs rotated between sections on a regular basis and all were "front office" workers. Tasks such as interviewing new clients or re-registering clients had associated work times but EOs had considerable autonomy as long as waiting times were under control. The variability of client requirements also resulted in autonomy and relaxed supervision.

EOs undertook their tasks with a neutral, impartial face being presented to clients, and with all clients ostensibly accorded similar treatment. While normal social courtesies were to be observed, any familiarity with clients (and indeed between staff) was discouraged ensuring emotions were neutralised (Ashforth & Humphrey 1995).

The 1970s: Emotional Expression Is Introduced

From the mid-1970s the CES faced increasing jobseeker client demands from deteriorating labour market conditions. Significant rises in unemployment levels placed enormous stresses on department officers. Claimants for unemployment benefits rose from 32,000 at 1 July 1974 to a peak of 195,000 in February 1975

(Department of Social Security 1975: 69). A change of government, and a concomitant change in attitude to the public service in 1976, created additional pressures. Tight operational budgets, staff ceilings aimed at reducing the size of the public service, and a greater preparation to directly regulate employment conditions of public servants led to industrial action. Areas of contention arose over wages, recruitment, tenure of employment, and the right to take industrial action, and continued throughout the 1980s.

Between June 1974 and June 1976 CES staffing increased by 48% (Norgard 1977: 173-174) despite government constraints and a 57% rise in client workloads. Recruitment prior to the change of government had increased the numbers of young trainee EOs in the CES. Simultaneously, to overcome shortages of trained staff the government introduced lateral recruitment. People with suitable private enterprise experience (as personnel, recruitment or interviewing officers) were recruited as EOs. The normal entry routes of clerical selection test, internal training and career paths were eliminated for these external recruits. Behavioural controls usually afforded by these routes were also eliminated.

The altered staffing profile produced three results. The occupation of EO lost its almost entirely male character with male/female proportions changing from 9:1 to 2:1 between December 1975 and December 1981 (Public Service Board 1976; 1982). Staff training following the increase was “at best piecemeal and at worst non-existent” (Norgard 1977:183), resulting in many staff whose skills did not match the requirements of their positions. Both new groups of EOs, one socialised in the less formal 1960s and 1970s, and the other socialised in private sector organisations brought different notions about interpersonal relationships into the CES and worker - client interactions became more informal.

While the CES was a network of regional offices it was controlled and coordinated by a head office in the capital city of each state. A zone office concept introducing an additional hierarchical level between CES offices and state headquarters, allowed greater management decentralisation, and better operational supervision and performance control with each zone office manager directing the performance of a group of eight to ten CES offices in a particular geographical area (CES 1980).

The zone office concept extended the principle of flexibility already in use in the CES by rotating staff between offices within a zone. Under conditions of work intensification rotation merely compounded EOs’ difficulties. Regular rotation between offices with the most frequent task being the registration of large numbers of unemployed clients, led to EOs with short periods of service failing to gain either the local labour market knowledge of their more experienced colleagues, or any expertise in the specialised services offered by the CES.

The introduction of a three tiered service system in 1978-79 focused attention on service delivery. Building on the introduction of labour market training programs, clients were differentiated for the first time on the basis of their needs. The first tier, self-service, was to be used by job-ready clients, those best able to help themselves. More priority could then be concentrated on disadvantaged clients (Norgard 1977: 46). Job vacancy boards displaying details of vacancies in selected areas were placed in CES waiting areas. Job-ready clients could self-select suitable vacancies, make enquiries of the EO stationed in the self-service area, and if deemed suitable after minimal screening, telephone the employer to arrange an interview. This was designed to allow placements with the least expenditure of staffing resources (CES 1978).

The second tier catered for more disadvantaged clients, those with labour market problems or whose skills had become redundant, while the third tier provided specialist services for those who "even in times of strong labour demand, may experience difficulty in obtaining and holding a job" (Norgard 1977: 47). More senior officers performed third tier activities, while EOs expended extra time and effort for second tier clients. This differentiation of client service in conjunction with declining labour market conditions placed new pressures on EOs. Not only were they dealing with job-ready clients who could not find employment, but they also had to increasingly focus on clients with labour market disabilities. Low levels of training and enormous workloads resulted in a mismatch between individual officers and the requirements of their positions.

Workers responded to the conditions of the 1970s in two ways: the use of emotions, and the playing of games (Burawoy 1979). To compensate for their inability to provide substantive assistance, the new EOs introduced emotional expression, supplying empathy. Best considered a coping strategy, the use of empathy was a common sense reaction to their situation. Goffman's (1959) notions of emotions as "control moves" can be applied here. Despite client frustrations associated with being unemployed, CES officers, unlike their counterparts in the Department of Social Security suffered little if any physical or verbal abuse, perhaps an outcome of their more empathetic approach.

In response to work intensification, workers introduced competitive games to see who could "get through" the most clients in a working day. Rafaeli and Sutton (1990) found that workers come to tacit agreements with clients over the quality of interactions at busy times. CES workers, in adopting apparently contradictory responses of emotions and speed, were exhibiting the same practices. During busy periods both staff and clients were prepared to dispense with the "niceties" although some form of rapport was still required, while at less busy times, emotional expressions facilitated more relaxed interviews.

Whether the result of a younger, more informal approach to interpersonal relationships or the result of service focused experience in the private sector, their relationships with clients became more openly empathetic. Despite recent research on gender and emotional labour highlighting the production of sexual difference (for example Taylor & Tyler 2000; Rosenthal et al 1997; Knights & McCabe 1998), in the CES both male and female EOs exhibited empathetic skills. The distinction may be that duties, qualifications and entry requirements as well as pay and conditions for EOs were identical, and not dependent on gender.

The 1980s: Management Commandeers Emotions

In the 1980s comprehensive, rapid and systemic reform of the entire Australian Public Service (APS) commenced. "What differentiated the 1980s from the 1970s was the rejection of traditional ways – identified with administration- and their replacement by a package of reforms based on management" (Halligan 1994: 19). Specific public service restructuring included the abolition of divisional structures, and the streamlining of administration and procedures for improved performance and management. These efforts reflected a growing notion that organisations, whether public or private sector, faced similar issues and constraints, and that private sector management techniques could prove efficient and effective methods for defining and delivering services in the Australian

Public Service (O'Faircheallaigh et al 1991).

Coinciding with the process of micro-economic reforms beginning with the National Wage Case of 1987, the broad reform intent was to provide an integrated and linked classification structure, eliminate barriers to career progression, and encourage skill acquisition thereby creating a more flexible workforce (Department of Industrial Relations 1989).

These initiatives could be likened to the "empowerment approach" (Bowen & Lawler 1992) to service interactions which has been associated with job enrichment, enhanced autonomy and greater participation. These reforms, while sold to workers as benefits, went hand in hand with the weakening of internal labour markets. The abolition of divisional barriers between the two internal labour markets, and the reduction in classifications created greater competition for fewer positions in a truncated hierarchy, no longer providing the illusion of a guaranteed career. Additionally, increased managerial powers for terminating staff reduced security of tenure. Lateral recruitment also broke down notions of a career service and diminished the effect of the internal labour market on employee behaviour.

To implement these reforms in the CES a task force, the Halton Review, sought to identify the type of regional and local services needed by clients, and to recommend cost-effective ways of providing speedy, comprehensive and accessible services (Department of Education, Employment and Training [DEET] 1988a: 25). The review also assessed the structure and charter of the CES, taking into account social, economic and labour market changes that had occurred since the 1977 Norgard Review and proposed a major restructuring and reorientation of the client service network to provide better service. The package of reforms, known as the Client Service Reforms, led to the recognition and valuing of interpersonal or empathetic skills.

The Reforms considered the CES a labour-intensive delivery organisation, with quality of service highly dependent on the "knowledge and interpersonal skills of individual staff members providing the service" (DEET 1988b: 38). In view of its diverse client populations and the range of potential actions available, the Reforms package recommended segmentation of services within or between offices. Designed to overcome perceived problems of information overload, and to enable staff to "develop specialised expertise for delivering a discrete range of services more professionally" (DEET 1988b: 38), the segmentation was deemed necessary for two reasons. The first was the disparity of skill levels displayed between pre-Norgard Review staff and those who had entered during the turbulent period of the mid- to late 1970s. The second related to recommendations of the Social Security Review proposing a more active partnership for agencies and clients involved in social welfare provisions in Australia (Cass 1988).

A client-centered service delivery approach with the emphasis on placing people, especially the disadvantaged, more effectively in jobs followed. CES offices were restructured as a number of independent, differentiated centers at existing sites: job placement centres; specialist service centres; youth centres; and industry service centres. Building on traditional CES activities and using caseload management, personalised services were to be provided to distinct client groups (DEET 1992: 13).

The Client Service Reforms called for new personnel policies and practices, enabling management to "develop and tailor a workforce to meet the performance needs of the organisation" (DEET 1988a: 48). The emphasis of the service delivery was on professionalism. Professionalism and specialised services implied closer, more supportive relationships with clients demanding more personal and emotional interactions. Most EOs by this time had been recruited since the mid-1970s and were well socialised in the culture of empathetic expression. Older workers who had not participated in the more informal interactions of the 1970s and 1980s had retired or were close to it.

Management's co-option of workers' empathetic expressions through the Client Service Reforms attempted to re-establish control over employee behaviour by reducing levels of informality associated with autonomous emotional expression by EOs. In addition, specialised service centres fragmented EOs with differentiated skill requirements, resulting in reduced career mobility. Such individuation or isolation has been argued to occur for productivity, flexibility or resistance reasons (Friedman 1990).

Since the mide-1970s intense disputation had been rife between EOs and their employers over almost every aspect of work and employment. Changes to work processes, to working and employment conditions, and to managerial styles did little to improve the situation. In cloaking organisational change in the language of empowerment, job satisfaction and participation, as well as improved customer service, management sought to recapture workers' cooperation.

Despite the prescription of emotions being aligned with management charters and organisational objectives, workers continued to be cynical and distrustful of management. Their empathetic expressions in service delivery were related to their loyalty to clients and not to management goals. This accords with findings by Taylor and Tyler (2000: 93) in the airline industry, where they found genuine resentment and cynicism underlying surface commitment to management programs.

The 1990s: Measurement, Evaluation & Privatisation

Towards the end of the 1980s, managerialism and marketisation within the public services resulted in client focus, service delivery and service standards becoming important issues in APS management practice and an explicit demand of the reform leaders (Ryan 1994). A vigorous client-oriented culture emerged, especially in departments with "interactive service work" (Leidner 1993: 1).

The quest for improved service delivery, the use of client satisfaction surveys, and the establishment of service standards followed. The development of CES Service Standards commenced in November 1991, to improve the overall level of CES service delivery, and to develop a means by which to publicise the improved level of service to both staff and clients (Woon 1993: 30). These standards were "just a way of defining certain types of behaviour that are, or will become, part of the way CES staff treat their clients" (Woon 1993: 31). They were to foster best practice in management, at the workface, and in staff training, and were to reinforce a service culture. The reinforcement of a service culture through the service standards was achieved with a range of monitoring and measurement systems including client surveys, service review packages, service quality units, client suggestion and feedback boxes, as well as a Hotline telephone service for complaints (Woon 1993: 33). They provided avenues for the measurement of service performance against customer demands, not only tightening management's control of emotional content in the interactive service experience but also introducing the customer as an additional aspect of management (Du Gay & Salaman 1992:

621).

By the mid-1990s it was clear that partial privatisation of the CES network was on the government's agenda. Employment services were to be contracted out to private employment agencies. While some workers were to remain with a greatly reduced public employment service, the rest were to be made redundant or take their chances with the private agencies. Rationalisation and staff shedding during the 1990s further damaged relations between workers and management, but the client service focus of past years facilitated the privatisation process.

Conclusion

Changes to organisational processes in the CES were in part necessitated by altered economic circumstances. They were also given impetus by increased worker resistance to, and discontent over, managerial decisions and government policy direction between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s. The tradition of neutralising emotions altered when new EOs introduced a level of emotionality. During a period of extreme change the use of emotions emerged as a coping strategy because of their youth or private sector service experience, in response to work levels and insufficient training. This provided EOs with some level of job satisfaction to offset their inability to provide substantive assistance, and also provided some level of control over the frustrations of clients. Management condoned the changes to the "impersonal" rules of bureaucracy unless it interfered with work- flows. So while the active use of empathetic skills was not encouraged by CES management, its use was not neutralised or normalised (Ashforth & Humphrey 1995).

After the Client Service Reforms empathetic skills gained significance and were considered by management as a primary skill for specialised and professionalised service delivery. These skills were incorporated into performance assessments and promotional deliberations, and subsequently into recruitment and selection, and socialisation programs. Empathy was no longer an individual characteristic used to provide meaning for the worker, to be ignored or frowned upon by management. Empathy was prescribed in the job and management regulated it.

In just over two decades emotional labour came full circle in the CES: from the *neutralisation* of emotions in the formal, impersonal bureaucratic environment, to the use of empathy in the face of economic upheaval, to the *prescription* of emotion for formal, professionalised service delivery. The expression of empathy, once a coping strategy introduced by workers in response to work intensification and insufficient training, and providing space for autonomy, was commandeered by management and was ultimately used against workers.

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