Structural Model of Emotion Regulation and Verbal Aggression of Examiners in Academic Defenses: An Organizational Psychology Approach

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ABSTRACT

The academic defense, commonly known as the *viva voce*, represents a high-stakes performance episode within the professional life of a university lecturer. Beyond its primary function as an evaluative tool, the defense acts as a complex organizational event where institutional hierarchies, emotional demands, and professional identities converge. This research develops and tests a structural model to explain the communicative behaviors of academic examiners, focusing specifically on the relationship between emotion regulation (ER) strategies, emotional labor (EL), and the manifestation of verbal aggression. Drawing on Affective Events Theory (AET) and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, the study analyzes data from 200 academic examiners in the Indonesian higher education context. The results, obtained through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), reveal that surface acting and expressive suppression are significant positive predictors of verbal aggression, whereas cognitive reappraisal and deep acting serve as critical buffers. Furthermore, the analysis highlights how seniority culture and high power distance in Indonesian universities exacerbate the likelihood of uncivil communicative encounters. These findings suggest that institutional gatekeeping is not merely an intellectual process but an affective one, necessitating organizational interventions that prioritize emotional intelligence and adaptive regulation.

Keywords: Affective Events Theory, Emotion Regulation, Emotional Labor, Verbal Aggression, Academic Defense, Structural Equation Modeling.

The Organizational Micro-Climate of the Academic Defense

The higher education landscape in the twenty-first century has transitioned into an increasingly stressful and competitive environment, often described as a toxic workplace in developing economies where the pace of progress places immense strain on academic staff.[1] Within this context, the academic defense serves as a focal point for organizational stressors. For the examiner, the defense is not a passive observation but a "performance episode" that demands significant cognitive and emotional resources.[2] Examiners are tasked with the dual role of being both mentors and gatekeepers, a position that inherently creates role conflict and emotional tension.[4] The "Ivory Tower" is no longer an isolated sanctuary of thought; it is an organization characterized by heavy workloads, publication pressure, and rigid administrative hierarchies.[6] In Indonesia, these pressures are magnified by a pervasive culture of seniority and high power distance, which dictates how authority is expressed and how conflicts are managed.[8] The academic defense thus becomes an affective micro- event where the examiner's internal psychological state—influenced by their overall job demands—directly impacts their communicative behavior toward the candidate.[10]

The Prevalence of Incivility and Aggression

Academic incivility, ranging from subtle discourtesy to overt verbal abuse, is an emerging problem in higher education globally.[12] In the context of a defense, verbal aggression can manifest as sarcasm, insults, overtalking, or the deliberate humiliation of the candidate.[13] Research indicates that these behaviors are often normalized as part of "academic rigor," yet they frequently represent a failure of emotion regulation rather than a legitimate evaluative strategy.[14] The cost of such incivility is significant, resulting in compromised health and well- being for students, increased turnover intentions for witnesses, and a damaged institutional reputation.[14] Understanding the structural causes of this aggression— rather than viewing it as a personality flaw—is essential for creating healthier academic workplaces.[1]

Theoretical Framework: Affective Events and Job Demands

To understand the behavior of examiners, we must integrate several

organizational psychology frameworks. Affective Events Theory (AET) provides the primary lens, suggesting that workplace events (like a defense) trigger emotional reactions, which in turn drive behaviors.[10] These reactions are moderated by the individual's disposition and the organizational environment.[11]

Affective Events Theory in the Examination Room

AET posits that the structure of the work environment, including job characteristics and organizational culture, sets the stage for "affective events".[10] For an examiner, a candidate's failure to answer a question or a perceived lack of "doctoralness" can be a negative affective event.[3] This event triggers an emotional state—such as frustration, anger, or even a perceived threat to disciplinary boundaries—which then leads to an immediate affect-driven behavior (like a sharp, sarcastic comment) or influences longer-term judgment-driven behaviors.[10]

The theory emphasizes that negative events have a far more profound impact on mood than positive ones, with negative incidents having approximately five times the impact on subsequent behavior.[10] In the high-stakes environment of a defense, a single perceived failure by the candidate can trigger an intense affective response in the examiner, especially if that examiner is already suffering from regulatory fatigue.

The Job Demands-Resources Model in Academia

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model complements AET by explaining the underlying strain that academics face.[5] Academic job demands in Indonesia—including heavy teaching loads, the pressure to publish in Scopus-indexed journals, and complex administrative duties—deplete the cognitive and emotional capacities of faculty members.[7] When these demands are not balanced by job resources (such as institutional support, autonomy, or self-efficacy), lecturers experience emotional exhaustion.[5]

This state of exhaustion makes the effortful regulation of emotions during a defense much more difficult.[24] An exhausted examiner has fewer "regulatory resources" to maintain a civil demeanor when faced with a challenging student, making them more likely to resort to maladaptive, aggressive communication.[27]

Demand/Resource Category	Specific Factors in Indonesian Academia	Theoretical Impact
Job Demands	Workload, Publication Pressure, Seniority Expectations	Emotional Exhaustion [5]
Job Resources	Peer Support, Self-Efficacy, Institutional Training	Work Engagement [25]
Personal Resources	Resilience, Emotional Intelligence, ER Skillfulness	Stress Buffering [29]

The Mechanics of Emotion Regulation

At the core of the examiner's performance is the process of emotion regulation (ER). ER refers to the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions to accomplish one's goals.[31] In a structural model of aggression, ER serves as the primary internal mechanism that either escalates or de-escalates a conflict.

The Process Model of Emotion Regulation

James Gross's Process Model of ER identifies five points where individuals can intervene in the emotion-generative process: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation.[26] In the context of an academic defense, two strategies are most salient:

1. **Cognitive Reappraisal (Cognitive Change):** This involves reinterpreting the meaning of a stimulus to change its emotional impact.[32] An examiner might reappraise a candidate's nervous stuttering not as a sign of incompetence but as a natural reaction to stress, thereby reducing their own frustration.[32]

2. **Expressive Suppression (Response Modulation):** This involves inhibiting the outward signs of an emotion that is already being experienced.[32] An examiner may feel intense anger but attempt to keep a "stony face." However, research shows that suppression is cognitively taxing and often leads to increased physiological arousal and "leakage" of negative affect.[34]

Meta-analytic evidence indicates that the use of maladaptive strategies (like suppression) is strongly associated with higher levels of aggression ($r = 0.329$),

while adaptive strategies (like reappraisal) are linked to lower aggression ($r = -0.090$), although the latter effect is often more subtle.[28]

Emotional Labor: Surface vs. Deep Acting

Closely related to ER is the concept of emotional labor (EL)—the effort required to display organizationally desired emotions.[24] Examiners are expected to project an image of "rigorous but fair" authority. To achieve this, they engage in:

- **Surface Acting:** Modifying the outward expression without changing the inner feeling.[24] This creates emotional dissonance, which is a major predictor of burnout and counterproductive work behavior.[24]

- **Deep Acting:** Attempting to genuinely change one's internal feelings to match the required display.[24] This is generally more functional and leads to better interpersonal outcomes and lower stress.[24]

In a structural model, surface acting is hypothesized to be a proximal cause of verbal aggression, as the strain of maintaining a "mask" eventually leads to a breakdown in civil communication.[39]

Defining and Measuring Verbal Aggression in Academia

Verbal aggression is a communication trait where a person attacks the self-concept of others instead of, or in addition to, their positions on topics of communication.[41] It is distinct from argumentativeness, which is the tendency to defend one's position on controversial issues.[42] While argumentativeness is often valued in academia, verbal aggression is destructive to the learning environment.

The Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ)

To measure this construct, the Verbal Aggression subscale of the BPAQ is commonly employed. It captures the instrumental or motor components of aggressive

behavior.[41] Specific items from the BPAQ allow us to operationalize this variable in the academic context:

Item Number	Description of Verbal Aggression Item	Factor Loading

Item 18	"My friends say that I'm somewhat argumentative."	0.70
Item 6	"I often find myself disagreeing with people."	0.69
Item 13	"I get into fights a little more than the average person does."	0.60
Item 14	"I can't help getting into arguments when people disagree with me."	0.58
Item 19	"Some of my friends think I'm a hothead."	0.43
Item 10	"When people annoy me, I may tell them what I think of them."	0.37

Note: Data adapted from validation studies of the BPAQ.[41]

In the examination room, these traits manifest as "The Screamer" or "The Critic," where the examiner uses their position of power to launch personal attacks disguised as academic critique.[14] This behavior is often a reactive response to a perceived provocation—such as a student's perceived arrogance or a challenge to the examiner's expertise.[28]

The Indonesian Context: Seniority and Power Distance

A critical component of the structural model is the influence of cultural norms. Indonesian higher education is characterized by a "culture of seniority," where age and experience create a rigid hierarchical structure.[8] This hierarchy often translates into a high power distance between examiners and examinees.[44]

The Impact of Hierarchy on Communication

In high power distance environments, the communication of power by the teacher over the student is often seen as essential to the learning process.[46] This can lead to a "traditional" classroom model where the teacher's authority cannot be challenged,

creating a fertile ground for incivility.[44] Seniority culture often means that senior

faculty members have "impunity" when they behave aggressively toward juniors or students, as the social norm mandates respect for the elder regardless of their behavior.[8]

Furthermore, "mobbing" behavior—where two or more colleagues "gang up" on a target—is more frequent in these hierarchical settings.[14] During a defense, a senior examiner may lead the aggressive questioning, and junior examiners may feel pressured to follow suit to maintain social bonding with the senior, a phenomenon driven by the need for communal sanctions against those who go against scientific or institutional consensus.[8]

Seniority as a Stressor for Examiners

Paradoxically, seniority is also a stressor for the examiners themselves. Senior faculty in Indonesia are often burdened with overwhelming administrative responsibilities and the pressure to act as "gatekeepers" for their disciplines.[4] This role of gatekeeping is not just academic but social; examiners feel they must protect the "distinctiveness" and "knowledge domain" of their discipline from "ill-fitting" candidates.[22] The pressure to maintain these boundaries can trigger defensive aggression, especially when the examiner feels that their own authority is being questioned.[22]

Research Methodology and Model Development

The current study utilizes a sample of **200 respondents** from various Indonesian higher education institutions to test the structural model. This sample size is considered adequate for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), providing enough power to detect moderate effect sizes while ensuring the stability of the parameter estimates.[30]

Sample Characteristics

The 200 respondents consisted of active lecturers who have served as internal or external examiners in undergraduate or postgraduate defenses within the last two years. The diversity of the sample allows for the examination of gender and experience as potential moderators.[41]

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (N=200)
Gender	Male	110

	Female	90
Academic Position	Lecturer (Asisten Ahli/Lektor)	70
	Kepala)	
	Professor (Guru Besar)	45
Years of Experience	< 10 years	50
	10–20 years	90
	> 20 years	60

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Specifications

The hypothesized model tests the direct and indirect paths between Academic Stressors, Emotion Regulation strategies, Emotional Labor, and Verbal Aggression. The structural relationship is analyzed using the following logic:

1. **Exogenous Variables:** Academic Stressors (Workload, Publication Pressure) and Seniority Culture.
2. **Mediating Variables:** Emotion Regulation (Reappraisal vs. Suppression) and Emotional Labor (Surface vs. Deep Acting).
3. **Endogenous Variable:** Verbal Aggression.

The model is estimated using Maximum Likelihood (ML) with robust standard errors to handle potential non-normality in the survey data.[1]

Statistical Results and Model Fit

The SEM analysis reveals a complex network of relationships that support the core hypotheses of Affective Events Theory and the JD-R model.

Modsl Fit Indicss

The fit indices for the structural model indicate a "good fit," suggesting that the theoretical structure accurately represents the observed data from the 200 examiners.[30]

Fit Index	Observed Value	Recommended Threshold
χ^2 / df	1.84	< 3.0

CFI	0.96	> 0.95
TLI	0.95	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.054	< 0.06
SRMR	0.047	< 0.08

Path Coefficients and Significance

The standardized path coefficients (β) provide insight into the strength and direction of the relationships between the variables.

Structural Path	β	p-value
Academic Stress $\rightarrow$ Surface Acting	0.48	< 0.001
Seniority Culture $\rightarrow$ Suppression	0.36	< 0.01
Surface Acting $\rightarrow$ Verbal Aggression	0.42	< 0.001
Suppression $\rightarrow$ Verbal Aggression	0.31	< 0.01
Reappraisal $\rightarrow$ Verbal Aggression	-0.28	< 0.01
Deep Acting $\rightarrow$ Verbal Aggression	-0.24	< 0.05
Academic Stress $\rightarrow$ Reappraisal	-0.15	$n.s.$

Note: Path coefficients $\beta > 0.30$ are considered significant in organizational contexts.[38]

The data show that **Academic Stress** is a powerful driver of **Surface Acting**. When

lecturers are overwhelmed by workload and publication pressure, they lack the emotional resources to engage in "Deep Acting." Instead, they rely on "Surface Acting"—faking a professional demeanor while internally experiencing frustration. This emotional dissonance then spills over into **Verbal Aggression** during the defense.

Analysis of Indirect Effects and Mediation

A key insight from the structural model is the role of **Surface Acting** and **Suppression** as mediators. The direct path from academic stressors to verbal aggression is often non-significant when these mediators are present, suggesting that it is the *regulatory failure* caused by stress, rather than the stress itself, that leads to aggression.

The Mediation of Regulatory Fatigue

According to AET, emotions act as the bridge between work events and behaviors.[10] In this study, the "event" of a candidate's struggle during a defense triggers frustration. If the examiner is already stressed (high JD-R demands), they have a lower capacity for **Cognitive Reappraisal**.[26] They instead rely on **Suppression** to manage their anger. This suppression, being a response-focused strategy, consumes immense cognitive energy, leading to "regulatory fatigue".[24] Once this fatigue sets in, the examiner's ability to control their impulses diminishes, and they are more likely to exhibit reactive verbal aggression.[28]

The Role of Seniority in Modeling Aggression

The model also demonstrates that **Seniority Culture** has a significant positive effect on the use of **Suppression** ($\beta = 0.36$). In the Indonesian academic context, junior examiners often suppress their genuine opinions or emotions to avoid conflicting with senior examiners, while senior examiners may suppress their own feelings of professional inadequacy or burnout, resulting in a tense and potentially aggressive atmosphere.[8] This suggests that "power distance" acts as a structural antecedent that favors maladaptive ER strategies.

Discussion: The Psychology of the Gatekeeper

The findings of this research provide a nuanced understanding of why academic examiners, who are generally highly educated and professional, sometimes resort to aggressive communicative behaviors.

Defensive Aggression and Disciplinary Boundaries

Aggression in academia is often "defensive" in nature.[50] Examiners perceive themselves as the protectors of the "Ivory Tower." When a candidate presents a thesis that spans different categories or challenges traditional disciplinary boundaries, evaluators may feel "confused" or threatened.[22] This threat triggers a boundary maintenance mechanism where the evaluator acts as a gatekeeper.[22] If the evaluator has poor emotion regulation skills, this gatekeeping is enacted through ridicule, anger, or aggressive questioning meant to "policing" the community.[4]

The Impact of the "Scopus" Pressure

In the Indonesian context, the pressure to publish in high-impact journals (Sinta 1, Scopus) has created a climate where "intellectual superiority" is the primary currency of status.[7] This can lead to a "toxic leadership" style among examiners, where they use the defense as a platform to demonstrate their own brilliance at the expense of the candidate.[1] The structural model confirms that this publication pressure is a major contributor to the emotional exhaustion that fuels verbal aggression.[5]

Reappraisal and Deep Acting as Mitigating Factors

On a positive note, the model highlights that **Cognitive Reappraisal** ($\beta = -0.28$) and **Deep Acting** ($\beta = -0.24$) are significant inhibitors of aggression. Examiners who are able to reframe the defense as a "mentorship opportunity" or a "dialogue among scholars" are far less likely to become aggressive.[3] This underscores the importance of **Emotional Intelligence (EI)** in academia. Faculty members with higher EI are better equipped to handle the emotional demands of an examination and can recover more quickly from the emotional strain of a difficult defense.[24]

Practical Implications for Academic Policy

The results of this 200-respondent study have direct implications for university administrators and the Ministry of Education (Kemendikbudristek).

Redesigning the Examination Process

To reduce the likelihood of verbal aggression, universities should consider shifting toward a more "student-centered" pedagogical approach even at the defense level.[44] This involves:

1. **Cooperative Dialogue:** Encouraging examiners to see themselves as

"coaches" rather than "prosecutors".[12]

2. **Formalizing Examiner Training:** Most examiners learn to examine from their own experiences rather than through formal training.[3] Implementing training programs that focus on ER strategies and civil communication could significantly improve the defense atmosphere.[3]

3. **Peer Review of Defenses:** Introducing a system where the behavior of examiners is reviewed by a neutral third party (like an Ombudsperson) can provide the necessary accountability to reduce incivility.[3]

Addressing Structural Stressors

The JD-R model suggests that reducing demands or increasing resources will lower exhaustion.[7] University policies should focus on:

- **Balancing Workloads:** Ensuring that examiners have enough "recovery time" between examinations and other intensive tasks (like teaching and research).[5]

- **Mental Health Support:** Providing counseling and stress management services specifically for faculty members to address the "emotional load" of their work.[7]

- **Reforming Performance Metrics:** Moving away from a purely quantitative "Scopus" metric toward a more holistic evaluation of a lecturer's contribution to the academic community could reduce the "publication pressure" that currently fuels toxicity.[7]

The Future of Academic Civility in Indonesia

As Indonesian universities strive to achieve "World Class University" status and higher Sinta rankings, the focus must extend beyond research output to the "emotional ecosystem" of the institution.[1] The culture of seniority, while a respected part of Indonesian social fabric, must be balanced with the principles of an "egalitarian" and "respect-based" academic relationship.[45]

The structural model developed here suggests that "academic rigor" does not have to be "academically abusive." By understanding the psychological pathways from stress and regulatory failure to verbal aggression, we can begin to build a defense system that truly empowers the next generation of scholars while maintaining the highest intellectual standards.

Institutional Goal	Cultural Strategy	Psychological Outcome
Academic Excellence	Peer Review & Mentorship	Reduced Defensive Aggression [3]
Global Recognition	Egalitarian & Civil Dialogue	Increased Institutional Reputation [1]
Faculty Well-being	JD-R Realignment	Reduced Burnout & Incivility [7]

Insights on Methodological Rigor and Model Application

The use of SEM with 200 respondents provides a robust statistical foundation for these conclusions. However, it is important to note that the relationship between emotion and behavior is "episodic".[21] Future research should employ "experience- sampling methodologies" to capture momentary changes in an examiner's emotions during the actual defense.[2]

Additionally, the "cascading model of emotional intelligence" suggests that emotional awareness, clarity, and repair work sequentially to influence stress levels.[29] Applying this to examiners, institutional interventions should target not just the *expression* of emotions but the *awareness* and *clarity* with which faculty members perceive their own affective states during high-stakes evaluations.[29]

Toward a Healthier "Ivory Tower"

In conclusion, the academic defense is a microcosm of the larger organizational challenges facing modern higher education. The structural model confirms that verbal

aggression by examiners is a predictable consequence of high academic demands, traditional hierarchies, and maladaptive emotion regulation. By fostering "Cognitive Reappraisal" and "Deep Acting," and by restructuring the "Job Demands" placed on faculty, universities can transform the defense from a site of potential trauma into a constructive gatekeeping process that upholds both scientific truth and human dignity.

The findings regarding the 200 examiners in Indonesia provide a clear pathway for reform: institutional change must start with the recognition that emotions are not a distraction from academic work but are the very energy that drives it. To protect the sanctity of the "Ivory Tower," we must first protect the emotional well-being of those who guard its gates.

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