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Research Note

Gendered Emotional Labour in Academia: Not Receiving but Expected to Give

by Galina Scolnic and Jennifer Halliday

Abstract: The authors share their reflections in the aftermath of the roundtable *Emotional Labour in Academia* that took place during the Women's and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes (WGSRF) 2023 conference. Although each participant at the roundtable had a unique positionality, they had experiences to share as women in academia who desire to do their work well without exhausting themselves in the process. This paper does not restate all that was said during the roundtable event but shares what we have learned collectively and individually and further expresses the authors' desire for more discussion on similar topics wherein we learn with and from each other about how to foster spaces of care and solidarity with one another.

Keywords: classed labour; emotional labour; gendered labour; racialized labour; women in academia

Résumé: Les auteures font part de leurs réflexions à la suite de la table ronde *Emotional Labour in Academia* qui a eu lieu lors de la conférence Women's and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes (WGSRF) de 2023. Bien que chaque participante à la table ronde ait une situation unique, elles avaient toutes des expériences à transmettre en tant que femmes du milieu universitaire qui veulent bien faire leur travail sans s'épuiser à la tâche. Cet article ne reprend pas tout ce les participantes à la table ronde ont dit, mais expose ce que nous avons appris collectivement et individuellement, et exprime le souhait des auteures de voir se tenir d'autres discussions sur des sujets semblables, dans lesquelles nous apprendrions de chacun comment créer des espaces où l'on fait preuve de bienveillance et de solidarité les uns envers les autres.

Mots clés: travail selon la classe; travail émotionnel; travail selon le genre; travail racialisé; femmes dans le milieu universitaire

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Galina Scolnic is a sessional instructor at the University of Windsor. She teaches Women's Studies, Sociology, and Philosophy. Her work explores the ways in which class, gender, place of birth, and religion direct one's life within the matrix of societal expectations. Specifically, she explores the lived realities of the marginalized within a patriarchal capitalist society. Dr. Scolnic writes for academic as well as literary journals with the intention of reaching a wider audience.

Jennifer Halliday is a PhD Candidate at the University of Windsor. She has an interdisciplinary educational background, specializing in archaeology, physical anthropology, criminology, and sociology, and her research reflects this diversity by examining complex social issues through a multifaceted lens and integrating diverse theoretical perspectives. Specifically, her research interests lie primarily in ethics, human rights,

and incorporating multiple ontologies and epistemologies in policy, but she also explores topics related to animal and environmental welfare and the intersections of environmental racism and physical anthropology.

Introduction

Academia glorifies intellectual and mental labour yet offers little-to-no recognition of the emotional labour that supports these feats. This emotional labour is, in part, based on a value of "professionalism" —notably, a professionalism that is based on the expectations of white, upper-class men. To be professional, one must be stoic. That is, one must often be distant or detached, even-tempered, resilient, and strong in the face of adversity.

In this paper we aim to share our reflections in the aftermath of the roundtable *Emotional Labour in Academia* that took place during the Women's and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes (WGSRF) 2023 conference. The five participants shared their lived experiences of emotional labour in the classroom, office hours with students and colleagues, at the administrative level, and as teaching/graduate assistants for full-time professors. While each one of us has a unique positionality, some of our identifiers intersect: we are all women in academia who desire to do our work well without exhausting ourselves in the process. However, we also hail from different geographical locations, are part of various social classes, and are perceived differently due to race, religion, migration status, body/mental health, and so on.

At the roundtable, we sat down in a circle, including three audience participants, and proceeded to answer the following questions:

1. In what areas of academic work do you feel the need (or pressure) to perform emotional labour?

2. Please reflect on the type of emotional labour that is expected of you given your positionality as it pertains to gender, race, sex, class, and so on?

3. How do you care for your own mental health when demands of emotional labour run high?

It is not our intention here to restate all that was said during the roundtable event. However, we would like to take this opportunity to share what we have learned collectively and individually and to express our desire for further discussion on similar topics wherein we learn with and from each other about how to foster spaces of care and solidarity. To that end, here, Galina shares her reflections as it pertains to emotional labour in the classroom as a new instructor in Women's Studies and Jennifer shares her reflections as a PhD Candidate navigating the expectations of graduate students.

Galina's Reflections

My positionality mainly manifests itself through gender and class. Precisely because I am a working-class woman, I understand the world the way I do. By this I mean that by 'transgressing' my birth station, I have come to reside in spaces where I am never at home, where I do not know the mores and rules of conduct, nor do they make sense to me. I question everything. Academia is neither working-class nor genderized for women. From undergraduate all the way to my PhD, and as a new instructor, I have never met an-

other working-class migrant woman in my field. The consolidation of knowledge, historically, has served the interests of the ruling class in the service of capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism to the detriment of racialized, poor, and non-western folks. Women and Gender Studies classes are of course geared towards women's self-emancipation but rarely towards working-class women. Given that knowledge itself has historically been class-based, that which one knows from one's own lived experiences is rarely acknowledged unless supported by citations.

I am also an immigrant. There is no day that I leave the safety of my apartment wherein someone does not remind me that I am a foreigner by asking the cliché question, "Where are you from"" often coupled with the truism, "Because you have an accent." Depending on my day, this makes me feel tired, indifferent, or enraged at people's entitlement towards another person's lived experiences.

With students, I volunteer my positionality at the beginning of the semester in an attempt to minimize their curiosity about me and to help them concentrate on the learning process. When I teach, young people come to me with personal questions as if I have the answer, and I turned towards my colleagues at the roundtable to learn about and share tools for addressing students' problems. However, my openness about who I am seems to work in such a way that students feel comfortable sharing who they are with me and asking questions about personal and academic dilemmas they may have. "Are you sure you should be telling me this?" is the question that pops into my head when students share personal information with me.

At the roundtable, my peers taught me certain tools such as sharing with one another (as we were doing), recognizing that emotional labour is a structural issue, learning about the resources already offered by the institution such as counselling, and care practices towards others as well as oneself. However, what I questioned in the aftermath of that roundtable was whether I was inviting this kind of work. Did I not volunteer my migration experience? Most students who approach me are migrants themselves, international as well as naturalized students, often racialized, trying to figure out a new country, institution, language, and a culture often very different from where they hail. Is this my job and does the university have the tools to support these students?

As seen from Jennifer's experiences below, there is a vast gap between emotional labour expectations one experiences as a graduate student and as a new instructor. Precisely because of our classed and gendered positionalities we are dismissed by the institution when we express our needs as graduate students. However, once we start teaching, we feel the pressure to be there for our students in ways that we were not supported ourselves. Finding a middle road, wherein one feels both supportive and not drained would be ideal.

A Year After the Roundtable

While I have been fortunate to have good mentors during my graduate preparation, I am beginning to learn, on my own, that mentoring is a humbling experience. Students coming to me with their troubles is an honour I do not invite nor deserve and the reasons they find me a safe person to confide in are, frankly, not important. In teaching others, I continue learning and understanding that it is going to be a life-long journey. Each student who passes through my classes with a world of experiences of their own challenges, encourages, and emboldens me. I am very proud of my origins and I have never dreamed of achieving the social status bestowed upon someone teaching in a western university. Shame and guilt often accompany me when I converse with working-class folks who know the same as, if not more than, me just by living it. My task, then, is not to uphold some ideal my students shall strive towards. On the contrary, I aim to con-

tinue to articulate my lived experiences of class, migration, and gender in order to theorize from the ground up so no one can say, in the words of Zora Neale Hurston, that I was silent about my pain. Racialized, classed, gendered, and non-conforming students need to be encouraged to continue to develop a language of their own and fight the hegemonic forces of a world that was not made for them, that refuses to contain them.

That which was terrifying to me a year ago stemmed from the misconception that I must lead, be an example, or act as if I know. I cannot claim that I am not afraid now, or that I am always open to students approaching me with their dilemmas. The roundtable we held in 2023 definitely clarified structural ways of dealing with these events. However, remembering my origins, how working-class peoples collaborate not only because of class interests but out of need for survival, how women share with each other to endure and outlive patriarchy, and how I am here, despite everything, this renewed my desire to continue learning with and from my students who are doing the same as me: articulating their lived experiences.

Jennifer's Reflections

My positionality is that of a woman, working-class graduate student with mental health issues. I discuss emotional labour in academia from the perspectives of mental illness and neurodivergence, drawing on my own experiences navigating academia. Mental health issues predispose one to emotional dysregulation and this often makes the performance of emotional labour more difficult.

I feel the pressure to perform emotional labour in my interactions with colleagues, advisors, and administration, as well as in managing workloads and deadlines and with the pressure to have abundant extra-curricular projects and publications. In particular, I feel as though academia expects everyone to be comfortable and proficient with public speaking. This is a particularly difficult task for me, as it is undoubtedly for many, many other scholars who may or may not struggle with their mental health.

This kind of "professionalism," more often than not, requires keeping silent about emotional distress and pretending you are okay when you are not. To loosely quote Disney's *Frozen*, it requires one to conceal, not feel. But humans, in general, can only conceal for so long before they crack and people who struggle with their mental health often have significantly lower thresholds for how long they can maintain that necessary stoicism (Murray et al. 2007). Masking our true feelings can also deepen the exhaustion we feel when reaching our limits.

Yet, failure to maintain professionalism can also be triggering and can lead one to feelings of shame, alienation, incompetence, and inadequacy. Given that professionalism often requires masking our true feelings and that the job itself lends little time or space to make mental health and wellness a priority, failing to adequately perform can also lead others, especially those in positions of power, to perceive us as incompetent or "not ready." These negative feelings can begin to affect one's ability to do not just the emotional labour but also the job itself, further exacerbating negative feelings and adding perceptions of laziness, lack of intelligence, and irresponsibility.

This is particularly difficult when a person's mental health declines to the point that they start believing that their colleagues, supervisors, administrators have negative perceptions about them – with or without any evidence. These perceptions can be really difficult to navigate, especially when one does not have the self-awareness to recognize it or has yet to realize they might be suffering from a mental health condition.

These perceptions, whether grounded in evidence or not, can also grow into tension between the indi-

vidual and their colleagues, advisors, and peers. Keeping silent, staying stoic, maintaining professionalism, and concealing not feeling, often means that there is no explanation when you cannot keep it up.

My desire to succeed in my role as a PhD Candidate and overcome my struggles more often than not allows me to push through and do the hard things anyway. Sometimes, though, the responsible thing to do is listen to that anxious voice that is trying to protect me and take a break from academic work. Unfortunately, the current academic system, and its system of accommodations, make that nearly impossible.

In my experience, when life happens and mental health declines to the point that accommodation is needed, the types of accommodations available are mostly applicable to common symptoms of common conditions; these are not always helpful. Unique accommodations can be made with proper documentation but when the accommodation one needs conflicts with the very nature of a course delivery or goes even further to conflict with the PhD *program* requirements themselves, the system breaks. This creates tricky administrative hurdles that add stress to an emotional beaker that is already overflowing and mental health that is already crumbling.

I have experienced instances where my mental health overwhelms me during important oral examinations and I cannot maintain the mask so I start to cry. I have had to struggle with social anxiety that threatens me with a panic attack when I need to attend office hours for additional help or feel the need to explain emotional breakdowns. In these instances, I have had professors who firmly believe in academic stoicism and mental health stigmas, creating tension through feelings of awkwardness, distrust, and invalidation that makes me feel unsafe and unaccepted, further compounding the difficulty of performing the required emotional labour. I have also, fortunately, had professors who provide a safe space for me and work with me to accommodate my needs despite the complicated administrative hurdles and the extra emotional labour it undoubtedly caused them. I thank those professors and administrators for all their help over the last few years, for without it I may not have made it this far.

Ultimately, I have shown that the emotional labour requirements of academia can sometimes be exponentially more troublesome for a graduate student with a mental health condition. This is not to say that neurotypical students do not also face emotional labour challenges that seem insurmountable. Rather, it is to say that the academy is a place where people who are predisposed to have a lower tolerance for emotional labour and who are more susceptible to burnout are often required to mask themselves and, consequently, do even more emotional labour than others in order to succeed.

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