

Maintaining Plausible Deniability: Detecting Mechanisms of Subtle Discrimination in a South African Higher Education Institution

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KEYWORDS Institutional Experience. Inter-subjective Processes. Non-Participation. Power Dependencies

ABSTRACT This paper considers some material manifestations of subtle discrimination at a historically Afrikaans South African university and attempts to make sense of what its outcomes are on institution members, especially in terms of “felt response” or “affect”. These responses have pronounced and negative effects on students to the point that institutional mistrust and student withdrawal is becoming problematic. Interfaces between aspects of Habermasian critical theory, organisational theory and affect theory will be applied to a published student article and relevant university policy documents, in order to show how these phenomena might be connected within the interactive (constitutive and constituting) relationship between university members, the institution itself and society. An alternative grounding of policy and practice in rights, justice and solidarity is suggested as a means to overcome persistent institutional divisiveness.

INTRODUCTION

For all the freedoms that equality laws and strategies have generated, people in society are still subject to microaggressions in the forms of subtle or everyday discriminations, with higher education institutions being no exception. Habermas (1976a: 104) reminds readers that there is a ‘decisive difference between obeying concrete demands and following intersubjectively recognized norms’. In order to evaluate the possible forces of these inequalities, which the researcher argues may be both internal and external, she has chosen to examine a student article¹ recently published by a media studies journalism student (Magano 2014a) in some detail below with particular emphasis on the following aspects of organisational theory (Ranson et al. 1980): interpersonal and subjective processes; environmental contexts; and power dependencies (at the University of the Free State or UFS²). The author sent the article to the researcher in 2014 to ‘take a look at’ and offer some thoughts on the matter as she was considering writing a follow-up piece (Magano 2014b). After a short reply, the researcher realised the issues were multi-levelled and too complex to dispatch in a short email – they needed more attention. The researcher informed the student of the intention to write a more detailed analysis in order to produce a clearer elucidation of the problem, as well as look at seemingly disparate policy and practice and con-

sider some alternatives from an institutional perspective. The researcher immediately received full support from the student:

I would hereby like to confirm that you may use my article titled: “The Soft Punch” for a philosophical analysis. In addition, I would like to state that I have read through the academic paper and agree with the author’s analysis (Magano 2015).

For the present purposes, the researcher will consider patterns of member interaction, as well as their intertwining with institutional environments and cultures. This student article is useful in describing, quite tangibly, what constitutes an experience of subtle discrimination, as well as the possible consequences thereof, for three reasons: firstly, it is probably representative of the views contained in many student voices on campus; secondly, it plainly illustrates the broader problematic of identity and subjectivity formations within complex institutional performativities and materialities which are often uncritically taken to be the norm – misconstrued as a natural repercussion of diverse social structures; thirdly, the article shows challenging internal and external connections with respect to policy and practice. The researcher has observed these co-constituting phenomena, and how they seem to form or influence student reactions, throughout 2013/2014 during Youth Forum and Student Critical Theory Group meetings/discussions (as well as other events)

which are held, recorded and archived at the Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice (IRSJ) at the UFS. This study, which focuses on university members' institutional experience, comprises part of an ongoing research project at the Transformation Desk of the IRSJ. The overall project of the desk, which encompasses several subdivisions, is entitled "Transformation in higher education: theory and praxis" and falls within the research framework (2011), as well as the transformation mandate (2014) of the IRSJ. Subtle discrimination remains a troublesome component of the institutional experience and is notoriously difficult to pin down.

While many subtle discriminations are dismissed as innocuous, the researcher contends that this is often not the case and agrees with Van Laer and Janssens (2010: 2) that they may have 'dire consequences'. Microaggression theory, in part, argues that such discriminations are 'unintentional' (Sue 2010a; 2010b; Cf. Deitsch et al. 2003; Dipboye and Halverson 2004; Rowe 1990); however, in terms of affect, it is suggested that felt responses and expectations of threat can be interpreted as real or legitimate (Masumi in Gregg and Seigworth 2010). The ambiguity of intent does not negate the outcome. The result of these discriminations may be harmful, whether they were intended or not. They are indelibly a part of everyday existence for many people, sometimes hardly identifiable, yet they are substantive in establishing norms for thought and action. Therefore, they can indirectly shape the potentiality of people. It seems that some critical consciousness-raising needs to take place without resorting to the familiar responses of defence, accusation or moralisation³. As with any form of social influence, practical steps towards transformation should be explored if actors are to assume agency in writing their own life projects; if groups are to retain any practical commitment to freedom or social justice applications; and if both are to foster a praxis of solidarity and 'shared forms of life' so essential to the optimal functioning of the modern democratic state (Habermas 1993: 23).

INTERPERSONAL PROCESSES: SUBTLE DISCRIMINATION, VALUES AND RIGHTS

In the literature, one may come across terms such as 'subtle discrimination', 'everyday dis-

crimination' and 'microaggression' to denote similar phenomena⁴. The researcher will stick to 'subtle discrimination' for the sake of convenience and clarity. 'Subtle discrimination' denotes everyday manifestations of systematic inequality - nothing overt or aggressive, such as expressed hate speech or physical assault. Blatant discrimination is abhorrent but, without dismissing its own set of complications which may be numerous, it is comparatively unambiguous and, therefore, a little easier to discern and assign accountability to the perpetrator thereof (cf. Sue 2010a: xvi; Van Laer and Janssens 2010: 2). One may point towards generic examples of subtle discrimination such as: patronising, condescending or paternalistic talk; assuming a lack of confidence or assertiveness in someone; contact avoidance; exclusionary speech and practice; excessive monitoring or discipline; humiliating speech and practice; stereotyping and snap judgements; stares and frowns; and so on (see Sue 2010b: 8). Keet uses the metaphor of 'the soft punch' and describes this as an act 'that has an embedded intention to belittle the other without being too obvious or explicit' (in Magano 2014a). The term 'soft' implies subtlety, something one does not see coming; something that does not *appear* to have harsh effects; while the term 'punch' suggests an intentional act, a directed action that is meant to do some damage to somebody. Institutional processes allow 'hidden inequalities' to persist via the 'inflexibility' of their nature (Rangasamy in Law et al. 2004: 27, 33). It is difficult for those who must deal with such discriminations to ascertain motivations, as well as respond effectively to both perpetrators and recipients. While much of the literature highlights that many of these discriminations are perpetrated *without* conscious awareness, they are most often read or perceived by recipients as intentional at the UFS, thereby implying a worrying, recurrent culture of mistrust.

While people search for academic definitions and distinctions to further make sense of events and concepts, analysts should not lose sight of the material consequences for students' very subjectivity formations⁵, as well as for their understanding of others. Subjectivity refers to individuality, the self, the condition of being a subject (Rosenau 1992). It is a possessive attribute which includes having points of view, experiences, emotions, beliefs, desires, ethics, postures, and agency or power. Subjectivity in-

forms how people think, exist and act in the world, society and towards humanity. When students change or suspend who they are for the sake of the “other” as articulated by Magano in the article, only to find that the “other” has little intention of returning the consideration or disclosing any acknowledgement of this sacrifice, let alone practicing some solidarity when needed, it can have damaging effects on both a personal and an institutional level. This appears to happen quite often due to the fact that many students see higher education as a means of directing themselves towards the social goods they want and need, and therefore have expectations of benefits they should be given by the system. This may ‘provide the emotional setting for disappointment’ (Ahmed in Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 41).

It is particularly discouraging when some members enter an institution expecting⁶ fair treatment and then find that they are repeatedly exposed to an alternative, rather grim, reality. What members seem to understand in these circumstances, is that they have no choice but to either accept the existing status quo or leave. The few that make a decision to do something about the problem often abandon their ambitions after a short time and thus resort to reluctant acceptance or withdrawal. The actuality facing many members of the university is that some ‘ethnocentric fantasies’ (Habermas 1994: 83) of one minority group⁷ continue to be recognised and accepted, while others are still being framed as divergent from that norm, or inappropriate in some way. In spite of the well-meant pursuit of universally applicable standards, and respectable intent to formulate equitable policies and similar paper-building efforts, the fact remains that ‘universities are not value-neutral places’ (Back in Law et al. 2004: 1). For example, the UFS residences, in particular, have chosen to frame themselves as having a “value-driven” approach which, the researcher would argue, is a fundamentally flawed concept and this flaw is aptly demonstrated in the following verbatim citation from the Residence Manual:

The value-based approach differs from the value-driven approach, in that the value-driven approach is where the values are the highest authority that governs all behaviour all the time. The value-based approach is when the values are not the highest authority and where values are applied randomly.

- ♦ *The distinctive elements of value-driven management are:*
- ♦ *Conversations that facilitate a building of trust in relationships, as well as fostering change in thinking and behaviour.*
- ♦ *Values are implemented as a structural instrument and not as a moral instrument. (Values are instituted as the highest authority of the residence in the same way as the constitution of the country is the highest authority in the country. The same way the country went from a dispensation where people gathered in the parliament were sovereign to a constitutional dispensation where the constitution is the highest authority.)*
- ♦ *Values seek to transform [sic] residences from power hierarchy [sic] to residences that realise the potential of the residents.*

Residences have the opportunity to formulate values that are the fundamental beliefs of right and wrong that guides [sic] behaviour of people (Housing and Residence Affairs 2014).

The problem in both of these framings, ‘value-driven’ or value-based’, is the term “value” which is particularistic in theory and in practice because it allows that each residence supposedly composes its own set of values, again ensnared in a fictional notion of cultural uniqueness and in-group solidarity (Habermas 1994: 133)⁸. The above document apparently advocates for a system that uses values as a ‘structural instrument’ as opposed to a ‘moral instrument’, and yet, a few sentences later, residences are called upon to formulate values as ‘fundamental beliefs of right and wrong that guides [sic] behaviour of people’. This is indeed the very formulation and enactment of moral instrumentation. Instrumentation implies that there is no intent to enact morals as good ends in themselves, but to use morals for the purpose of monitoring and controlling people in certain ways for other purposes⁹. Why there needs to be a separate set of conduct “values” for each constituent of the UFS, departing from that of the Constitution (1996) of the country, which is sound and valid, and is the highest legal authority in South Africa, remains an anomaly for many members. Furthermore, this approach is highly problematic in a modern democratic state that is ‘characterised by a plurality of forms of life and rival value convictions’ (Habermas 1993: 22). It could possibly be read that some constituents

of the UFS have not committed to the broad enactment of rights and freedoms contained in the Constitution (1996). Indeed, this is exactly how these separate sets of “values” have played out in the residences in an unconstitutional manner, often violating the rights and dignity of members, especially junior members¹⁰. A far better approach would be a rights-based approach situated within the legal framework of the country. Rights frameworks are both successful and reasonable in considering the actual treatment and wellbeing of persons¹¹. As with any framework, rights frameworks are not perfect and there is always the risk that they might not be well applied, but bad implementation does not necessarily imply a bad framework. Rights frameworks are useful in diverse spaces due to their universalisable characteristics. Pragmatically speaking, which people would not advocate for basic moral concepts such as freedom, equality, dignity, justice and peace to be guiding principles¹² regarding their own treatment and the treatment of others? Indeed, willing for your own group (or yourself) that which you would not will for another group (or person) would be violating a fundamental principle of normative or universalised implementation (Habermas 1993).

One of the strongest arguments for human rights is that they are inalienable; every individual possesses these rights at the time of his/her birth. No variance in nuance, milieu or negotiation should alter that fact. Residence committees, for example, (in their pursuit of values) are not there to decide how many rights or how much of a right any other student may, or may not, access. It is not the task of the university, or any of its substructures, to transform those who enter the premises so that they may conform to a particular, cultural, idiosyncratic paradigm. The entire approach of having a particularistic, culture- or value-based/driven system by which “others” must allow themselves to be engineered, needs to be rethought, if not abandoned altogether. Moreover, there is no guarantee that any particularistic culture or value produces justice; history has demonstrated this problematic repeatedly. Thus, a broader perspective is desirable and a rights framework provides possible extensions for much-needed thematisation in the form of ‘criticism, public reflection and justification’ (Habermas 2006: 66).

SUBJECTIVE PROCESSES: A STUDENT ARTICLE AND AFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT

For these purposes, the researcher will focus on a recent student article entitled “The soft punch. The pitfalls of assimilation” that appeared online in *The Journalist* near the end of 2014. The reason the researcher has chosen this article is that it is representative of some telling themes that have been emerging continuously from the student body during various gatherings at the UFS¹³. Disillusioned with the ever forthcoming promise of transformation, the student communicates that after more than 20 years of democracy in South Africa¹⁴, youngsters at the UFS are required to be ‘less African, to suffer the abuse of losing their identities’ in order that they may ‘assimilate’ successfully into their ‘now integrated’, ‘formerly white’, environments (Magano 2014a)¹⁵. Apart from physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural effects discussed in Sue (2010b), the researcher will examine some specific affective responses that appeared in this article. By ‘affective’ the researcher means specifically the signifiers that denote the *feelings, experiences and materiality* of a person within the framework of what Gregg and Seigworth (2010: 7) describe as:

[T]he regularly hidden-in-plain-sight politically engaged work – perhaps most often undertaken by feminists, queer theorists, disability activists, and subaltern peoples living under the thumb of normativizing power – that attends to the hard and fast materialities, as well as the fleeting and flowing ephemera, of the daily and the workaday, of everyday and every-night life and of “experience” (understood in far more collective and “external” rather than individual and interior), where persistent repetitive practices of power can simultaneously provide a body (or, better, collectivized bodies) with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm.

What forms a point of interest, is the typical affective language the student has used to relate her conduct and encounters within the institution.¹⁶ This type of rhetoric is not unique to the life history of a single student¹⁷. It alludes to on-going themes that have been heard on campus many times previously and can be recognised immediately:

1. Pain and Suffering

The student realises with great poignancy that she bought into the idea that being ‘too black’ and ‘too radical’ may have been a part of her identity, but she chose not to act in these ways for fear of not being taken seriously or being excluded. What is concerning here, is that characteristics of “blackness” or “radicalness” are already framed for her as being *de facto* negative and having no place in the university environment. The realisation that some parts of herself are defective or inferior in the eyes of an institutional culture in which she comes to believe and enact, causes deep personal pain and she articulates this using the term ‘abuse’ in several instances (Magano 2014a).

2. Anger and Shame

While the student is understandably angry at the system and/or individuals who have treated her in these ways, she also displays considerable resentment at herself for believing in and allowing the injustice for such a prolonged period (throughout her schooling and undergraduate degree). The shame that arises from ‘disappointment in the self’ is palpable (Probyn in Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 73).

3. Shock and Awkwardness

What is the deepest source of shock, it seems, is that in spite of her efforts to assimilate herself into the practices and regulations of the environment and avoid enacting ‘negative racial stereotypes’ (Watkins et al. in Sue 2010b: 41), she received little recognition and some betrayal in return. Furthermore, she realised that this was never going to come no matter how much she tried to be a “good black”, a term often heard in the local vernacular. In addition, the shock of realising that she bears some discomfort about ‘who she is and where she comes from’ is counter-intuitive to a societal presumption of pride in identity (Magano 2014a).

4. Repression and Endeavour

Because of this unease, the student takes the step to leave ‘important aspects [of herself] at the door’¹⁸. In order to make others around her more comfortable, she represses elements of

her identity and endeavours not to be a ‘disruption’ even though the situation at the residence (cited below), required such a disruption. With a growing realisation that she is the one constantly ‘bending over backwards’, she also realises that she will not be ‘met half way’ (Magano 2014a).

5. Submission and Complicity

The student, with ‘reduced agency’ submits to the status quo and thereby becomes complicit in her own circumstances, likening her situation to that of an ‘abused woman in a bad relationship’ (Magano 2014a). She cannot remove herself because she sees no alternative structure for reaching the goals and successes she wishes to achieve. Moreover, there is a moral attachment to this behaviour: ‘It’s the right thing to do’. This really amounts to a kind of “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” mentality¹⁹. She frames her complicity as: ‘I am merely reinforcing the past’ (Magano 2014a) which shows evidence of the interactive relationship between members and institutions, being both constituting and constitutive (Ranson et al. 1980).

6. Silence and Withdrawal

This is where the disturbing posture of ‘assimilation’ emerges, in what the student describes as ‘one-sided transformation’. The acts from the hegemonic group are deliberate, yet masked; the student does not realise for some time what has been happening. The ‘bruises’ and ‘beatings’ do not show until later²⁰, when she consciously acknowledges her experiences (Magano 2014a). Her enthusiasm in taking part in events becomes significantly compromised by exclusionary practices. The result is ambivalence and apathy.

In addition, it is important to note as Purwar (using Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus”²¹) has argued that these kinds of materialities may be mis-framed as “choices”, as the student indeed does, but they are not rational choices; rather, they are activated in practices mostly ‘unconsciously and automatically’ in acts of what Bourdieu terms ‘ontological complicity’ (in Law et al. 2004: 50). This process is more like acquiring and exercising the social capital (in the form of codes and conventions) needed to succeed in a particular lifeworld. Purwar further comments:

Those who don’t experience immediate adaptation to the situation, feel conscious, acute-

ly reflexive and ill at ease (Bourdieu (1990: 13). It is these bodies who are more likely to become aware of the normative dispositions in any field precisely because there is discordance between what one's habitus is and what one is required to be... (in Law et al. 2004: 51).

Although the student does not state this here, the researcher has heard with monotonous regularity on campus some form of: "I just want to get my degree so that I can get out of here". While the majority of the student body is now black, they remain, in this sense 'outsiders' (Purwar in Law et al. 2004: 52), both in terms of how they see themselves and how they think others perceive them. It is a familiar, disconcerting, distancing coping mechanism. For a subordinate member of the institution to report such an incident and take action against a perpetrator through formal disciplinary procedures, requires energy and time, with no assurance of a positive outcome. Furthermore, the outcome may indeed be punitive towards the perpetrator(s) but it most probably will not prove transformative for them and may further entrench discriminatory attitudes in the perpetrators and their supporters. Because subtle discrimination is pervasive, perpetual and systematic, one could find recipients exercising extraordinary levels of clemency in their everydayness in an effort of self-preservation (cf. Watkins et al. in Sue 2010b: 45), and often plagued by a 'constant burden of doubt' (Purwar in Law et al. 2004: 53).

Some positive affective engagement does come from the student in the form of using the opportunity to 'gaze back at the self... into what needs scrutiny' (Magano 2014a). This kind of reflexivity is often highly commended in the literature; it can be described as a 'troublesome' and 'uncomfortable' reckoning (Back in Law et al. 2004: 5). It is widely believed to be a valid line of action if one does want to move forward to a state of 'health' (Magano 2014a). The problem with this type of resolution is that discrimination, in all its forms, is devoid of moral value, and acquaintance with it is not guaranteed to foster such values in response thereto for either the perpetrator or the recipient. As Back (in Law et al. 2004: 5) has convincingly argued:

My quarrel with this line of argument is that uncommitted inquiry and intellectual independence can foster moral values at the very moment it is disavowing them. Consequently racism cannot be countenanced as part of a wider

commitment to independent thinking because it stands in the place of thinking; it stands for quick easy answers... education and sophistication produce no immunity from racism and white supremacy.

Furthermore, that the responsibility falls to the recipients of unwarranted discrimination to fix themselves is highly problematic. There is a broad tendency to focus too much on counselling the recipient of discrimination to cope and ignore the role of the perpetrator somewhat, perhaps because transgressions are often framed as "unintentional". The obvious problem for the South African context, and specifically historically Afrikaans universities, is that the recent (Apartheid) history does little to foster an air of institutional trust. A frank conversation and resolve between perpetrators and recipients would be the ideal but the lack of institutional trust has significantly compromised this potential. The researcher is not convinced it will be possible for the UFS to fully escape the constraints of the environment, history and the socio-political context which is one that appears to be characterised by conformity and permeated with parochial prejudices.

THE MATERIALITY OF ENVIRONMENT, HISTORY AND CULTURE

What is always thought-provoking in the South African historical context, is that there is a very small, but dominant sector of the population which is responsible for the marginalisation of the majority which is not typically the case in most societies examined in the literature. (These largely deal with ethnic minorities). One cannot ignore the impact of environmental conventions surrounding an institution because they impinge on the informal substructures within an institution (Ranson et al. 1980). The UFS is positioned in the central part of South Africa. Historically, this area was primarily inhabited by a largely Sesotho-speaking black population, and run by a strong, male, Christian, Afrikaans-speaking, white minority. The province has a few small cities and numerous small farming towns. Formerly, the towns were typically white, with larger, poor black townships neighbouring them. The geography has not changed much in the twenty years since the first democratic elections with the exception of a modicum of racial integration, with movement less restricted between the formerly classified areas.

While the UFS has managed to rewrite the majority of its policies and regulations in order to concur with the Constitution (1996) of the country, it has had vast problems aligning practice with these policies and fostering social integration²². The researcher would argue that the surrounding areas are largely *not* conducive to integration and inclusion and that they are particularly hostile to difference or diversity. In fact, discriminatory attitudes and practices are still very prevalent in these areas, including the widespread use of racist and sexist slurs or speech in the local vernacular, as well as blatant exclusion and discrimination among groups which have turned violent on occasion. These areas are the main feeder areas of the student body; thus, inclusive practices will inevitably be problematic and resistance can be expected. There is an incessant fear in the university structures that, if the Afrikaans language, religion and traditions are disbanded on campus, white Afrikaans students will leave the university for other campuses where they can enjoy the privilege of widespread cultural representation or of having everything in their own language, and, consequently, the university will lose diversity. Therefore, the impasse remains unresolved.

On the other hand, moving beyond the consideration of its own borders for a moment, the university has everything to gain if it could overcome this environmental difficulty. When people's institutional freedoms are endorsed, they become full agents in terms of participation, expression and contribution. These are norms which could be successfully applied in democratic structures but they are severely hampered by the continued exploitation of asymmetrical relations of power, such as when only certain individuals may speak, or only specific groups can exercise influence, or a particular culture is marked for predilection. Furthermore, disempowering members by means of exclusion or coercion cannot yield a true consensus which is supposed to be the goal of communicative action (Habermas 1976b).

Returning to the metaphor of 'the soft punch' mentioned above, it can easily pose as a joke - a silly act of play. Perpetrators of subtle discrimination are often shrewd about it. They are able to distort communication and meaning, even after the fact, by claiming quite convincingly, for example, that nothing bad was intended by their actions. The researcher will call this "maintain-

ing plausible deniability". By "maintaining plausible deniability", the researcher means that perpetrators are aware of what they are doing, albeit at different levels of cognisance²³. They often do have intent to take advantage of their own power, or to do harm and avoid taking responsibility for those actions. "Plausible deniability" means withholding key information that might place one in a compromising position with authorities if one is caught engaging in illegal or inappropriate behaviour. It is a posture that often lies at the heart of subtle discrimination mechanisms as it allows the perpetrator to side-step the consequences of his/her actions by invoking either ignorance or justification.

With regard to the student article, readers should understand that the UFS statements do make references to an ethos of inclusion exemplified in, for example, its 'human embrace'²⁴, but it also has problematic policies such as a dual (or parallel medium) Language Policy²⁵, which is inherently divisive. To demonstrate this, Magano reports in her article a celebratory event that took place at one of the residences on campus:

I was excited to be a part of their 40 years' reunion. We would show 'die Ou Manne'²⁶ how far the house had come. Half of the residents were now non-Afrikaners, with a revised house song that represented the new demographic and the new inclusive values...But then came the shock. The Prime²⁷ announced that the event would be hosted in Afrikaans only. "We don't want to offend die Ou Manne, they would walk out if they were to hear us speaking English," said the Prime. We managed to debate the language issue and eventually agreed on English. But there were more surprises in store and this time there was nothing I could do. Once die Ou Manne arrived, they sang the old house song and spoke Afrikaans only. And the cherry on this racist confection? Everything was printed in Afrikaans. Excluding a large part of the house was not even up for discussion now (Magano 2014a).

In spite of the fact that the event was integrated and diverse, the decision was taken to conduct the event in Afrikaans. In terms of social justice practices, the residence event should have been conducted in English because it is a language that all present could at least understand. The reason given for conducting the event in Afrikaans was not a morally bad one. It was done so as not to 'offend' alumni who were the

guests of the event (Magano 2014a). Now, not wanting to offend people *appears* to be a credible and good reason. However, this reason is not quite accurate. What is a more likely explanation, is that the alumni have considerable power at the UFS and they would have created a debacle if the event had been held in any language other than Afrikaans²⁸ because they refuse to accommodate difference and they are not interested in actively supporting transformation or inclusion. They are, however, extremely pro-active in their perpetual criticism of progress towards normalisation. In addition, the structures and systems at the UFS, in this case, specifically the Language Policy, make it possible for the transgression to be denied and even justified²⁹ which happens in numerous circumstances. There is nothing in the Language Policy that states that public events are to be conducted in the lingua franca, English, in the interests of inclusivity or in the enactment of the ‘human embrace’ (UFS Values). In fact, events are to alternate between English and Afrikaans (UFS 2003). The other nine official (African) languages of the country are usually absent from events, bar an initial multilingual greeting of “Goeiemôre / Good morning / Dumelang” every now and again. At the event in question, no one was violating policy per se, although it seems no-one was exercising common sense or decency either.

Rather than providing a language policy that supports a practice of free and open communication, the University continues to discuss the problem and do little to alleviate the stress it places on the system and its members. The Language Policy has not been revised since 2003³⁰ and no African language³¹ is included in the formal structures other than branding, signage and specific language courses. African languages are *accommodated* where ‘reasonably practicable’ (UFS 2003: 3). Consequently, through the Language Policy, it is possible to encode and (re)produce relations of domination³² within the institutional spheres of social practice and thought patterns, as well as within aesthetic preference and value assignment: ‘currently and in the foreseeable future, English and Afrikaans remain and will continue to serve as the dominant languages of instruction in higher education’ (UFS 2003: 1).

‘Contact lectures are offered in a parallel system involving English and Afrikaans’ (UFS 2003:

4), so that lecturers are required to duplicate each class offered on any given day. Pragmatically speaking, to use an example: if a lecturer presents an English undergraduate class on “The development of rationalistic key thinking in Parmenides and Descartes” on Thursday evenings, s/he will deliver the same Afrikaans lecture that morning on “Die ontwikkeling van rasionalistiese sleutel denke in Parmenides en Descartes” (Afrikaans translation). Learning material is supposed to be available in both languages. According to the policy, some postgraduate classes may be offered in either, or both, of the two languages if an appropriate consensus has been reached with the relevant students and has been approved by the Executive Management. Special arrangements, such as translation services or double-medium classes may also be approved by the Executive Management, (including South African sign language or ‘other arrangements’ for disabled students). The pointed development of Afrikaans, in particular, is framed as a responsibility of ‘all historically Afrikaans universities’ (UFS 2003: 1), regardless of how their student demographic has changed (now majority black, see UFS 2012, 2013). Promoting the Afrikaans language beyond the convention of communication and socialisation (cf. Rangasamy in Law et al. 2004) is doing damage to institutional trust. Schoeman (2000) has argued convincingly that language policy in South African education has been directly influenced by the ideology of Afrikaner ethno-nationalism. The ruling class employed language as a political instrument and the effects of those actions are not yet removed from contemporary South African society. Exclusion by language practice causes significant outrage amongst students and staff alike, and yet, no change is forthcoming. The Language Policy in fact, acknowledges this unfairness in a single point: ‘Many non-Afrikaans speakers continue to experience a significant level of exclusion and marginalisation as a result of language’ (UFS 2003: 2).

“Maintaining plausible deniability”, in this circumstance, results in a seemingly good argument for the preservation of a language, the recognition of the language rights of a minority group, and the protection of diversity on campus³³. The key information not communicated is that the Afrikaans language was the language of the oppressor during Apartheid and so carries a painful (and relatively recent) past with it

and it is still seen as the vehicle through which the Apartheid ideology was embedded in South Africa. Furthermore, it is no longer a compulsory language in schools, so many locals and all internationals³⁴ cannot understand the language, thus making it exclusionary. Pride in a particular language / religion / culture cannot override social justice. It is extremely problematic when language results in a divisive policy and practice as it continues to do at the University (cf. Schoeman 2000; Senekal 1992), especially when there are far higher ideals of ‘human reconciliation’ (UFS Vision), ‘human togetherness’ (UFS Mission) and ‘human embrace’ (UFS Values) to be pursued. The matter is more important than preserving the legitimacy of the institutional structures or institutional loyalty and trust. The question here is very simple: Is the UFS going to continue with alienating practices or is it going to take some bold steps towards implementing equitable policies and practices, thereby allowing the maintenance of the dignity of *all* its members to trump cultural recognition?

POWER DEPENDENCIES AND PROBLEMATIC RESPONSE MECHANISMS

Wright (1998) pertinently avers that the problem in society is not race but racism. One may extend that statement to discrimination in general: the problem is not difference but those who practice discrimination and, consequently, our focus should not be on tolerating, accommodating and rehabilitating the recipients but primarily on dealing with the perpetrators and normalising the inflexible institutional structures that allow or endorse such behaviour. Of course, when people find themselves on the receiving end of discrimination, one would be wise to listen, validate and consider seriously the merits of the complaint³⁵ and not become a ‘blockage point’ in the communicative process (Ahmed in Gregg and Siegworth 2010: 39). Authorities should not be tempted to respond to the following familiar snap answers exemplified below³⁶:

1. *Defend or downplay the behaviour.* (“You know, I don’t think he meant it...”).
2. *Deflect the issue.* (“The same thing happened to Susie the other day...”).
3. *Respond with an unrelated “feel-good story”.*

4. *Accuse the recipient of being a “victim”, “oversensitive”, “paranoid” or “having an inferiority complex”.*
5. *Blame the recipient.* (“I hear you, but what did you do prior to that?”).
6. *Framing the problem as a general one that affects everybody.* (“Well, that’s life,...”).
7. *Accuse recipients of faulty reasoning and argument.* (“I am not sure you understand correctly...”).
8. *Start academic theorising or problem-solving before thoroughly considering the issue.* (“Foucault wrote about this in *Discipline and punish*...”).
9. *Justify the problem.* (“When all is said and done, maybe it’s a good thing that this happened...”).
10. *Invalidate the complaint out of hand.* (“This is not the place for politics...”).

Before any focus is turned on the recipients of subtle discrimination, there has to be some serious consideration of institutional culture and how routine practice in the University continues every day. To focus on individual recipients almost always results in obscuring the issues and leaves the core business of the university untouched (Pilkington in Law et al. 2004: 25) and perpetrators get away with it, unscathed.

A similarly unacceptable response to subtle discrimination reports is to accuse the recipient of being a victim or thinking like a victim which can immediately be construed as either supporting or justifying the transgression, albeit indirectly. Let the distinction between *assuming a victim identity* and *acting like a victim when one is wronged* not be conflated or confused (cf. Rangasamy in Law et al. 2004: 27). This misnomer will again provide the mechanism for disguising the transgression and shielding the perpetrator from accountability which, in turn, thwarts transformation towards normalisation. Worse still, is to blame the recipient, dismiss the report as irrelevant and begin to point out academic contradictions in their arguments. None of this evasion will change the fact that some members identify themselves as ‘targets’ for discrimination and this forces ‘shifts’ in identity (Housee in Law et al. 2004: 64). Again, this departs from the issues and undermines confidence and trust in the legitimacy of the system³⁷ and/or the authorities who have been entrusted with maintaining that legitimacy.

It is suggested here that institutions simply have to do better. Apart from interpersonal and subjective processes and contextual constraints discussed above, structural forms are produced and sustained by ‘power dependencies’ (Ranson et al. 1980: 1). An organisation, for all intents and purposes, functions as an instrument of power and therefore ‘intrinsically embodies relations of inequality, dependence and compliance’ (Ranson et al. 1980: 7). A university’s power base is largely influenced by skill sets that actors bring to the institution and this is relevant in terms of the rank and file. While, legally speaking, students are adults, they are young. Their belief systems are underexposed to critique; they are unsure of their positionality both inside and outside of the university; they have a comparably limited life historical context; and they are dependent on their families and the more formalised structures around them for financial support, living space, transport and many other needs. In effect, students already have reduced agency and a relatively insufficient command base, in terms of skills, qualifications or know-how, from which to activate systematic change *beyond* voicing their exasperations and resentments. They experience the institution from what Habermas terms ‘a sobering perspective – from below... They understand that they are the prime victims of the absence of university reform. That is why they want to obtain the power of joint decision in all self-governing bodies’ (Habermas 1997: 17)³⁸.

If the more vulnerable (junior) members of the institution are heard and validated in meaningful ways, the chances are that their faith in different leadership bodies would improve dramatically and their participation in all structures would increase accordingly. This does not only bode well for the university but also for society. Junior members need to be involved in co-creating ‘an institutional framework that would make it possible to undo the interlocking of instruction and research with power and privilege inside and outside the university’ (Habermas 1997: 46). University bodies / authorities possessing power are not necessarily exercising that power negatively but they need to be sure in justifiably applying that power in a way that is beneficial to members; in a way that has widespread public and political support beyond the confines of the institution; and in a way that responds to members’ calls for how they can be

governed effectively. Progress is being made in this regard, but it needs to be further concretised into both formal and informal structures at the University. Universities in modern democratic states are no longer merely producers of experts and purveyors of competencies. They have an opportunity to produce critical and contributing members of the democratic system, which is, by its very nature participatory. If non-participation and/or negative affects of apathy and irascibility towards social structures are already entrenched at the university level, this will likely not prefigure active citizenship.

In addition, the unrelenting negative framing (‘too black’ and ‘too radical’, Magano 2014a) of political or activist actions and postures from the student body is all too familiar at the UFS. In a university setting, this view seems out of place. Politics is part of life, not that it should pervade the whole landscape of human experience and reduce it to some massive power struggle, but it is an important part of life, nevertheless. Many university authorities frame political action as conflicting with the formation of knowledges and consistently avoid actions/responses that have political content or undertones. This problematic has led to the dogged reproduction of a lingering Apartheid mentality that politics is only discussed in government and that it does not concern the university or any other institution. While the researcher agrees that politics is not the *central* function of a university, a university remains a sphere of public life and so must make place for such engagements. Lange recognises the need to ‘unpack the intellectual and political elements of our crisis’ in order to avoid, what she terms a ‘systems failure’ at the UFS (Lange 2011). In the past, this mechanism has served to silence members who were concerned about public and justice issues³⁹. In the contemporary university it has resulted in an abandonment of the politics of knowledge and culpability, as this dysfunction is deflected to the zones of otherness and elsewhere⁴⁰. Habermas comments:

Two tendencies are competing with each other. Either increasing productivity is the sole basis of a reform that smoothly integrates the depoliticized university into the system of social labour and at the same time inconspicuously cuts its ties to the political and public realm. Or the university asserts itself within the democratic system (Habermas 1997: 6).

With democracy in our midst for the foreseeable future and a totalitarian regime or authoritarian state is, thankfully, off the cards for South Africa, the researcher should like, with Habermas (1997: 6), to cast her vote for the second option.

CONCLUSION

Regarding an institutional ethical adjustment, diversity and difference could be reframed as a massive pool of human potential yet to be fully tapped in South Africa: diversity is not to be “tolerated”; diversity is not to be “celebrated”⁴¹. These attitudes pave the way for paternalism and patronisation which are problematic residues of the past, building frustration from many of the more progressive members of the higher education sector (and the corporate and private sectors) that they are *still* debating this issue twenty years into democracy. This seems reasonable in these times. The researcher suggests moving swiftly towards a strongly Habermasian commitment that social differentiation and pluralisation is not some unavoidable consequence of globalisation and migration that needs to be managed, but are very positive and beneficial features of modern societies, and consequently, of public life. How can a pluralistic, complex society trust in a consensus or system that was borne of homogeneity? No particularistic self-interests or ‘ethnocentric fantasies’ may serve as a foundation for the ‘realization of democratic participation and the development of a true pluralism’. A system balancing rights and state law is far more useful in this endeavour and it is suggested here that this is a crucial and viable grounding in the face of unsuccessful attempts at transformation that remain hemmed in by culture and tradition. The ethos [of an organization] also encodes the unwritten criteria and caveats that regulate entrance into the inner life of the institution, and access to the privileges of progression, that comes with a genuine sense of belonging. If the same people are consistently being excluded from the inner circles, they will not be able to effect change, except by intermittent demands for recognition which often come about in an attempt to destabilise the system by making loud noises or engaging in short bursts of ‘pseudo-revolutionary adventures’. If a material consequence for the academy is that members are habitually want-

ing to get their degrees and get out to greener pastures, it stands to reason that they will not stay in the academy long enough to access the inner circles and produce the necessary change in a politically responsible manner. The first requirement of internal systemic change is presence.

The diversities and differences contained in a pluralistic society are of the most important social developments in modern societies. Their very presence and the fervour with which they are embraced should be a defining, positive feature of modern institutions. This could mean that there will be casualties from the past; traditions, ‘ritualistic forms of expression’ and ‘symbolic modes of expressions’ will have to give way to ‘normative validity claims’; cultures might have to adapt under a new ethos of rights and justice. The university is but one state organ that is responsible for the implementation of rights which is critical for ensuring the effectiveness of a public sphere in the political realm. The process of dismantling cultural tyrannies in the public sphere does not have to be a painful one characterised by negative effects of loss and mourning. Subtle discriminations and the mechanisms that (re)produce them, need to be eradicated from the institution and abnormalised in broader contexts forthwith, in spite of cultural resistance. Universities should acknowledge that producing intelligent action without solidarity is foundationless and inconsequential. Finally, in order to highlight the reality of what is at stake here in terms of subjectivities, the researcher will ask a simple question for readers to ponder seriously before responding:

Knowing what we know about how people think, act, speak and feel every day, would you unreservedly embrace the idea of assuming the identity of a young, black student on the UFS campus tomorrow?

NOTES

- 1 The student has been privy to all correspondence with regard to her article and has read my analysis both prior to, and during, the submission process (Magano 2014b; 2015). The article was written for the student’s honours portfolio in her final year of journalism and media studies. She was advised by her mentor at that stage to write about her personal experience at the UFS. I further contextualise the article in the analysis below.
- 2 The researcher makes no assumption that these experiences are unique to the University of the Free State (UFS) or South Africa. The researcher is simply contextualising the inquiry for the reader.

- These materialities may indeed extend to different organisations in a variety of social or geographical settings. Certainly, chapters in Law et al. (2004) and Sue (2010a) have shown similar rhetoric in both UK and USA experiential contexts respectively, while Van Laer and Janssens (2010) elucidate the phenomenon in a European context. The difference in all these cases from that of the UFS and South Africa, is they deal with the demographics of ethnic minorities, while in South Africa the black population forms the ethnic majority that was previously excluded. Thus, the problematic focuses on why institutions such as universities seem to be experiencing major difficulties in transitioning to majority black institutions, is representative of the country's demographics.
- 3 Van Laer and Janssens (2010: 2) comment that 'our knowledge remains limited about the reasons why individuals experience certain behaviours as forms of subtle discrimination'. This is one attempt to understand such reasons in either internal, external or institutional contexts.
 - 4 One may also interchange the term 'discrimination' with specific types of discrimination such as 'racism', 'sexism', 'rankism' and so on for differentiated studies. See, for example, Essed (1990; 1991) for comprehensive work on everyday racism.
 - 5 Makkonen (2012: 17pp) comments extensively on this in a European context.
 - 6 Makkonen (2012: 3) aptly describes this discrepancy as 'the promise and the practice'.
 - 7 In historically Afrikaans universities in South Africa, this minority group is thought to be white Afrikaans (possibly male) students.
 - 8 Habermas (1989, 2001) offers insightful critique of similar notions of German nationalism subsequent to unification in this work which is relevant to the discussion of mechanisms.
 - 9 Kant, for example, warned readers of this problematic (in Johnson 2014).
 - 10 Residence members have made junior members sit on the floor and be silent during meetings, restricted their movements, made junior members wear uniforms, and so on. Furthermore, there have been many reported and unreported incidents of violence and hazing or initiation at university residences. See report requested by the Minister of Education, South African Human Rights Commission (2001).
 - 11 See Quinn (in Wenar 2011). The researcher would welcome more helpful alternatives should these frameworks prove impracticable or unjust.
 - 12 Extracted from The Universal Declaration of Human Rights "Preamble".
 - 13 Student Youth Forum and Student Critical Theory Group and Critical Conversations take place at the Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice, University of the Free State. Discussions are recorded and archived at the Institute. These discussions are initial probes into student experience and issues in order to give content to long-held suspicions and speculations.
 - 14 The first all-race elections after Apartheid took place in 1994. Historically, Afrikaans universities did not (racially) integrate significantly until after 1994. Some are still battling.
 - 15 Housee discusses the same phenomenon in these terms in Law et al. (2004: 65).
 - 16 This kind of affective rhetoric is often rejected by restrictive understandings of 'reasonable' discourse. In the interests of inclusivity, the researcher is assuming it may be useful to at least consider such expressions seriously. Young has argued: 'To the extent that norms of deliberation implicitly value certain styles of expression as dispassionate, orderly or articulate, they can have exclusionary implications' (2000: 14). This may be a reason that research in non-traditional areas of discrimination is lacking, as argued by Van Laer and Janssens (2010: 4).
 - 17 See, for example, a response in the discussion space below the article: 'I don't think there's any one black person who cannot admit that they've experienced the 'Soft Punch' in school, varsity or the workplace in the attempt to cater for their white/ Afrikaner counterparts' (Hatsu in Magano 2014a).
 - 18 Sen (2006: 23) terms this 'identity disregard' and calls for the explicit recognition of pluralistic identities within various subjects.
 - 19 Sue (2010b: 17).
 - 20 This is a consequence of problems of: 'attributional ambiguity', 'response indecision', 'time-limited nature of responding' (Sue 2010b: 17).
 - 21 "Habitus" can be read as a system of dispositions (lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action) that become embedded in people's incorporated structures.
 - 22 See, for example, Van der Merwe JC, Van Reenen D (in press) for extensive discussion of the tension-fraught transformation process at the UFS which largely followed an "accommodating the newcomers" model, that is teaching "them" to fit into the system while changing the system as little as possible.
 - 23 When inadvertent perpetrators offend unconsciously, these people usually do not have a problem feeling guilty for their transgression, offering a sincere apology or contributing to some sort of resolve. Sue writes about 'microinsults' and 'microinvalidations' which 'likely occur outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator' (2010b: 9). They still serve to disguise bias, allows an unconscious clinging to beliefs of inferiority, and 'oppresses and denigrates in a guilt-free manner' (Sue 2010b: 10).
 - 24 See UFS website "Vision", "Mission" and "Values".
 - 25 'The UFS maintains a system of parallel-medium teaching in English and Afrikaans' (see the UFS Language Policy 2003: 3).
 - 26 This is an Afrikaans term which may be translated into the English equivalent of 'old boys', that is, alumni of that residence.
 - 27 The head student of the residence.
 - 28 This type of outrage was evidenced at Convocation in April 2014, during which alumni shouted out insults ('You're wasting our time'; 'This is laughable') when a black student stood up and deliberately spoke in Sesotho in order to make a point about communicative (language) exclusion. The meeting was chaired in Afrikaans with earphones available for those who wanted to make use of translation services.

- 29 Cf. Pilkington in Law et al. (2004: 15). Individuals as well as social and cultural processes support such ideology and practice.
- 30 See UFS website under "Policy documents". Apparently, a new Language Plan is being considered at the UFS currently. There is as yet, no official record of this plan.
- 31 To clarify, in this context, the researcher refers to South African languages *excluding* Afrikaans.
- 32 In this context, the researcher is referring to John Thompson's understanding of ideology and power as *social* relations of domination as they manifest in life-worlds in terms of the actions of individuals, interactions between those individuals, social institutions and their structures. Visagie argues that this is one sphere of ideology and distinguishes two others of theoretical and aesthetic import, both of which go beyond the scope of this analysis. (see Visagie 1994: 9).
- 33 While the researcher is aware of arguments advocating the benefits of mother-tongue education, promoting localised language practice above English imperialism, as well as English language acquisition problems, these fall beyond the scope of this paper and may be relevant in an extended debate on the matter.
- 34 With perhaps the exception of Dutch/Flemish-speaking internationals, as Dutch forms the basic origin of the Afrikaans language.
- 35 The researcher acknowledges that there is a danger of being emotional in response and (over)reacting too quickly or rashly. This is a common consequence of the heightened sensitivity of discriminatory environments. Of course, there is the chance that some complaints are not valid.
- 36 This list has been adapted from Suchman (1995); Rindova et al. (2005); Coombs (2007) and reframed in terms of actual Internet and personal responses to this student article.
- 37 The literature covers these mechanisms considerably. Cf. Smith (2009: 31).
- 38 The researcher would like to note some progress at the UFS in this regard. Recently (2014), students were allowed to weigh in on the appointment of a Dean of Student Affairs and the authorities did heed their concerns. This was achieved by means of communicative action and that process is to be recognised and commended.
- 39 Indeed, the very formation of the Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice at the UFS was as a result of recognising the need for such spaces on campus.
- 40 Cf. Habermas (1997: 81) on commentary of technology and science as 'ideology'.
- 41 Cf. Gulam in Law et al. (2004: 12).
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