Emotional labour and the living personality at work: labour power, materialist subjectivity and the dialogical self

Paul Brook

University of Leicester School of Management, UK

Ken Edwards Building,
University of Leicester,
University Road,
Leicester, UK
LE1 7RH

Email: pb222@le.ac.uk
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Paul Brook

*University of Leicester School of Management, UK*

This article builds on Hochschild’s primary understanding of emotional labour, as an aspect of labour power and sold for a wage, to develop a materialist theory of labour subjectivity from within the Marxist tradition that deepens and extends labour process analysis. It argues that the physical, intellectual and emotional aspects of labour power comprise a dynamic, interdependent complex – Marx’s *living personality* at work - and that emotional effort is not a discrete, exceptional register of the self. A theory of the subjective-collective experience of labour power is then developed that commences with Vygotsky’s concept of the dynamic unity of *thought-speech-action* in order to theorise the inter-relationship between labour activity and consciousness. This is then integrated with Bakhtin’s materialist conception of emotion as the volitional tone of all labour activity and Vološinov’s dialogical concept of speech, as contradictory consciousness *turned outwards*. Thus, workplace relations comprise routine dialogical contests between individual-collective workers and management over the meaning and purpose of employees’ ideas, feelings and behaviour. The subjective-collective experience of labour power, therefore, is characterised as the *dialogical self*, constituted by an active presence in the labour process’ contradictory, antagonistic relations.

**Keywords:** collective worker, dialogical self, emotional labour, labour power, labour process analysis, materialist subjectivity

**New frontiers of debate**

In the thirty-years since the publication of Hochschild’s ground breaking *Managed Heart* (1983/2003) the widespread adoption and adaption of her pioneering emotional labour concept has proved to be theoretically and empirically enriching for the influential labour process analysis tradition (LPA) (Warhurst et al 2009). Despite her concept receiving significant criticism from within LPA (e.g. Taylor 1998), it is only in recent years that there has been a sustained debate around explicit attempts to develop a materialist theorisation of the subjective and collective experience of emotional labour (Bolton 2010; Brook 2010; Lopez 2010; Vincent 2011); and by logical extension, labour power as a whole.

This article builds on Brook’s (2009b) critical defence of Hochschild’s original concept and concomitant argument for the development of a revised version that is compatible with both labour
process theory’s ‘post-Marxist’ core propositions (LPT) (Thompson and Smith 2001) and classical Marxist informed LPA (Brook 2010; Rees 1998). What follows incorporates Hochschild’s foundational theorisation of emotional labour as “sold for a wage” (1983/2003, 7) and an “aspect of labour power” (1979, 659) with a dialectical theorisation that captures the inherently contradictory nature of workplace social relations. Moreover, it is argued that the emotional aspect of labour power needs to be understood as an inseparable dimension of labour power rather than as a discrete and exceptional variant. This in turn is underpinned by LPT’s pivotal understanding that an employee’s experience of work is not as an atomised individual but rather one that can be characterised as subjective-collective, which is constitutive of, and integral to workplace social relations (Armstrong 2011).

Recent developments in LPA around the nature, form and experience of emotional labour have revived debate on labour subjectivity in LPT, principally on the interrelationship between subjective identity and objective interests (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Thompson and Marks 2010). This renewed interest follows the longstanding debate over LPT’s so-called “missing subject” (Armstrong 2011; Thompson 1983/1989: 239; Thompson and Marks 2010) with post-structuralist critics (O’Doherty and Willmott 2009; Parker 1999). Contemporary debate on subjectivity within LPT tends to stress the need to combine with other theoretical resources, such as social identity theory and critical realism (Thompson and Marks 2010; Thompson and Vincent 2010). This article also proposes the combining of theoretical resources, as a fruitful avenue, but instead draws on critical psychological theories from within the Marxist tradition (Barker 2007; Collins 2000). Consequently, it presents a theorisation of the dynamic interplay between subjective identity and objective interests that offers the Marxian tradition within LPA the potential to renew its contribution via the development of more robust analyses of the dynamic interplay between structure, agency and consciousness in the workplace (Darlington 2012).

What follows draws on the pioneering psychological work of Vygotsky (1978; 1986), Vološinov1 (1973) and Bakhtin (1981; 1993; Dentith 1995)2. Initially, Vygotsky’s work is utilised to explore how individuals’ sense-of-self (consciousness) is a dynamic product of engaging in meaningful activity (labour) via tools, signs and symbols within the unequal and antagonistic social relations that characterise the capitalist labour process (Collins 2000; Jones 2009). This provides the foundation for a theoretical framework that captures the individual and collective experience of all forms of labour power. In order to theorise the specific experience of emotional labour, the work of Vološinov and Bakhtin is utilised. Their materialist understanding of emotion, as the volitional tone of all activity, is adopted in tandem with their analytic focus on speech-language, as the principal mediating tool between the individual-self and the socio-collective experience of unequal social relations under capitalism. As such, speech-language is conceptualised as a dynamic, material feature of social relations, where the meanings of words are inherently contradictory and therefore dialogical (Collins 2000; Dentith 1995; Holborow 2006). Furthermore, due to the structured antagonism and
subordination inherent to the employment relationship, the tensions and conflicts over the meanings of utterances and their related actions are greatly exacerbated. Such a basis enables a theorisation of managerial control as inherently contradictory and contested. In addition, it allows emotional labour to be analysed as an experience comprising an integral and dynamic relationship between the individual and collective worker. The article concludes by discussing the implications of the above for LPA generally and Marxist workplace class-analysis in particular.

**A question of compatibility**

While LPA has Marxist origins (Braverman, 1974/1998; Thompson 1983/1989) it has evolved, since its emergence in the latter half of the 1970s, into a tradition that now encompasses Marxist, post-Marxist, neo-Weberian, and other materialist-pluralist perspectives on the capitalist labour process (Jaros 2010; Thompson and Newsome 2004; Watson 2010). Nevertheless, LPA has retained throughout its waves of development (Thompson and Smith 2001; 2009) a *core* set of theoretical propositions (LPT), which its mainstream advocates have tended to characterise as *post-Marxist* (Jaros, 2010; Thompson 2007; Vincent, 2011) following their explicit rejection of Marxism’s labour theory of value (Carter 1995; Jaros 2005; Thompson 2007) and the associated, axiomatic understanding that workplace resistance is a manifestation of capitalist class struggle (Edwards 1990, 2010). Given *core* LPT tends to be formatively Marxist — minus its early emphasis on class-based analysis of exploitation and subordination in the labour process - it is reasonable to characterise it as a set of propositions that are *sub-Marxist*, irrespective of its common usage as the basis for avowedly non-Marxist analyses (*cf.* Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Bolton 2005; Edwards 2010; Marks and Thompson 2010; Thompson and Vincent 2010; Vincent 2011). As such, LPT continues to offer sufficient foundations on which to build robust Marxist accounts of the labour process (Brook 2010; Smith 2012).

LPT’s sub-Marxist core propositions are founded on the primary understanding that labour is a unique commodity due to its inherent indeterminacy. This is because when workers are hired they sell their labour power in the form of *yet-to-be-realised* labour in specific quantities for a more-or-less fixed duration. As a consequence, employers are compelled to convert employees’ labour power into actual work effort on a minute-by-minute basis, under conditions that permit capital accumulation (Littler 1990; Thompson and Newsome 2004). This understanding of labour power’s indeterminacy is consistent with Marx’s, who explains that labour is never sold in its entirety, as “a lump, once and for all”, as with buying a photocopier or building, for to do so would require the worker to sell their entire physical, intellectual and emotional entity as a slave, thereby converting their individual self “from the owner of a commodity into a commodity” (Marx 1976, 271).

From LPT’s core understanding flow four principal sub-propositions. First, that the primary analytic focus should be the experience of employees during the transformation of their labour power into a productive form⁴ (Thompson and Smith 2009). Second, that this transformation process is
underpinned by a capitalist employment relationship that is designed to extract surplus-value or a surplus from labour (Thompson, 2010). Thus, the employment relationship is founded on exploitation and subordination, thereby generating a “structured antagonism” between labour and capital (Edwards 1990, 128). Third, this requirement to transform labour power implies the need for employer control through the application of a variety of managerial strategies and tactics (Thompson and Smith 2001). Fourth, the combination of labour power’s indeterminacy and the employment relation’s structured antagonism ensure that management control is inherently contradictory and fraught with tensions that manifest as a tendency for workers’ to resist as well as consent (Thompson and Newsome 2004).

The logical consequence of LPT’s core principles is that labour’s final **determinate form**, such as serving airline passengers meals or a physiotherapy session, is not of primary analytic significance but rather its **social form** as wage-labour. Thus, the key questions for LPT are whether labour “has been drawn into the network of capitalist social relations, whether the worker who carries it has been transformed into a wage-worker and whether the labor of the worker has been transformed into productive labor” (Braverman 1974/1998, 362). Significantly, Hochschild shares the same principal focus by conceptualising emotional labour as a social form when she defines it as “the management of feeling” which is “sold for a wage” with exchange-value (1983/2003, 7) and as an “aspect of labour power” (1979, 659). It is this primary theorisation of emotional labour, as a social form of wage-labour, which has enabled its progressive, albeit critical, integration into LPA’s conceptual array (Brook 2010).

**Interrogating Hochschild’s concept**

Criticism of Hochschild’s concept from within LPA has tended to coalesce around its inability to capture the complex and contradictory experience of emotional labour and its control by management (Bolton 2005; Brook 2009a; Lopez 2010; Taylor 1998; Vincent 2011; Warhurst et al 2009). In particular, LPA critics highlight a normative tendency that portrays emotional labourers as passive (Callaghan and Thompson 2002) resulting in management possessing the capacity to exert near complete control over the labour process (Bolton 2005). In response to this weakness, writers from within LPA have sought to reorient Hochschild’s theorisation. Taylor (1998, 99), for example, offers a more nuanced interpretation of her stark distinction between **surface acting** and **deep acting**, thereby conceptualising emotional labour as routinely comprising an “incomplete transmutation of feelings”. Similarly, Lopez (2006) argues for more flexibility in Hochschild’s concept so that emotional labour is understood as on a continuum, with coercive, codified **feeling rules** at one extreme and authentic forms of emotion work at the other, enabled by a high degree of employee autonomy. Whereas Bolton (2005, 2) maintains that the normative tendencies are so deeply embedded that they generate a “one-dimensional analysis”, which effectively disallows the possibility of employees’ independent emotional agency. Thus, Hochschild’s analysis of management control is deemed to be “ultimately absolutist” in its consequences (Bolton and Boyd 2003, 290).
While Hochschild’s theorisation is limited in its ability to capture the contradictory and contested nature of workplace relations, its major weaknesses derive from a one-sided focus on workers’ individualised experiences via her principal notions of surface acting, deep acting and transmutated feelings. This produces an analysis that tends to atomise emotional labourers and over-emphasise the harm caused to them as individuals (Brook 2009b). This is despite The Managed Heart portraying a contested workplace where workers and managers engage in a “war of smiles” (1983/2003, 127) over labour intensification, including bouts of trade union militancy. However, her analysis inadequately explains this resistance in terms of its source within wider workplace social relations. While Hochschild maps the presence and activities of the collective emotional labourer, she is unable to explain its emergence or its relationship with the individual worker. Thus, she cannot account for how employers’ demand for collective adherence to common feeling rules frequently generates informal, mutually supportive sub-cultures, outside of management control, which in turn can offer fertile terrain for the emergence or deepening of trade union organisation (Korczynski 2003; Mulholland 2004; Taylor and Bain 2003).

For LPA, the collective worker is an inseparable dimension of workplace agency (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Martinez Lucio and Stewart 1997; Mulholland 2004; Thompson 1983/1989) owing to its interrelationship with the individual being constitutive, integral and dynamic (Hyman 2006). While there is debate in LPA on the degree to which the collective worker should be emphasised and the extent of its analytic reach as a concept (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Martinez Lucio and Stewart 1997) there is broad-based agreement that it is an inherent and formative dimension of workplace social relations. Thus, while informal, shop-floor work cultures may initially take the form of ameliorative “communities of coping” (Korczynski 2003, 55), through the carving-out of organisational space that allows employees to build their own mutual support networks, they can - and often do - evolve into vehicles for more overt resistance to management control (Filby 1992; Korczynski 2003; Villarreal 2010), frequently through trade union organisation (Baines 2011; Mulholland 2004; Taylor and Bain 2003).

The strength of Hochschild’s concept for Marxist informed LPA lies in its foundational understanding that emotional labour is an aspect of labour power, as illustrated by her oft-cited example of a flight attendant required to simultaneously undertake physical, intellectual and emotional labour when serving a passenger (1983/2003). Likewise, the act of speaking to a call-centre customer requires some physical effort to use the computer keyboard, no matter how minimal; mental effort to follow the correct technical and service procedures; and emotional effort to ensure the interaction contains the requisite level of politeness and desired tone. The implication is that emotional labour is not confined to interactive service work and that we need to think of emotion as “a covert resource, like money, or knowledge, or physical labor, which companies need to get the job done” across the full-spectrum of industries, occupations and tasks (Hochschild 1993, xii). This is because the logical extension to Hochschild’s conceptual foundation is that an individual’s labour
power comprises all three dimensions, where the predominance of any one aspect, at a given moment and place, is contingent upon the nature of the task and job design (Brook 2010). Emotional labour, therefore, constitutes the emotional volition, effort and capacity within all forms of labour power; even if it is principally physical or intellectual, which in turn means labour power comprises an inter-dependent relationship between all three aspects.

This unified concept of labour power is consistent with Marx’s own primary definition as “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being” (author’s emphasis) (1976: 270). Core LPT shares Marx’s understanding, as it too holds that “labor power is part of the person of the worker” with the effect that the worker experiences it as an “essential duality” in that they “must internally divide or alienate his or her existential self from the commodity labor power that he or she possess when entering capitalist employment” (Thompson and Smith 2009, 257; Thompson and Smith’s emphasis). It is a duality also understood by Hochschild who similarly argues that a front-line worker’s smile, mood, feeling or a relationship “comes to belong more to the organization and less to the self” (1983/2003, 198) and is therefore fundamentally alienating for the employee (Brook, 2009a; ibid; Weyher 2012).

A useful means of understanding the composition and scope of emotional labour effort is to conceive of it as three interrelated dimensions (Dunkel and Weirich 2013): an object of work to influence others, such as serving customers, or when being assessed during a staff appraisal; a means to get the job done, such as being patient when frustrated with a task, colleague or service-user; and, a condition of performing the work appropriately, as with complying with management’s feeling rules and contractual requirements, or adhering to professional standards of behaviour (cf. Hughes 2005). These are not mutually exclusive, as all three dimensions are commonly undertaken simultaneously by an individual worker, such as when performing interactive work with a service-user. Equally, all three forms of emotional effort are required in varying degrees when a worker speaks with their manager and often during meetings between co-workers where work-related decisions have to be made. Finally, each of these dimensions can also be transformed into their opposite, as a means to express reluctance or opposition to what is required by management or expected by the recipient.

**Debating the experience of emotional labour**

Recent influential LPA contributions on theorising the experience of emotional labour, as an element of organisational emotion, have tended to commence from the premise that employees’ emotion is a largely discrete, exceptional resource and workplace phenomenon, thereby semi-detaching emotional effort from a unified concept of labour power. Most notably, Bolton (2005) draws heavily on interactionist perspectives to argue that ‘emotion management in the workplace’ is characterised by an exacerbated indeterminacy compared to that possessed by physical and intellectual labour. This detaching of the emotional aspect is further compounded by her argument that emotional labour is but one specific form of emotion management, which only occurs when the worker engages directly in
pecuniary (commercial) service interactions (Bolton 2010). Thus, Bolton defines emotional labour by its determinate form – the final product - rather than as a social form of wage-labour, which is contrary to LPT’s primary focus on the latter (Brook 2009b).

The consequence of Bolton’s theorisation is that all other forms and uses of workplace emotion are deemed to be private emotion management, rather than an aspect of workers’ commodified (waged) labour power. This is because emotion’s exacerbated indeterminacy prevents management owning and controlling employees’ authentic emotions (Bolton and Boyd 2003). However, she overlooks the simple fact that irrespective of whether a front-line worker’s emotion management is genuine or feigned, enthusiastic, grudging or hostile, it is ultimately owned by the organisation, as a completed service interaction. In short, what Bolton refers to as emotion management is emotional labour, whatever the quality of a worker’s emotional effort. This is evident when service-users insist on complaining about an organisation’s service to a manager rather than the individual worker (Brook 2009b). Therefore, Bolton’s claim that employees retain ownership of this particular “means of production” (2005, 61) is erroneous, as the service means of production, as for all others, comprise employer-owned fixed-capital and technical components (i.e. the servicescape environment⁸), as well as the human labour input (Thompson 1983/89) – and even the labour element is fully owned by the employer on completion⁹.

In response to Bolton’s (2005) re-conceptualisation and Brook’s (2009b) counter critique, Vincent offers an alternative “economy of feelings” (2011, 1369) in which he draws principally on Ackroyd and Thompson’s (1999) post-Marxist LPT concept of misbehaviour (in contrast to a Marxist class-based concept of workplace resistance). While Vincent argues that emotion at work is a more embedded aspect of commodified labour power than acknowledged by Bolton, like her, he assumes emotions are discrete, exceptional and a qualitatively more significant register of the self than physical and intellectual labour. For him, the distinction between emotional labour and emotional management has “high conceptual validity” (Vincent 2011, 1371) because it underlines that emotion at work comprises more than management-directed waged, emotional effort. Hence, Vincent argues that emotions also “constitute individual and collective senses of self” and are “central to who we are” (2011, 1370). As with Bolton, there is the inference that physical and intellectual activities do not possess the same degree of significance for the self, and may even be disconnected from the processes of self-formation and maintenance in the workplace.

Despite Vincent claiming his analysis is founded on core LPT, which he describes as a “post-Marxian form of materialism” (2011, 1373), he does not explain how his concept of emotion at work is constituted as a materialist phenomenon founded in human labour¹⁰. This is despite core LPT’s focus being the “transformation of labour power” (Thompson and Smith 2009, 919) derived from the primary understanding that labour processes are constituted by human beings consciously activating their labour power to produce use-values by engaging with the natural world (Braverman 1974/1998, 31-32; Thompson 1983/1989). By assuming that emotion at work is a discrete entity, Vincent
effectively de-couples it from a singular concept of human labour, as activity comprising a complex of physical, intellectual and emotional effort. Vincent’s failure to anchor his concept of emotion at work in human labour results in a theorisation based on non-materialist, socio-culturally constructed emotion phenomena (cf. Sieben and Wettergren 2010, 7) combined with a hint of biological determinism, as for him some emotions are even “spontaneous and involuntary feelings that we cannot control” (Vincent 2011, 1369-1370).

**Labour power: a dynamic unity of functions**

What then could provide the basis for a materialist theorisation of workers’ subjective-collective experience of emotional effort and labour power as a whole? One such route is the influential work of the post-revolutionary Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978; 1986) who during the 1920s and 1930s sought to develop an understanding of human consciousness based on Marx’s theory of historical materialism, principally through studies of child development (Daniels 2008). Vygotsky’s central argument is that humans’ sense of self, personality and behaviour is formed through meaningful activity from an early age, which is directed towards our natural, material and socio-cultural world. For Vygotsky (1978), humans engage in meaningful activity by using not just physical tools, but also language and cultural signs inter-dependently (Daniels 2008; Holborow 2006), which simultaneously socially mediate the subjective experience of their activity. This is because physical tool systems, language and cultural sign systems - principally the use of writing and numeracy - are products of society, which dynamically evolve through human history depending on the form of society and its stage of development (Cole and Scribner 1978). Therefore, the development of individual consciousness, personality and behaviour cannot be reduced to the level of the individual, as its very composite elements - words, signs, concepts and motives - are socially formed (Barker 2007). While individual consciousness is socially formed, it is not purely the product of a one-way transmission from the external social world. This is because human behaviour is marked by an active appropriation of the material world, during which humans not only transform the external environment but in so doing also transform themselves (Vygotsky 1986).

Vygotsky’s materialist understanding of consciousness implies that it is not a purely psychological phenomenon, but is interdependently related to the corporeal dimension of the body and its physical engagement with the material world. The result is that the development of consciousness and personality is a dynamic process, which includes not simply assimilation, but a perpetual, complex re-organisation of the mind. The “various elements - perception, memory, attention, speech, emotion, cognition and the like - need to be understood not as separate entities capable of being studied in isolation from each other, but as functional complexes which develop and interact together” (Barker 2007, 2-3). Thus, Vygotsky understands consciousness to be the product of a dynamic unity of human thought, speech and activity, which in turn is constitutive of prevailing social relations. In doing so, he crucially offers the initial basis for a materialist account of emotion by
identifying it as an integral element of the motivation that drives human activity. Indeed, he argues that for activities to be human activities they must possess meaning for their actors in the form of motive (Collins 2000). Therefore, every thought and decision to act is “engendered by motivation, i.e., by our desires and needs, our interests and emotions…, an affective-volitional tendency” (Vygotsky 1986, 252).

The logical consequence of Vygotsky’s activity-based account of consciousness for conceptualising labour power is that emotion is not a discrete dimension, separable from physical and intellectual labour, but rather an integral aspect of a dynamic unity of functions and capacities (Jones 2009). This understanding implies that LPA should acknowledge that its analysis of particular aspects and forms of labour power, such as emotional labour, aesthetic labour, sexualised labour (Warhurst and Nickson 2009) and body labour (Cohen 2011) should do more to conceptualise labour power as a dynamic unity of functions, in which the prominence of any one aspect or composite form is highly contingent upon the particular task being undertaken. Indeed, much of the service labour process, ‘off-stage’ from front-line interactions, is taken up with predominantly manual and intellectual labour, such as restocking, writing-up notes, computer in-putting and maintaining the service environment (Richardson and Howcroft 2012). One notable example within LPA of a more explicit understanding of service labour power as a dynamic unity of functions is Taylor and Bain’s study of call-centre work, tellingly entitled, “An assembly line in the head”, where they found workers were often left “mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted” (1999, 115).

What is emotion?

Vygotsky’s materialist account of consciousness stresses its deep roots within prevailing social relations, via semiotic mediation (Collins 2000), where human activity is defined as meaningful through possession of affective-volitional motive, inclusive of emotion. At the same time in post-revolutionary Russia, there also emerged, but quite independently, the complementary Dialogical School of psychologists, principally around the work of Bakhtin and Vološinov11 (Brandist et al 2004; Collins 2000; Dentith 1995). The dialogicians shared Vygotsky’s understanding of a dynamic unity of functions, but were especially interested in exploring the role played by motive in activity. In particular, Bakhtin (1993) offered a similar starting-point to Vygotsky for developing a materialist understanding of emotion by arguing that all activity, speech and thought possesses an “emotional-volitional tone, and enters into an effective relationship to me within the unity of the ongoing event encompassing us” (Bakhtin 1993, 33) (Bakhtin’s emphases).

The logical consequence of this understanding is that emotion and emotionality cannot be conceptualised as discrete entities or manifestations. This is because the cognitive and the affectual are not distinct processes, but inseparable spheres of the inter-functionality of thought-speech-action. As such, there cannot be emotion without ideas and vice versa (Barker 2001). Emotion, therefore, is the tonal quality of all human behaviour, which colours and conveys the sense and motive of thought-
speech-action, such as when front-line workers provide enthusiastic service, empathic care or even grudging assistance with an irritated tone. In grammatical terms, emotions are not nouns, but rather adjectives and adverbs, “denoting qualities of action, speech, and thought” (Barker 2001, 176). Another element of variation is the intensity of the tonal quality or rather the degree of investment made by people when engaging in a particular event, task or relationship, such as being reserved, cautious or exuberant. In short, emotion is understood as the tonal quality of all labour power forms; the necessary emotional effort.

Like Vygotsky, the dialogicians stress the profoundly social nature of all ideas, speech and actions (Collins 2000; Dentith 1995), whatever their “accents, tones, colors and gestural qualities” (Barker 2001, 176), which means they can only be understood in their inter-subjective contexts, which are concrete historical settings (Leont’ev 1978). Therefore, front-line service workers’ subjective ideas, speech and behaviour when interacting with service users, managers and each other are not divorced from their exploitative and subordinate conditions of employment and the labour process’s inherent structural antagonism (Edwards 1990). In addition, feelings and ideas are not static, ahistorical phenomena, as they can alter and even be transformed by changes in the interactional setting, such as when a front-line worker’s willingness to smile freely is diminished, even withheld, when confronted with an unacceptable intensification of their work. As a veteran flight attendant explains, “(t)he more the company sees the battle, the tougher they get with the regulations... And, then in time, we reject them even more” (Hochschild 1983/2003, 130). During collective industrial action the terms of the effort bargain and managerial regime can be so openly questioned and challenged that it results in an enduring transformation in workers shared ideas and feelings on the nature of their work, employment and employer. Indeed, such transformed orientations can be so palpable that they can undermine, even overturn, previous assumptions by managers, service-users and the public about the nature and content of workers’ ideas and feelings. This is graphically illustrated by a report in the South China Morning Post of an airline cabin crew strike in 1993:

“In the advertisements, the Cathay girls fix a sultry smile then avert their faces with Asian humility. But in the past three days this servile image has been smashed by the perfumed picket line which has shown itself to be resilient and well-orchestrated.... Hundreds of glamorous women... are braving wintry conditions to brandish banners which scream their demands in bold coloured ink” (quoted in Linstead 1995, 199).

Hence, how individuals and groups orient to events, objects, topics or persons is profoundly affected by their orientation to other events, objects, topics and persons. In this case, the picket line is a public display of the strikers’ new orientation to the rest of society, including Cathay Pacific customers, in response to how the company is treating them. Equally, individuals and groups are also affected by the orientations and power relations with other people around them (Barker 2001),
especially those they interact with on a daily, routine basis, such as co-workers, managers and customers. Filby (1992) reveals this in his study of betting shops where employees’ created a counter-culture amongst themselves and regular customers of ridiculing sexual humour and exuberant playfulness. This undermined management’s authority on the shop-floor by sabotaging attempts to enforce corporate behavioural norms. As one manager complained to his staff: “Do you go into a bank or building society and see them singing and dancing and chanting, messing about, hugging each other, kissing each other?” (Filby 1992, 35)

By conceiving of an individual’s volition, ideas and speech (consciousness), as a “social event on a small scale’ with an ever present social audience” (Vološinov 1973, 90), it is possible to underpin an understanding of performing emotional labour – and labour power per se - as a simultaneously individual and collective experience. This is especially pertinent when considering the frequently collective context of service workplaces requiring high degrees of emotional labour, such as hospitals, call-centres and retail stores. This collective context can range from the common experience of having to execute supervised service norms, as part of a larger group of workers, to being part of an informal, supportive co-worker culture (Korczynski 2003) or even one that is formally oppositional in nature, such as a trade union organising campaign (Taylor and Bain 2003).

The language of thought-speech-action

What then is the conceptual means for empirically exploring and analysing the dynamic unity of thought-speech-action? For Vygotsky (1978; 1986), Vološinov (1973) and Bakhtin (1981) access is via speech and language. This is because it is not only a social tool to pursue meaningful activity, but also connects understanding between the individual (their internal thoughts and volition) with the external social world of activity and labour. Vygotsky and Vološinov explicitly follow Marx’s and Engel’s materialist understanding (Cole and Scribner 1978; Dentith 1995) that neither “thoughts nor language in themselves form a realm of their own… (t)hey are the manifestations of actual life” (1970/74, 118). Or more pointedly, language has its genesis in collaborative labour, as humans arrived at the point in their historical development where they had something to say to each other (Cole and Scribner 1978). Consequently, Vygotsky (1978; 1986) and Vološinov (1973) adopt Marx and Engels’ conceptualisation of language as “practical consciousness” (1970/74, 51) in that “it arises from the social demands and needs of the material world and also, through human co-operation and activity, contributes to the transformation of that world” (Holborow 2006, 6). Vygotsky (1978, 24) explains that the dialectical unity between the use of tools (practical intelligence) and the development of speech (symbolic activity) enables the emergence of abstract intelligence whereby humans are able to devise purposeful activity prior to its execution.

This dialectical unity is both Vygotsky’s and Vološinov’s basis for building on Marx’s notion of language as practical consciousness. Vygotsky (1978) argues that as a child develops, their thought and speech is gradually entwined so that the language of others is internalised whereby thought
becomes verbal in form and speech intellectual. This development is crucial in the formation of consciousness, as it is the basis of what Vygotsky (1978; 1986), Bakhtin (1981) and Vološinov (1973) refer to as *inner-speech*. With the emergence of an individual’s inner-speech, all ideas, motives, behaviours and activities, irrespective of their emotional tone, become suffused with, and suspended in speech. Inner-speech, therefore, is the identification of language with individual consciousness and the social dimension of each (Dentith 1995; Holborow 2006); and it is “not just an inner act on the part of an individual” (Vološinov 1973, 90).

While inner-speech may appear to be a monologue, it is intensely contextual (Vygotsky 1986), as it is an embryo of expression, set toward outward expression for social purposes, rather than just an inner act of the individual (Vološinov 1973). What this means is that the organising centre of inner-speech is its social context, as each utterance by an individual possesses an *evaluative accent* that is in response to the immediate situation together with their aggregate social conditions of life (Vološinov 1973, 103). Thus, when a front-line worker performs a service interaction they inwardly evaluate their speech prior to delivery within the social confines and expectations of their role as an employee of an organisation. This is illustrated by the experience of a nursing home care worker dealing with an abusive resident:

> “Now, look, Mr Rice. I don’t mind cleaning up, that’s my job, but I’m not going to do it while you yellin’ at me like that. If you can’t talk to me civilized, then I’m goin’ out and waiting in the hall till you ready to behave” (quoted in Lopez 2006, 147).

In this way, inner-speech can be understood as an interdependent dialogue between the individual and their social, collective context. Indeed, the social context for a word or utterance is not just the immediate event, but overlaps with, and reverberates in other contexts/events through the different, but similar and/or related experiences of other speakers. Indeed, amongst employees it can be the basis for the organic forging of collective support networks, *communities of coping* (Korczynski 2003). A financial services call-centre worker provides an example:

> “Sometimes the customer is rude, they will say ‘fuck off’ if you’ve given them a high quote. These comments are rare but they stick. They affect us all; they rebound round the whole team. One person will tell the person next to them, and the word soon goes round the team” (quoted in Korczynski 2003, 66).

Thus, social “contexts do not stand side-by-side in a row, as if unaware of one another, but are in a state of constant tension or incessant interaction and conflict” (Vološinov 1973, 80). The use of words and speech is the product of a dynamic inter-relationship between the speaker, the listener/s and their social contexts. Moreover, an individual’s own inner-speech and utterances are constituted
by this dialectical unity and are therefore inherently dialogical (Dentith 1995). Hence, just because the speaker and listener share the same language does not imply that they agree on its meaning and uses, especially under the contested conditions of the labour process.

**Dialogical contests and the labour process**

What then are the dialogical ‘mechanics’ of inner-speech and speech acts? Each utterance consists of two dialogically related dimensions. First, there is the subjective, evaluative personal meaning that each individual gives their utterance. In this dimension, the meaning and value of words-in-use are formulated in response to the individual’s own complex, lived experience. The second dimension is the objective social meaning that is attached to the utterance, which is generated in wider society. Words-in-use in society therefore are multi-accented (Vološinov 1973, 22), arising from the myriad of social contexts encountered and occupied by individuals. Consequently, consciousness is the product of this dialogical interrelationship between the two dimensions, which in turn is founded on the dynamic unity of thought-speech-action. However, within class society this dialogical relationship is highly exacerbated, as all social relations are distorted by alienation (Weyher 2012) comprising frequent, profoundly unequal interactions between people and groups, not least in the workplace between employee and manager; and even between front-line worker and service-user. The consequence is that the social meanings belonging to the powerful in society tend to be more influential and even dominant (e.g. the idea that market competition is ‘natural’). In effect, dominant social meanings in capitalism, as Hochschild acknowledges, are the ideologies that “function… as weapons in the conflict between contending elites and social strata” in which they struggle “to assert the legitimacy of their framing rules and feeling rules” (1979, 567).

Utterances, as human interaction, under the conditions of the labour process are not only dialogical in character, but also structurally unequal and inherently conflictual, as they comprise an exacerbated divergence between employees’ personal meanings and management’s social meanings. This in turn renders the meanings of words-in-use as contradictory, contestable and unstable. The dialogical relationship between personal meanings and social meanings has close affinities with Gramsci’s (1971) concept of contradictory consciousness in which there is a dynamic interrelationship between the experientially derived, organic good sense of the subaltern and the hegemonic common sense of the ruling class (Brandist 1996; Ives 2004) – the dialogical engine of ideological class struggle. Thus, within the labour process, the speech-language of managers and workers is suffused with the structural tension generated by the unequal and antagonistic social relationship between capital and labour. Workers, therefore, experience the workplace as a contradictory terrain where their personal meanings clash, compete and overlap with the objectified social meanings of management, as the frontier of control ebbs and flows in response to the “complex interplay of compliance, consent and resistance” (Taylor 1998, 100). Hochschild recognises just such a contest over the meanings of utterances when she discusses the emergence in the late
1970s of a managerial discourse in the US airline industry that made “a series of links between competition, market expansion, advertising, heightened passenger expectations about rights to display, and company demands for acting” (1983/2003, 90). It was a discourse that thingified flight attendants - as disposable and inanimate objects - and justified driving through work intensification in opposition to airline workers trade union resistance (Brook 2009a).

Personal meanings shape an individual’s thought-speech-action, as they harbour their expectations and therefore shape their responses. While personal meanings are subjective experiences they are dialogically forged, most often in an immediate collective context through common experiences of activity, learning, discussion and debate. In the context of the service labour process, a worker’s personal meanings derive from: their social and economic interests as an employee and citizen; their associations and interactions with co-workers and service-users; their common experience of doing the same job and navigating workplace power relations; and the resulting, emergent value systems that arise from employees’ shared interests, ideas and aspirations. An example is provided by a mental health counsellor discussing how she and her co-workers’ social justice values clash with management’s narrow cost-saving, efficiency targets in their not-for-profit healthcare workplace:

Most of us are here because we want to work with people not just in a way that makes a difference, but in a different way – we don’t want to just fill in reports and push paper… We want to work in a way that empowers people and challenges systems that harm people. We want to work with the community to take control back” (quoted in Baines 2011, 149).

The consequence is that individuals’ and groups’ personal meanings tend to suffer a disjunction with externally imposed social meanings in workplaces, where there is a continuous effort by management to subjugate workers’ personal meanings in favour of its own feeling rules and beliefs. Thus, workers’ forge their personal meanings via a continual dialogical contest between their own experience of the job and employer - sometimes underpinned by a countervailing trade union discourse - and management’s ‘official’ perspective and interpretations (cf. Taylor and Bain 2003). Performing emotional labour, therefore, is a contradictory and contested experience where management continually strives to establish its own feeling rules and corporate perspective as the dominant workplace social meaning, which is then routinely contested by workers’ personal meanings, often expressed in an emergent, resistive form, as subversive humour and misbehaviour (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999):

“One night a manager … was showing new starts round, and he passed the mission statement… So he led them back and started reading it when, spontaneously, about ten of us stood up and saluted him, singing the ‘Star Spangled Banner’. And, of course, these new starts got the
message that there was no respect for either management or company” (call-centre worker quoted in Taylor and Bain 2003, 1503).

In this way, Hochschild’s (1983/2003) notion of emotional labourers experiencing a transmutation of feelings, with its implied omnipotent management control, is instead an inherently incomplete process. As Taylor (1998, 99) found, “workers ‘pragmatically’ rather than ‘normatively’… accept managerial prescription of emotional labour” and that “(m)anagerial attempts to control such a private, personal realm… appear to provoke strong resistance” thereby making emotional labour a ‘double-edged sword’”. Accordingly, management control tends to be “partial, incoherent and often contradictory” (ibid, 100). Such an understanding also explains Bolton and Boyd’s (2003, 301) findings that airline cabin crew “remain very aware that they are dealing with demanding, sometimes ‘obnoxious’, customers and that they are offering an ‘empty performance’ where they ‘act out their role obligations without ever buying-in to the norms set by the company”.

In a service workplace there is often a contest between employees’ collectively forged meanings – and associated ideas - with those of management’s’ objectified social meanings. Words and phrases, such as ‘good service’, ‘professional behaviour’, ‘compassion’, ‘care’, ‘decent terms and conditions’ and ‘fair pay’ become sites of dispute over their meaning, purpose and implications. Even in healthcare and social work, where care and compassion is a necessary dimension of emotional labour and an expected professional norm, there are dialogical contests between workers and managers over what constitutes acceptable professional levels of care and compassion (Baines, 2011). Indeed, where workers are able to carve-out organisational space – autonomous of management – they may opt to provide improved care levels that are closer to their own personal and emergent (counter) social meanings:

I think if we hadn’t come up with (the role of greeter), he wouldn’t have made it. His weight was declining, he wouldn’t eat; it looked like a classic case of failure to thrive in the nursing home environment. Plus, he was dangerous to be around. But since he’s taken on this role, he’s like an entirely different person” (social worker quoted in Lopez 2006, 153).

A more extreme example was during the British Airways cabin crew industrial dispute (2009- 2011) where one of the key battlegrounds was over what constituted ‘excellent customer service’. The strikers’ principal argument was that the defence of their terms and conditions of employment was necessary to maintain the airline’s traditional standards of high service in opposition to the senior management’s view that it was possible to deliver a more profitable version of ‘excellent service’ by cutting jobs and pay (Upchurch 2010). In such cases there is a fierce dialogical contest in which management’s ideas and control are never wholly accepted as the dominant, unitary social meaning in the workplace. Instead, managers are confronted by a counter-culture of personal meanings and
emergent social discourse ‘from below’, because for the employees, management’s words-in-use are partial and misrepresent their own experience of work. A call-centre worker illustrates this when she explains her attitude to management’s attempts to control staff absence:

“If I don’t want to go in. I don’t go in. They ask what was wrong. We talked about it one day and thought we’d say something really embarrassing like. But then they give the sting and say how hard it was for team members. But people don’t see it like that. We can be sick. I mean the back-to-work (interview) is false” (quoted in Mulholland 2004, 719).

These dialogical contests between workers and managers are ubiquitous in workplaces to a greater or lesser degree, which LPA recognises as a cultural building-block for the emergence of the collective worker (Korczynski 2003; Mulholland 2004). As such, they are a manifestation of the structured antagonism and domination inherent to the labour process. It is also why Vološinov is able to offer a wider, class analysis of language when he states that “the word is the ideological phenomenon par excellence” (1973, 13) and within “the vicissitudes of the word are the vicissitudes of the society of word-users” (ibid, 157).

What then are the conceptual implications for Hochschild’s (1983/2003) notions of surface acting and deep acting? The answer is that they are too stark and simplistic to capture the dynamic, dialogical complex of workers’ personal meanings – and emergent, counter social meanings - in the form of their attitudes, motivations and behaviours. From a dialogical, and indeed LPA perspective, even if surface and deep acting were to be retained only as short-hand descriptions to highlight the distinction between emotional labour as mere behavioural compliance and when it involves giving something more of the self, they would have to be heavily qualified. As Taylor (1998, 99) found, employees either engage in “sophisticated surface acting” or “deep acting for pragmatic purposes”, to earn an income, often requiring the meeting and surpassing of targets, at the same time as standing guard over their personal feelings. This is precisely why LPA recognises that the experience of employment produces a rich mix of dynamic responses amongst individual workers, ranging from consent to resistance (Edwards 1990; Thompson 1983/1989). It is a range that encompasses the intermediary concepts of making out, playing the game and misbehaviour (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Burawoy 1979). Therefore, at the level of characterising employees’ responses to performing emotional labour, LPA already possesses a sophisticated and flexible array of concepts that is capable of mapping the richly textured, contradictory responses of workers. However, the concept of the subjective-collective dialogical self at work goes beyond characterising and mapping ideas, feelings and behaviours in the workplace by providing an underpinning explanation of their formation at the level of the interplay between the individual-collective worker’s subjective identity and objective interests. This offers LPA the potential for developing deeper understanding of, and greater analytic
purchase on the experience of performing the full range of physical, intellectual and emotional labour under the exploitative and subordinating conditions of the capitalist labour process.

**Conclusion: the dialogical self and labour process analysis**

This article has sought to develop a materialist, dialectical theorisation of the experience of emotional labour and, by logical extension, all other forms of labour power. In order to achieve this, Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the dynamic unity of thought-speech-action is utilised as the basis for explaining labour power as an interdependent complex of physical, intellectual and emotional capacities. The consequence is that emotional labour is not theorised as a discrete activity, but as an aspect of labour power in which the degree and form of emotional effort is largely determined by the extent to which it is required as an object, means and/or condition of the worker’s task and role. Such an understanding is further developed by Vygotsky’s (1986) and Bakhtin’s (1993) materialist understanding of emotion as the volitional tone of all activity, which in turn provides LPA with a compatible foundation to theorise the subjective-collective experience of labour power.

Vygotsky’s (1978; 1986) concept of inner-speech, as the organising centre for thought-speech-action, is then augmented by Bakhtin’s (1981; 1993) and Vološinov’s (1973) materialist theory of speech-language under capitalism that then enables empirical access to workers’ subjective-collective experience of their labour. Thus, employees’ routine experience of the workplace, as contradictory, contested and complex, manifests itself as an ideological contest over words-in-use where workers’ personal meanings variously clash, compete and coalesce with the objectified, dominant social meanings of management, service-users and wider society. In addition, the personal meanings workers have for words-in-use and their speech provide the material basis for the formation of workplace counter-cultures whereby the forging and common use of collectively shared personal meanings can begin to offer an amended or an emergent oppositional set of social meanings to those of management (and even service users). Thus, the concept of the *dialogical self* offers LPA a deeper tier of theorisation that enables it to explain the formation of ideas, feelings and behaviours at the level of workers’ individual-collective subjectivity.

The research implications for LPA is that an understanding of labour power subjectivity, underpinned by the concept of a dynamic complex of thought-speech-action, enables a closer theoretical alignment with LPT’s central tenet that labour power is an embodied set of capacities owned and possessed by the individual worker. As Smith (2012, 4) explains, “regardless of the type of use value that the employer wants from the labourer – hand, head, sexuality, look, muscle – these fragmented utilities can only come into a labour process within the whole person of the worker”, which is why Marx refers to a worker’s labour power capacities as their “living personality” (1976, 270). Thus, emotional labour effort is integral to all labour power activity, as it constitutes the worker’s volitional-motivational register (Sullivan 2012) when undertaking all forms of labour.
The understanding of emotional labour as a manifestation of the thought-speech-action complex also offers LPA’s ethnographic and other qualitative studies the potential to develop a more bespoke methodological orientation for exploring workers’ subjective-collective dialogical selves through their dialogue, ideas, activities and volitional tones. The recent emergence of dialogical approaches to qualitative research are distinctive precisely because they put emphasis on exploring a “complex and conscious subjectivity”, as an aspect of the whole person that “viewed dialogically, is social, relating to self as well as others” and is “complex in so far as it emerges and draws from a network of history, tradition and power” (Sullivan 2012, 43). It is a methodological approach which allows for each aspect of an individual’s labour power capacity to be treated as constitutive of the whole dialogical self – the living personality - rather than treating emotion as a distinct and qualitatively superior register of subjectivity, compared to that of physical and intellectual activity.

Such a theory of labour subjectivity offers all variants of LPA the potential for a closer methodological alignment with LPT’s core propositions. This is because it focuses specifically on the interplay of subjective identity and objective interests (Marks and Thompson 2010) inherent to workers’ experience of their labour power within the labour process. This is the case irrespective of whether LPA seeks to offer a Marxist, ‘post-Marxist’ or other materialist account. For Marxist LPA, Vološinov’s elaboration of a historical materialist theory of consciousness that is anchored in an interplay between language and the conflict-riven inequalities of class society opens up new possibilities for reinvigorating debates around worker activity, consciousness and class struggle. Such contributions provide the potential for a renewed Marxist alternative to LPA accounts of workplace consent and resistance that share core LPT’s rejection of class as a concrete, empirical basis for analysing workers’ identity, interests and activities (see Edwards 2010).

References


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**Notes**

1 There is a long-standing dispute over whether Vološinov and Bakhtin was the same person. I follow Dentith (1995) in assuming that they are two different writers, not least because Vološinov, unlike Bakhtin, is explicitly Marxist.

2 Vygotsky’s and Bakhtin’s work has long been popular in other branches of sociology and applied social studies (Daniels 2008; Dentith 1995), but has had minimal take-up and influence in the sociology of work. Vygotsky’s ideas underpin the large body of ideas referred to as Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Barker 2007; Jones 2009).

3 LPT core theory, as principally articulated by Thompson and Smith (2001; 2009), is not without its critics from either ends of the Marxist/non-Marxist LPA spectrum. Jaros (2005, 2010) argues it is too close, conceptually, to Marx’s labour theory of value and structured class antagonism. On the other hand, Martínez Lucio and Stewart (1997) and Carter (1995) argue that the core theory marginalises the role of the collective worker wrongly severs its connection to class struggle.

4 The reference here to productive labour does not imply that capitalist social relations are not manifest in the relations of ‘unproductive’ labour where, instead of surplus-value, surplus labour is extracted, such as in public sector service work (see Carchedi 1977; Carter and Stevenson 2012).

5 This interdependent unity of physical, intellectual and emotional faculties is readily apparent through our common knowledge that distressed emotional states affect physical changes, such as provoking headaches, digestive disorders, lethargy and even heart attacks.
This is not to ignore aesthetic labour, sexualised labour (Warhurst and Nickson 2009) and body labour (Cohen 2011). They are composites of physical, intellectual and emotional labour, which are the primary labour power capacities (Brook 2010).

Brook (2009a) offers a detailed critical assessment of Hochschild’s application of Marx’s theory of alienation in the Managed Heart, while Weyher (2012) usefully explores emotion in Marx’s alienation theory.

See Korczynski (2002) for a critical discussion of services management literature, including the servicescape model.

Brook (2009b) offers a detailed counter-critique of Bolton’s (and Boyd’s) critique of Hochschild and alternative typology of workplace emotion management.

In stressing the foundational role played by a unified conception of human labour activity, I follow Marx’s understanding of materialism that “The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism… is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively” (1975, 421). Vincent (2011) makes the same mistake by arguing that ‘emotion at work’ is a subjective phenomenon rather than a sensuous, real dimension of human labour activity.

Medvedev was another influential pioneering dialogician who wrote on literature as an ideological form.

Capitalism also transforms our society-wide ‘emotional economy’. Illouz (2007) argues that the individualised market relations of consumer capitalism have created an intensely ‘emotional capitalism’ of ‘cold intimacies’ where commodified market relations have become deeply emotional via discourses of ‘self-realization’ and ‘self-help’ that in turn are framed by ‘romantic fantasy’. Fineman (2010, 27) argues that contemporary capitalism produces “emotionologies (that) colour” loud public discourses on certain social groups and occupations, such as asylum seekers, bankers, nurses, firefighters and welfare claimants. Emotionologies are “politicido-ideological constructs, largely shaped by the agendas of powerful political groups and media that legitimate vocabulary and feelings as appropriate expressions for certain social groups and activities, such as “admiration, hate, love, pity, fear anger or indignation” (ibid).

It can be argued that competitive pressures on both private commercial and public service organisations have generated a specific neo-liberal form of ‘emotional grammar’ (Nussbaum 2001). This emanates from management seeking to inculcate worker servility and affective commitment to related organisational goals in the name of customer-orientation. In tandem with this has arisen the ideological pressure on employees to view themselves as individual market actors, working flexibly with portfolio careers, in which they should possess ‘emotional intelligence’ to enable them to become more intelligent, adaptive and reflexive thereby demonstrating “moral character” (Hughes 2005).

In Thedosius’ (2008) study of emotional labour in health care, she adopts Archer’s (2003) notion of the internal conversation as a means for offering a realist theorisation of the experience of emotional labour. However, her analysis does not employ an integrated theory of workplace structures and relations, such as LPA. Consequently, it tends to have a one-eyed focus on the experience of the individual worker, divorced from wider social relations and collective agency. Furthermore, while Archer’s inner conversation attempts to marry agency with structure it produces a ‘stretched’ separation between the two and deliberately ‘bends the stick’ in favour of agency (Mutch 2004).

Bakhtin uses the term utterance and Vološinov words-in-use and utterance to describe speech acts, which may be full sentences or even just verbal exclamations, such as Ah! The meaning of these is contingent upon the
participants and context. Speech acts in this sense are founded on the basis of many genres, not just formal language, which people use in everyday speech and communication (Dentith 1995, 37-40). I use the terms interchangeably.