

The Oppressive Classroom: Student Construction of Subjectivities

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Abstract – Adopting a poststructuralist discourse analysis framework, the study explores a student's multiple subjectivities framed within discursive relations of power. Acknowledging language as a major contestation site for negotiating subjectivities, it looks into the narrative of Ares, a senior university student. Utilizing the biographical approach, the study is centered on the shifting and fluid discourses in the student life of Ares, on how she was both positioned and positioning within conflicting discourses of an "obedient student" and "resisting student" surrounded by oppressive practices of academics. "Obedience" in the context of Ares meant refraining from questioning an academic's authority, undervaluing the self, and playing by expectations. However, a competing discourse involved "resistance" in the form of non-attendance to classes, contemplating on students' rights, recognizing oppression, blaming, and prescribing. These discourses can potentially provide a glimpse into the effects of academics' oppressive behaviors towards students and create possibilities for the development of institutional policies to help suppress a troubling culture of oppression in the academe. Implications for the academic community are considered.

Keywords – poststructuralist discourse, oppression, student subjectivity, obedience, resistance

INTRODUCTION

A classroom that is free from intimidating practices is a vital component for producing critical thinkers within a liberal pedagogical structure. A classroom free from fear, intimidation, and oppression of students is vital in creating an atmosphere of respect in the academe.

Bullying not only affects students' well-being and academic performance, but likewise compromises their feelings of safety; more so when academics themselves become the perpetrators of this oppressive practice. Giving voice to this rising phenomenon becomes paramount with researches on verbal and non-verbal communication in the academe being considered imperative with the rise of bullying and incivility in classrooms. The studies of Marraccini [1] and Grant [2] surveyed and explored students' experienced to affirm oppressive practices of academics towards students. In addition, results of Baluran and Yap's [3] study identified several oppressive practices among a professors as identified by both the students and professors themselves. Due to the results, they suggested that rising oppression in the academe merits valid concern. Moreover, Harris and Rosenthal [4] argue that there are indeed several aspects of the classroom context that render it a

unique setting where the traditional rules governing communication, both verbal and nonverbal, do not always apply and thus demands special research scrutiny.

The current paper addressed these observations by exploring discursive subjectivities of a student who has experienced oppressive behaviour from her professors. Considerable research suggests that one of the most important aspects for effective teaching is communication. Nussbaum in Georgakopoulos and Guerrero [5] has said that the way a teacher communicates, or is perceived to communicate, is widely considered to be an important determinant of students' attitudes toward a class and a teacher.

Universities uphold fundamentally the formation of human subjects and as Grant [2] has discussed in her study, central to the enterprise of higher education must be a concern with its ethical dimension, that is, with the question of what kind of people we want our students to become and how our practices are contributing to this formation.

Oppression according to Hanna, F.; Talley, W.; & Guindon, M., [6] can be manifested in different ways. It can be overt or obvious, or it can be conducted secretly without the oppressed persons knowing that

oppression is being perpetrated. It does not have to be vicious.

Although bullying is a regular recurrent action, even intermittent, oppressive acts have close association with bullying. Twemlow and Fonagy [7] defined a bullying teacher as “one who uses his or her power to punish, manipulate, or disparage a student beyond what would be a reasonable disciplinary procedure”. Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, and Brethour [8] found in a survey of 116 elementary school teachers that 45% admitted to having bullied a student. In a qualitative study using discourse and conversational analyses where teachers were asked about teacher bullying of students, Hepburn in Allen [9] states that at least one teacher openly admitted to having bullied students. The same observation has likewise found parallel results in the study of Baluran and Yap [2].

Teachers are critical in determining the school climate. Thus their attitudes to power dynamics are extremely relevant [6] especially in how students are positioned by teachers and how a student may likewise position himself within a discursive power dynamics. Oppressive practices by teachers according to McEvoy [10] tends to be chronic and often is expressed in a public manner... Equally significant, the teacher who bullies usually receives no retribution or other negative consequences.

In her paper that looked into the discipline of students, Grant [2] observed that discursive practices in university education allows us to understand the experience of students especially in their moments of failure and/or success which ultimately reflect an institution’s claims to be progressively developing the potential of its students.

With this observation in mind, the paper starts with the premise that we have multiple affiliations in that we do not see ourselves for example as a student but also as a friend, a brother, a sister, a member of a glee club, middle-class, future soldier, etc. These roles are not fixed and may have varying importance according to situations and affiliations. The fluidity of our humanity is not fixed, is complex, and constantly takes plurality. For the poststructuralist, according to Baxter [11], the specific locus of its interest is in language as a ‘site’ for the construction and contestation of social meanings.

Weedon [12] posits that in post-structuralist models, language establishes rather than reflects or expresses the meaning of society, experience and the individual’s sense of self. For the poststructuralist,

subjectivity is theorized as an effect of language. Language comes in many competing and often contradictory discourses. For Foucault, discourses establishes our subjectivity through material practices, shaping our bodies, minds, and that shape bodies as much as minds and comprise of power relations. This idea takes the observation that some discourses, and the subject positions and modes of subjectivity that they constitute, have more power than others. For Foucault, power is not held by a particular group. It is a relationship which inheres in discourses.

Furthermore, Weedon [12] suggests that discourses produce subjects within relations of power which potentially or actually involve resistance. Subjects positions involve different degrees and types of agency that can be both compliant and resistant. The discursive field, which produces meaning and subjectivities, is not homogeneous; rather, it includes discourses and discursive practices which may be contradictory and conflicting and which create the space for new forms of knowledge and practice.

This idea is likewise observed by Encanto [13]. She articulates subjectivity as linguistically constructed because the subject is constructed in language and language is the symbolic order, which is the medium of expression for the representations of a society (myths, images, ideas, and values).

Baxter [11] cites Weedon who highlights language as the common factor in any analysis of power, social meanings and construction of identities:

Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of selves, our subjectivity is constructed...post-structuralism theorises subjectivity as a site of disunity and conflict, central to the processes of political change and to preserving the status quo.

Studies employing the Foucauldian discourse analysis may for example look at how figures in authority use language to express their dominance, and request obedience and respect from those subordinate to them. In a specific example, a study may look at the language used by teachers towards students, or military officers towards conscripts. This approach may also be used to explore how language is used as a form of resistance to those in power.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The current study offers subjectivity in the fashion of post-structuralism to showcase how a

student is positioned and positioning within the discourse of oppression not only within but also outside of the classroom. Results may offer possible implications for the academic community when considering the effects of academics' oppressive behaviors towards students and create possibilities for the development of institutional policies to help suppress a troubling culture of oppression in the academe.

This research is guided by the following questions: (1) how does Ares, a senior university student, position herself within the discourse of academic oppression? and (2) how is Ares positioned within the discourse of academic oppression?

METHODS

This study explores the nature and construction of the discourses of the obedient student and resisting student in light of academic oppression using the poststructuralist framework. Utilizing the biographical approach, the study is centered on the shifting and fluid discourses in the student life of Ares (a pseudonym), a senior college student at the time of the interview.

Ares was purposively selected after discreetly surveying senior university students for referrals as to those who have experienced the most instances of oppression in the academe. For the eleven (11) students identified, informal interviews were held to investigate in-depth student experiences on academic oppression. Prior to engaging Ares, an informal interview was conducted before the researcher decided that she has indeed directly and indirectly experienced academic oppression. Ares was selected since among the students identified, she was the only one who was able to provide detailed accounts of her experiences. After the confirmation, her consent for an interview was secured.

The study used the biographical method to explore the discourses of Ares, a student who has experienced multiple oppressions in the academe. The study of biographical research according to Roberts [14] rests on a view that individuals are the "creators of meanings which form the basis of their everyday lives". They act according to meanings through which they make sense of social existence. Marotzki [15] explains that the interaction between the individual and society is played out in the medium of significant symbols (such as language). Human beings become familiar with the world and himself/herself in interpretations mediated by, and

bound to, interaction. Qualitative biographical research posits that an individual's can always be understood as a construct and that it is interested in studying individual forms of social and milieu-specific experience processing.

Central to the narrative is Ares' experiences in academic oppression and how they discursively positioned her and positioning in the nexus of power relations. Settelmaier [16] explains that every autobiography to poststructuralists is a construct for a particular audience and it looks at the purpose behind the construct.

Furthermore, Davies and Harre [17] point out that once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person predictably would view that world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the images and concepts involved within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned.

Ares' experiences as an "obedient student" and as a "resistant student" were explored through an in-depth, semi-structured interview. The interview was based upon ten (10) pre-prepared questions around the areas of her experiences being a university student and what oppression meant to her. The rest of the questions were spontaneously based on her narrative to clarify specific points. The interview data was treated as a narrative for the purposes of analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Competing narratives were evident in Ares' discourses between what she feels she should be doing and feeling in an oppressive discourse versus what is expected of her as an obedient student subjected to oppressive behaviors guised as part of student discipline among academics.

Citing Foucault, Grant [2] discussed that the Foucauldian view of the university is that of a disciplinary block which produces 'subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile bodies'. As far as Ares was concerned, she discursively acknowledged that university is an institution that disciplines and shapes students to reach their potentials but also privileged student's recognition of and opposition to oppression as part of her resistance.

1. The Obedient Student

It has been widely observed that discipline is most often associated with negativity so that it has become second nature for most academicians to utilize oppressive practices in dispensing discipline.

After looking into student discipline within the educational setting, Sawyer [18] suggested that when utilizing the systems approach, one must work hard to do so in a positive manner. Negativity is a constant in disciplining students, and this trend must be reversed.

In her narrative, Ares is discursively positioned by the institution to submit to regulations and simultaneously positioning herself as a 'docile' student.

1.1 Does not Question Authority

Professors in universities are considered to be specialists in their field. These academicians do not respond very well to threats to their authority. Ares learned this the hard way as she revealed instances in her discourses where she expressed confusion over a professor's behavior when she clarified about the topic. As a college freshman, she felt silenced by a professor rebuking her for not listening during class discussions, thus, her inability to comprehend.

"When I posed the question, the teacher accused me of not paying attention when the lesson was discussed. She said that most of us at the back were not listening, but the truth is we were in fact all ears at that time...She reprimanded me because she said I was not listening, I was not paying attention"

Further on, Ares was positioned by the professor as a student remiss in her role and therefore forfeits her right to clarify an issue of interest during the topic discussed at hand.

1.2 Undervaluing the Self

In an event where a professor put Ares in an embarrassing situation she seemed to trivialize the situation by dismissing the academic's manner towards her as warranted for the development of the self despite admitting that she was embarrassed. From this perspective, Ares as a student is subject to the controls of the institution and her own definition of a 'good' and 'obedient' student.

"Yes, I was embarrassed, but it's ok. I don't think the teacher felt that I was insulted, but I was embarrassed."

Discourses of studenthood according to Grant [2] is constituted by the contemporary discourses of studenthood which are dynamically produced by, and in turn produce, the institution—its beliefs, practices, rhetoric, physical arrangements and representatives 'on earth', the lecturers and administrators. In the discourse of Ares, a professor exhibiting anger towards students despite an oppressive stance is

justified, so long as they do so with student development in mind.

"I think it was ok when the teacher expressed anger. It's ok when they get angry especially when it was meant to correct us, to make our work better."

Unsurprisingly, self-deprecation by trivializing the oppressive practice of an oppressive academic is quite common among students in the Philippine context where because they are conditioned to be subjected to various verbal and non-verbal abuses disguised within the context of discipline, they begin to see this practice as expectations for obedience.

"I believe I have my share of faults because despite the embarrassments and insults I experienced, I may have still opted to follow the professor."

Moreover, during that time when she was scolded for not providing the right answer immediately, Ares had to apologize, in effect, for being misunderstood.

"... I even said 'sorry'. However, there were times when I just kept quiet."

By lightly dismissing an academic's oppressive acts against her, Ares thus positions herself as an obedient student.

1.3 Playing by Expectations

Obedience requires that a student, when called upon to answer questions posed by his professor has to answer in a direct, no nonsense manner. Deviation from this seems to justify a professor's censure. Ares lamented how her Math professor misinterpreted her actions and embarrassed her in front on the class.

"I failed to provide an answer in a Math problem because I do not know the formula. I tried to show some verbal as well as nonverbal signals to indicate that I did not know the answer. However, my professor misinterpreted my nonverbal signs-some dancing movements-as overacting. He feels that I was taking his questions lightly so I frankly told him that I did not know the needed formula."

To fit into the discourse of the obedient student, Ares admitted to the professor that she did not know the answer and recounted that she submitted to being silenced instead, forcing herself to accept the professor's observation of her being "overacting".

2. Resistance to Oppression

Competing discourses were evident in Ares' narrative. This phenomenon is recognized in McHoul and Grace's [18] discussion of Foucault's thesis of power where they point out that a strategic manoeuvre must be countered by an opposing

manoeuvre. In the case of Ares, she exhibited resistance within power relations involving oppressive professors by missing their classes on purpose, contemplating on her rights as a student, recognizing oppressions, blaming, and prescribing. Resistance to power has been observed by Foucault according to Grant [2] where he cautioned that it would not be possible for power to exist without points of insubordination which, by definition, are means of escape.

2.1 Defiance Through Non-Attendance

Ares attributes her reluctance to attend an oppressive professor's class to the negative experience she had. As previously discuss in her discourses of "obedience", Ares positioned herself as having an option to avoid the situation by not subjecting herself to it.

"It was my first few months in college-I think it was in July. Just a month in college, and I already felt like dropping the subject because I do not want to see the teacher again.

Moreover, competing with her discourses on obedience, Ares likewise displayed another form of defiance by refusing to greet her professor and instead avoiding him or spacing out whenever they met along the hallway.

"I think my professor realized that he did something wrong to me because I used to greet him whenever our paths crossed. After the incident, however, I do not greet him anymore because obviously I started to dislike him.

"I do not talk to the professor anymore even if we see each other by chance. But one time, he greeted me first. The incident, though, did not damage my self-worth at all.

2.2 Contemplating Students' Rights

Oppression in the classroom can likewise be extended even outside of class since the body as a subject is not separate from other experiences or spatial distance. This was experienced by Ares when she recalled an experience where miscommunication with the professor led them to miss the latter's class. However, the professor misunderstood the action as an insult when he realized that they attended their other classes except his.

"He saw me and my classmate in an office – and he confronted us. He got angry because we attended other classes but skipped his...He threatened us that

he would do something with our grades – that his last recourse was to lower our grades".

Her experience with a teacher threatening to manipulate their grades as punishment has made her questions her classmates' and her self-worth. Ares positioned herself as a subject that questions the professor's action and this kind of thought usually ends up with a critical examination of an academic's respectability. She questioned her rights as a student, a crucial first step in recognizing that something about the situation was not right.

"We felt threatened by what our professor said-that he could manipulate our grades to our disadvantage because he feels that we like our other classes better than his class. That is why we felt forced to attend his classes because we were scared that our grades will suffer. Here, I wonder where my rights as a student lie."

Questioning oppression likewise leads to some introspection:

"I felt that our worth as students-our intelligence most especially-may not be nurtured, may not be tested, because of what our professor did."

And ultimately gives way to skepticisms towards an academic's authority. Ares' discourse apparently takes on a negative stance towards the apparent blunder of the academic.

"I think at that time, I was not asserting that I was right-that she has not discussed about Emilio Jacinto at all."

2.3 Recognizing Oppression

Being able to recognize that one is being oppressed can be a form of defiance for he is able to determine that he does not deserve the treatment. This recognition ultimately gives way to non-acceptance of the other's behavior and gives rise to doubts amidst a negative academic atmosphere.

In one instance, Ares discussed her perspective of a professor who was probably venting her anger to the class. By rationalizing the professor's behavior, Ares draws on her perspectives in identifying an oppressive behavior.

"One of the teachers also said that we at the back of the classroom were always noisy. I do not know if she was just trying to find reasons to vent out her anger even to the wrong persons--because the truth is we were really listening to her."

In another event, Ares recounts how a professor made non-verbal signals to exhibit his displeasure:

“One of the examples of his signals is his scoffing sounds. He accompanies this with other nonverbal sounds: his chin up, and his arms akimbo. Some of the other teachers would broaden their shoulders to show more authority. Sometimes, the oppressive behavior is in the teachers’ eyes—they have this manner of looking at us... We have not yet experienced this kind, wait, we had with one of the teachers where we were really pointed out. Some other teachers used verbal slang, or compared us with the other classes, or would humiliate us like, “You have chosen this course, you should know about this (concept/term).”

Ares clearly recalls specifics of the events where she described a professor’s scoffing sound to indicate disgust or disbelief –

“If he corrects us during classroom discussions, he would scoff at us.. (imitate scoffing sound)..like this (imitate scoffing sound) wrong’.”

– Or how the professor would dismissively laugh at their ideas in a condescending manner aimed at their attempt at answering the question he posed, oftentimes comparing the class with other classes he had handled.

“When the professor asks one of my classmates to recite, and the answer is not what he expected; he would laugh at us, and compare us with his other classes. Sometimes, he compares us with the ones in the higher years. Someone also told us that he gossiped about us with his co-teachers. He told them that we do not fare well in the class discussions.”

Another time, Ares recalls how they came to know of the same teacher’s tendency to badmouth them to fellow academics in the office.

“He would gossip about us to the other teachers, that we were so incompetent...” Ares likewise recognizes a professor’s dominance where only the academic has the power to position them and for Grant [2], stays central to the process.

“Of course, when a student does not know the answer (inaudible)...and the teacher keeps on asking, keeps on cross-examining, it seems like the teacher positions himself as someone who knows so many things.”

2.4 Blaming

Spaces for resistance are always evident in constituting subjects as with the case of Ares where she discursively positioned herself as a victim of her professors’ oppressive shaming and blames them for the fate of her grades. Contesting academics’ dominance and oppressive positions, she avoided on

purpose attendance to the class of one professor during her freshman year.

“During that semester when the incident happened, I had lost my interest in attending my classes especially that professor’s class so that my grades went into a downward spiral.”

Despite knowing the consequences of escaping the reality of her situation, she blamed the professor for the poor grades she received partly because she did not feel like attending the class due to the embarrassment she suffered from being reprimanded by the professor.

“I cried the first time I got grades lower than 2.5. Somehow, I partly blamed my professor especially on the way he treated me.”

In another class, she positions herself as a victim of a professor’s oppression when she could clearly recall that it was the professor herself who could not remember having discussed a topic Ares tried to clarify.

“I have no intentions of embarrassing or insulting her when I personally ask her about the lesson. I think she puts the blame on me instead. She made it appear like it was my fault.”

2.5 Prescribing

Evident in her resistant discourse is Ares’ prescriptive stance towards oppressive academics by assessing their communication skills related to a more tolerant atmosphere in the classroom.

“I think the professor must improve on the way of telling the students what their faults are, that the manner must not be too extreme.”

Aside from prescribing a more respectful discourse towards students, she likewise expressed hopes for academics to acknowledge their mistakes –

“I hope there would be times when a teacher admits a mistake, like she would admit that she failed to discuss about Emilio Jacinto.”

and to maintain high standards of professionalism in the profession.

“I believe that what goes on in the classroom should not be gossiped that way.”

She continued with expectations on academics’ stance towards students:

“I really hope that teachers would be more student-friendly, but not to the point that teachers would just tolerate our wrong-doings. I believe it is ok if teachers would correct us, but I think it should be in a nice way. It should be in a way that does not demean students’ self-worth.”

It can be observed that Ares acknowledges that academics are backed by institutional authority to impose discipline but places this power within certain boundaries. As a sign of resistance, she identifies parameters to certain behaviors academics must ascribe to. She likewise propositions academics to consider some introspection on improving crucial communication practices closely allied with effective pedagogical skills:

“I hope the teacher would ask himself too as to why we behave this way, he could ask if he could have done something wrong himself. Not just because we appear to not know the answer. Who knows, we might know it, we’re just afraid he might discredit us again.”

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A classroom environment founded on respect and understanding has been shown to create positive results. The results of the meta-analysis conducted by Harris and Rosenthal [4] reveal that teacher nonverbal immediacy is strongly related to many positive student outcomes: liking for the course and teacher, willingness to take more classes with the teacher, and students' perceptions that they have learned a lot in the class.

Grant [2] observed that the practices of domination are usually justified as being for the student's good, or in the interest of fairness, flexibility or efficiency, or for the good of the university as a whole being, and, and at the same time, are established as 'normal' and thus guaranteed by common sense. However, the current study reveals disturbing patterns of oppression that may have us believe that this is a regular occurrence and through Ares' narrative, produces power relations detrimental to students' development.

Ares' narrative reveals not only patronizing and demeaning treatment of academics towards students but of resistance toward this power and dominance as well. This observation underscores the need for critical interventions and a more responsive policy to suppress an oppressive climate in the academe. Oppression in the academe can only leave vulnerable learners and a stigma to an otherwise supportive educational climate. The problem with justifying, trivializing, or dismissing the practice may feed its proliferation until it becomes systemic. As Allen [8] observes, the frightening aspect of this [teacher and student bullying each other] is that students and teachers may get caught up in a reciprocal exchange

that destroys the professionalism of the relationship and encourages mutual aggression. The case of Ares' resistance to oppression is revealing in that student subjectivities provide room for disrespect and disillusionment towards the authority of academics. This has been observed by Foucault according to Grant [2] where he cautioned that it would not be possible for power to exist without points of insubordination which, by definition, are means of escape.

Power dynamics is inherent in any institution but more so in universities where academics and students are involved in the immediacy of power relations and in so many ways, privilege the academics backed by institutional authority. Academics are strongly encouraged to reflect critically on their crucial roles as mentors and clearly examine oppressive practices that are detrimental not only to nurturing student growth but to the system itself. It is important now more than ever that institutional policy makers articulate specific provisions in crafting effective policies and transformative strategies to support a culture of mutual respect in the academe. In the study of Baluran and Yap [3], it was found that oppressive practices in the academe is on the rise with teachers themselves being able to identify their acts as oppressive. They recommended that trainings on communication strategies as an important aspect of pedagogical skills be implemented to scaffold teachers' ability to proactively establish an atmosphere where oppression and bullying are prevented. Likewise, Holley, Stromwall, and Bashor [20] assert that individual-level interventions are necessary, but must be combined with strategies that aim to change oppressive institutions and cultural practices. Keashly and Neuman [21] on the other hand believe that there is sufficient justification for pursuing more systematic research on bullying and aggression to better understand the nature, causes, consequences, and management of such damaging behaviors within institutions of higher education.

The study employed the biographical method in obtaining data through the perspective and subjectivity of one respondent. It is recommended that future exploratory research replicating the use of the poststructuralist approach be considered with more respondents to provide multiple voices thereby creating a richer and more in-depth investigation of student subjectivity towards oppressive practices by academics.

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