

ZIBELINE INTERNATIONAL™
PUBLISHING

ISSN: 2682-7964 (Online)

CODEN: SVSOC5

Social Values and Society (SVS)

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.26480/svs.01.2026.01.05>

Social Values & Society | SVS



RESEARCH ARTICLE

WHEN MENTORSHIP HURTS: A REFLECTIVE ACCOUNT OF CARE, BOUNDARIES, AND ACADEMIC DIGNITY

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History:

Received 26 January 2026

Revised 20 February 2026

Accepted 25 February 2026

Available online 4 March 2026

ABSTRACT

This reflective paper documents a personal experience of psychological strain, emotional destabilisation, and ethical disillusionment arising from a failed postdoctoral mentorship relationship within an academic laboratory. Written from the perspective of a senior academic who has long valued mentorship as a moral and scholarly duty, this reflective paper explores how sustained disrespect, boundary violations, and emotionally erratic behaviour by a supervisee can invert the assumed power dynamic of supervision. Through narrative reflection, this account examines emotional labour, insomnia, cognitive rumination, and the quiet erosion of trust that accompanies unprotected mentorship. This reflective paper does not seek retribution or adjudication. Instead, it aims to give language to a form of academic suffering that remains under-reported, namely the mentor who gives deeply and honestly from the heart, is destabilised emotionally, and is left unsupported.

KEYWORDS

Academic mentorship; Emotional labour; Bullying; Supervisor well-being.

1. INTRODUCTION

For most of my academic life, mentorship has never been transactional. It has been personal, patient, and rooted in care. I have always believed that guiding a training researcher of all levels to postdoctoral researcher means more than supervising outputs; it means investing time, emotional steadiness, intellectual generosity, and mostly importantly mutual respects and trusts by actionable behaviours and performances (not by words). This belief aligns with evidence showing that many academics conceptualize mentorship as a moral and identity-defining responsibility rather than a contractual task (O'Meara et al., 2014; Lawless, 2018; Peng et al., 2023). I have often told my students that science is not built only on data, but on character, responsibility, and respect (Yap, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d).

This paper is written because that belief was shaken. Not by failure in research, but by failure in conduct. What I experienced was not disagreement, nor ordinary academic tension. It was a sustained period of emotional disturbance caused by the erratic behaviour, disrespect, and boundary erosion from a postdoctoral researcher under my care. Large-scale assessments of research environments show that such unresolved relational mental stressors are a significant contributor to declining mental health among senior academics, and professors in universities (Guthrie et al., 2017; Douglas et al., 2025).

Over time, this experience compromised my emotional stability, my beauty sleep, and my sense of dignity as a mentor. Burnout research consistently shows that emotional exhaustion and insomnia emerge when personal values around care and responsibility clash with lived academic

realities (Maslach and Leiter, 2016; Watts and Robertson, 2011).

I write this not as an accusation, but as an honest reflection. Silence would have been easier. Writing is necessary.

2. THE INVISIBLE EMOTIONAL LABOUR OF MENTORSHIP

Table 1 demonstrates that emotional labour is a pervasive and structurally embedded component of mentorship across diverse professional and social environments, including teacher education, coaching, higher education, and volunteer mentoring. Despite contextual differences, a consistent pattern emerges in which mentors are required to manage complex relational dynamics, provide emotional support, and regulate their own feelings while maintaining professional roles. This emotional engagement often extends beyond formal responsibilities, blurring boundaries between professional and personal domains. Importantly, the table shows that such labour is frequently informal, unrecognized, and unevenly distributed, particularly among individuals in precarious or under supported roles such as adjunct instructors, graduate students, and volunteers. The cumulative effect is that mentorship operates not merely as a technical or instructional function but as an emotionally intensive practice sustained by interpersonal care, empathy, and relational commitment. Without adequate recognition or institutional acknowledgment, these demands may contribute to fatigue, role strain, and reduced sustainability of mentoring relationships, highlighting the need to conceptualize mentorship as an affective as well as pedagogical practice (Hamel and Jaasko Fisher, 2011; Relihan and O'Donovan, 2024; Clark and Casey, 2016; Kemp, 2022; McLeskey and Obernesser, 2024; Mõlkänen and Honkatukia, 2022).

Table 1: Emotional Labour of Mentorship Across Professional and Social Contexts.

| Text | Key Dimension of Emotional Labour | Description of Invisible Work | Implications for Mentors and Institutions | Reference |
|------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|-----------|
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10.26480/svs.01.2026.01.05

| Table 1 (cont): Emotional Labour of Mentorship Across Professional and Social Contexts. | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|--|-------------------------------|
| Teacher education | Hidden relational work | Mentoring pre service teachers involves managing complex interpersonal dynamics and transitions in authority. | Institutional recognition and structured support systems are necessary to sustain mentor well-being. | Hamel and Jaasko Fisher, 2011 |
| Teacher education | Emotional support provision | Mentoring requires sustained emotional engagement in addition to professional guidance. | Emotional competence should be formally acknowledged as a core mentoring capability. | Relihan and O'Donovan, 2024 |
| Teacher education | Overlooked emotional demands | Emotional strain experienced by mentors is frequently unrecognized within formal structures. | Lack of recognition increases fatigue and weakens mentoring effectiveness. | Clark and Casey, 2016 |
| Coaching | Emotional regulation | Coaches must continuously regulate emotions while maintaining authenticity. | Sustained emotional regulation increases vulnerability to burnout. | Kemp, 2022 |
| Coaching | Emotional performance beyond sessions | Emotional labour extends outside formal coaching interactions through ongoing relational management. | Work boundaries become blurred, intensifying emotional workload. | Kemp, 2022 |
| Higher education | Informal mentoring roles | Graduate students and adjunct instructors provide emotional support alongside teaching responsibilities. | Emotional mentoring should be acknowledged within workload policies. | McLeskey and Obernesser, 2024 |
| Higher education | Disproportionate burden | Female and minority instructors experience intensified emotional mentoring expectations. | Structural inequalities amplify emotional strain and competition. | McLeskey and Obernesser, 2024 |
| Volunteer mentoring | Relational emotional investment | Volunteers working with at risk youth experience emotionally demanding relationship building. | Training and psychological support are essential for sustainability. | Mölkänen and Honkatukia, 2022 |
| Volunteer mentoring | Unrecognized emotional effort | Emotional labour remains largely invisible despite its importance for mentoring success. | Lack of recognition undermines mentor retention and programme effectiveness. | Mölkänen and Honkatukia, 2022 |

Table 2 situates emotional labour within broader structural and institutional frameworks, revealing that the invisibility of mentoring work is not simply an individual experience but a systemic condition shaped by organisational norms, gendered expectations, and unequal recognition practices. The table highlights how institutional environments often fail to formally acknowledge emotional mentoring responsibilities, thereby limiting access to resources, support systems, and equitable workload distribution. Gender emerges as a central structural dimension, with women disproportionately performing emotional labour and experiencing intensified stress due to entrenched social expectations and organisational inequities. At the same time, the table identifies practical

strategies that can mitigate these challenges, including boundary setting, workload management, and the creation of participatory institutional spaces where mentors' experiences are recognised and valued. These responses suggest that emotional labour cannot be effectively addressed through individual coping alone but requires systemic change that integrates recognition, equity, and supportive infrastructure into mentoring cultures. By framing emotional labour as both a structural and relational phenomenon, the table underscores the importance of institutional accountability in sustaining healthy mentoring environments (Clark and Casey, 2016; Hamel and Jaasko Fisher, 2011; McLeskey and Obernesser, 2024; Porter et al., 2025).

| Table 2: Structural Challenges, Gendered Dynamics, and Mitigation Strategies in Emotional Labour of Mentorship. | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| Area | Key Issue | Description | Recommended Response or Strategy | Reference |
| Institutional recognition | Invisibility of emotional labour | Emotional mentoring work is often unacknowledged within organisational systems. | Formal recognition and policy level support are required. | Porter et al., 2025 |
| Institutional support | Lack of infrastructure | Mentors often lack structured support networks to manage emotional strain. | Develop professional support systems and mentoring communities. | Clark and Casey, 2016; Porter et al., 2025 |
| Gendered dynamics | Unequal distribution of emotional work | Women disproportionately perform emotional mentoring roles. | Institutional equity frameworks should address emotional workload distribution. | Porter et al., 2025 |
| Gendered dynamics | Intensified emotional burden | Gendered expectations increase stress and vulnerability among female mentors. | Recognition of gendered labour and redistribution of responsibilities. | Porter et al., 2025 |

| Table 2 (cont): Structural Challenges, Gendered Dynamics, and Mitigation Strategies in Emotional Labour of Mentorship. | | | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|---|-------------------------------|
| Professional coping strategies | Boundary maintenance and role clarity | Managing time, expectations, and emotional boundaries helps reduce overload. | Incorporate emotional labour management into professional training. | McLeskey and Obernesser, 2024 |
| Participatory organisational practice | Voice and representation | Creating contexts where mentors' experiences are heard helps expose hidden labour. | Establish reflective and dialogic institutional spaces. | Hamel and Jaasko Fisher, 2011 |

Mentorship is often framed as authority, but in practice it is emotional labour. It involves reassurance during uncertainty, patience during failure, and restraint when frustration arises. Recent scholarship explicitly identifies academic mentoring as sustained emotional labour that shapes professional identity and wellbeing (Lawless, 2018; Peng et al., 2023). In my laboratory, I absorbed these responsibilities willingly. I answered messages late at night and off office hours during weekends, mediated emotional episodes, and extended empathy beyond professional expectations.

What I did not anticipate was how one-directional this labour could become. Studies of supervisory relationships have shown that misalignment of expectations and values can quietly erode trust and wellbeing on both sides, particularly for supervisors who invest deeply in guidance (Pyhältö et al., 2015). Over time, the relationship shifted. Professional boundaries blurred. Respect eroded. Emotional volatility became normalised. Instead of collaborative scholarship, interactions were punctuated by unpredictability and emotional strain.

The emotional cost was cumulative. Evidence from higher education wellbeing studies indicates that prolonged exposure to such emotional

demands predicts exhaustion, sleep disruption, and disengagement, especially when institutional recognition and support are limited or absent (Douglas et al., 2025; Watts and Robertson, 2011). Each episode alone might have seemed manageable. Together, they became destabilising increasingly.

3. BEING BULLIED WITHOUT BRUISES

Figure 1 presents a minimal and visually obscured field that symbolically reflects the invisible character of emotional labour within mentoring relationships. The absence of visible structure or distinguishable features mirrors how emotional effort is often present yet unrecognized, operating beneath formal roles, institutional metrics, and observable performance indicators. Just as the visual space appears undifferentiated and difficult to interpret, the affective work of supporting, guiding, and sustaining others frequently remains concealed from formal evaluation and public acknowledgment. This visual metaphor therefore reinforces the central argument that emotional labour in mentorship is not absent but obscured, embedded in everyday relational practice while remaining largely unmeasured, undervalued, and structurally hidden.

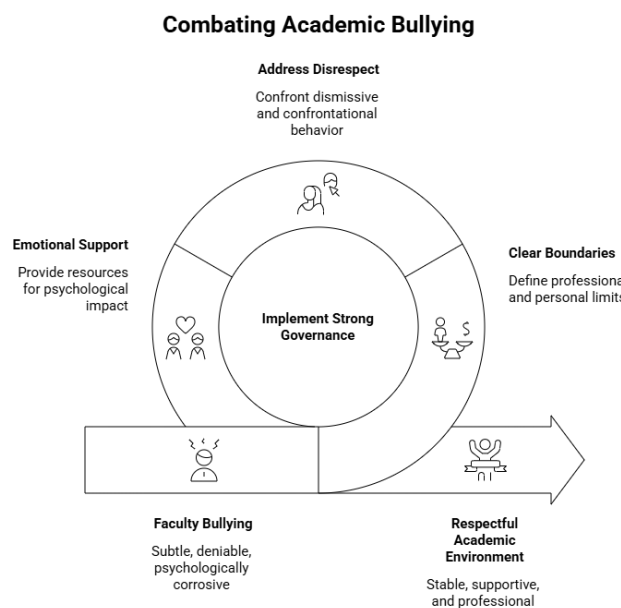


Figure 1: Visual Representation of the Hidden and Unseen Nature of Emotional Labour in Mentorship.

Bullying in academia is often imagined as hierarchical and downward. My experience challenges that assumption. Research on academic bullying has documented that faculty members can also become targets of persistent disrespect, unreasonable demands, and emotionally manipulative behaviour, particularly in environments with weak governance and unclear boundaries (Keashly and Neuman, 2014).

I found myself subjected to behaviours that were dismissive, confrontational, and emotionally destabilising. Requests were framed as entitlements. Corrections were met with hostility. Professional guidance was interpreted as personal attack. Requests of forgiveness were mixed with commandment (I want you to...) and personal family emotion (.. for the sake of ...). Such dynamics align with documented forms of relational aggression that are subtle, deniable, and psychologically corrosive (Keashly and Neuman, 2014).

What made this particularly painful was the inversion of expectation. I was the mentor. I was supposed to be the stable one. Yet, I began to feel disrespected in my own laboratory. Studies show that when supervisors experience bullying or sustained incivility, the psychological impact is amplified by role incongruity and isolation (Guthrie et al., 2017). There were no raised voices in public. No formal complaints. Just a steady drip of

emotional pressure that followed me home.

4. NIGHTS WITHOUT REST

The most telling symptom was sleep. Or rather, the lack of it. Nights became occupied by insomnia. Conversations replayed themselves. I asked myself what I had said wrong, what I could have handled better, why basic professional respect felt absent. Empirical studies consistently identify insomnia as core manifestations of academic stress and emotional exhaustion (Guthrie et al., 2017; Watts and Robertson, 2011).

I have supervised many researchers across decades. Conflict has occurred before. This was different. This felt personal, draining, and unresolved. Work-related well-being research in higher education shows that such unresolved relational stressors are among the strongest predictors of poor sleep quality and cognitive preoccupation (Douglas et al., 2025).

I woke up tired, emotionally thin, and less patient than I recognised myself to be. It is difficult to admit this as a senior academic. But honesty demands it.

5. DISAPPOINTMENT AND MORAL INJURY IN MENTORSHIP

Figure 2 conveys a visual metaphor of depth, silence, and containment that reflects the internalized emotional weight often carried by mentors. The uniform and indistinct visual field suggests not absence, but compression, where emotional experiences are absorbed, held, and rarely expressed outwardly. This representation emphasizes how mentoring frequently requires sustained emotional endurance that remains internal rather than

visible in observable performance or formal evaluation. The visual stillness symbolises the quiet persistence of care, responsibility, and psychological holding that mentors maintain over time. In this sense, the image captures the interior dimension of emotional labour, highlighting how much of mentoring work exists as a silent, enduring presence that supports others while remaining largely unseen and unarticulated.

Mentorship Disappointment and Moral Injury

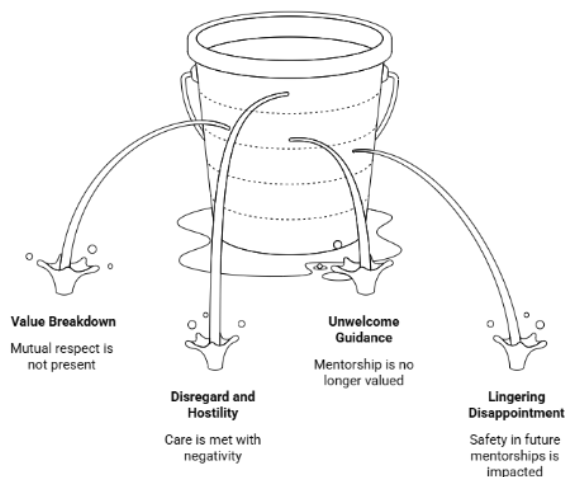


Figure 2: Conceptual Illustration of the Silent Depth of Emotional Burden in Mentoring Relationships.

The deepest wound was not stress. It was disappointment and hurts internally in the long term. I had invested trust. I had offered opportunities, resources, and protection. I had believed in potential. Research on faculty departure and disengagement highlights that such disappointment often stems from a breakdown between personal values and lived academic relationships rather than workload alone (O'Meara et al., 2014).

What I encountered instead was a breakdown of shared values. Academic mentorship assumes mutual respects. When that collapses, the mentor experiences something close to moral injury. Burnout theory frames this as value incongruence, where commitment and care are met with disregard or hostility (Maslach and Leiter, 2016).

The question is no longer how to guide, but whether guidance is even welcome. This disappointment lingered longer than anger. It reshaped how safe I felt offering myself fully in future mentorships.

6. INSTITUTIONAL SILENCE

Perhaps the most isolating aspect was the absence of institutional language for this experience. Policies overwhelmingly focus on protecting students and early-career researchers, while offering limited mechanisms for mentors to report psychological strain, bullying, or emotional harm (Guthrie et al., 2017).

The expectation seems to be endurance. Professionalism. Silence. Yet evidence from higher education wellbeing research suggests that such silence exacerbates burnout and disengagement rather than preserving professionalism (Douglas et al., 2025; Watts and Robertson, 2011).

Endurance without acknowledgment becomes erosion.

7. RECLAIMING BOUNDARIES AND SELF-RESPECT

This experience forced me to reconsider boundaries. Care without limits is not ethical. Emotional availability does not require emotional sacrifice. Mentorship should not come at the cost of mental health. Scholars of academic emotional labour argue that boundary-setting is essential for sustaining identity and wellbeing rather than diminishing compassion (Lawless, 2018; Peng et al., 2023).

I am learning to separate responsibility from overextension. To protect sleep. To insist on respect. These are not failures of compassion. They are acts of self-preservation.

8. CONCLUSION

This reflection is written for mentors who give deeply and suffer quietly

(like what I have experienced). It is written to name a form of academic pain that is rarely acknowledged. Mentorship is noble, but it must be reciprocal. Without respect, it becomes harm. I remain committed to mentoring. But I now understand that care must include care for oneself. I hope I could feel better after sharing this paper.

Lastly, in reflecting on this journey, I return to the quiet wisdom embedded in language and culture. Mentorship, when practiced with sincerity, is '*Bagai menatang minyak yang penuh*', that care given attentively, patiently, and without reserve. Yet, when such care is met without reciprocity, it leaves a residue that is not easily dismissed. The Chinese proverb '尽心尽力, 却不被珍惜' reminds us that giving one's heart and strength fully, yet not being valued, is a form of sorrow that accumulates silently rather than erupting openly. In English, the reflection is perhaps simplest and most direct, namely 'Care without boundaries becomes a burden, not a virtue.' Together, these expressions do not serve as accusations, but as acknowledgments, of emotional labour rendered invisible, of dignity tested, and of the necessity for mentors to protect their own well-being while remaining committed to ethical guidance. This reflection stands as a reminder that academic care must be reciprocal, and that sustaining mentorship also requires sustaining the mentor's mental well-being under a support system.

Ethical Statement

This reflective account is written from personal experience. All identifying details have been anonymised. The purpose of this paper is reflection, not accusation.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author declares that generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a supportive capacity during the preparation of this manuscript. These tools assisted with language refinement, structural organisation, and stylistic clarity of the text. All ideas, interpretations, reflections, and conclusions presented in this paper are the author's own and are grounded in personal experience and scholarly judgment. The author retains full responsibility for the content, accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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