

Let's Play Pretend, but Grown-Up Edition: Emotional Labor

Golsee Vue, Section 929, 800 words

Remember when we were kids? We used to have such wild imaginations and the limits to our creativity were limitless. One of the most vivid memories I have as a kid, and I'm sure many other people have, is when we would play pretend and take up any profession that we wanted. I remember every recess someone would scream out, "I call being the teacher!" The kid who got the role of being the teacher for the short 30-minute playtime that day would get to act out what they thought it meant to be a teacher. Many times, the "teacher" would pass out homework, correct easy math, and spelling, and create little teaching lessons. Along with that, the "teacher" would use a strict, disappointed voice when giving time-outs to the so-called "bad" students and use a fun, happy voice when giving rewards to the so-called "good" students. All this "play pretend" as a kid was fun and games, but perhaps there is a truth to the words "play pretend" even for when we grow up and actually become a teacher.

With pursuing a job comes something called *emotional labor*. Emotional labor is "the instrumental use and suppression of emotion" (Tracy, 2005, p. 261) for the sake of the job that a person has. It is reportedly linked to many negative psychosocial effects such as burning out, getting stressed, depression, becoming emotionally numb, etc. Emotional labor is necessary for managing other people's emotions (Kaplan, 2019). Emily Kaplan recalls in her article from Edutopia.org a time when she had tried to teach a writing lesson early in her career as a second-grade teacher. As a topic to write about she had thrown up the idea of when grandmother passed away on the white board in front of her students. This writing topic eventually caused her students to think about different losses that they encountered, causing many tears to be shed and no more time for the writing lesson. Kaplan, clueless on how to handle the situation at the time,

writes that she had seen, “a particularly sensitive little boy, his cheeks stained with tears, stood up and ran to the corner, then slid down to the floor and put his head between his knees” and how she had thought, ““if only I could do that”” (Kaplan, 2019). Although frustrated with not being able to successfully finish her writing lesson and on how to handle the situation at hand, Kaplan was forced to keep going for the sake of keeping that “teacher” role. What Kaplan was experiencing was also known as emotive dissonance. Emotive dissonance is defined as “a clash between ‘real’ feelings and ‘fake’ display” (Tracy, 2005, p. 262). It is the feeling we get from emotional labor; the feeling can be described as the equivalent to our childhood term of “play pretend,” which is necessary in order to maintain that “professional” image or “look the part” of a job.

Ruben Brosbe is a fourth-grade teacher in Harlem, New York City. In his article for theeducatorsroom.com, he writes about his struggle with emotional labor. He mentions how teachers learn how to “care for these students as if they are family,” (Brosbe, 2016) but when something happens to a student, they aren’t allowed to show their emotions as if they had cared deeply about them for the sake of not upsetting other students. Brosbe recalls a Thursday morning when he was called and given the news that a student would not be returning to school. In that moment, engulfed by his own emotions, he had asked one of the other teachers to watch over his classroom for him. Brosbe then walked to a nearby bathroom and cried. Brosbe talks about how many emotions he had felt at the moment but had to maintain composure for the sake of his students. Emotional labor can be “easier when it confirms a preferred identity,” (Brosbe 2016) which is why Brosbe found it even more difficult for him to show his emotions as he was a man who, according to social standards, wasn’t supposed to show his emotions in the first place. He says, after he had cried for his student, he felt shame “as a man and as a teacher”

(Brosebe, 2016). Brosbe expresses his frustration about having to be “professional” and still stay mentally healthy. He says, “If we don’t acknowledge this stress and treat it, we are ultimately doing a disservice to our students. You can’t take care of young people if you aren’t taking care of yourself” (Brosbe, 2016).

Emotional labor is something that shouldn’t be taken lightly. The emotive dissonance that goes along with emotional labor is damaging and everyone should be aware of it. The thing about playing pretend is it used to be fun when we were kids because we weren’t actually doing the job every single day. The success of getting the title as the teacher for the one day and dealing with the so-called “students” who were actually classmates at the time felt fun and satisfying. Playing pretend in the real world, every day, and for the sake of keeping the job that we’ve worked so hard to earn isn’t fun. Like Brosbe said, and as mentioned before, “you can’t take care of people if you aren’t taking care of yourself”. This emotional labor that we go through for the sake of our jobs is a reality that we face and put a face on for. Honestly, who would have thought that as a grown-up we’d still have to “play pretend”?

References

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