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Joy and Guilt, Passion and Anxiety. Exploring Emotions in the Neoliberal Academia

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Abstract

In this introduction to the Symposium on Emotions in Academic Work, we explore key reflections on emotion work, emotional labour, and feeling rules within contemporary academia, in light of the transformations brought about by the neoliberal reconfiguration of academic labour. Topics such as academic guilt, stress, time management, as well as joy and satisfaction, are examined through a gendered and intersectional lens.

Keywords: Emotions; Academia; Neoliberalism; Gender; Work.

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When we decided to edit a Symposium for *Sociologica* on emotions in academia, we felt overwhelmed with joy and enthusiasm. The topic managed to make our different research interests (emotions, academic studies, health) converge while also expressing our shared training and approach (gender studies, constructivism and qualitative research methods). Certainly, we were aware of the personal significance this project held for us — the joy of immersing ourselves in a collaborative effort among colleagues who respect one another and share a common vision of academic women's lives; the anticipation of reading thought-provoking essays we felt both entitled and obliged to engage with; and the opportunity to weave or strengthen international networks among scholars working on these themes. But we were equally aware of its value for the sociological community: this type of cultural work, we believed, was meaningful beyond ourselves.

From previous experience, we knew this could entail working late at night, chasing after authors, getting back-outs, and of course, that this would be our third shift (after other academic commitments and the family — echoing Hochschild & Machung's *The Second Shift*, 2012). It was indeed work, but more on the side of what it is usually considered service work or — adopting a more explicit feminist approach — "academic housework" (Heijstra et al., 2017), which includes all those organizational, administrative, and secretarial activities which are functional to the academic system, including the journal editing, but not necessarily taken in consideration when evaluating strict academics' "productivity". Nonetheless, our passion for the subject — the same passion which has been pointed out as being both a "trap" but also a source of joy by many critical scholars (e.g., Bloch, 2016) — and the conviction of its importance continued — and continues — to guide us with determination. Seen from another perspective, this was also about carving out emotional and temporal space for our research interests, beyond the research, the teaching, and the administrative burdens of university life.

Then came the months of actual realization of the issue: sitting down at the keyboard after dinner, emails to authors, messages exchanged on mobile chats. The most frequently uttered word among the three of us was "sorry". Apologies for late replies to emails, for sending messages at odd hours (despite our theoretical commitment to a *slow professorship* that doesn't involve working outside office hours), for not keeping up with the ever-optimistic pace of our theoretical agendas. Guilt was a constant presence in our experience, alternating with the pleasure of reading texts that echoed emotions we were living or had lived many times before.

At one point, we decided to talk about the constant guilt we were experiencing in relation to our job. This feeling, as has been widely noted, has a clear gendered dimension: women, caught between multiple roles and socialized to be available, often feel guilty as workers with their children, and guilty as mothers when at work (Korabik, 2015). For us, the guilt extended to our work — toward the work itself and toward ourselves. We shared this feeling, despite our different family structures, and we decided it deserved to be addressed directly. How much does the neoliberal academy we study thrive on our guilt? We were undertaking work that had no direct influence on our salaries or contractual/career standing, and yet we experienced both joy and persistent guilt, in this specific issue and in many other research, teaching, and administrative commitments we had. And how much did that guilt keep us up late or push us to wake up at dawn to get back to our computers? Academia as a system often exploits both. As scholars and academic workers, we have the best profession we could imagine for ourselves — but to foreground the unspoken rhythms of our job is itself of sociological significance, and as sociologists, we felt it was our duty to do so.

As Iacono Lobo puts it in the collection of essays *How to Build a Life in the Humanities* (2015), edited by Greg Colón Semenza and Garrett A. Sullivan:

> Academic guilt plagues me whenever I am not working. In this profession, after all, there is always something to do: new publications to read, a book, article, proposal, conference paper, or even an annual update to write, grading, lesson plans, and course development — and that's only in between teaching, office hours, faculty meetings, and other on-campus obligations. The seemingly endless demands on my time blur the line between my professional and private lives. [...] Academic guilt, too, is a self-conscious emotion. At its most innocuous level, academic guilt is a niggling feeling you get when you are not working, or when you failed to get work done (pp. 83–84).

Unlike other workplaces, the academic environment is marked not only by stress, anxiety, frustration, and a constant sense of responsibility — including for tasks we may not even be required to take on — but also by guilt. We often make our own choices about topics or tasks, yet still struggle to enjoy the outcomes, as we're already feeling behind on something else. Indeed, all these elements can be examined precisely through the analytical lens of the sociology of emotions.

1 The Emotional Turn in the Sociology of Academic Profession

The so-called *emotional turn* in the social sciences — a growing awareness of the role of emotionality in understanding social relationships and experiences, both for those living them and for the researchers studying them — has, in recent years, also reached studies on university work. Several theorists have analyzed academia through concepts like *feeling rules*, *emotional labor*, and *emotional grammar* (Hochschild, 1979, 1983 & 2003; Wharton, 2009), or developed typologies of *emotional processes* as part of the framework of an increasingly central sociology of emotions (Thoits, 1989)[1]. A growing amount of research and theoretical reflection has addressed the lived experiences, challenges, and contradictions of academic life (e.g. Bondi, 2013; Humble, 2012, quoted in Askins & Blazek, 2017). The overall idea is that university structures, which center on individual performance evaluation, generate and circulate particular affective economies (Ahmed, 2004). It has been shown, for example, that like other organizations, academia promotes some specific *representative emotions* (Flam, 1990; see also Hochschild, 1979) that are meant to represent it. For example, not showing too much pride

1. Arlie Russell Hochschild's seminal work, particularly her book *The Managed Heart* (1983), can be considered one of the first and most important works in the contemporary sociology of emotions. Among other themes, Hochschild explored the social construction and regulation of emotions through the aligning of one's internal emotional states and external expressions with organizational or societal expectations. Through detailed ethnographic research, particularly her case study of flight attendants and bill collectors, Hochschild demonstrated the contrasting emotional demands of these roles. More specifically, she referred to *feeling rules* to indicate the social norms that dictate how individuals are expected to feel in specific situations; to *expression rules*, which govern how emotions should be outwardly expressed, irrespective of one's internal feelings; and to *emotion management*, which involves the active regulation of feelings and expressions to conform to social or organizational demands. She also highlighted that emotion management can take the form of *surface acting*, where individuals modify their outward expressions without altering their internal feelings, or *deep acting*, where individuals attempt to change their internal emotional states to align with desired expressions. Such a distinction is crucial, since any conflict between felt and displayed emotions can be the source of stress and burnout. But the literature on emotions in workplaces is also clear in distinguishing between *emotion work* (personal management of emotions influenced by social norms) and *emotional labor* (publicly performed emotion management regulated by employers; see Hochschild, 1983; Wharton, 2009). Although developed several years ago, these analytical tools remain pivotal to understanding emotional life within the academic environment.

in one's own academic success, or presenting research results by displaying affective neutrality, despite the emotional burden of competitive settings. But this can also be true for *emotional cultures* of anxiety, as Brunet and Müller (2025) show in this Symposium. Drawing on Hochschild's (1979) and Flam's (1990) works, for example, Charlotte Bloch's *Passion and Paranoia. Emotions in Academia* (2016) examines in detail how emotions are managed in hierarchical contexts like academia. By examining emotions and emotion-management within academic institutions through in-depth interviews, she shows how emotions shape social bonds, power relations, hierarchies, micro-politics, and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within academic careers. Feeling rules ask researchers, for example, to display control, confidence, and overview, and this can be achieved through different techniques (from using a difficult vocabulary to taking pills or splitting one's project from one's person, as reported by the interviewees). In the academic setting, however, negative feedback (by peers or anonymous reviewers, or mentors or students) can be very painful since many academics are socialized to the profession to consider their work to be an extension of themselves (*ibidem*, p. 173). This is why many works, recently, have aimed at discussing the academic failure[2] to "break the silence" over feelings and embodied experiences that are "at once ordinary and everyday yet at the same time remain largely secret and silenced in the public spaces of the academy" (Gill, 2016, p. 40).

2 The Emotional Costs of Neoliberal Academia

In referring to contemporary Academia, Rosalind Gill (2009, p. 229) describes feelings such as exhaustion, overload, insomnia, out-of-placeness. Combined with hyperinflation of what is demanded of academics, and an audit culture that is now normalized, academic staff are asked to work on themselves to better manage proliferating workloads, through the prioritizing of goals and time organization. Any problem (and possible solution) is presented as an individual issue.

The market-based transformations that universities have experienced over the last three decades represent the background of this individualistic turn. Fostered by cuts in the public funds for higher education and the spread of a more management-like governance structure for academic institutions, the "modernization agenda" of universities has been remarkably similar across European countries and beyond (Krüger et al., 2018; Mattei, 2014). Sometimes framed in terms of "neoliberal" (Connell, 2014) or "corporate" (Prince & Beaver, 2001) university, some others in terms of "academic capitalism" (Slaughter & Leslie, 1999), this shift has been characterized by at least four common elements, including: 1) public-budget restrictions leading to a diversification of financial resources and an increasing reliance on competitive funding schemes; 2) the precarization of academic work and the rise of the number of unstable contracts leading to the so called "post-doc bubble" (Bataille et al., 2017); 3) the enhanced autonomy of universities requiring a growing professionalization of the management and the inclusion of external stakeholders in university boards; 4) an increasing pressure to public accountability

2. According to some, "academic failure" presents specific features worth exploring. Edwards and Ashkanasy (2018) define it as: "We suggest that academics are especially vulnerable in that they receive critical feedback and scrutiny of their work from many different sources on a regular basis, which in turn can trigger negative emotional responses. Common examples include rejections of applications for funding, poor teaching evaluations, negative feedback from students, unsuccessful promotion applications, rejection letters from journal editors, unsuccessful research outcomes and failure to achieve job security through a tenured appointment" (p. 167). One of the consequences is the "anticipated failure", the anticipation of negative emotions related to these events, and emotions about future events.

leading to the adoption of evaluation-based practices of the performance of both institutions and academics finalized to better allocate (scarcer) financial resources.

All these changes have prompted a new academic culture that emphasizes hyper-productivity and self-entrepreneurship, thus increasing individual competition within a context of increasing work precarization. Not unexpectedly, these transformations have come with high costs, both in terms of knowledge production and in terms of health and well-being for the "producers" of knowledge, namely academics. On the first front, the "publish or perish" culture risks leading to a fragmentation of knowledge due to the increasing pressure on researchers who are pushed to publish "more", prioritizing quantity at the expense of quality while favoring mainstream research agendas (Wright, 2010; Pellegrino, 2016). On the second front, the hidden costs of the so-called "greedy academia" in terms of mental and physical health include stress, anxiety, feelings of failure, shame, guilt, envy and other emotional burdens (Bloch, 2002; Mouly & Sankaran, 2002; Iacono Lobo, 2015; Edwards & Ashkanasy, 2018; Butler-Rees & Robinson, 2020; Smith & Ulus, 2020; Parra Saiani et al., 2025). In this regard, some authors even define stress and anxiety in the neoliberal university as a sort of "public secret", as Brunila and Valero put it (2018, p. 77).

These emotional costs mostly arise from, and are exacerbated by, the hierarchical nature of academic relations, which are usually informed by significant power asymmetries, particularly between tenured and precarious academics, and more broadly among those occupying different ranks or institutional positions within academia. In such relational contexts, the ritualized display of deference and controlled demeanor of academics in subordinate positions (Goffman, 2017[1967]) force them into what Freund (1990) defines as "dramaturgical stress", that is, a form of stress arising from being involved in interactions that require subordinates to ritually dramatise their own subordination (Cardano, 2008).

The systemic nature of stress in the academic context helps explain why, when we started our collective work on this issue and conducted our literature search across the main sociological databases, we found a clear predominance of studies focusing on "negative" emotions in academic work. In contrast, research exploring positive emotional experiences remains limited. It is thus evident that the neoliberal turn in academia produces a form of institutional pathogenesis: universities have become environments that actively generate stress, anxiety, insomnia, burnout, and emotional distress. The "ideal academic" (Thornton, 2013; Lund, 2015) is expected to be permanently available, passionately engaged, strategically emotive but also rational and always resilient: an embodiment of the entrepreneurial self (Rose, 1998) who internalises institutional demands as personal ambitions and governs his/her academic life through continuous self-optimization. From this perspective, the pharmaceutical market can offer a quick-fix solution: in fact, pharmacological treatments are becoming increasingly common to combat anxiety, manage chronic stress, but also to boost cognitive functioning and productivity, a phenomenon that scholars identify as medicalization and human enhancement (Conrad, 2007; Maturo, 2009). At the same time, neoliberal requests on performativity and emotional management are not always accepted passively. In fact, employees can be very aware of the affective practices imposed by corporations and other organizations, and may engage in various forms of resistance (Flam, 2002). Within this Symposium, Lund's paper (2025) explores precisely how embodied emotional investments may simultaneously resist such pressures. In the same vein, Breeze's contribution (2025) shows how even imposter feelings can serve as a form of resistance, that opens up space for collective reflection on exclusionary academic cultures.

Nevertheless, a passionate attachment to the work is also reported by many reflexive accounts of academic life (Cannizzo, 2018): an attachment fuelled by the writing, the research,

the discovery and the perception of bringing subjective value to the academic field, which is experienced in a quite ambivalent manner — "I love my work but I hate my job", to quote an early career academic in Australia (Osbaldiston et al., 2019). Passion and commitment often translate into long hours and bulimic patterns of work, erasing boundaries between work and life and high levels of mobility (Gill, 2016). In such dynamics, the issue of time management and (the illusion of) choice become crucial. Mullaney and Shope (2012) offer the concept of *emoting time*, describing how employers present emotional autonomy as a result of temporal autonomy. In academic work, the freedom to choose a research topic is portrayed as a form of empowerment, yet the emotional toll of managing time becomes an individual burden. If schedules are unmanageable and create emotional wounds, the responsibility is attributed to the individual. In other words, it's as if time management depended solely on the individual, since the choice of the research topic is up to them. The neoliberal university thus capitalizes on feelings like, on the one hand, guilt, shame, pride, stress, and envy, but also, on the other, on passion and pleasure, using them as a mechanism to cognitively restructure work time, thus personalizing systemic processes.

Indeed, it is quite easy to feel the pleasure of engaging in the work — if one can enjoy it despite tight deadlines (unsurprisingly, texts praising *slow professorship* have found an eager audience [Berg & Seeber, 2016]). This pleasure can stem from enriching a research field, or from enriching a reputation — most of the time both. Indeed, it is not surprising that academic work is an attractive career option for many, as it includes the opportunity to build global networks with like-minded colleagues, engage in work with social value, committing in inspiring activities, working with students, and having some degree of control over one's schedule and research topics, contributing to a body of knowledge, as Edwards and Ashkanasy point out (2018).

In sum, ambivalent feelings undoubtedly run through the emotional life of academia, shaping experiences in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. These considerations led us to the core question we confronted: how do emotions structure academic work (differently from other kinds of work), particularly in contemporary academia? How does the academy extract value from and actively elicit certain emotions — especially from some individuals more than others?

3 The Gendered "Academic Housework"

Yet like any other emotional landscape, such dynamics have a gendered dimension that intersects with career position, age, and institutional context (Hochschild, 1979 & 1983; for an intersectional perspective on gender and emotions see also Sassatelli & Ghigi, 2024). As many critical scholars have pointed out, meritocracy — a set of discourses and practices entrenched to the neoliberal academia that ranks and rewards academics based on their "merit" (Scully, 1997; Thornton, 2013) — risks legitimizing existing inequalities based on gender, as well as other social categories, as it sees the position of élites and privileged groups as based on their ability and talent and the one occupied by traditionally marginalized groups — like women, as well as low-income workers, racialized individuals, sexual minorities, and others — as the result of their lack of commitment and productivity (Scully, 1997; Rottenberg, 2018; Fraser, 2022; Gaiaschi, 2023). This makes women's emotional work to manage academic pressure — including feelings of anxiety, guilt and inadequacy — more demanding than men's. A further implication of neoliberal narratives on meritocracy — as it has been pointed out by feminist care economics — is the fact that it excludes care from meritorious activities (Tronto, 1993;

The Care Collective, 2020). This holds true for academia as well, where inequality is often structured along gendered lines, as it has been highlighted in previous contributions in this journal (see the Symposium *Don't Fix Women, Fix Academia? Gender Inequality in National Academic Contexts* in Cois et al. [eds.], 2023). Moreover, feminized "academic housework" is considered to be of lesser value than scientific outputs (Guarino & Borden, 2017; Winslow, 2010).

Indeed, gender is a fluid component of everyday practices, a boundary that can be raised or lowered depending on context. Like any organization, academic ones also use gender as a cultural resource to structure relationships formally and informally, shaping policies and practices — resulting, once again, in unequally distributed emotional burdens. As a matter of fact, women, in particular, are socialized into care work and emotional labor, with relational and empathetic styles that expose them to greater risks of burnout. Gender hierarchies in academia reinforce this, assigning emotional labor unevenly — women often occupy less prestigious roles that bear heavier expectations for care and emotional support, with little ability to refuse them, so that they are required to engage in a higher degree of emotional labour than men (Bellas, 1999; Hort et al., 2001). As in other domains, certain gendered qualities are assumed to be naturally transferable to professional roles, legitimizing organizations' appropriation of these traits. This creates a *surplus* of emotional labor — of course, unrecognized, unmeasured, and unpaid.

Nevertheless, gender cultures can also be a tool to *challenge* the emotional dispositions of neoliberal academia, as they can provide models of behaviours and attitudes inspired by the ethics of care and practices of caring-with (Askins & Blazek, 2017). By focusing on moments of joy, resilience and fulfillment in their collective biographies, Gannon and colleagues (2019) suggest how collaborative work, made of creativity, collegiality and communication, can challenge managerial, individualized academia:

> Joy was there in the positioning of women together around a big table, in the silent periods of writing, separate yet together. It bubbled up as each of us read our stories aloud, as we listened to each other, and gave feedback (p. 50).

A further challenge to individualistic practices comes from mentoring, which — according to Gherardi and colleagues (2024) — can be "a collegial and distributed practice of reciprocity, care, and support happening in the interstices of academia" (p. 13). In the same vein, the essay by Bonfanti, Cannito and Naldini (2025) in this Symposium highlights positive feelings of resilience and solidarity towards colleagues in vulnerable conditions. Likewise, on a more macro-level, actions envisaged to foster a more "care-oriented" perspective on productivity should be taken in order to make recruitment and promotion practices fairer and more inclusive. On this point, the European Commission recommends assessing research quality rather than quantity, not relying on journal-based metrics, as well as evaluating soft skills and ensuring that administrative responsibilities, student supervision, and marking workloads are transparent and valued alongside research outputs (EIGE, 2022).

4 This Symposium

Against this backdrop, the articles included in this Symposium explore, from various perspectives, the ways in which emotions structure academic work in contemporary universities. The opening contribution to this Symposium, by Lucas Brunet and Ruth Müller (2025), introduces the insightful concept of "emotional cultures" to examine how shared emotional norms

and practices shape academics' professional experiences. Through multi-sited analysis, they come to identify three distinct emotional cultures in contemporary academia: an emotional culture of anxiety, prevalent among precarious early-career researchers, who face competitive, precarious job markets; an emotional culture of eco-anxiety, common among ecological scientists who are deeply concerned about environmental crises; and an emotional culture of hype and restraint in research funding and evaluation activities. Their original analysis of emotional cultures in contemporary academia demonstrates that emotions have epistemic effects and influence the type of research that scientists pursue and the criteria by which reviewers deem projects fundable.

The different ways of investigating emotions and affect in academia are, instead, the topic of the second essay by Rebecca Lund (2025) who, drawing on her past research, reflects on and evaluates three specific theoretical approaches to agency and emotion. Through comparative analysis of Feminist Governmentality, Feminist New Materialism, and Feminist Practice Theory, she demonstrates that the latter — grounded in Marx and Merleau-Ponty's materialism — provides the most coherent framework for understanding how academics' embodied emotional investments may simultaneously reproduce and resist the ideological structures of academic capitalism.

Recognizing that pressures to conform to the ideal of the ever-productive, disembodied academic are not experienced equally, the third contribution by Sara Bonfanti, Maddalena Cannito and Manuela Naldini (2025), examines how these expectations are differently negotiated by scholars living with chronic illnesses. Drawing on interviews with Italian academics affected by chronic conditions, the article highlights, on the one hand, the additional emotional burden faced by scholars with chronic illnesses in dealing with stigma, concealing vulnerability, and conforming to the normative ideal academic; on the other hand, the analysis also brings to light positive feelings of resilience and solidarity, fostered through practices of mutual support and the redefinition of academic belonging.

The fourth contribution to this Symposium, by Maddie Breeze (2025), challenges the idea of imposter feelings as an individual issue, and redefines them as socially and politically situated, shaped by intersecting structures of inequality within academia. Drawing on queer feminist theory and employing autoethnographic, collaborative, creative, and fictionalising methods, Breeze contributes to a queer feminist sociology of emotions that embraces imposter feelings as sources of situated knowledge and subversive agency, enabling collective resistance to exclusionary academic cultures.

All the contributions in our Symposium show that emotions are experienced on an individual level, even if they are organized, mediated or shaped by both the organization culture and structure. This also means that they can be reinterpreted or transformed precisely through the academic community, moving "beyond the privileging and perpetuation of the fallacy of an emotionally and bodily detached, always-already stable researcher" (Todd, 2020, p. 492). Many authors have broken the silence of shame surrounding their personal experiences of academic failure or rejection in recent years. Mentors have found new ways to prepare their doctoral students for the logic of "publish or perish", demonstrating the potential for improvement that critiques of one's work and rejections can offer. Additionally, working groups have sought to reframe the meaning of academic performance, highlighting its broader significance. Many authors now propose to extend inward academic reflexivity outward, as care-based politics to challenge the affective and material expansions of managerial features of academic work. This entails repoliticising emotions through narratives challenging the "leadership", "success", and "excellence" myths (Tijdink et al., 2013) and creating informal academic spaces of discussion,

largely silent in peer review (Askins & Blazek, 2017).

In 2016, Johannes Haushofer, an assistant professor at Princeton University, gained attention for sharing a "CV of Failures" via a tweet. This unconventional document featured sections such as "Research Funding I Did Not Get" and "Academic Positions and Fellowships I Did Not Get", sparking widespread online discussion. Haushofer explained his motivation for publicly showcasing his setbacks and disappointments, highlighting the contrast between the visibility of successes and the often-hidden nature of failures. Reflecting on the unexpected response, he remarked, "Most of what I try fails, but these failures are often invisible, while the successes are visible", later joking that "This darn CV of Failures has received way more attention than my entire body of academic work" (*The Guardian*, 2016, quoted in Edwards & Ashkanasy, 2018, p. 178).

For our part, we also wanted to contribute to breaking the silence within the academic profession, as part of our public role as sociologists.

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