



RESEARCH ARTICLE

2024, vol. 11, issue 2, 219 - 226
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.#>

Re-imagining Institutional Culture for a Socially Just University

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Abstract

One major challenge for university senior executive teams trying to foster meaningful culture change is that the university is 'made up of' its staff. Due to persistent workplace inequalities at higher education institutions, there has been a growing interest in the role institutional culture can play in improving organisational fairness in recent years. Over the last decade, researchers have concentrated on employment discrimination, gender inequalities, and corruption. However, there has been an insufficient emphasis on reforming an organisational culture in which managers rely on employees to fulfil their goals, sometimes at the expense of social justice.

This article investigates the concept of institutional culture in universities, with an emphasis on its reimagining to promote a socially equitable environment. The article emphasises persistent inequities in higher education, which derive from historical and institutional injustices, particularly in postcolonial countries such as South Africa. Using a qualitative research technique, this article evaluates current institutional culture and makes recommendations for developing a more inclusive and fair academic environment. The findings show that altering institutional culture is critical for achieving true social justice in higher education. Furthermore, it is argued that Universities can approach culture using the Ways of Being thinking, which includes understanding and naming the diverse cultures that employees bring to work, viewing institutional cultures as camaraderie involving shared meaning-making across diverse groups, and attempting to influence the institution's nested hierarchies at the societal level by choosing to work for the betterment of society. The article concludes with strategic recommendations for institutions to address these issues while upholding fairness and diversity.

Keywords: Institutional culture, social justice, higher education, inclusivity, equity, transformation

Introduction

Universities are critical in developing society's values and expanding knowledge, yet they frequently reflect disparities embedded in larger social structures. Many universities' institutional cultures still reflect historical legacies of exclusion, racism, and injustice (Mbembe, 2016). Despite repeated attempts at transition, these legacies endure, particularly in former colonial countries such as South Africa. Institutional culture refers to the rules, attitudes, and practices defining how an institution operates, influencing staff and students. For universities to become centres of genuine social justice, the existing institutional culture must be reimagined to promote inclusivity and equity for all members of the academic community, (Badat, 2010).

Gaus et al. (2017) define culture as a mental program that shapes people's behaviours, attitudes, and actions in a society, citing Hofstede's (1980) theory. Culture has been employed in a wide range of organisations, particularly higher education institutions (HEIs), as a tool to nurture the change processes required to adapt to rapid environmental changes. Without a doubt, the less tangible changes in the institutional culture of universities, perpetuate social injustice and marginalisation in terms of gender, race, and sexual orientation.

Zulu (2021) focuses on how unchanged institutional culture has led to social injustice, specifically on black women professors at South African universities. The issue of social injustice is traced to legacies of colonialism and apartheid, where black women were at the bottom of the social ladder. At institutions of higher learning women find themselves marginalised and subsequently demoralised. According to (Zulu, 2017) A lot of Black women's academic involvement in heavy teaching workloads, administrative work, lack of supportive networks, and

household responsibilities revolves around the issue of the time that is consumed by these activities, which results in a lack of time for research.

On the other hand, Green & Jackson-Jefferson, (2021) and Showmni (2023) elaborate further on the current societal status and role of black women in the field of sociology has been a long-standing topic of conversation and inquiry. Researchers have examined the unique experiences, obstacles, and contributions that black women bring to sociology. Historically, black women have faced marginalization and discrimination in the field, dealing with both racism and sexism. Despite these challenges, black women have persevered and made significant advancements in academia and social research. In recent years, there has been a growing acknowledgement of the important perspectives that black women bring to sociological discussions. Their intersectional identities, which encompass race, gender, and class, provide a multifaceted approach to analyzing social phenomena. Additionally, black women have played a key role in shaping critical sociological theories and movements, challenging dominant paradigms and highlighting the experiences of marginalized communities. However, systemic barriers and biases still exist, hindering the full integration and recognition of black women in sociology. Efforts to address and dismantle these obstacles are crucial to creating a more inclusive and equitable sociological landscape. As sociology continues to develop, black women's voices and perspectives must be not only included but also centred. Their unique insights enrich the field, offering new avenues for exploration and a more holistic understanding of society. In conclusion, the status of black women in sociology is a complex and evolving subject. While progress has been made, there is still work to be done to ensure their full inclusion and recognition in the discipline. Ongoing research, advocacy, and a commitment to diversity are necessary to fully utilize the knowledge and expertise that black women bring to the field.

From the research above, it can be established that re-imagining institutional culture is imperative to a socially just university. This article looks into how institutional culture in universities can be changed to support social justice, with an emphasis on universities in the Global South. The article is organised in the following: how scholars conceptualise culture (providing examples of how culture is defined in the context of higher education), institutional culture, universities as organisations, and social justice at universities.

Literature reviewed.

In attempting to define the concept of culture, it is cardinal to indicate to the researchers that culture as a concept is explained in many ways, and various fields like anthropology, sociology, and others.

Culture is drawn mainly from anthropology and interprets how people live and organise themselves (Schein, 1992). Culture links surface characteristics of a society such as language, appearance, and dress, with their roots in the knowledge, beliefs, and values of the native population. As such, culture is often represented as a system where behaviour, such as rituals and interactions, is based on people's assumptions about the natural world, society, human nature, and themselves. Tierney and Lanford (2018) trace cultural studies to anthropology, where the focus was more on studying "exotic" groups of people assumed to have shared common habits. Culture over the years is still associated with activities that create a sense of unity for a common purpose. Bonvillian et al (2019) refer to culture as how individuals express and reflect attitudes about the world of the culture they come from.

Culture can be defined in a variety of ways. Scholars in anthropology study culture from a variety of angles. Culture can be defined in a variety of ways. Scholars in anthropology study culture from a variety of angles. Wright (1997:2), discussing the *Anthropology of Organisation*, posits that the concept of culture is used in four ways. First, it refers to problems of managing companies with production processes or service outlets distributed globally, each loaded with a different 'national culture'. Second, it is used when management tries to integrate people of other ethnicities into one plant's workforce. Third, it can mean the informal concepts, attitudes, and values of a workforce; or, fourth 'company culture' can refer to the formal organisational values and practices imposed by management as a 'glue to hold the workforce together and to make it capable of responding as a body to fast-changing and global competition. Culture is defined in a corporate environment as a force that binds the employees together.

The field of sociology (Go, 2020) has struggled to comprehend the social movements and activism that have emerged in response to the oppression and marginalization experienced by certain communities within society. According to Omi (2014), sociology has been hesitant to acknowledge the existence of systemic racism and to engage in a deeper reflection on the potential for transforming and critiquing institutional structures. The article aims to explore the contemporary reshaping of institutional culture to establish a more equitable university while recognizing the difficulties of addressing intersectionality in pursuit of this objective.

The following section progresses to a consideration of the concept of institutional culture as a multi-theoretical and multi-empirical theme. What do various theoretical perspectives foretell about the institutional transformation and reimagined culture necessary to produce a more socially just university? The final theme, then,

is for institutional researchers who are responsible for practices in institutional research and organizational change across our campuses. Given an understanding of intersectional culture and institutional change, what may we observe or do to participate with others in the process of reimagining institutional culture? The objective of this article is to invite readers to think about how the dismantling of institutional culture may seem to be insurmountable today, especially after numerous institutional and organizational failures in creating culture initiatives that spoke to social change.

Organisational Culture at institutions of higher learning

The conceptual approach to understanding and comprehending institutional culture and its profound influence on the university as an institution of higher learning has progressively evolved alongside and in tandem with unparalleled new theorisations of 'the university' itself, according to Misir & Misir, (2022). This convergence encompasses an intricate tapestry of interconnected and interdependent worlds, such as the realm of higher education, the intricate relationships between universities and society, and the contemporary and ever-evolving articulations of 'reimagining' the multifaceted notion and essence of the university.

Organisational culture is defined as the underlying beliefs, assumptions, values, and modes of interaction that contribute to an organization's distinct social and psychological environment (Deal & Kennedy, 2000). Deal and Kennedy (ibid) go on to say that culture encompasses an organization's expectations, experiences, philosophy, and values, which govern member conduct and are manifested in member self-image, inner workings, interactions with the outside world, and future expectations. Given this, institutional culture is built on shared attitudes, beliefs, rituals, and written and unwritten regulations that have evolved and are deemed valid. This description shows how the construct manifests itself in the workplace and employee behavioural components, as well as how organisational culture directly influences the behaviours of employees inside an organisation.

These multifarious elements and factors effectively set the stage and provide a compelling backdrop for this article's theoretical intervention, which delves deep into the intricate mechanisms through which institutions are meticulously composed, intricately reproduced, and amplified within the vast spaces of decision-making and value production. Moreover, it explores and sheds light on how institutions are profoundly experienced, lived, and made known through a complex and intricate network of human-nonhuman relationships that transcend traditional boundaries and limitations.

Cornelissen et al., (2021) argue that the empirical research, which serves as a cornerstone for articulating and substantiating this conceptual approach, tackles and addresses a wide array of critical themes and pressing issues. It comprehensively examines the pervasive problems of access and diversity within the realm of higher education, delving deep into the underlying dynamics that shape and influence university futures. Moreover, it provides an incisive and penetrating analysis of the intricate and intertwined themes of power and governance, the intricate dynamics of work and labour within the academic sphere, and the multifaceted dimensions of access to education (Cuyjet et al., 2023).

Research Question

This article articulates the specific issue of reimagining institutional culture for a socially just university. The question of what the university's response and transformation look like is urgent. The paper seeks to start answering a further question: when other futures, cultures, or spaces are to be reimagined and made actual within the university, how might existing members of the university 'work' to do this?

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative method, conducting semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with university personnel, administrators, and students from three South African universities. The participants were purposively selected to get relevant and rich information for the study (Campbell et al 2020).

The institutions chosen span a wide range of situations, including historically white institutions (HWIs) and historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs). The goal is to look at the variances and similarities in their institutional cultures, as well as the degree of transformation that has occurred. Purposive sampling was utilised to choose individuals with firsthand knowledge of institutional culture, including those who had been involved in change initiatives. Data from interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically, with a focus on reoccurring themes relating to social justice, equity, and institutional practices. Following a content analysis of the data gathered, themes were then drawn out for reflection. Data was evaluated reflexively with focus groups conducted at several tiers.

Findings

This section provides a comprehensive overview of our initial research on re-imagining institutional culture, exploring its various dimensions and complexities. The insightful perspectives shared by the participants highlight the profound impact of institutional culture on our relationships with one another, students, external partners, and knowledge itself. It is fascinating to observe how individuals within the institution embody and enact countercultural ways of being and doing, although it is worth noting that these perspectives had to be actively sought out.

The following key findings were identified :

Persistence of Historical Legacies: Many institutions' institutional cultures, notably in South Africa, continue to reflect colonial and apartheid histories. For example, several respondents at historically white institutions (HWIs) acknowledged the dominance of Eurocentric academic traditions and a lack of significant integration of African knowledge systems (Jansen, 2009).

Exclusionary Practices: Despite policies aimed at promoting diversity, students and professionals from historically marginalised communities reported feeling excluded due to subtle forms of racism and classism inherent in daily activities (Soudien, 2012). These include language obstacles, curriculum design, and societal conventions that favour a specific demographic.

Resistance to Change: Institutional opposition to cultural transformation was a recurrent theme, with several participants mentioning examples of tokenistic transformation efforts that failed to address underlying systemic concerns (Cloete, 2014). This includes employing a diverse workforce without a significant shift in power relations and decision-making processes.

Positive Examples of Transformation: Some universities have made significant progress toward inclusion. These schools aggressively promote the use of numerous languages in academic settings, African-centered curricula, and student support structures for historically disadvantaged communities (Heleta, 2016).

Discussion of findings

Findings are discussed according to the themes that developed during data analysis and are the following:

Persistence of Historical Legacies

The historical past has deeply influenced the culture, attitudes, and behaviours that underpin our policies and structures in contemporary universities. Universities have been shaped by those who were privileged to study and work within them. This historical selectivity makes inclusion extremely difficult to achieve in contemporary society. In the context of South Africa for example, institutional culture continues to reflect the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. For instance, at historically white institutions (HWIs), many respondents noted the predominance of Eurocentric academic traditions and a lack of meaningful integration of African knowledge systems. This is how an academic at (HWI) reflected: *“From the building names to the statues that are on campus, they are all reflective of colonial impact, there is little that shows that this institution is in Africa”*. Concurring with this statement Baloyi (2015) posits that the existence of the legacies of the past legacies may evoke feelings of not belonging for those who are marginalised and this is important to acknowledge. Recognizing the impact of history has numerous benefits. By acknowledging history, movements towards change can hold to account institutions that fail to address the ongoing exclusionary effects of this history. Further, seeing the impact of history demonstrates the deeply embedded character of the inequities produced. According to Smith (2024), a deep understanding of history shows how contradictory the idea of a socially just institution is and the huge efforts necessary for significant transformation. A profound knowledge also enables the development of strategies for breaking the impact. Thus, articulating and acknowledging history is powerful for the future.

Exclusionary Practices

Despite policies aimed at fostering diversity, students and staff from historically marginalised communities reported feeling excluded by subtle forms of racism and classism embedded in everyday practices. These include language barriers, curriculum design, and social norms that favour a certain demographic.

A student at HWIs retorted that *“the Eurocentric approach in most courses I am learning is overwhelming and some courses are taught in a language that I do not understand”*

An employee at an HIWs institution indicated that *“some of the documents at this institution are written in Afrikaans and you also receive email communications in Afrikaans, yet we have eleven languages in this country”*. Soudien (2014) and Keels (2020) and focus on the lack of change in policies despite diversity at former white institutions. A variety of mechanisms have been identified as exclusionary for students from various backgrounds. In general, these can be categorised under a) cycles of exclusion and low aspiration as the result of children's perceptions and beliefs about higher education; b) more formal policies and practices either at the point of access

or targeting resources; c) general campus climate, i.e., isolation and hostility towards all those perceived as "outsiders." In this section, we also include the negative impact of gender as part of the complexity of the exclusionary mechanisms.

Admissions policies routinely benefit high socioeconomic status (SES) students either by favouring prestigious or fee-paying schools or by focusing on inaccessibility to economic and social capital as a way to narrow down candidates. Resource allocation policies are heavily tilted towards middle and higher SES students in terms of maintenance grants, social support mechanisms, etc. Similarly, benefit "caps" operate to deny aid to those in need, particularly the poor in rural areas. A campus climate that is perceived as isolating and hostile impacts students' sense of belonging and hence their ability to integrate, which is especially effective in areas with little or no critical mass of diversity. The subsections that follow then provide evidence about the different forms of exclusion, with concrete examples that illustrate various ways of discrimination, including gender-blindness. This summary also gives the rationale behind the work of the project. The impacts of diversity in DEE are particularly noted. Because students can be disadvantaged by a combination of different identities, we also discuss how these different dimensions can intertwine.

Resistance to Change

Institutional opposition to cultural transformation was a recurrent theme, with several participants mentioning examples of tokenistic transformation efforts that failed to address underlying systemic concerns as also suggested by Cloete, (2014). This includes employing a diverse workforce without a significant shift in power relations and decision-making processes.

Resistance to change is explained from various historical, theoretical, and practical perspectives and suggests that resistance to change is generally about fear. Fear of access to resources, fear of demotion, fear of the unknown, and/or fear of lack of control. Two of the leading academic researchers in resistance show alternative beliefs around resistance, which highlight resistance not as an abnormality but as a normal reaction to change. One academic from HDIs (historically disadvantaged institutions) stated that "*transformation in terms of staffing was met with resistance but implementing the university policy in this regard led to changes*" Resistance is a sign of alignment, not misalignment; we resist because we believe everything belongs exactly as it is, and we only resist when people we respect claim it to be true that we should go along.

According to Allaoui & Benmoussa, (2020) resistance also occurs when we have our minds set on the positive benefits of the change we will make. Humans sometimes are far too grandiose and ambitious with the change plans. The experience of "the big idea" showed that the failure in achieving this was not controlling the increased expectations of our stakeholders; we unsuccessfully managed to bring them on board to the point that when the business case was developed and shared, expectations were not realized. This led to disengagement to the point of resistant behaviour and changed the University's HR plan. People resist in large part because of the shadow of past failures and because they remember the pain associated with past organisational mismanagement, abuse, and poor leadership. Additionally, it suggests that resistance shows a sign of commitment, that people aren't prepared to let it go because they love or respect what they do too much to let go of it with ease. Such a finding questions the nature of soft management: how much soft management

Positive Examples of Transformation

Some universities have made significant strides towards inclusion. These institutions aggressively promote the use of numerous languages in academic settings, African-centered curricula, and student support structures aimed at historically disadvantaged communities.

An academic and HDIs stated that "*our university has had so many changes, diverse staff members, women in managerial positions*". The sentiments shared by the academics are testimony to the significant strides by some other universities in terms of positive transformation.

Heleta (2016) suggest that examples of transformations within other educational institutions reflect social justice principles and a commitment to transformative change; they offer innovative ways for the university to represent inclusivity and equity. A first step would be to examine these for possible congruent practices. Here are three examples. One institution analyzed self-studies, interviews, and information from programs or departments on its campuses, representing a significant portion of its very high and high research doctoral programs. The programs were identified as potentially innovative by the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs. The innovations were wide-ranging and included non-traditional admissions, diversity, coursework, fieldwork settings, structures, resources for graduate and professional students, committees, and mentoring. In some ways, many of the examples may not appear to align with social justice. There has been no systematic attempt at program overhaul based on these examples or other approaches.

These case studies explore how innovation and commitment to social justice resonate within or disrupt mainstream structures. They provide another positive example. According to Assoratgoon & Kantabutra, (2023) the diversity requirements go a long way to promoting a safe climate of caring and a dynamic community that is attractive to non-traditional students and faculty alike. Lastly, another institution encouraged its faculty to implement innovative ideas to transform honours teaching and curriculum. Faculty members with novel change ideas were awarded considerable course reassignment time and travel funds. The proposals included a study on building care communities, Utopia teaching, developing social justice curricula, gaining sound faculty experience, and conducting service-driven travel with a class.

From the myriad of the findings above, one establishes that instead of university existing solely to provide expertise to alleviate social problems, the reformulations of institutional culture concentrate on reciprocity, utilising all available resources and abilities to address community-defined priorities, and assuming untapped potential in populations that are currently perceived as lacking, bringing about a paradigm shift in how universities interact with marginalized groups. These orientations, grounded in an understanding of the inherent connection between the institution and the broader society, provide an alternative foundation for the pursuit of social justice within educational institutions compared to the previously generated programmatic possibilities for change (Hattery *et al*, 2022). They challenge the existing state of affairs and encourage a reevaluation of the fundamental essence of higher education. Ultimately, the research findings demonstrate that reimagining institutional culture entails a profound epistemological challenge, as it involves rethinking the very nature and objectives of institutions.

Conclusions

Re-imagining institutional culture for a socially just university is a complex process that requires more than just policy changes; it requires a fundamental shift in values, practices, and power dynamics. The persistence of colonial legacies in many universities, particularly in South Africa, highlights the deep-rooted nature of these challenges. However, with intentional and sustained efforts, universities can create environments that are truly inclusive and equitable. For universities to become socially just spaces, they must go beyond tokenistic gestures of diversity. Institutional culture must be reshaped to embrace multiple epistemologies, empower marginalized voices, and dismantle structures of power that perpetuate inequality.

The research has made a valuable addition to re-imagining institutional culture. Culture shapes decisions, behaviours, policies, and practices that determine the extent to which people can belong, do well, and attain well-being in their university communities. Six building blocks have been identified from this research that can contribute to re-imagining institutional culture: values, vision, language, storytelling, structures, and accountability. These building blocks open a powerful and practical way to go about revisiting the field to articulate and prioritize new, alternative, socially just pathways for institutional culture in tertiary education. They are not offered as the building blocks to characterizing the culture of a socially just university, nor the building blocks of an already socially just culture. Rather, they are offered to start this important work of offspring.

Recommendations

The findings from this research outline the process, leadership, community, and system requirements from all stakeholders that will help support an enduring culture shift. While values are fundamental, it is only part of a larger re-imagination that has to take place. These requirements are fundamental action points for the university education sector. Policymakers, communities, students, educators, and institutions all play a part in ensuring culture and climate make a difference to the broader educational enterprise of attainment and graduate outcomes. For institutions working to personalize their student learning experiences, as much research identifies is essential, several contemporary domains require new foci. These include commitments to health and determinants of health, the development of independent and self-regulating learners, and the first-year experience, which requires serious institutional reconfiguration. Universities must establish clear monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the impact of transformation initiatives and hold leadership accountable for fostering inclusive institutional cultures.

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