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Book Review

The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling

By Arlie Hochschild

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From flight attendants to residential childcare practitioners: Why *The Managed Heart* still matters

Working in residential children's homes in England drew my attention to the emotional demands of residential child care, yet I lacked a language for understanding these. For me, Arlie Hochschild's *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983) provided that language. More than forty years after its first publication, the book provided an explanation for the emotional experiences I witnessed in practice, and ultimately shaped my doctoral research into residential child care practitioners' emotion work. I first encountered *The Managed Heart* while trying to make sense of the emotional demands of residential child care. Although Hochschild was writing about flight attendants and service workers, her ideas resonated with my experiences in residential settings. This was particularly evident in her discussion of social workers' expectations 'to feel concern, to empathise, and yet to avoid "too much" liking or disliking' of people who draw on services (p. 150). This tension

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between caring and maintaining professional boundaries closely mirrored the emotional demands I had encountered in residential child care. Thus, her work became the theoretical heartbeat of my thesis.

At its core, *The Managed Heart* explores emotional labour: the process of managing feelings and emotional expressions as part of paid work. Hochschild introduced concepts that have since become familiar across health and social care, including 'surface acting', where individuals display emotions, they do not genuinely feel, and 'deep acting, where they attempt to align their inner feelings with organisational expectations. Hochschild also explored the 'feeling rules' that shape what emotions are considered appropriate in different settings. These ideas provided a vocabulary for understanding something that often remains invisible within care work.

Before reading Hochschild, I recognised that residential child care practitioners constantly managed their emotions, but I could not articulate the meaning behind what I observed. Practitioners are expected to remain calm during incidents of aggression, regulate frustration in challenging situations, and provide emotional stability for children and young people often in significant distress. The work requires a delicate balance between authenticity and professionalism. Hochschild's writing illuminated how these emotional responses are not simply aspects of personality; they are skilled and intentional forms of work.

Practitioners discussed staying composed when frightened, containing their own emotional reactions during traumatic disclosures, and carefully managing what they expressed to support young people. Hochschild's concepts provided a lens through which these experiences could be understood. However, residential child care complicates Hochschild's original framework. In children's homes, emotional regulation is not simply organisationally required; it can be protective, therapeutic and deeply relational. Practitioners may manage their emotions not only to fulfil organisational expectations, but to create safety, maintain relationships and support children and young people. This raises questions about whether emotional labour in care work can always be understood primarily as the commercialisation of feeling.

Returning to *The Managed Heart* today, I appreciate both its strengths and its limitations. Residential child care differs considerably from the service occupations that Hochschild examined because relationships sit at

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the heart of the work. Nevertheless, Hochschild's insights remain remarkably relevant. At a time when residential child care faces ongoing challenges around workforce wellbeing, burnout, retention and trauma-informed practice, the book offers a powerful way of understanding the often-unseen emotional demands placed upon practitioners. More than forty years after its publication, *The Managed Heart* continues to speak to contemporary child and youth care practice. For me, it was more than an influential text. It gave me a language for understanding care and ultimately inspired a programme of doctoral research. That enduring influence is why I continue to recommend it today.

About the review author

Beth Jay is a National Embedding Manager at IMPACT, University of Birmingham, where she works to support the use of evidence in social care practice and policy. She previously worked in children's social care before moving into social care research. Beth recently completed her PhD, which explored the emotional experiences of residential childcare practitioners in England and Scotland through a feminist, qualitative lens.

The review author was reviewing their own copy of this book.

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