

## Hermeneutic Labor: The Gendered Burden of Interpretation in Intimate Relationships Between Women and Men

Ellie Anderson  
Department of Philosophy, Pomona College  
333 N. College Way, Claremont, CA 91711  
[Ellenjuneanderson@gmail.com](mailto:Ellenjuneanderson@gmail.com)

*Abstract: In recent years, feminist scholarship on emotional labor has proliferated. I identify a related but distinct form of care labor, hermeneutic labor. Hermeneutic labor is the burdensome activity of: understanding and coherently expressing one's own feelings, desires, intentions, and motivations; discerning those of others; and inventing solutions for relational issues arising from interpersonal tensions. I argue that hermeneutic labor disproportionately falls on women's shoulders in heteropatriarchal societies, especially in intimate relationships between women and men. I also suggest that some of the gendered burdens of emotional labor that feminist scholars point out would better be described as hermeneutic labor. Drawing on feminist philosophy as well as findings from social psychology and sociology, I argue that the exploitation of women's hermeneutic labor is a pervasive element of what Sandra Bartky calls the 'micropolitics' of intimate relationships. The widespread expectation that women are relationship maintenance experts, as well as the prevalence of a gendered demand-withdraw pattern of communication, leads an exploitative situation to appear natural or even desirable, even as it leads to women's dissatisfaction. This situation may be considered misogynistic in Kate Manne's sense, where misogyny is a property of social environments rather than a worldview.*

### 1. Hermeneutic Labor

In recent years, feminist scholarship on emotional labor has proliferated. Beginning with Arlie Hochschild, who coined the term in 1983's *The Managed Heart*, scholars have argued that social expectations place an undue burden on women to manage both their own feelings and those of others. Feminists have widened Hochschild's original account, which focused on the workplace, to encompass other domains of human interaction that might be said to involve 'emotional labor.' This widening has intersected with the uptake of 'affective labor' by those in the Marxist tradition who expand Marx's analysis of alienated labor under capitalism, often within a feminist context (Lanoix 2013; Lazzarato 1996; Oksala 2016; Weeks 2007). These discourses show the ways that women are tasked with being the container for the emotions of others in both public and private spaces. Gendered analyses of emotional and/or affective labor are often coextensive with feminist accounts of the exploitation of women's 'love labor,' 'love power,' and 'sex-affective production' in patriarchal societies (Lynch 2007, Lynch et. al 2009, Jónasdóttir 1994 and 2018, Ferguson 2018). Socialist and Marxist feminist scholars in particular have traced the burdensome, disempowering character of women's work of sustaining intimate loving relationships between themselves and men (Ferguson 1989 and 2018, Weeks 2007, Bartky 1990).

In this essay, I argue that a pervasive form of care labor that largely falls upon women in contemporary American society should be described as 'hermeneutic labor'. Related to emotional labor but distinct from it, hermeneutic labor is the burdensome activity of a) understanding one's own feelings, desires, intentions, and motivations, and presenting them in an intelligible fashion to others when deemed appropriate; b) discerning others' feelings, desires, intentions, and motivations by interpreting their verbal and nonverbal cues, including cases when these are minimally communicative or outright avoidant; and c) comparing and contrasting these multiple sets of

feelings, desires, intentions, and motivations for the purposes of conflict resolution. Hermeneutic labor is related to emotional labor because it works on the emotions—and, more broadly, the emotional domain of interpersonal life. Yet it is distinct from emotional labor because it pertains to explicit processes of interpreting emotions (as well as desires, intentions, and motivations) through cognitive processes, such as deliberating and ruminating. Naming ‘hermeneutic labor’ permits us to distinguish its harms from those of related forms of care labor. Indeed, many of the harms that feminists point out in analyses of the undue burden of emotional labor placed on women may actually be describing the harms of hermeneutic labor.

My analysis focuses on the prevalence of the exploitation of hermeneutic labor in intimate relationships between men and women. <1> While this is far from the only kind of relationship in which a gendered division of hermeneutic labor is evident, the dynamics of hermeneutic labor are especially salient here. Following Sandra Bartky’s claim that feminism must attend to the ‘micropolitics’ of everyday life in addition to other axes of oppression, I employ the view that “We need to locate our subordination not only in the hidden recesses of the psyche but in the duties we are happy to perform and in what we thought were the innocent pleasures of everyday life” (Bartky 1990, 119). My account also picks up on Sara Cantillon and Kathleen Lynch’s suggestion that inequalities in affective relations are concerns for social justice (Cantillon and Lynch 2017, 181). These concerns motivate the emerging interdisciplinary field of feminist love studies, which has argued for a renewed focus on the centrality of love—especially heterosexual romantic love—in the oppression of women. While heterosexual romantic love was a central object of critique in ‘second-wave’ feminism, proponents of feminist love studies argue that the continuing gender inequalities of supposedly egalitarian societies make sense only when love is understood as a key component of women’s oppression today (García-Andrade, Gunnarsson, and Jónasdóttir 2018).

Drawing on theories of emotional labor, feminist philosophies of exploitation, and hermeneutics, I develop the concept of hermeneutic labor and argue that it designates a pervasive form of exploitation of women by men in intimate relationships. These theories clarify studies in social psychology and sociology showing that women in intimate relationships with men are generally disempowered and dissatisfied by such relationships, owing to the burden of being relationship maintenance experts who offer unreciprocated hermeneutic labor to men unskilled in interpreting emotions. In the remainder of section 1, I define hermeneutic labor and argue that women are often placed in the position of being hermeneutic laborers on behalf of men in intimate relationships with them, drawing on feminist philosophy and feminist love studies. In section 2, I analyze specific dynamics of hermeneutic labor in these intimate relationships, in dialogue with US-based research from social psychology and sociology within the past half-century. I show that women are generally tasked with being relationship maintenance experts seeking to interpret both their emotions and those of partners who are men, while men tend to withdraw from conversations about emotions and lack skills for interpreting emotions. While this negatively affects both men and women, it more negatively affects women, who tend to be the less satisfied party in intimate relationships with men. In section 3, I argue that this dynamic of hermeneutic labor may be viewed as misogynistic, adopting Kate Manne’s recent philosophical account of misogyny as a property of social environments rather than as a worldview to which an individual must deliberately assent. In summary, identifying hermeneutic labor as a distinct activity from emotional labor, even as the two go hand in hand, serves to reveal unique harms of gendered exploitation in intimate relationships between women and men.

### *1a. The Hermeneutics of Hermeneutic Labor*

Hermeneutics is a method of interpretation for unpacking the latent levels of meaning in communication cues. Originating as a theory of interpretation for religious texts, hermeneutics entered philosophy in the twentieth century and is associated with philosophers in the continental European tradition such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and Linda Martín Alcoff. According to hermeneutics, the work of interpretation is a complex and learned skill, one element of which is understanding one's own prejudices as one investigates various layers of meaning. This requires skills in self-reflection, as well as nuanced and often intimate acquaintance with the meanings of cues from others. Hermeneutics recognizes that communication happens within a world of interpreters with cognitive biases, and thus encourages actively resisting the illusion that individual expression will be transparently received as intended by the person(s) to whom it is expressed. "A hermeneutically trained consciousness" must be sensitive to alterity (Gadamer 2004, 271).<2> Although Gadamer worried about extending hermeneutics beyond textual interpretation and into psychological interpretation, its methods are highly useful for discussing interpersonal relationships and their communicative components. Indeed, hermeneutics has been notably applied to philosophical analyses of race, gender, and sexual violation in recent years by Linda Martín Alcoff, and as a form of critique by Lorenzo C. Simpson (Alcoff 2005 and 2018; Simpson 2021). Applied to intimate relationships, hermeneutics is a useful term for designating the ways that individuals interpret the behaviors of others, balancing sensitivity to the fact that others may have very different desires, thought patterns, and communication strategies than oneself with confidence in one's ability to interpret others' communicative cues. Hermeneutics recognizes the entanglement of self and other, as well as of cognition and emotion.

When performed as a burdensome activity involving one or more of the components identified above, the work of interpretation may be called hermeneutic labor. While hermeneutic labor is closely related to emotional labor, it is a distinct form of labor with its own structure and effects. Identifying it as such helps us to see the scope of the unreciprocated caregiving that women routinely take on for both themselves and for men, especially when men are their intimate partners. Hochschild defines emotional labor as "the silent work of evoking and suppressing feeling—in ourselves and in others" (Hochschild 1983b, 40). By contrast, hermeneutic labor evokes, and sometimes suppresses, verbal interpretations of others' mental states, especially their feelings, desires, intentions, and motivations. As we will explore below, it is sometimes silent, involving a complex inner dialogue; other times, it is effusively verbal, as in conversations with friends or counselors. If emotional labor calls upon basic capacities for stimulating and suppressing emotions, then hermeneutic labor calls upon complex processes of cognition and emotion, such as the ability to imaginatively adopt the perspectives of others. <3> It also involves communication competence, or the set of skills required to use communication to reach a goal, and communication efficacy, or a person's confidence in communicating their thoughts to others (Merrill and Afifi 2012). As will be discussed below, its products are most commonly offered verbally, or in the decision to keep silent. Like emotional labor, the work itself is largely invisible to those who benefit from it.

Hermeneutic labor, like emotional labor, deals with feelings (although it also deals with other, related dimensions of interpersonal life, such as desires, intentions, and motivations). Hermeneutic labor deals with feelings differently than emotional labor, however. Hochschild's original definition of emotional labor is "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (Hochschild 1983a, 7). The skills involved in emotional labor come into play primarily in rapid responses to dynamic social situations with other people in real time. By contrast, hermeneutic labor primarily involves patient, deliberative reflection, and is generally undertaken in solitary rumination and/or in conversations outside of the situations on which it labors, as in conversations with friends or counselors. Hermeneutic labor reflects on social encounters after they occur, and prepares plans for future encounters. This may include reflecting on how they made one feel—and

whether that feeling was appropriate to the situation—as well as reflecting how others may have felt in the situation, and whether one should respond to others differently in similar situations in the future. It also often involves attempts to infer another’s mental and emotional state and make judgments about their personality by synthesizing multiple impressions one has received from another person over time. Emotional labor is the nurse extending a warm smile and squeeze of the hand as an elderly patient recounts a story from their past that the nurse has heard many times already; hermeneutic labor is the nurse wondering on the ride home whether her response was appropriate, and whether next time she might be able to tell the patient that she’s heard the story before without hurting the patient’s feelings.

Some definitions of emotional labor and related terms include what I identify as hermeneutic labor within them. For instance, Nicky James defines emotional labor more broadly than Hochschild, deeming it “the labour involved in dealing with other people’s feelings, a core component of which is the regulation of emotions” (James 1989, 15). For James, one aspect of this is “a mutual sounding out of what is acceptable” in emotional expression (21). Kathleen Lynch includes in her analysis of “love labour” not only emotion management, but also practices of other-centered mental planning, “anticipating and prioritising their needs and interest,” and supporting others emotionally (Lynch 2007, 560). Sandra Bartky describes the work of emotional repair as a crucial component of women’s emotional labor, and identifies “tend[ing] to a person’s state of mind” as requisite for this (Bartky 1990, 102). While the line between interpreting emotions and managing them is flexible, I contend that there is a relevant distinction to be made between these practices of interpreting emotions, mental planning, and sounding out what is acceptable—which I would classify as hermeneutic labor—and emotional labor.

Conceptually disentangling hermeneutic labor from emotional labor reveals that the contention that women tend to perform far more emotional labor than men do may in many cases more aptly describe the asymmetrical distribution of *hermeneutic* labor. While many feminists have compellingly shown that women are tasked with taking on a far greater deal of emotional labor than men in American society, some scholars have countered that men also perform substantial amounts of unrecognized emotional labor. Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò has recently argued that the masculine norm of stoicism requires significant emotional labor. Táíwò states that the association of emotional labor with emotional expressivity is overly narrow, and that men routinely undertake emotional labor of a different sort: namely, emotional compression. Táíwò’s analysis resonates with Hochschild’s original theory of emotional labor in *The Managed Heart*: while her example of the feminine-coded emotional labor of friendly and nurturing flight attendants has received the most uptake in secondary literature, Hochschild also argues that emotional labor is standard in masculine-coded jobs, such as “the bill collector who inspires fear” or “the salesman who creates the sense of a ‘hot commodity’” (Hochschild 1983a, 11). Others have also argued that emotional labor is prevalent, albeit invisible, in masculine-coded professions such as policing and professional wrestling (Martin 1999, Smith 2008). Thus, it is at the very least a matter of debate to say that women perform *more* emotional labor than men do.

However, I show in this essay that it is far less contestable that women perform much more *hermeneutic* labor than men do. Hermeneutic labor is not generally expected of men, at least not in substantial amounts. Additionally, distinguishing hermeneutic labor from emotional labor permits us to analyze the specific dynamics of disempowerment that emerge when hermeneutic labor is exploitative, as in intimate relationships between women and men. While both men and women are arguably harmed by gendered expectations of emotional labor, men benefit from gendered expectations of hermeneutic labor while women suffer from them. Bartky argues that women’s unreciprocated emotional labor results in “epistemic decentering, ethical damage, and general

mystification” (Bartky 1990, 118). Women are so strongly encouraged to assimilate the worldview of partners who are men that they lose confidence in their own ability to interpret the world, and in the validity of their own feelings; but they are kept ignorant of these harms by the belief that the success of their intimate relationships with men is proof of their worth and happiness (Bartky 1990, 117). Bartky is indeed identifying a central dynamic of women’s intimate relationships with men here. However, the harms she describes are, in my view, harms associated with hermeneutic labor rather than emotional labor. Only by explicitly identifying hermeneutic labor can we identify its unique harms, as well as the gendered asymmetry of these harms.

### ***1b. The Labor of Hermeneutic Labor***

Hochschild’s original account of emotional labor was restricted to paid labor in workplaces, where scholars have shown that emotional labor is disproportionately expected of women, especially women of color and those from marginalized ethnic backgrounds (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010; Hoerder et al. 2015; Parreñas and Boris 2010). Yet scholars have also extended analyses of emotional labor beyond paid workplace interactions to suggest that women regularly perform emotional labor for men in conversations, intimate relationships, and caretaking. This has led Hochschild to worry about “concept creep,” where private interpersonal relationships are modeled on capitalist modes of labor with exchange value (Beck 2018). <4> Yet feminist theories of household work have long claimed that unpaid caretaking work *is* a form of labor, even if not directly financially remunerated through wages or a salary. Kathi Weeks suggests that Hochschild’s own work on emotional labor reveals the extent to which the distinction between the public workplace and the private home is blurred in the case of emotional labor, rendering Hochschild’s worry about ‘concept creep’ unfounded (Weeks 2007, 244). Indeed, Hochschild herself has recently recognized that many activities within the home may be considered alienated labor under capitalism, asserting that we can “take it as a symptom that something’s wrong” in society (Beck 2018).

Following the feminist insight that the distinction between public and private spheres is blurred at best, and often serves to devalue women’s work, I suggest that hermeneutic labor is a form of labor frequently performed by women in intimate relationships with men. I define ‘labor’ broadly as a burdensome activity oriented toward meeting a given need through transforming given material. As Nicky James has noted, emotional labor outside or within the workplace may be considered ‘labor’ in at least three senses: 1) it is hard work that exhausts those who undertake it; 2) it is subject to principles of organization that render it more or less effective; 3) it valuably contributes to the social reproduction of labor power and the social relations of production (James 1989, 19-20). We may say the same about hermeneutic labor. In addition, like emotional labor, patriarchal scripts and compulsory heterosexuality enlist women to undertake this burdensome activity. Thus, women undertake far more of the labor of relationship maintenance than men do, in order to meet both their needs and those of men partners. As feminist philosophers including Sandra Bartky and Ann Ferguson have argued, women’s caregiving tasks are indeed laborious (Bartky 1990, 100; Ferguson 1989, 8).

Whether or not intimate relationships intrinsically involve labor is outside the purview of my argument here; all that is necessary is to show that gendered asymmetries in intimate relationships between men and women in contemporary American society render such relationships laborious, in particular for women. The dominant ideology views intimate relationships as ‘projects’ that require burdensome activity for the purposes of both maintaining and deepening intimacy. Such projects are generally undertaken because intimate relationships are seen to meet core needs, such as the need for

close emotional ties and self-development. Maintaining such intimate relationships requires complex interpretations and negotiations of feelings. As we will see below, women are taught that these activities are their job while men are taught that they are not; thus, women in relationships with men shoulder the burden of hermeneutic labor.

What's more, this labor is exploitative in hetero-patriarchal capitalist societies: men use women's hermeneutic labor power to gain the goods of intimate relationships for themselves at the expense of women's well-being. This claim has been well-established by feminist love studies, which emphasizes that exploitative relationships between men and women are the norm in purportedly equal societies, such as the U.S. and much of Europe (Jónasdóttir 1994, 223). Even as lovers in these relationships claim to be equal, the result is constant inequality" (Jónasdóttir 1994, 224). <5> As Ann Ferguson notes, "if the norms and practices of a romantic love relation in a patriarchal society create a situation where the masculine gendered partner in the relationship is receiving more self-esteem and social status than they give to the feminine gendered one, then that lack of reciprocal exchange can be said to be exploitative" (Ferguson 2018, 40). Men flourish as whole persons in intimate relationships, while women are reduced to erotic objects and emotional caretakers—what Kate Manne has called "human givers" (Manne 2017, 301).

This dynamic is exploitative in the sense that a person or group is unfairly benefitting from using another to achieve some gains at the expense of the one used (Farr Tormey 1976, 207; Bartky 1990, 117). Judith Farr Tormey describes women's nurturing labor for men as a zero-sum game, because what the exploiter gains, the exploitee loses (Farr Tormey 1976, 208); Sandra Bartky goes further to claim that it is worse than a zero-sum game, since women lose more than men gain (Bartky 1990, 106). Either way, exploitation involves 1) labor extraction without an equivalent exchange or return, and 2) the laborer's lacking control over the situation, such as setting the terms of the exchange of their labor (Jónasdóttir 1994, 81). In the case of intimate relationships, "men appropriate the caring and loving powers of women without giving back in kind" (Jónasdóttir 1994, 100). This exploitation stems from, and is reinforced by, pervasive gender asymmetries in which women are skilled love laborers but men hold more power to grant social recognition through love (Ferguson 2018, 50). And the conditions that undergird this asymmetry leave women dissatisfied and disempowered.

What, then, do men gain from women's hermeneutic labor in intimate relationships? What do women lose? Men gain tidily packaged interpretations of their own feelings, desires, intentions, and motivations and those of women partners, as well as the delivery of these interpretations in carefully chosen conversations (and the keeping of them to oneself when women partners think that sharing them might add to men's burdens). Women additionally diagnose the health of the relationship, assess partners' rights and duties, and narrate their own feelings and those of men. These diagnoses are often paired with concrete prognoses for improving the relationship. In short, women serve both as informal therapists for men and as informal couples' therapists for the relationship. Additionally, we may say that men gain from women's hermeneutic labor the freedom from interpreting their own feelings and those of women partners. If maintaining a relationship takes work—as contemporary American ideology takes for granted—then at least someone must be doing it. Men are permitted to be in intimate relationships with women while devoting minimal time and energy to reflecting on their own feelings and the emotional needs of women, let alone to rendering their feelings legible to women partners. More importantly, this unequal legibility both causes and results in laborious processes that disempower women partnered with men. As will be detailed below, what women lose in this dynamic is their epistemic and ethical integrity, as well as their potential for well-being.

Yet if intimate relationships between men and women normatively involve exploitation, then why don't women simply refuse to enter into these relationships? Patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality, and capitalism intersect to treat women as natural care laborers for men. In contemporary American society, added to women's status as care laborers is the romantic norm that

all individuals should be in intimate relationships in order to affirm their existence as persons, and that intimate relationships require sustained work and high levels of self-disclosure. In this way, women interested in men find themselves coerced into exploitation of their emotional and hermeneutic labor. Women's consent to exploitation in intimate relationships with men is coerced by social pressures (Farr Tormey 1976, 212). For Marx, coerced labor is characterized by the fact that it does not satisfy needs, but is a necessary means for satisfying other needs. Jónasdóttir compellingly argues that this is precisely the situation in which women find themselves in intimate relationships. She suggests that, because heteropatriarchal ideology attributes value to women inasmuch as they are valued romantically and/or sexually by men, women need men's love in order to be considered persons, whereas men do not require this. Like men, women seek to have their need for close emotional ties and self-development met through intimacy. But women lack power to control the situation, being "circumstantially 'forced'" to love and be loved by men under non-ideal conditions in order to receive the social recognition of being a member of a companionate couple (Jónasdóttir 1994, 224).

Men's exploitation of women need not be conscious, nor need women recognize that they are being exploited. Indeed, one of the ways that hermeneutic labor exploitation works is by being perpetuated by the seemingly neutral ideology that women are natural interpreters of their emotions and those of others. As we will see in section 2, hermeneutic labor is rendered invisible by a culture that takes it to be a sheer product of 'women's intuition.' Its exploitation operates in spite of the best intentions of individual men, and need require no ill-will or even recognition of the asymmetrical distribution of labor by either party in a couple.

## **2. Hermeneutic Labor in Intimate Relationships Between Women and Men**

Intimate relationships involve some of the most recalcitrant gendered power asymmetries in purportedly gender-egalitarian societies relative to other spaces of contemporary social life (Gunnarsson 2014, 99). Indeed, a review of research in the journal *Sex Roles* published between 1978 and 2010 revealed that dating roles have scarcely progressed at all in recent decades (Eaton and Rose 2011). Subsequent research, including on the rise of online and app-based dating, shows little significant change (DelGreco and Denes 2020; Cameron and Curry 2020). Women and men who embody traditional gender roles are typically the most successful in dating even in the present day. And a key feature of these roles is that women are the 'emotional experts' of the relationship. As dating progresses into intimate relationships, women's emotional needs frequently go unmet by men (hooks 2000, 160; Gunnarsson 2014; Gregoratto 2017; Afifi and Joseph 2009). The relative dearth of men's caregiving labor within families has also persisted amid other changes in gender roles in the twentieth century (Gerstel and Gallagher 2001, 199; Braudy Harris and Bichler, 1997; Gunnarsson 2014). These stubborn gender roles also reflect a persistent devaluing of care labor, which often goes socially unrecognized, especially by men (Lynch et al. 2009, 79).

Even as gendered scripts for intimate relationships have been resistant to change in recent decades, these scripts do not extend into the far past. Many of their features arise only with the emergence of a gendered division of labor in the Industrial Revolution, culminating in a strong division of the spheres of home and work in the early twentieth century. As scholars such as historian Eli Zaretsky have shown, the gendered division of emotion is the result of capitalist modes of production (Zaretsky 1976; James 1989; Hearn 1982). As recently as the Victorian period, passionate expressions of devotional love were coded masculine (Illouz 2012, 64). The distance and detachment that have come to be "key features of men's emotional styles when interacting with women" are, Illouz claims, in part a backlash to women's gains in the early twentieth century (2012,

80). With men's traditional roles being challenged by the influx of women into workplaces and other public spheres, as well as by the diminution of men's homosocial spaces, such as all-men's clubs, men transferred to romantic life the authority they had once held in the household. Gendered scripts in the twentieth century increasingly urged men to exhibit indifference, detachment, and an unwavering commitment to autonomy, while urging women to seek fulfillment through supportive, reciprocal partnerships. Men came to exert power over women by choosing to grant or reject their emotional desires, engendering a supply-and-demand relationship that intensified sexism in the social landscape of intimacy. With men withdrawing from emotional attachment, making their resources scarce, an over-supply of women's emotional availability develops, giving men more control over the field (2012, 85). <6> Women adopt strategies to feign scarcity, 'playing the game' as they battle for the rare reward of men's love and commitment. As Tom Digby argues, the "transactionality" of heterosexual love relationships in the US is dependent on a misogynistic ideal of men exploiting women by setting the terms of intimate relationships (Digby 2014, 37).

What, then, are some of the forms and effects of the hermeneutic labor structure on men and women in intimate relationships? As noted above, hermeneutic labor involves a) understanding and coherently presenting one's own feelings, desires, intentions, and motivations when deemed appropriate; b) discerning others' feelings, desires, intentions, and motivations based on interpreting their behaviors; and c) weighing these multiple sets of feelings, desires, intentions, and motivations for the purposes of conflict resolution. Men receive the fruits of hermeneutic labor in conversations in which women offer up to them their interpretations of women's own feelings, those of the men, *and* provide concrete plans for action; they also benefit when women keep silent about their interpretations and decide for themselves which actions will most benefit the relationship. While the hermeneutic labor involved in intimate relationships is wide-ranging, here I want to focus especially on the hermeneutic labor involved in interpreting one's partner's view of the intimate relationship itself. Here, we may specifically address the hermeneutic labor of a) understanding and coherently expressing one's own feelings *about*, desires *for*, intentions *regarding*, and motivations *for the relationship* when deemed appropriate; b) discerning others' feelings *about*, desires *for*, intentions *regarding*, and motivations *for the relationship*; and c) weighing these multiple sets of feelings, desires, intentions, and motivations for the purpose of *creating a plan for action* about how to arbitrate them. While all of these forms of hermeneutic labor negatively impact women in relationships with men, it is worth noting that c) is especially burdensome, because it risks reinforcing destructive stereotypes about women: namely, that they are needy, demanding, and/or manipulative (whereas a) and b) cohere relatively well with more positive stereotypes of women as emotional experts and nurturers). Women are generally expected to perform all three components of this labor invisibly, but especially c). The expectation of invisibility also relates to the stipulation in a) that one present feelings, desires, intentions, and motivations 'when deemed appropriate': deciding when to speak up, if at all, is a significant function of hermeneutic labor.

### ***2a. Women as Relationship Maintenance Experts***

Contemporary American society views relationships as women's job. Taught by caregivers to develop a fine-tuned ability to detect interpersonal dynamics, and by media that interpreting these dynamics is a worthwhile use of their time, girls are socialized to become relationship maintenance experts. Because of this, women are more adept at identifying and tackling potential problems in relationships than men are. Communications scholar Tamara Afifi notes, in a study of one hundred young adult heterosexual couples, that "both women and men expect women to be aware of a relationship's needs and to have developed a set of skills to manage any problems that arise in the



relationship” (Afifi, Joseph, and Aldeis 2012, 107; see also Fitzpatrick and Sollie 1999). In addition to the hermeneutic skills women often have for interpreting others’ behavior, they are socialized to share these interpretations openly. “As such, they are more likely to want to talk about relationship problems with their partners when they detect them,” Afifi et al. claim (2012, 106; see also Suh, Moskowitz, Fournier, and Zuroff 2004). Girls and women learn that working through relationship issues is important, and that it is their job to identify them.

Society reinforces this idea in a variety of ways, including by laughing off men’s ‘cluelessness.’ The task of exploring their own feelings, explaining them to women with whom they are involved, and picking up on the women’s feelings, is one from which we routinely excuse men by suggesting they’re just not ‘cut out for it,’ because women are more intuitive and nurturing—sometimes, even, smarter. As feminist theorist Mari Ruti writes, “young women are watching romantic comedies and television shows that teach them to accept the idea that men just don’t ‘get’ emotions and that they are consequently likely to act in hurtful ways—even though, deep down, they mean well so please have some sympathy” (Ruti 2018, 88-9). Folk psychology attributes women’s greater sensitivity to a more emotional nature rather than considering that women are simply more attuned to the dynamics of the relationship given their default status as relationship experts. If women are relationship experts and tasked with relationship maintenance, they will have a heightened perception for issues that are inapparent to men partners, as well as a greater investment in resolving these issues. So-called ‘women’s intuition’ is in fact a hard-won achievement that takes years to produce and sustain. It is a euphemism for hermeneutic labor.

Women’s skills in interpersonal communication not only contrast with men’s socially sanctioned lack of them, but also *make up* for men’s deficiencies. Psychologist Ronald F. Levant has termed this deficiency “normative male alexithymia” (Levant 2001; Levant, Allen, and Lien 2014). Alexithymia refers to a deficit in the cognitive and affective processing of emotions, where one is unable to put one’s emotions into words. Levant has argued that it is a rampant subclinical condition in mild to moderate form among men (Levant 2001, 425). It is ‘normative’ inasmuch as alexithymia is part of men’s socialization and scripts of masculinity. Men with high normative male alexithymia fear intimacy with their partners may feel constrained and unhappy by the gendered expectation that they refrain from sharing their feelings (Mumford et al. 2019; hooks 2000 and 2004). Indeed, men are not less emotional than women; they are merely less likely to express emotions (Levant 2001, 427; LaFrance and Banaji 1992). This is revealed by the fact that most common indicator of normative male alexithymia is suppression: alexithymia is related to men’s discouragement from finding words for their emotions, because naming them is in tension with masculine norms that reject vulnerability and attachment. “In sum, psychological research has found that men hardly disclose their personal feelings,” because these feelings are at odds with the ‘cool pose’ upheld as a masculine norm (Jansz 2000, 173). They are also at odds with masculine gender norms of invulnerability and strength (Connell 2005, Digby 2014). Bell hooks points out that obeying this masculine norm forces men to be dishonest about the very existence of their emotions both to themselves to others, a situation that is disadvantageous for both men and women (hooks 2000, 37-9).

Normative male alexithymia is the obverse of women’s emotional dexterity, and both are justified by being considered ‘natural’ thanks to traditional gender roles. It is widely understood that emotional labor goes unnoticed when performed by women in part because society takes women to be instinctively emotional, nurturing, and caring. Hermeneutic labor is a similar, albeit slightly more complex, case in this respect. Interpretation is an activity that requires more cognitive resources than emotional labor does, occurring largely in periods of reflection. In this respect, we might initially expect it to be less straightforwardly associated with women, since women have historically been associated with emotion over cognition. Yet hermeneutic labor is still implicitly coded feminine

because it involves interpersonal relationships. It is a labor that expends resources in interpreting others' behavior in order to achieve harmony and resolve conflict—hence, it corresponds to the gendered division of labor and values that associates women with the private sphere. Thus, hermeneutic labor is further rendered invisible by a culture that takes it to be natural for women to spend time and energy auditing their own and others' feelings, desires, intentions, and motivations, and communicating accordingly.

The task of being a relationship maintenance expert is particularly salient for women of color in relationships with men of color in white supremacist societies, especially among Black Americans. Patricia Hill Collins draws attention to the “love and trouble” tradition prevalent in the African-American blues tradition, where interpreting another's emotional ambivalence is a major theme (Collins 2000, 152). She argues that Black women in particular are tasked with providing emotional solace to Black male partners from racial battle fatigue, which the women are not recognized as experiencing as severely as their partners. Black women are “routinely counsel[ed]...to subjugate our needs to those of Black men,” affirming their personhood and masculinity in a non-reciprocal fashion (Collins 2000, 153; see also Utley 2010). Following the claim that hermeneutic labor frequently involves offering up plans for action about how to improve the relationship, the blues tradition offers a substantial rhetoric for how men can “change their ways” through faithfulness and expressiveness (Collins 2000, 154). Various studies suggest that Black women in relationships with men feel it is their duty to set patterns of communication with men partners, and experience this as unsatisfying (McLellan-Lemal et al. 2013; Awosan and Hardy 2017; Dogan et al. 2018). A study of unmarried heterosexual Black Americans between the ages of 25 and 35 suggests that Black Americans may see their romantic relationships as a sanctuary from oppressive social structures, which may indicate that relationships among this group “demand more emotional and psychological focus and attention” compared with other racial groups (Awosan and Hardy 2017, 477). Multiple women participants in this study referred to the “intensive labor” of communication that relationships require of them (474).

Sociological research also suggests that hermeneutic labor in intimate relationships with men may be more burdensome for working-class women than for upper-middle class women, largely due to working-class adherence to traditional gender norms. Lillian B. Rubin's influential 1976 study of working-class family life, *Worlds of Pain*, addresses how the masculine norm of emotional restriction among working-class men stemming from male-dominated workplace interactions renders it difficult for men to have romantic conversations with their wives (Rubin 1976, 116). Sociologist Eva Illouz has suggested that, since Rubin's time of writing, the proliferation of popular literature advising communication in marriage has impacted upper-middle class couples, encouraging both men and women to communicate more openly, but that this has not extended to working-class men (Illouz 1997, 278-9). Working-class women share with upper-middle class women a desire for open communication about intimacy with their husbands, but find this need goes unmet even more starkly than upper-middle class women, whose spouses at least in principle often subscribe to the therapeutic ethos that relationships take work. This leads Illouz to state that “the gender gap in communication is much wider for the working class than it is for the upper middle class” (Illouz 1997, 276).

## ***2b. Women's Relationship Dissatisfaction***

Studies repeatedly show that women are less satisfied in romantic relationships than men are. Interestingly, Afifi suggests that this is not due to different standards for relationships, but rather to different perceptions of whether standards are being met. In a study of one hundred young adult

heterosexual couples, women participants did not on the whole have higher standards for relationships than men did, but they more frequently felt that the standards (they shared with their partner) were not being met (Afifi, Joseph, and Aldeis 2012). Discussing relationship concerns is correlated with relationship satisfaction, but women often desire more discussion than men do. This same study suggests that the inability to talk about sensitive issues with one's partner results in dissatisfaction for both groups (Afifi, Joseph, and Aldeis 2012). Another study among young adults suggests that these sensitive issues include: assessments of the state of the relationship; rules and expectations for the relationship; and past behavior that strained the relationship (Dailey and Palomares 2004, 477). It similarly concludes that a lack of expressivity on these issues is psychologically damaging, although it excluded an analysis of gender. We may add that, because women are expected to maintain the relationship and raise concerns with it, they are likely to be more frequently attuned to sensitive issues, as well as to micro-problems in the relationship. Afifi et al.'s study shows that women are especially more likely to want more open communication than they are getting in their relationships (Afifi, Joseph, and Aldeis 2012).

Men tend to be more avoidant than women, and that avoidance negatively impacts relationships for both parties. Plainly put, both parties are negatively affected by men's behavior. Women, however, are more negatively affected: they find avoidance more dissatisfying than men do (Afifi et al. 2009). Women often detect men's avoidance, and this may be dissatisfying for them. As Bartky describes, women in relationships with men "yearn for recognition from the men with whom we are intimate. Its withholding is painful, especially so since in the larger society it is men and not women who have the power to give or to withhold social recognition generally" (Bartky 1990, 109). Thus, the desire to be recognized by one's intimate partner is both exacerbated and stymied for women in relationships with men. In addition, because women are socialized both to expect high levels of openness and to be the ones who set the bar for openness in the relationship, the dynamic may be more unsatisfying for them because they are both more likely to detect avoidance and more likely to take responsibility for changing the dynamic. Men may take an 'out of sight, out of mind' approach, accepting the status quo, because they do not recognize their own contribution to the dissatisfaction and power to change it.

In light of these dynamics, it is unsurprising that intimate relationships between women and men are less satisfying for women than for men, especially when men follow traditional gender norms. Both men and women's satisfaction report more satisfying relationships when their partners are expressive (Eaton and Rose 2011, 851). Because men tend to be less expressive than women, women are less satisfied in relationships than men. The ability to access another's feelings is also key to feelings of satisfaction; both men and women report similarly desired levels of affective accessibility, but men and not women are likely to report that these levels have been met (Afifi, Joseph, and Aldeis 2012, 107). And, inasmuch as emotional expressivity and affective accessibility are coded feminine in contemporary American society, feminine partners—regardless of their gender—meet their partner's needs more successful than masculine partners. This has led one researcher studying marriage to conclude that "femininity is critical to marital happiness" (Antill 1983, 154).

### ***2c. The Gendered Demand-Withdraw Pattern***

The most common pattern of communication between heterosexual dating couples is the pattern termed "female-demand/male-withdraw" (Vogel et al. 1999). According to this pattern, the woman attempts to bring up a topic for discussion, and the man avoids the topic or ends the conversation. Demand-withdraw exhibits an asymmetrical power dynamic whereby the withdrawer

is left less vulnerable than the demander. The demander may be viewed as needy, nagging, or introducing negativity into an otherwise pleasant situation. From the perspective of the demander, however, the choice to raise an issue for discussion is often the result of a hermeneutic thought-process about what the demander's issues are, how to raise them effectively, and what the demander might reasonably expect from a partner. As such, the situation is not 'otherwise pleasant' before the demander raises the discussion. The demander is put at a disadvantage relative to the withdrawer by virtue of the 'principle of least interest,' or the idea that romantic relationships involve emotional inequality which make the more-invested partner likely to be exploited by the less-invested partner.<7> The demander is also put at a disadvantage because the demand-withdraw pattern may lead to intense personal conflict and doubts, absorbing cognitive and emotional resources.

It is worrisome that the demand-withdraw pattern, in which women are most frequently the demanders and men the withdrawers, is the predominant mode of communication among the majority of dating couples. This pattern "ranks among the most destructive and least effective interaction patterns in couples' problem-solving communication repertoires" (Papp, Kouros, and Cummings 2009, 285). Women tend to be the ones a) to bring up difficult conversations, e.g. about the relationship, b) to be disempowered by bringing up these topics, given that they are making themselves vulnerable by making a demand that is likely to be met with withdrawal, and c) to suffer from negative feelings as a result of this pattern, leading in some cases to depression (287). The withdraw response often takes the form of stonewalling: the man simply blocks the woman's attempt to discuss something. He may be inclined to think of a partner raising issues as being overly 'sensitive', overreacting to minor things that do not merit discussion. He may think she raises issues more frequently than necessary. Finally, these attitudes of withdrawal may be closely related to gaslighting. The man might make the woman feel stupid or crazy for bringing up a topic, accusing her of inventing problems where there are none.

The demand-withdraw response highlights not only the notion that men in relationships with women are not expected to perform hermeneutic labor, but also that women are expected to perform hermeneutic labor invisibly. By the time the demander attempts to engage the withdrawer in conversation, she has already performed hermeneutic labor in preparation for the conversation: she has identified the problem(s) she would like to discuss and decided how to present them. The demand for a conversation both makes her previous hermeneutic labor explicit, and requests some hermeneutic labor on the part of her partner. But, by withdrawing, the partner suggests that he does not want to perform hermeneutic labor. He also asserts that he is entitled to set the terms of their shared conversations: by deciding when, and if, to assent to her demand for them, his power to withdraw outweighs her power to demand. This causes distress for the woman demander. It creates the sense of disempowerment that Bartky associates with women's unhappiness in relationships with men (1990, 109). Now, one might respond that the man's withdraw response indicates not that *he* simply does not want to perform hermeneutic labor, but rather that he does not believe that he *or his partner* should, or need to, perform hermeneutic labor with respect to their intimate relationship. However, we have explained above that the issue is not that women have higher standards for openness than men do; rather, men are more likely than women to feel that the standards they share with their partner have been met. Men as well as women also experience dissatisfaction due to the inability to talk about sensitive issues. Thus, men are still demanding and benefiting from women's hermeneutic labor, even though they may experience its products as unnecessary or unwelcome. The message of the gendered demand/withdraw pattern is that women should be performing their hermeneutic labor, but should do so invisibly, without involving men partners in it.

## ***2d. Where Women Perform Hermeneutic Labor***

Hermeneutic labor requires a huge amount of activity from women, yet it nonetheless serves to reinforce the stereotype that women are passive and men are active. This is because hermeneutic labor is largely invisible to men: it is primarily undertaken in rumination and conversations among women. Women expend overwhelming cognitive and communicative resources on hermeneutic labor, but much of this goes on ‘within their own heads’ and among one another. Ruminating is not merely being “lost in thought”; rather, rumination is the state of frequently thinking about a topic unrelated to immediate environmental cues, and it can be intrusive and even obsessive. Afifi notes that rumination is generated by a “discrepancy between individuals’ goals and their perceptions of their ability to meet those goals”; hence, a partner’s topic avoidance may be a reason for ruminating (Afifi, Joseph, and Aldeis 2012, 108). Women are twice as likely to ruminate than men are in general; in the case of intimate relationships, women are likely to ruminate if they feel avoidance from their partner “because open communication is an important relational goal for many women” (109).

Rumination is a form of hermeneutic labor. Yet it rarely achieves the outcome of resolution of negative feelings, especially when generated by a partner’s avoidance. A woman who seeks to stop ruminating about her partner’s avoidance by confronting him about it is likely to find herself in the throes of the demand/withdraw pattern outlined above; even if her partner is receptive, she may have lingering resentment over being the one tasked with identifying and resolving problems of the relationship. Alternatively, she might decide not to make waves and continue to avoid the topic, which is also likely to be dissatisfying because nothing is resolved (and the cycle of rumination may continue). As Bartky writes, “If she keeps her doubts to herself, she runs the risk of developing a sense of distance and falseness that...is a major mark of alienated caregiving” (111). Alienation from one’s partner, from the relationship, and from the efficacious expression of one’s feelings and the ability to change the dynamic when desired, reinforce ruminating patterns and lead to unhappiness.

Because attempted conversations with men partners so often involve a demand-withdraw pattern, many women turn to each other for help in interpreting their own feelings and those of men partners: women’s friendships serve as hermeneutic labor workshops. It is well-established that women spend much more time, both in real life and in media interpretations, talking about men than men do talking about women (take the Bechdel test, for instance).<sup><8></sup> And a substantial amount of this time is spent specifically talking about intimate partners who are men. Common forms of hermeneutic labor in these settings include ‘processing’ women’s relationship experiences, interpreting the cues and scarce words of men, imagining what they might be feeling on the basis of them, airing grievances, and carefully crafting their plans of action in response. In addition, an entire industry has cropped up in order to help women outsource some of their hermeneutic labor to experts. Many dating manuals geared toward women are designed to enable women to understand men’s behavior. Relationship coaches, podcasts, and therapists may do the same.

The burdens of hermeneutic labor may be especially challenging in early phases of intimate relationships, where partners are still getting to know each other. Relationships tend initially to involve the exchange of biographical and demographic information, and then to move to a phase of “exchange of emotions or feelings” (Dindia, Fitzpatrick, and Kenny 1997, 394). Intimate relationships often hit a roadblock in the transition from the first to the second phase. Individuals may be uncertain about when it is appropriate to start discussing feelings, afraid of rejection. After all, the other party might pull away if they feel it is too early to start discussing feelings, and the party who pulls away has the power advantage. They may choose to cut off the relationship suddenly altogether. In most cases, this dynamic is highly gendered. Women’s hermeneutic labor here most often consists in picking up on potential cues that a man might be in danger of being scared away. Popular gender norms depict men as being easily ‘spooked,’ and blame women for spooking them. Despite cultural scripts that code women as fragile and men as strong, there is a dominant

conflicting narrative that men are extremely fragile when it comes to emotional openness and anything that hints at commitment. That is, a key form of discomfort around expectations in dating is uncertainty about when it is first appropriate to raise concerns about the relationship, or even simply to ask where the relationship is heading. Related to this is the hermeneutic labor of deciding when, if at all, to speak up. Crucially, women may be unsatisfied when they demand to speak about something with their partner, as they are likely to be involved in the demand-withdraw pattern outlined above; but they may *also* be unsatisfied if they keep silent after ruminating about the discrepancy between their relationship standards and the status of their relationship.

### 3. The Misogyny of Hermeneutic Labor in Intimate Relationships with Men

Given that the hermeneutic labor of intimate relationships between women and men involves a gendered power asymmetry in which the labor is itself disempowering, it may be considered a form of misogyny. I adopt Kate Manne's definition here, where misogyny is "the system that operates within a patriarchal social order in order to police and enforce women's subordination and to uphold male dominance" (Manne 2017, 33). Misogyny polices and enforces the patriarchal social order, in contrast to sexism, which ideologically justifies it. Misogyny is not a worldview to which an individual need deliberately assent; rather, it is "primarily a property of social environments in which women are liable to encounter hostility due to the enforcement and policing of patriarchal norms and expectations" (19). Misogyny involves a "gendered economy of moral labor," in which women are obliged to offer feminine-coded services to men, often one man (i.e. a significant other), when he wants them (114). A key feature of misogyny, for Manne, is that it "involves men drawing on women in *asymmetrical moral support roles*" (xiii). Emotional labor is one such moral support role, and Manne likens a woman's role to a 'human giver' rather than a human being.

The social expectation that women be hermeneutic laborers on behalf of men is misogynistic not only because it exploits women, but also because it places them in a double-bind while mystifying them to this condition. Care and love labor are marginalized in part because of ambivalent attitudes toward intimate relationships: love is seen at once as frivolous and as essential for human flourishing (Lynch et al. 2009, 55). The very same ideology that expects women to interpret complex intimate relationship dynamics considers these relationships to be essentially uninterpretable. Romantic love is taken to be irrational and, thus, beyond comprehension or analysis. Carrie Jenkins describes this as the "romantic mystique," which suggests that love is a mystery, and that this is part of its appeal (Jenkins 2017, 7). Jenkins argues that this view sets up lovers for unsatisfying relationships and normalizes abusive ones. The romantic mystique is perfectly suited to permit men to avoid hermeneutic labor—it would be a futile task!—even as women are encouraged to keep 'overthinking' things in order to 'catch a man and keep him,' because doing so quietly benefits men.

Thus, women perform hermeneutic labor within an ideological framework that both demands and devalues it by considering it fruitless. Here, one may see misogyny at work within the social environment. Hermeneutic labor in intimate relationships enlists women as 'human givers' and chastens them when they do not fulfill this role; moreover, it *also* chastens them when they fulfill this role by offering interpretations of their feelings and those of intimate partners who are men when they are always at risk of being considered nags and shrews. In addition, while women are busy devoting great deals of their emotional and cognitive resources to their romantic relationships, they are prevented from using these resources elsewhere. Their gaze is constantly turned in on these relationships at the expense of other domains of their lives. Mari Ruti writes that women "are

conditioned to believe that masculine emotional ambivalence can be conjured away by sheer perseverance,” but this is not generally the case (87). Ruti relates this situation to what Lauren Berlant calls ‘cruel optimism,’ where one desires something that actively impedes one’s flourishing and satisfaction of desire (Berlant 2011, 1). This cruelly optimistic situation causes disempowerment and suffering for women. They are caught in the double-bind of ambivalent attitudes about love, which “produce sexual and love desires that they cannot satisfy”—especially for women (Ferguson 2018, 42).

#### 4. Conclusion: Epistemic Decentering in Hermeneutic Labor

There are a number of reasons for the prevalence of women’s hermeneutic labor in intimate relationships between women and men. Women’s socialization encourages them to be relationship experts, while men’s encourages them not to be; women’s social positionality and traditional gender roles combine to encourage women’s greater investment in romantic relationships than men; men’s socialization drives them to be far less adept and willing to take on the work of interpreting their own feelings and their partners’. As we have outlined above, this situation leads to women’s becoming informal therapists for men partners and for the relationship, but this results in their disempowerment and dissatisfaction. Women in relationships with men often find that men partners set the terms of when, and how, emotional expression is received: they are able to exert power by withdrawing from conversations with women partners and by withholding love and affection.

The harms of hermeneutic labor’s exploitation are psychological, epistemic, and ethical. In intimate relationships between men and women, hermeneutic labor depletes time and energy from women, who find themselves driven to ruminate and converse with others, such as women friends and counselors, in order for their relationships with men to be sustainable. Because men partners who receive the fruits of hermeneutic labor are often unwilling and unable to engage in relationship maintenance work themselves, women’s hermeneutic labor leads to their feeling disempowered and unappreciated, even as the labor they perform is beneficial to men partners and often necessary for the relationship. These feelings manifest in unhappiness, but social pressures, gender roles, and the desire for intimate relationships mystify women into thinking that this unhappiness is a price they must pay, and possibly something that may be overcome with even more hermeneutic labor.

Recall that Bartky considers women’s emotional labor for men to be disempowering. It epistemically decenters and ethically harms the laborer, involving “subjective and deeply interiorized effects *upon women ourselves* of the emotional care we give and of the care we fail to get in return” (109). While exploitative emotional labor is indeed exhausting and disempowering, we may say that what Bartky identifies as epistemic decentering is actually a result of hermeneutic labor rather than emotional labor. The “subjective and deeply interiorized effects” of hermeneutic labor may include obsessive cycles of rumination, preoccupation with relationship maintenance, and/or mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression. The harms of rumination and preoccupation are specific to hermeneutic labor, because it for the most part occurs temporally outside of the situations on which it labors. And, because hermeneutic labor is less about evoking and suppressing feeling and more about interpreting emotions, and planning how to address the emotional needs of oneself and one’s partner, it is in hermeneutic laboring that women come to question their very status as knowers. It is also in hermeneutic laboring that women are taught that their work is necessary but frivolous: the “romantic mystique” makes hermeneutic labor, but not emotional labor, appear pointless. Exploitative emotional labor may be intrinsically harmful, but need not of itself imply epistemic decentering. If anything, emotional laborers often recognize that they themselves have expertise in emotion management, including skills for evoking and suppressing feelings within

themselves. Unfortunately, they may also recognize that their expertise will go unrecognized by those who benefit from it. Hermeneutic laborers, on the other hand, may simultaneously recognize their own expertise *and* doubt it: because they may doubt that their hermeneutic labor is even possible. Performed within an ideological framework that considers intimate relationships to involve the mystery of romantic love, women may despair that their efforts to narrate and interpret are useless. And yet they are encouraged both to keep performing it, and to have sympathy for the emotionally under-resourced men who require it.

Even as hermeneutic labor and emotional labor go hand in hand, hermeneutic labor's reflective character, unique skill set of communication efficacy and sensitivity to reading others, and occurrence largely outside of the situations that it works *on*, suggest that hermeneutic labor involves unique processes of cognition, emotion, and imagination. So too are the harms of its exploitation unique. When a woman approaches her partner to discuss a troubling dynamic within the relationship, she may perform emotional labor in suppressing feelings of outrage and evoking feelings of sympathy. Her partner may also perform emotional labor in suppressing feelings, say of resentment or sadness, and evoking feelings of calm. But my argument suggests that before this approach, the woman has likely already spent hours assessing the dynamic and figuring out how to express it to her partner. Moreover, when the discussion is over—if it ever even begins—it is the woman who is most likely to rerun the situation over and over in her head, trying to interpret what happened and wonder whether she may learn lessons for the future.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank two anonymous *Hypatia* referees for their excellent suggestions for clarifying the nature of hermeneutic labor and its relation to feminist love studies. I would also like to thank *Hypatia* editor Bonnie Mann for suggesting the addition of “motivations” in the definition of hermeneutic labor.

### Notes

<1> The analysis presented here applies primarily to cisgender men and women, who overwhelmingly make up the participants in the empirical studies on which my argument draws. Because many of the studies pertain to the effects on adults of gender role socialization as children and adolescents, the conclusions drawn about men and women apply most straightforwardly to those whose gender identity matches that of their early socialization. For instance, persons raised as girls are likely to develop skills in relationship maintenance as adults even when they are not women, as Lewins 2002 found. Multiple studies have also focused on the emotional labor that cisgender women partners of trans men undertake, which in some ways maps on to relationships between cisgender men and women but also involve unique dynamics, such as emotionally supporting a partner during transition, as well as more commonly shared commitments to feminist gender roles than relationships between cisgender men and women (Ward 2010, Pfeffer and LaRossa 2010, Franklin 2014).

<2> This tradition of hermeneutics is similar, when applied to intimate relationships, to some psychological frameworks, including relational dialectics theory, uncertainty reduction theory, and communication privacy management theory.

<3> This distinction may map on to that of basic empathy and complex empathy. See Coplan 2011.

<4> In her original formulation of the concept, Hochschild distinguishes emotional labor from emotion work. While emotional labor is paid and has exchange value, emotion work is unpaid and



has use value. Emotion work happens in the private interpersonal sphere, and hence describes much of what is informally termed ‘emotional labor’ by others.

<5> This dynamic of exploitation is distinct from what Miranda Fricker calls “hermeneutical injustice,” which is a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). While hermeneutical injustice results from a lacuna in communal hermeneutic resources, rendering certain speakers unintelligible from the standpoint of dominant discourse, whereas women’s hermeneutic labor is intelligible and well-resourced by a culture saturated with discourses around intimate relationships. In contrast with hermeneutical injustice, hermeneutic labor exploitation refers to the ways that women are expected to undertake hermeneutic labor on behalf of men in intimate relationships with them, and that this labor is exhausting, disempowering, and coerced.

<6> This greater capacity for control is also related to the fact that men simply have a wider dating pool than women, because men are more equally, if not more, likely to accept a romantic partner who is younger and/or less educated than themselves, while women seek—and are sought by—men who are older and equally or better-educated than themselves (Illouz 2012, 77).

<7> The ‘principle of least interested is first theorized by Willard Waller in the 1930s. Studies since have shown not only that most heterosexual romantic relationships involve emotional inequality, but also that it is more frequently the man who is less invested than the woman (Waller 1938).

<8> The ‘Bechdel test,’ so called after the American cartoonist Alison Bechdel, was first spelled out in Bechdel’s 1985 comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*. The test specifies that a film has at least two women in it who talk to each other about something other than a man. Surprisingly few films pass it.

## References

- Afifi, Tamara D., Andrea Joseph, and Desiree Aldeis. 2012. The “standards for openness” hypothesis: Why women find (conflict) avoidance more dissatisfying than men. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 29 (1): 102–125.
- Afifi, Tamara D., Tara McManus, Keli Steuber, and Amanda Coho. 2009. Verbal avoidance and dissatisfaction in intimate conflict situations. *Human Communication Research* 35: 357–383.
- Afifi, Tamara D., & Andea Joseph. (2009). The standards for openness hypothesis: A gendered explanation of why avoidance is so dissatisfying. In *Uncertainty, information management, and disclosure decisions: Theories and Applications*, ed. T. D. Afifi and W. A. Afifi: 341–362. US: Taylor & Francis.
- Alcoff, Linda Martín. 2006. *Visible identities: Race, gender, and the self*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 2018. *Rape and resistance*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press.
- Antill, John K. 1983. Sex role complementarity versus similarity in married couples. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45: 145–155.
- Awosan, Christiana I., and Kenneth V. Hardy. 2017. Coupling processes and experiences of never married heterosexual black men and women: A phenomenological study. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 43 (3): 463–481.
- Bartky, Sandra. 1990. *Femininity and domination*. New York: Routledge.
- Beck, Julie. 2018. The concept creep of emotional labor. *The Atlantic*, November 26.
- Braudy Harris, Phyllis, and Joyce Bichler. 1997. *Men giving care: Reflections of husbands and sons*. New York: Garland.
- Cameron, Jessica J., and Emma Curry. 2020. Gender roles and date context in hypothetical scripts for a woman and a man on a first date in the twenty-first century. *Sex Roles* 82 (5–6): 345–362.
- Cantillon, Sara, and Kathleen Lynch. 2017. Affective equality: love matters. *Hypatia* 32 (1): 169–186.

- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment, second edition*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Connell, R.W. 2005. *Masculinities: Second edition*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press.
- Coplan, Amy. 2011. Understanding empathy: Its features and effects. In *Empathy: philosophical and psychological perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 3-18.
- Dailey, René M., and Nicholas A. Palomares. 2004. Strategic topic avoidance: An investigation of topic avoidance frequency, strategies used, and relational correlates. *Communication Monographs* 71 (4): 471-496.
- DelGreco, Maria, and Amanda Denes. 2020. You are not as cute as you think you are: Emotional responses to expectancy violations in heterosexual online dating interactions. *Sex Roles* 82 (9-10): 622-632.
- Digby, Tom. 2014. *Love and war: How militarism shapes sexuality and romance*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dindia, Kathryn, Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, and David A. Kenny. 1997. Self-disclosure in spouse and stranger interaction: A social relations analysis. *Human Communication Research* 23 (3): March 1997, 388-412.
- Dogan, Jardin, Candice Hargons, Carolyn Meiller, Joseph Oluokun, Cheshire Montique, Natalie Malone. 2018. Catchin' feelings: Experiences of intimacy during black college students' sexual encounters. *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships* 5 (2): 81-107.
- Eaton, Asia Anna, and Suzanna Rose. 2011. Has dating become more egalitarian? A 35 year review using sex roles. *Sex Roles* 64: 843-862.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Arlie Hochschild, ed. 2002. *Global woman: Nannies, maids, and sex workers in the new economy*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Farr Tormey, Judith. 1976. Exploitation, oppression and self-sacrifice. In *Women and philosophy: toward a theory of liberation*, ed. Carol C. Gould and Marx W. Wartofsky. New York: Capricorn Books: 206-221.
- Ferguson, Ann. 1989. *Blood at the root: Motherhood, sexuality and male dominance*. London: Pandora Press.
- Ferguson, Ann. 2018. Alienation in love: Is mutual love the solution? In García-Andrade, Adriana, Lena Gunarsson, and Anna G. Jónasdóttir, ed. 2018. *Feminism and the Power of Love: Interdisciplinary Interventions*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fitzpatrick, Jacki, and Donna L. Sollie. Unrealistic gendered and relationship-specific beliefs: Contributions to investments and commitment in dating relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 16 (6): 852-867.
- Franklin, Kolbe. 2014. Gender labor, assimilationism, and transformative practices: The relational negotiations of cisgender women and their transgender men partners. *Sociology Compass* 8 (6): 648-659.
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2004. *Truth and method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York and London: Continuum.
- García-Andrade, Adriana, Lena Gunarsson, and Anna G. Jónasdóttir, ed. 2018. *Feminism and the power of love: Interdisciplinary interventions*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Gerstel, Naomi, and Sally K. Gallagher. 2001. Men's caregiving: Gender and the contingent character of care. *Gender and Society* 15 (2): 197-217.
- Gregoratto, Federica. 2017. Why love kills: Power, gender dichotomy, and romantic femicide. *Hypatia* 32 (1): 135-151.
- Gunarsson, Lena. 2014. *The contradictions of love*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, Encarnación. *Migration, domestic work and affect: A decolonial approach on value and the feminization of labor*. New York: Routledge.
- Hearn, Jeff. 1982. Notes on patriarchy, professionalization, and the semi-professions. *Sociology* 16 (2): 184-202.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1983a. *The managed heart: commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1983b. Smile Wars. *Mother Jones*, December 1983: 35-42.
- Hoerder, Dirk, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, and Silke Neunsinger, ed. 2015. *Towards a global history of domestic and caregiving workers*. Leiden: Brill.
- hooks, bell. 2000. *All about love: New visions*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- . 2004. *The will to change: Men, masculinity, and love*. New York: Atria Books.
- Illouz, Eva. 1997. *Consuming the romantic utopia: Love and the cultural contradictions of capitalism*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press.
- Illouz, Eva. 2012. *Why love hurts: A sociological explanation*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press.
- James, Nicky. 1989. Emotional labour: skill and work in the social regulation of feelings. *The Sociological Review* 37 (1): 15-42.
- Jansz, Jeroen. 2000. Masculine identity and restrictive emotionality. In *Gender and emotion: Social psychological perspectives*, ed. Agneta H. Fischer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins, Carrie. 2017. *What love is and what it could be*. New York: Basic Books.
- Jónasdóttir, Anna G. 1994. *Why women Are oppressed*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Jónasdóttir, Anna G. 2018. The difference that (love) power makes. In García-Andrade, Adriana, Lena Gunarsson, and Anna G. Jónasdóttir, ed. 2018. *Feminism and the power of love: Interdisciplinary interventions*. London and New York: Routledge.
- LaFrance, Marianne, and Mahzarin Banaji. 1992. Toward a reconsideration of the gender–emotion relationship. In *Emotion and social behavior*, ed. M.S. Clark: 178–201. New York: Sage Publications.
- Lanoix, Monique. 2013. Labor as embodied practice: The lessons of care work. *Hypatia* 28 (1): 85-100.
- Lazzarato, Maurizio. 1996. Immaterial labor. In *Radical thought in Italy: A potential politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Levant, Ronald F. 2001. Desperately seeking language: Understanding, assessing, and treating normative male alexithymia. In *The New Handbook of Psychotherapy and Counseling with Men: A Comprehensive Guide to Settings, Problems, and Treatment Approaches*, ed. Gary R. Brooks and Glenn E. Good. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.: 424-443.
- Levant, Ronald F., Philip A. Allen, and Mei-Ching Lien. 2014. Alexithymia in men: How and when do emotional processing deficiencies occur? *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 15 (3): July 2014, 324-334.
- Lynch, Kathleen. 2007. Love Labour as a distinct and non-commodifiable form of care labour. *The Sociological Review* 55 (3): 550-570.
- Lynch, Kathleen, John Baker, and Maureen Lyons. 2009. *Affective equality: Love, care, and injustice*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Manne, Kate. 2017. *Down girl: The logic of misogyny*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Martin, Susan Ehrlich. 1999. Police force or police service? Gender and emotional labor. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 561 (1): 111-126.
- McLellan-Lemal, Eleanor, Lauren Toledo, Christine O’Daniels, Olga Villar-Loubet, Cathy Simpson, Ada A Adimora, and Gary Marks. 2013. “A man’s gonna do what a man wants to do”: African American and Hispanic women’s perceptions about heterosexual relationships: a qualitative study. *BMC Women’s Health*, 13 (27).

- Merrill, Anne F., and Tamara D. Afifi. 2012. Examining the bidirectional nature of topic avoidance and relationship dissatisfaction: the moderating role of communication skills, *Communication Monographs* 79 (4): 499-521.
- Mumford, Elizabeth A., Bruce G. Taylor, Weiwei Liu, and Peggy C. Giordano. 2019. Dating relationship dynamics, mental health, and dating victimization: A longitudinal path analysis. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 29 (3): 777-791.
- Oksala, Johanna. 2015. Affective labor and feminist politics. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41 (2): 281-303.
- Papp, Lauren M., Chrystyna D. Kouros, and E. Mark Cummings. 2009. Demand-withdraw patterns in marital conflict in the home. *Personal Relationships* 16 (2): 285-300.
- Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar, and Eileen Boris, ed. 2010. *Intimate labors: Cultures, technologies, and the politics of care*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Pfeffer, Carla A., and Ralph LaRossa. 2010. "Women's work"? Women partners of transgender men doing housework and emotion work. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72 (1): 165- 183.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2007. *The conflict of interpretations: Essays in hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Rubin, Lillian B. 1976. *Worlds of pain: Life in the working-class family*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ruti, Mari. 2018. *Penis envy and other bad feelings: The emotional costs of everyday life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Simpson, Lorenzo C. 2021. *Hermeneutics as critique: Science, politics, race, and culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Smith, R. Tyson. 2008. Passion work: The joint production of emotional labor in professional wrestling. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 71 (2): 157-176.
- Suh, Eun-Jung, Debbie S. Moskowitz, Marc. A. Fournier, and David C. Zuroff. 2004. Gender and relationships: Influences on agentic and communal behaviors. *Personal Relationships* 11: 41-60.
- Táíwò, Olúfẹ́ mi O. 2020. Stoicism (as emotional compression) is emotional labor. *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, 6 (2).
- Utley, Ebony A. 2010. "I used to love him": Exploring the miseducation about black love and sex. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 27 (3): 291-308.
- Vogel, D.L., S.R. Wester, M. Heesacker, and S. Madon. 1999. Dating relationships and the demand/withdraw pattern of communication. *Sex Roles* 41: 297-306.
- Ward, Jane. 2010. Gender labor: Transmen, femmes, and collective work of transgression. *Sexualities* 13 (2): 236-254.
- Weeks, Kathi. 2007. Life within and against work: Affective labor, feminist critique, and post-fordist politics. *Ephemera* 7 (1): 233-249.
- Zaretsky, Eli. 1976. *Capitalism, the family, and personal life*. New York: Harper Colophon Books.

#### Author Bio

Ellie Anderson is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Pomona College in Claremont, CA, USA. She has published on phenomenology, deconstruction, feminist theory, and philosophy of love. She is currently working on sexual ethics and the development of selfhood in intimate relationships.