

The Context of Care: Reconsidering Culture, Structure, and the Performance of Emotional Labor

Rebecca J. Erickson, The University of Akron

The emotion-management perspective first introduced by Arlie Hochschild (1979, 1983) has been consistently characterized as a “cultural” approach (Kemper 1993; Lawler and Thye 1999; Turner and Stets 2005). This classification is not surprising given the emphasis placed on how emotion norms and feelings rules enter into, and help to construct, emotional experience. In this paper, however, I reconsider the cultural label in light of Hochschild’s original theoretical formulation and recent sociological theorizing about the structure-culture distinction (Hays 1994; MacLeod and Lively 2003; Rubenstein 2001). I examine these issues further through an empirical analysis of the emotion management experiences of 1165 registered nurses. Specifically, I investigate how structure (e.g. gender, race, occupational structure) and culture (e.g., feeling and display rules, organizational values) combine in complex ways to differentially affect nurses’ performance of both surface acting and deep acting. Consistent with Hochschild’s original proposal that the emotion-management perspective be used as a lens through which to inspect social structure (1979:551), the results provide new insights into the gendered and racialized performance of emotional labor.