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by

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Learning to do emotional labour: class, gender and the reform of habitus in the training of nursery nurses

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Introduction

This paper revisits the theme of 'learning to labour' from a feminist perspective. It is specifically concerned with how women learn to do emotional labour in caring occupations, and explores the learning experiences of a group of trainee nursery nurses – almost all of them teenage girls – during the first year of their course. (A fuller case study can be found in Colley, 2002a.) The course is one of 16 learning sites in the project *Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education* (TLC), which forms part of the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme. The analysis and interpretation offered here draw on feminist readings of Foucault, Marx, and Bourdieu[1].

In his book *Learning to Labour*, Willis famously asked: 'how do working class kids get working class jobs?' (1977: title page). His ethnographic study of disaffected boys – 'the lads' – showed how class and gender combined, as they expressed their resistance to schooling through an aggressive masculinity and disruptive counter-school culture. This very resistance, however, led them straight from school into low-paid, low-skilled, low-status jobs that even unsuccessful middle class kids would not do. The appearance of choice masked a distinctive cultural pattern that reproduced particular working class trajectories.

However, young people's transitions have changed a great deal since then. The youth labour market has collapsed, post-16 transitions have become extended, and post-compulsory education and training (PCET) now structures these extended transitions for the large majority of young people. Much of this growth has been in vocational education and training (VET), whether entirely or partially work-based. Moreover, Willis's study focused exclusively on young men, and a wealth of feminist research shows that the combined impact of class and gender in learning to labour may be quite different for girls (reviewed in Francis, 2002). Throughout primary school (Steedman, 1982) and secondary school (Gaskell, 1992) domestic identities dominate girls' career aspirations, and lead them into caring jobs that are considered 'feminine'.

A feminist perspective on learning to labour

Bates (1990, 1991, 1994) applies a critical feminist perspective to the process of learning to labour. She re-frames Willis's question to ask: how do working class *girls* get working class, *gender-stereotyped* jobs? She argues that, to answer this question, we have to investigate what these jobs entail. She also shifts the focus from the point of transition at 16 to the subsequent process of entry into the labour market through a lengthy period of VET. The group Bates studied were working class girls – 'the care girls' – who had left school with few qualifications, had been rejected from their preferred career options (such as childcare), and found themselves instead on a full-time youth training (YT) scheme in care of the elderly, with one day per week off-the-job training with a YT provider. The care girls had to undertake a number of tasks they initially found very unpleasant and distressing, and much of

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[1] Given the length restriction for the conference proceedings, the paper is somewhat under-referenced.

their learning centred on coping with incontinence, violence and death. To do this, they had to learn above all to control and manage their own feelings of disgust, anger, sorrow and fear. They also had to control and manage the feelings of their patients.

Bates argues that VET contributed two significant social and cultural processes to learning to labour in elderly care. Firstly, it exercised a 'screening' effect, recruiting and then further sifting those girls who had suitable dispositions. Secondly, it also operated in a disciplinary way (cf. Foucault, 1991) to socialise 'suitable' girls into the work, and exclude those who were unable to adapt to the prevailing vocational culture. Although their off-the-job tutors and the criteria for their NVQ assessments conveyed a sensitive version of caring *for* people as also caring *about* them, the culture of the workplace demanded more 'toughness' and resilience. Those who were 'mardy' were characterised by others as 'bleeding, whining Minnies', and tended to drop out. Others who were too 'tough' and, for example, reacted violently when provoked by patients, were also filtered out.

Those most likely to settle in to the job were from families in the lower strata of the working class: girls who had already had to care for others, and had learned to endure privation, aggression and stress within the home. 'They are hardened by their previous experience, but crucially *constrained by gender* from developing a pattern of violent response' (Bates, 1994: 28, original emphasis). They were used to exercising the 'feminine virtues' of self-control and self-denial. VET mediated between these social and cultural resources that girls had acquired from their family backgrounds, and the labour market opportunities available to them. A certain classed and gendered predisposition was necessary, *but not sufficient*, for success. Processes of habituation and acculturation through VET both on and off the job were required for them to adjust their disposition further, become the 'right person for the job', and feel that the job was 'right for them'. Thus working class girls got working class, gender-stereotyped jobs.

Recently, as part of my work on the TLC project, I have been studying a vocational course in childcare. The data generated with the women and girls involved in this site during the first year of the research (it will continue for another two years) has resonated deeply with Bates' stories of the 'care girls'. In another paper which forms a pair with this one (Colley, 2002b), I explore the interaction of the vocational culture of childcare with class and gender in the life history of the site's tutor. A third paper (Colley *et al*, 2002) looks at the impact of vocational culture on student identity across this and two other VET sites in the TLC project[2]. This paper focuses, as Bates did, on the way that the control and management of feelings was central to students' accounts of their learning in the workplace.

The methodological approach of the TLC project is founded on partnership between researchers based both in universities and FE colleges, and includes the active participation of the site tutors. Some of the data is qualitative: repeated semi-structured interviews with the tutor, her team leader, and a sample of six students; researcher observations of the college course and work placements; and the tutor's own reflective journal. Other data is quantitative: a questionnaire survey of all students in the site, and college and national statistical data. All personal names have been changed, and the college is anonymised to protect confidentiality. Let us turn now to the learning site itself.

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[2] Both these papers are online at www.ex.ac.uk/education/tlc/docs/publications.

Learning about childcare

Joanne Lowe is the tutor for this learning site, one of two groups who started the Level 3 CACHE Diploma in September 2001. This is a full-time, two-year course, half of which is taught in college, and half of which comprises work placements in nurseries and primary schools. It is an overwhelmingly female course, located in the department for health and social care, and recruits mainly school-leavers. Some students originally had higher career aspirations to become professional teachers or nurses, but performed poorly in their school exams, and (like the care girls) have had to lower their ambitions. The large majority of students go on to work in private nurseries. Joanne and two of her three colleagues in the CACHE teaching team are former nursery nurses themselves, and they offer valued 'insider' expertise, as well as intensive academic and personal support for their students. Joanne is perceived as a very caring tutor, in whom students can confide. The promotion of equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice is central to her role and to the team ethos.

The site reflects the fact that childcare in the UK is a heavily gender-stereotyped occupation: 99 per cent of nursery nurses are female. Within the broader field of early years education, it is low-status and low-paid work. Nevertheless, the CACHE tutors place great emphasis on their view that nursery nursing is a *profession*. To a certain extent, as in other professions such as nursing, acceptance of low pay is taken as a sign of genuine commitment to caring for others. Just as in care of the elderly, a feminised, nurturing ideal dominates official criteria of quality childcare. This emphasises the personal attributes of the nursery nurse herself, who should display appropriate emotions – warmth, sensitivity and gentleness – alongside enthusiasm, effort, and enjoyment of contact with small children. Harshness and detachment are seen as negative behaviour (cf. Scarr, 1998, Tietze *et al*, 1996).

The CACHE tutors focus a great deal on this 'unwritten' curriculum of developing such personal attributes in their students, especially at the start of the course. They discuss how each group is 'gelling', and try to foster students' ability to 'bond' emotionally with each other and with their tutors. Joanne became particularly frustrated with two students, Sonya and Gaby. They led a small group who were persistently disruptive or absent and bullied other students. So Joanne set the college disciplinary procedures in motion:

> With Gaby, I just tried and tried, and it's just not worked. It's just a real clash… If they do go, I'm so looking forward to next year, because I think that I'll really bond with the group now, and Gaby and Sonya, they've stopped me from doing that, and they've stopped the rest… I think the group will be nicer… It'll definitely be more cohesive if they go.

Learning to labour in the nursery

When students discussed the new skills and knowledge they had gained, they talked about practical skills (such as preparing play materials, food, displays) and more cognitive learning (such as health issues, child development theory, legislation) acquired at college. However, alongside this prescribed curriculum, and the unwritten curriculum of emotional bonding, a further 'hidden' curriculum emerged as students talked about what they have learned as they participated in their work placements. Like the care girls, their narratives centred on coping with the emotional demands of the job, and revealed a vocational culture of detachment in the workplace which contrasts somewhat with the nurturing ideal that is officially promoted.

In a group tutorial discussion soon after the start of the course, following the students' first few days in placement, there were many expressions of delight at being with children. But the

session also revealed events described as far less pleasant: taking little boys to the toilet; finding oneself covered in children's 'puke' and 'wee'; and being hit by children. Joanne was at great pains to emphasise the correct behaviour students should display in these situations:

> *Joanne*: Don't forget, you've got to stay cool and say, {*nonchalant tone*} 'Oh, that's not a very nice thing to do, is it?', and keep your own feelings under control.

By the end of their first year, the management of feeling had become a central theme in all the female students' narratives, the one male student in the group being the notable exception. The girls often talked about the difficulties and stress of dealing with children's tears, tantrums, aggression, disobedience and provocation:

> The morning group [*of children*] are still tired and maungy, and in the afternoon, they're giddy and hyper… I was so tired after a week working at nursery… I don't know if I could do it again.

> I asked one girl to go and get a book because we were waiting for story time. Well, she kicked up: 'I'm not getting a book! I'm not getting a book, I'm staying here!' So I took her into the cloakroom and I sat down with her, and by this point she was really, really hysterical, crying because she couldn't stay outside.

This involves working on their own and the children's feelings to suppress extreme emotions and evoke calmer feelings. It requires conscious effort, repeated practice, and a degree of self-surveillance and self-denial on the part of the students:

> Sometimes I shout at the children, but that's just me… `Cause the nursery nurses don't always raise their voice as much as I do. I could probably just tone it down a little bit, still try and realise when I'm speaking loudly, try and quieten it down.

> Children can wind you up! You'd say something to them, and then they're really, really cheeky. They've learned how to answer you back, so they're gonna do it. And they <u>can</u> wind you up, and suppose you've got a short temper? But saying that, I've got a short temper, but I don't let them try it.

As part of this process, the students' affection for small children and enjoyment of play also had to be limited, in order to take on a consciously developmental role:

> Well, like, you're taught you can't be all lovey-dovey with the children. You've got to be quite stern if they've done something wrong.

> That's what I've kind of learned, now… I teach, although I was playing with the children. If you went and just played with the kids and just not said `owt, like 'How many bricks are there?', they wouldn't really ever learn, would they? So you've just got to really think about it. Make `em count the bricks, and say how many bricks there are, and also play at the same time.

By the start of their second year, students still agreed that working on their own and the children's emotions was a central aspect of their work. But they declared it was easy for them now, because they simply became a 'different person' when they entered into the workplace, reacting differently than they would at college or at home.

The subtle processes of screening and discipline identified by Bates also underpin learning to labour in the nursery. Gender is crucial, and has already filtered students well before they applied for the course, although the CACHE team has had some success in their campaign to attract a few boys. Girls had often looked after younger siblings and done part-time work baby-sitting or in various crèche or after-school club facilities. Some had had brief work experience in care of the elderly, which most described with revulsion: they would probably have been 'bleeding, whining Minnies' among the care girls.

Distinctive locations within the working class play an important role here too, although in a slightly different way for the nursery nurses. CACHE students were all working class, but slightly higher achievers than the care girls (many of whom had been rejected for childcare). Their parents were both keen and able to support them in full-time education rather than youth training. Like the care girls, they observed and judged each other in respect of subtle social differences. Nursery nurses are supposed to be 'nice girls', and one group rapidly defined themselves as 'nice', while dismissing others as 'rough'. 'Nice' students described themselves as living at home with both parents, usually in the leafier suburbs of the city. They felt well cared for, even spoiled, by their parents, and they knew that their college tutors care for them too. One summed up her view of 'rough' girls in the class:

> I come from a totally different background to some of these, because I mean, I don't know what it's like to not be without a mum or a dad, I live with both my parents. A lot of them are just one-parent families and it's like half of the places where they live, I've never ever heard of, or I don't even know where they are, but a lot of people say, 'Oh, it's really rough, it's really rough'.

Such differences of location within the working class were reflected in physical appearance, in clothing, make-up and jewellery, which are taken as signifiers of social status and morality in our society (Bourdieu, 1986, Skeggs, 2002). These formed part of the surveillance and discipline that operated in both college and placements. Students were allowed to wear what they pleased at college, and at first celebrated their release from school uniform. Joanne would comment on particular high-fashion items of clothing, sometimes admiringly, and then ask the group, 'But would you wear that in placement?' Gradually, students began to tone down their appearance, and noticed those who did not. On one placement visit, after giving lots of positive feedback to an otherwise excellent student, Joanne ticked her off for wearing a revealing cropped T-shirt:

> *Joanne*: Next time, though, I don't want to see you wearing that. Not very nice for parents coming in, seeing acres of belly every time you lean across the table.

By the end of the first year, observations in college showed that almost all the remaining students had adopted a modest 'uniform' of tracksuit bottoms, T-shirts and hooded fleece tops in sober or pastel colours.

However, as the year progressed, a number of the girls othered as 'rough' – including Gaby and Sonya – proved unable to develop emotional bonds with the group or with Joanne, despite her efforts to get them to integrate. By the end of the year several of them had either left, or been excluded through the disciplinary process, including one student who got into a fight outside college and was cautioned by police as a result. Others were working hard to behave more collaboratively in class. By contrast, only one of the 'nice' group quit the course. She

was the student who had complained that 'Children can wind you up!', and who was aware of her own short temper. She said that she had simply 'had enough' of working with small children, and had been unable to motivate herself to do the written work required.

None of this is to imply any criticism of Joanne and her colleagues. They themselves are deeply caring and committed to principles of social justice and inclusion. It is social structures, vocational culture and institutional arrangements of VET that drive these processes, and elsewhere we see how costly they are in emotional labour for Joanne herself (Colley, 2002b). Predispositions structured by class and gender combine in the childcare site rather differently than for the care girls, but the combination operates just as effectively to socialise and include those with suitable dispositions while excluding those who do not. Being female and *upper* working class, with happy experiences of being cared for by both parents, and a *lack* of 'hardening' experiences or 'toughness', appears to predispose girls to cope with the demands of the vocational culture in childcare in the appropriate manner. In addition, a particular type of individual disposition is necessary – one that is not short-tempered or liable to be 'wound up' by the tears and tantrums of small children.

Yet although these predispositions and dispositions are necessary, they are not in themselves sufficient. Even the most suitable girls have to adapt their dispositions further as they encounter the emotional challenges of the workplace. The pragmatic detachment required to cope with 'puke', 'pee' and punches is mitigated by the idealised image of the perfectly sensitive and gentle nursery nurse, and by the deeply caring culture created by college tutors. It remains to be seen what this will cost in terms of alienation in the longer term. As Willis (1977) argued in relation to 'the lads', the appearance of choice still reflects a distinctive cultural pattern of social reproduction. But here it reproduces trajectories that suggest the category of 'working class kids' has to be differentiated, both along gender lines and according to different strata of the working class. Upper working class girls get slightly better working class, gender-stereotyped jobs – childcare rather than care of the elderly – but they are still low-paid, still low-status, and they still get them by learning to labour upon their own feelings.

Learning to do emotional labour

Marxist feminists (e.g. Hochschild, 1983) have defined emotional labour as distinct from the traditionally assumed dualism of mental and manual labour. In emotional labour, the 'emotional style' of providing a service is part of that service itself, since 'in processing people, the product is a state of mind…[It] requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild, 1983: 6-7). This definition matches well the process the CACHE students described: inducing calmness or cheerfulness and suppressing anger or embarrassment in themselves, and trying to project a countenance that would also calm, comfort or discipline the small children in their care. This work is most easily recognised when the individual senses a tension between what they feel and what they know they 'ought' to feel, as when students berated themselves for being 'lovey-dovey', shouting too much, or having a short temper.

This definition draws on both a theory of feelings and a theory of labour, which are interconnected. A Marxist analysis argues that each society produces a dominant configuration of feelings (Heller, 1979). Feelings are socially regulated, prescribed and learned as part of our pre/dispositions or habitus (to use Bourdieu's [1986] concept), and therefore appear deeply natural. These norms differ not only for women and for men, but also

between social classes. They are determined by the different tasks allocated to each social grouping within the division of labour exercised by the prevailing mode of production – and these tasks are themselves ascribed different values. Women are generally expected to nurture others, but *working class* women undertake the more difficult and demanding tasks of caring for other women's children and elders. However important they are, these tasks are not highly valued in patriarchal capitalist society, and hence are low-paid and low-status.

Caring work not only involves labouring with the elderly or small children. The primary 'raw material' for working class girls in such jobs is *their own classed and gendered habitus*. Emotional labour demands that they both mobilise existing predispositions and dispositions, but also work further on their own feelings and dispositions in order to care appropriately. Habitus is durable, but Hochschild's analysis suggests that gendered habitus is more easily transformed, since part of women's oppression is their need/ability to adapt to the emotional demands of others. The deep cohesion of a strong learning culture with a powerful vocational culture in the childcare course and workplace reinforces students' adaptation (or exclusion for those unable to adapt) as they learn to labour. In this sense, the CACHE Diploma site is indeed a 'transforming learning culture'. But any attempt at transforming that learning culture itself must take into account the weight of the related vocational culture, and its connection with deep-rooted class and gender oppression in our society.

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