

Engagement and Exhaustion as (Un)Expected Consequences of Academic Teachers' Emotional Labor: Affective Injustice in Higher Education

Renata Góral ska

University of Lodz, Poland

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.22.3.02>

Keywords:

Affective Injustice;
Affect; Emotional
Labor; Academia;
Academic Teacher

Abstract: The aim of this article is to reconstruct the emotional experiences of academic teachers, specifically how they relate to identity and power relations. I assume that the experience of emotions is embedded in the context of socio-political needs and interests. The theoretical background consists of research from the philosophy of emotions, specifically the conceptualizations of emotional labor by Shiloh Whitney, along with studies and analyses on affective injustice, such as those by Francisco Gallegos, Katie Stockdale, Alfred Archer, and Georgina Mills. Based on these concepts, I argue that working in contemporary, neoliberally managed academia has important consequences for the development of subjectivity, both positive and constructive, as well as negative, destructive, and degrading. Emotional labor can serve as a tool for self(trans)formation and (self)reflection; at the same time, it can affectively marginalize teachers' subjectivity and decrease their sense of agency. This provides the theoretical context for research grounded in a qualitative framework. The reconstruction of academic teachers' experiences was based on qualitative semi-structured interviews. The research results indicate that the emotional labor of academics is a response to the emotional culture of a university governed by neoliberalism. The findings

© by the author, licensee Lodz University—Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Funding Information: This work was supported by the Interdisciplinary Research Grant, University of Lodz, under the "Initiative of Excellence—Research University" (IDUB-UŁ), Decision No. 3/IGB/2022, project "Engagement and Exhaustion as (Un)Expected Outcomes of the Emotional Labour of Academic Teachers," Project Code: B2311813000200.07. **Conflicts of interest:** None. **Ethical Considerations:** The author assures that no violations of publication ethics have occurred and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication. **The percentage share of the author in the preparation of the work is:** RG 100%. **Declaration regarding the use of GAI tools:** No GAI tools were used in the preparation of this work.

Received: 2026-02-05 Verified: 2026-04-20 Accepted: 2026-06-15



indicate that academia is an alienating and emotionally exploitative space for workers, where various manifestations of affective injustice are evident, primarily as a loss of emotional well-being and a diminishment of agency among academic teachers. By situating the emotional experiences of university staff in the context of affective injustice, the article proposes that educational research on academia should open up a space for discussion on more equitable and inclusive institutional practices in higher education.

Renata Góral ska is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Theory of Education at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Lodz. She has authored two monographs and numerous academic articles in the fields of education theory, higher education pedagogy, and pedeutology. She is a former Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Studia Dydaktyczne*. Her current research interests focus on the role of emotions and affect in education, with a particular emphasis on critical emotional education, emotional competence, emotional capital, and affective injustice in educational institutions.

@ renata.goralska@uni.lodz.pl

ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0794-8609>

Educational institutions are impregnated with feelings (...) Emotions contribute to the coherence of institutions, but they can also lead to their disintegration. They affect identity building and the development of the individual's personality. They produce well-being but also illness and suffering.

[Karlsohn 2016:137]

Since the 1990s, there has been a growing interest in the emotional aspect of the human experience in the social sciences and humanities, referred to as the "affective turn" or "critical affect studies" (see, e.g., Clough 2007, 2008; Amsler 2011; Leys 2011; Glosowitz 2013; Burzyńska 2015). The affective turn marked a turning point in the way emotions are conceptualized by scholars in the social and human sciences, as it brought to light previously unnoticed social, cultural, and political dimensions, expanding research on emotions to include categories such as culture, politics, subjectivity, and identity. As Patricia Clough writes, "The affective turn invites a transdisciplinary

approach to theory and method that necessarily invites experimentation in capturing the changing co-functioning of the political, the economic, and the cultural, rendering it affectively as change in the deployment of affective capacity" (2007:3).

Studies on affect draw inspiration from critics and theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1999) and Brian Massumi (2013, 2015), who conceptualize affect as pre-individual bodily forces that increase or decrease the organism's capacity to act (Clough 2008). From this perspective, affects are understood not as psychological dispositions but as fields of emotional tensions that are created, emitted, felt, and distributed by various communities, including institutional and educational communities. Affects thus have the power to shape both individuals and collectivities, as well as the potential to bind and divide them (Ahmed 2014). These studies reveal how individuals and social groups construct their (embodied) emotional experiences and how these experiences are embedded in a broader

context of social and political forces, needs, and interests. The affective turn examines the interdependencies and interrelations between discursive practices, human corporeality, cultural and social forces, and individually experienced, yet historically conditioned emotions and affects. Affects are treated as social, cultural, and political practices that have the power to bind and divide, with the potential for creation and destruction (Ahmed 2004; Glosowicz 2013).

The affective turn brings new perspectives to education, directing educators' attention to the (non) presence of affects and emotions in educational spaces/institutions. The openness of educators to philosophical and social theories of affect creates new research perspectives by highlighting the political entanglement of the emotional experiences of individuals functioning within educational institutions.

The purpose of this article is to reconstruct the emotional experiences of academic teachers, specifically their work with emotions on both individual and organizational levels. Referencing the literature on the philosophy of emotions and critical university studies, I draw on the conceptualization of emotional labor rooted in feminist studies and the critical tradition, as proposed by the feminist phenomenologist and philosopher Shiloh Whitney (2018a, 2018b, 2021, 2023). By adopting Whitney's definition of emotional labor, I similarly introduce issues related to affective injustice into the analysis.

Theoretical Framework: Emotional Labor and Affective Injustice

To analyze the emotional experiences of academic teachers, I draw on the category of emotional labor

introduced to the social sciences by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983), a proponent of the socio-cultural theory of emotions. According to Hochschild, emotions belong to the cultural system along with shared social knowledge about recognizing and expressing one's own and others' emotions. Hochschild argues that culture determines both how we experience emotions and how we express them. Emotional labor is associated with a professional role, which is closely linked to the emotional rules prevailing in educational institutions, i.e., socially accepted norms and expectations placed on employees, which serve as disciplinary techniques.

Studies on immaterial labor—which in the contemporary global economy is work of fundamental importance, as its products are immaterial goods: knowledge and communication—are pivotal for research on the concept coined by Hochschild (Lazarato 1996; Hardt Negri 2000, 2012). From this perspective, emotional labor involves producing and manipulating emotions, and its products include well-being, engagement, satisfaction, passion, and a sense of connection or community. Emotional/affective labor is the most important link in immaterial labor, as it generates agency, subjectivity, sociality, and community, thus forming society (Hardt 2012).

Emotional labor can, therefore, have many positive consequences for the development of subjectivity, autonomy, and a sense of agency; it can contribute to building (self)reflection, self(trans)formation, and emotional understanding (Denzin 1984). Emotional labor concerns teachers at all levels of education, including academic teachers, and carries numerous consequences for the subjectivity of academic teachers, both positive—constructive, and negative—destructive or degrading. If the emotional rules organizing a teacher's work are very

different from what they truly feel, daily emotional labor carries enormous costs, including emotional self-alienation, anxiety, shame, embarrassment, inauthenticity, and a sense of being manipulated and exploited (Hochschild 1983; Szanto 2017).

The emotions produced during the teacher's work do not leave them even after the "production process" is completed; they constitute a lasting "by-product" (Whitney 2018b), marginalizing their subjectivity and impoverishing their agency. The teacher is forced to metabolize the "excesses" and "waste" produced, and to "absorb" them. The result of this "emotional metabolizing" is felt at the individual level as anxiety, fear, stress, fatigue, humiliation, contempt, guilt, a lack of engagement, and exhaustion. If structural, institutional conditions force the teacher to produce this kind of "surplus" for many years, and if such emotions are long-lasting, strongly shaped, and modulated from the outside (often without the individual's consent and contrary to their value system), then the emotional rules prevailing in the workplace may lead to so-called "hacking" of the teacher's subjectivity (Slaby 2016).

In this text, I draw on an expanded conceptualization of emotional labor, rooted in feminist studies and the critical tradition, proposed by critical phenomenologist and feminist philosopher Shiloh Whitney (2018a, 2018b, 2021, 2023, 2025). Whitney expands the concept of emotional labor by incorporating issues related to affective injustice into the analysis. She argues that since emotions are regulated primarily by institutions and structures of dominance, individuals or groups are systematically restricted or have emotional patterns imposed on them, leading to what she terms affective injustice. This phenomenon involves the systemic distortion, delegitimization, or limitation of emotional ex-

pression and credibility of individuals and groups. Whitney shows that emotions are simultaneously a tool of resistance, a site of oppression, and an element of structural inequality. She contends that the source of affective injustice lies in socially recognized and constructed emotional norms, systemic differences in the credibility of social actors, cultural emotional scripts, and institutional sanctions for emotional "deviations." Affective injustice is thus a form of dispersed oppression, embedded in social structures. Other researchers in the philosophy of emotions (Srinivasan 2018; Archer and Mills 2019; Archer and Matheson 2020; Gallegos 2022; Krueger 2023; Stockdale 2023; Whitney 2018a, 2025) have also addressed affective injustice, like Whitney, using this term to describe situations where someone's ways of experiencing emotions or their expression are ignored, distorted, marginalized, devalued, or otherwise depreciated.

Similarly, Canadian philosopher Katie Stockdale (2023) asserts that affective injustice is an element of a broader theory of "affective injury." Stockdale clearly distinguishes affective injustice from psychological oppression. She claims that psychological oppression is a mental and emotional state, while affective injustice is a structural phenomenon, existing outside of the subject. Stockdale emphasizes that affective injustice is a form of violence, the source of which lies in social structures and power relations that distort, disorganize, or delegitimize the emotional lives of individuals and groups, weakening their ability to respond affectively in a morally just and politically effective manner. She states, "It operates primarily outside of us: in affective norms, practices, and relationships that are embedded in social conditions of injustice" (Stockdale 2023:113). This means that the source of affective injustice is located outside the subject: in emotional

rules prevailing in interpersonal relationships, institutions, and organizations.

Alfred Archer and Georgina Mills (2019) deepen the understanding of this phenomenon by analyzing it from the perspective of emotion regulation theory. They argue that affective injustice can be understood as a demand for effective emotion regulation. The latest work by Alfred Archer and Georgina Mills (2025) on affective injustice convincingly shows that many forms of this phenomenon are related to fear and anxiety.

American philosopher Francisco Gallegos (2022) proposes a novel way of conceptualizing affective injustice, defining it as a state in which individuals or groups are deprived of “fundamental affective goods.” Affective injustice is a violation of fundamental affective goods, meaning that if someone’s emotions are systematically ignored or ridiculed, that person loses access to the good of “emotional credibility.” Gallegos argues that the consequences of affective injustice can be extensive for the subject’s individual experience and include emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, and despair. Affective injustice contributes to experiencing heightened stress and psychological suffering (2022:185). Another form of affective injustice involves privileged groups imposing their emotional norms and standards on weaker groups, demonstrating that injustice does not require open violence or discrimination; it can take a subtle form, in which the individuals’ emotions are systematically devalued or presented as irrational. Alfred Archer and Benjamin Matheson (2022, 2023) call this form of injustice “emotional imperialism.”

The openness of educators to philosophical and social theories of affect creates new research perspec-

tives precisely because they highlight the political entanglement of the emotional experiences of individuals functioning within educational institutions. The theories of affect reconstructed above show that the emotional experiences of teachers are subject to ideological and political regulations that exert power over their emotionality.

In light of these considerations, investigating the emotional experiences of teachers working within contemporary academia is justified. Critical university studies demonstrate that in modern academia, there is progressive neoliberalization and the related transformation of the academic environment into a space of economic efficiency organized around the market model and instrumental rationality (Potulicka and Rutkowiak 2010; Giroux 2014; Kwaśnica 2014). This has led to the development of an increasingly prevalent “audit culture,” in which a range of disciplinary practices are employed to instill new behavioral norms (Shore 2008; Szadkowski 2015; Leszczyński 2018; Krzeski, Łojewska and Szadkowski 2025). Audit culture transforms not only institutions but the entire work environment, inducing a sense of uncertainty and instability among academic staff. Working in such conditions is exhausting, diminishing agency and self-worth. The consequence of the academic audit culture and the “soft” management of all aspects of life in contemporary late-capitalist universities is a “culture of fear” (Berg, Huijbens and Larsen 2016). Moreover, the negative effects of paternalism and manorial relations are reproduced in Polish universities, which deepens social inequalities and results in the breakdown of the social fabric and trust in employees’ interpersonal relations (Hryniewicz 2004; Hryniewicz 2007; Leder 2017; Bohuszewicz 2019; Zawadzki 2019), thereby reproducing affective injustice, which manifests primarily as a loss of emotional well-being and

emotional agency (Gallegos 2022). Marginalized individuals must perform emotional labor to adapt to these requirements, leading to exhaustion, sadness, and anger—in short, affective suffering.

This underscores the significance of studying the emotional experiences of academic teachers and what produces them. This article reconstructs the emotional experiences of academic teachers in a neoliberally governed university. Two research questions guided the study: What emotional experiences do academic teachers have in neoliberally governed universities? What regimes resulting from neoliberal university governance constitute the sources of academic teachers' emotional experiences?

Methodological Framework

The text is the result of research carried out under the IDUB Interdisciplinary Research Grant entitled Engagement and exhaustion as (un)expected effects of an academic teacher's emotional work (decision no.: 3/IGB/2022, project code: B2311813000200.07).

The research project is grounded in the framework of interpretive and critical research (Konecki 2005; Urbaniak-Zajac 2008, 2019; Chomczyński 2012), with qualitative semi-structured interviews, also known as in-depth interviews, as the main research technique. This methodology enables direct contact with respondents and the creation of an appropriate atmosphere conducive to obtaining full, in-depth responses and emotional experiences (Konecki 2000; Babbie 2004; Niedbalski 2012). These encounters are called active qualitative interviews (Holstein, Gubrium 1997), where the interviewed teachers are also active participants co-creating the narrative, allowing the conversation to be steered with flexibil-

ity depending on the situation. This type of interview provides opportunities to reach the emotional dimension, "feelings and flowing depths of heart-felt viewpoints and values" (Holstein and Gubrium 1997:57). The interview is viewed here as a "social event during which the interviewer is a participating observer" (Hammersley and Atkinson 2000:161).

The empirical material comes from online interviews conducted between April and July 2025 with ten women and seven men working at eight Polish public universities. The interviewees—who included professors—work in the social sciences and had at least ten years' experience at the time of the interview. The respondents varied in terms of status and power; for example, some had previously held the positions of dean, vice-dean, and vice-rector, while others had never held such positions.

In-depth interviews provide opportunities to access the private, intimate sphere of teachers' emotional experiences related to work and interpersonal relationships in academic institutions, while also being an important element of projects in critical university studies, especially when we want to investigate the relationship between the subjective and the institutional in academic practice (see, e.g., Holstein and Gubrium 1997; Niedbalski 2012; Konecki and Pawłowska 2013; Skórzyńska 2023).

The following analytical categories were used to survey academic teachers' emotional experiences. First, the analysis focused on the types of emotions and emotional efforts (emotional labor) of academic teachers operating within a culture of surveillance and audit. Second, it examined the regimes resulting from neoliberal university governance to explain the sources of these emotions. These analytical categories provide tools for describing the emotion-

al labor of academic teachers in a contemporary university, where passion and commitment to the educational process have become entangled with the neoliberal culture of academic governance. I argue that academics' emotions are shaped by institutional dynamics and cultural and political norms and regulations. In other words, academics' emotional labor is deeply intertwined with the emotional culture of a neoliberally governed university, which can generate various manifestations of affective injustice.

Research Analysis

Engagement and Exhaustion in the (Emotional) Work of Academic Teachers

The interviews with the academic teachers provide a complex picture of emotional experiences related to academic work, revealing both satisfaction and frustration arising from interactions with students and colleagues. The greatest source of satisfaction for academic teachers is their relationships with students, an experience that evokes positive and profound emotions filled with enthusiasm and personal commitment.

Teachers view students as a source of inspiration, hope, and personal fulfillment, emphasizing the value of mutual respect, trust, and authenticity. These relationships inspire, motivate, and reinvigorate their own view of the world and are characterized by a lively intellectual exchange. One participant states:

For me, the value is that they (students) are not afraid to say certain things (...) they don't just pretend to know that if they express their authentic opinion, it won't affect their final grades. That is also very satisfying for me. And it allows me to reflect on myself (...)

it's invigorating for me. One feels that what they say sparks a fire in their eyes. [I3]

Another participant shares a more optimistic view:

I work very well, and I really enjoy working with students. But quite recently, I had a moment... a thought that maybe I can't handle it anymore, that this generation is different, that maybe we just can't communicate anymore. But I noticed in the last two years a wave of improvement, and I would say that I feel we are getting along very well. We work well together, and I also get feedback that people enjoy working with me. [I5]

Similarly, another respondent highlights the broader societal value of teaching:

[Students] provide me with the greatest satisfaction—they engage me emotionally, and this often keeps me going. And that is hope (...) I also speak of hope in a social sense because these are young people, and soon they will be working in various places, replacing our generation, and somehow taking care of us if they already provide such positive emotions and concrete actions. So, it awakens hope and the conviction that it will be good to entrust them with responsibility. [I8]

For these respondents, teaching gives meaning to their lives; it is their passion and a source of energy, even personal fulfillment. This goes beyond personal feelings, as the latter statement shows that the teacher sees in students a "hope" for society. They regard them as a future, competent generation that will replace the current one and "take care" of the older generation. This reflects a deep trust in young people and faith in their positive impact on the future. It indicates that the teacher has created an atmosphere of trust, openness, and safety.

Conversely, many accounts describe conflicts and frustrations arising from interactions with students. The teachers note that their well-being and motivation depend on the quality of interactions with students, particularly regarding student engagement, response, and authenticity. As one interviewee notes:

[A student] wrote that this grade was very unfair, and I could see from her facial expression and the way she communicated that she was quite dissatisfied with our cooperation (...) Sometimes I have the impression that classes are a punishment for students, that it's something that disrupts their daily routines, and then one loses passion (...) because there is no response from the other side, I burn out, it makes me less willing, and a growing frustration and dissatisfaction arise within me, and I even begin to think... I start... it sometimes scares me a bit, but I begin to see the world through such bitter... bitter glasses. [I3]

[Students] have a very entitled attitude, often those who give little of themselves but are very demanding of lecturers, with their demands often disproportionate to the effort they put in. They want lecturers to be very tolerant, very indulgent, yet at the same time fair, so these expectations are inconsistent. [I3]

These statements from academics highlight the conflict between a passion for teaching and the realities of the academic system. They show how difficult conflict situations can be and how destructive it is for a teacher's passion to feel that students are attending classes out of obligation. A lack of student engagement leads to burnout, decreased motivation, and increasing frustration. The metaphor of "bitter glasses" illustrates how negative experiences can change one's perception of the world and lead to cynicism. The respondents note that the time dedicated to students and teaching is sometimes

seen as "wasted" in terms of career advancement and performance evaluation. This indicates a systemic problem within universities, where the passion for teaching is undervalued, and work time is accounted for based on publication metrics, which frustrates dedicated educators and highlights a significant issue present in universities: the academic system demotivates educators while primarily rewarding publication activity.

Teaching has always been very important. I really enjoy working with people, but unfortunately, it is not very significant today; in fact, it is a burden because good preparation for classes takes a lot of time, and that time could be used for writing articles, which translates into our performance evaluation and overall university performance metrics. [I3]

Several accounts focus directly on the negative impact of student evaluation systems on academic culture, interpersonal relationships within the university, and the sense of security for teaching staff. They discuss how the evaluation system undermines the academic ethos, turning education into a commercial relationship, which leads to frustration and restricts teaching freedom.

I have had unpleasant experiences with evaluations, of course—on the one hand, we are aware that we keep things in perspective, and if I have reasonably wise superiors whom I trust, I will approach the evaluation calmly (...), but it can be a tool that will be used against you. [I6]

The current evaluation system makes you feel like a servant, performing the role of a service provider in the eyes of students, where you must be very careful not to offend anyone's tastes (...) it is somewhat constraining. [I3]

We can be called in by the dean or the rector to discuss our behavior in meetings with students, which has created a huge precedent and a sort of communist, almost totalitarian system, where we have dirt on you. If necessary, we will pull it out... [I3]

These testimonies describe an atmosphere of fear and insecurity at universities, where student evaluations become a tool for controlling academic staff. Although the existing evaluation system was introduced to promote transparency, it instead intensifies an atmosphere of fear, frustration, and lack of trust within the academic environment, becoming an instrument of control and potential abuse of power. Evaluation has become a tool for administrative power and is often used to discipline lecturers rather than to constructively improve the quality of education. This leads to a loss of autonomy for lecturers, generating feelings of helplessness, uncertainty, and alienation, as they feel that their efforts and work quality are devalued.

The teachers also express negative emotions when describing relationships with colleagues, both superiors and subordinates. They talk about the conflicts and divisions present in the academic environment, expressing deep disappointment with the work atmosphere, which is far from the ideals professed by academics. The academic environment is seen as emotionally unhealthy, dominated by low motivation and a lack of trust. It is also where conflicts of values arise, requiring compromises with their own conscience, engaging in dishonest games, or accepting unethical behaviors:

We cannot live without conflict, which is very depressing. Considering that we are educators, we should strive to build community, to develop unity in diversity—and yet we go against that. The institute is

very divided. It has always been divided. There have always been factions (...) we are dualistic, like our country (...) it is terrifying. [I3]

Holding a position is associated with dealing with various conflicts. Negative emotions are primarily rooted in malicious behaviors that cause tension, such as slander or gossip, which, unfortunately, is quite prevalent. The following respondent notes that the academic environment is not lacking in jealousy:

I resigned from this position due to the tensions that existed. At that point, I decided to step back, as it was more important for me to behave decently than to hold on to the position. I don't want to elaborate on it, but it was quite a difficult—I would say a very difficult—experience, that resignation. (...) It was one of the toughest events I have experienced in my adult life. [I11]

One interview provides a critical diagnosis of the entire academic environment, where the teacher expresses pessimism regarding the possibility of changing an organizational culture that is chronically divided and contradicts its own basic ethical values. These chronic divisions hinder effective collaboration and build an atmosphere of fear and distrust:

[At the university], we do not feel safe, and it is no longer a value in itself for us. It is very hierarchical (...), we do not treat employees with lower titles or lower academic degrees as equals. We do not want to treat them that way; we fear it will threaten our authority. [I3]

There are no relationships... No, there aren't... everything is very superficial, and we just pass each other by. [I3]

These accounts portray the academic environment as toxic, hierarchical, and oppressive, characterized by fear and superficial relationships, resulting in exhaustion and professional burnout. It undermines the traditional ethos of the university as a community and signals a crisis in academia caused by the transformation of universities from communities into corporate organizations. This leads to the dehumanization of relationships, a loss of a sense of security, neglect of specific employee needs, and a feeling of injustice.

The Neoliberalization of Academia as a Source of Affective Injustice

The neoliberalization and transformation of academia into a space of economic efficiency and increasing competition have shaped all aspects of academic teachers' work according to the market model. This has led to the development of an increasingly prevalent "audit culture," characterized by a range of disciplinary practices through which university administrators attempt to instill new norms of conduct within organizations (Shore 2008).

Market-inspired audit and evaluation systems in academia have been designed to create competition within and between academic staff. Changes concerning evaluation have been implemented, focused on indicators and procedures, overlooking the human factor. Audit culture transforms not just institutions but the entire work environment and, most importantly, alters the sense of self, impacting identity and a sense of agency. Academic teachers view these mechanisms negatively:

It was done in a very technocratic way, which has dehumanized our relationships—that were not very good to begin with—and the job satisfaction and

sense of security that should also be felt there have evaporated. [I3]

Academics critically assess the corporate system, which they describe as unjust and sometimes ruthless, particularly towards women, who often have to fulfill multiple significant social roles, such as motherhood:

It's simply the fault of a system that has become very corporate, which has stopped paying attention to the human side, where many women work, and women have to juggle many roles... [I3]

The teachers criticize the academic system, focusing on the lack of stability, unclear evaluation criteria, the oppressive nature of evaluations, and the subjectivity of reviews. Their statements indicate that they are under constant pressure and uncertainty. The interviewees speak of unclear criteria, chaos, a lack of predictability, and the misalignment of evaluation criteria with the specifics of academic work, generating frustration and a sense of lacking a vision for academic development:

The evaluation changes like the wind; when we start the audit period, we have no idea what will happen in a year, and certainly not in four years. So, it is simply unacceptable for a person to be subject to evaluation without knowing the criteria. We constantly struggle with how we will be evaluated. An expert evaluation is about to be introduced, and I'm already scared because I don't know who the expert doing the evaluating will be... [I6]

The introduction of soulless, technocratic metrics has destroyed the sense of community, security, and satisfaction, replacing it with fear of job loss. The result of this technocratization is the erosion of

interpersonal relationships. People cease to be partners, which worsens the work atmosphere, generating continuous pressure and fear:

I can't stand being evaluated. I get anxious and angry when someone scrutinizes me. I feel a sense of injustice that someone wants to harm me, as it usually involves searching for faults rather than recognizing what has been done well. I really cannot stand evaluations. I hate it... I can't stand it... I can't stand being evaluated. [I11]

Academic teachers view the parameterization system as oppressive, opaque, and based on subjective assessments, forcing submission to arbitrary decisions and causing continuous fear:

I am increasingly frustrated. I see that other things are becoming important to me; I have different criteria. Generally, I get less and less satisfaction from this work. Yes, unfortunately, I think it greatly contributes to professional burnout. Fear arises... such uncertainty about whether I will manage to meet expectations... [I3]

Academic teachers uniformly criticize the ongoing commodification of the academic space, which they believe is characterized by continuous evaluation and reporting, a lack of stability, regulatory chaos, and subjectivity and injustice in the evaluation process. The emotional costs of constant evaluation are highlighted in their statements, with teachers mentioning alienation, frustration, and helplessness in the face of the system, stress, a sense of injustice, and fear.

Conclusions

The research demonstrates how the emotional experiences of teachers are embedded within the culture

of educational institutions and how deeply they are entangled in the power relations that prevail in academia. It shows how cultural factors—expressed in the rules governing academia, educational programs, and ministerial regulations—define what a teacher should feel and how they should express emotions while performing their professional duties. The analyses confirm the growing number of research reports on the rising tensions, emotional burdens, and distress among academic teachers (see, e.g., Kwiek 2015; Szadkowski 2015; Gill 2018; Szwabowski 2019; Zawadzki 2019; Skórzyńska 2023; Steen-Johnsen, Magnussen and Trysnes 2025; Zembylas 2026b).

The findings indicate that audit and evaluation systems in academia shape standards of behavior; they define norms and rules of conduct and influence the well-being and sense of agency of academic teachers. Recently, work in higher education has become a source of uncertainty and fear, driven by job insecurity, high expectations regarding grant income, and the enforcement of academic mobility—meaning the preference for short-term employment forms (e.g., project-based)—which results in frequent changes of affiliation, especially among younger university staff. This evokes feelings of uncertainty and instability among academic staff. Working in such conditions is exhausting, diminishing agency and self-worth. It can thus be said that a “culture of fear” has firmly taken root in academic institutions, as a consequence of the academic audit culture and arising within the framework of “soft” management of all aspects of life in contemporary late-capitalist universities (Berg, Huijbens and Larsen 2016).

The analysis demonstrates that academic teachers' emotions are an adaptation to an academic culture in which passion and commitment to teaching and

research have become “entangled” with neoliberal trends in university management. Heightened anxiety, uncertainty, frustration, and a sense of injustice lead to a state of profound exhaustion resulting from constant assessment, exposure to stress, and a lack of a support system. Exhaustion is a “structural emotion” that emerges and is shaped by political and institutional dynamics. It is also a form of affective survival shaped by constant exposure to volatility and uncertainty, which, most importantly, weakens teachers' capacity for long-term engagement in teaching and research.

The participants described academia as an alienating and emotionally exploitative space for workers—one in which manifestations of affective injustice are evident. Affective injustice is a concept that adequately captures the emotional reactions verbalized by the respondents, as well as their foundational character, situating them within structures larger than the individuals themselves. Affective injustice arises as a result of educational policies and privileged groups imposing emotional norms. As individuals working in academia must perform “emotional labor” to adapt to these requirements and rules, they experience exhaustion, sadness, and anger—in short, affective suffering.

The research highlights the political entanglement of emotions, feelings, and affects—a thread that has been marginalized in educational theory and research. Thus, it directs attention towards an educational framework of empowerment (Biesta 2010, 2013), and towards an approach centered on dialogue and tolerance that fosters individual development, autonomy, and the ability to make independent and critical judgments (Kwieciński 2019). I align myself with Krzysztof Maliszewski (2021) in advocating for “an idea of education that serves the work of awakening—it does not make us hostages of the here and now, nor reinforce the bubbles of fleeting collective imaginings, but helps us live with open eyes and cope—as much as we can—with our flawed, fractured condition and with social phantasms” (2021:22; author's translation).

According to this framework, education involves building critical consciousness. The core of this approach is to evoke emotional engagement that will liberate learners from a “culture of silence,” allowing them to view themselves as individuals capable of resistance and autonomous action (Szkudlarek 2019:578). It also fosters agency and responsibility, especially regarding structural injustice (Boler 1999, 2015; Boler and Zembylas 2003, 2016; Zembylas 2026a).

References:

- Ahmed, Sara. 2004. “Affective Economies.” *Social Text* 22(2):117-139.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2014. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Amsler, Sarah S. 2011. “From ‘Therapeutic’ to Political Education: The Centrality of Affective Sensibility in Critical Pedagogy.” *Critical Studies in Education* 52(1):47-63.
- Archer, Alfred and Ben Matheson. 2022. “Commemoration and Emotional Imperialism.” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 39(5):761-777.
- Archer, Alfred and Ben Matheson. 2023. “Emotional Imperialism.” *Philosophical Topics* 51(1):7-25.
- Archer, Alfred and Georgina Mills. 2019. “Anger, Affective Injustice, and Emotion Regulation.” *Philosophical Topics* 47(2):75-94.

- Archer, Alfred and Georgie Mills. 2025. "Fear and Affective Injustice." Pp. 11-30 in *Moral Psychology of Fear*, edited by Ami Harbin. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Babbie, Earl. 2004. *Badania społeczne w praktyce [Social Research in Practice]*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Biesta, Gert J.J. 2010. *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy*. London: Paradigm Publishers.
- Biesta, Gert J.J. 2013. *The Beautiful Risk of Education*. London: Routledge.
- Bohuszewicz, Paweł. 2019. "Kultura folwarczna: długie czy krótkie trwanie? [Farm Culture: Long or Short-Lived]." *Barok. Historia-Literatura-Sztuka* 26(2):171-184.
- Boler, Megan and Michalinos Zembylas. 2003. "Discomforting Truths." Pp. 115-138 in *Pedagogies of Difference*, edited by P.P. Trifonas. New York: Routledge.
- Boler, Megan and Michalinos Zembylas. 2016. "Interview with Megan Boler." Pp. 17-30 in *Methodological Advances in Research on Emotion and Education*, edited by M. Zembylas and P.A. Schutz. New York: Springer.
- Boler, Megan. 1999. *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Boler, Megan. 2015. "Feminist Politics of Emotions and Critical Digital Pedagogies." *PMLA* 130(5):1489-1496.
- Burzyńska, Anna. 2015. "Afekt – podejrzany i pożądany [Affect – Suspicious and Desired]." Pp. 115-134 in *Kultura afektu – afekty w kulturze [Culture of Affect – Affects in Culture]*, edited by R. Nycz et al. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytut Badań Literackich PAN.
- Chomczyński, Piotr. 2012. "Paradygmat interpretacyjny [The Interpretive Paradigm]." Pp. 211-214 in *Słownik socjologii jakościowej [Dictionary of Qualitative Sociology]*, edited by K. T. Konecki and P. Chomczyński. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Difin.
- Clough, Patricia T. 2007. "Introduction." Pp. 2-33 in *The Affective Turn*, edited by P.T. Clough and J. Halley. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Clough, Patricia T. 2008. "The Affective Turn." *Theory, Culture & Society* 25(1):1-22.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1999. "Percept, afekt i pojęcie [Percept, Affect, and Concept]." *Sztuka i Filozofia* (17):10-26.
- Denzin, Norman K. 1984. *On Understanding Emotion*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gallegos, Francisco. 2022. "Affective Injustice and Fundamental Affective Goods." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 53(2):185-201.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2018. "Beyond Individualism: The Psychosocial Life of the Neoliberal University." Pp. 193-216 in *A Critical Guide to Higher Education & the Politics of Evidence: Resisting Colonialism, Neoliberalism, and Audit Culture*, edited by M. Spooner and J. McNinch. Regina, Canada: University of Regina Press.
- Giroux, Henry A. 2014. *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Hammersley, Martyn and Paul Atkinson. 2000. *Metody badań terenowych [Ethnography: Principles in Practice]*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Zys i S-ka.
- Hardt, Michael. 2007. "Foreword." Pp. ix-xiii in *The Affective Turn*, edited by P.T. Clough and J. Halley. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Holstein, James A. and Jaber F. Gubrium. 1997. "Active Interviewing." Pp. 113-129 in *Qualitative Research*, edited by D. Silverman. London: Sage.
- Hryniewicz, Janusz T. 2004. *Polityczny i kulturowy kontekst rozwoju gospodarczego [The Political and Cultural Context of Economic Development]*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Hryniewicz, Janusz T. 2007. *Stosunki pracy w polskich organizacjach [Labor Relations in Polish Organizations]*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Karlsohn, Thomas. 2016. "On Emotions, Knowledge and Educational Institutions." *Confero* 4(1):137-164.
- Konecki, Krzysztof T. 2000. *Studia z metodologii badań jakościowych. Teoria ugruntowana. [Studies in Qualitative Research Methodology. Grounded Theory]*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Konecki, Krzysztof T. 2005. "Jakościowe rozumienie innych a socjologia jakościowa. [Qualitative Understanding of Others and Qualitative Sociology]." *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* 1(1):1-3.

- Konecki, Krzysztof T. and Beata Pawłowska. 2013. "Wstęp: W stronę socjologii emocji [Introduction: Toward a Sociology of Emotions]." *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* 9(2):6-9.
- Konecki, Krzysztof T. and Beata Pawłowska (ed.). 2014. *Emocje w życiu codziennym. Analiza kulturowych, społecznych i organizacyjnych uwarunkowań ujawniania i kierowania emocjami* [Emotions in Everyday Life: An Analysis of the Cultural, Social, and Organizational Conditions of Emotional Expression and Regulation]. Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.
- Krueger, Joel. 2023. "An Ecological Approach to Affective Injustice." *Philosophical Topics* 51(1):85-112.
- Krzeski, Jakub, Olga Łojewska i Krystian Szadkowski. 2025. *Narodziny dyskursu doskonałości naukowej z ducha terapii szokowej* [The Birth of a Discourse of Scientific Excellence from the Spirit of Shock Therapy]. Poznań: Pracownia Komunikacji Naukowej UAM.
- Kwaśnica, Robert. 2014. *Dyskurs edukacyjny po inwazji rozumu instrumentalnego* [Educational Discourse After Instrumental Reason]. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe DSW.
- Kwieciński, Zbigniew. 2019. "Edukacja w galaktyce znaczeń [Education in a Galaxy of Meanings]." Pp. 41-53 in *Pedagogika. Podręcznik akademicki* [Pedagogy: An Academic Textbook], edited by Z. Kwieciński and B. Śliwerski. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Kwiek, Marek. 2015. *Uniwersytet w dobie przemian* [The University in Times of Change]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Leder, Andrzej. 2017. „Relacja folwarczna [Feudal-Style Relationship]." *Krytyka Polityczna* 45:230-243.
- Leszczyński, Adam. 2018. „Prekariusze na uczelniach [Precariat at Universities]". *Krytyka Polityczna* <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/prekariusze-na-uczelniach/>.
- Leys, Ruth. 2011. "The Turn to Affect: A Critique." *Critical Inquiry* 37(3):434-472.
- Maliszewski, Krzysztof. 2021. *Bez-silna edukacja. O kształceniu kruchej* [Powerless Education: On Educating the Fragile]. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.
- Massumi, Brian. 2013. "Autonomia afektu [The Autonomy of Affect]." *Teksty Drugie* (6):112-135.
- Massumi, Brian. 2015. *Politics of Affect*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Niedbalski, Jakub. 2012. "Wywiad swobodny [Unstructured Interview]." Pp. 335-337 in *Słownik socjologii jakościowej* [Dictionary of Qualitative Sociology], edited by K.T. Konecki and P. Chomczyński. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Difin.
- Potulicka, Eugenia and Joanna Rutkowiak. 2010. *Neoliberalne uwikłania edukacji* [The Neoliberal Entanglements of Education]. Cracow: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls.
- Shore, Chris. 2008. "Audit Culture and Illiberal Governance: Universities and the Politics of Accountability." *Anthropological Theory* 8(3):278-298.
- Skórzyńska, Agata. 2023. „Psucie wiedzy i znikające instytucje. Szkic z neoliberalizującej się akademii [The Corruption of Knowledge and Vanishing Institutions: A Sketch from the Neoliberalizing Academia]." *Teksty Drugie* 1:19-42.
- Slaby, Jan. 2016. „Mind Invasion: Situated Affectivity and the Corporate Life Hack." *Frontiers in Psychology* 7(266):1-13.
- Srinivasan, Amia. 2018. "The Aptness of Anger." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26(2):123-144.
- Steen-Johnsen, Tale, May-Linda Magnussen and Irene Trysnes. 2025. "Emotional Labour in the Neoliberal University: The Standpoint of Female Academics in Norway with Experience of Sick Leave." *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 33(2):192-204. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2024.2419441>.
- Szadkowski, Krystian. 2015. *Uniwersytet jako dobro wspólne. Podstawy krytycznych badań nad szkolnictwem wyższym* [The University as a Common Good: Foundations of Critical Higher Education Studies]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Szkudlarek, Tomasz. 2019. "Pedagogika krytyczna [Critical Pedagogy]." Pp. 571-584 in *Pedagogika. Podręcznik akademicki* [Pedagogy: An Academic Textbook], edited by Z. Kwieciński and B. Śliwerski. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Szwabowski, Oskar. 2019. *Nekrofilna produkcja akademicka i pieśni partyzantów: Autoetnografia pracy akademickiej i dydaktycznej w czasach zombie-kapitalizmu* [Necrophilic Academic Production and Guerrilla Songs: An Autoethnography of Academic and Teaching Work in the Age of Zombie Capitalism]. Wrocław: Instytut Pedagogiki Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.
- Urbaniak-Zajac, Danuta. 2008. "Rzeczywistość pedagogiczna a sposoby jej poznawania – perspektywa interpretacyjna

[Educational Reality and Ways of Knowing It – An Interpretive Perspective].” Pp. 185-200 in *Konceptualizacje przedmiotu badań pedagogiki* [Conceptualisations of the Subject of Research in Pedagogy], edited by K. Rubacha. Cracow: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls.

Urbaniak-Zajac, Danuta. 2019. „Empiryczne badania jakościowe w pedagogice [Empirical Qualitative Research in Pedagogy]” Pp. 453-471 in *Pedagogika. Podręcznik akademicki* [Pedagogy: An Academic Textbook], edited by Z. Kwieciński and B. Śliwerski. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Whitney, Shiloh. 2018a. “Affective intentionality and affective Injustice: Merleau-Ponty and Fanon on the Body Schema as a Theory of Affect.” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 56(4):488-515.

Whitney, Shiloh. 2018b. “Byproductive Labor.” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 44(6):637-660.

Whitney, Shiloh. 2021. Emotional Labor and Affective Injustice. Women in Philosophy. Retrieved October 3, 2025 (<https://blog.apaonline.org/2021/09/22/emotional-labor-and-affective-injustice/>).

Whitney, Shiloh. 2023. “Anger Gaslighting and Affective Injustice.” *Philosophical Topics* 51(1):27-62.

Whitney, Shiloh. 2025. “Anger Gaslighting as Affective Injustice.” Pp. 147–174 in *Gaslighting: Philosophical Approaches*, edited by Kelly Oliver, Hanna Kiri Gunn and Holly Longair. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Zawadzki, Michał. 2019. „Uniwersytecki Hollywood, czyli kilka uwag na temat skutków neoliberalizmu w szkolnictwie wyższym” [University Hollywood: Some Remarks on the

Effects of Neoliberalism in Higher Education].” Pp. 253-262 in *Strategie i Innowacje Organizacyjne Polskich Uczelni* [Strategies and Organizational Innovations of Polish Universities], edited by Ł. Sułkowski, J. Górniak Cracow: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.

Zembylas, Michalinos. 2003. “Caring for Teacher Emotion.” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22(2):103-125.

Zembylas, Michalinos. 2004. “The Emotional Characteristics of Teaching.” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 20:185-201.

Zembylas, Michalinos. 2021a. “Refusal as Affective and Pedagogical Practice in Higher Education Decolonization: A Modest Proposal.” *Teaching in Higher Education* 26(7-8): 953-68.

Zembylas, Michalinos. 2021b. “The Affective Turn in Educational Theory.” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. [Accessed 01 Oct. 2025] (<https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-1272>).

Zembylas, Michalinos. 2023. “Affective Governmentality, Political Sensitivity, and Right-Wing Populism.” *Prospects* 53(3-4):325-339.

Zembylas, Michalinos. 2026a. “Disaffection as Refusal: Affective Injustice and the Politics of Unfeeling in Pedagogies of Nation.” *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 34(2):579-96. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2025.2524506>.

Zembylas, Michalinos. 2026b. “The Moral-Political Economy of Discomfort: Who Is Allowed to Feel Uncomfortable in Higher Education.” *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, April, 1-19. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2026.2658184>.

Citation

Góralska, Renata. 2026. “Engagement and Exhaustion as (Un)Expected Consequences of Academic Teachers’ Emotional Labor: Affective Injustice in Higher Education.” *Qualitative Sociology Review* 22(3):12-26. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.22.3.02>