

The new feeling rules of emotion work in heterosexual couple relationships

Abstract

This article suggests that new feeling rules of intimacy within heterosexual couple relationships are widely recognised and reflect the contention that an androgynisation of the value of emotion is taking place (Illouz, 2008) whereby men are expected to disclose emotion and provide emotional support to female partners. Simultaneously the new feeling rules are recognised to be difficult to follow for men due to the highly gendered nature of emotion work in heterosexual relationships suggesting talk of emotion has changed while practice has not. Drawing on interview data collected in the UK (13 male and 15 female) it is suggested that the new feeling rules can be broken down into three distinct areas associated with the highly desirable status of being a 'good partner': (a) being 'emotionally skilled', (b) disclosing emotion and (c) performing relational emotion work. This analysis enables a critical appreciation of how inequalities of emotion work can be reproduced as part of the pursuit of having a 'good relationship', mainly unquestioningly, and sets out a new way of looking at the relationship between emotion work, gender and equality.

Introduction

Couple relationships are widely considered to be central to personal lives with 'the intimate sphere becoming the unquestioned non-place that anchors heteronormative public discourses' (Laurie and Stark, 2012, p. 25) – often related to wellbeing, happiness and success. Ahmed (2010) highlights how the concepts of happiness and intimacy are intertwined within an 'assumption that happiness follows relative proximity to a social ideal' (p. 53). Couple relationships themselves are thus highly valued and the pressure to be in a 'good relationship', or any relationship at all, is widely recognised as being central to having a fulfilling life (Wilkinson, 2012). Roseneil et. al (2020) recognise the pervasive power of the 'couple-norm' which centralises coupledness as 'the normal, natural and superior way of being an adult' (p. 3) so that the couple-form is seen as a sign of good citizenship and being in a couple is seen as an achievement. Yet heterosexual relationships have long been regarded as a site where gender inequalities are normalised and reproduced. If love and care are understood as key material resources that are produced and distributed within couple relationships (Jonasdottir and Ferguson, 2014) then their exchange must be analysed within an awareness that unequal distributions of these are directly related to the persistence of male dominance and power (Jonasdottir and Ferguson, 2014, Jackson, 1999).

This paper will use the concept of feeling rules to examine the ways in which now commonsensical changes in attitudes to emotion (Ahmed, 2010) have both, at a discursive level, opened up space for men to do more emotion work while making invisible new ways women are expected to support men in doing so. Hochschild (1983) suggested that emotional exchanges are governed by sets of 'feeling rules' which establish a sense of obligation or entitlement, answering questions regarding 'what should I feel?' so that individuals intervene in feelings in order to shape them. While it may be expected that intimate relationships would have more freedom from feeling rules, Hochschild suggests this is not the case. Rather 'the deeper the bond, the more emotion work, and the more unconscious we are of it. In the most personal bonds, then, emotion work is likely to be the strongest.' (1983, p.63). Evidence of change since previous research in the feeling rules around the responsibility for and performance of emotion work in heterosexual couple relationships can thus be seen as a manifestation of the dynamic intersection of norms about gender and intimacy. The structuring of these norms is never uniform, yet the pull to do what feels 'right' is compelling. Through examining the new feeling rules it becomes possible to look at a process of androgynisation taking place in regards to the *value* of emotion work and at the same time to analyse the persistent notion that women are largely better at *doing* emotion, as well as the impact of this.

Quantitative research conducted in Germany focusing on emotional wellbeing (Horne and Johnson, 2019) and qualitative daily diary research conducted in the U.S. focusing on relationship quality (Curran et. al. 2015) found traditionally gendered patterns of emotion work within the relational context. Research with three young couple in the UK found that 'the heterosexual relationship is a place for men to express their emotional vulnerability, and the woman is constructed as more emotionally skilled' (Holford, 2019, p. 165). While quantitative research gathering daily experiences of emotion work over 10 days in the US, with heterosexual and same sex couples (Umberson et. al. 2020), found that it is too simplistic to focus on gender similarities or differences. Rather it is relevant to consider the gender of participants, the gender of their spouse and the interaction between the two concluding that 'the provision of emotion work may be more psychologically taxing when one's partner is a man' (Umberson et. al. 2020, p. 1154). The persistence of gender inequalities within recent research into emotion work within heterosexual couple relationships (Horne and Johnson, 2019, Holford, 2019, Umberson et al, 2020) suggests that while the interviews for this paper were conducted approximately 10 years ago the experiences they reflect continue to be relevant today.

Within traditional gender norms of intimacy it has been claimed for many years that women fulfil an 'emotional contract' (Hite, 1988, p. 30-34) to provide emotional support, adopting a nurturant role which is 'closely interwoven with our location within patriarchal relations' (Jackson, 1999, p. 118). This performance of nurture is central to femininity as 'being validated as a feminine person is paradoxically conditioned on the readiness to set aside one's own person' (Gunnarson, 2014, p. 105). Nurture is directly connected to emotion work as women are often expected, including by themselves, to be emotional facilitators for their loved ones including partners and children (Jonasdottir, 2011). While the characterisation of unemotional men, in distinction to 'emotional women', (Lupton, 1998) has been critiqued by psychologists and sociologists (Cohen, 1990; Galansinski, 2004, de-Boise and Hearn, 2017) it continues to pervade understandings of intimacy in which women are considered 'naturally' more emotional, often understood as more emotionally skilled.

Emotion work, or emotion management is recognised by Hochschild (1983, p. 20) as having been 'better understood and more often used by women as one of the offerings they trade for economic support'. Hochschild states that women are trained to manage their feelings more than men leading to them performing more emotion work 'especially emotion work that affirms, enhances, and celebrates the well-being and status of others.' (p. 165, 1983). While it can largely be argued that women are less financially dependent on men since the 1980s and in the UK gender norms have moved past seeing women's primary role as a mother or a wife whose roles are to provide care and support, the 'discursive force' (Lahad, 2017, p. 5) of nurture being central to the performance of femininity remains prominent.

The new feeling rules present a picture in which men now too are expected to be nurturing through being emotionally supportive of their partners. At first glance these new rules appear to represent continuity for women who were expected to do emotion work in the traditional rules and to represent a new set of expectations of 'what should I feel?' for men that challenge traditional norms of men being unemotional (Seidler, 1991). However on closer inspection it becomes clear that the expectation that men (at least try to) nurture their partners must lead to a shift in the role of not only men but also of women in heterosexual relationships. The androgynisation of the value of emotion work (Illouz, 2008) therefore both opens up spaces in which men are expected to be more emotionally supportive as well as spaces in which women are expected to support them to do that.

The old feeling rules?

Arlie Hochschild (1983) introduced the highly influential concept of emotion work into sociology, and more widely into the public imagination, referring to the requirement to manage feeling so as to

'render them 'appropriate' to a situation' (p. 551, 1979). Hochschild stresses that doing emotion work not only refers to controlling or suppressing emotions, rather it refers to 'the act of evoking or shaping, as well as suppressing, feeling in oneself.' (p. 561, 1979). This process of evocation and control of emotion reflect norms and ideology through a cultural awareness of feeling rules. Indeed Hochschild highlights the 'underside of ideology' (p. 557) that is revealed by feeling rules, particularly when these change due to shifting relations between 'the sexes' (p. 557). Old feeling rules are dropped in place of new ones for Hochschild (1979, p. 567) when 'A sense of rights and duties applied to feelings in situations is also changed' highlighting the centrality of context to feeling rules. Hochschild goes so far as to say changes in feeling rules reflect the psychological effect of rapid social change themselves (1979, p. 567). Feeling rules therefore provide latent 'social guidelines that direct how we want to try to feel' (p. 563, 1979, my emphasis) emphasising the idealised aspect of feeling rules. Feeling rules are essentially a guide to emotions that reflect cultural values; following these rules in practice however requires work – specifically *emotion* work.

Hochschild highlights that emotion work is not only performed on the self, through self-management, but also by the self to manage feeling in others, referred to by Hochschild (1983, p. 163) as 'relational work'. Within research on intimacy and personal relationships the concept of emotion work has been widely used and has found gender difference in the performance of relational emotion work (for example Erickson, 2005; Duncombe and Marsden, 1995; Minnotte et al., 2007; Umberson et al, 2015). In her research using two waves of postal survey data collected over 1995–1996 from 335 married parents (225 of whom were women), Erickson (2005, p. 338) found that accounts of emotion work were highly gendered when referring to the 'activities that are concerned with the enhancement of others' emotional well-being and with the provision of emotional support'. Wilcox and Nock (2006, p.322) found that the most crucial determinant of women's marital quality was their assessment of their husband's marital emotion work defined as 'any effort to express positive emotion to their wives, or to set aside time for activities focused specifically on their relationship' which can be interpreted as the performance of relational emotion work.

In the 80s and 90s a large body of empirical work researching heterosexual couple relationships and gender equality was conducted. Across this literature female participants were consistently found to be less happy in heterosexual relationships, a fact often directly attributed to their male partner's lack of emotional involvement (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993, 1995, Mansfield and Collard, 1988, Komter, 1989, Benjamin, 1998). The ground breaking work of Duncombe and Marsden led them to conclude that 'gender asymmetry in relation to intimacy and emotion work may be the last and most obstinate manifestation of gender inequality' (1993, p. 150) due to the lack of willingness on

the part of their male participants to acknowledge a problem existed. When considering the feeling rules that are apparent within this body of work from the 1980s and 90s it is clear there was a large gender difference in expectations of who should do emotion work within heterosexual couple relationships wherein women were widely regarded as 'nagging' their partners for intimacy while male partners were largely emotionally missing (Duncombe and Marsden, 1995).

The influence of therapeutic culture

Therapeutic culture generally refers to the increasing influence of therapeutic understandings of the self that have emerged from psychology and counselling during the 20th century, including an increased emphasis on the value of help seeking and emotional expression (Wright, 2008). The argument that men are becoming more emotionalised (Lupton, 1998) in response to therapeutic culture (Illouz, 2008) rests on wider patterns of social change in the professionalisation of emotion work. The shift for men to be characterised as more emotionally engaged in their intimate relationships has been attributed to a feminist agenda from the late 1960s onwards (Seidler, 1991) which has resulted in a feminisation of emotional discourse, one of few aspects of social life which is determined by women. In 'Transformation of Intimacy' Giddens (1992) described changes in intimacy within a social world marked by processes of individualisation driven forward by women - 'the emotional revolutionaries of modernity' (p. 130) - in search of equality. Radical shifts in the gender order were predicted as characterised by sexual and emotional equality through a 'restructuring of intimacy' (p. 58) as men were expected to disclose their emotions more.

Illouz states that disclosing is a central tenet of therapeutic discourse which 'incessantly conveys ...that all bonds can be formed and maintained through partners' ability to express verbally their needs, emotions, and goals and to negotiate those needs through language' (2008, p. 134). An androgynisation of emotional lives is a result of new models of 'gender blind narratives of identity' (p. 15) that challenge men, in particular middle and upper class men, to become more emotionally reflexive and talkative. This androgynisation of emotional lives has however been questioned by empirical research that found while men are aware of the therapeutic narrative, this has not altered their practice (Brownlie, 2014). The process of androgynisation for Illouz (2012) coincides with an increase in the rationalisation of emotional lives that has led to a 'cooling' of intimacy as emotions are experienced within a context that is shaped by the intertwining of economic and emotional cultural models within late capitalism. However, this focus on intimacy operating as rational transactions is based on an individualistic concept of intimacy that has been widely challenged as it leaves little room to consider how gender inequalities in intimacy persist at a structural level (Jamieson, 1998, Smart, 2007, Carter, 2021, Twamley, 2019). The extent to which equality in the

reciprocity of emotion work, and by extension the operation of gendered power, are challenged through the new feeling rules will be analysed throughout this paper.

Methods Section

This study explores how emotion intersects with power in couple relationships within adults living in Scotland. The first stage of data gathering was through an online survey (N=1,081) conducted in 2010 as part of a wider piece of research into sexual attitudes and communication. Survey participants who chose to continue to be involved in the research (and could be contacted) after the researcher's year of maternity leave took part in a telephone interview (N=43) in 2011, and those that were available and still interested were interviewed face to face. Interview participants included men (N=16) and women (N=16), both in relationships and not, identifying as heterosexual (N=28) and homosexual (N=4) with all participants identifying as white, predominantly Scottish or British, except one male heterosexual participant who identified as North African. Interviews were conducted in 2012 across Scotland.

As this paper is primarily focused on analysing emotional work and its reciprocity between men and women within intimate couple relationships it includes only to the data collected from individuals who identified as heterosexual, a total of thirteen men and fifteen women. Of these 28 participants twenty five were in relationships at the time of interview. All interviews were conducted with individuals (i.e. no couple interviews) by the author and lasted between 60 to 120 minutes (average 90 minutes) in a range of locations including university buildings, participants' homes, cafés and a hotel lobby. Interview topics included a discussion of participants relationship histories, gender equality and emotional participation including questions on providing and receiving emotional support.

As an interviewer I was aware of cultural assumptions about my position (middle class, female, feminist) that impacted on the rapport developed, including as a woman interviewing men about their emotions (Liebling, 2004). The interviews were conducted while the researcher was between 8 and 9 months pregnant which may have contributed to gendered patterns emerging within the data as female participants with children provided advice on parenting and being a partner, male participants with children joked about the difficulties of parenthood and participants without children discussed their intentions around having children

Using the work of Frith and Kitzinger (1998) and Chandler (2012) data was analysed as an account of couple relationships, specific to the context of the interview, in order to consider how participants *talk* about their relationships and what this talk is doing during interview. 'Collaborative constructions' produced within the interviews describe what relationships are like using motifs of

wider socio-cultural narratives such as therapeutic discourse (Illouz,2008). This approach was chosen in order to understand how participants themselves construct and negotiate their reports in interactive ways. The presence of emotion work in the interviews was observed during the transcription process, facilitated by reflection on what took place in the interview context. As suggested by Frith and Kitzinger (1998, p. 316) emotion work is considered to be a resource used both in and beyond the interview to achieve various roles including presenting themselves in a favourable light, both to the interviewer and themselves, to retain a sense of agency or power in presenting their accounts of their intimate relationships.

Where interview quotes are presented these have been chosen by the author as they are the most relevant quote to support the argument being made. Interview data was analysed using narrative analysis following the 'storying stories' approach (McCormack, 2004) to facilitate a deep understanding of the personal stories being told with recognition that these stories are also accounts, given in the specific environment of the interview setting (Frith and Kitzinger, 1998) Through paying particular attention to similarities and differences between stories, especially in relation to the gender of participants, key aspects of emotion work became apparent from the data.

Characteristics of participants are reported in brackets beside each quote including their self-chosen pseudonym, their chosen social class status and age bracket at time of interview. Identifying information has been excluded to ensure anonymity for participants. The study was approved by the Director of the Graduate School in the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh and all participants gave written consent to take part and have their data written into publications.

The New Feeling Rules

There are three central expectations that participants had as to what constitutes a 'good partner' in regards to emotion work: (a) being 'emotionally skilled', (b) an ability to disclose emotion and (c) the performance of relational emotion work. What becomes clear when looking over all the accounts of participants is that there is almost complete agreement around the centrality of these three aspects of emotion work, and these expectations are androgynous – they are expected of both men and women. However, directly alongside these universal expectations is discussion of who is skilled at *doing* these forms of emotion work which is highly gendered. This tension is unquestioned by participants and discussed in ways that show it to reflect the common sense idea that women are 'better' at emotion and by extension emotion work.

Being 'emotionally skilled'

The performance of personal emotion work refers to the process of 'self-management' whereby individuals manage their feelings to fit in with their understanding of the feeling rules in a given context (Hochschild, 1979, 1983). What is clear from the interviews conducted is that a central aspect of doing personal emotion work is knowing how one feels and understanding the emotions of others, both of which are consistently presented as being highly gendered. Throughout every interview references were made to the different abilities individuals have to be 'in touch' with their emotions, with women consistently being regarded as usually better than men. Mitt reinforces this distinction when he describes his own ability to be emotional:

'I get the impression that women are much more in touch with their emotions than men are, so I don't think I'm up on that scale, but I think I'm better placed than most men are.' Mitt (male, m.c., early 50s)

This notion of a scale supports the central tenets of therapeutic discourse that being in touch with one's emotion is valuable and positive, a skill set one should aspire to have, and simultaneously implies a hierarchy of emotional skill that is highly gendered.

The consistency of gendered expectations of emotional skill across all participants was striking, including within the account of Marlene who was aware of the ways in which she did *not* fulfil the expectations of her to be emotionally skilled. Marlene described herself as being sad and frustrated at her 'lack' of this skill and explains how her husband supports her in social situations:

'I have to use him as an emotional reference point because I'm not very good at sometimes working out what other people mean... It's having sufficient trust, I suppose it exposes your frailties if you are having to ask these kind of referencing questions, and it's not something I would do with anyone else, to say 'excuse me, I'm socially inept, can you tell me what I should be feeling here?'.' Marlene (female, m.c., mid 40s)

Although Marlene represents a different perspective to that of a 'naturally emotional' woman, her description of herself as 'socially inept' draws on a notion that she *should* be emotionally skilled by being able to perceive and understand the emotional cues of people around her. One male participant, Jack (also questions the commonsensical gendered assumptions that permeated the accounts of all participants when he described who raises issues within the relationship he has with his wife:

'I am probably...it's funny, my wife and I think it's quite interesting that probably I have more of the personality traits that you might usually ascribe to a woman! And my wife is

probably more like the man, in that she just kind of lets things go.' Jack (male, m.c. mid 30s)

If we accept the ability to understand the emotions of others and the desire to raise issues within a relationship to be contingent on having emotional skill then the accounts from Marlene and Jack highlight that not all women perceive themselves to be highly emotionally skilled, and not all men as unskilled. Yet all participants drew on highly gendered socio-cultural motifs of emotion even when they themselves did not reproduce these motifs. Therefore, despite claims that all good partners *should* be emotionally skilled, in the context of heterosexual couple relationships there are very different expectations as to what that represents for men and women.

Disclosing Emotion

There is widespread recognition of a shift in attitudes towards disclosing emotion so that talking about one's feelings is portrayed, often unquestioningly, as being an important part of maintaining both a healthy relationship (Giddens, 1992) and sound mental wellbeing (refs). In line with this understanding all interviews contained a discussion of the expectation that a 'good relationship' requires the disclosure of emotion, even if this can be difficult or exposing. Chaser described himself as being 'good' at emotion, in that he is emotionally expressive, but highlighted that while his partners had appreciated this in the past it was not necessarily unproblematic for him:

'My ex said I was very expressive emotionally and others have said that too, once I open that door I'm very much... I'm very expressive, surprisingly sometimes I suppose...but I could be quite easily hurt if that somehow is used against me...the fact that I'm emotionally open.' Chaser (male, w.c., early 50s)

Chaser highlights a sentiment found in most of the interviews with men: that being emotionally expressive can be difficult and potentially exposing while also being desirable (Author's own, 2017). The desirability of being able to talk about feelings within a couple relationship is recognised in all of the interviews with male participants who either stress how they are good at this already, how difficult it can be, or that they are *trying* to improve their ability to disclose emotion. None of the accounts from participants questioned the notion that talking about one's feelings is positive and necessary. Caracticus supported the importance of being able to disclose emotion as he wanted to be in a relationship where he would be encouraged to share his feelings:

'Fiona: When you're looking for a partner would you rather have somebody who doesn't push you to talk about how you're feeling or do you actually quite like?

Caracticus: No I would like to be better at it, so yes I like it.

Fiona: Does it feel comfortable?

Caracticus: No! Caracticus (male, w.c., early 30s)

Caracticus refers here to the desire to be 'better' at talking about how he is feeling which can be understood as a way he is 'working to try to fit the feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1983). Caracticus knows that in order to follow the new feeling rules, in which disclosing emotion is required, he wants to get 'better' at it and wants a partner to help him achieve this, despite this work being difficult for him. Disclosing emotion is therefore central to being a good partner for Caracticus, a sentiment echoed by all of the participants.

Interestingly in interviews almost all female participants spoke of their male partners' difficulties with disclosing intimacy and almost all male participants discussed themselves. In an extract from the interview with Grace she describes her current relationship and *why* disclosing emotion was seen as central to having a 'good relationship' for her:

'He does talk about things so I have to conclude from that he shares what concerns him... I want to be the person that hears that and I don't think the relationship would be worth much if he didn't feel able to do that... I think we all need people to be vulnerable with and be special to and share delights and sorrow in equal measure and so having him there for that really matters.' Grace (female, m.c., early 50s)

Grace brings attention to the reasons she wants her partner to disclose his emotions with her, firstly that he shares his concerns with her which tells her that he trusts her, that he can be vulnerable with her. Secondly she wants to be the person who hears that, implying here that she feels a sense of recognition that it is her role, as his partner, to listen to him and be the person who is chosen to share 'delights and sorrow' with. The combination of these two aspects of having a partner that discloses emotion speaks directly to the central notion that being in a 'good relationship' bestows status on individuals. The cultural value of couple relationships being a social ideal, directly related to the pursuit of happiness (Ahmed, 2010), is reproduced here through Grace's account of questioning the 'worth' of a relationship in which emotional disclosure does not take place. Emotional disclosure, specifically discussing one's emotions, therefore becomes a symbol of having a 'good relationship' and is central to the new feeling rules.

Relational Emotion Work

Relational emotion work refers to work that is undertaken to manage the feeling of others (Hochschild, 1983, p. 163) to include providing emotional support and enhancing others' emotional wellbeing (Wilcox and Nock, 2006). Relational emotion work has been found to be highly relevant in

relationship happiness (Erickson, 2005), with research finding wide gender differences in who actually does this form of emotion work (for example Minnotte et al 2007, Umberson et al 2015) in line with the old feeling rules. In the new feeling rules there is a widespread acceptance that relational emotion work is necessary in a 'good relationship' as can be seen from Clint when he describes his current relationship:

'Providing emotional support is one of the most important things you can do in a relationship...the ability to provide emotional support is hugely important in a relationship. Without it, if you can't provide emotional support to your partner I don't think you're in the right relationship, simple as.' Clint (male, w.c, mid 30s)

Clint here shows his *awareness* of the new feeling rule related to relational emotion work, itself a requirement to be seen as a 'good partner', both within the interview context and beyond.

Performing relational emotion work (by being emotionally supportive) is not only associated with being in a 'good' relationship but also to being in the 'right' relationship suggesting that a relationship without this support is somehow void or lacking. This sentiment is echoed by Christine who stated in her interview that she felt her partner didn't show her the love that he claimed to have for her as he did not share his feelings or ask about hers:When :

'I think we both kind of walled ourselves to some extent... like it's simple, could you please just try a little harder to be interested in my day... I don't know if that's fair or not of me, but I believe that watching that kind of behaviour does demonstrate an element more of love.' Christine (female, m.c., late 40s)

Again here the importance of relational emotion work to having a 'good relationship' is seen as central. Christine states here that a lack of interest in her life by her husband is interpreted as a lack of love, a lack of him doing relational emotion work. The notion of emotional support is extended here by Christine beyond disclosing emotion, or listening to one's partner's emotional disclosure, to the mundane everyday interaction of taking an interest in someone's day. The idea from Christine that her partner needs to 'try harder' in itself reflects her recognition that this requires work, specifically emotion work, on his part which he is not prepared to give her or do for her (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993, 1995).

Amanda extends the definition of relational emotion work further by highlighting how raising issues within the relationship is a sign of care from her partner, a sentiment echoed by almost all female participants:

'Normally I think I can tell him everything although sometimes I think he doesn't do the same, sometimes it seems to me...I'm the one, nine times out of ten will bring the subject up and it would be nice if he would do it more...because sometimes you think, well does he care enough or is it me who is caring?' Amanda (female, w.c., early 30s)

Amanda questions the reciprocity in her relationship and in doing so constructs herself as the provider of relational emotion work and her partner as the recipient. This sentiment was shared by several female participants when recognising that they raise the majority of issues in their relationship to discuss them and considered this an act of relational emotion work they were performing to improve their relationship.

Many of the female participants described examples of their role as a 'good' partner being one in which they use their intimate knowledge of their partner and their increased emotional skills to support their partner to disclose emotion. Susie provides an account of her knowing her male partner was upset as an example of how he *tries* to talk about his feelings:

'A lot of the time it is being patient because it takes him so long to articulate what it is he wants to say, but a lot of the time I just ask him a question and probably sit for like a few minutes before he's able to actually say what's wrong... he would probably say that it's something that he's not used to, but it's worked the last few times and he has been able to open a bit. I mean as I said, it's minimal what he will say and I think he finds it hard to even identify what he is exactly feeling, because I think that feeling upset that's the main one that comes out but that can mean a whole world of different feelings, so I'm like well, you're upset, we'll just deal with that... that is my role, because if he's not right I want to help and I want to do something...I wouldn't just sit back and let him be upset.' Susie (female, m.c., late 20s)

Through performing this relational emotion work Susie is simultaneously fulfilling her role as a 'good partner' to provide emotional support while also enabling her partner to fulfil the new feeling rules through him disclosing his feelings. Both of these outcomes of her relational emotion work reproduce the highly gendered expectation that women are 'better' at emotion.

While no male participants discussed examples of them doing this kind of relational emotion work of facilitating conversations about emotion there were two examples described by female participants which highlight that there is no strictly gendered pattern of providing emotional support. One example of Marlene, presented earlier, whose husband was

essentially her emotional guide in social situations where she struggled to understand the emotions of others. The second example was discussed in an interview with June when she was asked about emotional participation in her relationship where she described a recent event which made her feel loved by her husband:

'I've had a really sore shoulder and I've been having physio on it, she had said to put a hot water bottle on the back of my shoulder and lie on it and like the past two nights without me even knowing, when I've been going to get ready for bed, he has gone and turned the bed down and arranged my pillows and made the hot water bottle and had it lying there and that kind of thing means a lot.' June (female, w.c., mid 50s)

June highlights here that emotional support, and by extension the performance of relational emotion work, can be performed in many ways which do not require talking at all (Jamieson, 1998). However this kind of demonstration of love was not recognised as central to couple relationships by participants and was only discussed by a few participants (who notably were in longer term relationships). Rather the performance of relational emotion work was consistently associated with talking – about mundane events such as for Christine, about issues in the relationship as for Amanda or about feeling upset as for Susie. The new feeling rules seem to therefore include an expectation that relational emotion work is central to having a good, healthy relationship, a status that is questioned when this emotion work is not present.

Conclusion

The central argument of this paper is that there are a new set of androgynous feeling rules for heterosexual relationships which are widely recognised and acknowledged and yet the traditional notion of women being 'better' at emotion work makes following these rules highly unequal. It is crucial to acknowledge the two levels at which feeling rules operate – at a cultural level as a manifestation of norms around intimacy and gender, and at an interpersonal level where individuals interpret these rules within their couple relationships. At the cultural level the new feeling rules set out expectations, in line with therapeutic culture, that emotions should be shared and that this is a requirement of having a good, fulfilling, healthy relationship. This represents a marked shift in expectations of men from evidence from previous research in the 1980s and 1990s where several pieces of research found that male partners did not want to talk about their feelings (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993, 1995, Mansfield and Collard, 1988, Komter, 1989, Benjamin, 1998). The 'old feeling rules' were markedly gendered and reinforced the traditional notion that men were unemotional in stark contrast to women. The biggest shift between the old and new feeling rules suggested in this

paper is the expectation that men should *want* to both discuss their emotions and provide emotional support to their partners. However, while this androgynisation of the feeling rules is widely accepted as 'right' and necessary for a good relationship, the ways the rules are interpreted and in turn shape action at an interpersonal level is not straightforward.

At the interpersonal level Hochschild (1979, 1983) suggests that feeling rules are used to answer questions around 'what should I feel?' so that individuals intervene in feelings to shape them into what feels 'right'. Throughout this paper it has been suggested that while there is a widespread acknowledgement of the ungendered expectations of the new feeling rules – and this is what principally makes them new - there is simultaneously an expectation that women are 'better' at emotion. The perception of women being more emotionally skilled, in general, manifests itself in varying ways highlighting the dynamic ways norms of gender and intimacy are at play within the interpersonal level of relationships.

It could be argued that the new feeling rules were being demonstrated within the interview context itself as the interactional goals (Frith and Kitinger, 1998) of being perceived to be a 'good' person and having a 'good' relationship within the interview. However what constituted the category of 'good' was highly gendered. Women constructed themselves as knowledgeable, caring and emotionally skilled while women often constructed men as emotionally unskilled and frequently requiring female support. Women drew on accounts of caring about their partners and being prepared to perform relational emotion work to facilitate their wellbeing. It could be argued that this narrative is attractive and desired by women as it casts them as active agents in having 'good' relationships. Women have an investment in these constructions as it justifies why they do relational emotion work and take responsibility for that work. Women therefore largely saw themselves as responsible for their partner's emotional wellbeing, supporting the suggestion that women are relational while men retain the position of the absolute (Janisdottir, 2011).

In contrast men had an investment in talking about being, or trying to be, emotionally open within the interview context as it cast them as a 'good' through demonstrating their knowledge of the new feeling rules. In return for acknowledgement of these new feeling rules, and recognition of the idealised notion of their role in living by those rules, it could be argued that men are rewarded with women's relational emotion work, with minimal suggestion that they should take equal responsibility for this work. Men therefore have an investment in these constructions and in recognising that they are gendered as they reproduce the notion that women should be responsible for emotional wellbeing within heterosexual relationships as women are more emotionally skilled. Knowledge of the new feeling rules is therefore a resource for men as it can be utilised, in the

interview context and potentially beyond, to justify the unfairness of continuing to benefit from unequal divisions of emotion work. While the focus of this paper is on a change to the feeling rules of emotion work it is important to recognise that the potential challenges for men in *doing* this work continue including the risk of losing a sense of emotional control that can lead to a sense of vulnerability (Author's own, 2017).

Overall the shift from the old to new feeling rules relating to heterosexual couple relationships can be interpreted as a positive one as it reduces gender inequalities of emotion work, however as with all social change this shift is partial and complex. At an interpersonal level the women interviewed were considerably more happy than in previous research (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993, 1995, Mansfield and Collard, 1988, Komter, 1989, Benjamin, 1998) as they mainly felt listened to and cared for. Simultaneously the sense of men not wanting to talk about their feelings in previous research has been replaced with a desire to be better at emotional communication and to be emotionally supportive of their partners. When this is related to the structural level it is clear that the unquestioned notion that women are better at doing emotion facilitates a continuation of gender inequalities in intimacy. I would argue that the new feeling rules mask, to some extent, the continued inequality of emotional reciprocity where women are expected to *do* more relational emotional work and be responsible for supporting male partners to do this too. The distance between the acceptance of the new feeling rules as androgynous on one hand and the gendered performance of these rules within most relationships on the other hand is stark. It is within this apparent contradiction that insight can be gained into how intimacy can thrive despite inequalities, through the apparently commonsensical notion that women are more emotionally skilled than men. I would argue that for inequalities of emotion work within heterosexual relationships to reduce further in the future, and potentially become equal, the cultural expectation that women are 'better' at emotion will need to be challenged, by both men and women.

Bibliography

Ahmed, S. (2010) *The Promise of Happiness*, London: Duke University Press

Benjamin, O. (1998) 'Therapeutic Discourse, Power and Change: Emotion and Negotiation in Marital Conversation'. *Sociology* 32(4): 771-793.

Brownlie, J. (2014) *Ordinary Relationships. A Sociological Study of Emotions, Reflexivity and Culture* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Carter, J. (2021) Traditional Inequalities and Inequalities of Tradition: Gender, Weddings and Whiteness. *Sociological Research Online*, Online first

Chandler, A. (2012) Self-injury as embodied emotion work: managing rationality, emotions and bodies, *Sociology*, 46:3

- Cohen, D. (1990) *Being a Man*. London: Routledge.
- Curran, M. A., McDaniel, B. T., Pollitt, A. M. Totenhagen, C. J. (2015) Gender, Emotion Work, and Relationship Quality: A Daily Diary Study, *Sex Roles*, 73:157-173
- De Boise, S. and Hearn, J. (2017) Are men getting more emotional? Critical sociological perspectives on men, masculinities and emotion, *The Sociological Review*, 65(4): 779-796
- Duncombe, J. and Marsden, D. (1993) 'Love and Intimacy: The Gender Division of Emotion and 'Emotion Work'. A Neglected Aspect of Sociological Discussion of Heterosexual Relationships'. *Sociology*, Vol. 27, No. 2; pp. 221-41.
- Duncombe, J. and Marsden, D. (1995) 'Workaholics' and 'whingeing women': theorising intimacy and emotion work – the last frontier of gender inequality?. *Sociological Review* 43 (1): 150-169.
- Erickson, R. (2005) Why Emotion Work Matters: Sex, Gender, and the Division of Household Labor. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67:337-351.
- Frith, H. and Kitzinger, C. (1998) 'Emotion work' as a participant resource: a feminist analysis of young women's talk-in-interaction, *Sociology*, 32:2
- Galansinski, D. (2004). *Men and the language of emotion*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Giddens, A. (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gunnarsson, L. (2014) 'Loving him for he is: the microsociology of power', in A.G. Jónasdóttir and A. Ferguson (eds) *Love – a question for feminism in the twenty first century*. London: Routledge.
- Hite, S. (1988) *Women and Love*. London: Viking.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1979) Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure. *American Journal of Sociology* 85: 551-575.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Holford, N. (2019) Gendered emotion work and micro-practices of heterosexuality: Two middle-class teenage partner relationships, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 74:162-168
- Horne, R. M. and Johnson, M. D. (2019) A labor of love? Emotion work in intimate relationships, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 36(4):1190-1209
- Illouz, E. (2008) *Saving the modern soul: Therapy, emotions, and the culture of self-help*. University of California Press.
- Illouz, E. (2012) *Why Love Hurts: A sociological explanation*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Jackson, S. (1999) *Heterosexuality in Question*. London: Sage.
- Jamieson, L. (1998) *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jónasdóttir, A.G. (2011) "What Kind of Power Is 'Love Power'?" in A.G. Jónasdóttir, K.B. Jones and V. Bryson (eds) *Sexuality, Gender and Power: Intersectional and Transnational Perspectives*. New York/London: Routledge.
- Jónasdóttir, A.G. and Ferguson, A. (2014) *Love – a question for feminism in the twenty first century*. London: Routledge.

- Komter, A. (1989) 'Hidden Power in Marriage'. *Gender and Society*, 3(2):187-216.
- Lahad, K. (2017) *A Table for One: A Critical Reading of Singlehood, Gender and Time*. Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Laurie, T. and Stark, H. (2012) Reconsidering Kinship: Beyond the Nuclear Family with Deleuze and Guatarri, *Cultural Studies Review*, 18:1 (19-39)
- Liebling A (2004) *Prisons and Their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality, and Prison Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lupton, D. (1998), *The Emotional Self: A Sociocultural Exploration*, London: SAGE
- Mansfield, P. and Collard, J. (1988) *The Beginning of the Rest of Your Life: a Portrait of Newly-Wed Marriage*. London: Macmillan.
- McCormack, C. (2004) Storying Stories: a narrative approach to in-depth interview conversations, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 7(3):19-236.
- Minnotte, K. L., Stevens, D. P., Minnotte, M. C., Kiger, G. (2007) Emotion-Work Performance Among Dual-Earner Couples: Testing Four Theoretical Perspectives. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(6) 773-793.
- Roseneil, S., Crowhurst, I., Hellesund, T., Santos, A. C., & Stoilova, M. (2020). Introduction. In *The Tenacity of the Couple-Norm: Intimate citizenship regimes in a changing Europe* (pp. 3–5). UCL Press.
- Seidler, V. J. (1991) *Recreating Sexual Politics: Men, feminism and politics*. London: Routledge.
- Smart, C. (2007) *Personal Life: New Directions in Sociological Thinking*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Twamley, K. (2019) 'Cold intimacies' in parents negotiations of work-family practices and parental leave? *The Sociological Review*, 67 (5), 1137-1153
- Umberson, D., Thomeer, M. B., Lodge, A. C. (2015) Intimacy and Emotion Work in Lesbian, Gay and Heterosexual Relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77: 542-556.
- Umberson, D., Thomeer, M. B., Pollitt, A. M., Mernitz, S. E. (2020) The Psychological Toll of Emotion Work in Same-Sex and Different-Sex Marital Dyads, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82:1141-1158
- Wilcox, W. and Nock, S., (2006) What's love got to do with it? Equality, equity, commitment and women's marital quality, *Social Forces*, 84:3
- Wilkinson, E. (2012) The romantic imaginary: compulsory coupledness and single existence in Hines, S. and Taylor, Y. (eds) *Sexualities: past reflections, future directions*, London: Palgrave
- Wright, K. (2008) Theorizing therapeutic culture: Past influence, future directions, *Journal of Sociology*, 44(4): 321-336