

Book Review: Pugh, Allison. *The Last Human Job: The Work of Connecting in a Disconnected World* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024, 384 pages, Hardcover, \$29.95

In *The Last Human Job*, sociologist Allison Pugh offers a compelling examination of “connective labor,” the often overlooked and undervalued work of creating emotional understanding between people in everyday professional life. The book explores how this relational effort underpins much of our social and institutional functioning, even as it is increasingly constrained by systems designed for measurement, automation, and efficiency. Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, Pugh gives voice to what many workers have long known but lacked the language to express: that emotional presence, responsiveness, and mutual recognition are not incidental to work, but essential components of it.

Pugh defines connective labor as the collaborative act of seeing and being seen. It involves empathic listening, emotional regulation, and the capacity to respond in real time, often while navigating bureaucratic or digital systems that offer little support. Through close observation of teachers, physicians, therapists, and other community workers, they show how this labor is foundational to outcomes society values most: healing, learning, safety, and care. Yet these very outcomes are increasingly assessed through abstract indicators that obscure the human effort behind them.

What elevates this conceptual framing is the richness of Pugh’s ethnographic storytelling. The strength of the book lies not only in its theoretical clarity but in the way fieldwork and analysis are intertwined. Vivid moments such as a chaplain sitting with a patient in distress, a teacher pausing mid-lesson to support an anxious student, a hairdresser offering their chair as a space for emotional safety are not illustrative side notes, they are the substance of the argument. These scenes reveal the tension at the heart of modern institutions, which depend on this connective labor while frequently designing systems that inhibit or erase it.

The Last Human Job contributes meaningfully to current conversations in sociology, organizational studies, and the study of emotional labor. Readers familiar with Viviana Zelizer's *Relational Work in the Economy* will find strong points of connection with Pugh's analysis.

Where Zelizer disrupted the boundary between emotional and economic domains, Pugh deepens the discussion by exploring how institutions actively seek to codify and commodify connection itself. Their analysis roots this process in real workplaces, revealing how connective labor is shaped, constrained, and undervalued across sectors.

One notable constraint of the book is its focus on care-oriented professions within public and semi-public sectors. While Pugh references connective labor in commercial settings such as sales, management, and customer service, these examples receive less sustained attention. A more developed exploration of relational work within for-profit industries, including finance, technology, and platform economies, could have extended the analytical reach. This would have provided further insight into how connective labor operates under the pressures of surveillance, algorithmic systems, and market-driven expectations. Even so, the book's central contributions remain timely, grounded, and widely relevant.

For those in the career development sector, Pugh's insights resonate deeply. Advising, mentoring, and teaching rely heavily on sustained connective labor. Helping individuals discern purpose, weigh options, and navigate uncertainty is not procedural. It demands presence, trust, and interpretive skill. Pugh provides the language to describe this invisible labor and offers a conceptual map for understanding why so many professionals in this space report exhaustion, even when the visible tasks appear straightforward. When discretion, time, and relational attentiveness are reduced to scripts, metrics, or algorithmic outputs, the work becomes more difficult to perform and harder to explain.

The book also offers valuable insights for scholars and practitioners across the social sciences. It brings clarity to conversations about emotional labor, organizational culture, and the ethics of work, and it does so with empirical grounding and methodological care. Whether situated in sociology, education, health studies, or labor research, Pugh's framework invites critical reflection on how institutions are structured and how values are transmitted through the design of systems, technologies, and performance expectations.

Pugh is careful not to romanticize connective labor. They note that emotional presence can be unwelcome or even harmful, and that the expectation to offer it is distributed unevenly, often along lines of race, gender, and class. These tensions are just as present in educational and social service settings as they are in medical or therapeutic spaces. Rather than invoking nostalgia for an imagined past, Pugh calls for the creation of better structures through deliberate choices about policy, staffing, leadership, and technology. They insist that these decisions shape whether connection is supported or sacrificed.

The Last Human Job captures something many have felt but struggled to articulate. It explains why some forms of work feel so different from what the metrics suggest. More importantly, it helps build a language for advocating change. The book invites us to rethink how we value labor, how we design institutions, and how we care for the people doing the work that holds others together. This is not secondary labor. It is essential, and it deserves to be seen.

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