

Manipulation from the Perspective of Academic Teachers

Alina Wróbel

University of Lodz, Poland

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Abstract: The following text concerns manifestations of manipulation that occur within academic practice. Here, manipulation is understood as forms of influence grounded in a complex mechanism that underlies a covert method of influencing and controlling people. The study was situated within the interpretive-critical paradigm, and the article is based on the findings of qualitative research conducted through unstructured interviews with academic teachers. Manipulative mechanisms were conceptualized based on descriptions of academic teachers' experiences, and analysis of the interview data identified examples of phenomena and procedures whose characteristics correspond to those of manipulation understood as a method of exerting influence on individuals. These findings are discussed from three perspectives: the macro perspective, encompassing decisions and procedures implemented within educational policy and their consequences; the meso perspective, referring to the university as an institution with hierarchical relationships based on the abuse of power; and the micro perspective, concerning interpersonal relations among academic teachers. These considerations are grounded in an understanding of the academic community that treats the autonomy and agency of all members of this community as essential conditions for the community's authentic development and for strengthening academic teachers' professional identity.

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Alina Wróbel is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Theory at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Łódź. Her research interests include the frontiers of general pedagogy and educational theory; the philosophical and theoretical foundations of education; paradigmatic shifts and research turns in the humanities; humanistic pedagogy and its anthropological foundations; contemporary theories and ideologies of education; the intentionality of educational action and manipulation. Vice Chair of KNP PAN (Committee on Pedagogical Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences) for the term 2024-2027, Chair of the Theory of Education Section of KNP PAN, and Member of the General Pedagogy Section of KNP PAN.

 alina.wrobel@uni.lodz.pl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8675-035X>

The following text concerns manifestations of manipulation that occur within the academic sphere. This study aimed to analyze the personal experiences of academic teachers as described in the interviews they participated in. I proceed from the premise that concepts carry interpretative assumptions that shape the research process, which is why, before analyzing academic teachers' experiences, the meaning of manipulation itself must first be addressed. For this reason, the most important theoretical context for this study was the understanding of manipulation adopted here and the characteristics of this mode of exerting influence on people. The theoretical framework presented here was developed based on an interdisciplinary review of the relevant literature, with the framework's fundamental assumptions drawn primarily from research in political science.

The article is based on the findings of qualitative research conducted through unstructured interviews with academic teachers. While my understanding of manipulation fundamentally shapes the interpretation of the experiences described by the interviewees, analysis of their experiences identified examples of phenomena and procedures whose characteristics

correspond to those of manipulation understood as a method of exerting influence on individuals. This is understood as forms of influence grounded in complex mechanisms that underly covert methods of influencing and controlling people (see Karwat 2022:67-97; Metelski 2024:115-117). These examples were identified from the participants' descriptions of the states they experienced, accompanied by a sense of objectification, restrictions imposed on their capacity for action and self-determination, and the resulting violation of their right to self-realization. The procedures described by the participants constitute manifestations of such mechanisms of influence. They involve manipulative, deceptive, and dependency-producing practices, often based on covert mechanisms concealed behind the formal and legal frameworks governing higher education institutions. This situation leads to the "depreciation of European traditions of understanding the academic community, its cognitive and institutional autonomy, and its independence from political and ideological contingencies" (Karwat and Pierzchalski 2022:8).

The analysis presented here is situated within the interpretive-critical paradigm and, more specifi-

cally, within the perspective of the construction of meanings and identities through social interaction. In this context, the dynamic transformations taking place within social, cultural, political, and economic life acquire particular significance, as they generate numerous phenomena within academic practice itself, and more precisely within the functioning of the university. The vision of the university as an ivory tower (Soley 1995) has long since faded into the past, while the pace of contemporary change directly affects higher education institutions, the status of academic teachers, and the possibilities for them to develop autonomously.

Theoretical Framework of the Study: The Nature of Manipulation

The analysis of manipulation presented in this study is grounded in theoretical perspectives that conceptualize manipulation as a form of exerting influence on others that simultaneously constitutes a form of violence. Violence is understood here as a mode of influencing people—their thinking processes, behavior, or conduct—to obtain resources or achieve objectives while restricting their rights and freedoms (see Pratkanis and Aronson 2003:VII-VIII). In characterizing various forms of social influence, Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson distinguish manipulation from other modes of communication, such as persuasion. In their view, persuasion is a communicative act, a form of argumentation, debate, and discussion—that is, a type of discourse aimed at supporting or opposing a particular standpoint. It is oriented toward reaching an understanding and preserving the target's freedom of choice. Manipulation, by contrast, is identified as a strategic action with concealed aims, intended to control the target's behavior, often against their will. This is precisely how it is interpreted in the humanities

and social sciences (cf. Hołówka 1993; Siemieniecki 2007; Rogaliński 2012; Fleischer 2023; Hannon 2023; Metelski 2024).

Social psychologists further argue that there are only two ways of inducing someone to act in accordance with another person's wishes: through the use of power (or relationships based on force) and through manipulation (Joule and Beauvois 2006:16). The former is typically interpreted as natural, socially accepted, and deriving from the social order or from the established principles governing an institution. The essence of the latter lies in its covertness and in the restriction it imposes on the autonomy and freedom of action of the target.

The concept of manipulation appears in the humanities and social sciences in a variety of meanings. These range from denoting precise manual operations, through sequences of activities associated with specific procedures—for example, administrative procedures—to the covert influencing and controlling of other people. The negative connotation of the term dates back to the eighteenth century, when it began to refer to actions aimed at exerting an influence over another person (d'Almeida 2005:24-27).

While the concept continues to function across multiple semantic fields (see Wróbel 2006:17-19), its broadest meaning concerns ways of influencing the behavior of others. Manipulating an individual's consciousness, mind, or behavior—as opposed to manipulating objects—is generally associated with dishonest practices or scheming (see Winn 2003). Understood in this way, manipulation refers to covert, backstage, and deceptive actions (d'Almeida 2005:10-23). It denotes a form of influence whose mechanisms remain hidden from the target (see Łukaszewski et al. 2009:20-24). It is not only the ma-

nipulative procedures that tend to be concealed but also the goals. The concealment of purpose is often linked to the assumption that if the method of influence must remain hidden, the intended goal is somehow unworthy or harmful to the target. This assumption, however, is not universally accepted.

The etymology of the term manipulation directs attention toward the objectification of the target. Depriving an individual of subjectivity has consequences for personal freedom as it restricts the space available for autonomous choice and reduces freedom beyond what is necessary. In such circumstances, the target mistakenly believes that they are independently deciding upon their actions, when in reality, they serve merely as an instrument of the manipulator, advancing that individual's goals. This situation often grows more complex when the manipulator creates an illusory sense of agency in the target. The manipulator can be understood as seeking to outwit others in such a way as not to alienate them—indeed, sometimes even to gain their appreciation and gratitude—while simultaneously pursuing personal objectives. The manipulator's welfare or interests are neither identical to nor necessarily compatible with those of the target. Thus, manipulation involves exploiting an advantage—not through force or legal authority, but through psychological, situational, or tactical superiority. It involves taking advantage of any favorable circumstances, an advantage that frequently emerges through the creation of confusion and the use of deception.

Manipulation may, therefore, be characterized as an activity that is:

- deceptive,
- based on exploiting tactical advantage,

- undertaken intentionally in pursuit of goals the manipulator defines and regards as valuable,
- objectifying towards the target,
- founded on concealing its actual aims and mechanisms,
- generating and/or sustaining false consciousness in the target,
- resulting in a temporary or permanent loss of the target's capacity to act according to their own intentions, knowledge, and rational judgment,
- undermining resistance to such influence (see Wróbel 2010:9-16).

One form of manipulation, which constitutes a narrower and more stereotypical understanding of the concept (see Karwat 2022:251-274), involves actions undertaken with the explicit aim of instrumentalizing the target. According to the theoretical assumptions adopted here, classifying a form of influence as manipulation depends primarily on intentionality, the goals pursued, and the calculated nature of the action. The mechanisms employed, their characteristics, and the circumstances in which they occur do not, in themselves, constitute defining attributes of manipulation. Within this perspective, manipulation is understood as a form of influence in which the manipulator, drawing upon knowledge of human behavioral patterns, seeks to exert a desired effect on another person or group without their awareness that they are being deliberately influenced. The manipulator's goals represent the envisioned states of affairs they intend to bring about.

Based on definitions of manipulation in the literature, it can be argued that manipulation occurs when the primary motive of the manipulator is maximizing their own interests, or those of a group or institution with which they identify. Two essential characteristics emerge from this understanding: manipulation is always planned and concealed. Its planned nature follows directly from its purpose. If manipulation is undertaken to achieve a desired objective, that objective must first be recognized and specified by the manipulator. The intended goal subsequently determines the procedures employed in the manipulative process. Targets generally enact the manipulator's objectives unwittingly. However, the degree to which their awareness is suspended may vary—from complete unawareness of external control, through forms of apparent participation, to fully conscious involvement in manipulative activities.

Once again, concealment—already defined as a defining characteristic—becomes evident: the goals of the action remain outside the awareness of the manipulated individual. As participants in social life, people are constantly exposed to influences that they either recognize and interpret in their own way or perceive without identifying their true purposes. Manipulation is, therefore, a form of intentional influence exerted upon an individual or group in such a way that, without realizing it, they undertake actions that satisfy the manipulator's needs (Maruszeński and Ścigała 1999:14).

Given the understanding of manipulation adopted here, disclosing its aims to the target effectively renders it ineffective, since the individual can then resist. The subtlety and precision involved in selecting manipulative methods make this a form of

influence whose interpretation requires careful attention to context.

Taking into account the nature of manipulation described above, forms of interpersonal influence constitute an integral part of social reality and are enacted across diverse social contexts, groups, and institutions. Consequently, manipulation as a form of influence will be analyzed from three different perspectives:

- macro level – social life and its structures, including educational policy;
- meso level – the university as an institution with hierarchical relationships based on the abuse of power;
- micro level – interpersonal relationships among employees within an academic institution.

Although different mechanisms of manipulation may operate within each of these three perspectives, they are united by the essence of the phenomenon and its consequences—namely, objectification (and at times instrumentalization), as well as the false sense of agency experienced by the manipulated person (see Wróbel 2006:37-39). Mirosław Karwat (2022) argues that:

(...) a valid intuition, and consequently a rational premise in attempts to grasp the specificity of deceptive actions referred to as manipulation, lies in recognizing the clear opposition between forms of influencing others that are based on equality, reciprocity, partnership, and respect for people's right to make independent decisions regarding matters that

concern them, and forms of influence characterized by arbitrariness. The latter involves ignoring another person's will or preventing them from exercising self-determination, making decisions about another person's situation or behavior, and even determining someone's fate by acting in their name without their consent or deciding behind their backs and over the heads of entire communities. (p. 275)

For the present study, manipulation is understood as a form of influence that is:

- intentional and subordinated to goals defined by the manipulator,
- objectifying toward the target,
- restrictive of the target's autonomous action,
- based on exploiting an advantage over the target and using deception.

Finally, I wish to emphasize that I do not equate workplace harassment with bullying. These concepts refer to other forms of violence that fall outside the scope of the analysis presented in this article (see Helios and Jedlecka 2017).

Methodological Framework

This article presents findings from research conducted as part of the Interdisciplinary Research Grant (IDUB) entitled Engagement and Exhaustion as (Un)Expected Outcomes of the Emotional Labour of Academic Teachers (Decision No. 3/IGB/2022; Project Code: B2311813000200.07).

The research project was situated within the interpretive and critical research paradigms (Konec-

ki 2005; Urbaniak-Zajac 2008, 2019; Chomczyński 2012). The principal research technique employed was the unstructured in-depth interview, which enabled direct contact with the participants and created an atmosphere conducive to obtaining in-depth accounts (Konecki 2000; Babbie 2008; Niedbalski 2012). The interviews took the form of active qualitative interviews (Holstein and Gubriu 1997), in which the participating academic teachers actively co-constructed the narratives. This approach allowed the conversation to be guided flexibly in response to the circumstances and the unfolding dynamics of each interview.

The empirical material analyzed in this article derives from 17 interviews conducted with ten women and seven men employed at eight Polish universities. The participants came from the social sciences and varied in terms of professional experience, although each had at least ten years of academic experience. The interviews were carried out between April and July 2025 as online meetings via MS Teams. The in-depth interview provides access to the academic teachers' private experiences of their work and interpersonal relationships within universities, particularly relationships that take the form of manipulation. This mode of inquiry becomes especially valuable for examining the relationship between individuals' subjective experiences and the institutional—and at times even violent—dimensions of academic practice (see, among others, Konecki and Pawłowska 2013; Nowak 2023; Skórzyńska 2023; Rakowski 2023).

Manipulation was conceptualized through analysis from three perspectives: systemic (macro), institutional (meso), and interpersonal (micro), which also constitute the analytical categories applied to the empirical material.

Academic Teachers' Experiences of Manipulation

An analysis of the interview material reveals that the narratives contain numerous references to experiences that either originated from, or continue to be shaped by, manipulative practices. In recounting their pathways into and through academia, the participants referred to three principal areas of academic activity: research, teaching, and organizational work. Their personal accounts were embedded within the broader context of their academic trajectories, ranging from the factors that initially motivated them to pursue careers in higher education, through the successive stages of becoming academic teachers, to identity-related choices and the institutional and systemic transformations affecting science and higher education in Poland. These interviews reveal how the participants' personal experiences and choices intertwine with changes taking place within academia and the broader socio-cultural environment.

The following discussion concerns manifestations of manipulation within academic practice, analyzed through the interrelationships among three perspectives: macro, meso, and micro. The analysis of the empirical material suggests that these perspectives are interconnected and continually influence one another. However, the micro perspective was least evident in the interview data as participant reflections were dominated by the systemic embeddedness of academic practice and the institutional frameworks shaping their professional activities. Consequently, this article focuses primarily on the macro and meso perspectives, recognizing the particularly strong interdependence between them. Nonetheless, the findings demonstrate that transformations at the systemic and institutional levels

also affect interpersonal relations among academic teachers—that is, the micro level.

The Macro Perspective: The Evaluation of Academic Disciplines and the Changes It Entails

An important experience shared by all the participants was finding their place in the world of research. In describing their entry into academic life, participants frequently referred to personal aspirations and a fascination with the academic community, which sometimes emerged as early as their student days. Over time, however, this fascination often diminished over time, and becoming an academic increasingly involved difficult experiences.

Reflecting on the changes that have occurred within academia in recent years, the participants emphasized that the introduction of current rules and criteria governing the evaluation of academic disciplines has significantly altered the meaning of research engagement. Academic activity and personal passion for one's field of inquiry have gradually lost their significance. Research has become an obligation whose rationale no longer aligns with individual ambitions and intellectual interests. One participant described this situation as follows:

You simply have to accumulate those points and tick the boxes. Whereas a few years ago, I could still feel some excitement about it. And even now, sometimes I am pleased that I've written something worthwhile, but that happens only occasionally. Most of the time, I treat it more as an unpleasant obligation than a source of joy. [I2]

The attitude reflected in this statement suggests that motivation to engage in academic work is no longer driven by personal choice, intellectual passion, or

the need for self-realization. Instead, the principal motivating factor becomes compliance with formal requirements resulting from evaluation criteria. This example illustrates how personal interests and choices are pushed to the margins, while rigid systemic demands, which constitute forms of institutional violence, come to determine the quality and character of academic practice.

Participants also reflected on broader institutional transformations and their consequences. Referring to earlier experiences in academia, one interviewee described the situation in the following terms:

Of course, there have always been expectations that we should publish. But nowadays everything has become so formalized and described through all these criteria and parameters, which, to be honest, I never fully understand. It's exhausting. Yes, it is exhausting, and I experience it as a form of oppression—one that I find increasingly difficult to accept because I am becoming less and less willing to consent to such extensive oppression. [I3]

This excerpt reflects a sense of systemic entrapment, or what the participant herself describes as oppression—a form of symbolic violence that restricts freedom of action. In consequence, it undermines individuals' agency in designing and pursuing their own professional development, while being masked by regulations governing evaluation procedures. This example demonstrates that research is not necessarily motivated by authentic personal choice but by systemically imposed evaluation requirements. Academic teachers are further objectified: their intellectual interests become secondary to institutional goals, for example, achieving higher positions in academic rankings. In this environment, they find it

difficult to operate autonomously; instead, they are required to operate within systemic frameworks.

The obligation to publish, obtain research funding, and increase the internationalization of universities has also generated a growing sense of insecurity regarding professional stability and future career prospects. One participant described this experience as follows:

[...] We had to accept that there was a strong desire for us to be at the same level as international universities, but this was done in such a technocratic way. As a result, our relationships became dehumanized—even though they had never been particularly good—and the satisfaction we derived from our work, as well as the sense of security one ought to feel in such a place, simply evaporated. [There is this feeling that we could be] let go at any moment because we might stop producing the "right" publications. [I1]

Participants associated these experiences with dehumanization, being fired, and oppression. Such experiences were also accompanied by fear:

There is now this fear, this uncertainty: will I manage? Will I be able to meet these expectations? My career matters a great deal to me because I am an ambitious person, and I have become accustomed to doing well in my work. I would still like to continue succeeding, but perhaps that will no longer be possible. My productivity may no longer be what it once was, and I will have to come to terms with the fact that I may no longer be one of the top performers but somewhere in the background. I will have to find fulfillment in other areas as well, and this is something I still have ahead of me. [...] I think that job satisfaction has declined. [I1]

The persistent sense of threat and continuous competition deprive interpersonal relationships of their fundamental humanistic dimension, transforming them into arenas where achievements are constantly compared. The pressure described above becomes a source of experiences that, in the participant's view, require emotional processing and may contribute to declining job satisfaction and professional burnout.

Another participant highlighted the risks these ongoing transformations pose to universities:

I can also see numerous dangers in moving towards turning universities into corporations. Universities can then be controlled very easily and lose their independence when all financial resources depend solely on parameters and on whether decision-makers—put simply—approve of something or not. Those decision-makers are outside academia. We have already experienced several educational reforms that demonstrated just how easily everything can be manipulated, overturned, and transformed. Suddenly, predatory journals receive a hundred points for virtually nothing because they correspond to a particular philosophy or worldview. It becomes very easy when governance is effectively externalized, because ministries ultimately decide on all these indicators and parameters. [...] Perhaps this is also connected with the fact that academia is looking less like academia and more like a corporation. [I2]

Continuous and often antagonistic competition contributes to the erosion of university autonomy as institutions become permanently engaged in securing resources for research. Academic freedom in its traditional sense—associated with intellectual independence and the pursuit of truth—loses significance under pressure from those governing the

higher education system. Indicators of academic achievement become instruments through which power is exercised over universities, particularly in contexts shaped by ideological differences and the concealed interests of those holding authority.

Relationships became dehumanized under evaluation pressures—a recurring theme throughout the interviews—undermining the fundamental norms and principles that have traditionally underpinned the academic community. This transformation affects the principles governing the formation of research teams and the evaluation of their achievements, for example. At present, collaboration with colleagues from one's own academic unit may no longer be regarded as advantageous, even when individuals share a common scholarly tradition or research school.

The Meso Perspective: Hierarchy, Informal Networks, Divisions, and Factions

According to the participants, one of the most difficult experiences was—and continues to be—finding their place within the hierarchical structures of the university, which do not foster community. On the contrary, they often give rise to domination and symbolic violence, including abuses of power rooted in formal authority and organizational hierarchy. As one participant noted:

The university is certainly a relic of authority. The so-called Act 2.0 has, unfortunately, granted His Magnificence [the Rector] absolute power, and that is very harmful. [I4]

One characteristic aspect of everyday life in academia is that:

...there is still a very hierarchical culture here... we do not treat employees who occupy lower positions—who hold lower academic titles or have lower academic degrees—as our equals. We do not want to treat them as equals because we are afraid that this would threaten our authority. [I1]

Among younger faculty members, this hierarchical structure is often accompanied by the conviction that:

One is not regarded as a significant element, but [...] as a tool for achieving a particular goal. Unfortunately, because of this, the university is increasingly becoming a non-place for us. We do not become attached to it; it feels very temporary, and people simply think about when they will retire. [I1]

An individual's work is valued more when, for example, their publications generate points that contribute positively to the evaluation of the discipline. As a result, the implicit message becomes: I matter when I bring in points. Hierarchical relationships are experienced particularly acutely by early-career researchers. One participant described this experience as follows:

I can say straight away that this is something visible in our academic environment: many young doctors, early-career academics, experience what I would quite literally call humiliation, simply because we occupy a lower rank. It is extremely painful. For a long time, it caused me to withdraw and left me with a profound sense of inferiority. And I can honestly say that without support—both from a professor at the university and from my family—I would not have managed to cope with it, because it really clips your wings. [...] We are human beings, yet someone deprives us of our subjectivity. [I5]

These accounts describe situations of humiliation and the calculated exploitation of professional dependency and organizational position, both of which ultimately restrict subjectivity and individuals' right to self-realization. Here, manipulation manifests itself through the instrumental treatment of younger colleagues, whose commitment and efforts are used to serve their superiors' goals and personal interests.

Participants also described the hierarchy as sustained by informal systems of influence:

I simply cannot accept—and I probably never will accept throughout my academic career—what in academia is referred to as “the system.” You know very well what I mean: competencies do not matter; connections do. And that is disastrous. Until this changes, Polish education will not make significant progress. Competence must matter. Individual academic achievements and teaching accomplishments must matter, not who knows whom or who has coffee with whom. [I4]

Similarly, another participant observed:

Cliques and resentments continue to operate and play an important role, instead of substantive values. For someone in their thirties, for example, this could have serious consequences—they might simply become discouraged from pursuing this kind of activity. [I6]

The abuse of power relations also extends to interactions involving students and can be used as a means of harming colleagues within the workplace. One participant recounted:

These are very difficult issues. For me, it is completely incomprehensible that a lecturer—even one holding

a habilitated doctorate—would use students in order to spite another lecturer. [...] These are painful experiences because I simply cannot understand such behavior. How can someone avoid speaking directly to a colleague from the faculty and instead question students during lectures, portraying another lecturer as strict, critical, or saying that “he will make your life difficult”? Students then form this opinion of a lecturer without having experienced any of it themselves. And because students talk, these kinds of stories inevitably spread. [I5]

Another particularly distressing experience concerns navigating divisions and competing “camps” within a university environment, as illustrated by the following statement:

The institute is deeply divided. It has always been divided. There have always been different camps. We are a bit dualistic, much like our country as a whole—there always has to be an enemy. It is frightening. First, there was the former dean’s camp, and now two new camps have emerged once again. [I1]

These experiences of navigating this complex institutional environment the individuals’. As one participant explained:

Whenever I take on a new role, I know that this also involves forming various relationships. And I can see that there are tensions within the Institute, sometimes even conflicts. Sooner or later, I will have to take a stand. [...] It is impossible to be pleasant and agreeable to everyone—not only because you cannot satisfy everybody, but because you must remain honest with yourself. To give an example, there is one person in whose presence I genuinely felt what Hegel described: when you encounter them, the principle immediately comes into play that “I am the master,

the other is the servant;” these roles become instantly established. [I7]

The divisions described above, fueled by conflicts of interest and competition among faculty, generate attitudes characterized by calculation and deception aimed at exploiting others in pursuit of personal objectives—strengthening their own achievements and consolidating their own position within the institution. Another participant commented:

We seem incapable of living without conflict, and that is deeply depressing. Considering that we are educators, we should strive to build community and foster unity in diversity. Instead, we go against that. [I1]

The conflicts that emerge reinforce existing divisions and shape interpersonal relations within academic institutions. Participants noted:

Some people undermine others, but they do so in a more calculated way because they are simply more intelligent about it. [I1]

The strategies employed in such situations rely on psychological and sociological mechanisms that ensure effectiveness by exploiting a tactical advantage. In these circumstances, the common good recedes into the background, while personal success becomes the dominant priority—often achieved at the expense of ethical principles.

The Micro Perspective: Alienation and Loneliness in Academia

The quality of interpersonal relationships and the divisions that exist within academic institutions contribute to feelings of alienation and loneliness among academic teachers. Many of the interviews

contained accounts of negative experiences resulting from competition among academic teachers, a lack of mutual goodwill, and increasingly competitive attitudes. One participant described this state of affairs as follows:

There are people with whom I simply work well, and whenever I lead a project, I invite those individuals regardless of which department they belong to, because I have the feeling that there is also a kind of competition between departments here. [I8]

Some participants attributed the origins of these conflicts to the legal frameworks governing higher education and science. One interviewee explained:

The changes introduced through the legislation meant that we had to accept that there was a strong desire for us to be at the same level as international universities, but this was done in such a technocratic way. As a result, our relationships became dehumanized—even though they had not been particularly good—and the satisfaction we derived from our work, as well as the sense of security one ought to feel in such a place, simply evaporated. I myself lack that sense of security, because at any moment we may be let go if we stop producing the ‘right’ publications. [...] So, you have to do something about yourself, because otherwise you become a disgrace to our Institute. This deforms people; generally speaking, it diminishes job satisfaction and strongly contributes to professional burnout. Being there no longer provides satisfaction for its own sake; instead, one becomes merely a tool for achieving some external objective. Unfortunately, because of this, the university is increasingly becoming a non-place for us. We do not become attached to it; it feels very temporary space, and people simply think about when they will retire. [...] Yes, a non-place—a space

with which we do not identify and which no longer holds any significance for us. [I1]

This account illustrates how the macro, meso, and micro perspectives intersect: systemic solutions reshape institutional frameworks, which in turn negatively affect the quality of interpersonal relationships, contribute to their dehumanization, and foster feelings of alienation. The participants described experiencing a lack of security, constant competition, and anxiety about failing to meet publication expectations. This situation becomes a source of frustration and a sense of instrumentalization. The individual—their needs, personal motivations, and intellectual interests—ceases to matter. What becomes important is their achievements, but only insofar as they serve the institution’s objectives. Hence, the participants repeatedly described themselves as “a tool for achieving some external objective”—an objective disconnected from their own aspirations and values.

Teaching is another important sphere of academic teachers’ experiences. The quality of the teaching and relationships with students can also become sources of negative experiences. Although the participants frequently mentioned the importance they attach to teaching and to their interactions with students, teaching itself was likewise described as generating feelings of objectification and instrumentalization. When reflecting upon the beginnings of their academic careers, the participants often associated teaching with satisfaction and fulfilment. However, when discussing their current experiences, they noted significant changes in academic practice and the adverse consequences that have followed. One such consequence concerns the status assigned to teaching within evaluation systems and the result-

ing decline in motivation to maintain teaching quality. Participants described these changes as follows:

I increasingly have the impression that the current system for evaluating teaching means that we are essentially providing a service, acting as service providers from the students' perspective. We have to be extremely careful in everything we do because otherwise we might fail to meet students' expectations. [I1]

The contemporary student is increasingly positioned as a customer, whose satisfaction with the quality of the "service" provided becomes paramount:

We are expected to be available during holidays; students can email us even on Christmas Eve. I remember one student who sent me five emails on Christmas Eve because he demanded an answer. That was when I realized that we genuinely have no boundaries—or perhaps we fail to establish them—in terms of our availability and our constant readiness to be there for others: for university authorities and for students. And in all of this, where is the space for being there for ourselves? [I5]

Matters are further complicated because teaching evaluation systems are sometimes experienced as instruments of control and repression directed towards academic teachers. One participant described this issue in the following terms:

We are not allowed to know exactly what is written in those surveys, yet we can be summoned to the dean's or rector's office to discuss our behavior during interactions with students. This has created an enormous precedent, almost a communist or even totalitarian system, where we have dirt on you and can bring it out whenever necessary. I find this deeply disturbing

because, first of all, it establishes a dangerous precedent and reinforces students' mistaken belief that anonymity previously did not exist, and secondly, it fundamentally undermines the original purpose of these surveys. [...] The survey has become a tool—a genuine instrument in the hands of superiors. [I3]

The sense of objectification and subordination to students' opinions leaves participants feeling pressured by their institutions, diminishing their sense of agency and weakening their personal engagement in teaching. Such pressure runs contrary to treating academic teachers as active and autonomous agents (see Archer 2013), marginalizing their autonomous capacities—the right to make reflexive choices and pursue activities they themselves deem meaningful within their social and institutional settings.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis presented above shows that objectification and instrumentalization are experiences that accompany contemporary academic practice. From the macro perspective, systemic solutions—including laws and regulations—generate feelings of fear, uncertainty, and a lack of professional stability among the participants. These experiences have fundamental implications for both individual development and the quality of academic work undertaken by university teachers. Here, one may speak of a form of "large-scale manipulation" operating at the systemic level. Academic teachers become subjects of manipulation enacted through political decisions concerning science and higher education.

This macro-level perspective shapes what happens at the meso level, determining the institutional frameworks within which academic teachers operate. The hierarchical structures of the university,

together with the abuse of power and forms of violence, do not foster the development of community; instead, they become sources of objectification. These patterns of interpersonal relations, reinforced by existing divisions, contribute to experiences of alienation and loneliness.

At the micro level, manipulation becomes particularly evident in academic teachers' experiences when participants recall the hopes, aspirations, and commitment that accompanied the beginning of their academic careers. The stronger the personal investment in the ideals of academic work at the outset, the more pronounced the experience of manipulation appears in retrospect. Within the contemporary university, there seems to be increasingly limited space for academic teachers' genuinely autonomous development.

Here, important questions emerge concerning the academic ethos—a set of fundamental values, norms, and attitudes that shape both the scholarly community's identity and the principles governing academic practice. The manifestations of manipulation identified in academic life challenge the foundations of this ethos as an ethical category. Ethos—the ethical substance of our community—is both given to us and entrusted to us. It constitutes the core of our identity and our most important point of reference. If we accept this, then we should insist that humanity, both within ourselves and in every other person, always be treated as an end in itself and never merely as a means (see Kant 1953).

This orientation constitutes a counterweight to the forms of manipulation described by the participants in this study. These manipulative practices restrict autonomous action, subordinate academic work to objectives that conflict with academic teachers' per-

sonal motivations and needs, and objectify them in the service of systemically imposed interests. Persistent uncertainty and competition intensify relationships of dependency, facilitating the exploitation of power asymmetries to the detriment of the targets.

These dynamics reflect the logic of symbolic and structural violence, as evidenced by the interpenetration of the three perspectives of influence discussed throughout this article: the macro, meso, and micro levels. Revealing these interconnections constitutes the essence of the analysis undertaken here and provides an important impetus for further research into academic teachers' experiences and the factors shaping contemporary academic practice.

Researching the manifestations of manipulation in academic settings and disseminating knowledge on this topic is one way to strengthen academic freedom and academic teachers' right to autonomous development and agency. Analysis of manipulation from systemic, institutional, and interpersonal perspectives revealed examples of decisions and procedures made at the ministerial level (formalized in laws and regulations), power relations based on abuse, and relationships within academic environments that bear the hallmarks of manipulation and limit the scope of academic teachers' autonomous action. These actions and decisions are manipulative precisely because they are not communicated directly but are pursued behind the scenes to achieve hidden goals.

Therefore, knowledge of this issue and the ability to accurately identify manipulative phenomena should be a core competency of the modern academic teacher. In today's world, manipulation continues to take new forms and presents academ-

ic teachers with new challenges. Consequently, to effectively combat manipulation, its contemporary aspects should be examined and practical conclusions drawn from the research. Academic teachers can take the following practical steps:

- develop and implement ethical principles to prevent manipulation;
- develop critical thinking skills;

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- organize training to recognize manipulation.
- In summary, researching manipulation and analyzing the social spaces in which it occurs, apart from its cognitive value, offers specific recommendations. Disseminating knowledge on this topic raises awareness, counteracts the spread of such behavior, and helps prepare academic teachers to cope with manipulation and the violence it brings to educational institutions.
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