

An Unholy Union: Gold Digging and Emotional Labour in Relationships

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of emotion work or emotional labour in the personal sphere in general and within the context of heterosexual relationships and marriages in particular. It further examines the role of gender and attempts to draw comparisons between the emotional labour required for jobs and the emotional work required to sustain a heterosexual marriage or relationship. It inspects the narrative of a 'gold digging' spouse during divorce settlements, and the harm that it inflicts on the non-propertied spouse.

Emotional Labour & Emotion Work: An Introduction

The term 'emotional labour' is attributed to Arlie Russel Hochschild, a sociologist and professor emerita at the University of California, Berkeley, who formally coined the concept in her 1983 book 'The Managed Heart'. At the time, Arlie described emotional labour as having to "induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others". She referred to it as the work of managing one's own emotions that was required by certain professions citing the examples of jobs like air hostess and waitress, where smiling and maintaining a pleasant countenance is part of their role. Nannies, eldercare workers, nurses, teachers, therapists, life coaches, call-center workers are other examples of jobs that require similar manipulation of our real feelings and emotions. The term has taken off since then, with it being a part of social media debates & discussions and everyday conversations. Hochschild and other sociologists have noted that emotional labor in this type of work often produces "emotional dissonance", i.e., a conflict between emotions experienced by the employee and those required by the organization.

Abraham, R. (1999) writes,

"Emotional dissonance was found to induce job tension leading, in turn, to emotional exhaustion. Employees with innately low self-esteem were more likely to experience emotional dissonance and suffer from emotional exhaustion. Other employees found that emotional dissonance reduced their self-esteem leaving them dissatisfied."

Hochschild's work on flight attendants found that unless managers acknowledged and appreciated the emotional efforts of their workers, the pressures around emotional dissonance created by so-called "surface acting" caused flight attendants stress, anxiety, and resentment against their employers – and, ultimately, long-term burnout. (Hochschild, 1983) Companies often take emotional labour for granted, going even as far as setting up a rating system for services provided by the employees where providing emotional labour gets you higher ratings, such as when Uber and Ola drivers have to take into consideration your musical preferences while driving or how your food delivery person has to mask his exasperation at hostile customer interactions. These companies not only advertise and take credit for the "professionalism" and "comfort" that their services provide but do not see this emotional labour worthy of being included in their wages. (L. Stark 2016) Academic studies and research models that acknowledge and evaluate the importance of emotional labour in the workplace are being taken more seriously by employers and corporations, even if monetary compensation for the same is not even close to being a reality.

Since then, emotional labour has also moved from being applied solely in the context of work to the private sphere of one's life and what it entails and demands of us, emotionally. It has also been defined academically as 'emotion work.' This extension in its meaning can be best encapsulated by the New York Time's definition of emotional labour being "the actions that tend to go unnoticed but still are expected." Being polite to a rude relative, setting up and managing children's schedules, intervening in arguments, remembering special dates in a relationship and planning birthday, anniversary or christmas parties even if it mentally strains you to do so are all examples of emotional labour in an interpersonal setting. There has been much debate over what can come under emotional labour, especially with reference to the argument of whether it is emotional labour or just labour you have emotions towards. Even Hochschild claimed the term in popular discourse has been very blurry and over-applied. In these cases, masking of your true feelings for the sake of those around you can be taken as the deciding factor.

The Question of Gender

This conversation brings an important aspect of this definition of emotional labour into the limelight: gender. Arlie Hochschild, in a recent interview said that in heterosexual partnerships, emotional labor often falls to women, who are generally socialized to take on the emotional lives of others. "Women often are conditioned to be nurturers and to put aside their own needs to tend to the needs of others," she added. Women themselves often discount the time and effort involved in caring work not only because it is expected to be a spontaneous expression of love but also because the illusion of effortlessness is part of doing the work well (Hochschild,1983).

Gender construction theory provides a theoretical basis for examining the extent to which gender is associated with the performance of family work. For example, the more feminine characteristics men and women apply to themselves, the more household labor they are expected to perform. Similarly, applying more feminine-expressive traits to oneself was associated with the performance of more emotion work among both men and women. (Erickson 2005)

Therefore gender as well as gender construction does play an important role when it comes to emotional labour.

Emotional Labour in Heterosexual Relationships

With almost half of the employed women in India working in the service industry, exploring the theme of emotional labour at work is of the essence. The idea of gender comes into play in the workplace too, a recent example being the outpouring of complaints online about how women find themselves having to repeat themselves multiple times in online meetings to be heard and their opinions taken seriously, an example of emotional labour. Women from racial and caste minorities have to manage 'emotion work' in their personal and professional lives by either ignoring racist and casteist microaggressions and masking their anger or having to make an effort to educate and inform the people around them about why they feel uncomfortable even though the onus is not on them to do so. All of these take a toll on the mental well being of a person.

But another aspect of emotional labour or emotion work can be applied in the context of marriages. Marriages in India, tend to veer sharply towards women in terms of the physical and emotional labour required to manage a household and sustain a marriage. It is "expected" of women to do so and they have been conditioned to slip into the role naturally without questioning it.

While there has been a bare nod towards trying to recognize the economical value of unpaid labour women put in such as cooking, cleaning and so on, any emotional labour they put in tends to go unnoticed. Scholars argue that the reason why emotional labour falls so heavily on women in marriages is due to the fact that similar to house work, women are conditioned to believe from an early and impressionable age that being helpful, intuitive, empathetic, giving advice and easing tensions and disputes are “womanly attributes” and as a result of this, society deems them to be better at it. (Erickson, 2005)

In terms of sharing of household work, even when their partner picks a task to complete, women often have to take care of the emotion work aspect of it. Women primarily are in charge of primarily monitoring and assessing future needs even if men undertake these tasks in the end. Examples include keeping track of toilet paper supply, planning of dinner, selection of daycare centre, etc. Anticipating needs, identifying options for filling them, making decisions, and monitoring progress are mentally taxing and often a cause for conflict among couples; women do more cognitive labour overall and more of the anticipation and monitoring work in particular. (Daminger, 2019)

Feminist scholars have pointed out the obvious ties between patriarchal arguments against legalising paid & consensual prostitution and the emotion work women put in during sex in a relationship. In the former case, women who are willing to earn their living using their own bodies come under restrictions because sex is “expected” from women and not seen as something to be paid for. In the latter, research shows that women tend to “fake their orgasms” for the benefit of their partners.

A recent study (Brewer & Hendrie 2010) provided evidence to suggest that “copulatory vocalizations in women are not a reflexive consequence of orgasm.” The data collected from 71 sexually active heterosexual women states,

“More detailed examination of responses during intercourse revealed that, while female orgasms were most commonly experienced during foreplay, copulatory vocalizations were reported to be made most often before and simultaneously with male ejaculation. These data together clearly demonstrate a dissociation of the timing of women experiencing orgasm and making copulatory vocalizations and indicate that there is at least an element of these responses that are under conscious control, providing women with an opportunity to manipulate male behavior to their advantage.”

The study pronounces this conscious effort to make copulatory vocalisation in spite of a dissociation of timing as providing women with an opportunity to manipulate male behaviour to their advantage. But we can also look at this effort to induce feelings for the benefit of others as emotion work. Another survey stated that 91% of male college students experience orgasm during sex as opposed to only 39% of female college students and the subsequent study stated that in light of gender inequality and a social construction of

sexuality, endorsed by both men and women, that privileges men's sexual pleasure over women's, such that orgasm for women is pleasing, but ultimately incidental. (Wade LD et al., 2005)

Another major emotional manipulation that women are expected to do is to keep up a polite and pleasant countenance even under emotionally distressing behaviour by their partner, family or in-laws. Men, on the other hand, are not forced to do so in conventional family settings. In the category of childcare, women are the ones to be solely or primarily expected to be attentive to the children's emotional needs. (Daniels, 1987)

Gender roles in India still work in a binary, irrespective of economic status. Indian women top the global chart of doing the most of the unpaid work and domestic work. The 2020 India Inequality Report by Oxfam stated that urban and rural women spend 291 and 312 minutes respectively on unpaid care work, while men spend only 29 minutes and 32 minutes on the same. This lack of help and support when it comes to emotion work not only affects their mental well-being but can affect women's performances in the professional spheres due to lack of time and energy.

Gold Digging in the Context of Marriage

The term gold digger has been around for over a century, and is now perhaps immortalised in Kanye West's Gold Digger (ft. Jaime Foxx). While the term '*gold digger*' is almost exclusively used to refer to women, this was not always the case. First found in Rex Beach's 1911 novel, *The Ne'er-Do-Well*, the term was initially used devoid of any gendered connotations:

"These people are money mad, aren't they? Worst bunch of gold-diggers I ever saw"

However, each subsequent use of the term in the 20th century inched it closer to being a gendered term. The Cambridge Dictionary defines a gold digger as "someone, *usually a woman*, who tries to attract a rich person, *usually a man*, in order to get presents or money". References to cold, beautiful and calculating women abound in popular literature and cinema, but the trope of a gold digger has evolved during the past century: from "spoiled, baby-ish party girls who end reformed as happy homemakers, wives and mothers" to icons and then to the villains they are today.

The gold digger shifted into the role of an icon under the shadow of the Great Depression, as a means of economic survival of women. As Slavens (2006), writes:

"...the Depression era gold digger, ..., served to emphasize the economic inequalities that were all too

apparent after the economic collapse of 1929. She also pushed to the forefront inequities between men and women in an economic situation that allowed only limited job access to women and encouraged women to stay at home and leave the few available jobs to men, the traditional bread winners for the middle class family. Unlike her predecessors, the gold digger of the Depression knew where she stood and the world-wise women who appeared in gold digger texts of the period have known hardship and are, therefore, socially and morally justified in their attempts to raise their status while exposing the flaws in a system that forces them to circumvent acceptable avenues to survive. In this situation, the gold digger became a powerful force not only for her exposure of class and gender inequities but also her challenges to conventional ideas about gender, class and a moral system built on both.”

While much of women’s socioeconomic mobility has always been closely tied to that of her husband, due to unequal opportunities in the job market (and during those times, in education too), women could not afford to marry men who could not provide them with financial stability. This dependence was further exacerbated during the Great Depression: In the United States, work-ban laws for married women were enacted in over half the states. Married women who worked were viewed as selfish women taking away limited jobs from those who needed them more (Perkins, 1930).

In the post-depression world, as women gained employment rights and opportunities and feminism progressed, the gold digger went back to being the villain: with no end goal in sight other than to trap a wealthy, old man with her beauty. As opposed to rebellion, gold diggers were now seen as regressive. However, the question remains: have class and gender inequities disappeared in the 21st century? The answer is a resounding no. Women’s opportunities have not improved since the 1990s, and there remains a glass ceiling in most top sectors (International Labour Organisation, 2019).

On the other hand, despite the inception of sugar relationships – a transactional relationship in which sugar relationship is a form of transactional sexual relationship in which an older and wealthier partner (sugar daddy/mommy) provides material resources to a younger partner (sugar baby/boy) in return for her or his companionship (Nayar, 2016) – gold diggers continue to be viewed as unfairly taking advantage of men.

The narrative of a woman immorally extracting wealth from a man has most often been furthered under the institution of marriage. Women’s dependence on their husbands for financial security becomes cyclic in nature: it is often used as a justification for lower wages and fewer job opportunities, and these circumstances themselves make it harder for women to support themselves and increase dependency. In the 21st century, too, structural inequalities prevent women from meaningful equality with men (Stewart, 2013). The term gold digger remains gendered in part due to its expansion: it is now an accusation levied on women who are seen reaping “undeserved financial gain” (Thompson). This is most obviously seen during a divorce. In an attempt to make divorces fair, the judiciary has been encouraged to take into account the

contributions of the non-moneyed spouse to the marriage and to child rearing. On the breakdown of a relationship, this often leads to a transfer of financial assets away from the propertied or moneyed spouse to the non-moneyed one i.e., it is usually a transfer from a man to the woman. This provides the non-moneyed spouse with a certain degree of financial independence on relationship breakdown, as their work at home led them to forgo property accumulation by participating in the workforce. According to Thompson (2016), accusations of gold digging on divorce were:

".....undoubtedly influenced by the idea that individuals should work to support themselves on divorce, regardless of the cost to their earning power that mothering or homemaking has had. Closely linked to this is the importance placed on the ways in which spouses come to own property that results in spouses with a claim based on non-financial contribution to be treated as if, in Smart's words, 'they did not come by their share of the property in a legitimate way in the first place.' "

As an increasing number of women outearn their husbands, their non-financial contributions remain higher: the bulk of domestic responsibilities is still shouldered by women and they remain the primary caretakers for their children. Therefore, weighing financial contributions to a marriage more strongly than non-financial contributions during divorce settlements would unfairly penalise women.

Conclusion

Emotion work or emotional labour in the context of interpersonal relationships requires a significant amount of recognition and appreciation in lieu of the mental toll it takes on the person undergoing it. We have also established that emotion work largely falls to women, mainly due to gender construction and therefore needs to be taken into consideration during women empowerment planning or family and gender research studies.

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