

Emotion as a student resource in higher education

Item Type	Journal article
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Citation	Bartram, B. (2014) 'Emotion as a Student Resource in Higher Education', British Journal of Educational Studies, 63 (1) pp. 67-84 doi: 10.1080/00071005.2014.980222
DOI	10.1080/00071005.2014.980222
Publisher	Taylor & Francis
Journal	British Journal of Educational Studies
Download date	2025-05-16 13:31:55
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/2436/615142

'Affective strategizing?' – an analysis of emotion as a student resource in Higher Education

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Introduction

In a bid to investigate a relatively under-explored aspect of staff-student interactions (Van Kleef, Homan & Cheshin, 2012), this paper offers a critical examination of the ways in which emotion is sometimes utilised as a resource by students in Higher Education (HE). It begins by reviewing a number of psychological and sociological studies of emotion, before moving on to an examination of the role of emotion in the HE context. Devised as a qualitative case study located in a modern English university, the paper in part adopts a discursive psychology approach to explore students' use of emotion as a bargaining tool in emailed requests for study concessions. It also makes use of interview data collected from 12 university staff to provide additional perspectives on the issues at hand. The paper and subsequent discussion is structured around the following research questions which underpin the enquiry:

1. In what ways do students' make (strategic) use of emotion in written requests for study concessions?
2. What are staff views of students' tactical use of emotion?

Through exploring these issues, it is hoped the paper will shed some light on this less researched area, and in doing so, contribute to improved understandings of staff-student interactions and behaviour in an increasingly competitive and changing HE climate. It is further hoped that this will lead to practical recommendations for student and staff induction programmes, and provide a more general basis for reflecting on, questioning and understanding social behaviour in HE.

Literature review

As many commentators have noted, “the past decade or so has seen a huge surge of interest in the realm of emotions” (Gillies, 2011: 185). As a topic of enquiry, emotion rests on a long-established tradition in psychology, though as Gendron (2010:371) points out, psychologists have “yet to converge on a definition of emotion and may have difficulty doing so in the future”. The topic appears to be of growing research interest to educationists too (Christie et al, 2008: 567), with several studies exploring the notion in the HE context. The majority of these are primarily focused on students’ emotional reactions to the HE environment/experience (e.g. Beard, Clegg and Smith, 2007, Cramp et al, 2012, Christie et al, 2008) and/or the development of emotional literacy (e.g. Mortiboys, 2005). Rather than exploring the development of emotional ‘skills’ or mapping emotional responses against experiential trajectories in HE, however, this paper attempts to examine the ways in which emotion is sometimes *used* as a resource by students in HE to influence the feelings and behaviours of others – an area which is relatively under-researched (Van Kleef, Homan & Cheshin, 2012). As such, the focus is on examining the potentially strategic utilisation of emotion, drawing on Edwards’ (1999:278) understanding of emotion as ‘a way of talking’. Wilkins (2013:397) links this notion to a discursive psychology approach and suggests that an analysis of emotive discourse can be used to investigate “ways of accounting for the self and the socio-linguistic activity of affirming and validating particular constructs of reality.”

This kind of emotional bargaining – or ‘affective strategizing’ (AS) as I refer to it here – has been explored in a number of psychological studies. Wilkins (2013:401) echoes this again in his discussion of the way in which “emotion can be understood to constitute a powerful rhetorical ploy,” often used to legitimate and secure support for partial accounts of reality. Li and Roloff (2006) employ the term ‘strategic emotion’ to describe the same phenomenon. They discuss the centrality of emotions in bargaining situations, where they have power as influence strategies. Barry (1999:94) provides a useful definition for this strategic affective deployment, describing it as “the wilful use of emotional display or expression as a tactical gambit by an individual negotiator”. As such, this understanding of emotion goes against interpretations that root the concept in irrationality and see it as a potentially debilitating impediment (e.g. Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). Barry’s and Li and

Roloff's perspective thus sees the construct as a resource tactically utilised to fulfil the purpose of securing agreement or concession, rather than as something which obstructs rationally motivated intentions:

“A strategic negotiator assesses the need for specific emotions, plans for the display of such emotions, and executes the plan with appropriate expressive behaviour.” (Li and Roloff, 2006:179)

Studies such as this see emotion as part of an individual's psychological repertoire, and with regard to AS, allow for the possibility that “individuals might have a dispositional tendency to emotionally manipulative behaviour” (Austin et al, 2007: 180). This treatment of emotion is sometimes questioned by sociologists (e.g. Boler, 1999, Marinetti et al, in press) who are more inclined to see emotions as socially situated in relational dynamics. As such, emotions become un-tethered from individual psychology and relocated within social structures and power hierarchies, where they may fulfil the instrumental purpose of negotiating positional advantage. This view clearly resonates with the construct of AS discussed here, and as Ahmed (2004:119) suggests:

“Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective.”

Bloch (2012:7) describes this theoretical positioning as falling within the interactional approach to emotions, which “highlights the role of social and cultural factors in their development and display.” Like Boler, Bloch is interested in the ways in which emotion is involved in the asymmetrical distribution of power in HE. In her study of emotions in academia, she draws on Clark's (1990) theory of emotional micro-politics, discussing the use of emotions as a positioning tool in day-to-day interactions. Clark's theory uses the notion of social space to reflect how power positions within social hierarchies accrue different interactional rights, and identifies the role of emotional practices in negotiating these rights in an HE climate increasingly dominated by competitive relationships, ideas to which I will return below.

At this juncture, it is useful to turn to other sociological perspectives for a broader examination and contextualisation of the place and evolution of emotion in modern society. Gillies (2011:185) comments on how “emotionality as an ethos has spread across formal structural social networks, spanning business, media, politics, education, welfare, criminal justice and law as well as cultural meanings and practices.” Mestrovic (1997) echoes these ideas in his description of post-emotional society. He uses this term to describe what he sees as growing social tendencies towards conspicuous emotional display. His point is not just that we are becoming less inhibited about revealing our private emotional reactions, but that emotional display is increasingly accepted and exploited as an advantaging strategy, in the interests of impression management. This sociological view clearly resonates with the psychological perspective expressed above. Mestrovic extends this discussion, however, by arguing that overt displays of emotion have become increasingly mediatised, and to a degree normalised, through such phenomena as reality television and confessional talk shows, where celebrities often ‘bear all’ in a calculated quest for greater exposure, higher ratings and careerist advantage. Calvert (2004) reiterates these same points, referring to growing exhibitionistic and voyeuristic tendencies in the press and on television. He ties such tendencies to greater cultural needs for self-disclosure and social validation. These ideas are arguably reflected in Giddens’ (1992) analysis of individualisation and the contingent and dis-embedded nature of late modern life which amplify the need for trust, security and connection. From this perspective, (emotional) self-disclosure is seen as an important strategy for securing trust, approval and developing relationships.

Suler (2004) considers the ways in which technological environments increasingly provide contexts for such social interactions and communications. He focuses on the wealth of interactional possibilities that exist online and introduces the notion of the ‘online disinhibition effect.’ He argues that the personal distance afforded by electronic exchanges can encourage some of us to be more emotionally expansive, freed from the potentially inhibiting effects of instantaneous face-to-face reactions in real time. He also refers to the idea of toxic disinhibition whereby certain individuals may experience a sense of catharsis by indulging in unfettered forms of emotional expression. Such

tendencies, as Suler acknowledges, will of course be influenced by many variables, not least of which personality styles.

Returning to specifically educational contexts, much of the work of Ecclestone and Hayes (2009, for example) is critical of a perceived emotional fixation in education. The authors argue that the education system in the UK has become preoccupied with the affective dimension of schooling, and are highly critical of what they describe as a growing therapeutic orientation in education which foregrounds learners' emotional experiences and self-esteem at the expense of broader educational purposes. Their concerns not only relate to the way in which the education system thus becomes implicated in the processes described above by Mestrovic, but also to the associated reductive effects – an educational climate is created, they argue, which infantilises pupils and students, fosters an ethos of 'edu-care' and ultimately supports a view of learners as vulnerable and hapless. Hey (2011:209) among others, however, is keen to counter such arguments which she believes are based on a "lazy conflation of the affective with personal therapy".

Leathwood and Hey (2009) extend this analysis in their discussion of the emotional dichotomy that has dominated education. They discuss traditional views of education as a medium for developing rationality and a process which involves the subjugation of the irrational and emotional. This conflict is anchored in oppositional views which reflect Cartesian dualism and gender binaries in terms of the rational masculine and the emotional feminine. They suggest – perhaps somewhat contentiously - that the distaste for educational interest in affect noted in Hayes' and Ecclestone's work relates to reactionary concerns about social change in HE, based on "conventional class-based disdain about the incursion of 'the masses'" (435):

"Both resistance to the affective turn in HE and resistance to the incursion of the masses draw on a discourse of dumbing down, a pollution of the ivory tower, and evoke a powerful binary: purity/danger, pristine/contaminated, rational/irrational" (435).

Clearly, there are very different viewpoints on and understandings of the role, place and function of emotion in the education system. This variety of positions if nothing else perhaps serves to illustrate that educational

institutions, as Gillies observes, “have an uneasy relationship with emotions,” (2011:186) and that affect is strongly embedded in multi-faceted ways and relationships in HE. The paper will now turn to a more detailed examination of the research approach adopted to explore the emotional phenomenon at the centre of this study – students’ affective strategising in HE.

Research context and design

The first stage of the study makes use of a discursive psychology approach to examine students’ tactical emotional deployment. Discursive psychology offers a number of advantages that sit well with this enquiry. Firstly, as Wiggins and Potter explain, this approach “studies how psychology is constructed, understood and displayed” (2007:73) and “is focused on discourse because it is the primary arena for action, understanding and inter-subjectivity” (73). This position is based on a set of central observations about the nature of discourse that again reflect the understandings shared by this study – that discourse is both constructed (through words and categories) and constructive, in that it is actively used “to present particular versions of the world” (77); and that discourse is action-oriented and socially situated, inasmuch as it aims to achieve a particular goal in a specific social context (Moss, 2008).

Methodologically, discursive psychology involves a preference for working with naturalistic materials in that it makes use of data which have not been generated purely through the research process, hence “it captures data as it happens” (79), from real-life encounters (Moss, 2008). And furthermore, “a typical study will build on a collection of some phenomenon” (81). To reflect these tenets, the study utilises a collected dataset of 41 student emails as a basis for exploring students’ use of emotive discourse in the context of a modern university. The emails analysed for the purposes of this project were all those received during the course of one academic year requesting one particular concession – an assignment extension. As such, the paper does not claim to deliver generalizable insights but rather to offer an illustrative and tentative account of affective strategizing in a current educational setting. Given that the setting – a modern, urban university in the English Midlands –

arguably shares many similarities with other institutions in terms of student demographics, location and curricular provision, there is some basis for arguing that this 'typicality' may support the credibility and indeed relateability (Hammersley, 1990) of the findings beyond their immediate context.

Clearly, it is important to deal with a number of potential criticisms that could be levelled at this paper. First of all, using student emails as a source of data might seem ethically questionable. After all, emails represent confidential exchanges between tutor and students. Their use can, however, be defended and not just on the basis of their representing a useful and extant dataset, commensurate with the discursive psychology data preference described above. Though students were initially unaware that their emails may be selected for inclusion in this project, announcing the research intention at the beginning of the year to all those who might subsequently contact me is likely to have produced reactive effects that would have compromised the project's validity. Given that the very nature of this enquiry required an analysis of 'emotion in use,' student awareness of the research interest would thus have been somewhat problematic. In order to offset the ethical sensitivities involved, no extended quotations will be used in the paper to ensure student anonymity.

Furthermore, at the end of the year in question, the 43 potential students involved were all contacted by email and asked if they objected to the content/themes of their emails being subjected to analysis in connection with this project. They were given assurances of anonymity and were blind copied into the message, so that their identities were hidden from the other recipients. Only 2 respondents objected, hence a total set of 41 emails have been included in the analysis below. Discussion in the following sections will focus only on the generic nature of emotive scenarios and language volunteered by the students, i.e. their 'emotive discourse' – described by Edwards (1999:271) as "purposeful assemblies of versions of reality and cognition". Furthermore, there is no attempt to question the veracity of the student claims or to belittle the nature of the predicaments involved. The aim is solely to explore and provide some evidence of the ways in which emotion is tactically deployed as a bargaining tool.

Semi-structured interviews with 12 members of staff from the faculty of education and health were additionally carried out. In an attempt to achieve a representative sample within the confines of a small-scale qualitative study, the sample selected included an equal balance of male and female participants, whose ages ranged from 28 to 59. 10 of these were teaching staff with recent experience of teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, while 2 interviewees worked in support/administrative roles that involved routine contact with students. Their exact positions have not been named to preserve anonymity. The interviews invited staff to share their views on students' AS, the contexts which underpinned this, and their explanations for such behaviour. The aim of including the staff angle was to provide a broader perspective on the issues involved, and the extent to which staff experiences reflected commonalities. A particular interest was in exploring the ways in which staff accounted for their perceptions. It is hoped that the combination of techniques involved here has supported the trustworthiness of the findings by contributing to more rounded and robust impressions.

The first stage of analysis involved categorising the situations described by the students to contextualise and support their requests for an extended assignment submission deadline. This initial analysis therefore examined to what extent students contextualised their request by drawing on emotive discourse. The second involved a more detailed exploration of language. Analysis of staff interviews was based on a system of thematic coding to categorise the range and types of views expressed by staff.

Findings

Research question 1 - In what ways do students' make strategic use of emotion in written requests for study concessions?

An analysis of the 41 collected emails reveals a restricted set of circumstances that were used to provide a context for the requests. Some emails drew on more than one of the categories below, hence the categorisations total exceeding the number of emails received. The third column shows examples of language items used within each category to illustrate the classification process:

Emotional 'category'	Number of emails	Examples of language items used
Personal anxieties/difficulties	20	Stress, stressed, down, sleeplessness, anxiety attacks, worry, fear of failure, not coping, fear, poor attitude, upset, lost, STD tests, concerned, uncomfortable, inadequate, getting nowhere, having a hard time, arguments, disappointment, scared, medication, shattered, intimacy difficulties,
Mental health difficulties	14	Depression, inner demons, breakdown, burnout, psychotherapy, suicidal, out of balance, counselling
Family-related difficulties	12	Finance, childcare, pregnancy, single parent status, divorce, death, grief, illness, relationship break-up
Criminal activities	5	Physical assault, burglary, attack, police, drugs

It is worth noting that potentially more predictable issues were not volunteered in the emailed requests. For example, none declared issues of physical medical conditions, competing work-related demands, pressures of balancing commitments or problems of time management. The accounts constructed in the emails were all structured around emotionalised self-declarations, and often developed with great detail and colour, as evident in some of the language items included in the table. One possible challenge to this assertion might suggest that the issues raised in the students' emails do not constitute *tactical* use of emotion – the students concerned are simply drawing on extenuating circumstances with strongly emotive dimensions. This may indeed be the case. However, two issues are worth highlighting. The relatively high number of requests received (43 requests out of 203 students taught by the researcher in the year in question); and the reliance on overt displays of emotionalised semi-sensationalism to bolster their requests (cf. Calvert, 2004), hardly any of which draw on more pedestrian and perhaps predictable rationales, as mentioned. This may of course be a reflection of the complex realities of ('non-traditional') students in a modern university. On the

other hand, perhaps it does illustrate Mestrovic's (1997) post-emotional landscape discussed above – extended and overtly emotionalised narratives geared towards manipulating a specific advantage (Li & Roloff, 2006) – and perhaps in some cases cynical strategies of impression management. Given that emails constitute an electronic form of communication, this may additionally support Suler's (2004) online disinhibition effect.

Research question 2 - What are staff views on students' tactical use of emotion?

The findings from the interviews will be organised in three sections, discussing 1) the extent to which staff believed AS occurs; 2) the emotional contexts which students drew on; 3) staff accounts of the reasons for such behaviour.

With regard to the first point, all 12 interviewees indicated that they experience students' affective strategising as a fairly routine aspect of their working lives, with 10/12 perceiving this as a growing tendency. In terms of the specific goals motivating the bargaining behaviour, a common set of requests for academic concessions/favours was identified by staff:

- Extended deadlines
- Additional tutorials
- (multiple) reading of drafts (in a context where department policy dictates that draft work is not read prior to submission)
- Higher grades
- Allocation of an alternative supervisor/tutor
- Lenient marking/special consideration (“it takes away the ability to be harsh”).

In relation to the second point above, all interviewees were asked to comment on whether students drew on emotionalised narrative to contextualise and justify their requests. Staff responses reflected the same emotional categories identified in the student email analysis above, and in terms of frequency of mentioning, were almost evenly split between personal difficulties and family-related issues. There were 21 references to personal anxieties and difficulties, the majority of which related to students reporting a general sense of stress and pressure, and in some cases, more specific phobias and mental health conditions, as illustrated by the comments below:

“Oh yeah, they pull at your heartstrings, ‘I’m so stressed, I can’t cope, my life’s terrible,’ and I need this grade...”

“The emotional cards come out like ‘I’m under a lot of pressure, it’s stressing me out, I will fail this, it’s not fair.’”

“I hear a lot of mental health issues, very often depression, stress-related anxiety, this gets trotted out quite a lot.”

Family-related difficulties were equally prominent in the interviews (25 references), and these again echoed many of the themes expressed in the student emails such as parental divorce, deaths, illness, and so on. As one respondent noted, for example:

“Bereavement in the family crops up all the time, and it’s amazing how far some families seem to stretch and how many nans some people apparently have!”

Two recurrent themes emerged during these discussions. The first was the difficulty of knowing whether the circumstances mentioned by the students were true (“it’s just so hard to know whether it’s genuine or not and you’re being played”), and the second related to a perception that some students present layered emotional accounts, “sometimes even a catalogue of quite intense issues, entering into parts of their personal lives that you don’t need to know about”:

“You get this kind of stacking up of emotional stories. It starts off with ‘I’m stressed’, this is low-hierarchy, then they add the next layer, the move to self-illness or family illness perhaps, more convincing, and then clinch it with a death, top level.”

Alongside these categories, the interviews revealed one additional context mentioned by students that was not present in the student email sample – 8 references to emotional stress generated by conflicts with individual members of university staff:

“I’ve had some students saying they’re distraught because they don’t get on with such and such a tutor, and that’s putting them at a disadvantage. I’m not saying that doesn’t happen but I do wonder in some cases. I overheard a

conversation on the car park earlier in the year between 2 students I didn't know. One said they'd made a complaint about a tutor and the other student asked 'well, was there really a problem with him?' and the other student said 'well, no, there wasn't really, but I might get a bit more support now', or words to that effect."

Finally, some staff mentioned their awareness of students occasionally using emotion on the one hand to flatter, and on the other, to threaten. Though these comments were only raised by 2 members of staff, the strategic inflection is clear in both cases:

"A lot of students can be very sophisticated in how they use their emotions and play their femininity, almost flirting at times when they're asking for a favour."

"There was one incident with a student once, I refused to give him an extension, his response was, after a bit of a drawn-out discussion – 'did you know I'm a boxer?' It was ridiculous, and I wasn't scared, but the threat was clearly there."

So far, then, the data suggest wide agreement on AS as a common HE phenomenon, the particular goals behind the behaviour and the emotionalised narratives drawn on. However, what factors are perceived to lie behind such behaviour? An analysis of the reasons offered by the interviewees reveals a complex amalgam of 4 inter-related areas:

- Student-related factors
- Factors relating to pre-university education
- HE-related factors
- Broader socio-cultural factors

These will now each be examined in turn.

Student-related factors

Several respondents located the drivers of such behaviour within student psychology (cf. Austin et al, 2007), often perceiving this kind of strategising as a function of certain deficits. 7 interviewees connected AS with students who lacked qualities such as stamina, resilience, sufficiently developed social skills,

emotional intelligence or maturity. 1 respondent related the behaviour to a perceived lack of motivation:

“A significant number opt into HE for reasons that aren’t about personal development, interest in the subject or even a career – they come into HE as something to do, the line of least resistance and effort in life. Once they opt in, the commitment isn’t there, so they have to resort to desperation tactics, exploiting life events to get themselves through year after year.”

3 staff members linked AS with a lack of self-esteem:

“I think it has something to do with their lack of self-esteem over being able to cope with academic issues.”

In this connection, 2 respondents suggested that students would sometimes resort to this behaviour as a way of pre-empting and coping with negative self-expectations based on previous performance:

“I think they start to use these emotional strategies in order to try and compensate for something they feel they haven’t done or they can’t do, so it’s either in anticipation of an event they don’t think they can do or they already have a very strong feeling they’re likely to fail, and a lot of that is based on what their previous educational experiences have been.”

For another respondent, however, low self-esteem simply created “a need for attention, sympathy and validation.” Several respondents related a lack of resilience or esteem to the need experienced by some students to use AS as a way of offsetting blame and avoiding personal responsibility for perceived failings or preparedness:

“I think it’s just the way that they do things and, it’s a thing of lowest control, it’s kind of locating the problems onto somebody else, and not accepting that they could have done this or that. So there’s an emotional transference of responsibility there, and a whole range of subtleties within that.”

2 participants suggested that there may even be a degree of social learning, whereby instances of successful AS are shared and incorporated into other peers’ behavioural repertoires by example:

“So if one student gets something in a particular way I think there’s then information passed around between friends, like ‘this is what you need to say’ or ‘this is who you need to say it to if you want such and such, additional time, support, or whatever.”

There was some discussion as to whether particular types of students engaged in AS more than others. Most interviewees felt it was difficult to comment on gender, given the preponderance of female students on the courses taught. Otherwise, there was a view that younger undergraduates lacking maturity may be more inclined to AS, though this was disputed by others, and other respondents felt mature undergraduates and post-graduate students – often perceived to have more complicated lives – engaged more frequently in AS.

Pre-university factors

4 participants expressed the view that experiences at school and/or college may have contributed to “training students to use their emotions tactically”. All of the 4 referred to what they perceived to be “overly nurturing” cultures at school and college, echoing Ecclestone and Hayes (2009), and felt that AS might be used as an attempt to create closer and more empathetic relationships in a more anonymous HE environment (cf. Bloch, 2012). 3 participants referred to school curriculum changes in recent years, with coursework having replaced previous exam-only formats, thereby creating a new space (Clark, 1990) for such behaviour:

“All the coursework and retakes now in schools have changed the relationship between the student and the teacher, the students have a more active role in that now, and I think they’ve got used to bargaining, trying to influence.”

Another commented on how growing parental awareness of such processes had led to a sense of “negotiated partnership in grading work and projects for GCSE especially,” all the more so in a climate where secondary teachers and schools perceived a need to be more responsive to parents’ wishes. Another participant suggested that ability grouping arrangements commonly used in secondary schools were also firmly implicated in engendering AS:

“Thinking about it, it’s a strategy they’ve had to acquire, ‘cos if you look back at secondary school, at 13, year 9, you are set foundation, intermediate or higher,

and you've got to make damn well sure you're in a higher group. Obviously, there's only so many kids you can fit into those groups, so if you're borderline, you've gotta do what you can to influence the best outcome – it's part of school culture.”

HE-related factors

All those interviewed expressed the view that different aspects of university life played some part in encouraging AS. Some staff felt this behaviour depended to a degree on the lecturers themselves, or more specifically staff personality, arguing that “students soon learn who they can break ground with and who they can't”:

“They want something and so they play people – they know I'm a soft touch, so they know I'll probably be receptive and cave in.”

One interviewee, again echoing Clark (1990), felt that some staff members presented themselves in overly familiar ways to students, and talked about how “blurring lines like this maybe encourages and opens up more space for emotional interactions – and so students may feel it's appropriate to use these situations as legitimate leverage”. Another participant candidly acknowledged his occasional complicity in this – “this isn't a one-sided thing, I'm aware of feeding on emotional stuff from students – lecturers get something out of this too.” For another respondent, this was less a result of staff personality and more to do with a university culture that emphasises approachability and staff openness:

“We pretty much have an open door policy, so if someone knocks on the door, we're there and we'll say 'Right, what's the problem, come in,' we're very reactive. I suppose having this strong relationship with students might sometimes encourage them to be more emotional with us.”

Several respondents echoed these sentiments. One suggested that from the moment students enter university, “they get showered with attention for the first few weeks, and they think of us almost as friends in some cases.” Another interviewee described a similar perception of a university climate that prioritises close connections:

“I think we’ve really bought into a pastorally obsessed culture here – ‘if you’ve got any problem, come into my office and talk to me’ – this establishes itself right from induction, and is carried on and intensified. It’s not formalised as such but there is a pervasive discourse here, the construction of what a lecturer is here is very paternalistic.”

Another respondent felt that this kind of culture was partly generated by the “nature of what we teach – we’re still teaching them study skills modules. I mean, these modules have no content – so we make friends with them to get them through – you have to pretend to be their friend to keep them on board.” This perception of a need to ‘keep students on board’ was mentioned several times in the interviews, and particularly in connection with course evaluations. 3 respondents commented that they prioritised emotionally open relationships with students because of their concern to receive positive evaluations:

“I probably over-emphasize emotional relationships with students because I want them to enjoy the sessions and the module, and equally, I want positive evaluations.”

“I need to get good module evaluations here, and I think students know that, and that makes us vulnerable. When students try things on with me emotionally, it’s in the back of my mind that I can’t be harsh because they might write bad things in their evaluation.”

Though such views were only expressed by 3 interviewees, 7 mentioned their perceptions of a target-driven institutional culture that encouraged staff to prioritise emotional involvements with students as a way of minimising complaints and appeals, and meeting retention and achievement benchmarks:

“A lot of all this stroking, getting them not to panic, it’s all about making sure we don’t lose them and meeting retention targets. Plus we’re monitored on numbers of complaints.”

“I think the NSS puts a lot of pressure on us all to overplay the pastoral side- there’s pressure on us to respond to students to keep them satisfied so they say nice things – especially when they’re paying £8500 a year!”

Two interviewees acknowledged that students themselves were similarly caught up in the same monitorial university culture, which might at times encourage them to engage in AS behaviours:

“Students are placed under increasing surveillance – taking part in online sessions, electronic formative assessments, in some ways it’s harder for them to hide now. And this places a burden on them to respond in imaginative ways.”

“We now get student advisors to ring up ‘at risk’ students and non-attending students to check up on them, and when they come back in, you usually get all sorts of emotional outpouring by way of explanation, so you don’t hold it against them.”

Taking a slightly broader view, and picking up on the finance factor, another participant suggested that overarching influences affecting the HE sector as a whole might equally explain tendencies towards AS among students:

“The general climate of HE now, the kind of neo-liberal background I think encourages a mind-set of ‘do whatever it takes to get what you need, especially as you’re paying a lot of money. Anything’s worth a shot, it’s every man or woman for himself’.”

Finally in terms of HE factors, assessment was singled out by 4 interviewees who commented on the centrality of high-stakes assessment in student life and how a perceived preoccupation with results was regarded as instrumentalising learning and encouraging AS in the process:

“The current system encourages students to fixate unhealthily on grades and marks. The constant emphasis on marks and percentages makes a lot of them hyper – it’s all about ‘marks maximisation’, never mind the learning. So if you can bring emotions into the game to serve this purpose, go for it – every little helps!”

Socio-cultural factors

Finally, a number of additional possibilities relating to the students’ socio-cultural environment were offered by interviewees. 3 suggested that a growing social tendency towards what they perceived as over-protective

parenting has contributed to a generation that has been attentionally indulged to such an extent that emotional ways of acting have become routinized. 1 participant acknowledged this in his own parenting:

“I think they have been overprotected...I was brought up by parents who lived during the Second World War and my relationship to them was loving but not touchy feely. And we didn’t have all the consumer goods, etc, ‘cos they weren’t available. But now, I buy my kids things all the time, ‘cos things are so much more affordable, and I’m constantly hugging my kids, I tell them I love them every day – I wasn’t ever told that by my parents. And I think this is now the dominant discourse in parenting, so children grow up so used to attention, so a lot of students expect it and behave in ways to get it if it’s not forthcoming.”

This idea was reiterated by another participant who related this to infantilising tendencies more generally (cf. Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). She cited the example of parents who attend university open days with their children, “asking all the questions, dominating the discussion and never letting them speak – treating them like 10 year-olds”. Another interviewee reflected on the potential influence of the media in normalising AS behaviours, referring to a “culture of emotional hysterics” on television and tabloid newspapers (cf. Mestrovic, 1997 and Calvert, 2004). Another spoke of what he saw to be “a mawkish sentimentality about all sorts of issues, which I think has entered into Higher Education too,” while a further respondent felt that AS may just be a natural consequence “of living in a more emotionally open society where we talk more about how we feel.” A particular aspect of this more open culture was raised in relation to diminishing stigmas attached to declarations of medical conditions (also evidenced in the email dataset). The participant who mentioned this had experience of processing students’ requests for extenuating circumstances, and noted a “huge growth in claims based on mental health issues over the last few years,” to the extent that expert advice had been sought and engaged in assessing and administering the requests. The interviewee acknowledged the positive changes in social attitudes and openness that arguably lie behind a greater willingness to declare such conditions, but felt slightly uncomfortable about what was perceived as strategic utilisation by some students:

“I think it’s great that people are willing to be more upfront and that there’s less stigma, but I do feel some students just see this as a benefit to be exploited – I’ve heard some say – ‘it’s really good news I’ve been diagnosed as bi-polar – I’ll get extra time!’”

Discussion and conclusions

Reviewing the above in relation to the questions underpinning the study, a number of conclusions emerge. Firstly, there are strong indications that affective strategizing is a fairly common occurrence in this particular HE environment, as corroborated by the dataset of student emails and the broad consensus among interviewees. This consensus of opinion suggests that AS is not considered to be gendered or age-related behaviour, or even a particularly novel behaviour, but the majority of those interviewed did perceive it to be a growing behavioural tendency among students. As discussed, there is inevitably a degree of uncertainty in terms of categorically establishing whether the students’ emotionalised narratives wholly conform to Barry’s (1999) notion of strategic affective deployment, but the students’ exclusive reliance on emotionalised accounts in the email sample, and the views of staff in this study suggest a strong degree of (perceived) strategic utilization.

The emotional narratives used centre on a range of personal/mental health/family-related difficulties, and these categorisations are borne out in both the emails and interviews. It was also noticeable that students sometimes drew on multiple categories to contextualise and strengthen their requests. Those interviewed again expressed wide agreement on the nature of the concessions at the heart of the behaviour – as discussed, all relating to specific forms of academic favour and advantage.

Exploring staff perceptions of AS drivers reveals a complex but collectively shared picture of 4 inter-related factors. Explanations related to student psychology, often seeing AS as a (maladaptive) coping strategy; modern school cultures that opened up more space for emotional manoeuvring (Clark, 1990); the pervasiveness of emotion in contemporary society and culture (Mestrovic, 1997); and – perhaps most persuasively of all, based on the frequency and depth of references and elements within the interviews, and something less identified in other studies – the HE environment itself. As discussed, this

category brings together a combination of influences that are seen to encourage AS. The staff accounts highlight the ways in which a target-driven institutional and sector-wide culture encourage the exploitation of staff (and student) emotion in the interests of 'customer' retention and satisfaction, against a monitorially-inflected background of targets, indicators and evaluation mechanisms. The central role played by assessment within this scenario seems of particular note - in a neo-liberal HE climate where competitive pressures have intensified and heavy emphasis is placed on high-stakes assessment, classifications and competition, as described by Bloch (2012), emotional bargaining seems to have become an important tool in the struggle to survive and thrive. And in relation to Clark (1990), AS perhaps offers students a space to navigate and negotiate new interactional rights in a HE system where 'clients' expect greater influence and position.

Clearly, it is difficult to identify straightforward recommendations on the basis of the study. All the same, a number of points are worth considering. One unanswered question concerns the extent to which the perceptions of AS here may be related to 2 factors – the nature of the institution and sample. As a 'widening participation' university, accepting students from a broader range of 'non-traditional' backgrounds, it may be that the students in question are perhaps more reliant on emotional coping resources in the potential absence of more developed forms of social and cultural capital that students elsewhere may possess. Furthermore, it is possible that the location of this case study within a faculty of health and education – arguably areas of study that appeal to students who are more 'affectively inclined' – has skewed the findings. Both these factors point towards the usefulness of further research conducted across other subject areas and institutions, and indeed research which brings in the students' own direct perspectives.

Given that the study supports Gillies (2011) suggestion that emotions appear to occupy a difficult space in education, one pragmatic recommendation arising from the study is perhaps to confront AS as a social practice in HE more openly. More open discussion and awareness raising as part of staff and student induction programmes may provide a useful platform for re-considering the nature of staff-student interactions and the pressures and issues that bear on these. Clearly AS is driven to a degree by psychology

(Austin et al, 2007), but the study illustrates how contextual factors may amplify tendencies towards the behaviour – explicit discussions on the topic in appropriate fora may at least help to promote more straightforward and less charged staff-student interactions. More broadly, the study strongly highlights how HE climate and cultural factors may be implicated in increased tendencies towards AS – altering these poses perhaps an impossible challenge in the current neo-liberal stronghold within which HE operates. All the more reason, then, perhaps to reflect on the ways in which this climate is affecting our behaviours and social micro-processes, and to consider ways in which we might - at an individual level at least - attempt to offset and mitigate some of these effects.

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