

Gertraud Koch, Stefanie Everke Buchanan (eds.)

# PATHWAYS TO EMPATHY

*New Studies on Commodification, Emotional Labor,  
and Time Binds*

campus



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# Introduction: Getting There: From Impediments to Pathways to Empathy<sup>1</sup>

*Gertraud Koch and Stefanie Everke Buchanan*

Across Europe and the United States of America, over the last decades, we hear an ever louder call for an expansion of the market, reduced regulation, and shrinking of government services. Indeed, in the eyes of many, the market can do no wrong, and the government—outside of its military function—can do little right. Since the 1970s, we have witnessed the rise of global corporate giants, the reduced power of labor unions and increased co-optation of governments by business. To be sure, market forces have risen alongside other trends—the rise of science, technology and a rationalization of life reflected in all parts of life (Larsen 2011; Löfgren 2006 on meta-narrative). Taken as a whole, the free-market *zeitgeist* has produced a powerful—and as yet under-theorized—impact on our lives. As a *worker*, the pre-Fordist employee is now the post-Fordist “entre-ployee”. She assumes risks and lives with insecurity like an entrepreneur. But she works for a boss, like an employee. As a *consumer*, the individual who once turned to family, friends and church to meet personal needs now turns—in the absence of government services—to market services, i. e., to babysitters, eldercare workers, for pay dating services, life coaches. As *private individuals*, we draw from a market-colonized culture, ideas and images of the self. The individual is advised to develop a “personal brand”. The internet dater is advised to count his “R.O.I”, i. e., return on investment. All this takes place within a larger culture of “blur” between companies seeking to add emotional appeal to the goods and services they sell, and individuals who seek to draw useful tips for successful living from the market (Illouz 2007). Workers bring to work personal ideas, tastes, habits. And for its part, the workplace exercises great

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influence over every aspect of the private individual (Moldaschl and Voss 2002; Hochschild 1983, 2003; Sieben and Wettergren 2010).

Arlie Hochschild has studied the impact of capitalist forces on intimate life in many ways and from many perspectives. Her work carves an important path between those who barely acknowledge capitalism at all, and those who acknowledge it but assume that its influence is always alienating. Especially in *The Outsourced Self* (2012), she describes a large and well-occupied space for resistance. Adapting Freud's notion of "mechanisms of defense" she describes the various semi-conscious means through which individuals work to *keep personal life personal*. A woman pays a love coach to guide her through the many small acts of looking for love on Match.com—picking a photo to post, a subject line, a self-description, for example. But when the coach says, "Shall I scan the replies you get on line" she says, "No, I'll do that, because when I find my true love I want to tell him that that *it was I* who found him." She purchases a whole service, but elevates one act to symbolize her un-outsourced self. Or a middle-aged daughter comes to love the caretaker she hires to care for her elderly, brain-injured father, and so loves the father *through* an empathic reach to a proxy caregiver. In these ways and more, people carve out ways to detach themselves from a culture of detachment so often connected to market life. They protect both their autonomy and sense of relatedness to others.

In line with this new emphasis in Hochschild's perspective, the authors of these essays are interested in the contradictions, counter moves, resistances and the daily practices individuals use to cope with the promise and demands of the market. For indeed, there are limits to market influence, as Collin Williams shows (2005). To what degree does the individual draw a line between self and the myriad everyday manifestations of market culture? By what feeling rules does he or she say, I will be emotionally attached to this, but I will be detached from that? In addition to rules about *what* to feel—happy, anguished, sad—we encounter rules about *how much* to feel—or even whether to feel anything at all. Given these rules of attachment and detachment, what emotion work does an individual perform in an effort to abide by this rule? Sometimes at a certain point in an interaction, an individual will encounter a moment of anxiety—he is too detached, alienated—and he will counter it using various mechanisms of defense (Hochschild 2011, 2012). At other times, in the quest for efficiency, he finds himself too emotionally attached. ("I don't need to be best friends with the babysitter or have drinks with the dog-walker" one respondent told Hochschild.) It is

through our various personal rules of engagement, Hochschild argues, that we regulate capitalism from inside.

It is the purpose of this collection to explore the complex forces of commodification and the many ways we embrace it, resist it and “muddle through”. We aim to delineate the strategies by which the individual asserts the un-alienated self, and the public discourses available for trying to seem that way. We aim to theorize the collective strategies by which we might achieve a better balance of social spheres—market, governmental, civic, personal, and so articulate an alternate cultural world in which to assert a humane self.

This shift of perspective from impediments to pathways to empathy is the leading paradigm for the contributions in this volume. In their work, many of these authors have developed ideas about ways in which the individual counters commercialization and point to welcome and unexpected spaces of resistance. The contributions—literally in the sense of “paying tribute to”—demonstrate to how many areas the thoughts of Arlie Russell Hochschild have flowed over the past three decades, and show the wide variety of fields her work has influenced.

## The Contributions

Leading into the topic, *Arlie Russell Hochschild* sketches *Empathy Maps* and develops a novel way of looking at ways in which we direct our empathy, zoning people in one area of life to receive much empathy, and those in another area of life, to receive little or any. While proposing a metaphor-driven idea we can apply to all spheres of life, it clearly applies to the division between commercial life (for which the cultural rule is emotional detachment) and personal life (for which the rule is attachment—care, empathy). She thus provides a connection with her detailed studies on the commodification of life in contemporary societies, and simultaneously assumes a changed perspective on them. Her mapping out of the borderlands between alienated and fulfilling lives calls forth the “credit” side of our lives—that which makes up for what commodification sometimes subtracts. Hochschild thus introduces us to a central antagonist who, in everyday life, can be against the depersonalizing effects of commodification.

Empathy is part of human nature, and we may feel it even in the heat of conflict. The feeling can be strong or mild, laced with ambivalence or pure. And there is a “sociology” to empathy. Some social categories of people feel it more than others—women more than men, for example. And we differ in aim—some social groups empathize with the poor, others empathize with the rich. Some cultures provide feeling rules that promote wide-spread, race-blind, empathy. Others don’t. Hochschild shows that the links to commodification are far more multi-faceted and contradictory than we might first assume. In her paper, she maps out a landscape full of pathways which individuals may take on their way to achieving a wide-zone marked for empathy with many others. Without ignoring or downplaying the constraints placed upon individuals by the rules of the post-Fordist world, she also points to a way forward and to strategies for achieving a more humane world.

The section “*Family and Work*” focuses on fields of tension between competing urgency systems of family and work. Competing demands lead to an almost unmanageable 24-hour day, as well as to an emotionally torn biography. The time in the age span between 30 and 45, which frequently sees the concurrent pursuit of career and family, is therefore often described as the rush hour of life. However, family life and work life are not always experienced as areas of tension. Depending on one’s own perspective, they can also be experienced as a mutually facilitating, harmonious unity, as demonstrated by two of the studies. The section thus draws a multifaceted image of time binds at home and at work, as well as of how these demands on our time are felt.

In her study on family and work life in the context of late-forming families in Spain, *Nancy Konvalinka* provides insight into the tight squeeze experienced in a societal setting in which traditional views on when to start a family compete with limits set by human biology and market realities. Using theoretical lenses derived from Bourdieu’s concepts such as *habitus* as well as the concept of the *life course*, she traces the interplay between emotion and economy and the strains that traditional expectations and new market realities pose and to which individuals feel they must respond on their own—either by arranging for a stay-at-home parent or hiring a caregiver. Either way, they spare the state the need to help out.

Using a highly unusual research strategy, *Jeremy Schulz* interviewed men who shared much in common—age, profession, marital status and devotion to their jobs. Only one thing differed: national culture. For one group were American and the other Norwegian, and each reflected a different “logic”

toward the deployment of time and energy. The Americans favored a logic of “use your time and energy until you get the job done”. They took little account of family and community and so used up their time and energy—revealing haunting parallels to the way in which America, as a nation, “uses up” such resources as oil. While equally motivated, the Norwegian men chose a more “sustainable” approach to their time and energy, mindful in the morning of their attachment to home and community in the evening.

In the study by *Caroline Ruiner*, family and work are experienced as positively related rather than contrary spheres of life by one of her survey groups. From their childhood in an entrepreneurial family, they derive the *cultural capital* to become self-employed and to experience the related temporal as well as risky aspects as positive. The other group of entrepreneurs who cannot draw on family experience in running a business, on the other hand, feels insecure about and overburdened with the demands placed upon them. She accounts for the emergence of both the fearless and fearful approaches to economic insecurity.

The contributions of the “*Labor Feelings*” section take their conceptual lead from emotional labor and feeling rules and develop suggestions how these could be expanded and rendered productive for empirical work. *Paul Brook* as a researcher who is particularly attuned to the spaces for independent action and the individual possibilities for resistance in connection with emotional labor presents the emotional capacity for labor as comparable to the capacity for physical and intellectual work. Like other forms of labor, Brook argues, emotional labor is characterized by indeterminacy and incomplete commodification. He develops a suggestion as to how Hochschild’s concept of emotional labor can be linked to the tradition of labor process analysis in a way that yields a unified framework for the conceptualization of and further research on the emotional, intellectual and physical capacity for work.

*Wolfgang Dunkel and Margit Weibrich* critique the idea of emotional labor, preferring to understand it as interactive service work. Here, too, the clients are involved in the work process and also perform emotional labor in the process of interaction. Dunkel and Weibrich thus sketch the emotion management described by Hochschild as progressive commodification in the service sector as a (new) mode of social relations which serves to provide exchange between people and does not exclusively or even primarily constitute burdensome or alienating moments of a work situation.

In her essay, *Gertraud Koch* takes up the concept of feeling rules for cultural anthropological research as it has so far received surprisingly little resonance in work culture research but has rather remained in the shadow of studies on emotional labor which were oriented at individual and socio-structural aspects. The text demonstrates and makes available the potential of the concept as a point of access for the cultural analysis of work contexts and demonstrates at which points it still requires further elaboration and development via empirically based theoretical work.

The section “*Emotion, Body Work and Autonomy*” gathers empirical case studies which open up their respective fields by use of Arlie Hochschild’s concepts from a variety of perspectives. *Sarah Braun* studies a hairdressing salon, and demonstrates through this research how the emotional labor includes a bodily dimension. The atmosphere at the salon, which is sketched as a part of the wellness arrangement in this service industry, also originates from the embodied work of the service providers, that is, the staff—for instance via the embodied moods of the service workers.

Emotional labor and body work also play a decisive role in the empirical field in which *Petra Schweiger* conducted her research on elder care work in a nursing home. In her thick description of the dilemma faced by carers as they encounter more demanding and rationalised conditions of work. She offers deep insight into how economization and rationalization undermine the workers ability to relate humanely with clients. It is in light of these conditions, she argues, that workers employ strategies in order to benefit patients.

In her study of freelancers in the media, *Birgit Huber* argues that the media sector is part of the service sector. But as a part of the creativity industry, it also plays by different rules than those that operate in the trade, care or the wellness sectors. Self-employed web designers can delimit work and private life as they chose, Huber finds, enabling them to actively design life according to their own preferences. Here, clients become friends, and friends turn into customers. The dissolution of boundaries in work and life forms in a self-employed, creative occupation is presented as one opportunity to gain autonomy and lead a largely self-determined life.

Finally in the section “*Scientific Reception*”, *Irene Götz* completes the arc from the introductory sketches of Hochschild’s empathy maps by sketching the reception of Hochschild’s work in work culture research as a fruitful intellectual exchange. With her infallible sense for empirical fields, in which cultural changes can be “captured” empirically, Hochschild has instigated

cultural anthropological research over many years. The contribution reads as an homage to Arlie Russell Hochschild, her ingenious, imaginative, holistic perspective on work, her remarkable contentual power for inspiration, as well as to the exemplary methodological approaches, particularly for cultural anthropological work research, which she has found.

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