

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Structural Stupidity and Double Vision in Academia: A Case Study of Failed Research Project Collaboration

Agnieszka Satola Ph.D

Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Department of Social and Cultural Sciences, Fulda, Germany.

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Corresponding Author: Agnieszka Satola Ph.D, Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Department of Social and Cultural Sciences, Fulda, Germany.

Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of structural violence and epistemic delegitimisation within a research project at a German university. Drawing on poststructuralist and feminist organisational approaches, it demonstrates that universities are not neutral, rational systems, but discursively produced fields in which power, identity and difference are constructed and stabilised.

The focus is on a case study of a research assistant with a migrant background, whose criticism of the project's normative orientation constitutes a discursive transgression. The reactions of the project management follow a pattern that David Graeber describes as 'structural stupidity': criticism is formalised, personalised and depoliticised; epistemic authority is secured through symbolic practices; and the responsibility for reflection is shifted onto the powerless. The subsequent institutional marginalisation of the researcher demonstrates how organisations deal with conflicts through exclusion rather than through structural reflection.

Keywords: Structural Stupidity, Double Vision, Epistemic Violence, Interpretive Labour, Failed Collaboration.

1. Introduction

Research at universities is increasingly organised in teams, consortia and interdisciplinary projects. Yet these projects are not merely technical or organisational units, but fields in which power, identity and difference are discursively constructed. The structure of such projects usually follows a clear pattern: project leadership rests with tenured professors, whilst all empirical and conceptual work is carried out by mid-level academic staff – doctoral candidates, postdocs and research assistants, who are generally employed on fixed-term part-time contracts. This university model can be described not only as 'feudalistic' but – in the sense of poststructuralist organisational research – as a symbolically and discursively produced power structure in which certain subject positions are privileged and others marginalised.

Collaboration in such projects is therefore often based not on a shared pursuit and realisation of academic goals, but on the expectation of obedience, conformity and the performative repetition of organisational norms. The risk of defying these expectations is high: those who do not toe the line risk the non-renewal of their fixed-term contract – and thus their academic future. This 'natural order' appears stable not because it is functional, but because it is discursively established as self-evident. Poststructuralist perspectives show that such orders are not neutral, but are generated by symbolic orders of knowledge, cultural codes and distinctions that determine who is allowed to speak, who is heard and whose knowledge is considered legitimate.

But what happens when this order is not shared? What happens when a member of the academic mid-

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level staff critically questions the project's objectives, methods or power relations, thereby disrupting the organisation's discursive structure? How is such a contradiction formulated, how is it interpreted, and how does the professorial status group react to it? And how can such a case be interpreted theoretically if it is understood not as an individual misunderstanding, but as an expression organisational and the production of difference?

These questions will be addressed using our case study as an example – the case of a failed collaboration in a research project on migration and integration at a German university. Before presenting the specific case, we will outline theoretical perspectives on power, organisation and identity that go beyond classical organisational sociology. As the project takes place within the context of a university, it is necessary to take into account the specific symbolic orders and power structures of this field in order to understand the dynamics of collaboration.

2. Poststructuralist and Feminist Perspectives on Power and Organisation: An Extension of Classical Theories

Classical organisational research – from Max Weber through Talcott Parsons to Niklas Luhmann – is based on an understanding of organisations that is now only of limited suitability for analysing modern universities and their power relations. Weber describes organisations as rational-bureaucratic structures in which authority is exercised through formal rules, offices and areas of responsibility. He understands authority as a form of dominion based on an 'absolute duty of obedience' (Weber 1922/85: 542). What is decisive here is not the exercise of power by the authority figure themselves, but the internal consent of those who confer authority. Authority thus arises through consent, not through coercion.

Luhmann distinguishes between organisational power and personal power within organisations. Organisational power arises from structurally distributed rules, hierarchies and decision-making processes, whilst personal power is based on the specific position of individual actors within the organisation (Luhmann 2019: 206). He views organisations as systems that function through gender-neutral member roles and in which personal characteristics such as gender, ethnicity or social background play no systemically relevant role. In these models, power appears to be functional, rational and formally legitimised.

However, this understanding is insufficient for the analysis of higher education institutions. Higher education institutions are not neutral, rational systems, but highly symbolically structured organisations in which gender, ethnicity, migration, language and status play a central role. Traditional organisational research overlooks these dimensions. It cannot explain why certain groups are epistemically delegitimised, why criticism is labelled as 'inappropriate', why professors secure their authority not only formally, but also symbolically and culturally, and why the abuse of power appears not as a breach of the rules but as the norm.

Poststructuralist approaches, by contrast, assume that organisations consist not only of structures and roles, but also of symbolic orders, cultural codes and discourses that determine who is allowed to speak, who is heard, and whose knowledge is considered legitimate. Gender, ethnicity and other differences are not 'secondary characteristics', but are actively produced and reproduced within organisations. Organisations are sites of identity production, not merely of role assignment. Riegraf (2010) demonstrates this as well as different orders within organisations are contingent on being historically emerged, culturally shaped and stabilised through repeated practices. Organisations thus reproduce not only capitalist but also patriarchal structures. Gender is a 'primary means of expressing power relations' (Scott 1986: 1067). Organisations thus become fields in which gender-specific inequalities are structurally produced and reproduced – through the division of labour, symbolic orders and institutional routines.

Postcolonial or Third World feminism criticises Western dominance in feminist and organisational theories and demonstrates that categories such as 'women' or 'gender' are not universal. 'Women of other origins and skin colours (...) would merely be subsumed under this movement' (Mayer 2002: 74). This perspective highlights the fact that organisations reproduce cultural and epistemic norms that are oriented towards white, national and linguistic majority perspectives.

Feminist standpoint theory complements this perspective and argues that knowledge is never neutral, but always depends on people's social position and the power relations that shape their outlook. Because traditional academia often operates from privileged (mostly male) perspectives, the experiences of women and other marginalised groups are distorted or rendered invisible. Research should therefore take the lived realities of marginalised groups as its starting point, as this offers an 'epistemic advantage':

those who are oppressed must learn the rules, ways of thinking and expectations of the dominant group, whilst the privileged do not have to make this effort to conform. This creates a ‘double vision’ on society, which allows power structures to be recognised more clearly and leads to less distorted, more reflective knowledge. A ‘standpoint’ is not simply an opinion, but is developed through critical reflection and political experience and is intended to lead to more responsible knowledge (Narayan 2004: 221).

David Graeber expands on these theoretical insights by analysing the role of structural violence and structural stupidity within organisations. He describes interpretive labour as a one-sided interpretative task that must be performed by the powerless in order to compensate for the blindness of the powerful. Power groups, by virtue of their privileged position, can afford to disregard complexity; epistemic denial and simplification become tools of domination.

Graeber writes: *‘Situations created by violence—particularly structural violence [...] invariably tend to create the kinds of wilful blindness we normally associate with bureaucratic procedures. It is not so much that bureaucratic procedures are inherently stupid [...] but rather, that they are ways of managing social situations that are already stupid because they are founded on structural violence’* (Graeber 2015: 57).

3. The Situation of Mid-Level Academic Staff in Germany

Before we turn to the case in question, it is necessary to outline the employment-law and structural situation of mid-level academic staff. The German university system is based on a deeply entrenched structural inequality: on the one hand, there are tenured professors with stable, lifelong positions and extensive institutional power; on the other, mid-level academic staff, predominantly hold fixed-term posts and project-based contracts (see Bahr 2022; Gleirscher et al. 2022; Niendorf 2025). In this constellation – as in other precarious employment relationships – much depends on the character of the individuals involved, the course of their interactions, and the arguments and mechanisms employed to assert one’s own position. The resulting monopoly on power leads to systemic abuse of power: staff are largely at the mercy of the professors’ goodwill.

Yet mid-level academic staff with a PhD form the backbone of university research and teaching and,

particularly in research projects, bear the brunt of the academic workload. At the same time, the German university system makes virtually no provision for this group as an independent academic unit. Those who manage to secure a post at all usually do so as part of a project led by professors, as lecturers for special tasks – often with a significantly excessive teaching load – or as coordinators in administrative units. However, there is little provision for their own intellectual development – reading, writing, research – within the scope of these posts, and this usually takes place in their spare time.

Furthermore, the doctoral degree is scarcely recognised in material terms: those without a doctorate often earn the same as staff with a doctorate. Nevertheless, those with a doctorate are given preference in recruitment, as they are better qualified for academic work and also for reasons of prestige.

Within this already precarious field, mid-level academic staff with a migration background find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position. Whilst mid-level academic staff as a whole suffer from precarious working conditions, those with a migrant background face an even more acute form of precariousness, arising from characteristics such as language, accent, origin, habitus, cultural codes and religion. These characteristics interact in an intersectional manner and become powerful selection tools by which academic competence is informally assessed – often to the detriment of those affected.

Garfinkel describes this dynamic as ‘seen but unnoticed’ (Garfinkel 1967: 36): international researchers are seen, assessed and observed, but predominantly from a deficit-oriented perspective. Whilst their transnational experiences, professional knowledge and multilingual skills are acknowledged, they receive little institutional recognition or application. Rather than being regarded as a resource, they are often seen as deviating from an implicit norm based on national, linguistic and cultural majority norms. This creates a paradoxical situation: international researchers are visible enough to be assessed and monitored, but not visible enough to be recognised as equal bearers of scientific knowledge.

This group often finds itself compelled to constantly prove its capabilities – frequently to a greater extent than their German colleagues – in order to gain access to positions and career paths at all. As a result, they are under constant pressure to legitimise themselves and to appear ‘better’ or ‘particularly suitable’.

This logic also shapes everyday university life: academics with a migration background must adapt their academic perspectives, theoretical approaches and research experiences to the epistemic norms of the majority society in order to be considered 'suitable'. This creates pressure to conform that has an impact not only academically, but also socially and culturally.

The number of international staff at German universities is very low – and the proportion of those holding permanent posts is even lower. The position and scope for action of mid-level academic staff within university structures are rarely the subject of scholarly reflection, and even less so with regard to their involvement in research projects and, in particular, with regard to researchers with a migration background. Research into this group represents a gap in the literature, which this study aims to address.

4. Case Study: Collaboration in the Project on Migration and Integration

The specific case on which this article is based is a research project at a German university in the field of migration and integration. It was led by three professors and carried out by two research assistants. The project was embedded in political expectations and mainstream discourses that had already shaped the research perspectives and approaches from the outset. The project leadership adopted a normative view of migration and integration, guided by politically desirable narratives – in particular, the economic logic of recruiting skilled workers and technocratic solutions for their integration.

The research assistant PhD-RA1 was the only person on the project with a migration background. She was hired – or so she was led to believe – because she had already written a doctoral thesis on a related topic, possessed extensive experience from several research projects, had many years' of teaching experience in the field of migration and integration, and knew how to design and conduct empirical research. As part of the project, she conducted around twenty interviews, took part in several sessions of participant observation within the organisations under study, and established contacts with relevant organisations in the city.

Despite this crucial empirical work, the academic staff showed no interest whatsoever in jointly analysing or interpreting the interviews – nor, any willingness to engage with the topic from an academic perspective.

For this reason, PhD-RA1 independently authored an academic article based on the interviews and offered

one of the three professors (Prof-PM3) the opportunity to contribute. However, following the publication of the article, it was completely ignored by the rest of the project team; it received no attention whatsoever. At the same time, her dissatisfaction with the lack of collaboration within the project grew. Her academic and biographical knowledge was not sought, her empirical work received no recognition, and she was instead forced to carry out tasks that were well below her qualifications – such as drafting standardised integration concepts or so-called 'country dossiers' at level, which were entirely driven by economic interests and national priorities, yet were incompatible with her academic understanding of migration and integration.

After three and a half years of this strain, she decided to write an email in which she openly addressed the structural problems. The anonymised version of the correspondence is set out below.

Project correspondence

Project team

- [PhD-RA1] (female): PhD, Research Assistant on the project (the only international member of the project)
- [Prof-PM1] (male): Professor, Project Manager (former Dean, already emeritus)
- [Prof-PM2] (female): Professor, Project Manager (shortly to retire)
- [MA-RA2] (female): MA, Research Assistant on the project
- [Prof-PM3] (male): Professor, Project Manager (successor to the Professor Emeritus)
- [BA-SA1] (female): B.A., student assistant

19 April 2023 — Email from [PhD-RA1] To: [Prof-PM1], [Prof-PM2], [MA-RA2] Cc: [Prof-PM3], [BA-SA1]

Good day [Prof-PM1], [Prof-PM2], [MA-RA2],

Before the next meeting takes place, I would like to briefly explain why I suggested last time that we meet less often. I simply can no longer tolerate the uncritical perspective with which you view the topic of migration and integration in this project. And the whole thing is presented with such a conviction of normative correctness and arrogance that I wonder what the aim of the whole project is — certainly not integration.

@ [Prof-PM1], back in 2016, seven years ago, we received the ‘improved’ version of our project report on Spain, in which the results had been halved, all critical sections had been removed and the findings had therefore been falsified. The focus was on the experts’ usefulness, whilst other aspects were ignored. All the Spaniards then left. Even back then, I wrote to you that the imposition of our cooperation partners’ particular interests was reminiscent of the policies of the guest worker era, the consequences of which many still have to bear today. And I also wrote at the time that these documented changes contradicted both my political and my personal stance; it seemed to me that science was being instrumentalised to produce an expert opinion whose outcome was a foregone conclusion. Since then, my view has not changed; it has only become more firmly held.

Kind regards, [PhD-RA1]

19 April 2023 — Brief reply from [Prof-PM1]

Dear Team,

I have got into the habit of replying to such emails only after I have had a good night’s sleep.

Kind regards, [Prof-PM1]

19 April 2023 — Reply from [Prof-PM2]

Dear Ms [PhD-RA1],

No one should be forced to work on a project they do not wish to work on. I am personally open to a termination agreement taking effect on 1 May. Please let [Prof-PM3] and me know if you would like to proceed with a termination agreement. I assume he would have no objections in this case. If not, all other matters can be discussed.

Yours sincerely, [Prof-PM2]

20 April 2023 — Detailed reply from [Prof-PM1]

Dear [PhD-RA1],

I consider your email to be completely inappropriate in terms of both form and content.

Regarding the form: What sort of mailing list is this? You address [MA-RA2], [Prof-PM2] and me directly, whilst copying in [Prof-PM3] and your assistant. How am I supposed to interpret that? What does your assistant have to do with internal project disputes? Have you ensured that she does not speak publicly

about internal project matters? In any case, I will not include her on the list of recipients in this reply. Moving on to the content: Who are you actually trying to address, and on what subject? The bulk of your email refers to your apparently dreadful experiences of working with me on the Spain project. But what do the other project participants have to do with this? That should have been discussed between us — and there could have been a phone call in which you could have told me what you felt you needed to tell me. And finally: Why did you agree to work on a project I had secured in the first place? Usually, you don’t do that if you think your own ideas and expectations aren’t being met.

As for the content: You know that I believe your comments on the Spain project are wrong. However, your view of the world is now being presented in a way that makes me, at least, look like some sort of lackey of capital, and therefore borders on impertinence. The complexity of this past project means we cannot even begin to explain why our differing points of view arose. This sort of reassessment may be important to you — but in that case, you should have spoken to me. This is completely irrelevant to our current project.

Unless, perhaps, in your view, you see the current project as being in danger of focusing exclusively on the perspective of employers and ‘the usability of skilled workers’. But I do not see it that way. It is true that I consider the recruitment and integration of international workers — , whether as skilled workers or for training — to be indispensable, and I defend the view that other measures (e.g., increasing wages) would ensure the provision of nursing care in Germany. As much as I am in favour of these other measures, I do not think that will be enough — not by a long shot.

Based on this assessment, a field of action is now opening up for a sociology that sees itself as critical: participation in the constructive organisation of work and its social structuring. In the current project, this focus on work has led to the development of the term ‘integration work’ and its implications, to a concrete proposal for the ‘status management’ of ‘skilled workers awaiting recognition’, and to a constructive proposal for financing the professional recognition procedure and integration, which would benefit both employers and applicants. I would also include the accompanying outputs – the ‘country dossiers’ and our integration concept – even though they have a more indirect impact on the work and cooperation within the institutions.

All of these design proposals were developed on the basis of analytical findings that highlighted shortcomings or conflicts — in other words, they are ‘critical’, but without being permanently labelled ‘criticism’, ‘problem’ or ‘conflict’.

However, I see not only an important difference between us in what ‘criticism’ is supposed to mean. We also hold equally different views on the practical handling of recruitment, workplace integration and social integration. Not only do I believe that our work should leave its mark on the organisations we deal with — the entire project is designed to do so. In my opinion, this means that this goal largely determines the activities within the project.

However, a design-oriented approach is not merely an attitude — design is constructive work based on analysis, and this work requires the necessary creativity.

Unfortunately, I have had to realise that your analytical skills are complemented neither by a penchant for nor an aptitude for creative and constructive design.

And when you then tell us that you can spend less time on the project in the winter semester because you have taken on such heavy teaching commitments, I am initially left speechless.

What strikes you as ‘arrogance’ is simply sarcasm to me — not nice, not constructive and rather helpless, but also no worse than the arrogance associated with the ‘critical perspective’.

Yours sincerely, [Prof-PM1]

20 April 2023 — Final message from [PhD-RA1]

Dear [Prof-PM1],

I was expecting specific questions and constructive suggestions for further project work — but I see none. Your email only serves to confirm, in all its glory, the issues I have raised.

@ [Prof-PM2], thank you for suggesting the idea of a termination agreement. I hereby terminate my employment contract for the project with effect from 1 May 2023. I will submit a written notice of termination to HR.

Kind regards, [PhD-RA1]

Analysis of the email and discussion

The research assistant’s email marks a break with the project’s discursive order. It is not merely an expression of personal dissatisfaction, but an attempt

to reveal the symbolic and structural mechanisms that have shaped the collaboration. From a poststructuralist perspective, the email can be read as a performative act that disrupts the hegemonic order of knowledge and exposes the underlying power relations.

Her criticism is directed not only at professional decisions, but also at the discursive construction of migration and integration within the project. At the same time, this is an attempt to extricate herself from the role into which she was forced by the project management — a form of epistemic and emotional self-devaluation, or ‘mental prostitution’: the expectation that she should scientifically legitimise the neoliberal logic of ‘exploiting’ migrant care workers, produce standardised outputs such as ‘country dossiers’ at Wikipedia level, and operate within a working environment characterised by national arrogance, professorial dominance and competition. Her criticism is directed at the project management’s ‘uncritical perspective’, its normative arrogance, the politically motivated distortion of earlier research findings, and the epistemic violence directed at minority perspectives. It becomes apparent that she accepts the project management as neither a formal nor an academic authority. She possesses specialist knowledge, personal experience of migration and integration, as well as a sensitivity to structures of inequality and power relations. This ‘double vision’ enables her to recognise power relations more clearly and to highlight the project management’s blind spots. This criticism is a classic example of interpretive labour (Graeber 2015, p. 67): The staff member takes on the interpretative labour that would be necessary to break through the project management’s structural blindness. Her email is not intended to maintain cooperation, but rather highlight to the other project members the politically uncritical stance, the Western arrogance and the substantive incompetence.

The project management’s reaction makes it clear that they did not expect such criticism — particularly not from someone lower down the hierarchy, on a fixed-term contract and, moreover, not German. The professors’ reactions follow a pattern that Graeber describes as ‘structural stupidity’. Criticism is dealt with by offering a termination agreement, which effectively amounts to a threat of dismissal. It is trivialised and formalised by reducing it to issues of tone, the mailing list or form (“I consider your email to be completely inappropriate...”). Instead of addressing the substance of the issues, the project leader responds in a condescending manner, initially seeking to restore a supposedly disrupted order and

labelling the staff member as someone who has ‘overstepped her bounds’. The criticism is formally reinterpreted, shifted to matters of style and thus depoliticised. It is personalised by being dismissed as ‘your view of the world’. And it is epistemically delegitimised by accusing the employee of a lack of creativity and constructiveness – from the perspective of an older German professor who believes he knows better. The female colleague is not only marked as academically subordinate, but also as culturally ‘deviant’. Her perspective is interpreted not as a resource, but as a disruption.

This dynamic corresponds to the narcissistic self-image of the academic status group, which sees itself as the sole bearer of academic authority and perceives criticism as an attack on its own identity.

The power imbalance persists even after the research assistant’s dismissal: she was not asked whether she wished to contribute to the anthology containing the project’s findings, despite having carried out key empirical work over a period of three years. Instead, another person with a surname similar to that of the research assistant is listed as co-editor. After the project ended, none of those involved spoke to PhD-RA1. Furthermore, she was immediately removed from the project website. Five months after her dismissal, one of the professors (Prof-PM2) passed away; however, her name continues to appear on the website, even though she has long since died. The staff member, by contrast, becomes ‘deader than the dead’ – an expression of the utmost symbolic violence and institutional erasure. Institutions often resolve tensions by removing the person who points out structural stupidity, rather than changing the structures themselves. This form of marginalisation is no accident, but rather an expression of a system that systematically disciplines and excludes vulnerable groups when they question power relations.

5. Conclusion

The members of the dominant group could have understood the employee’s criticism, reflected on it and used it as an opportunity to question their own positions. They had scope for action – both organisationally and epistemically. Instead of utilising this, they consciously chose to reproduce the existing order. This decision is no accident: maintaining one’s own position of power is easier, more comfortable and carries less risk than engaging with the perspective of a structurally disadvantaged person whose criticism calls into question the epistemic and moral foundations of the project.

The case thus serves as an example of how individual decisions in academic contexts are closely interwoven with structural power relations, and how difficult it is to break through them – even for people who regard themselves as intellectuals or outstanding academics. The project leadership opted against reflection and in favour of defensiveness.

Poststructuralist and feminist theories make it clear that power relations within organisations are constructed through discourse and stabilised by everyday practices.

The analysis shows that the supposed collaboration within the project was a façade. Political clients impose normative constraints on research; transfer logics undermine academic autonomy, intra-team power dynamics prevent genuine cooperation, and intersectional vulnerability increases the likelihood of abuse of power. Collaboration thus becomes a rhetorical tool that obscures the actual power relations.

Genuine collaboration therefore requires structural reforms: binding rules on supervision, authorship and project work; independent oversight bodies, protective measures for vulnerable groups, and a critical reflection on the role of professors as holders of institutional power. Universities must be places where power is consciously reflected upon – not places where power is conveniently reproduced. Only then can academic work on migration and integration live up to its claim to highlight social inequalities, rather than perpetuating them within its own field.

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