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Gender, Life Coaching, and the Commodification of Interpersonal Services

Intimate labor is an intriguing category to consider for understanding how an increasing number of occupations, such as life coaching, require workers to use emotional labor and specialized knowledge to provide customized, personal services for individual clients. Through in-depth interviews with life coaches for my dissertation research, I am exploring how individuals create meaning in their work and negotiate interactions with their clients.

Many coaches describe their work as involving extensive listening, support, care, and concern for others. They also feel that their job is to provide objective, unbiased feedback to their clients. While many of these skills have been an integrated into numerous other occupational realms, such as therapy, life coaches are also providing the type of interpersonal services that many people have historically received from close friends and family members, primarily women. I am interested in how life coaches are using these skills as professional resources. More broadly, I also want to investigate how gender is implicated in the professionalization of the coaching industry as well as how it shapes the interactions and experiences of individual coaches.

Participating in this conference would be a tremendous opportunity for me to push my analysis further and interrogate these ideas with a group of scholars similarly interested in labor, gender, and meaning.