

## When does someone care for us? Unacknowledged emotional labour and academic identity erosion.

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### Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### Abstract

This paper highlights the lived experiences of academic staff and explores the impact of emotional labour on their wellbeing. It discusses the broader implications for individual health, Higher Education (HE) institutions, and the whole sector. Emotional labour often involves a degree of emotional deception to meet professional expectations, which can result in feelings of guilt and fragmented self-perceptions. Additionally, it is a form of labour that is easily exploited and subject to role ambiguity (Constanti and Gibbs, 2004), potentially leading to depression and a diminished sense of identity. Within HE, emotional labour tends to be invisible (Newcomb, 2021), undervalued, with limited recognition of its costs, inadequate strategies for managing it (Branch and Duché, 2022; Hillersdal et al., 2020), and a noticeable lack of compassion and care directed towards academic staff. This study adopts an interpretivist philosophical position, using qualitative interviews and solicited diaries, which were analysed through thematic analysis.

### Full paper

*'It is impossible to be a top-line manager and administrator and mentor and researcher and writer and outreach officer and IT expert and online instructor and pedagogical innovator and recruiter and teacher and marker and external examiner and press pundit and grant bidder and editor and look after your own wellbeing. No-one can do that. Yet that's what is often asked'* (O'Hara, 2024).

An essential aspect of academic work is emotional labour, which has implications for the health and wellbeing of staff, Higher Education (HE) institutions, and the sector more

broadly. This element of academic work is, however, often overlooked and there is a lack of attention to caring for academics and, the cost of emotional labour, and of instruction on how to manage it (Branch and Duché, 2022; Hillersdal et al., 2020).

Emotional labour (EL) is defined as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (Hochschild, 1983, p.7). In HE, the demand for staff to express contextually appropriate emotions has intensified alongside the evolving nature of academic work. Increasingly, the HE landscape is characterised as "turbulent, uncertain and unpredictable" (Barrett, 2004, p.95). Despite this, much of the existing research has relied on quantitative methods, often neglecting the nuanced, lived experiences of academic staff engaging in emotional labour (Wharton, 1993; Berry & Cassidy, 2013; Tunguz, 2016). This gap in understanding is significant, especially as emerging evidence indicates that university environments may be adversely affecting academics' physical and mental health (Urbina-Garcia, 2020).

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of emotional labour among academic staff to answer the following research questions:

- 1 - To what extent do academic staff engage in emotional management?
- 2 - What effects does performing emotional work have on academics?

The study employed interpretivism to understand the social world and its meaning to the individual (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011), guided by an inductive approach, and case study strategy honouring the 'embeddedness' of social truths (Cleland et al., 2021) in real life case scenarios. Qualitative semi structured interviews and solicited diaries were undertaken involving five academic staff members at a research-intensive institution in the UK, who have regular contact with stakeholders in the educational process, and therefore, significant potential for carrying out emotional labour. The study was guided by a clear ethical process.

Findings revealed that interactions with students, colleagues, and management consist of complex emotional responsibilities, some of which might put staff at risk of (psychological) harm, and which staff tend not to have training for. Data also uncovered the significant impact of unacknowledged (invisible) or negative emotional labour (Newcomb, 2021) on job satisfaction and the perception that the psychological contract between staff and their

institution has been breached (Lorenz, 2012, 2015; Lapsley, 2009). This perception is particularly acute when staff values and professional ethos are consistently compromised—especially when they feel uncared for and exploited to the detriment of their own wellbeing, while the emotional benefits of their labour accrue to students, stakeholders, and the institution, rather than to themselves.

Results identified the importance of collegial relationships and support, highlighting that developing strategic solidarities and acts of kindness and care are a prominent way to deal with the isolation, anxiety and ongoing emotional toll caused by a state of constant change, precarity, uncertainty, and growing atomisation in the sector (Wood et al., 2024). A growing administrative burden, coupled with a perceived erosion of autonomy and collegiality, constitutes an important part of the current lived experience of staff, contributing to the challenging realities of academic life. A lack of institutional support has emerged as a critical factor in the deterioration of working conditions, adversely affecting both staff wellbeing and their ability to perform effectively (Middleton, 1989; Zapf & Holz, 2007; Gross & Levenson, 1997; Pennebaker, 1990).

Findings indicate the urgent need for institutional acknowledgement of emotional labour and its intensification for many academics, in the form of increased awareness and compassion within the workplace (Dupret et al., 2024). Specifically, the study points to the importance of enhanced training for staff engaged in frontline emotional work, as well as for managers, to improve understanding and compassionate responsiveness. Such initiatives could facilitate the development of coping strategies, while also holding institutions accountable for creating policies that acknowledge, address, and fairly compensate emotional labour. Integrating emotional labour considerations into workload models and staff appraisal systems would represent a meaningful and practical step forward. Future research could involve more participants and explore different contract types to deepen understanding of emotional labour across contexts.