Emotion and moral concerns in university academics: an exploratory study of 66 case studies of teacher experiences (0145)

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Abstract

Although teaching is emotionally and ethically demanding, university teachers' emotions and sense of moral purpose are under-researched. Based on the assumption that teachers' emotions are bound up with their moral purposes, this study investigates what kinds of moral concerns underpin teachers' emotional moments. It draws on Graham, Nosek, Haidt, Iyer, & Ditto (2011) moral foundations theory which posits that there are five main moral intuitions/concerns found across cultures: Harm/Care, Fairness/Reciprocity, Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity. Sixty-six case examples (written as emotionally evocative poems) were coded according to this five-part moral framework. Care/harm and authority/respect were the most common single moral concerns underpinning these emotional experiences, though there were examples of all five moral concerns within the set. Twenty of the cases referenced multiple moral concerns, suggesting the complexity of both emotional and moral demands in teaching. Implications for research, teaching and educational development are highlighted.

Introduction

"Teachers' emotions are inseparable from their *moral purposes* and their ability to achieve those purposes." (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 838)

Hargreaves (1998) interviewed teachers who spoke passionately about their love of children and desire to create emotional climates that help students learn, and grow. They were motivated by rewarding relationships with children. With a few exceptions (Noddings, 1984; Goldstein, 2004), this moral imperative of "working with young people and watching them grow" is a neglected aspect of teacher education and research on teachers (Martin, 2004).

Yet, we know even less about the moral imperatives of university teachers. Rather than focusing on nurturing young people, Anna Neumann (2009) found that tenured American professors are deeply engaged with their subject matter, reporting peak moments of flow that were both motivating and rewarding, which she called "passionate thought".

Akerlind (2005) identified "contributing to disciplinary growth or social change" (p. 21) as the most sophisticated conception of academic growth and development among Australian academics. However, her participants did not describe this moral purpose as a part of growing as a university teacher (Akerlind, 2003). Researchers in moral psychology have found that purpose is vital to thriving in life (Damon, 2008). Quinlan (2014) draws on literature on values-based leadership and analyses of effective university settings to show that clarity of values, commitment to a shared sense of purposes, and intentionality are necessary to create higher education institutions that promote students' growth and development.

This study explores what moral concerns are embedded in the practice of university teaching and connections between emotion and moral concerns.

Conceptual framework

I use moral foundations theory (Graham, Nosek, Haidt, Iyer, Koleva & Ditto, 2011) to examine the moral concerns that underpin teaching in higher education.   The theory takes a functional view of moral systems, defined as "an interlocking set of values, virtues, norms, practices and identities, institutions, technologies and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible." (p. 368).

Graham and colleagues' (2011) research yielded fives sets of moral intuitions: Harm/Care, Fairness/Reciprocity, Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity. These concerns are considered universally available, but are developed to varying degrees in different cultures and contexts. The theory expands the definition of moral concerns beyond concerns related to Care/Harm and to Fairness/Reciprocity to include as part of the moral realm, questions about ingroups/loyalty (to country, family and ingroups, which is vital for research on prejudice), authority/respect (concerned with traditions, hierarchies, social roles and order), and Purity/Sanctity (concerned with standards of purity, decency, chastity, natural laws, disgust).

Method

I analyzed a subset of case studies drawn from a larger project (Quinlan, in press) that captured the emotional experiences of university teaching or learning through 138 case studies written as poems. Poetic case studies were used because they are emotionally evocative (Padel, 2002) and better capture the emotional dimensions of teaching. The cases were solicited from poetry communities in English speaking countries (US, UK, Canada, Australia). All but two of the cases were situated in US higher education. The cases primarily took place in humanities classrooms or during individual interactions with students where the discipline did not feature.

Only case studies written from a teacher's point of view were analysed (n=66). Each poem was classified as addressing one, multiple, or none of Graham et al's (2011) five foundational moral intuitions.

Results

Of the 66 case studies analyzed, 18 did not clearly fit any of Graham et al's (2011) five moral concerns. Of the remaining examples (n=48), nine (9) dealt with care/harm; 8 with authority/respect; 6 with ingroup/loyalty; 3 with fairness/reciprocity and; 2 with purity/sanctity. Fifteen dealt with two major concerns; the most common combination addressed both authority/respect and ingroup/loyalty (4). Care/Harm was also frequently combined with another foundational intuition such as Purity/Sanctity (4), Fairness/Reciprocity (3) or Ingroup/Loyalty (2). Five case examples addressed three or more moral concerns. Illustrative excerpts of relevant case examples will be provided.

Discussion

There has been little research on moral imperatives or demands on teachers in higher education. This study applied Graham and colleagues' moral foundations theory (2011) to case studies of university teaching (n=66) and found examples of each of the theory's five moral concerns. As these case studies were solicited and selected for how they represent a range of emotions experienced in connection with teaching (not moral issues), the large percentage of cases that capture moral issues (72%) highlights the connection between emotions and moral intuitions.

Given the prevalence of moral concerns associated with care and with authority, especially, these topics warrant further attention in research and practice. The case examples also highlight common intersections between foundational moral concerns (and, thus, moral dilemmas) that university teachers may confront.

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