

Butler C, Harris J. (2015)

[Pills, ills and the ugly face of aesthetic labour: 'they should've discriminated against me'.](#)

Work, Employment and Society

DOI: 10.1177/0950017014559965

Copyright:

This is the authors' manuscript of an article that has been accepted for publication in *Work, Employment and Society*, published by Sage, 2015.

Link to published article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0950017014559965>

Date deposited:

15/10/2014



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License](#)

Pills, ills and the ugly face of aesthetic labour: ‘they should’ve discriminated against me’

Accepted for publication in *Work, Employment and Society*

Clare Butler

Newcastle University, UK

Joanne Harris

Office manager in a professional services firm, England, UK

Abstract

This article presents a vivid account of one woman’s experience of taking on a second job - the role of a slimming club consultant - when her husband is made unemployed. Her story highlights how aesthetic labour, particularly when a worker’s appearance becomes more prominent over time, can lead to dangerous behaviours, namely the use of weight-loss pills and illegal drugs. These behaviours resulted in sleeplessness, frequent headaches and a feeling of disgust. Furthermore, this troubling account raises an important and uncomfortable question: can discrimination in the workplace sometimes be ‘for the best’?

Keywords

aesthetic labour, body, diet industry, discrimination, embodied capital, narrative, obesity, work

Introduction

An individual's appearance can influence his or her job prospects (Chiu and Babcock, 2002) and career progression (Pettinger, 2004). When workers' embodied characteristics are commodified as part of the employment relationship, then their work efforts fall within the domain of aesthetic labour (Witz et al., 2003). The focus on physicality that is central to aestheticised work means that people are frequently subject to pressure to craft, and re-craft, themselves in order to match the bodily requirements of their role (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006). Prior studies have found this crafting includes dress codes (Christman and Branson, 1990); body work for plus-size models (Czerniawski, 2012); and rules regarding make-up and hair (Hochschild, 1983).

In some working environments, people accept, or even embrace, aestheticised work. For example, many performers in theatre or television consider appearance-based evaluation a given (Dean, 2005) and within the fitness industry the term 'ocularcentric labour' - defined as the worker seeking the adoring gaze of the client as the primary return - has been used to represent the psycho-social rewards employees gain from their physical capital (Harvey et al., 2013; Sappey and Maconachie, 2012:505). However, it is the growth of aesthetic labour in the wider labour market - particularly retail, hospitality or consultancy (Hall and van den Broek, 2012; Nickson et al., 2012; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007b; Wellington and Bryson, 2001) - that has been subject to much recent research attention. In these settings, where employees are increasingly being called upon to serve as bodily role models, many consider 'lookism' to be discriminatory, 'unfair and unjust' (Waring, 2011:205). Lessons from prior research suggest that whether people consider workplace aestheticization to be fair or not depends on: the organization's reporting of their requirement for a certain look; workers' understanding and acceptance of these requirements; and whether, as a result, looks form a clearly understood and expected part of the

employment bargain (Czerniawski, 2012; Dean, 2005; Hall and van den Broek, 2012; Harvey et al., 2013; Sappey and Maconachie, 2012).

Arguably, the slimming club sector has its roots in the promotion of the aesthetic. Along with an improved physique, slimming clubs - just one part of the lucrative diet and weight-loss industry - promote enhanced health and wellbeing as part of their offering (Monaghan, 2007). The discourse that surrounds being overweight is often loaded with morality, considerations of social status and emotional weakness (Hardy, 2013). In response, slimming clubs promote their supportive climate - often blending notions of togetherness and disciplinary guardianship (Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010) - within which 'rational' approaches of self (and other) regulation are normalised (Heyes, 2006; Monaghan, 2007). Employment within the slimming club sector is often precarious: those who deliver the classes are typically self-employed with commission-based earnings. Slimming club consultants personify the firm (Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010): with their embodied capital (Bourdieu, 1986) - most often, their physicality - marketed as evidence of the success of its programmes.

Indeed, in the story that follows Joanne was mindful of her appearance prior to applying for the role of slimming club consultant. However, despite the aesthetic nature of the sector, throughout the recruitment process her looks were never mentioned: her approachability and friendliness were noted as key attributes which led to her appointment. Yet over time, Joanne's appearance increasingly became an integral part of her work. The conversations with her line manager and the pep-talks by senior officers at regional training events, 'encouraged' her to morph into a different (read, slimmer) form for the role. That is, the discourse within the firm highlighted that the consultants are the face of the firm; and an inspiration to its clients who were said to gain much needed strength from their appearance. In the context of a growing aesthetic economy, and where bodies and 'body size is an

overlooked topic that deserves attention in organizational research' (Levay, 2014:578), this 'on the frontline' piece draws attention to the reality for some workers when embodied characteristics are integral to their employment. The story that follows highlights the desperate and escalating actions that one woman took in an attempt to manage and produce an appropriate body to match the requirements of her work role.

The narrative presented here is the result of an in-depth interview undertaken in 2013. The story below was relayed in response to the question: 'tell me about your experience of running a slimming club' and was subject to little verbal interjection from the interviewer. The interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The original transcript was revised by the narrator only: this involved Joanne amending identifying or colloquial terms. As a result, the text below is Joanne's story and is in her own words; as such, it is an unfolding monologue that emphasises the personal experience of aesthetic labour and, more specifically, the experience of a lack of person-role-organization fit. Joanne's account concludes with a series of questions; they make for uncomfortable reading and were difficult to answer in light of her experiences. However, they highlight the importance of foregrounding the voice of workers, and their non-work life, to further our appreciation of the experiences of work and employment.

As a means of introduction to the narrator, Joanne Harris is 44 years of age and lives in central England. She has been married to Mark, an IT consultant, for 19 years and they have two children, aged 12 and 14. She has a degree in business and works part-time as an office manager in a professional services firm.

Joanne's story

It was around four years ago now that Mark lost his job [in early 2009]. Terrifying is not the word. I know it's not exactly news these days, people losing their jobs, but it's not until ... well,

when it happens to you, you're still stunned. We've got two children and, my salary, it's not bad, but it's not enough to cover the bills. Mark seemed better with losing his job than I was [when he lost his job]. He didn't sit about complaining. He was out there looking straight away. He's got a lot of contacts, but it was surprising how many of them were in the same boat or whose firms just weren't taking on staff. He did a bit of work here and there, but he couldn't get anything permanent or that paid enough to cover our outgoings. I needed to do something. I considered asking for more hours, upping to four days a week say, but with the state of the economy and the way firms were getting rid of people, I didn't want to put my head above the parapet. Mark wasn't keen on me looking for anything else. His parents are not in the best of health and so I tend to go and help them one day a week on top of looking after our lot. But in the end I just told him tough: we're a partnership and we just have to do whatever.

To be honest, there seemed to be a lot out there when I started looking: shop work and tele-sales mostly; much of the tele-sales was selling insurance though and I didn't fancy that. One day I saw an advert for someone to run a healthy lifestyle group - a slimming club by another name. It was linked in the advert to a government get fit and fight obesity initiative, but it was part of a well-known chain. I rang the number, spoke to the regional manager, and got through the initial interview. He explained how the company worked; the terms and conditions [self-employed and commission-based earnings]; and the training and support that was given because, as I told him, I didn't have any experience in this work at all. But I've always been quite a confident person, and anyway he said I sounded like I could add a lot to the job. I was asked to go for a more formal interview where he said I'd be asked to deliver a mock class alongside a typical interview.

I don't know why, but I didn't tell Mark I was going. It wasn't so much that I didn't want to get his hopes up or anything, but it was the job itself. I mean after two kids - well to be honest I've never been thin, ever. I'm a size 16, the average woman they reckon, don't they,

and I wondered if I was what they'd be looking for. I wore a black trousers suit and a black and white shirt. I looked okay and it went well. Anyway, it must've done as they gave me the job. I was matched up with Sarah, the lead officer for the region. She'd worked with the company for about 7 years and she was really up-beat and really supportive. The training was a mix of online exercises, reading, evening and weekend sessions and so I was able to fit it in around work [Joanne's part time role at the professional services firm] and other commitments. Mark seemed to be pleased and the kids as well.

The company were keen for me to be up and running as soon as possible. They wanted to get the post-holiday, pre-Christmas crowd and to be established by the New Year ready for what they called the resolution rush. Setting up took just over a month and by that time, I was keen to get started. The class started off quite small, but soon developed into about 14 or 15 people coming every week; mostly friends of friends and nearly all women. The money wasn't fantastic, especially when considering the effort, but it helped and I really enjoyed it. It was great to be able to help people to feel better about themselves and people were losing weight and saying how much better they felt. And they looked better too - happier, brighter you know. It was so different to the day job: getting positive feedback was really rewarding. I felt I was the job, if that makes sense. The job was me in a way that my other job wasn't. It was the sense of a real connection and seeing your efforts in front of you. I found myself on the internet more than the children some nights trying to learn about healthy eating and about the psychology of health and fitness and dieting. There's so much information out there. The obesity crisis is everywhere and diet and exercise advice, but people find it hard to do on their own. That's why most of them joined the class: for the initial kick-start; the support to keep on going; and for someone to give them a friendly shove if they go off track.

I went on top-up training after a couple of months. We were being given our own pep-talk I suppose. There were maybe twenty-five of us, mostly from the midlands and southern

England; we were given presentations about exercise and nutrition [delivered by staff from the UK central office]. We were asked to think about our own behaviours and habits and to consider that we are the face of the company. A lot of the sessions were focused on positive thinking: stressing that you gain strength from doing the things you thought you couldn't do and how you need to be the person you want to be. They were promoting the importance of us having the right attitude and image - getting us on the same bus someone said - so that we could help others to achieve their goals.

As I said, I really enjoyed the job in the beginning. It was the winter and the build up to Christmas and then the New Year boost was really energising. By this time Mark had found work too. He was given a temporary contract in IT support, not at his previous level or what he trained for exactly, but it was work, and such a relief with the cost of Christmas and everything. I know it sounds silly to talk about winter being better, but it was the clothes and being able to wear a jacket. The thing was, I wasn't doing as much in the evenings. I was helping out at a second class every other week by this time. And this was on top of the support I was giving outside the classes - texts, emails. The classes were really popular and quite successful. My mum was helping out with the children and doing bits of ironing and things around the house so when I was at home I think I was doing less, moving less. I guess that's why I started to put on weight. I daren't get on the scales, but I knew from my clothes. I know it sounds ridiculous, but I didn't know how much I weighed and I didn't want to. After Christmas, in the February, I started to get really worried about it. I needed to get through the classes and so I decided to buy a Body Shaper. I don't know if that's what they're called exactly. I'd seen them on TV and they looked like wide elastic belts, but when I went to the shop I bought a proper corset. It cost a fortune, it was surprisingly comfortable though, but really I didn't care at the time as long as I looked the part. And I suppose that's the thing. I did look the part, but I felt like a hypocrite. Well, I was a bloody hypocrite and I felt absolutely

dreadful about it. Every week I'd go and be the enthusiastic, yes you can, and this is how person and giving out all this encouragement, but inside was another thing.

Then, in the course of a week or two, I saw three class members while I was shopping in town. I'd never met any of them outside [the class] before. It wasn't a problem or anything, but I knew I didn't look my best. I looked bigger and I felt it. I was getting more and more unhappy with myself and Mark was noticing. He'd ask me if I was alright and I'd say yes, but he and my mum, they both knew I wasn't. The summer was coming and I had to do something. I bumped into a girl from school by chance: Helen. I hadn't seen her for a couple of years; she'd moved away for a while, but she was still in touch with one or two of the others from school and she invited me on one of their nights out. We had such a good night. It was great to just laugh and not think about all the other things that were going on. We decided to make it a regular thing: monthly or whatever, just so we could get away from real-life, so to speak. But a week or two later Helen texted me, saying it was one of the girl's birthdays and that they were planning another night out. They were going to meet at one of the other girl's houses, have a few drinks before going out and get a taxi from there. I'd never met this other girl before, but she was really nice. She'd recently got divorced and was a bit nervous about being single again in her 40s. We got chatting about things, you know like you do when you're on your third glass of wine, and I was telling her about how I was worried about my weight. She mentioned that she'd recently lost weight by taking weight-loss pills that she'd bought online. She said that she took four a day, five if she was going out or knew she'd overeaten, and that they speeded up your metabolism so that you burnt off more calories. They sounded like caffeine tablets, but also, in the way she described them, a bit like those supplements that body builders take. I knew, I know, that it's not the right way to lose weight, obviously I do, but when you need to lose weight it's tempting isn't it?

That was how it started. She was getting them for me when she bought hers. I'd pick them up on the way from work. I bought a month's supply at first and was taking them as recommended. I did make sure I ate healthily too: although, actually, I was probably hungry most of the time. But, I didn't do exercise, I've never been to an exercise class or the gym. It's never been of interest to me. When I was younger, I seemed to be fit enough from walking around university and just normal life and then when I had the children - well, I never sat down. But, as I said, I've never been thin. My mother's not thin, nor my sister or my cousins; all the women in my family are 'curvy' as my grandmother used to say. But when I took the pills, I felt quite quickly as though I'd lost weight, although I was still too concerned to actually get on the scales. It did give me a confidence boost and soon I was taking more than I should've done. People at work [in the professional services firm] started to notice too, and I was getting comments about how good I looked. Sarah called into one of the [slimming] classes one night and was really complimentary about how I looked and how I was representing the company really well. I hadn't told people at work [in the professional services firm] about my 'other' job - only close friends. I live far enough away from work [in the professional services firm] for people not to know and I didn't want my two lives to meet, to be honest.

When I ate too much or if I went out with the girls and drank a bit too much, I would take more of the pills. I did find that I had trouble sleeping and had headaches, but on top of this it was a stressful time with Mark still on a temporary contract and the children, well, just being children, you know. One night [when on a girl's night out] I was offered [by man in a nightclub] 'a sort of speed', as he called it. Thing was, by this time I'd stopped losing weight. I was probably a size 12, 14. I certainly wasn't thin, and I didn't dare stop taking the pills in case I put it back on. So, I took one of the tablets from this guy - we did know him, he was a nice guy who was often out when we went out - cost me a tenner. How bloody ridiculous is all this though? Here I am, an intelligent woman, married with two children, good job, nice house - a

normal woman - and here I was buying drugs from a man in a club. After I took the first one I remember waiting for something to happen. I have no idea what I was expecting, but something. I had taken drugs once or twice while I was at university, you know at house parties, but it was never my thing and it was a different time then and I didn't care about things in the same way.

Soon I was spending a lot of money, what with the weight-loss pills, supplements and things. Yes, I did start taking 'speed' regularly - not more than a couple of times a week – but, yes, it was regular. Christ it was all so, so dirty. I was disgusted with myself. I really did feel disgusting. I would buy a few at a time as well, just in case I didn't see him. I was becoming so focused on me and how I was feeling. I don't know, looking back now, if it was paranoia, but I was losing sight of what was real. I had lost weight though. I couldn't afford new clothes so I just used a belt. I weighed and could see that I was lighter than I was before I was married. But I also looked empty. I don't know what I mean by that; don't know if I can describe it. But, I was on auto-pilot. I was juggling work, family and everything just like so many women I know. I seemed to be managing my job [in the professional services firm] fine – at least nothing was ever said. Mark asked me to cut back on what I was doing. He could see the difference in me, obviously. Although he knew that we needed the money, he said nothing was worth ruining my health for. He had no clue what I was doing.

The [slimming] classes, though, still felt positive. They were an escape and they were a great success in so many ways. I was getting great, really nice feedback from the members and from Sarah. My weight loss was, apparently, inspiring others - I was being held up as some sort of heroine by the local and regional clubs. But, the next time I went to the regional meeting, there were only a few people there I knew. A lot had left and there was a different feel about it - much more professional, pressured maybe - more slick, I guess. I was described in the meeting by the new regional director, Sarah's boss, as being a role model for the organization. How

bloody ironic is that? I was a role model for health and I was popping God knows how many pills a day and feeling horrible.

I knew I needed to change something, but I didn't know how to. I was aware of how out of control it all was. But I couldn't get away from the fact that we needed the money and I knew I needed to be a certain size to earn the money. There was talk of me taking on a different role, more managerial, or taking on a wider geographical area - my 'inspirational' image apparently. It would have meant reducing my days in my real, other job [at the professional services firm] or maybe, even, leaving altogether and taking this [slimming club consultant role] on as a whole career. I had been in the [slimming club consultant] role for eighteen months, two years by this time. Then a few things happened all within a few weeks of each other. Mark got a job, a permanent job this time, and was going to be back to near enough his original salary. My father was taken ill and, although he's fine now, it meant that Mum couldn't help out when Mark was away from home on the induction and when he'd be working with clients on site. What really got me to do something though was when my daughter spoke about wanting to be thinner and lose weight like me. It was the first and only time she'd ever said it; we were all in the kitchen just about to eat. I told her she was lovely, beautiful, healthy and fit and that a changing body shape was a part of growing up. The conversation quickly moved onto other things, but I could feel the emotion building up. It was like a heat - a pulsing heat - that was rising up from my feet. I've never known anything like it. I went upstairs into the bathroom and just cried and cried and cried. I couldn't stop. Mark came up to see where I was. I told him it was just the worry of my dad. I don't think he believed me. He asked if we were okay, if our marriage was okay. I think looking back now that with the weight [loss] and going out and how different I'd become, I wonder if he thought I was seeing someone else. He said that he felt as though he was losing me and he didn't know what to do. I didn't tell him the truth about any of it - I still haven't - but it was then, well, I knew things couldn't go on as they were.

The next day I rang and told Sarah I was finishing. She was supportive, but also disappointed. She said that I had worked so hard over the past year or so and had really transformed myself. She tried to persuade me to stay by saying I could go back to my original one class a week and she made a few other suggestions to reduce my hours. A couple of days later I had a call from the regional director who asked me to reconsider. He offered me more money to stay on and asked if I wanted to take the lead on promotion for the region. He said that I had become their pin-up and that I was an example to others who were struggling with their weight. At this point, I was getting upset he was making me feel like I was letting people down. I felt like telling him exactly how much of a bloody example I was, but thankfully I didn't. I just ended the call. I got tough and told him straight that I definitely wasn't interested in continuing in any capacity.

It was afterwards when I was thinking about what he'd said, when he said what I had become. It got to me, you know. What had I become? I was nothing better than a bloody druggie; I was a druggie, I was spending about £100 a month to maintain a size which never fitted me, and for a job. When I think back, I can't believe how quickly all this happened. How quickly I got drawn into it. Since then, I've stopped taking everything and I'm back to a size 16. The corset? I've kept them - because I bought another one - I've kept them in the drawer. I don't know why.

Thing is, and I know I'm just one case and maybe this is just this particular industry, but have organizations got a responsibility here? Haven't they got some responsibility to consider whether you're suited to the job? There have to be a lot of people doing jobs that they're not suited for - physically or in other ways. They may not know it yet, but they will when they realise that they have to change to continue in the job. I know, I really do know, that this is an awful thing to say. I know, I'm sure you won't agree with me, but I think not appointing people, discriminating against them if you like, is sometimes better. They should've discriminated

against me. They could see I was big, 'curvy'. And they knew that they wanted a size 12 at least. The pep talks, the encouragement to become something you're not, at the time felt supportive, but it wasn't, was it, it was pressure to change. And, it's made worse by putting it as if it's about supporting others by being a good example - it's wrong, just wrong. It puts pressure on you to change who you are, doesn't it? I know I did it. I know it was me, but you look at how many people are unemployed and how desperate people are and they'll do anything and that's the danger, isn't it? They, employers I mean, are playing with people's lives, their families, and their health in some cases. It's like emotional blackmail. Is that better than discrimination? Is discrimination wrong if it's maybe for the best? Who decides what's best, yes I know and I know this might be an unpopular view and yes discrimination in many, if not most, cases is wrong, but can it sometimes be right?

References

- Bourdieu P (1986) The forms of capital. In Richardson JG (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood Press, 241-258.
- Chiu RK and Babcock RD (2002) The relative importance of facial attractiveness and gender in Hong Kong selection decisions. *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 13(1): 141-155.
- Christman LA and Branson DH (1990) Influence of physical disability and dress of female job applicants on interviewers. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 8(3): 51-57.
- Czerniawski AM (2012) Disciplining corpulence: the case of plus-size fashion models. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 41(2): 127-153.
- Dean D (2005) Recruiting a self: women performers and aesthetic labour. *Work, Employment and Society* 19(4): 761-774.
- Entwistle J and Wissinger E (2006) Keeping up appearances: aesthetic labour in the fashion modelling industries of London and New York. *The Sociological Review* 54(4): 774-794.
- Hall R and van den Broek D (2012) Aestheticising retail workers: orientations of aesthetic labour in Australian fashion retail. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 33(1): 85-102.
- Hardy KA (2013) The education of affect: anatomical replicas and 'feeling fat'. *Body & Society* 19(1): 3-26.
- Harvey G, Vachhani SJ and Williams K (2013) Working out: aesthetic labour, affect and the fitness industry personal trainer. *Leisure Studies* 32: 91-104.
- Heyes CDJ (2006) Foucault goes to Weight Watchers. *Hypatia* 21(2): 126-149.
- Hochschild A (1983) *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Levy C (2014) Obesity in organizational context. *Human Relations* 67(5): 565-585.
- Moisio R and Beruchashvili M (2010) Questing for well-being at Weight Watchers: the role of the spiritual-therapeutic model in a support group. *Journal of Consumer Research* 36(5): 857-875.
- Monaghan LF (2007) McDonaldizing men's bodies? slimming, associated (ir)rationalities and resistances. *Body & Society* 13(2): 67-93.
- Nickson D, Warhurst C, Commander J, Hurrell SA and Cullen AM (2012) Soft skills and employability: evidence from UK retail. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 33(1): 65-84.

- Pettinger L (2004) Brand culture and branded workers: Service work and aesthetic labour in fashion retail. *Consumption Markets and Culture* 7(2): 165-184.
- Sappey J and Maconachie G (2012) Ocularcentric labour: 'you don't do this for money' *Industrial Relations* 67(3): 505-525.
- Warhurst C and Nickson D (2007a) Employee experience of aesthetic labour in retail and hospitality. *Work, Employment and Society* 21(1): 103-120.
- Warhurst C and Nickson D (2007b) A new labour aristocracy? aesthetic labour and routine interactive service. *Work, Employment and Society* 21(4): 785-798.
- Waring P (2011) Keeping up appearances: aesthetic labour and discrimination law. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 53(2): 193-207.
- Wellington CA and Bryson JR (2001) At face value? image consultancy, emotional labour and professional work. *Sociology* 35(4): 933-946.
- Witz A, Warhurst C and Nickson D (2003) The labour of aesthetics and the aesthetics of organization. *Organization* 10(1): 33-54.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Prof. Robert MacKenzie and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and challenging remarks. Clare would also like to thank Joanne for sharing her story.

Biographies

Clare Butler is Lecturer in Work and Employment at Newcastle University Business School, Newcastle University, UK. Her research interests include workplace-as-theatre and the performance of work; identity; embodied capital; emotional labour; and aesthetic labour.

Joanne Harris is an office manager in a professional services firm. She is also a wife and mother to two wonderful children.

Corresponding author

Clare Butler, Newcastle University Business School, Newcastle University, Barrack Road, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 4SE, UK. Email: clare.butler@newcastle.ac.uk