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**Open-Ended Interviews and Emotional Labor:
Succeeding at the Emotionally Challenging Job Interview**

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Job candidates want to make the best impression possible when approaching their job interviews, even though the interview experience is inherently “an emotionally challenging endeavor” (Kusenbach 2002: 150). When job candidates act without awareness of their own emotions, they will be more influenced by their emotions, rather than less (Hoffmann 2007; Kleinman and Copp 1993). Success requires an understanding of the emotional labor demanded by a job interview. Hochschild defined emotional labor as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (1983: 7). Awareness of emotional labor is particularly true when recruiters use open-ended interviews.

Open-ended interviews demand especially challenging emotional labor, because the interview is not constrained to a narrow set of questions. Instead, the questions evolve into areas that the interviewee – and even the interviewer – might not have anticipated. Unlike the emotional labor the job candidates might perform in other areas of their lives, emotional labor during an interview can be particularly difficult because the interviewees are often without the crutches available to other settings, such as nearby co-workers who help “with the deflection, shaping, and the eventual transformation of inappropriate emotions” (Lively 2000: 40).

Emotional Labor

The decisions about what level of emotion – and which emotions – to share can be very difficult. The display of any emotion could be considered unprofessional (Kleinman and Copp 1993). Therefore, professionals in many fields force themselves to display an acceptable level of detached neutrality (Yanay and Shahar 1998). The open-

ended interview with its minimal structure and the possibilities of discussing unexpected topics, makes decisions about sharing emotions both more critical and more difficult.

The fact that interviewers, themselves, might show various emotions does not eliminate the importance of the interviewees' emotional labor. In fact, it could actually heighten the importance. Therefore, which and how much of one's own emotions to show in response to the emotions and questions shared by the interviewers are significant decisions.

In some situations, one might stay composed and impart as neutral a presentation as possible. Alternatively, one might try to alter one's own reactions based on what was being said by the interviewer in each situation. Either strategy can be difficult.

My work in conducting research interviews can illustrate some aspects of emotional labor in the interview context.

Neutral Presentation

In some instances, I decided that the best way to act was to exhibit as neutral a self presentation as possible. For example, when I was collecting interview data at a number of worker cooperatives, several worker-managers I interviewed spoke, with much despair, about how they are seen in their new quasi-managerial roles (see Hoffmann 2005). They told me that many former co-workers now saw them as turn-coats or sell-outs, but, they insisted to me, they were still the same people, still working for the good of the cooperative and its members.

I did not even allow myself to nod, but, at most, tried to strongly "blink with compassion." I tried to look very engaged in what they were saying so that they would

know that I was listening carefully to them. In order to control my own emotions, I did not want to allow myself to speak and express more than I believed I should. I wanted to say, “No, people understand; they still like you, still respect you,” but this wasn’t true; their co-workers had denounced them to me in their own interviews. Despite my compassion for these respondents, I could not let myself tell them a lie in order to comfort them.

Alternatively, I could have said, “So what if some do? They’re jerks. Forget about them.” This might have been an honest statement of my opinion, but would have taken the interview into a different kind of situation, and so I did not say this either. Therefore, all I could allow myself to do was to hold their gaze, and solemnly, intentionally blink. I engaged in substantial emotional labor to suppress emotional responses that would soothe or defend these respondents.

Sharing Emotions

Other times, I concluded that *not* sharing my own emotions would have negatively affected the interview as much as sharing would have in the situation described above. This was particularly true when research participants discussed extremely painful topics, as they did in my study of problems in the workplace (see Hoffmann 2006).

Sometimes, these discussions became quite emotional for the employee and also affected me as the interviewer. For example, one of the groups of employees I studied, homecare workers, cared for sick or elderly clients. Homecare workers I interviewed often discussed their sadness around their clients’ deaths, which was particularly intense

when the homecare worker was the person who discovered the dead body. For a listener, including an interviewer, to not display some emotion – such as compassionate expressions, gestures of comfort, or empathetic tears – would seem either disconcertingly obtuse or cold-heartedly indifferent.

When interviewing those in the food distribution industry, a worker described harassment at a previous job so abhorrent that she quit. Although she had left that position several years earlier, her emotional injuries were still quite raw. As she described the treatment she received in her previous workplace, she cried so hard that she shook. I could not sit next to my tape recorder and dispassionately watch her. Not only would this have been unkind, but it could have communicated to her that I failed to understand her story or that I sided with her abusers.

However, just as I was willing to share my emotions, I also was conscious to restrain myself emotionally. This was important emotional labor that I could not fail to perform. In the above example, when displaying some emotions, I was vigilant to not entirely break down myself. I allowed myself to express some emotion, but I did not want to turn the focus of the interaction to me and to an emotional outpouring of my own. Thus, having expressed some emotion and establishing some connection with the interviewee, I had to refocus my gaze from the sadness at hand to my role as information gatherer.

Whether one is the interviewer or interviewee, having a job interview or collecting data, awareness of one's emotions and the necessary emotional labor can be critical. Job interviewers, like research interviewers, are interested not only in what the interviewee says but also how she or he acts. The emotions experienced during the

interview, “whether by interviewer or interviewee, are as real, as important, and as interesting as any other product of the interview. To ignore or discount manifestations of emotion is as unreasonable as ignoring the talk” (Blee 1998: 395). To perform well during an interview, the job candidate needs to be aware of the emotional labor component of the interview and her/his ability to determine the most appropriate response.

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