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## **EMOTIONAL LABOUR OF UNIVERSITY TEACHERS IN THE CONTEXT OF ACADEMIC CAPITALISM: THERAPEUTIC ETHOS AND COMMUNICATION NORMS AND PRACTICES WITH STUDENTS (CASE STUDY OF TWO UNIVERSITIES)**

This paper discusses the influence of therapeutic culture on the emotional labour of teachers at two universities, Higher School of Economics and University of Jena. Drawing on the concepts of emotional labour, academic capitalism, and therapeutic culture, the study is aimed to identify changes in the normative requirements for emotional labour of university teachers and corresponding changes in their professional ethics in the context of the commercialization and managerialization of higher education. The research focuses on the norms and practices of communication between teachers and students at these universities, providing a comparative analysis (Case Study). The research hypothesis is whether the therapeutic ethos, as being part of a westernized, mainly Anglo-American culture, is more internalized in European (German) academia compared to Russian academia. The pilot study employs a qualitative methodology, consisting of interviews with faculty members from both universities conducted between April 2022 and January 2023 (N = 10). The findings suggest that the emotional labour of faculty members at both universities is closely related to the expansion of commercialization, bureaucratization, and managerialism in the higher education system. The therapeutic ethos acts as a regulator of the emotional labour that results in new emotional norms of communication between teachers and students, rooted in students' expectations of emotional support from their teachers. Faculty from both universities highlight the need for policies and practices to create a positive emotional environment. I argue that while the therapeutic culture modifies the professional role of teachers and tends to support academic capitalism, it conflicts with the principle of

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role separation and teacher authority. The findings of the study can be used for further research in the field of university education transformation.

*Keywords:* emotional labour, academic capitalism, therapeutic culture, emotion norms, professional ethics

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Research on 'emotional labour' is one of the most important areas in the 'sociology of emotions.' It gained significant recognition following the publication of Arlie Hochschild's *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Feelings* in 1983 (Hochschild 1983). While 'emotion work' refers to the management of emotions in particular situations and socio-cultural contexts, the concept of 'emotional labour' delves into the principle of emotion management in the public sphere, in accordance with the norms and expectations set by the employer or organization (Hochschild 2012). Emotional labour is 'invisible' to others, difficult to measure, and typically unpaid. It is an integral element of academic capitalism, revealing inequality in the contemporary higher education system. This aspect not only transforms the concept of the university (Readings 1996), but also revises the expectations of teaching staff and the values and ethics of teaching (Slaughter, Leslie 1997; Slaughter 2020; Constanti, Gibbs 2004; Jessop 2018; Berry, Cassidy 2013).

The next key concept of our research is 'therapeutic ethos' or 'therapeutic culture,' which is characterized by a psychologized, individualistic worldview that generates corresponding norms, discourses, and practices internalized in different spheres from private life to education (Furedi 2004; Wright 2006; Illouz 2008; Madsen 2014 a, b). In the contemporary higher education landscape, academic capitalism co-exists with the 'therapeutic ethos' and, as this article argues, the 'therapeutic ethos' influences the higher education landscape, specifically the norms and practices of teacher-student interaction (Ecclestone, Hayes 2019). This influence extends to the emotional work of teachers reflected in the informal requirements and expectations from university administrators and students, aimed at ensuring the emotional and psychological comfort of students (Gretzky, Lerner 2019; Lerner et al. 2021).

This research article is focused on exploring emotional norms and practices of emotional labour in the interaction between university teachers and their students at two academic institutions located in two different countries and, correspondingly, two different academic landscapes: the National Research University 'Higher School of Economics' (Moscow, Russian Federation) and the Friedrich Schiller University of Jena (Jena, Germany). In this article, I show how university teachers at two universities perceive and articulate their emotional labour. In particular, I aim to identify how the therapeutic ethos of academic capitalism influences the emotional norms and practices of emotional labour among teachers at both universities, and how these factors are reflected

in the academic culture of both universities, influence the professional role of university teachers and are embedded in teacher-student relationships.

### **Fundamentals of Research Methodology**

This study is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with faculty from two universities: Higher School of Economics, which is a public research university founded in 1992 and headquartered in Moscow, Russia, and the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, which was founded in 1558 and counted among the ten oldest universities in Germany based on Humboldtian principles of academic autonomy and research orientation. Despite their different histories, both institutions are research-oriented universities offering a wide range of educational programs (Bachelor and Master) in such fields as the humanities, social sciences, medicine, and STEM. In order to shed light on the communicative aspects of teacher-student interaction, it was decided to focus on the faculties of sociology and foreign languages, because of the interactive nature of the teaching approach in these fields as well as the access to the field. A total of 10 informants (professors, docents, lecturers and junior researchers) participated in the study, including 5 informants from Higher School of Economics (3 female and 2 male) and 5 informants (3 female and 2 male) from the Jena University (see the List of Informants for more details).

To conduct interviews with teachers from both universities, a single interview guide was prepared in Russian and English (as the interviewed academics from the University of Jena teach in English). The interviews were conducted both offline and online using the *Zoom* platform. On average, each interview lasted for about one hour, with the duration varying from forty minutes to one and a half hours. The informants were chosen on the basis of convenience sampling – from the closest academic environment – which were mainly teachers who led seminars and lectures, as well as their colleagues who were recommended as potential interviewees. Initially, the focus was exclusively on sociology lecturers from the two universities. However, the scope of informants was later expanded to include faculty members from the foreign language departments of both universities.

The data gathered from the interviews was analyzed using qualitative content analysis methods. Initially, open coding was used to categorize the data presented in the interviews. During the next phase of analysis, axial coding was used to identify the relationships and processes between the phenomena. As part of the axial coding process, links (including causal conditions, context, action strategies, and consequences) were established within each category identified during open coding.

The first thematic block of the guide questions serves as an introduction to the discussion and includes general questions about the characteristics of teacher-student communication. The second block delves into questions regarding teachers'

emotional work and their 'soft skills' in interactions with students. The third and fourth blocks, which conclude the guide, contain questions on student's generation and, in particular, about the emotional and psychological well-being of students, their need for psychological support and assistance, as well as their evaluations of the quality of teaching (following the system of student evaluation of teaching that functions at both universities). These topics are important indicators for assessing the influence of the therapeutic ethos and academic capitalism on university culture. In order to highlight the issues that academics consider the most important in the context of the research, we formulated final questions: what do teachers think about the contemporary education system in Russia and Germany, what problems they can acknowledge, and what needs to be changed.

Although we aim to place the central research problem in the wider academic context, the limitation of our research is that it focuses on specific aspects of the National Research University Higher School of Economics and the University of Jena, rather than a comprehensive extensive study of their overall academic structures and cultures. The insights we draw are based on the experiences and perceptions of university teachers regarding the academic environment and culture at their respective universities, as shared during the in-depth interviews conducted for this study. These perspectives inform our analysis and comparison of the two universities.

### **Communication between teachers and students: norms and practices**

According to Bill Readings and his theory of University transformation (Readings 1996), the format of communication within the academic world is currently changing and is characterized as clearly structured, impersonal, and devoid of soul contact. The constraint of limited time is a notable factor, exerting pressure on both teachers and students. The existence of this style of teaching relationship with the student was confirmed by one of the professors at Higher School of Economics: '*Precise programs and strict structuring, nothing superfluous, no close contact, everything is limited, time is limited. Everything is structured, so, please, pedal. You pedal, we pedal. The conveyor goes*' (Informant № 5, HSE).

The aforementioned metaphor of an academic system as a 'conveyor' reveals a corresponding perception of an organizational culture of universities and approaches to teaching and learning that are seen as dominated by utilitarian views and market management principles (Brooks R. et al. 2016; Kanade, Curtis 2019).

Such a critical attitude is articulated in a comparison with the Soviet academic culture, which is represented by an older teacher generation and is seen as more humanistic and offering a broader world view:

There were many shortcomings in the past era. Ideological pressure – on students and teachers. It's a terrible thing. It's gone. But there was something. There was respect for science, for that area of human activity that expands

our knowledge, goes into the world around us, and explains this world. Including in social sciences and natural sciences. Especially in social ones. It turns illiterate people into expertly literate people who understand the world around them. Philosophy, humanities. This is gone. What remained are some representatives of the older generation (Informant № 5, HSE).

A teacher from the University of Jena shares thoughts, which reflect the specific of a German context:

We used to have *Bildung*, but now it's *Ausbildung* in German. So this is training. You train students to function afterwards. It's not like they study subjects that particularly interest them. They are interested in the progress of their studies, for example, business, teaching, education, nursing or something else, but this is *Ausbildung* (preparation for a profession), this is not studying – this is preparation (Informant № 8, FSU Jena).

Now the concept of 'study' is different from what it was before. It's not that wide anymore. People don't study extensively, they just study the content that they have to create later (Informant № 8, FSU Jena).

Teachers are often distrustful and suspicious of a consumerist approach to learning and communication favored by some students. As expressed by a teacher from HSE:

That's just distrust associated with these emotions. You must provide me with a service, I am in the educational services market, I don't trust you, and if I don't trust, then I check, I control. That's when such emotions like suspicion build up. Both from teachers and students. Teachers are very wary and suspicious of students who come with the mindset of buying knowledge or satisfying some kind of service request (Informant № 1, HSE).

According to the teacher at the University of Jena, the current relationship between students and teachers is centered on the principle of 'investment' (input) and consumption, rather than discussion. This makes the current student-teacher relationship different from that of a generation ago:

When I started teaching in 1998, it was easy to discuss political and social issues with them. They knew everything, and I was very inspired to discuss these topics with them. Now it is more like we (teachers) are investing, but there is no discussion. They do not understand politics and what is happening around them (Informant № 8, FSU Jena).

These two examples show how the consumerist approach that exists in the context of the academic cultures of both universities changes the ethics of teaching, instilling fear, mistrust, and indifference in teacher-student communication. In contrast, as some of the teachers stated, communication with students should be grounded in trust-based relationships:

In my opinion, emotionality is rather unnecessary. I don't know to what extent, from the point of view of science, trust is an emotion or not, but it seems to me that it would be right to build it in the context of some kind of trusting

relationships, rather than emotional ones: overly positive, negative, hysterical. You can show emotionality, but not bordering on any of its extreme forms (Informant № 2, HSE).

One of the teachers at HSE identifies 'emotional barriers' to effective communication with students. These barriers include, on the one hand, feelings of danger and discomfort, and feelings of relaxation and euphoria on the other:

There should not be any emotional barriers that prevent the successful flow of this process. In general, there should be nothing that would cause a feeling of danger, discomfort or relaxation, euphoria. Everything else should not be subject to any regulation. It is impossible to regulate the entire emotional life by some kind of internal emotional regulation. This is impossible. If only because this is a situational, spontaneous thing that usually arises in the very process of interaction. Depending on so many factors, it is impossible to adjust them. Therefore, any regulation seems to be just an attempt to bureaucratize this process even more (Informant № 1, HSE).

The implementation of non-conflicting, supportive communication of a therapeutic nature is defined by a teacher at HSE as a new, informal norm in interactions with students:

The whole polarity of the system has changed. The teacher should be affectionate, gentle, and avoid conflicts. If a student obviously cannot manage – so politely, anyway you should say: 'you are very good, you are wonderful.' To play such a role of a psychotherapist all the time absolutely (Informant № 5, HSE).

At the same time, there is a point of view among HSE teachers that expresses non-acceptance of such norms of interaction: *'Don't live your students' lives. Do not be for them daddies and mommies. Science unites us, interest in the profession'* (Informant № 5). Some HSE teachers are skeptical about the role of soft skills and do not consider them as essential competencies for their professional activities:

I don't employ any special psychological methods and I don't see the need for this. The primary method is to convey the content of the material to students. The form of report, argumentation, examples, logic. It is not so easy to build and it takes my main energy (Informant № 5, HSE).

According to HSE faculty members, maintaining politeness when communicating with students is crucial. They emphasize the importance of avoiding excessive distance and 'flirting' (which is perceived as treating students as equals to teachers) and demonstrate goodwill:

I try to be polite, I don't try to demonstrate my intellectual superiority. I try not to demonstrate my superiority in terms of life experience. I try not to build a big distance between myself and students. But on the other hand, I don't try in any way to flirt with them, proceed from the principle that we are guys, we are all good friends and so on. No, we belong to different stratification levels and we must keep this in mind (Informant № 5, HSE).

For teachers at the University of Jena, creating a comfortable environment and a positive atmosphere is seen as a crucial element for a more effective and interactive communication with students:

In addition to the fact that the teacher must have the necessary knowledge in the field and be able to clearly convey this to students, he must be attentive to the atmosphere in the classroom. I think as a teacher you have to be patient and able to moderate the discussion and create a good atmosphere. I believe that the latter is especially important in order to interest and inspire students. It is more than a common cliché that a teacher should just read their notes and talk about them all the time without paying attention to the students. The process should be more interactive. You need to have interactive skills (Informant № 6, FSU Jena).

I think it's necessary, but it's not in my job description. I do this because I believe that if you associate something positive with this learning content, it will be remembered more (Informant № 8, HSE).

Some of the practices of emotional labour, particularly those involving the control of facial expressions and the conveyance of a 'positive display' (Hochschild 1983), are revealed in the story of one of the teachers at the University of Jena:

I try to support students when they speak. For example, I nod in response to their words. I also try to support them with facial expressions and be very positive when they speak. I try to be very positive even when I hear something not very smart from students. I try to put it in a form that makes some sense and tell it to the class in such a reformulated way.

Attentiveness to students' emotions allows the teacher to change the format of interaction during classes: *'Sometimes I notice that the students look very puzzled, sometimes focused and almost angry. Then, I sometimes try to stop talking so much and organize group work, for example. This changes the course dynamics'* (Informant № 6, FSU Jena). The teacher also carefully monitors the students' emotions and focuses on them during class sessions:

But sometimes it can be really hard to see people's faces. Sometimes they look so angry or focused and they watch what you say, but sometimes I think they're just tired of listening to it. Sometimes I just try to ignore people's faces because I think it's important to finish my thought and bring the discussion to a logical conclusion. But still, I try to look at people's faces and notice how they react to certain topics. Sometimes I try to give more examples if they seem too puzzled (Informant № 6, FSU Jena).

In order to establish successful communication and reduce the distance between a teacher and students, the following approach is used:

I also don't try to look like a polished, perfectly narrating teacher, I also show my lack of confidence in the language (I teach in English, which is not my native language). I might forget a term or stumble while saying it and then say,

'Ok, my English is not that good.' I hope this somehow inspires students to be involved in the discussion without being overly afraid and being too hard on themselves (Informant № 6, FSU Jena).

Our research shows that teacher-student communication is changing in the context of university transformation marked by tendencies towards the commercialization of education that are evident in both universities, leading to the formation of a 'service demand' from students and a subsequent 'service exchange' between them and teachers. The lack of discussion and the prevalent 'consumption of knowledge' is perceived as a consumerist approach, which is marred with feelings of distrust, suspicion, and control, whereas good communication is characterized by the absence of emotional pressure. Trusting relationships are seen as an ideal type of communication between students and teachers, the core of which should be based on norms of non-conflicting, supportive communication and practices of maintaining a comfortable environment and positive atmosphere.

### **Students' request for psychological support and teachers' response**

The demand for therapeutic interaction among students can be attributed to the understanding through the cultural traits of the contemporary generation. As a teacher at Higher School of Economics observes: '*...some students, young people who are more sensitive to gender, ethnicity and other characteristics. And students react so emotionally powerful that they stop feeling the content of the subject*' (Informant № 3, HSE). HSE teachers view this sensitivity positively, seeing it as an opportunity for students to express their individuality and creativity, especially in research projects:

They are waiting for attention to their individual needs and requests, which vary. Not only in psychological and biographical moments, but also professionally. Everyone studies the topic this way, and I want to approach it this way. Here is the individualization, which pleases, in everything. Not only in some personal, psychological needs, which the younger generation, as I understand, are often accused of today's younger generation. This individualization becomes the basis of creativity, including research approaches. It expands the boundaries, gives freedom for research (Informant № 3, HSE).

Teachers at the University of Jena see direct support for students with mental health problems as a violation of their professional ethics and an intrusion into students' private lives that can have negative consequences:

...this is about some kind of assistance that I cannot provide to all students. I know all of them in different ways. I know my graduate students and their personal traits best of all. I feel, for example, the risks of dropping out of the educational process and preparing a diploma. I look at this pragmatically and I am sorry because I cannot solve a person's problems with their romantic relationship, their sexual identity, relationship, or their relationship with their



parents. I think these are ethically forbidden areas for me as a professional. It is in this narrow context, in terms of how to conduct research that I can help. In the situation of personal relationships and personal assistance in other matters, I would prefer to avoid providing such assistance, because I am not an expert here, and this may cause some not-very-good consequences. Strictly speaking, this is forbidden to me from the point of view of professional ethics, since I am not a certified specialist in the field of psychological assistance. In my amateurish opinion, I might (from my age, class position, or anything else) say something and it may seem to me as a good joke or some kind of advice, something that will help a person; and a person because of what I said commits suicide, for example; because we have different communicative spaces; and I am not a specialist in the field of psychological assistance (Informant № 9, FSU Jena).

Although teachers at the University of Jena acknowledge the students' request for psychological support, they strive to maintain a professional distance and clearly define the boundaries of their competence, which does not include providing psychological counseling or direct psychological support to students. In their view, students' personal problems should not interfere with the educational process. There is a clear division of roles, with teachers refraining from assuming the role of a therapist due to a lack of necessary qualifications:

I do not do therapy, but sometimes you have to talk about the complexities of this psychological nature: someone died, different things happen, the world is not perfect. And if I can help here – I am happy to do it, but I try to avoid it, because I am not a professional in this area, like someone else. So why should I help others with their psychological problems that I know nothing about? It is personal. This is not what I want to know about. It is not my business to know about the personal problems of the students. Otherwise, it would be irresponsible (Informant № 9, FSU Jena).

In instances where students are facing more serious problems, teachers at both universities refer them to mental health support centers:

I have had situations where people have directly told me they are suffering from depression and are in a very bad mental state. The university has a special center that specializes in providing psychological support. I sent some students there so they could get professional help. Yes, I try to refer them to support centers, since I cannot provide professional help. I am not a therapist. I cannot help people if they have depression or some kind of traumatic experience. I do not have the appropriate education (Informant № 10, FSU Jena).

A professor at the University of Jena emphasizes the time factor when discussing students seeking help: Yes, I had a student who suffered from panic attacks. She missed one class and came very late to another class and I asked her to stay and told her, 'Be careful, you can't miss more than three classes and it will be a shame if you can't finish the semester because you miss too much.' She said that she had a psychological problem, panic attacks. So now I know, I keep it to myself, and if she is not there, I can ask her in private. I know people can take advantage of this, but if you are kind to people and open to these things... But you will have to spend much more time than another, maybe less accessible teacher. You invest your free time in this (Informant № 8, FSU Jena).

The teacher also talks about the potential for excessive 'guardianship' over students:

I do not feel the time, which is not good for me, but good for others. I always put the person first, and if there is a problem and he wants to talk, I am here for him. I personally answer all student emails. It is a lot of extra work that is unpaid, but I feel like I owe them because they are my students and they are confused and they need an answer and they get it. Maybe I am being too protective of them. I think this is the end of the spectrum where I need to be careful not to overdo it (Informant № 8, HSE).

The emotional labour and psychological support that teachers provide to students, especially in response to difficulties, is most pronounced during their collaborative work on research papers: *'Such informal relationships arise with students for whom you act as a supervisor. Starting with a thesis, then a master's, in graduate school, and so on. During some kind of research, this format appears – less formal, more emotional'* (Informant № 1, HSE).

It was found that closer emotional communication between students and teachers occurs in the context of writing term and final papers, when a teacher usually inspires and morally supports students or is expected to do so. Although this communication is perceived as more emotional and less formal, teachers at both universities acknowledge the need for distance and boundaries that separate them as professionals from the role of psychotherapists when students tell them about experiencing such serious problems as depression, which, according to the teachers, should be addressed by psychological support services.

## Conclusion

The study revealed that the emotional labour of the teachers at both universities (Higher School of Economics and the University of Jena) reflects some aspects of academic capitalism, including processes such as commercialization, bureaucratization, and managerialism of education at these universities. Functioning within the system of academic capitalism that has developed in contemporary higher education under the influence of neoliberalism, emotional labour is influenced by the therapeutic culture. Norms of public expression of psychological difficulties and the destigmatization of mental health disorders and corresponding practices are embedded in the therapeutic ethos, which is marked by an increasing demand from students for emotional support from their teachers.

As the study has shown, in spite of the students' demand for psychological support, teachers at both universities generally see their relationships with the students in professional terms and try to avoid emotionality, marking the boundaries between their role as teacher and that of psychologist or psychotherapist. At the same time, there is a prevalent norm of 'comfortable teaching' and practices of creating an emotional comfort and a positive atmosphere through encouragement in the context of academic culture at both universities.

Teachers' emotional work is not regulated by the university administration, but it is built up by the teachers themselves in a communicative process with their students. Feelings of mistrust, suspicion, and control are perceived as counterproductive, while the establishment of trusting relationships is seen as the ideal form of a student-teacher communication.

Despite the fact that teachers at both universities take note of students' requests to look after their emotional and psychological well-being, there is a widespread belief among teachers that fulfilling such a role should not fall within the scope of their professional competence.

### List of Informants:

<i>Informant №</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Interview Format</i>	<i>Academic Title</i>	<i>Duration of Interview</i>
Informant № 1.	Female	50–60	HSE	Online (ZOOM)	Professor	01:19:06
Informant № 2.	Female	30–40	HSE	Online (ZOOM)	Docent	01:00:12
Informant № 3.	Female	40–50	HSE	Online (ZOOM)	Docent	01:02:37
Informant № 4.	Male	50–60	HSE	Online (ZOOM)	Professor	00:40:16
Informant № 5.	Male	60–70	HSE	Online (ZOOM)	Professor	01:14:07
Informant № 6.	Female	20–30	Jena University	Online (ZOOM)	Junior Researcher	01:14:07
Informant № 7.	Female	40–50	Jena University	In Person	Junior Researcher	00:54:36
Informant № 8.	Female	50–60	Jena University	In Person	Lecturer (Lehrbeauftragte)	01:00:08
Informant № 9.	Male	50–60	Jena University	In Person	Professor	00:46:25
Informant № 10.	Male	40–50	Jena University	In Person	Junior Researcher	01:14:04

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