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Working conditions in interactive (service) work

Dr. Margit Wehrich

Interaction work – fundamental challenges in service work



Interaction work ...

- ... is a special job: people are special “work objects” with their own interests and needs.
- ... is necessary: Service provider and customer, consultant and client, nurse and patient must work together to achieve a result that is satisfactory for both.
- ... is challenging: it requires specific interactive skills, must be coordinated with other work tasks and meet contradictory requirements.



Interaction work ...

- ... is meaningful: it is always a question of whether the service also benefits the customer or patient.
- ... is highly relevant economically: It promotes good service quality and helps to keep work processes in companies/organizations running.
- ... is not appreciated enough: it requires a special work design.



Interaction work: always important, but little researched

- For a long time, labor research concentrated on production work in the factory.
- Sociology made a distinction between "work" and "interaction" and between instrumental and communicative action.
- Subjectivity, feelings and physicality were not a topic in labor research for a long time.



Our projects on interaction work – also funded by the BMBF

- *Intakt* – Interaktionsarbeit als ein zukunftsweisender Ansatz zur qualitätsorientierten Organisation von Dienstleistungsprozessen (BMBF)
- Dienstleistung als Interaktion (DFG)
- KoprA – Kooperationsnetz prospektive Arbeitsforschung (BMBF)
- PiA – Professionalisierung interaktiver Arbeit (BMBF/ESF)
- Arbeitsgestaltung bei Interaktionsarbeit (HBS)
- PräFo – Prävention von Belastungen bei formalisierter Arbeit in Dienstleistung und technischer Entwicklung (BMBF)
- UMDIA – Unterbrechungsmanagement bei digital gerahmter Interaktionsarbeit (BMBF/ESF)

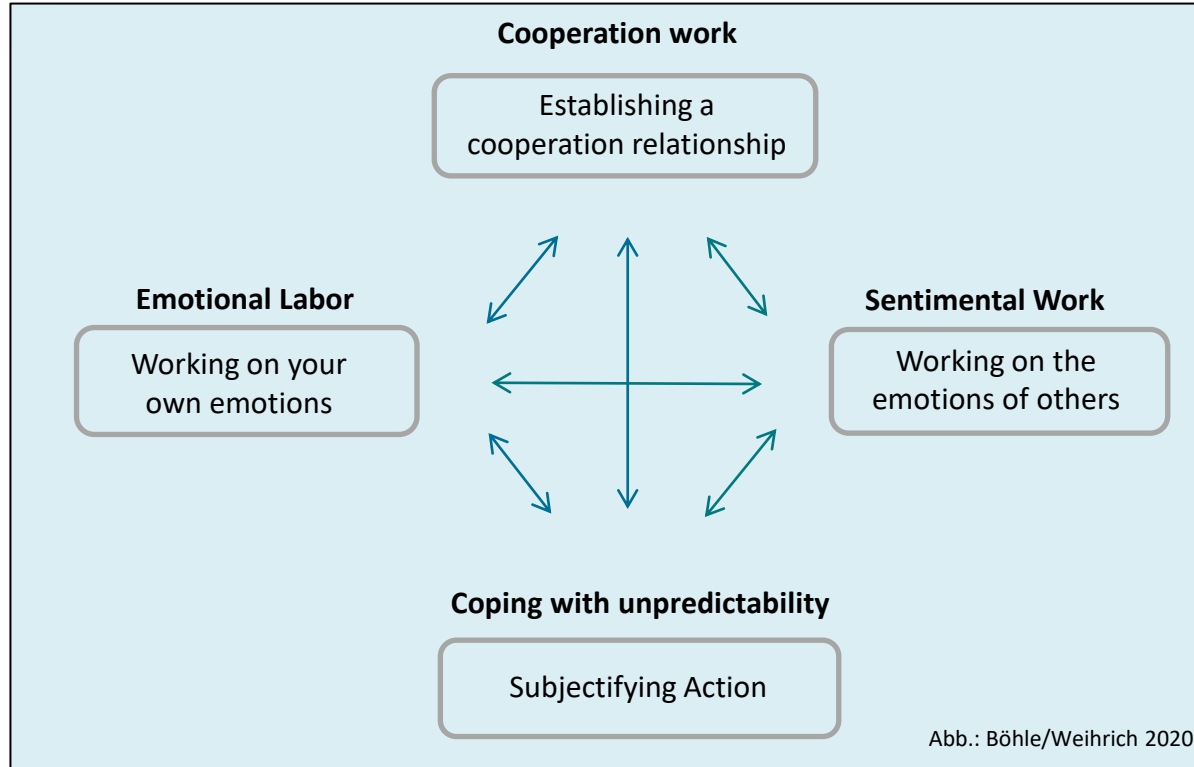


Areas of research and methods

- Nursing and care for the elderly, retail, gastronomy, employment agency, railroad, bank, hotel industry, factory planning, software development ...
- Interviews with and accompaniment of employees and clients



Interaction work





Establishing a cooperation relationship

“Difficult patients are those who do not know what they want. If the patient says he is in pain, he gets painkillers. If he says he's hungry, he gets food. And she's in pain, but doesn't want painkillers.”

Nurse in the inpatient nursing sector



Establishing a cooperation relationship

Wolfgang Dunkel and Margit Wehrich have identified interdependence problems in service relationships that need to be worked on jointly by service providers and customers.

- It must be defined what the object of the service should be and how the service should be created. This must be agreed upon.
- Both sides have to make their contributions. Since services are "incomplete contracts", this requires trust in each other.
- It must always be counted on the fact that conflicts emerge. One must be able to settle these conflicts.



Working on your own emotions

"I can't go to work here with anger, rage and problems, I can't do that ... This is transferred to the residents. The sick people take it in, whether someone is authentic or just playing, that's the way it is."

Caregiver in a facility for dementia patients



Working on your own emotions

- As Arlie Russell Hochschild has shown, organizations impose rules of feeling. Employees must manage the discrepancy between their actual and the expected emotions.
- But: service providers cannot show their actual emotions because otherwise they would not be able to do their work at all – and therefore, for example, work on their anger or limit their compassion. And they also give themselves rules for their feelings.



Working on the emotions of others

"One is always present in these cabins and the patients know that there is someone there, they don't have to be afraid. So that's what I always try to convey to the patients, they don't have to be afraid anymore, we take care of them."

Nurse in the emergency room of a hospital



Working on the emotions of others

- Anselm Strauss and his colleagues have pointed out that sentimental work is at the service of medical work: in many cases it is sentimental work that makes factual work possible.
- But sentimental work can also be the content of the service.



Subjectifying action

"We find that there [if the oral transfer is omitted] quite a lot is lost. Simply individual things that are told about the patients, simply also, I would say, impressions that we perceive when we care for a patient, which we then want to pass on (...). Sometimes it is also a gut feeling, perhaps, what you say ... There are many things that you cannot document in this way. Oh well."

Nurse in the inpatient nursing sector



Subjectifying action

Fritz Böhle has shown that subjectifying action is necessary when dealing with unpredictable situations.

It is characterized by:

- Step-by-step approach
- Associative and holistic thinking
- Perception with all senses
- Personal attachment



Change of perspective

Customers, clients and patients also perform interaction work:

"And then someone comes and then you say, yes, I've been sitting for so long. And then she says, you have to excuse me, I was called by my supervisor. First I grumble inwardly and think to myself, I'll pay for the stay, I'm actually also a supervisor then ... and then I say ... when I have made her laugh, then I say, actually I have to, I'm the boss."

Resident of a home for the elderly



Our research questions

- More detailed analysis of the dimensions of interaction work and their relationships to one another
- Differentiation of the requirements for interaction work in different settings
- Relationship between formalization, digitalization and interaction work
- Adaptation of the principles of humane work design
- And most recently: Determining the special role of interruptions in interaction work (UMDIA)

Conclusions for work design

- Interaction work is a necessary, but highly preconditional work. It requires appreciation – also in an economic sense.
- Interaction work needs room for manoeuvre. It must not be the task of employees having to defend such rooms for manoeuvre or even create it anew.
- All processes in companies/organizations must be examined for their effects on interaction work – and designed in such a way that they promote interaction work.



Conclusions for work design

- Employees must be actively involved in the design of work processes – including the design of technology.
- Clients and patients also perform interaction work. They need good "working conditions" as well.

Attention: Interaction work is a vulnerable type of work that we must protect. If it comes under pressure, it also undermines what constitutes service work: negotiation and balancing of interests!



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Thank you very much!

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