

The Madman and Psychotherapy in the Neoliberal Academy: A Chinese Doctoral Student's Experience in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This self-reflective essay examines my experience as a Chinese doctoral student while studying in a large research university in America. Through my self-reflection, with Foucault's analysis on power, I hope to shed some light on my experience with the neoliberal academy, which caused much discomfort and created my fragmented identities. Instead of questioning the problematic neoliberal power relations that caused my discomfort in the first place, as the *madman* of higher ed, I was directed to psychotherapy to treat my symptoms, which only caused more confusion. Through my story, I hope to reveal how social context, neoliberalism in this case, and social discourse of psychotherapy, work hand in hand in the higher education space, which have exercised intangible power and created fragmented identities among many international doctoral students in America. At the end of the article, I provide suggestions for graduate students to navigate the neoliberal academy.

Keywords: competitive individualism, higher education, international doctoral student, madness, neoliberalism, power relations, psychotherapy

This self-reflective article examines my experience as a Chinese doctoral student while studying for my doctoral degree in education at an American university. As a Chinese student, on many occasions during my study, I have felt that my presence has disturbed the norms of my department because of my different cultural background, which has prevented me from producing the desired "right" output.

No one has ever explicitly described to me who the most desired doctoral students are. However, the secret message passing around in my department daily led me to the understanding that to fit into the polished class of higher ed, one must constantly talk up one's ability and always be on the go seeking out new challenges and avoiding vulnerability.

THE OTHER STUDENT

To put my frustration in context, there was one time I made a light joke about how the assigned articles were hard to read in a meeting with my peers, mentor, and another professor. After the meeting, my mentor kindly told me in private that words like those made me look bad in front of others. I was perplexed about her comment at the time since academic reading is different from other forms of reading because it is complex and discipline-specific (Sohail, 2015). And the same thought about academic reading was shared in private among a cohort of doctoral students, but why couldn't I bring it up in the meeting?

Other similar experiences made me extremely anxious for all the classes, meetings, and gatherings I attended within my department. I was so nervous about saying the wrong words, and I had to write down things such as: "Don't ask stupid questions" or "Think carefully before you talk," as a reminder to conduct myself properly in front of my colleagues.

I started to observe those doctoral students who were the "golden children" of my department. I found that they acted and talked quite differently with and without their professors' presence. They often shared their frustrations about their work in private but presented an entirely different picture in a highly positive manner in public and often spoke in a way that highlighted their achievements compared to their peers. However, as a Chinese student, I have been taught to be modest and downplay my achievement. My communal background also plays a role in how I speak about myself—one's success is achieved as a group with the assistance of many people.

My body became a massive site of struggles because I felt the need to discard part of who I am and take up an identity that was alien to me, to be seen as intelligent as my colleagues. The official discourse on campus claims it values diversity; however, the secret message passing around in my department states otherwise. One must be "alike" to be accepted. It seemed like everyone knew the secret codes of conduct, and I was clueless.

I searched extensively on the internet for stories of similar kinds and came across many psychological terms such as "imposter syndrome" or "social anxiety disorder". Road signs about the on-campus counseling

center were placed all over my university back then. Altogether, they sent out a message to me suggesting that I didn't fit in because of my mental issues and I needed help. By the end of my first year of doctoral study, I started my counseling journey.

The act of talking helped relieve some of the stress I had, but it did little with my situation at my department. I was convinced that I would be cured eventually if I kept up with my counseling sessions. Two years passed and my counselor suggested that I join a summer counseling group since students in this group all shared similar experiences. From this experience, I have learned many similar stories from a variety of colleagues across different disciplines of studies, and each of them was positioned differently in the "matrix of domination" (Angelucci, 2017) and experienced disadvantages in various ways.

I still remember a girl who was always in tears during our group counseling sessions. As the only two female members in her department, she and her professor were under tremendous pressure to bring external research funds to show they were valuable to the university. The stressful working environment also led to a troubled relationship between her and her professor. She was often verbally abused when she could not meet her professor's expectations. However, by the end of each group session, all the suggestions we could give her were to go back home and clean her room. Those moments made me start questioning these on-campus counseling services. It was clear that this student's problems were rooted in the unhealthy power dynamics in higher education. Suggesting that she should go back and clean her room does little to address the troubling power relationships within her department, which had caused all her discomforts in the first place.

I stopped going to the counseling sessions after that. Instead, I started to read extensively on the culture of higher education institutions. It seems like current research on international graduate students' experiences mainly focuses on documenting our negative perceptions and difficulties when studying at American universities. Little research has critically examined the underlying reasons for their struggles in higher education. As a result, most research focuses on socializing international students with the host culture rather than considering the inadequacies of the host societies, which should be resisted and changed rather than accommodated.

For me, the moment of enlightenment finally came when I came across Michel Foucault and his work on *Madmen* (1988). As Foucault (1988) explained in his writing, madmen were disobedient; they were physically and mentally excluded by society. The formula of exclusion was established with the lazar house (historically a place to quarantine

people with leprosy); leprosy was the madman's disease, which suspended him from society. Through the segregated practices used on the lepers, the number of lazar houses decreased over time; hence the formulas of exclusion were validated, and they continued to be carried out ritually (Foucault, 1988).

Foucauldian analyses and power have found their way through modernity into the present (e.g., Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Holloway & Brass, 2018). In the neoliberal age of reason, all sorts of people who are unwilling to be structured into the economic model of competition (Metcalf, 2017) are deemed irregular and abnormal and are confined and treated in "asylums." The ancient organization and disciplining of the bodies and then souls has provided the basis for the rejection and exclusion of the madmen in the field of higher education in the modern days.

In the next section of this article, I hope to share some of my understanding of the neoliberal higher education institutions based on Foucault's work. Specifically, I hope to highlight how the neoliberal culture and the on-campus counseling center work hand in hand, exercising power and marginalizing the nonconformists. It is by no means my intention to claim that I have found a definite answer for all the problems graduate students face in higher education. Instead, I hope to contribute to the existing scholarly works on graduate students' lives by sharing some of my findings of the field.

NEOLIBERALISM AND ITS IMPACTS ON INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS

Neoliberal assumptions consider a college education as a personal financial investment; hence higher education is no longer viewed as a public sector, contributing to the defunding of universities across the United States (Mintz, 2021). With reduced funding from the states, colleges in the United States have been engaged in recruiting international students as a source of revenue while paying little attention to these students' desires and requirements (Alfattal, 2016). International students are defined as those who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin (UNESCO, 2021). The United States hosted more than 1 million international students in 2019–2020 (Moody, 2020).

Under neoliberalism, public institutions are remodeled along commercial lines as corporations, which have been encouraged to pursue entrepreneurial qualities (Peters, 2001). Accordingly, a new type of personality is needed to navigate neoliberal relations. As I mentioned

earlier in this article, I used to constantly feel the need to talk up my capacity as much as possible so that I could stand out among my peers in my department. I was also expected to continually seek out risks and challenges and embrace competition to align with the entrepreneurial qualities perpetuated by the neoliberal culture (Verhaeghe, 2014). However, at home, Chinese people are often taught to be modest and keep a low profile regarding their achievements and status when interacting with others (“Proper Character and Behavior, 2013). As a result, I have had to adopt behaviors that were inauthentic for me to fit in while working for the neoliberal academy. This chronic phoniness has created much discomfort inside me and eventually has led to much psychological distress.

THE MADMAN AND PSYCHOTHERAPY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

What made things worse is that my epistemological concerns and internal conflicts are framed as madness through the official psychotherapeutic discourse that flows on American campuses. I have been in and out of the mental treatment facility provided by my university for years while studying for my doctoral degree. However, the on-campus service of psychotherapy only treats the symptom of my madness instead of helping me to understand the conditions through which my madness is formed.

As the madman (Foucault, 1988) of higher education, doctoral students’ experiences are often shaped by the discourse of the neoliberal enterprise culture, such as competitiveness and efficiency, and they tend to experience more issues and are usually directed to counseling services provided on campus (Benshoff et al., 2015; Brunila, 2014). Neoliberal ideology denies the inherited interdependence of human beings, and we are taught to manage ourselves as an enterprise; we take sole responsibility for our own mental and physical well-being (Sugarman, 2015).

Psychotherapeutic technologies work as influential vehicles in the process of producing highly individualized, self-monitoring, and governing consumer citizens (Bondi, 2005). They govern and control the soul not by crushing the subjectivity of the individual but by harnessing the whole personality through the alignment of neoliberal political, social, and institutional pleasures and desires (Bondi, 2005; Brunila, 2014). As shown through the stories I shared in the first part of this article, it was through these therapeutic spaces that graduate students’ oppressive experiences are replayed (Reeve, 2002), and the victimhood of international students and their status as the madman in higher education is established (McLaughlin, 2012, as cited in Brunila, 2014).

The positions of graduate students' victimhood and their status as the survivalists of higher education are closely tied to the idea that through therapeutic interventions, one can get rid of psychic and emotional chains and vulnerabilities as they eventually become self-autonomous and disciplined individuals (Brunila, 2014). In this sense, therapeutic discourse and neoliberal ideology work hand in hand to create the illusion of self-autonomy that can be realized only "in the right way" (Brunila, 2014), which is the hidden norm of academia.

As the madmen of higher ed, graduate students can only be released from these mental treatment facilities when they can imitate all the formal requirements of social existence in the neoliberal academy and display such behaviors in a congruent and orderly manner (Foucault, 1988). In other words, they must be the "alike" in order to be accepted.

Psychotherapy and counseling are often criticized for ignoring and depoliticizing questions of power relations such as racism, sexism, etc., and focusing on fostering the universality of experiences of the oppressed to build social connections with other graduate students through shared victimhood on college campuses (Benshoff et al., 2015; Brunila, 2014; Moodley, 2007). The act of speaking offers the possibility of shifting power dynamics. The words of the madmen, however, are interpreted by their counselors. In this process, the madman becomes the object of experts' analyses (Zhang, 2020). Their experiences are described with abstract diagnostic language without troubling these simple categorizations used to describe complex human experiences shaped within relations and context (Brunila, 2014; Foucault, 1988).

CONCLUSION

Through my story, I hope to shed some light on how the neoliberal systems mark certain people, which results in some graduate students' vulnerabilities while studying in the neoliberal academy (Montoya et al., 2000; Phoenix, 2006). Instead of challenging the neoliberal power relations that created the adversaries the graduate students face daily, our vulnerabilities are treated as mental disorders in different psychotherapy spaces provided on campus as a quick fix.

The concept of competitive individualism is central to the neoliberal system. There is a prevailing attitude that the individual is responsible for taking care of their own needs (Verret, 2012). To combat the individualist attitude as perpetuated by the neoliberal culture and to improve international graduate students' experience in higher education, I believe that students of communal backgrounds would benefit both emotionally

and academically from more peer interactions. For example, departments within higher education could assign new graduate students more advanced peers as their mentors at the beginning of their doctoral studies, who might help them navigate their program of study and guide some of their research and teaching practices (Zhang, 2020)

Moreover, I believe that pushing for students' unions is another way for graduate students in general to resist the neoliberal agenda in higher education (Zhang, 2020). On the national level, neoliberalism has profound effects on education overall (Kuehn, 2008). Under the globalized neoliberal education movement, teachers' unions have been playing a leading role in terms of protecting public education from being destroyed by neoliberal policy (Kuehn, 2008). In the field of higher education, graduate students have fought hard to establish unions that allow them to bargain collectively related to pay and working conditions with their universities and at the same time provide them with protection against unfair or arbitrary treatment by supervisors and other detrimental situations where they currently lack power (Benderly, 2018).

Lastly, this article has its limitations. My reflection focuses primarily on the drawbacks of neoliberal education institutions in general. I wonder if I could achieve a more layered and thorough understanding of the neoliberal culture should I examine my intersectional identities more carefully (Chung et al., 2018)? For instance, as a female, first-generation Chinese college student, how does each of my identities interact with the neoliberal culture and position me differently within the higher education institution? These are some of the questions I will continue to explore as I move forward.

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