

Teaching Anthropology in Polarizing Times: “Weaponized Aggrievement” and Impacts on Minoritized Faculty

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Abstract

In this article, I describe how teaching anthropology in polarizing times can potentially impact instructors. Using Florida as an example, I show how polarizing political contexts can embolden students to challenge faculty and coursework they view as ideologically incompatible with their own perspectives. These scenarios may result in some students engaging in what I refer to as “weaponized aggrievement”: leveraging the sentiment of feeling “wronged” for personal benefit and to maintain a sense of moral superiority. I describe how faculty whose identities are minoritized may be particularly vulnerable to weaponized aggrievement and offer suggestions for institutional support.

Keywords

Florida, politics, policy, political conservatism, higher education.

Introduction

One afternoon at the end of the Spring semester at the private Florida college where I was faculty, a student, Brock, walked into my office. Brock had visited my office a handful of times during the semester. Once, he came to tell me that professors “coddle students too much in classrooms,” pointing to my use of trigger warnings when discussing sensitive topics, as an example. On another occasion, he and a fellow classmate, Chad, stopped by after class to share a news story with me that supported their viewpoint about how biased academics were. The story focused on academic peer review, and they played videos summarizing the controversial “grievance studies affair”: a project in which three academics submitted bogus papers to peer-reviewed journals focused on cultural and social topics like sexuality, women, and gender studies (Mounk, 2016). Famously, and the focus of Brock and Chad’s visit to my office, one of the bogus papers accepted for publication included a rewrite of parts of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* with phrasing changed so that it appeared to be written in a feminist style. Brock and Chad used the hoax to argue to me that academia itself, as demonstrated by the peer-review process, was fraught with bias. Specifically, they claimed the bias was against straight white men, and this hoax study was the evidence to support their point since the authors were publishing in fields that they believed vilified straight white men. But the day that Brock entered my office at the end of the Spring semester, it was not to discuss his latest thoughts on inherent biases in academia, nor complain about trigger warnings. Instead, it was to complain about a grade I had given him on a class assignment.

Brock is a tall, muscular, straight-identifying, white man. Chad, one of his closest friends in my class, is physically similar. I am a gay white man of average height, and at the time of our interactions, I was much physically smaller than the two of them. Although I carry privileges of whiteness and cisgender maleness into the classroom, and these are privileges not all faculty have, to some students, my gay identity and physicality can be perceived as exploitable weaknesses and failures to conform with expectations of masculinity. Brock and Chad made fast friends in the beginning weeks of my introductory anthropology course of about 20 students. They often pushed back on topics commonly taught in introductory anthropology classes, such as the cultural construction of race and gender in cross-cultural perspectives. Their eagerness to express their views made them the most vocal and frequent participants in class discussion. As Brock entered my office that day to discuss his grade, I invited him to sit while we discussed his concerns.

The final assignment for the course required students to choose a topic related to one we discussed during the semester and expand on it through a research paper. For example, students could focus on themes such as sex, gender, communication, economy, or kinship, and write a paper on a topic of their choice related to those anthropological concepts. As an introductory course, students learned basic elements of writing a research paper, including how to write an argument and sustain an argument with support from scholarly sources. Brock's paper did not meet the assignment criteria, and it largely seemed to rehash early discussions in my office: how academia writ large was problematically "coddling" youth, evidenced by practices such as trigger warnings.

As I discussed his paper with him, pointing to the feedback I left, he pushed back and interrupted me, raising his voice, standing up and hovering over me in my chair. When I explained how the paper did not meet elements of the rubric, he interjected and argued. Colleagues down the hall, who were waiting for me to join them for a meeting, heard him. I nervously began sending them text messages. "I may need your help with this student," I wrote to one. As we talked, Brock raised his voice as he became irritated with my explanations for his grade. Explaining I could not identify the paper's thesis was met with Brock yelling, "What do you mean? It's right there!" as he gestured firmly at my computer screen.

While some faculty may have told a student like Brock that his behavior was inappropriate and end the conversation there, I felt unable to do so. At the institution where I taught, faculty were expected to always be accommodating to students and to maintain a cheerful and helpful demeanor. As one colleague explained "people pay a lot of money to go here. We have to provide a certain kind of service to our students." This idea led another colleague to often refer to our institution as "a boutique school." Fortunately, this expectation meant I had a set of practices I used when responding to students who were unhappy with their grades. As an instructor who had seven years of teaching experience (four at that institution specifically) at the time of the interaction, I had a mental list of steps for when these moments happen. That list included showing students resources that explain how to write a strong argument, remembering which day in class we discussed arguments in case of the "I don't think we talked about this in class" assertion, and I had detailed assignment descriptions and rubrics to support my grading.

Despite my efforts, Brock was disinterested in how I supported my position about his grade. Knowing our conversation was not productive, and needing to attend my meeting with my colleagues, I informed him that we needed to wrap up our conversation. He continued pressing his point. Politely, I told him we could reschedule, and that we needed to end our discussion. I stood up moved towards my office door; Brock positioned himself in the pathway between my desk and door. I was trapped behind my desk with Brock, unmoving, asserting how he knew he had written an 'A' paper. "I know how to write a paper, Dr. Kline," he pressed, leaning towards me. "I went to the best private high school in my home state. Maybe it's not the paper. Maybe it's your bias," he said, jerking his head and hand toward me.

In Florida, like many other US states, faculty are in an instructional crucible in which some students actively look for examples of a political viewpoint entering the classroom. Florida's context is perhaps famous due to Governor Ron DeSantis's 2024 presidential campaigning that was grounded in attacking "woke politics" following the passage of the state's Stop WOKE Act. The law passed in 2022, and it included a prohibition on teaching concepts deemed related to critical race theory in public K-12 schools and banned public university instruction of topics that made students feel any guilt or shame related to their race, sex, or national origin because of events "committed in the past" (Hodgson & Kumar, 2023; Mathis, 2023). Another law, HB 233, permitted students to record professors' lectures as evidence for complaints, presumably including those of political bias, and to promote "viewpoint diversity" (Woo, 2022). While these laws were applicable to public institutions and not to private ones, like the one where I taught, they nevertheless contributed to an overall environment of students looking to make examples of their professors' purported biases and unfair treatment to politically conservative students.

Teaching topics central to anthropological ways of thinking can be difficult in these political contexts. Some students may push back against some of the content inherent to anthropological ways of thinking because the topics may be related to highly contentious topics - see, for example, the American Anthropological Association's (2002) statement on Evolution and Creationism. Similarly, as faculty colleagues and I have described elsewhere, students may also protest being exposed to topics that may challenge their ways of thinking about politicized topics such as sex and gender (Russell et al., 2023).

In this article, I consider how Florida's political climate can result in some students feeling emboldened to challenge course content and faculty based on perceptions of the content being politically and ideologically incompatible with their worldviews and sense of self. In particular, I assert that faculty who are minoritized due to racial, sexual, and gender identities may be particularly vulnerable to these challenges and offer suggestions for how institutions and departmental colleagues can support one another. These suggestions can provide opportunities for institutions to support faculty who feel professionally constrained by mounting anxieties over how their profession can get caught in political crosshairs. This is particularly needed for how some instructors may personally become embroiled in what I refer to as "weaponized grievance:" leveraging the sentiment of feeling "wronged" for personal benefit and in ways to maintain a sense of moral superiority.

Emboldened Students

My exchange with Brock was one example of how I saw students feel emboldened to challenge grading and teaching by leveraging accusations of bias. Such accusations, from my perspective, seemed to emerge since 2017, and may be part of what psychologists have described as "the Trump effect on prejudice:" a normative climate of expressing several prejudices (Crandall et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2021) that can also embolden people to express some of their prejudiced perspectives. The new types of emboldened pushback exceeded what were otherwise typical and common forms of students pushing back on instructors by asserting disbelief when presented evidence that contradicted their perspectives. Such pushback could be occasional or limited to one class period, such as when a student shouted at me in a presentation showing data about undocumented immigrants' healthcare utilization rates compared to US-born adults. The data showed that undocumented immigrants have lower health care expenditures than US-born people, and a student interrupted me to yell, "Well, I don't believe that at all!" Newer forms of challenging faculty that seemed to emerge since 2017 felt more aggressive and accusatory.

In some circumstances, aggressive pushback was semester-long and could result in refusal to complete course assignments because they did not align with students' perspectives. For example, in a course related to the discipline of public health, one student, Anna, routinely objected to course content. Anna felt the course material was "one-sided," and did not represent politically conservative viewpoints. The course used a textbook published by a major textbook publisher and included selected peer-reviewed readings from fields such as anthropology. Anna objected to how the textbook made claims she disagreed with, such as the point that in most high-income nations globally, health care is conceptualized as a right rather than a product for service. She took issue with data showing the US has the lowest life expectancy compared to nearly all other higher income nations globally (National Academies of Sciences & Medicine, 2021). Anna felt such assertions were disrespectful to the US and were untrue because, the US had the best health care system, and health care was not a human right, but rather a business.

In class, Anna, like Brock, also seemed to enjoy trolling classmates in her objections to discussion topics or refusing to hear their perspectives. For example, when one of Anna's classmates, Griselda, pointed out the US has higher infant mortality rates than other high-income nations (Gunja et al., 2023), Anna argued back by saying, "If a baby is sick and doesn't have health insurance, and their parents can't afford to pay for them, then they die. And that sucks for them, but that's the way it is, and it doesn't mean health care should be a right." Anna's refusal to engage with other students' perspectives and her vocal opposition to course content resulted in several of her classmates complaining privately to me about how she made them uncomfortable.

I regularly consulted colleagues to find strategies for promoting learning and to make sure no one, including Anna, felt alienated. Colleagues suggested several solutions: "pair her with another difficult student during small discussions so they won't disrupt the rest of the class;" "let other students respond to her and let them deal with it." These suggestions seemed punitive, however, especially since I'd heard some faculty say some politically conservative students felt the "liberal students ganged up on them," and the second suggestion seemed to promote that idea. Still, regardless of the topic or how it was presented, and no matter who spoke, Anna found ways to express feeling aggrieved. The most helpful suggestion for responding to her came from a colleague who specialized in faculty development and the scholarship of teaching and learning. I explained to her that I felt Anna was trying to make me "a problem," but I did not understand why. My colleague suggested "take everything she says and bring it back to the discipline. This way, it's off you, and back to the discipline."

This was among the most helpful suggestions I received and defused numerous scenarios. I made sure to never cut off Anna's points, and never dismiss them; instead, her disruptive comments turned into what became a

familiar response from me. “That’s an interesting point,” I’d say. “How might that fit in the perspective of global health that we’ve been learning about this semester?” Discussions would ensue about how the idea may or may not have been compatible with the disciplinary way of thinking that students were learning. The strategy allowed me to shift away from Anna casting me as a “biased professor” and instead showed how some of Anna’s comments did not easily align with, or sometimes contradicted, many global health disciplinary perspectives. It also helped neutralize her comments, avoiding the problematic scenario of students “ganging up” on one another. Further, it helped reinforce disciplinary ways of understanding certain issues, a key pedagogical goal for undergraduate education.

Anna’s sentiment of aggrievement heightened, however, when she objected to writing an assignment that focused on a global health topic of her choice. The central requirement of the assignment was that it must focus on a non-US country. Anna claimed this was unfair, and that there was no need to write an assignment about a place outside the US. Despite the assignment requirements, Anna wrote about the US and on a topic related to controversies surrounding transgender women competing in professional sports. Upon receiving her grade, she was unhappy and complained to administrators and colleagues and alleged that I graded her unfairly because I “did not like Republican girls.”

The institution lacked formal regulations for how to handle such complaints, and dealt with them on a case-by-case basis. In this circumstance, an administrator asked my department colleagues to regrade the paper and discuss it with me. When we met to discuss the re-grade, they suggested I “just change her grade and make [the situation] go away.” Such responses were not unusual at this institution, that was largely tuition-dependent and whose general response to students reflected a “customer is always right” perspective. Feeling left with no options, I acquiesced to my colleagues’ suggestions, despite feeling the student had not earned the grade they wanted me to give her.

Students leveraging bias assertions were, as Anna’s scenario shows, effective in getting a desired outcome: an improved grade. Such claims may even be more effective in producing an institutional willingness to capitulate to student complaints in an era of “anti-wokeness” that is partly characterized by villainizing academia. The consequence, however, is that rewarding complaints with grade revisions may lead to increased grade inflation and, more broadly, devaluation of degrees from some institutions. Further, Anna’s assertion of grading bias, especially on the grounds of “not liking Republican girls,” struck me as particularly painful. As a gay man, they reminded me of familiar societal tropes and descriptions about gay men: gay men are often equated with effeminacy and femininity’s socially constructed traits, including “emotionality” rather than “rationality.” In the case of Brock’s bias assertion, the claim suggests either an emotional or cognitive bias that obscures rationality. In other words, the error lay with me as a person, rather than the inferiority of the work product. Similarly, gay men are often euphemistically described as men who “don’t *like* girls.” Such descriptors, including others such as “being a bit funny,” or “that way,” stigmatize gay men. More than reminding me of the societal stings of homophobia, Brock’s and Anna’s behavior also demonstrated how some students leveraged a sentiment of being aggrieved, weaponizing their aggrievement since it had social currency and could be used to their benefit in the politicized climate many faculty find themselves teaching in.

Aggrievement, or the feeling of being treated unfairly, can be a powerful feeling. As instructors, many of us may feel sensitive to students’ expressions of feeling aggrieved because we care about our students’ wellbeing. As such, we may want to immediately remedy a situation so the feeling of being wronged can be assuaged. Minoritized faculty, including faculty who have felt stings of discrimination for their identities, may be particularly sensitive to wanting to address a feeling of aggrievement. Given the strong feelings associated with aggrievement, *weaponized aggrievement* can also be similarly powerful.

In conceptualizing weaponized aggrievement, I am referring to the strategic use of being aggrieved as a socially recognized affective experience and leveraging it for personal benefit. Weaponized aggrievement can be used to diminish the aggrieved’s potential missteps and instead shift focus to the source of their aggrievement. Because the feeling is being leveraged for personal benefit and to change power balances where the purported aggrieved can be seen as situationally “correct,” it is a form of emotional manipulation not unlike gaslighting (Sweet, 2019). Gaslighting is a form of abuse in which a person makes someone doubt their own experiences by making them feel “crazy” (Hailes & Goodman, 2023; Sweet, 2019). The term has also recently captured sociologists’ and anthropologists’ attention to explain relationships between larger sociopolitical phenomena and individual experiences (Kline et al., 2023; Sweet, 2019). In the examples I’ve provided here, weaponizing aggrievement can

effectively permit students' pushback on concepts that do not align with their political views, validate their refusals to engage in learning exercises, and claim harm all while creating their own forms of disruption.

Weaponized grievance parallels features of contemporary "grievance politics" globally. As political scientists have described, elements of "grievance politics" include a fundamental focus on "negative civic energy" that is centered on "the fueling, funneling, and flaming of negative emotions such as fear or anger" (Flinders & Hinterleitner, 2022, p. 673). Grievance politics has been described as an undercurrent of 'ressentiment' (not to be confused with *resentment*): an emotional response to desire an unattainable object and reframing that scenario in a way to maintain moral superiority and victimhood (Capelos & Demertzis, 2022). How might this reframing, in the form of weaponized grievance, impact faculty who teach topics like anthropology in particularly contentious political times?

To be clear, pushback to, and critique of, course topics from students is something faculty can celebrate. Students who disagree with aspects of course topics based on what they have learned in other courses or their own experiences can provide important nuance to course discussions. What is alarming, however—and concomitant with weaponized grievance—is how critique morphs into attempts to harm others, particularly due to identity-based dislike. This can be difficult to identify, and is not necessarily new in the US. Indeed, many Black faculty face pushback from non-black students at primarily white institutions (PWIs), which can manifest in several ways, including non-Black students deflecting responsibility for limited course engagement as a way to fault the instructor (Brown, 2020; Fields, 2007; Warren & Frison, 2022). Further, cisgender women are more likely than cisgender men to encounter students who evaluate them based on appearance and perceived intelligence (Mitchell & Martin, 2018).

Consequences of Weaponized Grievance

Academic freedom is being challenged across the US in the form of legislation prohibiting what faculty members can teach (PEN America, 2023), proposals to end or change tenure for faculty continue to grow across the US (Quinn, 2024), and all of this coincides with a rise in anti-intellectualism that accompanies decreasing trust in science (Kennedy & Tyson, 2023). For faculty, weaponized grievance may feel like another example of an ongoing battle waged against their profession.

The layers of such a metaphorical battle—at societal levels through policy, institutional levels through university and college responses, and interpersonal levels through student confrontations—may deepen job dissatisfaction and faculty burnout. In a survey of faculty and staff at 4-year institutions and community colleges, findings showed 64% of faculty felt burned out at work to some degree (Vyletel et al., 2023). For faculty who are minoritized because of their race, ethnicity, gender identity or expression, or sexual orientation, the compounding impacts of weaponized grievance may be more acute, as 84% of women and 71% of gender minorities reported feeling overwhelmed by work in past 12 months compared to 68% of cis, straight men (Vyletel et al., 2023). Weaponized grievance may disproportionately impact these faculty who already carry the burdens of being minoritized that can impact their overall wellbeing (Frost & Meyer, 2023). Additionally, minoritized faculty often do hidden emotional labor in the form of informal advising, mentoring, and service work that may not be formally recognized by institutional leadership (Ueda et al., 2024).

For faculty at institutions that evaluate faculty effectiveness based on teaching, weaponized grievance may carry professional consequences. Student dissatisfaction and complaint for some faculty—particularly contingent faculty such as adjuncts—can impact some faculty's career trajectories. Although teaching evaluations are not good measures of teaching effectiveness, at some teaching-focused institutions, including the one featured in this article, students' teaching evaluations of faculty carry the most weight for tenure and promotion decisions (Emery et al., 2003). For contingent faculty, complaints may serve as reason to non-renew faculty.

Conclusion: What Can Faculty and Institutions Do?

Weaponized grievance can be a strategy for some students to use in a political context in which students feel emboldened to problematize individual faculty members who teach topics contrary to their worldview. If the context giving rise to this pushback persists, how might instructors navigate these challenges and get support they need from their institutions? From the experiences described here, one helpful strategy was to take potentially disruptive moments related to course topics and connect it back to the discipline. Indeed, as my

colleague suggested, this strategy took the scenario away from me as a faculty member and instead brought it back to the discipline as a whole.

Another suggestion is for institutions to challenge the consequences of weaponized aggrievement through considering the weight of student comments on instructors' teaching. Teaching evaluations are ineffective measures of teaching effectiveness and instead can be tools for students to share complaints rather than assess teaching (Boring & Ottoboni, 2016). Indeed, faculty who are women, racial, sexual, or gender minorities often receive worse evaluations or are seen as less credible than non-minoritized faculty (Hendrix, 1998; Kogan et al., 2010; Russ et al., 2002). Rather than focusing on student evaluations, teaching effectiveness can instead be evaluated through considering factors such as using teaching methods designed to promote and deepen learning, including activities and assignments that promote higher order thinking. Indeed, as an alternative to examining student responses, evaluations can consider the many "lenses—"or ways of seeing the world, that shape teaching, including the lenses of the instructor, students, peers, and scholarship of teaching and learning (Brookfield, 2017). Instead of solely relying on student feedback, instructional evaluation can consider domains of teaching such as alignment of course components and outcomes, creating inclusive learning environments, and regular reflection from self-assessment, peers, and students (Barbeau & Happel, 2023). At the institution described here, reforms on evaluating teaching effectiveness began shifting from focusing on teaching evaluations and towards the examples I describe in this article. Unfortunately, I was unable to see the outcome of the changes since I left that institution, but I hope there was a positive impact. Further, institutions should acknowledge the contextual challenges in which some faculty teach, and how some disciplines, including anthropology, may be more vulnerable to student critiques about political bias than others because of core disciplinary ideas.

These suggestions are merely a starting point for addressing what may be ongoing challenges for some faculty. Given the potential harms associated with weaponized aggrievement, institutional leaders can use some of the suggestions here to support faculty who teach topics that place them at heightened risk of being involved in weaponized aggrievement scenarios during times of deep political polarization.

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