



Welsh, John F. (2009). The Status Degradation Ceremony: The Phenomenology of Social Control in Higher Education. *Workplace*, 16, 80-89.

## **The Status Degradation Ceremony: The Phenomenology of Social Control in Higher Education**

John F. Welsh

Higher education serves many social functions in addition to the sacred triad of teaching, scholarship, and service. Some of these functions are manifest, visible, and publicly known. Others are latent, not-so-visible, and sufficiently privatized that they are best known to those who control the knowledge and policy processes within institutions, government, and corporations. Understanding the latent functions of higher education is one of the tasks of critical analysis, particularly where those functions defeat human interests and the freedom of individuals.

One of the functions of higher education, and education generally, that is gradually becoming better understood, is its operation as an agent of surveillance, enforcement, discipline, and social control. That is, colleges and universities function to enforce prevailing social and political policies, and reinforce the central attributes of social systems, especially the those concerned with the distribution of wealth, power and other social *desiderata*. At the level of individuals, the social control function of higher education means colleges and universities also discipline those who are defined as threats to the social system or as failures according to its standards and rewards structure. In some cases, the discipline of individuals is preemptive; it occurs before any actual deviance or failure had occurred. Usually, the preemptive forms of discipline occur through intimidation or the creation of anxiety regarding potential sanctions for deviance, resistance, or failure as defined by the social system. In all other cases, discipline occurs in response to perceived or constructed infractions of organizational or societal policy. In all cases, the social function of discipline is to protect the structure of the power relations and the proffered propriety of organizational and societal policy.

The recognition of the social control function of higher education suggests an important question: does the prevailing literature on higher education adequately address the role of colleges and universities as agents of social control? Has it adequately or appropriately explored and analyzed the activities of colleges and universities as far as the surveillance of behaviors, the enforcement of policy, and the discipline of individuals are concerned? It is hard to make the case that the literature on higher education has adequately explored these topics. In part, this may be the outcome of a pro-administrative bias in higher

education research literature. Although there are important exceptions, the tendency is to study higher education from a point of view that is not critical of its basic expectations, structure, and operation. At the level of individuals, particularly those who may be victimized or targeted by the social control apparatuses in higher education, the enforcement and disciplinary functions of higher education are not well understood, nor are processes of resistance to them.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the understanding of the social control function of higher education, especially as it operates at the level of individuals, differentiated from the more collective dynamics of class, race, and gender. The basic argument of the article is that colleges and universities are not the absolute havens of social consensus and individual freedom that administrative propagandists present. Instead, they are conflict-ridden organizational fields that include structures and mechanisms that purport to manage conflict and individual deviance or resistance to institutional policy and authority. The article explores the basic elements, operation, and consequences of the status degradation ceremony as an important process of social control in higher education as it occurs at the level of individuals (Garfinkel, 1956).

There are other forms of social control in higher education, but the status degradation ceremony is an important tool that institutional authorities use to manage individual deviance and resistance within colleges and universities. It is also true that the status of groups or collectivities can be degraded through institutional ceremonies, as well. This essay is focused on the experience of individuals who find themselves targets of such degradation ceremonies.

The article proceeds by examining three questions about the status degradation ceremony: (a) What is the status degradation ceremony and what theoretical perspectives help us understand it? (b) How does the status degradation ceremony operate? (c) What are its consequences for individuals and uses for colleges and universities? These questions are examined through a series of theses or theoretical statements about the status degradation ceremony that are intended to provide an initial statement about this form of social control in higher education. The theses are unapologetically focused on the individual experiencing a status degradation ceremony and promote the experience of the person as the central element in the study of social control in higher education.

1. The status degradation ceremony is a social process in which the social status, identity, prestige, and reputation of a person are appropriated and damaged, or perhaps destroyed, by those administrators, staff, and offices in the institutional administrative structure responsible for social control. In the process of degrading an individual's status, the administrative social control apparatus responds to the perceived deviance or resistance of a person and attempts to manage the conflict or control the disruption that the identified behavior is believed to have caused. The administrative theory underlying the status degradation ceremony is that if the institution can damage the identity, reputation and/or material well-being of an individual, it can ensure the stability and operation of the institution and its parts.

2. Fundamentally, the status degradation ceremony is a means of ensuring the conformity of individuals within colleges and universities. Broadly understood, it is a process of social control intended to ensure that individual students, faculty, and staff think the thoughts, express the attitudes, and act in ways that fit within the parameters approved by the institutional administration and the corporate and governmental masters it serves.
3. Students, staff, and faculty can all be targets of a status degradation ceremony. The student who is thought to violate hate speech codes on a social web site, a staff person who is not sufficiently deferential to the clientele in the parking office, or the faculty member whose scholarly activity is not thought to be consistent with, or supportive of, institutional strategic directions can all find themselves as subjects of institutional disciplinary measures and, thus, targets of status degradation ceremonies. In the first example, the individual may be the target of a student disciplinary board; in the second and third examples, the individuals may be the target of personnel evaluation systems.
4. The breadth and depth of status degradation ceremonies in higher education today are limited only by the breadth and depth of institutional policy, formal and informal, that purports to govern, modify, or control the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals, and the mechanisms designed to enforce them. Thus, wherever institutional policies, standards, or expectations are supported through enforcement mechanisms, there is potential for individuals to experience a status degradation ceremony.
5. There are basically two types of social control mechanisms in higher education: direct and ideological. Direct social control refers to mechanisms that entail physical or material outcomes or sanctions for individuals, such as expulsion from a program for students and denial of tenure for faculty. Ideological social control refers to ideas or cognitive mechanisms that promote or encourage conformity and obedience to authority. Status degradation ceremonies entail both direct and ideological social control to the extent that they include material sanctions and appeals to prevailing institutional or societal values to manage the deviance or resistance of the individual. It is critical to understand how the person experiences a status degradation ceremony, including both the direct and ideological forms of social control.
6. Marxist theory, anarchism, and radical conflict sociology are helpful in understanding the structural and organizational features of social control in colleges and universities. However, these theoretical perspectives tend to be weak in the understanding of human consciousness and individual experiences. Edmund Husserl (1936) and Alfred Shutz (1967) are frequently credited with developing a form of phenomenology focused on intersubjective experiences or shared meanings of common social events. As far as Husserl and Shutz are concerned, phenomenology is a means for reducing common, everyday experiences to their basic elements by progressively “bracketing” or separating out those features that

- are not essential to our understanding of the phenomenon under study. However, the phenomenology developed by Husserl and Shutz was largely academic and apolitical; that is, it did not understand itself as part of a process of challenging alienated social environments or oppressive forms of social organization.
7. Theorists such as Enzo Paci (1972) and Paul Piccone (1971) expanded phenomenological analysis to comprehend and critique individual experience within an organizational environment characterized by exploitation and asymmetrical power relations. In the hands of Paci and Piccone, phenomenological analysis became a philosophy of liberation, not merely the study of consciousness. Both Paci and Piccone understood phenomenology as a form of emergent self-conscious self-determination in alienated and hostile environments. Phenomenology actually studies a moment in the process of rebellion and resistance in which the person loses a taken-granted view of the world and begins to realize that the social organization is exploitative and alienative, and that its principals are largely hostile to individual liberty and self-fulfillment.
  8. Phenomenological analysis can be fruitfully applied to the understanding and critique of status degradation ceremonies in higher education, or those experiences in which an individual's social identity, and potentially other forms of personal property, is forcibly and ritualistically appropriated and damaged by organizational elites. In order to understand the person's experience of the status degradation ceremony, phenomenological analysis is indispensable; the analysis of the status degradation ceremony from the viewpoint of a critical or dialectical phenomenology is indispensable if the experience of individuals in higher education is to be free of domination, exploitation, and abuse.
  9. At a minimum, the critical or dialectical form of phenomenological analysis is an important counter-theory to the administrative narrative in higher education. Administrative narration is concerned with the conditions that support or threaten the social control of the organization. Administrative practice is focused on the integration of offices, programs, collectivities, and supra-individual entities with the institution's strategic objectives; individuals are management challenges and potential sources of deviance and resistance to institutional strategy. Phenomenological analysis is concerned with the experiences of the person within the organization. Critical phenomenology is especially focused on the experiences of the person during a confrontation with the exploitative and alienative processes within colleges and universities. Thus, it is an inherent challenge to any apparatus of social control, since its objective is self-conscious self-determination, not the integration of organizational strategy and individual behaviors.
  10. The status degradation ceremony is an ensemble production that includes three participants: the agents of the administration, the target, and the audience. From the standpoint of the individual experiencing it, the status degradation ceremony is a process that has discernible stages, or identifiable benchmarks on a timetable:

- (a) the administrative construction of deviance, (b) the administrative gang-bang of the target, and (c) the stigmatization of the person as a moral reprobate.
11. The *first stage* of the status degradation ceremony entails the procurement, fabrication, and/or exaggeration of evidence by administrators and their minions that supposedly represents an infraction of an arcane policy or a behavioral standard of some sort. The purpose of the construction of evidence is to use it as a weapon against an individual by labeling the person as a deviant or an “outsider” (Becker, 1963). The administrative construction of deviance converts an individual into a target of the disciplinary and social control apparatus of the organization. Individuals are converted into targets for a variety of reasons, generally because they do not fit neatly into the organizational strategy and self-image due to appearance, cultural heritage, eccentric behaviors, unorthodox beliefs, or mere administrative caprice or intent to exact vengeance.
  12. The successful conversion of the person into a target, and ultimately a deviant, requires the social construction of “evidence” necessary to convince relevant audiences of the need to discipline the individual. Deviant behaviors, like conforming behaviors, are not self-evident. The act or feature that interests the administrative team must be observed through some form of surveillance. It must then have a label affixed to it by the political or moral entrepreneurs in the administration who have power to make the label stick. Evidence must be identified, constructed, and presented as such by the administrative team involved in the disciplinary process. The audience of the status degradation ceremony must eventually be convinced that the evidence reflects or means what the entrepreneurs say it means: that the person is a deviant or rebel and must be disciplined and sanctioned by the institution.
  13. The critical feature of the administrative construction of deviance is that the person is effectively labeled by the enforcement apparatus of the organization. The ultimate validity or truth of the evidence constructed by the administration is important to the target, but may not be germane to the labeling process in the institution. What is critical to the status degradation ceremony is that the administration has the resources to affix the label to the person regardless of the person’s actual behavior and resistance. Moreover, the degradation ceremony teaches the target that the organization is founded on the asymmetrical ability of the administration to label the person’s behavior.
  14. The process of identifying, interpreting, and presenting evidence to an audience provides considerable opportunity for meanings to be negotiated, massaged, and constructed by the agents of the administration. This means that the administrative team involved in the assault on the person’s identity and reputation has many, perhaps infinite, opportunities to refine, expand, reinvent, withdraw, and reintroduce evidence against the person.

15. The meaning of evidence is ultimately determined at the institution by the interaction of the technical elites in the administrative lattice responsible for social control and the policy makers who have legal responsibility for the institution. The technical elites can include campus police, institutional counsel, academic and student affairs officers, public relations, and human resources. It can include anyone in the administrative lattice who has access to information that can be converted into evidence, or anyone who has access to resources to fabricate evidence against the individual.
16. The success of the labeling process is also affected by (a) the decisions the target makes to accept, reject, or resist the label; (b) the energy, resources, and abilities of the target to resist the labeling process; (c) the energy, resources, and abilities of the administrative entrepreneurs to impose the label; and (d) the motivation, energy, resources and abilities of the audience to intercede on behalf of either the target or the administration.
17. Often, sycophantic students, staff, and faculty collude with administrators to construct the “evidence” against the intended victim. Colleges and universities have no shortage of interpersonal conflicts and vendettas, latent and manifest. Thus, there is usually no shortage of snitches, or confidential informants, among students, staff, and faculty who are willing to assist administrators in converting persons into deviants. The target frequently does not get to confront the obsequious accusers, or challenge the evidence they contribute, because the organizational Leviathan tends to protect the anonymity of snitches who reinforce administrative control.
18. The *second stage* of the status degradation ceremony is an administrative gang-bang that usually occurs in a Star Chamber orchestrated by bitter, dour administrative functionaries, usually deans and associate deans whose careers have been reduced to such efforts at social control because of a lack of competence and credibility in their academic and administrative duties. The purpose of the gang-bang is to physically confront the target with the evidence of deviant behavior and to make the labeling process a material fact as far as the target and the audience is concerned.
19. The infinite supply of associate deans and lower level administrative functionaries ensures that other institutional personnel can participate in the gang-bang to attack, humiliate, and disorient the intended victim simultaneously and sequentially so that effective response or self-defense by the target becomes impossible. Thus, the gang-bang helps to assure that the target knows on an intellectual and visceral level that the organization is materially superior, and sufficiently powerful to impugn the person’s identity and threaten the person’s social status.
20. The functionaries in the gang-bang also corroborate the senior administrator’s construction of the evidence against the target. The gang-bang may provide the

appearance of due process, but it is actually a continuation of abuse and procurement of more “information” to be used against the intended victim. It is a form of surveillance that occurs while the target is enduring stress and disorientation. All forms of communication, verbal and nonverbal, including indignation and outrage, expressed by the target during the gang-bang is re-cast as hostility, lack of cooperation, and lack of credibility. Any form of communication that the administrative gang-bangers can construct or define negatively becomes part of the ensemble of evidence used against the target.

21. The frustration, indignation, and outrage expressed by the target during the gang-bang are “looped” into the administration’s re-definition of the person as a miscreant or deviant (Goffman, 1961). The person must be guilty, in the administrative narrative, because s/he was so unreasonable and angry during the gang-bang. Anger and frustration expressed during the gang-bang, while normal in other assaults, are taken as evidence of guilt or moral failure in the higher ed gang-bang. In the administrative account, an innocent and reasonable person would cooperate with the degradation and cheerfully accept the spoiled identity inherent in the construction of deviance. The person’s resistance to the spoiled identity imposed by the administration is evidence of moral failure because, in the administrative narrative, the person fails to accept the moral infallibility of the institution. The gang-bang ensures that the degradation ceremony acquires an infinite circularity that becomes difficult or impossible for the person to refute, regardless of the initial validity or invalidity of the accusations. Everything the person says or does is reinterpreted as evidence that reinforces the administration’s accusations.
22. The *third stage* of the process is the moral “stigmatization” of the person. A stigma is a spoiled identity. Stigmatization is a means of legitimating the spoiled identity to the external audience. It is also a process that diverts attention from the administration’s abuse of the person (Goffman, 1963). The stigmatization creates the false appearance that individual liberty and individual dignity are secondary to the organization’s lofty judgments about the person’s moral worth. The stigma fraudulently changes the discourse from a focus on individual liberty and self-fulfillment to the person’s moral character as it has been impugned and tainted by the institution. The most significant consequence of moral stigmatization for the individual is increased marginalization from the social, cultural, and political resources of the institution. Moral stigmatization pushes the marginalization of the person to absolute limits so that the person is not only demoralized but deprived of any and all resources to challenge the stigma.
23. Behaviors that can be fabricated or exaggerated as vulgar, racist, sexist, classist, rightist, or, generally, not politically correct, are especially elevated or highlighted to undermine the person’s reputation, identity, and moral character. The institution need not, and probably does not, actually have a progressive agenda, but its administration understands that left-wing shibboleths have sufficient cachet to mobilize the mindless piling on. The most significant facet of the labeling of

- deviants with the sacred critiques of the left, especially racism and sexism, is that they effectively taint the person as irredeemably inferior, from both moral and intellectual points of view. The process of moral stigmatization thus helps the organization reinforce and recreate social hierarchies, even as it pretends to be the enemy of hierarchy and the societal purveyor of opportunity and enlightenment.
24. Communication networks are the *sine qua non* of the process of stigmatization. Hallway gossip, personnel meetings, administrative lunches, power powwows, and confidential memoranda are supplemented by more high-tech forms of lynching or stigmatizing the person, such as blogs on social and newspaper websites. If the administration has successfully linked a label with a strong connotation to the person, the communication tends to become as sanctimonious as it is ignorant. Successful stigmatization depends on the sanctimony and ignorance of the audience. It also depends upon the motivation of the audience to participate in the assault. Thus, the administration must make the target appear morally and intellectually inferior to both the administration and the audience.
  25. Institutions typically provide opportunities for targets to respond or even to seek redress against the administrators who may have abused them. Grievances and hearings have latent social control functions. Most significantly, both are forms of surveillance that inform real or potential challenges to administrative control. Grievances and hearings provide symbolic forms of due process and, thus, dramatize an interest in equity and justice. However, grievances and hearings, even those negotiated through collective bargaining, typically occur too late to prevent or reverse the degradation of an individual's status. By the time a grievance or hearing occurs, the target has already been labeled a deviant, and has suffered the gang-bang and the moral stigma. Even a victory in a grievance or hearing cannot erase or rectify the damage to the person's social status, prestige, identity, reputation, and networks, especially if strongly connotative labels, such as "racist" or "sexist," have been affixed to the person. The person is left with the impossible task of refuting a stigma.
  26. The range of sanctions a person can experience in the status degradation ceremony includes physical, social, and psychological forms that vary by the role of the person in the organization. For students, physical sanctions can include such things as expulsion from an institution or program; social sanctions can include marginalization and loss of professional networks; and psychological sanctions can include humiliation and the subversion of the person's sense of self and self-worth. Ability to continue at the institution may be threatened, as is the ability of the student to pursue the career. Many of the same social and psychological sanctions can be exacted against faculty and staff. For those in higher education occupations, physical sanctions can include loss of tenure, denial of tenure, poor performance reviews, loss of salary increases, loss of employment, and referral to law enforcement.

27. By stigmatizing the target, the administration and the corporate and governmental elders who prop up decrepit and corrupt administrators mitigate or eliminate additional legal or political challenges to the abusive treatment of persons. Those who would dare defend or support a “racist,” “sexist,” or “homophobe” inevitably run afoul of the network of elites in the institution and its corporate and governmental sponsors.
28. From a phenomenological standpoint, the stages of a status degradation ceremony are analogous to a fight or a physical attack on a person with multiple assailants. The person’s response is analogous to principles of effective self-defense. Metaphorically, the first to strike has the advantage. Since the status degradation ceremony is initiated by the moral and political entrepreneurs in the administration, the target is initially at a disadvantage. The target may learn about the conflict only after the administration has been at work on the status degradation for some time. However, the target can resist the process more effectively by metaphorically striking first and resolutely at subsequent stages in the process. This requires anticipating administrative strategy at subsequent stages, and planning for the worst. For example, by anticipating the nature and the specifics of the gang-bang, the target can tilt the field a little more in his or her favor by insisting on legal representation, or by the inclusion of a union representative or a sympathetic senior faculty member. The target can also disrupt the process of moral stigmatization by lining up opposition and by discrediting the process and the administrators involved in it. However, self-defense against multiple administrative assailants who are armed with organizational resources is treacherous and filled with ambiguity.

The status degradation ceremony merges direct and ideological social control. The direct, physical, and material humiliation and sanctioning of an individual by the enforcement and disciplinary apparatus of the institution functions to intimidate other students, staff, and faculty into conformity. It entails a warning with a clear message that individual resistance to the organization is unlikely to succeed. It also functions to reinforce prevailing organizational norms and policies through the creation of deviance, which is the conversion of persons into objects of derision and reprobation.

The status degradation ceremony reveals a very unsettling reality about both higher education and America: large organizations have expansive cadres of administrators who have the power and resources to make life miserable for individuals, despite the Bill of Rights and institutional proclamations to the contrary.

## References

Becker, Howard. *Outsiders*. New York, NY: Free Press, 1963/1997.

Garfinkel, Harold. 1956 "Conditions of successful degradation ceremonies." *American Journal of Sociology* 61(March 1956): 420-424.

Goffman, Erving. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. New York, Doubleday, 1961.

Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Prentice-Hall, 1963.

Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1936/1970.

Paci, Enzo. *The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man*. Evanston: IL: Northwestern University, 1972.

Piccone, Paul. "Phenomenological Marxism." *Telos* 9(Fall 1971): 3-31.

Shutz, Alfred. 1967. *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

John F. Welsh is an independent scholar who writes on individualist and libertarian theory. He is the author of *After Multiculturalism: The Politics of Race and the Dialectics of Liberty* (Lexington Books, 2008). His web site is [www.johnfwelsh.com](http://www.johnfwelsh.com).