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## **Critically Analysing the Ethical Dilemmas Arising from Lecturer and Student Relationships at the University: Pushing Social Boundaries for Institutional Revolution**

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### **Abstract**

The basis of the ethical dilemma discussed in this article is the controversy surrounding the personal relationship between a student and their lecturer. The social constructs of university highlight that the potential for any friendship or relationship within the institution is very uncommon and both parties usually assume that integration of their social groups cannot take place. Many people argue that the relationship of this nature can adversely affect grade attainment and fairness of judgement. We assess and reflect upon the merits of this conventional view by drawing upon a real-life case-study involving the first author (a lecturer) and the remaining six authors (his students). After considering the various arguments on both sides, and drawing upon authors such as Freud, Marx, and Sartre, we conclude that, if individuals remain honest, the relationship can only mean a greater understanding for the student and a lesser alienation complex for both parties.

**Keywords:** Academic freedom, academic ethics, alienation, COVID-19, existentialism, Freud, Sartre, Universities.



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## Introduction

The social constructs of University have been set in stone for hundreds of years. The culture of these great institutions has meant that ethical dilemmas amongst different stakeholders arise on almost an everyday basis. The ethical dilemma of whether or not a personal relationship between a student and a lecturer should be admissible is a debate which has been hardly addressed due to the lack of integration within the culture of universities, with students assuming this is not acceptable or even remotely exploreable. Discussing this dilemma in relation to theories of existentialism, justice, moral reasoning, Hofstede's view on company culture, Freud's id-ego-superego theory, and Marx's theory of alienation, we now suggest a perspective on this dilemma which is both ethical and pragmatic.

The basis of the ethical dilemma discussed in this piece is the controversy surrounding the personal relationship between a student and their lecturer. We are only discussing academic relationships which progress to friendship, which have a social side, and where student and lecturer sometimes meet off-campus. These relationships are more common at Honours, PhD, and DBA level. Romantic or sexual relationships are beyond the scope of this article.

This is an unusual project, because it does not fit neatly into any conventional discipline category such as business ethics, Corporate Social Responsibility, or Human Resource Management. It could be considered as part of academic leadership and mentoring studies, and it touches on the related issues of academic freedom and academic ethics. However, whilst it does not collect and analyse data using conventional quantitative research methods, it is considered worthwhile and innovative as an exercise of personal reflection, on the part of a lecturer-student team, about a topic which is only going to grow in significance in the future, given universities' desires to cut conventional on-campus contact especially in the wake of the COVID-19 'pandemic'. With societies becoming less hierarchical and traditional gender and racial categories being transformed and surmounted, social relationships and off-campus informal mentoring relationships between lecturers and their students will only become more common in the future. However, many people still hold conservative attitudes towards lecturer-student associations and the ethical concepts used to address these relationships may be too constraining. This is the new age of the 'portable' university and egalitarian social relationships more generally.

We propose the following Research Proposition which will guide and structure (but not unduly constrain) our subsequent discussion and reflection:

*Research Proposition:* What do the theories of existentialism, id-ego-superego, and alienation (in particular) teach us or reveal to us about the merits and validity (or otherwise) of a relationship between lecturer and students which progresses to friendship, also exists off-campus, and has a social side?

This study adds to the literature on existentialism, the id-ego-superego model of Freud, and alienation by taking classic 19th and 20th century ideas from philosophy and psychology and applying them to our 21st century university context.

## Methodology

This article is a personal reflection by the authors involving a series of past events involving the first author (the lecturer) and the remaining six authors (students of the lecturer who formed a group in the *Business & Professional Ethics* module and who submitted a joint-essay on which this article is based). The authors' use a number of classic 19th and 20th century theories on philosophy and psychology in order to make inferences and draw conclusions in relation to the study's sole Research Proposition. Readers must draw their own conclusions about the merits of the various arguments assessed and made by the author-team. Respect for privacy is not a concern as no personal or institutional names are used in the article. The students involved are all listed as co-authors of the article and they have consented to act as co-authors. The lecturer is added as a co-author with their permission. The fact that the article was originally a student essay has been made clear on the opening page; and readers can draw their own conclusions about the suitability of this approach.

Ethics committee approval is not needed as the article is simply personal reflection by the authors on some past events in which they were personally involved. It is more like a memoir or autobiography, backed up by the application of some academic literature. No data involving human subjects was specifically collected for the express purposes of this article.

There was no sample selection, as such, other than the lecturer agreeing with the students that the points raised in the students' original essay were notable and worthy of exposure to a wider audience. It was also viewed as important by the lecturer (first author) that only high-quality work be published and the lecturer was only willing to attempt to publish an essay which had scored a High Distinction grade. (The grade was approved by both internal and external moderators of the University. The lecturer ensured that the essay was one of the five pieces of work sent for internal and external moderation).

We studied the chosen theories and reflected in depth on the issues raised by the ethical dilemma and how the theories chosen could illuminate or give guidance. All of the theories used were introduced by the *Business & Professional Ethics* lecturer in class and appear in the approved Lecture Notes for the module. (Hofstede's theory was taken from the *Accounting Theory & History* module.) As such, there was no bias in the selection of the theories used. Discussion of the ideas took place firstly within the students' group and then, during and after this process, in meetings between the lecturer and various student group members (sometimes on a one-on-one basis and sometimes in larger groups). Conclusions reached are a joint-product of our various discussions, but are primarily the students' own. The lecturer made no attempt to manipulate or pressure the students to reach certain conclusions, although the students were aware of the lecturer's own personal views (in a general sense).

## Findings: Existentialism

(In this section) we take an existential look at the problem. We use Jean-Paul Sartre's existential text *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1943/2015) and the philosophical theories he presents to break down and analyse the issue. One of the most important elements of existentialism is freedom in the sense that a human being has no choice but to have freedom of choice over their own actions. Therefore, existentialism encourages human beings to

experience this freedom for themselves and to look at life independently from the social norms and stereotypes that can be used to define us (Crowell, 2004) and our place within the world. When we look at the example of a student and lecturer having a relationship outwith university, an existential viewpoint suggests that both parties are doing no wrong in forming the relationship. Social norms may point towards a student and lecturer having a relationship as unusual or even as unethical (Cooper, 1999). The relationship could be viewed by others in many ways – the student may be looking for a better grading by becoming friendly with the lecturer. The university itself or other students may deem the additional time spent with a small percentage of students as unfair on others, even if the relationship has a purely unprofessional capacity. By purely an ‘unprofessional side’, we mean that the social side of the relationship begins to outweigh the academic side as might occur, for example, where the student is researching a dissertation on football or music and the student and lecturer are both dedicated football or music fans. In such cases, it might be hard to precisely locate the barrier between academic and social talk. However, existentialism would encourage the student and the lecturer to act in line with the freedom they as human beings innately have. Public opinion would potentially be drawn away from this perspective in the widest sense and students have a complacent attitude towards the relationship dynamic to fit in with social constructs (Crowell, 2004). Sometimes it can be seen as unpopular to have a close relationship with your tutor, so, in some cases, avoidance may only be about maintaining popularity. This ‘accepted way of doing things’ has been engrained in universities for years and it is important to recognise that anything different may be a bridge too far for many students (Crowell, 2004).

If both parties genuinely seek a relationship, for whatever reason, based on their own feelings, then they should exercise this freedom of choice, despite what societal norms or greater opinion may have to say about it. This concept is presented as ‘existence preceding essence’ by Sartre. The human being is first and foremost a thinking, feeling, conscious being capable of looking at the world and taking actions free of any outside influence (Cooper, 1999). Sartre encourages humans to act in line with their own genuine feelings and in turn experience this freedom and not act in such a way as to maintain their essences. Acting in this manner would be an act of ‘bad faith’ as the being acts to maintain a certain image of themselves either in their own eyes or the eyes of others (Catalano, 1985). Sartre would call this an inauthentic act, one where the being is more concerned with the perception others may have of them than their own feelings and beliefs. An existential view in this sense does however highlight the importance of taking responsibility for one’s own actions to ensure that one acts in a moral fashion. Sartre also points out that a human being must take responsibility for their own actions as a person’s essence should be defined by the actions they take; people should not take actions merely to define themselves in a specific way (Spade, 1996). However, it is possible for human beings to view themselves through the eyes of others.

Therefore, when acting out our freedom as humans, we must act morally as an immoral act, as viewed through the eyes of others, which can affect how we view ourselves even when we act genuinely. The only limitation an existential point of view would place upon the relationship would be to ensure that both parties act through existence and not essence, that is to say they enter into and maintain the relationship for genuine reasons and not to maintain an image of themselves to others. For example, the student may enter such a relationship in a disingenuous manner to appear like the star student to others and would

thus be acting in bad faith. We think that an existentialist viewpoint here is primarily that neither the student nor lecturer are, first and foremost, students or lecturers but human beings with feelings and desires, which they must act in line with provided that they do so genuinely (Crowell, 2004). Sartre's theory of the 'look' and the 'other' may come into the argument if the student and lecturer are affected by the way in which they see the relationship through other people's eyes. Cooper (1999) views the scenario in a simple way in that teachers are encouraged to bond with students in order to increase their learning capacity and motivate them. This is known as teaching in the new belief. Despite this, students often drive the opposite function in that they want to distance themselves from the teacher and not have a relationship to motivate them – this is the old belief which respects the social barriers of scholar society.

### **Findings: Justice Theory**

John Rawls proposed his justice theory in his 1971 book *A Theory of Justice* – a theory based primarily on social contract theory. Rawls believed that by adopting his theory of justice-as-fairness several things could be achieved – basic rights for all members of society and equality of opportunity for all people. Rawls also believed that as a society we should focus on the needs of the most disadvantaged members of society. The theory of justice-as-fairness contains three fundamental principles: an 'original position' meaning that when people use the theory to solve ethical problems certain factors shouldn't be taken into consideration such as sex, race, or gender. The second, a 'veil of ignorance', is based on people adopting the first principle and assuming that they have no race, sex, gender, or other distinctive characteristics until the dilemma has been resolved so that these issues may not affect the process. Thirdly, the 'unanimity of acceptance', is the principle that all involved must agree to the decision being made before it becomes enforced.

Within these three fundamental principles, Rawls also pointed out procedural steps for implementing the theory, without these a contract between two or more parties shouldn't exist: (1) entering into the contract; (2) agreeing unanimously to the contract, including basic conditions in the contract; (3) maximising the welfare of the most disadvantaged person; and (4) ensuring the stability of the contract. Rawls believed that by following these steps and principles, ethical decisions could be made in such a way that would lead to a fairer outcome for all. However, where Rawls' theory differs from the more classical utilitarian view is in its approach to the problem of redistribution. Typical utilitarian thought would suggest that where someone needs certain resources, those who own those resources should share them with the person in need. Rawls points out that in many ways this leads to an unfair outcome for those in the greatest need, for example a person with a disability usually needs different forms of help from society than a non-disabled person.

Traditional utilitarianism would suggest that everyone should get the same. However, Rawls proposed that resources should be divided fundamentally in a way in which society deems as being fair to everyone; therefore, the disadvantaged members of society, such as people with disabilities, can get what they need and not just what everyone else has (Cohen, 1987). When we look at the example of the student and lecturer, Rawls' theory appears to be slightly less relevant here as we are looking at a personal relationship and not a binding legal contract between two parties. We think the problem could be analysed in two ways: first, the relationship could be deemed as being fair if a decision was made by all relevant parties under the fundamental concepts. That is, by having the relationship, no-one was

given a disadvantage or afforded an advantage over someone else. We think that a better way to apply the theory here is to be aware that not all university students have the same needs and requirements. Unlike traditional utilitarianism, which would see the lecturer's time divided up equally for everyone or in such a way as to maximise utility, Rawls' theory would have the lecturer's time divided up in the fairest possible way. For example, if a student was struggling, then it would be right for the lecturer to spend a greater deal of time, possibly outside of university, with the student to help them (Crowell, 2004). However, often it is the best students who actively seek extra help and advice rather than the struggling student. We think that principally the theory of justice-as-fairness would deem such a relationship right so long as it resulted in a fairer society for all. A lecturer can really only help the student that puts in the effort to approach the lecturer and this often involves personal expense in terms of giving up time and money to visit campus for consultation. The lecturer, therefore, often invokes the implied ethical principle that students' efforts and sacrifices to seek out consultation should be rewarded.

### **Findings: Moral reasoning**

Moral reasoning is a term used to describe the process by which human beings make decisions. As humans, we can use our knowledge, instincts, and feelings to weigh up ethical dilemmas by thinking of the possible outcomes of our actions. Moral reasoning often points to the use of ethical theories such as utilitarianism or deontological theories which people use in order to make moral decisions. However, as Freud pointed out, we make moral decisions from a very young age, before we know or understand complicated moral theories and hence the ability to function with our own moral compass is innately within us. Many people also use logical arguments to describe how they reached a certain decision but cannot actually explain the argument, again showing how human beings have an innate ability to weigh up the consequences of their actions and come to what they believe is the morally correct outcome (Turner et al., 2002, pp. 304-305). What is deemed morally correct, however, is determined greatly by culture, religion, and ethical norms. For example, in Western culture it is morally acceptable for a young man to ask a woman out on a date but, in many Middle Eastern cultures, this is considered highly unacceptable. The culture within which we grow up has a major effect on our own moral compass and what we deem to be correct.

When applying this theory to the example of a student and a lecturer, we will use the system proposed by Immanuel Kant. He theorised that in order to make moral decisions in this way, a person should go through a four-step process. The first step involves developing an understanding of your reasons for wanting to carry out the action. The second step involves imagining a world where other people made decisions using your logical or moral argument as justification. The third stage involves pondering whether the world could function using your arguments as justification; and the fourth is contemplating whether you would wish to live in a world where this was the case (Weber, 1990). Kant, therefore, believed that if you would not wish others to make moral decisions based on the logic that you use to justify a specific course of action then it is morally wrong to use it. We feel that Kant's theory here is more relevant to our example than the justice theory discussed prior. However, it must be said that this theory seems to be widely applicable beyond the example under consideration.

If we take Kant's theory, we can discuss whether the student and lecturer may have a relationship outwith university by following these four steps. In this example, it would be for both the student and lecturer to decide for themselves ultimately whether they would like to live in a world where such a relationship was morally correct. In our opinion, we believe we would reach the conclusion that such a relationship wasn't an issue and could be beneficial, both in the sense of a personal or social relationship, and one where university work was discussed or worked on (or both academic and social talk took place). This last point is where proponents of Rawls' justice-as-fairness theory may disagree; such a relationship, as evidenced, for example, by a 3-hour, one-on-one afternoon session at a 'pub' (a 'bar', to use the American terminology), down the road from campus, could be viewed as being unfair on the other students because some get to spend more time with the lecturer than others. We think that many people would reach the conclusion that any additional time the lecturer has should be spent with the most disadvantaged students as they are in the most need of it. However, as mentioned, lecturers often invoke the principle that students' efforts and sacrifices should be rewarded; and it is the better students who often put in the most effort to access the lecturer.

One significant point is that if student and lecturer converse in the lecturer's office, the conversation can be politely concluded if a new student arrives at the lecturer's door. This cannot happen with a pub conversation as the new student arriving on-campus at that time will find themselves confronted with the door to a locked office. Should pub meetings take place only after 4:30 p.m. then? The problem with this answer is that pubs get busier and noisier after this time and this might disrupt concentration and conversation flow.

It must, however, be said that morality is usually linked to whether something is correct or incorrect. We think most people would see nothing innately wrong with the relationship unless either party was using the opportunity to benefit themselves, such as the student looking to become friendly with the lecturer solely in order to gain better marks. The issue of a potential visitor to campus being met with a locked office door, while conversation with another student continues down the road at the pub, does raise a difficult dilemma. However, is any lecturer's open-door policy really expected to operate Monday to Friday 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.? Don't many lecturers nowadays often 'work from home' (especially post the COVID-19 lockdown of March to July 2020)? How does that resolve the dilemma?

### **Findings:** Hofstede's organisational culture theory

Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede, who is well-known for his research into cross-cultural groups and organisations, laid the groundwork for organisational cultural design which is fundamentally linked to business ethics. A strong ethical backbone must be instilled by the board and the directors to ensure they perform essential moral duty (James et al., 2018). It is argued by Hofstede et al. (1990) that the organisation's values are engrained in its identity and are less likely to change in comparison to the company's personnel, inspirations, and rituals. This culture is fortified by the history and social constructs of the organisation and will always be attached to the company (Hofstede et al., 1990). The ethical boundaries of a student-lecturer relationship have been set in stone for years and these boundaries are never really tested historically with students rarely looking to extend relationships beyond an in-class dynamic. The ethical boundaries exist due to the culture of a teaching environment. Students and lecturers come and go; however, they will always have the same psychology around how they should interact with one another and out-of-class



interaction is something which is hardly considered, alongside its potential benefit to both parties.

Relating to the values Hofstede et al. (1990) refer to, it is the values of university students and lecturers built up within the institution for hundreds of years which create the mainstream feeling for inductees to merge with. In this case, students feel that lecturers may be unapproachable and the possibility of having a friendly relationship is very unusual. On the same wavelength, the lecturer extends the option of increased support to students, almost on a daily basis; however, the option is hardly ever taken up by students with an increased level of independence assumed to be required at this stage of learning. The culture which is engrained in the very fabric of the university makes it very difficult to break out of these social normalities and creates an apparent ethical issue when a student and lecturer venture away from the construct. This situation of students rarely taking up the offer seems to be more prevalent nowadays as most students have full- or part-time jobs and live far from campus; therefore, they are unable or unwilling to consult with the lecturer other than in the narrow windows of before-class and after-class when many other people tend to also want access.

James et al. (2018) specifically defined the purpose of ethics of care as: '[t]he two moral demands placed by the ethics of care theory within a business setting are: (a) Preserving relationships with all stakeholders; and (b) Exercising special care with the stakeholders by attending to their needs, values, and desires' (p. 3).

It should be outlined that a university is no different from any institution in having a responsibility to monitor its stakeholders and provide adequate support to all interested parties to ensure maximum satisfaction and investment. The social constructs it creates are moulded by the ethical motivations created by stakeholders in its history and bending the rules can automatically be seen as unethical, without due thought, based on assumptions according to the organisation's past. Is it the university's responsibility to extinguish these relationships between students and lecturers? Or should it be adding fuel to the fire despite what the university implies about the apparent innate separateness of lecturers and students (Crowell, 2004)?

### **Findings:** Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of id-ego-superego

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of psychology further expands on the ethical dilemma of a personal relationship of a student and lecturer. Freud was an advocate of developing your personality individually; learning from the mistakes you make along your journey; and melding yourself into a stronger version of yourself through experience (Freud & Strachey, 1994). In many aspects of university life, especially for the student, it is typical to make multiple mistakes in the process of becoming a top academic performer as they adapt to the mentality and environment of after-school life. In his 1923 book *The Ego and the Id*, Freud (1923/1990) highlighted three main parts of the mind: the 'id', which is the source of desires – sex, death drive, and life-preservation; the 'ego', which is the mind processing centre; and finally the 'super-ego', which is the self-consciousness of the brain which enforces the established social norms (Thurschwell, 2009). The ego is also the mediator between id, super-ego, and the external world, which places it under extreme strain and pressure. The development of an individual is directly correlated with the evolution of their ego, with a stronger and more integrated ego providing clarity of mind in making decisions

and the capability to control desires. The development of the ego is directly related to the ethical dilemma being discussed, bearing in mind the company culture theory of Hofstede's.

Developing a strong ego and an effective super-ego as a university student means to be conscious of your surroundings, respecting the culture of the institution, and being mature enough to harness studies effectively along with a vibrant social life. Every part of life must be in balance and in harmony, with no part of life allowed to become too weak or ineffectual. To many, their consciousness relies on the comfort zone of having a distant relationship with the lecturer and having an approach to university assignments which is very much based on so-called 'independent' effort. This overall approach is common amongst students and is seen as unassailable by many. But it can be argued that friendship and personal relationship between a student and a lecturer can enhance the search for a stronger ego and a more useful super-ego. The student enters the adult-world, in part, through the mentoring relationship with the lecturer. The student puts aside the naïve view that academic life requires one to work in isolation on one's academic essay 'masterpiece', discussing it with no-one, until the 'masterful' and 'pure' work is submitted to the godlike authorities on or before the due-date. Even input from the local lecturer might be seen as negatively impacting upon the overall integrity of this process and the 'purity' of the submitted 'masterpiece', although, strangely, consulting the textbook isn't even though the textbook is just the (written) words of a different lecturer based in some faraway, revered place. Thus, existing social hierarchies are preserved and reproduced through this worldview.

But, for the student, there is always the fear of failure, of coming up short, of having one's work rejected. The lecturer is seen as a 'harsh parent' figure, remote and inaccessible.<sup>1</sup> The student is in the library, the lecturer is a certain distance away in their office. But there is also the awareness, and it is hard to reconcile this with the 'harsh parent' concept, that the lecturer is just doing their job and goes home at the end of the day to their own family. As they do so, the lecturer wilfully shuts out consciousness of the university world. This is both reassuring and distressing for the student. If the lecturer is a salaried employee / normal citizen, and not always the harsh parent, then the harsh parent (or stern parent) role must be placed beyond, on to the institution itself, its stones and spires, its grassy courtyards and lakes. This is no more comforting as the aspect of the *possibility* of human kindness and warmth is finally removed, replaced only by the hope of institutional objectivity and memory. When I graduate, my achievements will be protected forever within the University's computerised database, the stern parent who cannot die and will outlive me.

The 'id' (desire) of the student is to have optimal academic performance and utilising full support can unlock a student's potential in this regard. Even though the super-ego of an average student would enforce a standard relationship with the lecturer, the development of a relationship can improve the chances of an integrated ego as opposed to a fragmented ego where parts of life are disconnected from one another. The 'id' doesn't make plans for the future in terms of the consequences of actions; the drive to succeed is the primary focus (Thurschwell, 2009). This divisive dilemma continues to relate to the theory in that abiding by social conventions, in this case, can be argued to create fragmented and almost childlike perspectives, with the minds of these individuals assuming that the boundaries of a lecturer-

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<sup>1</sup> This whole paragraph is based upon the first author's personal experiences as an undergraduate at a sandstone or Ivy League university from 1986-1989.

and-student relationship cannot be crossed. This assumption may be seen as childlike as it conforms to the strict relationships of a secondary-school environment where the culture the child is exposed to is consistently less relaxed and overtly controlling. Those who push this boundary aim to reach new heights and place themselves in the best possible position to succeed (Westen, 1998). After all, as much as every action can be seen as deliberate in many eyes, the cognitive process which drives motivations and leads to performance of actions can be argued to be primarily unconscious (Westen, 1998, pp. 339-343) and the major reasoning as to why unethical acts are performed may not be directly the individual's (conscious) fault.

Super-ego self-regulation, at its heart, is based on the *fear of loss of love* (Freud, 1932/2005, p. 122), rather than objective good or evil. The student *assumes or presumes* upon the lecturer's 'love' (manifested in terms of fairness, but also politeness and courtesy). To have a *real* relationship with a lecturer means that the loss of love becomes a more real threat, love can no longer simply be assumed; loss of love could be revealed before and independently of the grading process – therefore, such a relationship is perceived to be very risky.

How will students, relying upon presumed separation of 'judge' and 'supporter' roles across different individuals (lecturer as judge or stern parent, and other family members, partners or significant others as supporters), manage in the workplace where the boss who promotes you (or not) at the end of the year is one of the same people you are expected to drink with away-from-the-office on Friday nights? When this happens, it must break down the distinction between 'judge' and 'supporter' which the student may try to continue to separate mentally up until the final-year of university study. For judge and supporter to be the same person may create anxiety and confusion (because frequent contact increases the chance of love being magnified to an unacceptable level and/or love being withheld due to a miscommunication or disagreement). However, in the university situation, a research supervisor or even a regular lecturer can and might (want to) act in both capacities – judge and supporter. (Note that this does not happen in the better situation where the lecturer does not mark the student's work, e.g., at PhD level or when a casual marker is hired – in these cases, the judge role largely disappears or is at least subordinated to the supporter role). We have endeavoured to explain the unconscious desire to avoid more than a very brief and instrumentalist contact with the lecturer.

### **Findings:** Karl Marx's theory of alienation

The young Karl Marx theorised, in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, that the capitalist mode of production ensures human beings become isolated within their own social classes and are driven apart (James & Walsh, 2018; Marx, 1932/1994; Ollman, 1976; Wharton, 2015).<sup>2</sup> Under capitalism, people cannot fulfil their potential or satisfy their most natural desires; they are constrained by their situations and social roles rather than having the freedom to express themselves (Bain et al., 2020, pp. 4-5; Marx, 1939-1941/1993, 1867/2017). Individuals are unable to think in terms of their personal intentions, dictate their own actions, and define the relationships they have with others.<sup>3</sup> From this the theory

<sup>2</sup> For some contemporary applications of Marxism to practical problems, see James and Leung (2018, Section 2); James and McKenzie (2018); James et al. (2018); and Walser (2014, pp. 165-172).

<sup>3</sup> An outstanding text on Marxist perspectives in the sociology of education is Levitas (1974/2012).

of alienation is derived, which is the estrangement of individuals within society due to the deprivation of the right to think for themselves (Bain et al., 2020, pp. 4-5). Instead, they are cornered and coerced into following and acting out the parts assigned to them by their economic and social status and roles played within the processes of production, distribution, and consumption. Although it is a theory created in the 19th century, and based on factory-work under capitalism, it has direct links to the social and ethical issue addressed in this piece, i.e., whether or not students and lecturers should be able to have a personal relationship.

Reinforcing relevant theory, Freud's consciousness development is directly related to Marx's theory of alienation, as Frankfurt School scholar Herbert Marcuse was only too aware. Groups of individuals, in this case students or lecturers, can be alienated by the culture of the University or the social constructs of the institution itself. On another level, students who are isolated in the 'mature' environment of the university, and are forced to be totally independent, can sometimes feel unsupported and demotivated to succeed. This is due to the alienation concept and the barriers that enforcing an unsociable outlook can reproduce. In this case, students who feel alienated by the social constructs of the institution may rely upon the lecturer to bridge this shortfall in order for them to progress academically. Similarly, lecturers can feel alienated by the boundaries created by the culture of university and having associations with students, beyond the standard 6-minute doctors' surgery type of consultation, provides a personal touch to their jobs and reduces their own sense of alienation.

Those who argue that the social boundaries creating this alienation complex should forever remain inviolate and those who have a tunnel vision outlook on university life will feel that students should never have a personal relationship or friendship with the lecturer. 'Being friendly' is sharply demarcated from 'friendship', in ideology as in practice, and meeting outside the sacred and clearly understood physical space of the campus is seen as an impossible expectation or a foolish act. Complications clearly emerge which would confuse those who adhere to the ideology of sharp demarcation lines and rigid role definitions – what if student and lecturer both live in the immediate area of the campus and and/or both support the local professional football club? If they go to the pub and then the game together on a Saturday afternoon, are they still defined and bound by their respective 'lecturer' and 'student' designations? If yes, are we never free and can we never shrug these off?

In articulating this particular argument, it's vital to show how Freud and Marx's theories combine in this case. Both theories agree that integration of boundaries should be the aim of the organisation and having integration imbedded in the culture motivates individuals and encourages increased unison in decision-making. Having an integrated society at university would increase communication links between tutor and students, creating a dynamic where students would see lecturers as more approachable and friendly (*as well as more real*) and thereby increase motivation and productivity. In its current cultural state, integration is frowned upon with many assuming some boundaries should never be crossed because of apparent conflicts-of-interest and it is unethical for it to be any other way. Should a student really be punished for having a strong ego, integrating their social boundaries, and advancing their own academic skills? Whilst knowledge can be communicated via the lecture format, perhaps skills, wisdom and ideas are best inculcated via two-way and three-way afternoon

conversations in the pub. Is it really unethical that lecturers shouldn't provide as much support as they possibly can to their students, even if it suggests a personal friendship?

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this particular ethical dilemma within a university setting allows for a well-balanced debate as to what is morally correct in the scenario that a student and lecturer develop a personal relationship. With ethical social constructs having been developed and honed for centuries, within these institutions, it is hard for many to comprehend that these relationships can exist and it is automatically assumed that, when they do, a sinister reason will be at the heart of it. However, this is not always the case with engagement in this way shown to promote productivity and motivation within students and in turn boosting university exam and essay results despite the assumption that it is a situation automatically considered unethical.

In the authors' opinion, justice isn't shown to students who are maligned for looking to develop their knowledge and expanding their skill-set by becoming closer with their tutors. An isolated student can often result in lower scores and less success in the longer-term, with the lack of motivation that comes with the feeling of alienation. Integration of the boundaries present in university environments can only serve to eliminate alienation of both students and lecturers, contributing to the harmonisation of the community, and providing a more relaxed atmosphere for students to relate to and thrive under. In our opinion, although it's clear that assumptions will always be made that those relationships are negative, students who have strong and integrated egos, and see beyond the social normalities holding so many others back, should not be criticised and punished in their pursuit of academic success.

The lessons learnt from the ethics discussed here are outlined throughout this paper. Using existentialism, it is clear that students and lecturers should be able to act freely in tune with their own personal desires as human beings and it is their right, despite the ideology of personal-relationships-are-unacceptable being held by many within the university. The justice theory requires the relationship to contribute to a fairer society for all and it is our belief that more personal relationships can only lead to a more motivated student body and a more enjoyable environment, on the whole, for both lecturers and students. We have mentioned that relationships can spontaneously result where a student may have been struggling and required more help from their tutor in the first place, or was doing reasonably well but wanted to excel. To many, this would contribute to the morality of the scenario; however, a student using the scenario to gain an unfair advantage is completely different and must be condemned.

Using the opinions of philosophers Hofstede, Freud, and Marx, further lessons have been learnt about this ethical dilemma. Hofstede made it clear that a strong organisational backbone must be in place for ethical culture to be instilled and this creates assumptions as to how individuals within a university *should* behave. Students and lecturers who strive to move the boundaries against the social norms can potentially change the university learning environment for ever. Freud and Marx had different theories but they mesh to teach many lessons in this particular scenario. It is clear that having a strong ego can see students progressing at a higher rate and integration of the social boundaries existing in university can potentially lead to reduced alienation in these environments. A super-ego voice that is too 'harsh' (Freud, 1932/2005, p. 140) or 'severe' (Freud, 1932/2005, p. 126) will cause the

student to shy away from breaking social norms, due to guilt and fear, and the culture of the institution will never change. Decreased alienation could increase motivation, productivity, and students' results whilst making university a more all-round enjoyable experience for all stakeholders. We hope that students and lecturers who continue to push these boundaries, within the confines of morality, are rewarded in the future, instead of being disciplined, and we expect that, when and if this happens, the landscape of the university will be revolutionised for the greater good.

## Notes

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*Authors' note:* This article was written by six Accounting Honours students at a Scottish university. We are responding to a case where our lecturer was consulting with us about work at a local pub close to campus and this practice was the subject of a complaint by another student. The first author, the lecturer in question, tidied up the article and added some extra points and referencing. An earlier draft of this article, minus the lecturer's contribution, was submitted as an essay in the Business & Professional Ethics module. Fortunately, this lecturer kept his job due to the kindness of his boss.

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