

What about the emotional labor of university teachers in teaching? A survey from a Chinese university

ZHENG Jiuhua¹, LIU Na^{2*}

¹ Department of Public Administration, Shanghai Ocean University, Shanghai, China; 201306

² School of Marxism Studies, Liaoning University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Shenyang, China; 110847

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56293/IJMSSSR.2022.4599>

IJMSSSR 2023

VOLUME 5

ISSUE 2 MARCH – APRIL

ISSN: 2582 - 0265

Abstract: Emotional labor is an important factor that affects the teaching effectiveness of teachers, and university teachers are no exception. In order to understand the current status of emotional labor among university teachers, this paper investigated the emotional labor of 253 university teachers from China. The results showed that university teachers have a high perception of emotional display rules, and engage in high levels of emotional labor behavior. They employ more deep acting and naturally felt emotion strategies in emotional labor, and age differences were found in surface acting, which decreases with age. Finally, this paper proposes suggestions for improving the impact of emotional labor at both the individual and organizational levels. University teachers need to continuously improve their own emotional management abilities and intrinsic work motivation, while universities need to create a good educational ecological environment and provide social support for university teachers.

Keywords: university teachers, emotional labor, teaching, deep acting, naturally felt emotion

1. Introduction

Since Hochschild proposed the concept of emotional labor in 1983, it has become a common perspective for studying teacher emotions in the field of education. Yin et al. expanded on Morris and Feldman's definition of emotional labor, stating that emotional labor in teaching refers to "the effort, planning, and control needed for teachers to express organizationally desired emotion during their interpersonal transactions with students and others in classroom and school settings." [1] University teachers face a variety of different types of students, including differences in cultural background, learning ability, and interests, which pose great challenges to their teaching and management work. They need to constantly maintain a positive emotional state in different teaching activities, adjust their emotional state according to the situation of their students, and ensure the achievement of teaching goals and their role as teachers. In this process, teachers engage in both acting and genuine emotional expression. In addition, teachers also face heavy teaching and research tasks, as well as pressure from various aspects of the school, students, and society, all of which can lead to emotional fluctuations and emotional fatigue. According to Hochschild's criteria for emotional labor occupations [2]: (1) university teachers need face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with students or others; (2) university teachers need to display specific emotional states such as enthusiasm, happiness, confidence, and passion and satisfaction with teaching when interacting with students and others; (3) teachers' emotions in teaching are subject to certain constraints, including job requirements and cultural expectations of the teacher role in universities, such as the need to create a harmony teacher-student relationship. It can be seen that the teaching process of university teachers is a process of emotional labor.

Emotional labor can be divided into three strategies: surface acting, deep acting, and naturally felt emotion [3]. Surface acting refers to the act of adjusting one's facial expressions and tone of voice to display emotions that are not truly felt, in order to meet the emotional demands of teaching. Although most college teachers report using surface acting infrequently, research has shown that it is still present, albeit often unconsciously, such as when a teacher feels like they are playing a role in a play [4]. Deep acting involves teachers using cognitive methods, such as self-persuasion and imagination, to change their inner emotions and display the emotions required by the organization's teaching demands. Naturally felt emotion, also known as automatic emotion regulation or passive

deep acting, is the third emotional labor strategy, where teachers feel the same emotion as required by the teaching situation without consciously managing their emotions [3]. Unlike other teacher groups, university teachers not only need to express positive emotions but also negative emotions, such as anger, especially in the Chinese tradition of respecting teachers and valuing education. Expressing negative emotions can be acceptable or even more effective in achieving teaching goals. Furthermore, the relationship between university teachers and students is more equal, and their interactions are more frequent and have a longer duration. Therefore, emotional labor among university teachers differs significantly from other groups.

The issue of emotional labor among university teachers not only affects their work efficiency and quality, but also has adverse effects on their physical and mental health, and may even lead to occupational burnout, depression, and other problems. Therefore, how to help university teachers better manage emotional labor issues, improve work efficiency and quality, has become an important issue in the current education field. Although emotional labor of teachers has been widely valued in recent years and domestic and foreign scholars have conducted a lot of research, there are relatively few studies on emotional labor among university teachers. The current research has mostly focused on primary and secondary school teachers, while university teachers, who are different from primary and secondary school teachers and traditional service industries, face more complex emotional labor issues due to differences in the objects they face. Existing studies are more concerned with the impact of emotional labor on work outcomes, lacking systematic observation of their emotional labor status and behavior. Therefore, the emotional labor status of university teachers is not yet clear. This paper conducts a survey of university teachers using questionnaires on emotional labor strategies, in order to understand the emotional labor behavior and status of university teachers, and provide optimized suggestions for colleges and universities.

2. Method

2.1 Participants and procedures

The present study employed a mixed-methods approach to data collection, combining both online and offline methods. For local samples in Shanghai, questionnaires were distributed and collected on-site. For participants from other regions, data was collected through online questionnaires, and participants were given red envelopes as incentives upon completion and verification of their responses. A total of 270 questionnaires were distributed across the country, with 253 valid responses obtained, resulting in an effective response rate of 93.70%. Of the 253 valid questionnaires, 68.4% were completed by female participants, and 31.6% were completed by male participants. The age range of participants was between 23 and 65 years, with an average age of 41.08 ($SD=7.63$) years. The teaching experience of participants ranged from 1 to 42 years, with an average of 14.10 ($SD=8.94$) years. Of the participants, 11.5% held the title of professor, 40.7% held the title of associate professor, 40.7% held the title of lecturer, and 7.1% held the title of teaching assistant. In terms of educational background, 54.5% held a doctoral degree, 41.1% held a master's degree, and 4.3% held a bachelor's degree. In terms of institutional classification, 8.2% were from 985 universities, 14.2% were from 211 universities, 70.9% were from regular undergraduate universities, and 6.6% were from vocational colleges. The distribution of academic disciplines was 15.80% for science and engineering disciplines and 84.2% for humanities and social sciences. The average weekly teaching hours for the participants were 8.09 ($SD=4.38$).

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 Display rule and interpersonal interaction.

This study employed the Emotion Display Rules Scale developed by Diefendorff et al. [5], which consists of 14 items. Among them, there are four items for positive display rule perceptions, three items for negative display rule perceptions, two items for frequency of interactions, two items for duration of interactions, and three items for routineness of interactions, such as "My work with students is fairly routine." Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's α in this study was 0.90.

2.2.2 Emotional Labor Strategy Scale.

This study adopted the Emotional Labor Scale developed by Diefendorff et al. [5], which consists of 12 items and is divided into three dimensions. The surface acting contains six items, the deep acting contains four items, the

naturally felt emotion contains two items. The items are such as "The emotions I express to students are genuine" Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's α in this study was 0.77.

2.2.3 Demographic characteristics.

These include age, gender, education level, teaching experience, professional title, academic discipline, university classification, and weekly teaching hours.

2.3 Analyses

Regarding the analysis of missing values, no variables with missing values exceeding 5% were found. The mean substitution method was used to replace missing data. Descriptive statistics and reliability measures were analyzed using SPSS 25.

3. Results

3.1 Common method variance

The data for this study were all self-reported by university teachers, which may have caused issues with homogeneity bias. Therefore, Harman's ^[6] method was employed to examine the data, and the results indicated that the maximum factor accounted for 22.84% of the variance, which is below the 50% threshold. This suggests that the homogeneity bias in the data can be accepted and further analysis can be conducted.

3.2 The display rules and interpersonal interaction of emotional labor perceived by university teachers in teaching

This study investigated the perception of emotional labor rules among university teachers in their teaching, and the results showed that the mean of the perception of the positive display rule was 4.04 ($SD=0.67$), while the mean of the perception of the negative emotion suppression rule was also 4.04 ($SD=0.74$). Following Chang, Lin, and Song's definition ^[7] of high scores as those above the mean, these results indicate that university teachers are strongly aware of the external demands for their emotional displays.

This study investigated the emotional labor behavior of university teachers in teaching, and the results showed that the mean of frequency of interactions was 3.93 ($SD=0.90$), the mean of duration of interactions was 3.50 ($SD=0.99$), and the mean of regularity of interactions was 3.41 ($SD=0.94$). These results indicate that university teachers use emotional labor behavior frequently, for a relatively long duration, and in a somewhat routine manner in their teaching.

3.3 University teachers' emotional labor Strategies

Upon analyzing the data, the overall characteristics of emotional labor strategies employed by university teachers were as follows: surface acting had a mean score of 3.08 ($SD=0.88$), deep acting had a mean score of 3.86 ($SD=0.66$), and genuine emotions had a mean score of 3.78 ($SD=0.77$). Both deep acting and genuine emotions scored above the mean of 3, indicating that university teachers' deep acting and genuine emotions are at a relatively high level.

3.4 Analysis of the differences of emotional labor in teaching of university teachers

As the table 1 showed that no significant differences were found in all variables with regard to gender, university type, teaching experience, and weekly teaching hours. Regarding job titles, a post hoc analysis showed that professors had the strongest sense of rule-governed suppression of negative emotions ($M=4.23$, $SD=0.75$), followed by lecturers ($M=4.11$, $SD=0.65$) and associate professors ($M=3.98$, $SD=0.77$), while teaching assistants scored the lowest ($M=3.69$, $SD=0.93$). In terms of education level, individuals with a Master's degree had the highest level of routine emotional labor ($M=3.61$, $SD=0.93$), followed by those with a Bachelor's degree ($M=3.55$, $SD=0.52$), and those with a Doctoral degree scored the lowest ($M=3.25$, $SD=0.95$). In terms of disciplines,

individuals in STEM fields ($M=3.94$, $SD=0.83$) scored higher on emotional duration than those in humanities ($M=3.48$, $SD=0.99$). As for age, the younger the age group, the higher the scores for surface acting. The group under 30 years old scored the highest on surface acting ($M=3.52$, $SD=0.79$), while teachers over 50 years old scored the lowest ($M=2.83$, $SD=0.91$).

Table 1 the differences of emotional labor in teaching of university teachers

VARIABLES	AGE	JOB TITLES	EDUCATION LEVEL	DISCIPLINES
Positive display rule perceptions				
Negative display rule perceptions		2.64*		
Frequency of interactions				
Duration of interactions				3.03*
Routineness of interactions			4.38*	
Surface acting	2.70*			
Deep acting				
Naturally felt emotions				

4. Discussion

4.1 University teachers have a high perception to emotional display rules.

The results showed that university teachers perceived a higher level of emotional display rules, whether it was the requirement to display positive emotions or suppress negative emotions. Furthermore, there was a significant difference among job titles, with professors feeling a stronger need to suppress negative emotions. This indicates that although universities do not explicitly require how emotions should be displayed, university teachers are able to perceive the external demands on their emotions, which is consistent with the conclusion reached by Zheng^[4]. The emotional labor of university teachers is not arbitrary and requires compliance with the explicit and implicit rules of the university and culture. Faced with these rules, on the one hand, they will follow relevant rules, such as the requirement for teachers to care for and love students, but on the other hand, unreasonable emotional rules can trigger a high level of emotional arousal, and even lead to refusal and resistance, resulting in a reconstruction of the emotional rules.

4.2 University teachers exhibit higher behaviors of emotional labor.

The display of emotional labor behavior is high among university teachers. The results showed that regardless of frequency, duration, or routineness, they all exceeded the average score, especially the score of display frequency was 3.93, far exceeding the average, with differences in education and discipline. This indicates that university teachers are emotional laborers who have internalized the relevant emotional rules and automatically adjust their external behaviors in accordance with the requirements of emotional rules during teaching. University teachers need to frequently display corresponding emotions in the classroom to achieve teaching goals, and they also need to communicate and interact with students for a long time from freshman to senior year, providing guidance, answering questions, serving as course mentors, and so on. All of these require teachers to focus on students at all times and be deeply involved, and they need to continuously monitor and adjust their external emotional expressions. Unlike other teachers, university teachers not only need to display positive emotions but sometimes need to display appropriate negative emotions to attract students' attention. All of these can easily increase the psychological problems of emotional disorders among university teachers.

4.3 University teachers prefer to use deep acting and naturally felt emotions strategies

The results showed that university teachers use all three emotion labor strategies, but they prefer deep acting and naturally felt emotions. Unlike service industry workers who have one-time interactions with their customers, university teachers have a long-term and multiple interactions with their students, with the function of education and teaching. As university students are already adults, they can better distinguish and appreciate the sincerity conveyed by deep acting and naturally felt emotions. Compared with surface acting, it brings them a different

experience and makes them more willing to interact with their teachers, thus promoting teaching. In addition, when teachers face emotion rules from the outside, they need to adopt corresponding emotion regulation strategies consciously or unconsciously. Deep acting and naturally felt emotions are less likely to cause emotional dissonance and consume fewer resources, and they may even receive feedback and supplement of resources. This also reduces the cognitive burden and is the best choice for their own health.

4.4 Age differences exist in surface acting.

Although university teachers use surface acting strategies less frequently, differences in age exist and show a decreasing trend with age. Those under the age of 30 are mostly new PhD graduates who have become university teachers and are still in the process of identity transformation. When interacting with students, they tend to play the role of a teacher and imitate the expected behaviors of teachers. With the increase of work experience, especially after the age of 40, they gradually develop their own self-perception of the teacher-student relationship and no longer need to play a role, but are more willing to understand and tolerate students from the bottom of their hearts. Therefore, superficial acting decreases and they may even disdain pretending.

5. Suggestions to improve emotional labor in teaching

5.1 Improving teachers' emotion management abilities to promote professional development

Emotion management abilities refer to teachers' ability to recognize, understand, express, and manage their own and others' emotions. While university teachers generally have strong professional abilities, they may not all be skilled at managing their emotions, especially for STEM teachers who may require more in this regard. Universities can help teachers better manage their emotions by strengthening teacher training, especially for typical emotional situations in teaching, including emotional awareness, expression and understanding, emotion regulation, deep acting techniques, how to handle relationships with students, how to effectively resolve conflicts, etc. Additionally, universities can provide psychological counseling and guidance services, where teachers can find professional help to solve some psychological problems and acquire better emotional management skills. By improving teachers' emotion management abilities, they can not only better control their emotions and reduce emotional labor, but also better cope with work pressure and improve work efficiency.

5.2 Universities should create a favorable educational ecosystem and improve the working environment.

As the carrier of higher education, universities should strive to create a favorable educational ecosystem, establish a good teaching atmosphere and working environment, to alleviate the workload and improve the work efficiency and satisfaction of university teachers. Multiple departments should cooperate to reduce administrative management and the administrative burden on teachers. This requires coordination and top-level design from the government to simplify repetitive work and unnecessary social affairs dispatches, enhance the autonomy of universities, and truly achieve "professor governance of the university". At the university level, departments should strengthen communication and coordination, make use of network management functions, and provide teaching assistants, IT support, and research assistants to help teachers better allocate their workloads, reduce their workload, and devote themselves to teaching and research. Additionally, emotions have become an important factor affecting teachers' work. Therefore, universities need to continuously improve teachers' working environment by improving classroom facilities, providing better office conditions, and offering comfortable and relaxing workspaces. Furthermore, universities should provide teachers with spaces for negative emotional venting and necessary psychological support.

5.3 Increase social support for organizations and establish effective support networks.

According to the resource conservation theory, the psychological resources of university teachers are limited, and if not replenished in a timely manner after emotional labor consumption, it is easy to cause psychological resource depletion and have a significant impact on the mental health of university teachers. Social support from the university is an important resource for supplementing teachers' resources. Universities can help teachers establish social connections and support systems by establishing support networks, which can include creating social media groups for teachers, teacher teams, etc. Through these social connections, teachers can share their emotions and thoughts, and receive support and understanding from other teachers, which can help teacher's better deal with

emotional issues and alleviate emotional burden. At the same time, establishing teacher teams can provide better cooperation opportunities, thereby improving teachers' cooperation awareness and innovation ability.

5.4 Strengthen teachers' intrinsic motivation and improve their professional identity.

Teachers' own professional identity and passion for their profession are intrinsic motivation for their professional development and the main means to avoid negative consequences of emotional labor. Research has shown that professional identity involves focusing on and enjoying a sense of professional accomplishment in one's work, university teachers should increase their identification with their profession at the cognitive level, thereby reducing occupational burnout caused by emotional labor.

Funding

This work was supported by Humanities and Social Science Youth foundation, Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (number 18YJC880144)

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
My university considers my research to be exempt from academic ethics review

Acknowledgements

Data collection assistant, Lv Jingchen, Li Leyan, Dong Yichong, Yu Ting, Zhou Jun, Tang Ruitong.

References

1. Yin H., S. Huang, and J. Lee. 2017. Choose your strategy wisely: Examining the relationships between emotional labor in teaching and teacher efficacy in Hong Kong primary schools. *Teaching & Teacher Education* 66:127-136.
2. Hochschild A. R. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 26.
3. Ashforth, B. E., and R. H. Humphrey. 1993. Emotional labor in service roles: The influence of identity." *Academy of Management Review* 18:88-115.
4. Zheng J.H. 2022. Emotional Labor in College Teachers' Teaching: a Qualitative Study Based on Job Demands-resource Model. *Heilongjiang Higher Education Research* 40(01):77-86.
5. Diefendorff J. M., M. H. Croyle, and R. H. Gosserand. 2005. The dimensionality and antecedents of emotional labor strategies. *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 66(2):339-357.
6. Harman H. H. 1976. *Modern factor analysis* 3rd ed. revised. Chicago Illinois the University of Chicago Press,
7. Chang, T. S., H. H. Lin, and M. M. Song. 2011. University Faculty Members' Perceptions of Their Teaching Efficacy. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 48 (1):49-60.