Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Bullying Power Dynamics in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study utilizes Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine how tenured faculty members and adjunct instructors experience bullying through language and micro-aggressive behaviors, a particular focus on gender bullying.
Keywords: bullying, micro-aggressive behaviors, higher education, gender, adjunct

Bullying is a phenomenon commonly observed and researched amongst the student population, who are the main makeup of classrooms, but has been woefully neglected when it comes to discussing from an educator's standpoint. This study focuses on higher education institution, colleges and universities, as the target population are adjunct instructors and professors. There is budding research about this specific subset, but it is sparse, so this study seeks to expand scholarship in this area. This study investigates the question if female adjunct instructors experience bullying in the form of micro-aggressive behaviors at a higher frequency than their male adjunct counterparts and their female and male professorate counterparts. The study tests the hypothesis that female adjunct instructors do in fact experience bullying in the form of micro-aggressive behaviors at a higher frequency because not only are they at the bottom of the faculty member hierarchy, but they are also plagued with their lower ascribed sex and gender identity. Participants will be selected through use of purposive non-probability sampling at the researcher's judgement. This qualitative study utilizes interviews as research methods to explore on an interpersonal level of how micro-aggressive behavior contributes to the construction of power imbalance and how language and behavior in hostile environments is gendered.

Literature Review

Young (2017) explains in her review of literature that bullying in higher academia is severely overlooked even though occurrences of workplace bullying take place at a higher rate than workplace bullying in the corporate world. Sometimes coined as academic mobbing (Khoo, 2010), bullying a faculty member is degrading the individual and subjecting them to humiliation, general harassment, and emotional abuse. These mobbing activities are hidden and often difficult to prove as there is little trace from the mobbers who engage in micro-aggressive behaviors. Mobbers employ bullying tactics to make up for their self-perceived weaknesses and incompetence and their victims tend to be highly intelligent, innovative, and high achieving. Simon and Nail (2013) examine bullying from a social influence perspective. The authors conduct a literary critique to identify how social influences can affect behaviors and attitudes that can result in bullying as well as how these behaviors and attitudes affect those involved. From their analysis, they categorize three types of roles present in bullying situations: the active role, the bully or victim, passive role, a bystander, and the perceived presence, peer pressure or attitudes. The authors conclude "more research is needed to understand the complexity of

bullying so that anti-bullying efforts can be more targeted" (Simon & Nail, 2013, p. 86). Ryan and Morgan (2011) examine bullying from a social constructionist perspective; in their study, the authors suggest that the construction of bullying based on perceived differences becomes normalized as both students and teachers contribute to the perpetuation and continuation of power imbalance. Cassidy et al. (2016) provide a gendered analysis on cyberbullying experiences of faculty members from a small sub-set of Canadian universities. In their study, they found that while there are shared commonalities amongst faculty members, imbalance of power dynamics contributed towards vulnerability of bullying for female faculty members versus their male counterparts. This proposal hopes to take shape similar to this analysis in a way that offers a gendered analysis while utilizing Foucauldian discourse, examining the power relations at play through a gendered lens. While their study focused on cyber-bullying, this proposal will focus on bullying in general with an emphasis on language being used to negotiate power.

Conclusion

Situating bullying as a discursive practice where power expressed through language constructs a hierarchy that structures employment positions as well as gender as component of power relations, allows for an intersected position-gender explanation of the processes that make up academic workplace bullying. Whichever variation of bullying, exposure can leave victims feeling helpless, humiliated, or depressed. Beyond the unwanted behavior, bullying centers on the need for power and can involve real or perceived social power imbalances. This research elucidates how bullying manifests through language expression. While the structure of language can be meant to empower, language can also be weaponized in micro-aggressive acts against those who are usually not considered the face of bullying. The research presents an understanding of how adjunct instructors and faculty members navigate the unique circumstance of suffering from, participating in, or witnessing bullying encounters while holding power positions within higher education.

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