Academic labour as professional service work? A psychosocial analysis of emotion in lecturer-student relations under marketization

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Academic labour as professional service work? A psychosocial analysis of emotion in lecturer-student relations under marketization

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Abstract

The marketization of higher education entails a radical reshaping of the educational relationship as one in which the lecturer is recast as a professional service worker, implicitly or explicitly tasked with ensuring the satisfaction of fee-paying students as sovereign consumers. What does an organizational discourse of high customer satisfaction mean for the emotional experiences of lecturers on the frontline? In this article, we conduct a psychosocial analysis of academics’ experiences of interacting with students in a marketized higher education context. We illustrate how institutional imperatives readily align with lecturers’ internalised professional duty of care for students who are discursively constructed as highly anxious and vulnerable. At the same time, changing power differentials wrought by marketization heighten the likelihood of emotional responses in the relationship that are...
intense, spontaneous, and sometimes involuntary – and thus appear replete with unconscious meanings. Informed by Freudian psychoanalysis, we illustrate how academics enact various defence mechanisms in response to unconscious feelings of dependence, subordination, vulnerability and resentment of the student as an authority figure. We conclude that organisational imperatives to ‘corporately care’ for students have the unintended consequence of generating acute ambivalence that drastically intensifies the psychological demands on teaching staff.

Introduction

Students talked about wanting academic staff to have empathy and compassion, to smile and encourage. Most revealingly, they asked academics “to treat and talk to me as though I’m a person.” (The Guardian, 2018a)

I was expected to conform to a set of rules…Everything was prescribed: we were told when to meet students and for how long, as well as what to focus on and in what way. (The Guardian, 2018b, anonymous article entitled ‘Lecturing in a UK university is starting to feel like working for a business’.)

University counselling services ‘inundated by stressed academics’ (Richardson, 2019, BBC News)

Numerous public sector reforms in OECD countries since the 1980s have attempted to change the production of services such as education and healthcare along neoliberal lines, ostensibly to improve quality via managerialism, rationalisation and the introduction of market logics (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Pollitt, 1990; Power, 1997). Such reforms have involved the establishment - at least at a discursive level - of a service worker-
service recipient relationship, placing new emphases on staff as frontline workers to create
and maintain positive (efficient) relationships with ‘customers’.

Combined with managerialism, some have argued that an ideological commitment to
serving the sovereign customer – which is often accompanied by marketing priorities which
valorise customer satisfaction through the fulfilment of their needs and desires – can supplant
the caring, vocational nature of many service roles, such as university teaching (Fineman,
2010; Deem et al., 2007). The marketization of higher education (HE) in England in
particular has sparked a vigorous and impassioned scholarly debate. Advocates point to the
power of market competition to drive up quality and the need for universities to be more
accountable to those it serves and provide a better experience for students (see Guilbault,
2018), while vociferous critiques from a wide range of academic disciplines have detailed the
serious threat it poses to the fundamental ideals and purposes of HE (see Docherty 2014;
Lynch 2006; Molesworth et al. 2011; Ritzer, 1998). Within this literature, the notion of the
student as a customer or consumer of a commodified educational experience looms large.
Yet, the corollary conceptualization of the lecturer in this rhetoric – namely, as a frontline
service worker – has been strangely invisible. Even in the fine body of work examining the
impact of marketization for academic staff and the nature of their professional work, the
emphasis has tended to be on governance issues, the ramifications for research, relationships
with colleagues, and mental wellbeing (Barker, 2017; Hall, 2018; John and Fanghanel, 2015;
Taberner, 2018) rather than the labour involved in teaching. Certainly, aspects of
marketization including the introduction of metrics and measurement (such as the Research
Excellence Framework, but also audits of teaching and student satisfaction in the Teaching
Excellence Framework (TEF) and National Student Survey) have become major features of
university culture, where they inflict ‘a toll on the emotions’ (Morrish, 2019: 51) of many
who work in it. Yet there has been a reluctance to scrutinise academic work for the emotional
efforts it entails, despite it ‘merit[ing] an analysis as much as any other workplace’ (Gabriel, 2017: 960). Indeed, recent scholarship (Erickson et al., 2020) and media commentary (Fazackerley, 2019; McKie, 2020; Weale, 2019) indicates widespread experiences of stress and increasing mental health problems among HE staff that suggest the university, too, is a most emotional arena.

Outside academia, the rise of consumerism and an ethos of customer care in many organizations has also seen emotion placed at the heart of the service encounter (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Sturdy, 1998). As Fineman (2010: 29) puts it,

The very notion of ‘customer’ is imbued with symbolism…the once passive, silent or long-suffering client, passenger, patient, student or taxpayer is free, or freer, to express how they feel about the institution that has provided the service and, more poignantly, the person who has served them.

Theoretically, emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983, 2003) has been a highly valuable concept to render visible the ways management seek to oversee and control personal interactions between employees and customers in commercialised contexts and the impact these have on employees (e.g. Barger and Grandey, 2006; Henkel et al., 2007; Leidner, 1993). However, a theoretical perspective of emotional labour - the effort to display the emotions perceived as expected in employed work - is recognised as less appropriate for the analysis of emotions involved in historically non-commercial contexts (Bolton, 2005; Gabriel, 2010). Though the accomplishment of service work in organizations such as universities may indeed involve managerially prescribed emotional appearances, it may rely to a greater extent on the performance of ‘emotion work’ – i.e. individuals’ pre-existing ability to control themselves - at one’s own discretion (Guy et al., 2008). Public sector staff may skilfully manage their own
emotion (Bolton 2015: 60) in ways that occur outside commercial ‘feeling rules’ or choose to go beyond the script to enact compassionate human interaction (Kanov et al., 2017).

Such a sociological perspective has helped to underscore the knowledge and skill of employees, and the complexity of motivations that lie behind sincere and cynical performances of emotion when interacting with ‘customers’ (patients, clients, students etc.). In academia, extant scholarship indicates that performances of emotion in line with institutional expectations – levels of emotional labour – are increasing markedly (e.g. Berry and Cassidy, 2013; Chubb et al., 2017; Ogbonna and Harris, 2004). Yet, the popularity and mainstreaming of the terms ‘emotional labour’ and ‘emotion work’ has tended to blur their conceptual distinctions at the cost of some of their original analytic power (Gabriel, 2008). Indeed, the spread of marketization and managerialism also make previous distinctions between commercial for-profit contexts and the public non-profit sector increasingly hazy.

Others have criticised perspectives of emotional labour for their focus only on the social aspect of affect in the workplace. For Gabriel (2009) emotion at work is not solely dictated by the logics of capital accumulation; service work with a pronounced caring dimension may frequently involve feelings that are not scripted but arise unpredictably, with differing intensity and passionate embodiment (Gabriel, 2010). This may be especially pronounced in historically public sector professions including university teaching (Gabriel, 2017), although scholarship has tended towards the analysis of such work in healthcare contexts (Menzies, 1960; Lewis, 2005, Bolton, 2005). Fotaki et al., (2012) have argued that psychoanalytic approaches that take into account individuals’ situatedness in society are especially appropriate in analyses of emotion, since psychoanalysis recognises the influence of human desires, passions and above all, the work of the unconscious in ‘continuously affecting behaviour, often in unexpected or unwanted ways’ (Vince, 2019: 958). If emotion itself is to be understood as both socially constructed and having a private, internal dimension...
(Fineman, 2003; Craib, 1998), the emphasis on social norms, rules and expectations in sociological perspectives may underplay the influence of the psychic world. As Craib (1998: 112) puts it ‘the sociological aspects of emotional life should not be mistaken for the whole of emotional life’.

In this paper, we advance empirical investigation of the emotions involved in service worker-customer relations by adopting a psychosocial approach (Frosh and Young, 2008; Hollway and Jefferson, 2013) to investigate the affective dimension of the lecturer-student relationship under marketization. Our contention here is that a discursive conceptualisation of the lecturer-student relationship as service-worker and customer – effectively recasting university teaching as professional service work – may have important ramifications for the working lives of staff that have not yet received the attention they deserve. Using data from in-depth interviews with teaching academics, we adopt a psychosocial approach to 1) examine the emotional meanings of the discursive positions our informants adopted and 2) consider the unconscious processes that may mediate the relational dynamics of this changing work relationship. We posit that the emotional intensity of many of our participants’ accounts reveals a psychological dependence, including an emotional dependence, on students. Employing psychoanalytic concepts, we argue that the anxiety-ridden narratives of many participants reveal unconscious yet powerful feelings of ambivalence towards students, which appear to stem from processes of transference. In doing so we offer a critical interpretation (Gabriel, 2019; Svensson, 2014) of academics’ affective experiences of ‘customer’ interaction.

In the following sections we first outline the contemporary HE context and consider the reinvention of the lecturer-student relationship as one of service provider and customer. We then present how a psychoanalytic perspective is especially useful for theorising powerful and unpredictable emotional experiences that are both likely and largely overlooked in this
context, before detailing Freud’s concepts of ambivalence and transference as key concepts that inform our psychosocial analysis.

Service work and emotion in the marketized academy

The neoliberal reforms by the UK government in the 1980s were expressly intended to increase the accountability and responsiveness of universities as service providers (Brown and Carasso, 2013) and empower students to make rational, informed choices as fee-paying customers of educational offerings. The impact of creating a market within a much-expanded HE sector has been dramatic: for the first time in their history, universities were forced to generate revenue in a marketplace of buyers and sellers. The end of grants and the introduction of upfront tuition fees, from a maximum of £1000 per year in 1998 to £9250 in 2018, cemented the social position of the student as a consumer and the reinvention of HE from public good to private commodity. Now subject to market forces, the post-purchase satisfaction of students has become an institutional imperative, resulting in a reification of the ‘service offering’, an experience in which teaching academics and their relationships with students are key.

As organisational members, students and lecturers have always been in a social relationship, generally a hierarchical one of unequal power distribution (Holmes et al., 1999). However, marketization results in greater power being structurally embedded and discursively awarded to students (Nixon et al., 2018) and there may be reasons to welcome this (Hollway and Jefferson, 1996; Wilson, 2000), though this is a specifically customer sovereignty. HE scholars have argued that many students arrive with a consumer confidence and carry the same attitudes over to their educational experience (Molesworth et al., 2009; Varman et al., 2011). Certainly, most young people enter HE highly accustomed to making consumer choices but few may be aware of the alternative roles available for them as students beyond demanding customers (Gross and Hogler, 2005). Molesworth et al. (2009) have
argued that the adoption of market-driven ideology, in policy but also and perhaps moreso by university senior management teams, encourages students to see HE primarily as a commodity they must possess to access a consumer life by obtaining a well-paid job.

In marketized HE, academic staff who teach are uniquely positioned as most obvious ‘provider’ of curriculum content and assessor of student work. One consequence of reconfiguring the lecturer-student relationship as one of service provider and service recipient is a heightened importance of the performance of the lecturer as a key determinant in the quality of the interaction as experienced and evaluated by the student. In one of the few studies that attends to academics’ emotional experiences in relationships with students, Ogbonna and Harris (2004) argue that massification and marketisation have intensified occupational and organizational expectations of staff to make an affective, not just intellectual, contribution to the student body. They identify both the surface and deep acting described by Hochschild (1983) as well as spontaneous non-acted emotional displays by lecturers. The combination of rising student numbers, managerial expectations to be ‘nice’ (rather than simply professional) to students, and individualised penalties for non-compliance based primarily on student feedback, alter the content of emotional display rules for lecturers (Ogbonna and Harris, 2004). A felt obligation to students as paying customers underlies a similar sentiment expressed in Clarke et al’s (2012: 10) study, “should we care about students or not?...[W]e have to care about them, they are paying for this”. Though teaching is a ‘traditional primary concern’ (Clarke and Knights, 2015: 1871) of the academic role, much of the extant discussion focuses on the myriad consequences of research assessment procedures, overlooking how the relationship between lecturers and students also affects working conditions. Indeed, formal complaints by students are increasing (Turner and Southgate, 2019) and there are signs of growing student incivility towards staff (Burke et al., 2014) reminiscent of that suffered by other public service workers (Stroebæk and
Korczynski, 2018). What remains opaque, however, is what an organizational discourse of customer satisfaction means for the emotional experiences of teaching academics on the frontline, whose roles are now implicitly or explicitly reconceptualised as professional service work.

_Theorising emotion in service encounters_

Emotion work is a sociological term that refers to a conscious act of attention and effort directed at attempting to regulate one’s affective state and thus to manage one’s feelings (Eller and Alexandre, 2007; Goffman, 1969; Scheff 1997). Hochschild’s (1983) development of the concept of emotional labour established the fact that workers do not only labour manually or intellectually but must adopt an emotional attitude appropriate to their job role, and this is particularly so in customer-facing service work. Like many occupations, university teaching requires certain emotional displays - enthusiasm, concern, authority, for instance - that are integral to the job. However, since emotional labour was developed from the analysis of commercial contexts, it is known to be limited when analysing professional service work with greater autonomy (Hochschild, 1983). Bolton’s (2005) typology of emotion management offers a less deterministic view in awarding more agency to organizational actors to better theorise the complex work of managing one’s emotions and the emotions of others in marketized public sector contexts (Bolton, 2009; Bolton and Boyd, 2003). However, its theoretical emphasis on actors’ skilled management of their emotional responses is less suited to the analysis of those feelings that may be difficult to express or understand, that take us aback with their intensity or refuse to be subordinated to cognition; those that have been referred to as an ‘unmanageable’ aspect of work in organizations (Gabriel, 2010: 45).

In a psychoanalytically-informed critique of emotional labour, Gabriel (2009) argues that all service relationships involve a caring dimension which is likely to generate a plethora of unpredictable and powerful emotions that are not easily managed by organizational actors.
This caring dimension (whether positive or negative) means that early relations with parents or primary care-givers, in the lives of both the carer and the cared-for, can be reawakened, unleashing powerful and unmanageable fantasies, ‘where each becomes for the other an object of fantasy or desire…charged with extreme positive or negative qualities’ (Gabriel, 2010: 55). Fantasies first experienced as a result of the gratifications and frustrations of infancy can be triggered in both service worker and cared-for customer, including desire for power, submission, dependency and vulnerability. As Menzies’ (1960) seminal work illustrated, the nurse-patient relationship is laced with libidinal wishes and strong impulses that derive from intense and opposing sets of feelings experienced in infancy. Both nurse and patient may thus experience gratitude, resentment, envy, pity, compassion and fear: conflicting emotions that evoke those experienced in extreme form as an entirely dependent baby. Gabriel (2010) thus places fantasies - derived from early memories of being helpless and cared for - as key to understanding emotion especially in service interactions that can involve flirtation, harassment, emotional blackmail, toxic exchanges, romance and violence.

In the service encounter, hugely different forms of emotional connectivity emerge if employees create a ‘hierarchy among customers’ (Gabriel, 2009: 182), including very intense relations well beyond what is expected given the organisational script. For their part, customers too may behave unpredictably and their irrational behaviour increases the emotive demands made of frontline employees, who may view customers as both demanding and deserving, and feel both close to and resentful of them (Gabriel, 2009). In such settings, Korczynski (2009: 74) has described how routinization and managerial expectations of empathy from staff contribute to a lived experience of customer interaction as ‘deeply contradictory’, where customers are both a source of pleasure and pain, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and positioned simultaneously as friend and enemy. Thus, for many interactive service workers, their affective experience is characterised by ambivalence.
Moreover, the complexity of emotions in such relationships means they are liable to entail ambivalence beyond the range of consciousness (Korczynski, 2009; Sturdy, 1998).

Less is known about the consequences for workers of unpredictable and unmanageable service encounters (Gabriel et al., 2015). Given that service workers can develop relationships with customers full of meaning, may have intense emotional reactions beyond scripted performances, coupled with the noted unpredictability and irrationality of customers, psychoanalytic theory on emotion is particularly useful.

**A psychoanalytic view of emotions for the lecturer-student relationship**

Psychoanalysis conceptualizes emotion as motivation; feelings are seen as driving forces of behaviour, not (just) socially constructed (Fineman, 2000). Psychoanalysis also views emotions as having histories within the individual subject’s life so that experiences with significant others from early life can influence one’s emotional response in a current interpersonal situation: an unconscious process known as transference. Teacher-student relations are known as particularly likely to involve transference, both ‘positive’ transferences of affectionate feelings and ‘negative’ hostile ones (Freud, 1930; Freud, 1974). Indeed, for some educationalists, transference – the unconscious displacement of thoughts, feelings and behaviours from a previous significant relationship onto a current relationship – is what gives the teacher/student relationship its ‘fire’ i.e. the power of teaching lies in the intensity of the connection (Robertson, 1999: 152).

Here, there are clear parallels between educational scholarship and organizational literature that focuses on adults; for many organizational psychoanalysts, ‘the subordinate-superior relation resembles the structure of the child-parent relationship and as such, calls forth and reactivates its core paradoxical dynamics’ (Oglensky 1995: 1038). Though the marketization of HE explicitly seeks to alter the educational relationship, psychoanalytic analyses of HE are scarce, and tend to focus on pedagogy (e.g. Gilmore and Anderson, 2016;
Robertson, 1999) or students (e.g. Nixon et al., 2018) rather than the experiences of staff. This is despite the fact that it is well known that transferential feelings can be projected by the teacher onto the student and not solely vice versa.

As we have seen, organizational scholarship indicates that the affective experience of many professional service workers is characterised by ambivalence that may be unconscious. In educational scholarship, it is well-known that transference is likely in (non-marketized) pedagogic relationships (Robertson, 1999). In psychoanalysis these concepts are connected; ambivalence is a major feature of transference. Ambivalence refers to the simultaneous combination of opposing affective orientations towards the same person, object or symbol (Smelser, 1998): i.e. attraction with repulsion, love and hate, respect and fear. Freud’s notion of ambivalence originates in his view that relations with parents always contain two sets of opposing emotional impulses, those of an affectionate and submissive nature, but also hostile and defiant ones (Freud, 1955 [1909]; 1979 [1926]). Gradually recognising the existence of an external environment and the limits to his/her omnipotence, infants mobilise unconscious defences and illusions in order to cope with ambivalent feelings and a lack of control, as well as the ‘helplessness, envy and rage that accompany these moves away from the glories of the narcissism and grandiosity of infancy’ (Oglensky, 1995: 1036). The resulting intra-psychic conflict is resolved in different ways but typically involves one of the two opposing sets of feelings being heavily repressed and the other (usually affection) intensified (Freud, 1979 [1926]). Consistent with Freud’s characterisation, Smelser (1998) emphasises that it is the relationships with those on whom we most depend that are rife with ambivalence; a subordinated person in a power relationship is dependent, their freedom to leave is restricted because it is costly politically, ideologically or emotionally.

Psychosocial approaches explicitly adopt ideas and concepts from psychoanalysis but assume that emotions can be both socially constructed in context and be unrelated to, and pre-
exist, such performances (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). The characteristic assumption of psychosocial studies is that the psychological is not reducible to the social and vice versa (Hoggett 2008). Indeed, Fotaki et al. (2012; 1113-1114) name psychosocial approaches as particularly suited to capturing ‘the diversity and complexity of emotions to understand people’s experiences of workplaces’, as exemplified in recent work by Baker and Kelan (2019) and Dashtipour et al. (2020). Though there are tensions between social constructionist and psychoanalytic perspectives, scholars interested in understanding emotion have identified the critical potential of using psychoanalytic ideas alongside rather than instead of social constructionist theories (see Clarke, 2003; Craib, 1995, 1997; Ulus and Gabriel, 2018). As Clarke (2003: 153) argues, ‘neither discipline provides a better explanation, but together they provide a deeper understanding’ [emphasis in original]. A psychosocial analysis recognises that emotions are situated, or ‘socially scaffolded’ (Craib 1995: 154), for example, by discourses operating in marketized contexts. It also recognizes that there is emotional life for the individual beyond the scripts and display rules of the job role which necessitates an explanation. Theoretical concepts of psychoanalysis emphasise features of certain emotions that are often rendered invisible in sociological analyses (see Clarke, 2003). Transference is one of these key concepts and is especially helpful for an analysis of lecturer and student relations because it illuminates the ‘intricate, delicate dance of mutually affecting emotions between individuals’ and that these often occur ‘under the surface of explicit emotion rules’ (Ulus and Gabriel 2018: 224). As such, a psychosocial approach allows us to identify the discursive positions our participants adopted under an institutional imperative of customer sovereignty and offer an explanation of the intrapsychic dynamics that account for the emotional meanings of such positions.

**Methodology**
The following analysis and excerpts draw from 50 in-depth interviews with academics from 10 UK universities (6 pre-92, 4 post-92), each lasting on average one hour and fifteen minutes (see online supplementary material for participant detail). Our aim was to glean richly detailed and diverse experiences of academics and their relations with students with no intent to compare segments within our dataset. We thus purposively sampled from across the social and physical sciences, length of teaching service (3 months to 34 years), geographic location (North England, South England, the Midlands and Wales) and gender (25 men, 25 women) to ensure diversity of emotive content. Although the literature on workplace emotion identifies it to be highly gendered (see for example Ashencaen Crabtree and Shiel, 2019) our focus in this paper is the analysis of discursive positions that were common across the dataset. The interview was loosely structured around the topics of academic identity, perceived expectations of their job role (from students and management), organizational culture, and positive and negative interactions with students, in which specific examples or stories were requested throughout. Depth interviews were considered most appropriate given participants were recalling personal experiences and their accompanying affective responses in as much detail as they could provide. We correctly anticipated this would, on occasion, result in conversations that triggered distress and other intense emotions in the participants (see for example deMarrais and Tisdale, 2002), which always prompted an offer to stop the interview by the interviewer. Most interviews were transcribed verbatim, however, four participants declined to be audio recorded and so detailed notes were made by the researcher immediately afterwards.

Our initial analysis proceeded with each author independently reading all transcripts in order to collate similarities and differences across the dataset, especially regarding the emotional tenor of each interview, which was assisted by listening to audio recordings and reference to interviewer fieldnotes. This process yielded copious observations per interview
and commonalities across the dataset that we consolidated to identify the main discursive positions our participants adopted.

We then re-read the transcripts and first stage notes to re-examine the data for significant minor details, ambiguities, repeated references, contradictions and any implicit forms of association made (Kvale, 2003). Psychoanalysis is particularly interested in associations that can yield meanings that follow an emotional, rather than rational, logic (Cartwright, 2004; Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). Unconscious motivations may thus ‘leak out’ in the interview situation, just as in the analytic one. We therefore also documented emotionally vivid stories and metaphors as potential indicators of unconscious dynamics that could explain the emotional investment in the discursive positions. Initial working interpretations were corroborated or dismissed depending on the presence of associated signs in the data. For example, indications of fear, as well as affection in relations with students prompted us to consider transferential dynamics. All participants’ names below are pseudonyms.

There is one further point that is pertinent to our methodology. Psychosocial studies emphasise the notion of the participant (and the researcher) as a defended subject. It acknowledges that we all employ defence mechanisms to protect ourselves from our own painful emotional experiences. Methodologically, this manifests as a conception of the subject as an unreliable narrator. As Thomas (2019: 7) puts it, ‘the unreliable narrator is not a judgement of the person, but of their narrative.’ It refers to the notion that the meanings of participants’ accounts of themselves – indeed, our own accounts of ourselves – are not wholly transparent or necessarily trustworthy: that lived experience is itself influenced by desire, fantasy, defences against our vulnerabilities, and thus reports of lived experience cannot be accepted at face value as the ‘final arbiter of truth’ (Gabriel, 2019: 193). The interpretive task of psychoanalysis thus involves a hermeneutics of suspicion rather than a
hermeneutics of understanding (Ricoeur, 1970). This means that rather than trusting articulated experience as evidence of meaning, psychoanalysis requires the systematic search for clues, signs and symptoms in order to uncover patterns of unconscious meaning that may not be readily accessible to participants themselves. Rather than seeking to avoid overinterpretation of data, psychoanalysis strives for it in order to offer accounts of social phenomena that are critical and novel, rather than ostensibly sensible or moderate (Frosh and Emerson, 2005, Gabriel and Carr, 2002; Svensson, 2014). A psychoanalytic reading thus goes ‘behind’ the text, so that an individual’s discursive positions can indicate anxieties, defences and relations that developed in infancy and recur throughout their lives (Frosh and Young, 2008).

**A psychosocial account of lecturers’ emotions in relations with student-customers**

The following empirical sections start with a discursive reading that identifies two powerful subject positions and shared discourses employed in lecturers’ narratives of their relationships with students. We reveal a dominant construction of the student as a vulnerable child, pressured and anxious, which corresponded with an abundance of images of lecturers as care-givers. The analysis then proceeds with a psychoanalytic formulation that examines the possible sources of investment in these discursive positions by considering the influence of fantasies from early life experiences on emotions in the relationship. We suggest that the rise of student-customer authority in HE, constituted in policy but also (re)produced in institutional structural mechanisms and cultural practices of staff and students, leads to an inversion of psychological dependence at the subject level, especially emotional dependence. This appears to create unconscious feelings of ambivalence in lecturers towards students: both love and affection, hate and fear. This interpersonal relationship with students – where they are overtly, if at times begrudgingly, viewed as fee-paying customers whose recruitment and retention is directly linked to academics’ employment – has emotional consequences for
staff that suggest the presence of unconscious processes of transference. Moreover, our analysis indicates that this recasting of the lecturer-student relationship can trigger profoundly troubling feelings associated with subordination and vulnerability in the unconscious.

Discursive reading

Pastoral care as customer service  A shared discursive construction of students was as highly vulnerable young people. Reproducing a broader policy discourse in English HE (Brooks, 2018) and sectoral awareness of rising mental health conditions (e.g. Hubble and Bolton, 2020; Shackle, 2019; Stokel-Walker, 2020), many participants characterised their students as under immense pressure. The burdens students face are internalised; from tuition fees to the supreme importance of gaining high marks and thus ‘good’ graduate employment combine to produce highly anxious, emotionally insecure students. The axiomatic nature of this discourse led, for some interviewees, to a heavy sense of caring responsibility. Participants referred to academic work as ‘a caring profession’, or spoke of their relationship with students as one in which they care about or for students, as well as expressing some concern about the perceived requirement to care ‘too much’ about student welfare. The seemingly increasing levels of student care, and the work involved in this, was also reflected by participants’ metaphors for their work as a lecturer: social worker, mentor, surrogate parent, confidante, counsellor, and for one participant, priest.

Though these discourses were not necessarily deemed problematic, they produced a subject position for lecturers that had consequences for their understanding of professional behaviour and emotional experience. First, such a narrative means lecturers need to care for every student, predominantly understood as satisfying their needs. Second, it positions student welfare as a personal rather than systemic responsibility, thus producing a sense of a highly atomised workforce in which lecturers must ‘get through this on their own’. We
expected complaints about having to care for students as Ogbonna and Harris (2004) describe. Instead, our data exposed interpersonal relations that were experienced as emotionally intense, often seeming to involve internalised conflict for staff.

Although some participants challenged the characterisation of students as customers as an inaccurate generalisation, an implicit managerial expectation that students’ expanding needs and desires ‘have to be’ recognised was accepted as largely consistent with implicit institutional priorities of service quality and customer satisfaction. Some interviewees referred to students, not necessarily disparagingly, as service users. In a similar vein, our interviewees referred to the lecturer’s role as that of coach, personal trainer, or more pejoratively, customer service agent. Despite this, explicit requirements to perform more ‘care’ appear in Janet’s account of a toxic encounter with a student:

This year I had a student who…actually did say, “I’ve paid £9,000 and you’re not helping me.” I’d said, “Well, you need to do this. Where have you been? You haven’t attended.”…Her attitude was, “This is the service you should be making available to me.” It turned out she had said that to every person who had taught her. I then spoke to other staff, because I was so upset by it. I had people from the disability team writing to me saying, “You’re not supporting this student adequately. Where is such-and-such.” […] It was very upsetting. [When we met to discuss the work] it was always, “You are making me anxious,” the student would say. […] Eventually this person stood and shouted at me for 10 minutes. I had to say, “You have upset me significantly now. This is inappropriate; this is not part of my role. I do not have to listen to people shout. It is unacceptable, please go away.” She kept saying, “Let me finish.” She kept putting her hand in front of my face. It was really unpleasant.

This experience is narrated by Janet as the angry outburst of an irate customer, in an encounter highly reminiscent of consumer incivility and verbal abuse levied at service
workers in liberal market economies (Stroebaek and Korczynski, 2018). Janet describes the
tudent’s behaviour as a customer’s dissatisfaction with a transactional service in a discourse
of consumer sovereignty (‘I’ve paid £9,000…’) that is embellished by the student with claims
of being subject to emotional harm as a result of Janet’s responses (‘You are making me
anxious’). While one might expect academics to have a ‘status shield’ (Hochschild, 1983:
163) to protect them from such expressions of contempt, furnishing individuals with the
material, cultural and symbolic resources to address them, this contrapower aggression
(Lampman et al., 2009) is worsened by colleagues’ accusations that appear to directly
challenge Janet’s display of care (‘You’re not supporting this student adequately’). A sense
that academic staff are not trusted by management increases anxieties that are compounded
when student-customers are experienced as ‘management accomplices’ (Bolton and
Houlihan, 2005: 685).

Several participants described how psychologically demanding the task of handling
students in a crisis was, including reports of violence and rape, (‘she’d been raped and the
Welfare Office gave her a leaflet’ one interviewee told us). Even outside of such extreme
situations, our interviewees admitted to privileging student-focused academic labour over
family commitments, and working beyond reasonable expectations. It seemed that a deep
commitment to professional ideals common to public sector service workers (Cohen et al.,
2018) was intensified by managerial priorities of student satisfaction and the resulting
expectations for frontline academics. For some staff, the discourse of students as pressured
and vulnerable and a shared professional ideal to care for them, did not appear at odds with
an implicit management protocol to satisfy students: it intensified it. Few illustrated this as
clearly as Andrea. Her extraordinary efforts to accommodate all students’ needs leads to
almost self-sacrificing exertions and considerable emotional demands:
I do worry that ultimately, we will be held accountable for [poor attendance]...I try really, really, really hard in my seminars, to do as much as I can, to accommodate absolutely everybody...And I can’t see what else we can do, other than handing out fivers when they come in through the door [...] I'll give each student 1,500 words of feedback...pour over the students’ feedback...And if the students don’t engage with it, I think, “What am I doing wrong?” You know? [...] The nature of this job, you never shut-off, do you? So even if you take time off sick...I cannot not check my emails, because somebody might tell me off for not doing something. And then in my email box, “Bing,” what pops up? “Oh by the way Andie, I’ve just self-harmed; what do I do?” And I’m thinking, “Think, Andie. Really, really quickly. Because you can’t say the wrong thing here.” You know?...I was saying to the Welfare Team; what if she killed herself? What if she killed herself? To be told that stuff, can be incredibly traumatic [...] By no fault of the universities necessarily, we are expected, more and more, to step into that role. And they’ve just released the TEF results...It’s about student satisfaction, and a big part of student satisfaction is pastoral care.

Andrea’s testimony could be read as an example of deep acting, that she is experiencing the emotions dictated by her playing the part of lecturer. Though there is no explicit management protocol scripting interactions, Andrea clearly fears managerial repercussions of poor performance and internalises an implicit management protocol to care by going the extra mile in order to offer the best possible service. Yet there is an intensity to her account that suggests the involvement of emotional forces that go beyond efforts to evoke emotions ‘appropriate’ to a work situation. She rails against student apathy with a variety of pedagogic techniques to improve engagement yet seems despairing that it is never enough (‘I can’t see what else [I can do’), feels she alone is responsible for responding appropriately to a student crisis, and must manage her own emotional responses of frustration, concern and outright panic (‘What
if she killed herself?’). This appears to engender chronic guilt; she constructs student
misbehaviour as a personal failing (‘What am I doing wrong?’), thus prompting her to work
longer and longer hours almost to the point of self-exploitation (she claims to frequently work
at weekends and during sick leave).

The lost authority of in loco parentis Linked to the discursive construction of the student as
vulnerable, we were struck by the prevalence of a conscious recognition of the parent-child
dynamic operating within interactions with students, including by those without children.
Hannah, a lecturer with just three months’ experience, described teaching as ‘heart-warming,
exciting…I’m not a mother…That sort of, nurturing relationship…[is] an absolute
unexpected pleasure.’ By constructing one’s professional identity like this, our participants
were able to assert the importance of the caring aspects of their interaction with students,
disciplining when necessary but seemingly always motivated by nurturing intentions that
went far beyond any notion of a transactional service relationship dominated by a need to
secure high student satisfaction.

Yet, understanding the relationship as a parental one meant participants felt
increasingly responsible for students’ emotional as well as intellectual development. At the
same time, conversations with lecturers may be approached by students as contexts of service
interactions in which the traditional superiority of the academic can be directly challenged by
assumptions of customer sovereignty. The emotional potency of such an encounter is
illustrated in the following extract, in which Hannah’s own anxieties appear intensified by
having to handle students’ aggressive outpourings regarding a risk assessment:

One student became very aggressive and quite confrontational. It was all “this is
fucking bullshit” and, you know, “It’s a tick box exercise,” and they saw it as me
torturing them, actually, rather than a part of UK law…The other student was…just in
tears, you know - way out of being, kind of productive - in a sort of chest-beating,
toddler tantrum, kind of way. The one that was angry…everything I said was big
sighs and rolled eyeballs. And the other student, it was, sort of quivering bottom lip.
And I just stopped and I went, “I need you both to absolutely draw a line right here…I
want to see some young professionals. Enough.” […] I wanted to scold him like a
child, because he was acting like a child…but I didn’t because I’m a brand new
academic and I don’t know how far I can go.

Hannah and Janet’s stories illustrate a shared sense of lost authority (cf. Ylijoki, 2005)
described in many examples of emotionally intense work experiences that we heard,
including student complaints, criticisms voiced publicly during lectures, in conflicts over
marks, when being asked to account for low student satisfaction scores to management, or
forced to confront angry parents. Pastoral care as expected customer service combined with
the lost authority of in loco parentis meant relations with students could be extremely
psychologically challenging for lecturers. With few or increasingly marginalised off-stage
non-judgemental spaces where professional scrutiny is absent, the impact of such stresses on
staff appear especially difficult to bear. To offer an explanation for why, we now turn to
psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalytic reading

The student-customer as an object of ambivalence Our participants’ accounts convey an
emotional experience of relations with students as one of profound ambivalence. The shared
discursive construction of students as children suggested interactions were consciously
associated with familial relationships in which the external object is the target of genuine
affection and nurturing love. Yet we also saw signs that this relationship can arouse the fear,
resentment and hostility associated with early primal experiences with authority figures that
one is obliged to repress. Reproducing the discourse of the vulnerable student constitutes a
familiar rationalisation that serves defensive purposes. In this way, lecturers’ own anxiety

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created by different and often demanding student behaviour could be intellectualised, thereby offering a semblance of control. This rationalisation was common in our data and is best illustrated in this excerpt from our interview with Claudia:

[A student] took one of my modules and she got a high 2.1. And she fired the most offensive emails at me about how I was destroying her career and she’d had always achieved top marks in everything she’d ever done…I felt, it was a terrible shame. I felt she was… Her reaction was a stress reaction on her part. A reaction because she was taken aback that she wasn’t getting first-class marks. And clearly, the pressure she was feeling in other ways to go out into the marketplace with lots of other people and get jobs against lots of other people. So I felt for her at the time. I felt that her reaction was because of the pressure she was under.

Abuse of service workers can be understood as produced by the context; as Bolton and Houlihan (2005: 695) note, rude customers ‘also feel victims of the system’. Here however, Claudia is attempting to disassociate aggressive behaviour from her student. Rationalising incivility as products of students’ intense anxiety appeared to be a central way our participants sought to comprehend, console and comfort themselves in situations of threat. Emotional investment in such a discourse is likely to be a part of a defensive strategy against assaults on the ego posed by forms of behaviour we might in other work contexts refer to as client abuse (Stroebaek and Korczynski, 2018). However, it may also signal a defence against the expression of repressed hostility aroused within the relationship – a natural emotional response perhaps when one is subject to aggressive behaviour (‘the most offensive emails’) – and thus the vulnerable student discourse is a self-assuring rationalisation that buttresses the suppression of such emotion (Smelser, 1998). Constructed as unfairly pressured and in genuine need of care, students may trigger strong mixed feelings – pity (‘I felt for her at the time’) and tenderness, but also anxiety and envy – so they unconsciously receive ‘not just our
compassion but also our fear, contempt and hatred’ (Hoggett, 2006: 182; see also Menzies 1960). Such contradictory feelings and ensuing rationalisation were particularly clear in our interview with Carl who early on in the interview repeatedly described his view of students as anxious:

My expectations of students are driven by my awareness of their anxiety in the world that they live in…I interpret them as being very anxious about a world that is looking more and more like the gig economy…So they arrive here with certain kinds of anxieties about the future I feel like they didn’t have in the past.

However, when asked about his own experiences offering pastoral advice to individual students, Carl’s narrative suggests the possibility that he is projecting his own anxieties on to the student body and hints at unconscious aggressive impulses directed to the internalised student object:

Initially I coped very badly and I kind of freaked out…You start feeling like you are responsible and you need to help and you didn’t realise that someone could actually suffer this much. A lot of my students are the first time I have encountered anything like this…I’ve had students who have basically told me that my failure to let them progress to the next level is going to drive them to suicide…part of me wants to help, but also part of it gets my heckles up, because I’m not driving anyone to do anything… “I don’t undertake any action for you.”

Carl’s own anxieties appear interwoven with his belief that his students require him to own their anxieties too. If academic labour is experienced as increasingly precarious under marketization, the projection of largely unconscious fears by tutors onto students as a defence mechanism (they are all anxious) may be widespread, and only intensified when students appear to transfer the responsibility of passing the course back to the tutor.
Signs of unconscious ambivalence pervaded the dataset. For instance, we saw primary responses to ambivalence in the expression of highly positive attitudes directed towards students as the source of the ambivalence, such as fanatical commitment (Weigert and Franks, 1989) - as illustrated in Andrea’s account above - and movement towards objects of ambivalence in which ‘in spite of [one’s] estrangement and fears, [one] tries to win the affection of others’ (Pratt and Doucet, 2000: 214). We also identified negative primary responses to ambivalence, in interviewees’ use of derogatory comments (‘we call them “daddy’s little princess”’) common in service organizations, as well as vacillation (Pratt and Doucet, 2000) as indicated by the defence mechanism of temporal splitting (‘she had all the bad attitudes [in the first year]…absolute gold by the end’).

Feelings of fear and hostility were apparent when our informants described face-to-face confrontations, the discovery of social media content criticising them personally, and the weight awarded to student evaluations by management. The widespread use of anonymous student feedback may account for anxieties arising in this work relationship, and several informants relayed stories of managerial inquiries into their teaching practice prompted by such metrics. Yet across the dataset, our informants’ accounts indicated deeper anxieties including profound feelings of rejection, powerlessness and even persecution that suggest repressed desires and unconscious primal conflicts were resurfacing within this changing work relationship.

Beyond respect or admiration, our interviewees’ narratives contained signs of both feelings of estrangement and an unconscious desire to win students’ affection. Associated inner fantasies of being needed and loved are especially apparent in the following excerpt from our interview with Matthew, in which he stated repeatedly that he sees caring for students in the fullest way possible as his duty.
First [students] say, you know, “No, I don’t need you. I’ll just look at the recording,” but then they say, “I’m really stuck with this assignment. I need some help.” I mean, that’s where I get the chance to do what I came here to do; show that humans are humans... And then, I suppose, that has a good influence on them, and then that creates a good impression about me as well. Then, after the year, or after the course, they actually end up, maybe, liking me for years [laughs] because I’ve been there to help them [...] When you have a chat with a student on a matter that is quite sensitive, you’ve got, sort of like, a fan for life.

Such inner desires, however, heighten the potential for psychic injury when they conflict with the demands of external social situations. In the excerpt below, personal negative anonymous student feedback constitutes an assault on Matthew’s ego and his anger, even during the interview, was evident:

I mean, at first when you read it, it actually makes you sweat, and it’s, like, ‘Why do students actually act like this, when you know that I’ve tried my best and I’ve given it 100%, and you haven’t? But you now have the audacity to turn around and say, “Look, it’s not my problem, it’s yours”.’ And at first you feel a bit upset, and sometimes you feel angry, but I don’t sleep on it really. I just put it out before I go to bed, and when I wake up in the morning, I always try to forget about it, and that’s it. Even when I meet that person face-to-face, although I know who that person is, they have no clue that I’ve already identified that these are the culprits. I don’t try to take it out on them, or, you know, accept whingers. And it’s just...I just try to go on with life, I suppose [...] The rotten apples, the bad ones, you can’t change them.

Receiving critical student feedback is often painful for lecturers, but may be more so when it triggers unconscious impulses associated with past intrapsychic conflict. The defences evident in this excerpt certainly suggest the resurfacing of such feelings. Suddenly the
deserving student is experienced as an aggressor arousing fear (‘it actually makes you sweat’) and becomes the target of hostile impulses that, though subject to defence mechanisms, still find expression albeit in distorted form (‘I’ve identified...the culprits...I don’t try to take it out on them’). Recognised as dangerous or unacceptable, the expression of these feelings are quickly subject to defence mechanisms. Matthew deploys denial (‘I don’t sleep on it really’), and attempts to manage his anxiety through the defence of splitting (Klein, 1987), consoling himself via the reassuring simplicities of good and bad external objects, of students as ‘rotten apples’ and later in the interview, as ‘naughty but nice’.

_The student-customer as authority figure_  In psychoanalysis, hostile feelings and defiance signify dependence just as much as affection and obedience (Freud, 1991 [1920]). Contemporary student behaviour was characterised by many participants as emotionally intense and potentially threatening, thus the meaning patterns assigned to these external threats ‘set in motion simultaneous _inner_ struggles with those kinds of affects, meanings, symbols and ambivalences that are aroused by association’ (Smelser, 1998: 210). Our data suggests that lecturers’ emotional meanings of present relations with students resembled those unconsciously associated with authority figures, heightening the potential for the relationship to trigger potent emotions associated with the oedipal drama.

In an inversion of the claimed transfer of emotional attitudes by lecturers from one’s children to their students, we saw signs that lecturers feel subordinate to the student, creating an unconscious dependence highly reminiscent of that likely to have been first experienced in relation to the parental authority as an infant. Indeed, psychoanalysis views ambivalence as originating in the intimate relations between a child and his or her parents and siblings, relations from which the child cannot escape (Smelser, 1998). The oedipal situation of the child involves entering into competition with the same-sex parent for the love of the opposite sex parent. Early infantile fantasies of being punished by the parental figure resurface,
stimulating afresh the accompanying conflicting emotions, including rage, as glimpsed in Matthew’s testimony. We saw how a customer authority within lecturer-student interactions appeared to trigger feelings highly reminiscent of those experienced as a result of being ‘at the mercy of another’ (Oglensky, 1995: 1044). Furthermore, just as in the first realisation of one’s total dependence on an external other (Freud, 2001 [1914]), in contexts of customer sovereignty the aggressor is unable to be challenged.

As Smelser (1998) describes, we can become bound affectively to those with authority in the organizational context because of their power, but also because we load both positive and negative childhood transferences on to them. Indeed, unconscious transference projections of students as son/daughter substitutes common to teachers signals a relationship of dependence that can underpin an affectionate attachment with students (Freud, 1930). However, in our analysis an institutionally-inscribed customer status of students seemed to make such types of attachments uncommon. In the following excerpt from Adrian’s interview, transference projections seem to heighten feelings of hostility:

Occasionally I have students who are not so respectful. I find that difficult. It’s a really difficult situation that our student population is in, and that we’re in, because they are paying £12,000 a year to be here...they deserve to have – the language is all wrong and it’s the language of business, which I don’t think is the right language to use – a reasonable product in terms of a reasonable experience. My daughters deserve a reasonable experience [...] I tend to find that many of my undergraduates are not as respectful...Many of them are not engaged and I don’t understand that...‘Why are you not doing this?’ ‘Why don’t you care?’ I just don’t understand that. My daughters engage. I find it frustrating when [students are] disrespectful because I am never disrespectful towards them.
Here Adrian unfavourably compares his students’ behaviour to that of his own university-attending daughters, who apparently ‘care’ about their studies and by implication, respect their lecturers. However, this excerpt also indicates how the unconscious transference of thoughts and feelings associated with the paternal relationship – notably Adrian’s emotional dependence on his daughters’ respect and ability to please him – to an internalised object of the student intensifies the emotional response when students do not behave as the subordinate recipient of parental love. Students’ apparent indifference and ‘disrespect’ of him as a lecturer – perhaps stemming from a consumer subjectivity in which the relationship is transactional – prompts a resurfacing of the troubling unconscious feelings associated with being in a subordinate position.

Naturally, lecturers may seek something from those they care for; staff have affective needs. Yet where the cared-for are awarded customer sovereignty they may come to unconsciously represent an authority figure. The following story from Stephen, given in response to the interviewer’s request to share an example of a positive experience with a student or students, reveals the narcissistic satisfaction of being admired, even loved, by those on whom our ego increasingly depends:

The most pleasure is getting cheered at the graduation ceremony, when I walked in.
And I deliberately went in last…And when I went past the students, the slow hand clap of 2000 people turned into a massive cheer and a scream of “Stevie!”, which brought me to tears. I literally was in tears…I sat there, there were tears in my eyes, with the biggest smile on my face, and thought, “Yes, it’s all worthwhile.”

As an object of love, Stephen is moved to tears in a manner reminiscent of a subordinate’s fulfilment of a projected wish of parental adoration from a superior. However, this passage also hints at unconscious emotions associated with sibling rivalry. Seemingly in competition with colleagues for students’ affections (‘I deliberately went in last’), the gratification of
narcissistic desires is only heightened by the public context of its expression alongside other colleagues. Similarly, the following extract from John’s interview indicates how a pastoral care role can afford opportunities for narcissistic gratification by awarding special attention to individual students, and thereby securing a place of special affection for oneself:

I enjoy being an academic advisor…I quite like young people to be honest. I know they get rubbished in the media, ‘snowflakes’ and all that kind of nonsense…I kind of quite enjoy it and I enjoy mixing with them…Just the other day - a really worrying one - but a student who suffers quite badly with depression and anorexia, and I spent a good couple of hours just talking with her because she was in one of her down modes […] [Students expect] a priest. Somebody they can turn to. Somebody they can rely upon. Somebody who will be there on their side…They’ll come and discuss things [with me] they wouldn’t discuss with other people and I include parents and friends in that.

Here John is expressing the kinds of satisfaction many professions that involve care can provide. However, it is also suggestive of the pleasures of ‘rescuing’ students in a relationship where one unconsciously depends on their need to be saved (see Robertson 1999).

Though all social interaction mixes realistic reactions and transference ones (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983), we heard many stories of tension-ridden situations with both individual and groups of students that entailed the deployment of protective measures and inhibitions suggestive of neurotic anxiety. In an institutional context where managers were commonly viewed as all too keen to satisfy the customer (and their parents), several of our participants detailed a myriad of practical mechanisms they now use to protect themselves against punishments inflicted by student authority, such as expectation-setting in their first dealings with students, lecturing on organizational policy and procedures, operating a
yellow/red card warning system, and devoting time at the start of every class to go through answers to student emails received in the interim. The following excerpt from our interview with Claudia reveals feelings that suggest a deep-seated fear that coloured many of our participants’ most emotionally vivid descriptions:

I’m becoming more and more cautious over the years. I’ve gone from being quite relaxed about lots of things to now being more nervous about things…So I’ve adapted my whole approach to how I am with the students as a result. […] I had a very bad reaction to a student…she complained that I’d cut her short when she’d been giving a response in a lecture room and she went and made a complaint, a formal complaint and I was very, very, very upset about it…And I was actually off sick. I’d never been off sick before and I’ve never been off sick since…I think what upset me most was thinking, well, I don’t know how I could have done it differently really…I think that has stayed with me and that will continue to…And I think when you’ve got large student numbers, it’s hard… I constantly think, “Now, this room is full of individual students. Am I actually going to manage to look after them all?”…And if I’m brutally honest with you, I think that’s why I’m more anxious today than I was 10 years ago because I don’t think that will ever go from me… So, yes, it’s tougher today.

The potency of this event is indicated by the increased anxiety Claudia feels with all students she encounters in her work, rather than solely the breakdown of trust with the individual complainant. The complaint is presented as coming from nowhere, as if a force of nature, the arbitrariness of which seems to heighten feelings of helplessness and victimhood (‘I don’t know how I could have done it differently’). Like others, there is a sense of having to constantly prepare for the worst, and that a relationship of dependence in which genuine affection usually presides (because hostile impulses are repressed) could suddenly and without warning arouse almost paranoid feelings of persecution (they are out to get me no
matter what I do) and trigger pre-existing hostile impulses first encountered in the painful recognition of dependence after early childhood illusions of self-sufficiency and contentment.

A psychoanalytic reading emphasising unconscious fantasy activity suggests that it is in fact the disagreeable notion that students come to represent an authority figure akin to a parent that arouses such profound and disorientating ambivalence in the unconscious, leading to its inversion in the contrary image – and emotional investment in the discursive subject position – of the child. Indeed, primitive fears awakened in lecturers in relations with students may have a further oedipal dimension; appearing as more powerful than s/he is, the subordinate wishes for the authority figure to be out of the way, which in turn produces a terrible dread of his/her vengeance and thus a fear of him/her (Freud, 1979 [1926]). This threatening impulse is repressed via reaction-formation; lecturers’ fantasy activity transforms the impulse into its opposite, namely, fervent devotion (‘Am I actually going to manage to look after them all?’). In this way, unconscious feelings of dependency, vulnerability and resentment are kept under repression.

**Conclusion: a critical interpretation of the lecturer as service worker**

The epigraphs of this paper allude both to relations riddled with intense, often difficult, emotion in contemporary academic labour, and their importance to organizations that increasingly revolve around customer-oriented service quality. Though managerial controls on the encounter between service provider and service recipient appeared to be more normative than direct in our study, we argue that an organisational discourse of customer satisfaction is reshaping long-standing social norms of the power differentials between students and staff in ways that have profound effects for lecturers’ (and students’) emotional responses. Where once students may have primarily been in a subordinate role to lecturers, rooted in intellectual capital being central to the relationship, the importance of their satisfaction to HE institutions heightens the potential for lecturers to become emotionally...
dependent on them. Caring for students was perceived to be increasingly necessary but also managerially expected so long as it was construed as helping to satisfy students’ customer needs and desires. Organisational imperatives to ‘corporately care’ about and for students - because they are the customers of the university - have the unintended consequence of generating the sorts of acute ambivalence and emotional dependencies we have described here.

Camouflaged by the nurturing instincts and caring behaviour associated with parenting a child, a reasonable and socially acceptable discourse of teacher-student relations, our psychoanalytic interpretation suggests teaching academics unconsciously experience deep and powerful feelings of vulnerability, submission, fear and hostility that are awakened within a work relationship that is changing radically in nature. Our analysis captures affective work that recognises the nature of all human interactions that take us beyond scripts and professional role demarcations, often generating unpredictable and irrational feelings based upon inner representations and ‘an emotional life rooted in the past’ (Oglensky, 1995: 1037). As such, personal appropriation of emotions that emerge in the workplace is likely to occur, when lecturers’ care for students involves unconscious transference projections of them as son/daughter substitutes (Freud, 1930). Notions of surface and deep expression of feelings miss the always fine-grained actual experiences of the frontline service workers we spoke to where, for example, many of their responses to the student-customers’ behaviours and emotional outbursts were unmanaged, spontaneous, even involuntary.

Many studies point to a view that academic work has seen considerable growth in affective management and that this is both because the marketized organisation deems it appropriate but also because academics themselves are sensitive to their own career progression that is itself evermore dependent on commercial business-like metrics. Our analysis contributes to these discussions by revealing the ready alignment of institutional
imperatives of high customer satisfaction with an internalised professional duty of care. Such an alignment weakens resistance to an excessive individualisation of responsibilities as afforded by a sector immersed in neoliberal value. In a context of student-consumer sovereignty, academics feel they must ‘give of themselves’ whatever the seemingly angst-ridden student feels they need to cope. Furthermore, our analysis suggests a discourse of service provider and customer in the academy increases the likelihood of unconscious and profound feelings of ambivalence, generating anxieties for teaching academics that may entail considerable psychological effort to process. The institutional mechanisms to support frontline staff are, at present, limited and piecemeal, perhaps in part because of widespread managerial denial of the realities of the sorts of experience we have articulated in this paper. The existence of authentic communities of coping (Korczynski, 2003) appear rare, even in a setting historically steeped in a public service ethos.

This leads us to highlight the need for more research that considers the implications of an academic-student relationship characterised by often unplanned intense emotional experience for the pedagogic endeavour. Are many academics now primarily shifting the emphasis from intellectual to emotional needs and desires of students? We have also exposed how the affective consequences for lecturers of reconceptualising academic labour as professional service work are significant, intense and largely unheard. We thus also call for research to investigate the existence of organic coping mechanisms or ways to challenge these psychic demands; particularly those that may be collective in character considering how isolating this aspect of the academic’s work appeared to be.

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Biographies

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