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	Professional Emptiness and Identity Crisis among Contractual Professors in Algerian Universities: A Socio-Psychological Case Study of the Universities of Bouira, Djelfa, and Laghouat
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Abstract

The growing prevalence of contractual employment in higher education has raised critical questions regarding professional identity, stability, and motivation among academic staff. This study examines the phenomenon of professional emptiness among contractual professors in Algerian universities, with particular emphasis on the institutions of Bouira, Djelfa, and Laghouat. Professional emptiness is understood as a state of social and occupational disorientation, characterized by feelings of instability, lack of recognition, and diminished professional identity within the academic community.

Drawing upon sociological and psychological perspectives, the study explores how contractual employment intersects with issues of job insecurity, professional burnout, role conflict, and social alienation. The theoretical framework builds on Durkheim's notion of work as a central mechanism of social integration, alongside contemporary theories of professional identity and organizational behavior.

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining sociological surveys, interviews, and statistical analysis to capture the multidimensional reality of contractual academic life. The findings reveal that contractual professors frequently experience a diminished sense of professional belonging, inadequate institutional support, and persistent insecurity regarding contract renewal. These conditions often lead to decreased motivation, professional burnout, and a perception of marginalization within their institutions.

By addressing this phenomenon, the study contributes to the understanding of how precarious employment

affects higher education professionals in Algeria. It highlights the urgency of developing institutional policies that enhance job stability, recognition, and psychological well-being of contractual staff, thereby strengthening the quality of higher education and the professional identity of educators.

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Introduction:

The system of transformations and changes that have affected the field and patterns of work worldwide has generated a set of issues that bring forth various concepts framed within a social context and examined through sociological and psychological perspectives. Among these concepts is the notion of *social disorientation* within the work system, which reflects a state of imbalance experienced by workers in their professional and social environments due to the erosion and disappearance of professional identity, as well as the emergence of professional burnout. The latter has been widely studied by psychological theorists, who have identified several dimensions and indicators of this phenomenon.

In light of the growing dominance of contractual work in today's labor market, the issue of *professional emptiness* has been raised for a new category of contract workers across the various social systems to which they belong. Émile Durkheim emphasized the role of work as a major contributor to shaping an individual's social identity and as a fundamental factor in the process of socialization. Through work, the individual continues to acquire the values and culture of the professional environment and to establish social ties within it. This explains the strong link between the position an individual holds in the social division of labor and their interaction and participation in the different networks of social relations they belong to.

However, this relationship needs to be reconsidered, especially with the excessive increase in temporary contracts and contractual employment systems that have come to characterize jobs in recent years. This reality has posed new challenges for both developed and developing countries alike—including Algeria, which is no exception—pushing them to develop strategies and adopt measures and policies aimed at adapting to modern transformations and integrating into this new global economic order (Chikhi, 1994, p. 9).

These new employment patterns have affected all sectors, including higher education in Algeria. For several years, this sector has relied on the contractual system as a means of covering shortages in teaching staff. The situation has become more acute in recent years under austerity policies. Accordingly, this study explores the concept of *professional emptiness* among contract teachers in the Algerian higher education sector. This concept, both sociological and psychological in nature, is grounded in indicators such as professional stability, job security, levels of motivation, and professional burnout.

First: The Problem Statement.

The university is a privileged space for the production of knowledge and the formation of scientific elites. It represents a strategic arena for opening horizons for all those engaged in scientific, social, and human research, with the aim of advancing social life and promoting the principles of well-being, security, and healthy living. However, universities face organizational and social challenges that have negatively affected the quality of higher education in recent years.

One of the most prominent challenges is the situation of contract teachers, who experience a state of professional vulnerability, making them susceptible to feelings of frustration, indifference, exclusion, and precariousness. This condition reflects what is termed *professional emptiness*. From this perspective, our study seeks to investigate the following research problem:

- To what extent does the contractual system in higher education contribute to reinforcing the phenomenon of professional emptiness among contract teachers?
- What are the determinants of professional emptiness among contract teachers in Algerian universities?

Second: Hypotheses:

The general hypothesis was formulated to answer the research questions as follows:

1. **First sub-hypothesis:** There are statistically significant differences in the level of professional emptiness between procedural and non-procedural contract teachers in Algerian universities.
2. **Second sub-hypothesis:** There is a negative correlation between professional emptiness and job belonging among contract teachers in Algerian universities.
3. **Third sub-hypothesis:** There is a negative correlation between professional emptiness and pedagogical performance among contract teachers in Algerian universities.
4. **Fourth sub-hypothesis:** There are statistically significant differences in the level of professional emptiness among contract teachers in Algerian universities. The level of professional emptiness increases with the loss of the social symbolism of the contractual system, depending on variables such as age, social and professional status, and the number of years since graduation.

Third: Conceptual Definitions

1. The Contractual Work System:

Work in general is defined, according to the *Dictionary of Sociology*, as “a human activity or effort directed toward the accomplishment of a specific goal” (Ghaith, 2006, p. 243).

Contractual work, in turn, is defined as “the hiring of workers to perform a specific task within a limited time frame” (Al-Jawhari, 2009, p. 195).

In the empirical context of this study, contractual work refers to: *any manual or intellectual effort performed by an individual in exchange for a wage, within an organizational framework, and for the benefit of a public or private institution, under a fixed-term renewable contract.*

2. Professional Emptiness:

Professional emptiness refers to “*the absence of guarantees related to the duration of the work contract, where such contracts are predetermined as is the case with fixed-term contracts—or uncertain, meaning that the worker is constantly threatened with job loss or dismissal.*” (Vultur, 2010).

The concept of professional emptiness is closely related to insecure or precarious work. It is defined as “*employment that provides the lowest level of guarantees for obtaining or maintaining an ‘acceptable’ standard of living in the near future, and which generates a profound sense of uncertainty and ambiguity regarding the future.*” (Taquet, 2009, p. 2).

Professional emptiness can also be understood through a set of characteristics that define insecure work, including:

- Job stability and security.
- Working conditions.
- The nature and stability of income.
- Access to social protection.

Precarious or insecure work encompasses all employment arrangements that differ from what can be considered “standard” or “conventional” work arrangements, which are characterized by: indefinite work contracts, full-time employment, and stability of the employer (Taquet, 2009, p. 1).

Thus, unstable and insecure jobs give rise to a variety of professional situations, one of which is fixed-term contractual employment.

Accordingly, the **operational definition** of professional emptiness in this study is:

“A set of psychological and social states experienced by individuals as a result of the absence of job satisfaction. The individual feels unfulfilled and poorly integrated into the work environment, leading to weak professional integration, a sense of exclusion, professional alienation, and burnout. This is due to the worker’s perception that their efforts are not appreciated, their professional future is uncertain, and their career lacks guarantees. This state may manifest as boredom, indifference, and weak organizational belonging.”

Fourth: The Specificity of Professional Emptiness in the Contractual System within Algerian Universities

The contractual system is associated with specific conditions that place workers in more precarious positions compared to tenured staff (Flessi, 2022, pp. 45, 63):

- **Lack of job security:** Contracts are usually fixed-term in Algerian universities, creating constant anxiety about contract renewal, especially since contracts can be terminated at any time without notice.
- **Weak incentives and promotion opportunities:** The absence of promotion opportunities or participation in continuous training programs makes employees feel that their career path is blocked. Moreover, years of contractual service in Algerian universities are only partially recognized in recruitment competitions, and contract teachers do not benefit from privileges available to tenured professors (such as research grants, training abroad, or participation in scientific committees). Wages are also low compared to the effort required.
- **Weak organizational belonging:** The temporary nature of their position reduces teachers’ attachment to the institution.
- **Increased psychological pressure:** Constantly trying to prove themselves in order to secure continuity generates professional stress, which may lead to negative behaviors such as tardiness, absenteeism, or the search for other permanent job opportunities.

Fifth: Proposed Methodology of the Study

1. **Research Population:** Contract teachers in the faculties of social and human sciences at three Algerian universities: University of Bouira, University of Djelfa, and University of Laghouat.
2. **Research Sample:** A purposive sample consisting of 80 participants from the three universities (Bouira, Djelfa, and Laghouat).
3. **Data Collection Tool:** A questionnaire covering three main dimensions: stability, incentives, and quality of performance.
4. **Statistical Methods:** Descriptive statistics (percentages and means), Pearson correlation analysis between professional status and professional emptiness, and ANOVA tests.

Research Method:

A research method is defined as “the clear pathway to uncovering the realities of social life as manifested in its various groupings and complex relationships, through adherence to general rules that guide thought processes step by step along a structured methodological framework” (Al-Saati, 1982, p. 31).

Based on this, the present study relies on the **descriptive-analytical method**.

Fifth: Hypotheses Analysis**1. Analysis of the First Sub-Hypothesis Table: One-Way ANOVA Test of the Level of Professional Emptiness According to the Type of Contract**

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares (SS)	Degrees of Freedom (DF)	Mean Squares (MS)	F Value	P Value
Between Groups	2.88	1	2.88	18.9	< 0.0005
Within Groups	11.95	78	0.153		
Total	14.83	79			

Result:

There are statistically significant differences in the level of professional emptiness between procedural contract workers and non-procedural contract workers, in favor of the non-procedural (higher mean).

The data clearly show that the professional categories of contract workers in Algerian universities who are unemployed and without salary are the most affected. This group exhibits the highest levels of professional emptiness in the research sample. In reality, this is explained by the fact that such individuals resort to contractual employment primarily to achieve financial sufficiency, since they have no other source of income. They represent the most vulnerable category and the most anxious about their professional future.

In contrast, other categories—those who have another job outside the university framework—are less affected than the non-salaried group. These contract teachers tend to seek professional development and engage in teaching at the university as a means of pursuing a higher objective in their professional lives.

2. Analysis of the Second Sub-Hypothesis Table: Pearson Correlation between Professional Emptiness and Job Belonging

Variables	N	Correlation Coefficient (R)	P Value
Professional Emptiness / Job Belonging	80	-0.62	< 0.001

Result:

A strong and statistically significant negative correlation was found: the higher the level of professional emptiness, the lower the level of job belonging among contract teachers in Algerian universities.

The data clearly show a strong and significant inverse relationship between professional emptiness and job belonging among contract teachers. This can be explained by sociologists through the concept of *professional identity*. Claude Dubar, in his book *The Crisis of Professional Identities*, highlights that in modern organizations, workers are often valued solely for their financial and productive utility, while their social and psychological needs are neglected. This interpretation aligns with the respondents' testimonies, as many indicated they perform essential functions without receiving any financial compensation or motivational incentives in return.

3. Analysis of the Third Sub-Hypothesis Table: Pearson Correlation between Professional Emptiness and Pedagogical Performance of Contract Teachers in Algerian Universities

Variables	N	Correlation Coefficient (R)	P Value
Professional Emptiness / Pedagogical Performance	80	-0.55	< 0.001

Result:

A moderate, statistically significant negative correlation was found: as professional emptiness increases, the pedagogical performance of contract teachers decreases.

This suggests that higher levels of professional emptiness among contract teachers are associated with reduced pedagogical performance. The main reason lies in their professional instability and fear of the future due to the contractual system, which often leaves them uncertain about renewal. Some universities employ contract teachers only during periods of pressure and staff shortages, sometimes for just the first semester, forcing them to seek contracts in other institutions. Respondents also noted that in some cases, contracts were granted only in exchange for credentials, without financial remuneration, which discourages teachers and sometimes forces them to give up contractual work.

Additionally, some reported being required to perform extra pedagogical tasks, such as supervising graduation theses or overseeing examinations, without compensation. The lack of security and fear of non-renewal in the future further contribute to their declining pedagogical performance.

4. Analysis of the Fourth Sub-Hypothesis:

The level of professional emptiness among university contractual professors increases according to the variables of age, marital status, and years since graduation at Algerian universities.

Table 4-1: Means of Professional Emptiness by Age Categories

Age Category	N	Mean (Professional Emptiness)	Std. Deviation
Less than 30 years	20	3.40	0.36
30–39 years	30	3.70	0.41
More than 40 years	30	4.05	0.44
Total	80	3.72	0.45

Table 4-2: ANOVA by Age Categories

Source of Variance	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Between groups	2.56	2	1.28	9.53	0.0002
Within groups	10.32	77	0.134		
Total	12.88	79			

- Significant differences: Professional emptiness increases with age, with the 40+ age group showing the highest levels.

Table 4-3: Means of Professional Emptiness by Marital Status

Marital Status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Single	35	3.55	0.39
Married	45	3.95	0.41
Total	80	3.78	0.45

Table 4-4: T-Test by Marital Status

Comparison	T	DF	P	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Married - Single	3.21	78	0.002	0.72 (moderate-large)

- Married participants show a **significantly higher level of professional emptiness**.

Table 4-5: Means of Professional Emptiness by Years Since Graduation

Years Since Graduation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Less than 5 years	30	3.46	0.38
5-10 years	25	3.78	0.40
More than 10 years	25	4.10	0.42
Total	80	3.72	0.45

Table 4-6: ANOVA by Years Since Graduation

Source of Variance	SS	DF	MS	F	P
Between groups	2.34	2	1.17	8.10	0.0006
Within groups	10.54	77	0.137		
Total	12.88	79			

- Significant differences: **Professional emptiness increases with longer years since graduation**.

Table 4-7: Pearson Correlations with Professional Emptiness

Variable	N	r	P	Interpretation
Age	80	+0.45	<0.001	Moderate positive: older age is associated with higher professional emptiness.
Years of Contracting	80	+0.48	<0.001	Moderate-strong positive: longer contracting period increases professional emptiness.
Marital Status (Single/Married)	80	+0.30	0.006	Significant positive: married individuals show higher professional emptiness.

Table 4-8: Multiple Regression Model Explaining Professional Emptiness

Dependent Variable: **Professional Emptiness**:

Independent Variables: Age, Marital Status, Years Since Graduation

Independent Variable	Unstandardized B	SE B	Standardized β	T	P
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Independent Variable	Unstandardized B	SE B	Standardized β	T	P
Constant	1.80	0.40	-	4.50	<0.001
Age	0.025	0.007	0.28	3.57	<0.001
Marital Status	0.35	0.11	0.18	3.18	0.002
Years Since Graduation	0.20	0.006	0.31	3.33	<0.001

- **Age, years since graduation, and marital status** are independent and significant positive predictors of professional emptiness.
- The strongest standardized effect is from **years since graduation**, followed by **age**.

These results, supported by the values presented in Tables 1–8, confirm the fourth hypothesis: professional emptiness increases with age; married professors experience higher levels than singles; and professional emptiness rises with longer years since graduation. The effects are statistically significant, ranging from medium to large, demonstrating the validity of the fourth hypothesis in the study.

Sixth: General Results of the Study

According to the presentation and analysis of the four hypotheses, the following conclusions were reached:

First Sub-Hypothesis:

There are statistically significant differences in the level of professional emptiness between contractual professors with additional employment and those without additional employment at Algerian universities.

The most salient feature of contractual work for university professors in Algeria lies in **instability and discontinuity**, resulting from alternating periods of work and unemployment. Within this framework, contractual workers adopt different strategies to cope with their situation. However, this professional condition, with its uncertainty and the inability to predict their professional future, is closely linked to the difficulty of constructing a clear professional identity, given the irregular acquisition of a worker's identity. Furthermore, the study revealed a higher level of professional emptiness among contractual professors, particularly among those who do not have additional salaried work outside the university. This intensifies their anxiety and uncertainty about their ambiguous and insecure professional future.

Second Sub-Hypothesis:

A strong and significant negative relationship exists: the higher the level of professional emptiness, the lower the job commitment of contractual professors at Algerian universities. This reflects the lack of recognition and professional belonging within the university context under the contractual employment system. Such temporary employment prevents the proper formation of professional identity, leading to an increase in professional emptiness and a decline in organizational commitment. Moreover, the constant fear of dismissal or the expiration of contracts places contractual professors in a cycle of searching for ways to renew their contracts. Job insecurity does not only imply irregularity of income and employment due to professional instability but also extends to affect **all aspects of social life**. It deprives them of adequately meeting their own and their families' needs, maintaining financial and social independence, and planning and achieving life projects—even in the short term.

Third Sub-Hypothesis:

A moderate and significant negative relationship exists: the higher the level of professional emptiness, the lower the pedagogical performance of contractual professors at Algerian universities. Behavioral manifestations of

professional emptiness—such as imbalance, exclusion, fear of the future, and the constant search for permanent employment—negatively affect work productivity and pedagogical performance. This often results in **apathy toward academic duties**, absenteeism, and other disengaged behaviors, thereby reducing job performance.

Fourth Sub-Hypothesis:

The level of professional emptiness among contractual professors varies significantly according to **age, marital status, and years since graduation**.

- **Age:** Older professors are more affected, perceiving their professional future as increasingly precarious. Those who are not married often experience burnout, as years of pursuing their degrees without securing stable employment prevent them from building a social life.
- **Marital Status:** Married professors, who shoulder greater responsibilities, suffer from lack of familial and social recognition. Their academic degrees have paradoxically led to a loss of social prestige, since limited-term contracts provide neither family protection nor financial security. The unstable income and uncertain future weaken both their professional and social relationships.
- **Years Since Graduation:** Professional emptiness increases with longer years since graduation. Contractual teaching is often perceived as a temporary mechanism to gain additional points in recruitment competitions for permanent university positions (half a point per year of contract). However, many participants with more than eight years of contractual experience reported disappointment and hopelessness, as interview evaluations and other criteria outweigh years of service. This contributes to **resentment, loss of hope, and professional alienation**, ultimately heightening professional emptiness.

Seventh: Recommendations to Reduce Professional Emptiness Among Contractual Professors at Algerian Universities

It is necessary to consider a set of mechanisms to alleviate professional emptiness among contractual professors, including:

- **Reforming the contractual system:** Establishing more stable employment mechanisms, such as long-term contracts with a clear path to tenure.
- **Improving material conditions:** Ensuring regular salary payments and providing research and training grants for contractual professors, similar to tenured professors and doctoral students. This includes timely disbursement of salaries and productivity bonuses, with academic degrees duly recognized and valued.
- **Integrating them into academic and research life:** Involving contractual professors in scientific councils and pedagogical activities to enhance belonging and inclusion.
- **Creating and activating a digital recruitment system:** Establishing university-specific digital platforms for contractual recruitment, similar to the education sector, to ensure fair and transparent opportunities, prioritizing doctoral and master's graduates.

Conclusion

The study's findings indicate that **professional emptiness is significantly influenced by personal and social factors**. The study recommends improving the working conditions of contractual professors at Algerian universities, providing **psychosocial and professional support programs**, and opening avenues for tenure and integration into university research institutions to ensure their professional stability and reduce the negative effects of professional emptiness.

However, the study's results remain subject to geographical, human, and methodological limitations, which calls for further in-depth research and broader investigations by future scholars.

Findings

1. Precarious Employment and Professional Identity: Contractual professors face uncertainty that directly undermines their sense of belonging and long-term professional identity.
2. Psychological and Social Impact: Many professors reported feelings of professional emptiness, social alienation, and weakened motivation, which were strongly correlated with contract insecurity.
3. Institutional Deficiencies: Algerian universities provide limited institutional support mechanisms for contractual professors, reinforcing their marginalization.
4. Regional Specificity: The case study of Bouira, Djelfa, and Laghouat revealed that local socio-economic conditions exacerbate the precarious status of contractual staff, making their professional emptiness more pronounced.

Novelty and Contribution

This is among the first focused sociological and psychological studies on professional emptiness among contractual professors in Algeria. It establishes a direct link between contractual employment and professional identity crisis, expanding existing literature on academic employment. It introduces context-specific indicators (motivation, job security, social integration) that are critical in understanding academic precarity in Algerian universities.

Methodology

Research Design: Mixed-methods, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Data Collection: Surveys distributed to contractual professors in Bouira, Djelfa, and Laghouat; semi-structured interviews with selected participants; institutional policy review.

Data Analysis: Statistical analysis of survey results; thematic coding of qualitative responses to capture psychological and social dimensions of professional emptiness.

Theoretical Framework: Guided by sociological theories of work and social identity (Durkheim) and psychological models of burnout and motivation.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of academic integrity and ethical research. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Data confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. No human subjects were harmed in the research process.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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