

# Emotional labour in higher educational institutions

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## Abstract

Emotional labor in higher education institutions is a relatively understudied research area. Academic staff are prone to dividing their time at work amongst teaching, research and administration. It is essential to understand the demands that emotional labor places on academic personnel and its impact on higher education institutions. Subsequently, the paper establishes that academic staff are emotional laborers, explores emotional labor among academic staff in higher education institutions, and presents the challenges faced. A theoretical framework of emotional labor is given as well. The consequences and challenges of emotional labor are further evaluated. Academic profession is a stressful occupation. There is a need for academic staff to effectively manage their work and emotions during designated areas of work, as increase in emotional labor enables lecturers to meet changing occupational and organizational expectations.

*Keywords:* emotional labour, academic staff, higher educational institution, occupational stress

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## 1 Introduction. Literature review

The concept of “emotional labor” was first theorized by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in 1983. One of the most influential sociologists of her generation, she is an American professor emerita of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Hochschild (1983) defined emotional labor as a face and bodily image creation management that can be observed by all. Hochschild also revealed that when the emotional feelings of employees do not match the rules of emotional display – such as when an employee feels sad but must appear enthusiastic to a customer – they often use one of two strategies to ensure that their actions are in line with the display rules. Deep acting alters felt emotion in order to change emotional display and produces a genuine emotional display, whereas surface acting only alters the outward expression of emotion and produces a faked emotional display. She called the process of managing emotions as part of the work role, ‘emotional labour’, and a central concern was how emotional labour, particularly the feelings of dissonance and inauthenticity that arise from surface acting, affect employee well-being.

Since the publication of 'The Managed Heart' there has been a lot of empirical and theoretical literature on emotional labour. Ashforth & Humphrey (1993) added a third dimension to Hochschild's approach as natural emotions (expression of naturally felt emotions). “Natural Emotions” mean that employees show or reflect emotions, regardless of any pressure or other cause, such as surface acting and deep acting dimensions. The theoretical understanding of emotional labour has been deepened by attempts to consider it in relation to theories of emotional regulation (Grandey, 2000), action regulation (Zapf, 2002; Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003); social interaction (Cote, 2005), and demand-resource approaches to stress (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). These theories have been used to test and explain the extent to which emotional labour has

positive and negative effects on employee wellbeing.

In short, developments in the field of emotional labour indicate that its effects are dependent upon the extent to which the processes occurring during emotional labour either promote resource gain (e.g., social support, self-efficacy) or act as a demand and prompt resource loss. Resource gains improve well-being and resource losses decrease well-being.

Emotional labor theory has been strongly rooted in service-related industries and is most likely witnessed in hospitality services (Kerr & Brown, 2015), call centres (Holman, Chissick & Totterdall, 2002), nursing (De Jonge, Le Blanc, Peeters & Noordam, 2008), and hospitality and tourism (Chu & Murrmann, 2006; Van Dijk & Kirk, 2008). Recently, emotional labor has been researched in various disciplines, and have gained attention from public administration scholars (Hsieh, Yang & Fu, 2012) and in the education field among teachers in schools and academics in universities (Berry & Cassidy, 2013; Tunguz, 2014).

## 2 Emotional labor in HEI

Higher education institutions perceive their students to be customers and hence, the role of teaching staff can be advocated as that of a service provider (Gibbs, 2001). As academic institutions are categorized as a service provider, with customers, means of production and service deliverers, such an approach demands that academic staff perform emotional labor. This presents the need to ensure that negative emotions are controlled and expect their performance at the time whilst executing of duties, thereby ensuring effectiveness towards teaching and learning activities being experienced by the customers (students).

Gibbs (2001) noted that academic staff, in higher education, are expected to perform emotional labor in order to achieve the dual outcomes and hence, the generated outcomes are perceived as customer satisfaction, and profits

for the institution. Notably, the effect of emotional labor on academic staff can also be extended to teaching effectiveness.

Barkhuizen and Rothman (2006) proved that the academic profession is a stressful occupation. Academic work is divided into teaching, research, and leadership with a high administrative workload (Barkhuizen & Rothmann, 2006). As a result, academics feel powerless in the face of the changing nature of their job. Ogbonna and Harris (2004) noted that academic staff are burdened with various demands, which are sometimes conflicting.

In order to achieve teaching effectiveness, academics need to ensure they are able to regulate, manage and monitor their emotions. Moreover, academic staff should be able to create, foster and enhance a positive teaching and learning environment (Boyer, 1987; Gates, 2000).

Most teachers manage their feelings, and express their emotions according to normative beliefs or emotional display rules held about the teaching profession. However, lecturing warrants unpredictable displays of emotion over lengthy periods, and may exaggerate some emotions (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004). Academics carry out a wide range of disparate tasks. Emotional labor may occur in the classroom during lecturing, outside the classroom communicating with the students remotely via e-mail, Moodle, etc. Moreover, academics involved in committee work are faced with the demands of emotional labor when generating ideas and maintaining collegial relationships. Among other activities, academics are involved in research activities. Collaboration among researchers and the aforementioned research role may place further emotional demands on academics (Dhanpat, 2016).

Studies have noted that academics face high levels of occupational stress. A strong association exists between occupational stress and emotional labor (Mann, 1999), and is likely to have negative effects on the health and well-being of individuals. Notably, the consequences of emotional labor are dependent on the characteristics of the job and organization and, hence, lead to emotional exhaustion (Kruml & Geddes, 2000), emotional dissonance, job satisfaction (Ibanez-Rafuse, 2010), workplace stress, and burnout (Mann, 1999).

Thus, increased levels of emotional labor that are found in academic sphere require continued investigation into

occupational stress and emotional labor among university lecturers, researchers and other staff.

### 3 Conclusion

The effects of emotional labour on wellbeing have been established as being over and above other individual variables (e.g., positive and negative affectivity) and contextual variables (e.g., job control). It is also possible to distinguish between constraining and enabling emotional labour environments. In constraining emotional labour environments, job demands are high, job resources low and employees do not identify with display rules or the motives behind them. Consequentially employees are more likely to experience the negative aspects of emotional labour. In enabling emotional labour environments, the opposite is the case (Holman et al., 2008). After all, employees are able to regulate their emotions by using various strategies (Cossette & Hess, 2015).

Recently, higher education institutions in Latvia have faced radical changes, namely, downsizing and restructuring, an increase competition, lack of local students because of demographic changes in the society, shift to education in the state language, Latvian, subsequent influx of foreign English-speaking students, constant changing of educational programs; and the most recent, because of Covid-19, necessity to provide distance learning education to all, even day department, students.

Thus, an increase in emotional labor enables lecturers to meet changing occupational and organizational expectations. It is imperative that universities pay attention to the emotional demands faced by newly hired and less experienced university lecturers in terms of staff recruitment, staff retention and staff wellbeing (Dhanpat, 2016). Ideally, the management of universities and departments should understand the challenges faced by academics through the pressures of emotional labor. High emotional labor intensity are likely to pose a threat to academic staff job performance, well-being, teaching effectiveness and job satisfaction. It is essential that academics address the emotional demands of their work (Grandey, Kern & Frone, 2007; Rupp & Spencer, 2006). However, there is need for further research on how academics perceive their challenges of emotional labor from a personal perspective, and its impact on students.

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