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COMMENTARY

The Institutional Betrayal and Bureaucratic Violence of Higher Education

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Abstract

Teachers navigate funding cuts, political machinations, sexual harassment and assault investigations, racism, and white supremacy amid various locally constructed crises. Using bureaucratic violence and institutional betrayal – two interlinked, yet distinct, theoretical frameworks – in this brief commentary, I propose that academic working conditions constrain pedagogical choice, with significant implications for anthropological teaching and learning.

Keywords: *bureaucratic violence; institutional betrayal; higher education*

Introduction

Critiques of higher education abound. Amid crises of funding cuts, political maneuvering, sexual harassment and assault investigations, racism, and white supremacy, we are now faced with what has been variously termed the Great Resignation (Hoenigman Meyer 2022; Varghese 2022) and the Great Disengagement (McClure and Fryar 2022). Following Gusterson's (2017) call to systematically study institutions of higher education as ethnographic contexts, I utilize bureaucratic violence and institutional betrayal – two interlinked, yet distinct, theoretical frameworks – to propose that contemporary academic working conditions constrain pedagogical and scholarly choices with implications for teaching and learning. Drawing on literature related to bureaucratic violence and institutional betrayal, I utilize my own context (Georgia, United States) to illustrate these dynamics and the implications they have for academic work.

Institutional Betrayal and Bureaucratic Violence

Anthropologists have illuminated how bureaucracies, as institutions administering both care and control, are dynamic spaces in which decisions are made, knowledge is produced, and materiality renders institutionally-based interests and goals visible. Researchers have examined bureaucratic surveillance (Torpey 2002), the administrative

production of indifference (Herzfeld 1992), the life of documents (Boehm 2020), and the devaluation of affective life in decision-making and processes (Graeber 2015). Bureaucracies emphasize the quantification of care and productivity (Graeber 2015), compartmentalize the human experience (Graeber 2015), create and perpetuate unequal access to resources (Horton and Heyman 2020), and act as a tool of surveillance (Joronen 2017), while creating feelings, such as fear and distress, among those who are the objects of or subject to the institution (Heckert 2020; Rehsman 2020).

Scholars point to the neoliberalization of academic institutions where “coercive techniques of accountability” (Shore and Wright 2000, 63) reinforce hierarchical power dynamics, the adjunctification of higher education, and increased evaluations of instructors via student, annual, and multi-year evaluations (Gusterson 2017). Studies have also revealed the inequalities reproduced by academic hiring networks (Kawa et al. 2018). Following data illustrating deep systemic inequalities within institutions of higher education, the Anthropology of Mental Health Interest Group published a policy statement in spring 2022 affirming the need for transformation in academia and attention to the way it perpetuates oppression and causes mental distress (Fletcher et al. 2022). However, there remains significant ethnographic work to be done in contexts of higher education (Forsey 2020).

That academia relies upon an extensive hierarchical bureaucratic structure that presents itself as a system of care while dictating extensive levels of control is not a particularly new insight. However, employment in academia has also illuminated the need to extend the analysis of academic institutions beyond their function as a perpetrator of control which can be understood as forms of structural and everyday violence in bureaucratic form. Following Graeber’s (2006, 105) conceptualization, bureaucratic violence is the “boring, humdrum, yet omnipresent forms of structural violence that define the very conditions of our existence,” including identification processes, employment records, subtle threats and rules enforcement, and ever-mounting bureaucratic requirements for everyday labor and life.

Institutional betrayal is a theoretical framework analyzing the harms perpetrated by institutions that purportedly offer care (such as universities) and on which others (such as students) are dependent. Harm can be pragmatic (i.e., production of inequality) and psychological (i.e., emotional distress), and it can stem from institutional actions and inactions that affect trauma and traumatic experiences (Smith and Freyd 2014). Originating from trauma theory and betrayal trauma theory in psychology, institutional betrayal has been used to analyze sexual assault (Gómez 2022; Pinciotti and Orcutt 2021), military sexual trauma (Andresen et al. 2019; Holliday and Monteith 2019), COVID-19 effects on undergraduates (Adams-Clark and Freyd 2021), nursing (Brewer 2021) and medical contexts (Klest et al. 2020), and workplace inequity in academia (Pyke 2018). Where institutions of care, such as a university, create some measure of dependency, individuals may experience violations via that institution such that traumatic experiences

are exacerbated or created (Parnitzke Smith and Freyd 2014). Thus, we must examine how an institution entrusted with care acts as a perpetrator of abuse (Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004). This framework, when used alongside bureaucratic violence, can reveal the patterns of violence embedded in academic bureaucratic forms and rituals, in addition to rendering visible the widespread damage these cause on the individual and group levels for students, faculty, and staff.

Dynamics of Higher Education in Georgia

State-funded higher education institutions have repeatedly come under intense scrutiny from political bodies. To reflectively examine the dynamics of institutional betrayal and bureaucratic violence at work in public higher education institutions, I will utilize my own US state of Georgia as an illustrative case study. Public land grant institutions in the state are connected via the University System of Georgia (USG), which is overseen by the Board of Regents (BoR). The USG includes 26 institutions throughout the state headed by the BoR, the single governing authority that oversees higher education at these institutions throughout the state and which issues new policies, such as tenure and promotion review policies. These policies must then be adapted by each institution to fit their unique context (i.e., liberal arts college, top-tier research university, etc.).

In 2020, outcries of concern about teaching critical race theory (CRT) led to not one, but two requests from legislators in Georgia to seek detailed information from each of the state's land grant institutions about how topics such as race, whiteness, oppression, inequality, and other related topics are taught in the classroom (Stirgus 2022). In the first such instance, colleagues at other institutions were asked to provide syllabi, statements, a list of courses, or other materials (Stirgus 2021; Wrigley 2021). These requests were made by a legislator then handed down from the BoR and USG to university presidents, from presidents to deans, from deans to department chairs, and, finally, from department chairs to faculty for self-reporting and to the staff who then had to organize this information.

In fall 2021, after the first round of lawmaker inquiries into issues of race pedagogy on campus, the Board of Regents and University System of Georgia approved new guidelines for post tenure review. The policy change includes the introduction of performance improvement plans – a commonly used technique in corporate environments to remove individuals from their positions – and “remedial actions” if “the faculty member fails to make sufficient performance” which may include “suspension of pay, salary reduction, revocation of tenure, and separation from employment” (USG 2022, 8.3.5.4). Currently, there are no guidelines for understanding whether similar remedial actions could be incorporated into policies affecting non-tenure track faculty or graduate teaching assistants – groups that arguably hold much more precarious positions relative to tenure-track faculty.

Critics of this move see it as part of a broader pattern of state behavior to constrain the topics faculty teach and research, with potentially dramatic implications for pedagogy (Cooper 2021). The University System was subsequently condemned by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP 2021). AAUP may consider censuring the USG, which could harm the ability to recruit excellent teachers, researchers, and administrators who value good working conditions that foster positive learning environments (Hill 2021). Amid lawmaker-led inquiries into classes and pedagogy and efforts to restrict the teaching and learning of anti-racism and decolonization (Prabhu and Tagami 2022), there has been interest in having the highest echelons of higher education leadership in Georgia staffed with politically conservative individuals. For example, in February 2022, Sonny Perdue was unanimously selected to become the Chancellor of the BoR. The BoR itself is comprised primarily of successful businessmen who earned their degrees in the 1980s; there is a notable dearth of experience in higher education practices, policies, teaching, and administration among members of the BoR. The unanimous Board decision to make Sonny Perdue the one and only finalist for the position of Chancellor is perhaps a way to allay the fears of conservative students and parents (Stirgus and Bluestein 2022). Perdue's connections to, support for, and experience with the Trump administration, along with his long-standing presence in state politics, were certainly considered positive attributes by some (Stirgus and Bluestein 2022).

Impact on Anthropology

Anthropologists in Georgia are certainly impacted by new limitations on the strength of tenure, post-tenure review and "improvement plan" requirements, and political appointments throughout the BoR. However, teaching anthropologists are also impacted by the new reactionary legislation that comes in the wake of anti-critical race theory media attention. In spring 2022, the Georgia Senate passed Bill 377, which amends previous educational guidelines in the state. The bill states that state entities, such as the USG and BoR, as well as local school boards and systems, are required

to take measures to prevent the use of curricula or training programs which act upon, promote, or encourage certain concepts.

The bill further stipulates that elementary and secondary education should not teach so-called "divisive concepts," which is defined as any concept that claims a race is superior to another, that the US or our state is "fundamentally or systemically racist," or that individuals on the virtue of their race or color are "inherently racist or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously," among other points (SB 377). This bill has potentially severe implications for anthropologists working at state institutions.

Anthropologists have historically been at the forefront of investigating, uncovering, conceptualizing, and working in practice sectors related to white supremacy, enslavement, genocide and ethnocide, and systemic oppression across institutional

spaces (Baker 1998; Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2019; García 2021; Hale 2006; Harrison 1998; Harrison et al. 2018; Hoberman 2012; Kondo 2018; Moore et al. 2003; Mullings 2005; Page and Thomas 1994; Rosa and Bonilla 2017; Stuesse 2016). Important work in this field has illuminated, for example, race-based biased hiring practices in higher education (Brondo and Bennett 2012), the operation of higher education as inherently a “white public space” wherein faculty, staff, and students of color are systemically marginalized (Brodkin et al. 2011), in addition to broader discussions of how anthropology as a discipline further contributes to white supremacy (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2019).

Race is discussed in most introductory anthropology classes, which are often a core curriculum option. In Georgia, for example, undergraduates have the option to take an anthropology course to fulfill one of the Area E Social Sciences requirements (USG 2021). Given disciplinary interests in studying race with a critical lens that investigates the pervasiveness of racism throughout societies, cultures, and the institutions they create, how will anthropologists be affected by SB 377? To what extent will these instructors be reported by students, parents, colleagues, or watch-dog groups, and what protections – if any – will be guaranteed to protect academic freedom and evidence-based knowledge and practice? Matters are not helped by the aforementioned limitations that have been placed on tenure nor the fact that Georgia is a “Right-to-Work”/Fire state that strictly limits the activities and strength of unions.

Bureaucratic violence and institutional betrayal are concepts that can help us understand the complexities of academic labor at this juncture in this context. Bureaucratic institutions – the USG and individual universities – are white public spaces (Brodkin et al. 2011) and are being explicitly leveraged to prevent critical data, evidence-based practice, and theory from reaching students. Furthermore, new mechanisms that provide as yet unclear remedial actions for faculty who are deemed to not sufficiently perform in their job role have potentially severe employment and economic repercussions and have occurred in tandem with moves to limit what concepts can be taught. Faculty, especially those in precarious positions, may well fear repercussion for teaching the newest cutting-edge research that addresses race, inequality, oppression, and other key theoretical concepts that adequately prepare our students for the real world and work. The very institutions that tout academic freedom and encourage creativity and critical thinking are the same that will limit who is hired, determine whose work is “divisive” in concept or thought, and implement remedial actions that could lead to salary cuts, revocation of tenure, and firing.

Conclusion

Taken together, these actions illuminate the dynamics of institutional betrayal and bureaucratic violence in higher education. From the faculty perspective, though tenure can be deeply problematic and flawed, tenure can also be construed as a form of care

from the institutional body – an opportunity for a limited measure of security and safety in one’s job despite the potentially political or controversial nature of one’s work. The notion that tenure will continue, but post-tenure review effectively renders the granting of tenure symbolic only, rather than a true provision of protection and care, is a form of institutional betrayal.

Simultaneously, lawmakers’ aggressive investigations of concepts taught in the classroom (i.e., critical race theory) – while not an outright proscription – induces concern and fear among faculty and graduate student teachers alike. In my course on diversity, inclusion, and social justice, what topics are considered “acceptable,” and which could put my career in jeopardy? What are the boundaries and limitations of lawmaker influence in educational practice? Ultimately, we cannot discuss teaching and learning effectively without addressing the working conditions of faculty, staff, and graduate students. We cannot discuss teaching and learning without attending to the forms of bureaucratic violence and institutional betrayal that implicitly or explicitly restrict, constrain, and depersonalize the educational experience.

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