

Consumerism in Higher Education: Pressures and Faculty Conformity

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Since the 1960s, researchers have recognized the impact and development of consumerism in higher education (Germain & Scandura, 2005). This article primarily examines the concerns of this phenomenon through the paradigm of social psychology, and more specifically, through the use of social influence theory. A customer service-oriented or business-model approach to students defines consumerism in higher education with students having a significant voice in the teaching and learning process. Zemsky (1993) argues that students covet conveniently packaged and easily-digestible knowledge that is useful and directly applicable to their future jobs. Further, institutions of higher education (IHE) perpetuate this trend through areas of social influence such as tenure review, accreditation, and marketing. Thus, both students and institutions ultimately influence faculty to conform to a consumerist model inside the classroom in order to maintain their positions within the academy.

Consumerism in higher education unmistakably comes with the risk of compromising quality and rigor in academia. The foundational principles of higher education are questioned when providers of knowledge and research become automatons to business transactions. For example, in a study by Ellis, Burke, Lomire and McCormick (2003), the authors found a positive correlation between high grade point averages and high student ratings of instructional quality at their university. By comparing over 5,000 student evaluations to the grades of over 165 classes, the authors' findings suggest that instructors who give unusually high grades benefit from notably high instructor ratings. As Ellis, et al., ask, "Why would an instructor try to adhere to a rigorous grading standard when doing so harms his or her chances for promotions and raises in salary?" (p. 39).

Although some faculty conform to the expectations of a corporatized higher education system, students move away from an investment in self and towards the goal of future material affluence. The following sections discuss conformity, which is a phenomenon frequently referenced through the paradigm of social psychology within social influence theory. This discussion includes a review of the existing literature as well as an analysis on consumerism in higher education as it pertains to social psychology and social influence.

Literature Review

Social Psychology

Following the mid-twentieth century, "contrasting systems of psychological inquiry evolved toward a greater emphasis on data collection" (Brennan, 1998, p. 309). As the history of science, philosophy, and psychology began to intertwine, and after the areas of psychoanalysis, behaviorism, and humanism developed in the early 1900s, contemporary trends in the field of psychology developed. For instance, throughout the nineteenth century, the precursors to contemporary social psychology were evident through movements including positivism, Darwinism, and social evolution. Floyd Allport, in his 1924 publication of *Social Psychology*, focused not on instinctual explanations for behavior (as in behaviorism), but rather on what he referred to as "prepotent reflexes, or impulses modified by conditioning" to explain social processes (as in social influences) (Brennan, 1998, p. 322).

As a result of the merging ideas amongst disciplines, *social psychology* developed as the field of psychology which seeks to understand the reasoning behind people's thoughts and behaviors in social situations (Rathus, 2005). Regarding the

ontology, or nature of being, of social psychology, researchers are motivated to discover the “sociology of psychology” as both of these fields intertwine to create the meaning and beliefs of this discipline (Ayres, 1918, p. 36). According to the epistemology of this paradigm, an individual’s knowledge is socially constructed and researchers in this field define axiology, or the nature of value, in terms of human emotions and behaviors. Research in the field employs both quantitative and qualitative methodology and researchers are interested in measuring social norms such as leadership, competition, trust, and obedience. Three perspectives dominate this field: individual contributions, interpersonal relations, and group behavior (Brennan, 1998). The power of group behavior, or social influence, can play a remarkable role in individual behavior and is the main focus throughout this article.

Social influence. One area of social psychology, known as *social influence*, studies how one individual and/or group can alter another individual’s thoughts and behaviors (Rathus, 2005). These alterations occur when individuals recognize, and feel pressured by, the ways in which others (people and/or organizations) think and behave - causing those who represent the minority to match those of the majority. Two of the most common areas of behavior on which this theory focuses are *obedience* and *conformity*.

Obedience. Experiments in obedience theory often express the power of authority on individual behavior and choice. This phenomenon is found not only through research experiments, such as Stanley Milgram’s shock treatment (1963) and Philip Zimbardo’s Stanford prison experiment (1971), but also in real-world situations including the Holocaust and Rwandan genocide (Rathus, 2005). In Milgram’s experiment, unwitting participants administered electric shocks (which, unbeknownst to them, were fake) to learner-actors when the learners answered a question incorrectly. Milgram found that of the 40 participants, 26 obeyed an authority figure by continuing to shock the learners even after they were seemingly

unresponsive (Milgram, 1963). Zimbardo’s experiment, also focusing on obedience to authority figures, asked participating students at Stanford University to play the roles of prison guards and prisoners. After only six out of the scheduled fourteen days, Zimbardo ended the experiment due to the extreme emotional reactions (depression, crying, rage, and acute anxiety) of five of the ten prisoners (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973).

Admittedly, the researchers conducted these experiments and subsequently obtained these results under unethical and extreme circumstances. Although institutional review board processes are in place today to protect researchers and participants, these classic studies demonstrate the extent to which individuals are willing to obey authority and power.

Conformity. In addition to the power of authority and obedience influencing individual behavior, the power of the majority group can also alter individual choice and actions, which is known as *conformity*. It can be difficult to decipher between obedience and conformity when evaluating individual behaviors and, in some cases, the two may overlap. When this occurs, researchers must recognize from where the change in individual behavior stems - is it to conform to the majority group and social norms or is it to obey a required request? As outlined in the following experiments, behaviors can result from a perceived majority pressure even in the absence of obedience and authority as influences.

Solomon Asch’s (1956) social conformity experiment, conducted in 1951, is one of the most cited resources when referencing the power of social influences. The experiment requested groups of seven to nine individuals at a time to take part in a visual discrimination study (N = 123). The participants were asked to match the length of a given line shown to them on a card to the length of one of three lines on a second card. Asch instructed all but one of the participants (the minority subject) beforehand to unanimously choose an incorrect matching line. The experiment sought to study the influence of the majority’s guess on the minority

subject. Results found that only 7% of subjects in the control group expressed error in their matching while 37% of subjects in the experimental groups guessed incorrectly along with the majority. From this analysis, Asch asserted that “the unanimously wrong majority produced a marked and significant distortion in the reported estimates [among subjects]” and felt that opposing group pressure influenced the independence of individual judgment (1956, p. 12).

Following Asch’s procedures, researcher Richard Crutchfield conducted an experiment in 1953 which asked individuals to answer multiple choice questions in a variety of forms (geometrical figures, lengths of lines, vocabulary items, etc.). Individual subjects were supposedly shown a panel of other subjects’ answers before choosing their own answers; however, the experimental apparatus was wired and no other subjects were submitting answers. Out of the four question types, the following percentages represent the number of times subjects guessed incorrectly towards the majority: 46%, 37%, 58%, and 30% (Crutchfield, 1955). As revealed by these numbers, others’ responses seemingly influenced many participants before they selected their own answers.

Both Asch and Crutchfield’s experiments highlight the significance of social influences and pressures to conform to the “norm” or the majority. Interestingly, researcher John Bargh (2007) recently discussed the implications of contemporary social psychology. His writing suggests that classic experiments from Asch, Zimbardo, and Milgram focused mainly on external environmental pressures on the individual regarding acts of conformity and obedience. Today, social psychology explores the impact of both internal and external forces in determining individual judgment and behavior when exposed to authority figures and/or majority pressure. Not only are examples of conformity and obedience expressed in experiments, real-world situations, and social psychology television shows such as *What Would You Do*, but also throughout the American higher education system. In the following section, the authors examine the external

pressures which students and institutions place on postsecondary faculty to lower their standards, or conform, to the consumeristic demands prevalent in higher education. The question remains as to how faculty balance their internal beliefs of education and the external pressures imposed by students and institutions.

Consumerism in Higher Education

The “commodification of higher education” is, for the most part, no longer an unfamiliar phrase or concept (Armstrong, 2014, p. 2). Past and current literature, since the 1960s, recognizes and continues to express concerns over the consumeristic mindset present within institutions (Germain & Scandura, 2005). Author Russell Young (1993) expressed the concern that due to students having more control over both what and how they are taught, faculty, among others, have begun to lower their standards and expectations of quality work. Young (1993) claims that good professors “give the students the skills that they need to survive in a competitive world” and that those skills should not be discredited and forgotten in the name of easy grades and favorable evaluations (p. 13). Two of the most popular and frequently cited factors contributing to the expansion of consumerism inside the classroom are grade inflation and student-teacher evaluations, while institutional factors such as the corporatization of amenities and business-like marketing encourage consumerism outside of the classroom (Germain & Scandura, 2005; Regan, 2012). These factors create tension between students, faculty, and the traditional baseline goals of education. Naijiam Zhang (2011) stated that “education is philosophy in action,” where the term philosophy is derived from the Greek word *philosophia*, meaning the “love of wisdom or learning” (p. 7). The consumeristic ideology, perpetuated by both students as well as institutions as organizations, appears to undermine such values of higher education by encouraging choice overload and “grade grubbing” as opposed to an investment in lifelong learning (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002).

Institutional influence. As Armstrong (2014) stated, “Students are defining what they want out of their college education due to the abundance of choices reflected in areas such as major declaration and course selection, faculty evaluations, and the available amenities and facilities” (p. 2). Colleges and universities promote and encourage these choices which reflect signs of ongoing consumerism in contemporary higher education. Understandably, the field of higher education began to grow following the 1960s when faculty could no longer be the main source of guidance to students. Prior to the 1960s, students depended on faculty to provide not only instruction inside the classroom, but also general guidance and advice. According to the literature, this period is often referred to as the *in loco parentis* era, which is Latin for “in the place of a parent.” Following World War II, student enrollment increased along with students’ expectations of a college education which caused IHE to require more than students and professors; education needed to partner with constituencies from various fields such as marketing and public relations (Zhang, 2011). This led to the use of promotional services in order to “operate in an environment in which [institutions] compete with each other to attract students” (Goenner & Pauls, 2006, p. 935).

With this growth also came revisions to the tenure review process and accreditation criteria such as more of an emphasis on student evaluations and a shift from enrollment- to outcomes-based assessment, both of which have also contributed to increased consumerism in higher education by pressuring faculty members to conform to these metrics (Dodd, 2004; Kezar, 2013). Kezar’s research quotes a non-tenure track faculty member’s feelings of being overlooked and conforming to institutional distinctions. The professor states, “I’m the one who’s written a recent book on the issue and is well published, and I speak across the country on the issue but I cannot even design the course” (Kezar, 2013, p. 584).

Student influence. Young (1993) and Regan (2012) discussed the irony in how faculty

tenure and promotions are influenced by student-faculty evaluations when students are typically rating their professors on matters not relevant to teaching competency, but rather on their perceptions and feelings “about such intangibles as personality of the professor [and] grading standards” (Young, 1993, p. 2). Uncontrollable factors that students take into consideration significantly influence these evaluations, such as teaching styles (performance-based versus lecture), testing procedures (multiple choice versus essay), and the degree to which students feel they should receive a particular grade (Young, 1993). Additionally, much research exists on the idea that students’ perceived sense of entitlement for “choosing” higher grades often influences grade inflation. In a 2002 study based on approximately 850 undergraduate sociology students, Delucchi and Korgen found that 73.3 percent of their student sample would take a course where they learned little or nothing if they could receive an A grade.

Although attempting to meet students at their level may enable faculty to gain some popularity, these faculty are only doing themselves a disfavor by conforming to the consumeristic pressures embedded in modern-day IHE. Such conformity is a disservice for students as they are less likely to gain the skills needed to survive in a competitive world such as the ability to analyze, critically think, read, and write (Young, 1993). The following sections will explore these ideas more fully through the paradigm of social psychology and the use of social influence theory.

Discussion

Social Influences

Peter Seybold (2008) asserted that “the entire university is being subjected to the logic of profit, which is reshaping the priorities of the institution and degrading the everyday practice and culture of higher education” (p. 116). Although this is just one perspective on the matter, it is reflective of the current trend in higher education toward consumerism whereas learning is often secondary to

the business transaction of obtaining a degree. In other words, if the students as consumers are not satisfied with the product of the postsecondary experience, the institution loses revenue. This is perhaps best illustrated in the classroom, especially when viewed through the paradigm of social psychology. At the institutional and student levels, several social influences which perpetuate consumerism impact faculty behavior to the extent of conformity. Examples which demonstrate this include the tenure review process, institutional and unit-level accreditation, and marketing.

Accreditation. Accreditation at both the institutional and unit levels is an unavoidable and recurring obligation for any institution which seeks to acquire or maintain eligibility for federal funding as well as to be able to process the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Further, accreditation is crucial in order to maintain and expand the revenue stream that is student enrollment. Given that students are often motivated to attend college in large part due to the perceived return on investment that a postsecondary education could provide, it is logical to conclude that they will most often choose to enroll in a fully-accredited IHE where they are also able to receive federal loans. Although institutions have minimal control over the criteria set by the accreditors for new or continuing accreditation, they must still demonstrate that such criteria are being met. Dodd (2004) stated, "In recent years, there has been a national revision of standards toward institutional effectiveness with an emphasis on achievement of outcomes rather than adherence to standards" (pp. 14-15). Further, Chaden (2013) found that institutions traditionally hired faculty members to focus on teaching within their disciplines. However, due in large part to the aforementioned shift in accreditation criteria, retention is now the focus of many faculty members across the higher education landscape. Given these trends, faculty members must now conform to this type of outcome-based assessment as a form of social influence, which ultimately places significantly more of an emphasis on retention and matriculation than ever before.

Tenure review. Achieving tenure is undoubtedly one of the foremost goals of faculty members across the nation. However, the availability of tenure-track positions is becoming increasingly rare in many fields. According to Kezar (2013), as much as two-thirds of both the full- and part-time professoriate are now considered to be non-tenure track faculty. In order to generate the greatest amount of profit, administrators must decide where to make cuts in restrictive budgetary times. Given that tenure-track faculty require more resources to support, it is clear that this is one such area in which cuts continue to be made while competition for positions continues to increase. To further complicate matters, many question the overall fairness of the tenure review process. Many faculty members believe that unfair and inconsistent criteria determine one's place at the university (Lawrence, Celis & Ott, 2014, p. 162). Lawrence et al (2014) also studied faculty perceptions of this process and found the existing literature in support of the notion that faculty often view it as "...problematic" (p. 156). One of the primary reasons for this view is frustration with the use of student-driven faculty evaluations as a significant factor in the review process. According to Berrett (2014), "Even though evaluations have become ubiquitous in academe, they remain controversial because they often assume a high-stakes role in determining tenure and promotion" (para. 4). In combination, these institutional decisions result in an increased amount of pressure on faculty members to conform to the consumeristic model of higher education.

Students also socially influence professors through the tenure review process due to their role as intermediaries between the faculty and the rest of the institution's administration. Many colleges and universities allow their faculty evaluations to read as if they were "customer/student-satisfaction surveys" instead of assessments of teaching ability (Delucci & Korgen, 2002, p. 105). Trout (1997) claimed that when higher education functions properly, faculty members are bound to frustrate students. The author states, "Students--who want--

in their terms--a comfortable environment should find much to complain about, if professors are doing their job well” and argues that education is not meant to be a comfortable place where students’ feelings become the professor’s priority (p. 29). Faculty members conform to the trend of consumerism when they lower their standards in order to appease the students who are responsible for completing the faculty evaluations which ultimately impact tenure decisions. However, students do not receive the most fulfilling academic experience if they request curriculum and standards of teaching to be diluted in the name of receiving easier assignments and more “A” grades on transcripts. Therefore, both institutions and students perpetuate consumerism and faculty conformity through the current structure of the tenure review process.

Marketing. A third factor for consideration with regards to the perpetuation of consumerism in higher education is marketing. Through television, social media, and texting, IHE are reaching students quickly and purposefully. According to Wright (2014), “In order to attract students, colleges and universities must offer a product (service) which is positioned to attract students” (p. 88). Whether this includes a campus that resembles a resort or inflated statistics regarding job and graduate school placement rates, it is clear that such marketing strategies can create preconceived notions in the minds of the students as consumers regarding their role in the academic process when they arrive in the classroom (Bradley, 2013). As potential consumers of the university’s goods, students want institutions to market education in a service-friendly manner whereas they have a say in faculty-student interactions, course content, and course management (Judson & Taylor, 2014). Further, “university marketing may bypass the filter of skepticism through which young people typically perceive other advertisements” (Bradley, 2013, p. 84). Marketing as a social influence can ultimately perpetuate the role of students as consumers who pressure faculty members to conform to the

lowering of academic standards in order to provide them with the above-mentioned deliverables.

Conclusion

The aforementioned social influences of the tenure review process, accreditation, and marketing are not intended to comprise an exhaustive list of the social influences which perpetuate consumerism and ultimately result in faculty conformity. However, these factors are intended to illustrate how student buy-in to such influences can have this effect. Perhaps the main question that remains concerns how faculty members demonstrate such conformity. With the combined pressures of maintaining one’s tenure-track position, meeting institutional and unit-level accreditation criteria, and fulfilling students’ expectations from the marketing which contributed to their enrollment, one manifestation of faculty conformity is grade inflation. Lewis (2014) found that “grade inflation is embedded into and rewarded by institutions” (p. 46). In one longitudinal study, researchers from the Teachers’ College at Columbia University found that “A” grades increased from 7% to 26% while C grades decreased from 25% to 9% across undergraduate populations enrolled in institutions around the nation from the years spanning 1969 to 1993 (Kezim, Pariseau, & Quinn, 2005). While this trend in grade inflation could be due to a variety of factors, it is clear that it coincides with an increase in consumerism over the last several decades. As Delucchi and Korgen (2002) emphasized, it is now common practice for students who do not earn the grades that they need to simply demand them instead.

Another example of a behavior which demonstrates faculty conformity to consumerism is the adoption of more lenient teaching styles. Such styles may include allowing multiple attempts on assignments or tolerating the use of technology for non-academic purposes (such as social media) in the classroom. These student-centered behaviors are difficult for some faculty to adopt, as they can be “confusing and anxiety-producing” (Knowles, 1986,

p. xii). Many faculty also consider this type of conformity towards students' expectations to be a form of "coddling" in that doing so only assists in driving the consumeristic mindset among college students (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 184).

Future Implications

Ultimately, faculty face the challenge of appeasing multiple constituencies while maintaining academic quality and rigor. With over 7,000 postsecondary Title IV institutions in existence in the United States, students are inundated with choice (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Unfortunately, as students drive the market of mass higher education, this often forces institutions into pandering in order to sustain enrollment and compete in the marketplace. However, the authors of this article would be remiss not to mention that consumerism in higher education can hold positive implications as well. For example, Chaden (2013) found that the aforementioned changes in accreditation standards such as a shift toward outcomes-based assessment can result in faculty members developing innovative teaching practices in order to increase student learning rather than lowering standards. If this trend continues into the future, the result could be more graduates with adequate preparation for the workplace or other aspirations than ever before.

When considering the issues of consumerism in higher education through the lens of social influence theory, there are ostensibly few solutions. The nature of social influence theory and conformity oblige the faculty member to cave to the pressures of his or her institution and students. By threatening the livelihood of the instructor, or facing coercion by his or her colleagues, the faculty member will continue to capitulate to demands. Perhaps the only solution is for institutions to attempt to restore the postsecondary instructor's confidence in his or her ability to educate through means such as revising the tenure review process to focus more so on scholarship than student evaluations. Of course, this also further perpetuates the debate regarding how much weight each

element of tenure review (typically teaching, scholarship, and service) should carry. While researchers continue to understand topics surrounding grade inflation, the tenure review process, accreditation, and marketing strategies, several key questions remain for future consideration. Such questions include: who should be driving the market and how can IHE, students, and faculty adjust to the phenomenon of conformity while upholding the academic identity of the postsecondary institution?

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