



Challenging the *status quo* of an institutional culture in theological training

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Abstract

Institutional culture is one of the most salient forces operating in higher education because it is a vehicle for implementing organizational and institutional change. This article reports on an ethnographic study that focused on the role of a theological institution's culture and how the culture shaped diversity management, and ultimately student formation. This article highlights the saliency of the institutional culture in maintaining the *status quo* and not supporting the establishment of more equitable learning environments. Within theological education we need to dismantle beliefs and practices that shape and sustain social injustice and that will require some institution cultures to be challenged and changed. Being aware of the formative nature of the institutional culture provides critical insights into an institution's change process and can help theological students and educators to find a common theological discourse.

Key words

Institutional culture; theological education; diversity; change processes; higher education

1. Introduction

Institutional culture is one of the most salient forces operating within colleges and universities. Institutions are strongly shaped by demographic, economic and political factors together with internal forces like history, values, processes and goals that allow the organization to function (Condreanu 2013:49). An institution's culture does not exist in a vacuum but is more likely part of a subculture of the broader society. This unique culture develops throughout the history of the institution; it is its own way of conceptualizing and doing things.

Institutional culture is important because it is a vehicle for implementing organizational and institutional change (Tierney 2008:3). A focus of this article is that there is much to learn about the influence of institutional culture, how it shapes the environment and student learning and how it can shape an institution's change process (Kezar & Eckel 2002). Institutional culture is defined as 'the collective, mutual shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs and assumptions that guide the behaviour of individuals and groups in high education and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions' (Kuh & Whitt 1988:12). This definition emphasises the intricacy of institutional culture and reveals the way that members of an institution 'perceive and interpret the surrounding world, as well as the way they behave in it' (Schein 2004:36). According to Nussbaum and Chang (2013:7) 'there are a set of unwritten rules that dictate what is considered to be the acceptable way; group members convey social expectations by how they act.' Organisational culture impacts on organisational processes, even its performance (Collins 1998). This cultural script is a frequently overlooked ingredient in the educational process (Carroll et al 1997:18).

Within theological education 'institution culture' refers to the 'world' of the theological institution because each institution has its own unique cultural script which operates in separate intellectual, religious and social worlds that shape beliefs and practices of those involved in the life of the institution (Gollick & Chinn 1994:31). Theological institutions are communities of particular values and religious commitments and they form institutional cultures that are more intense than is characteristic of most other higher education institutions. Limited information has been gathered through studies on how different aspects of the theological institution environment are associated with student formation and how effective these components have been (Birkholz 1997).

In post-apartheid South Africa, there is the question of how institutions are dealing with social diversity while preparing future ministers to develop multicultural competence. Unfortunately the "way diversity, especially race, gender and sexuality has been approached by Christian communities has not always been productive in bringing about dialogue about the topic ... even when they reflect greater diversity, there is the real risk of embracing an uncritical kind of cohesion without deconstructing

dominant constructs that continue to perpetuate inequality” (Naidoo & De Beer 2016:3). The idea of selecting diversity, amongst other issues to explore institutional dynamics, “is to show the hidden values and norms that need to be thoroughly articulated, analysed, evaluated, deconstructed and reconstituted” (Steyn 2011:4), so as to create equitable institutional cultures.

Within higher education, the promotion of racial diversity has long been recognized as an important function. Yet in spite of higher education’s role as an equalizer of opportunity, substantial racial inequities persist (Cross 2004:388). In the South African higher education context, Jacobs states that “how knowledge is produced, organised and adjudicated as knowledge always holds the ability to generate patterns of exclusion on the basis of a variety of discriminatory categories” (2014:204). In addition, Andre Keet (2015:1) states that

we can tie the notion of socially-just institutional orientations to a politics of the present ... we may be able to judge institutional culture not on the basis of its traditions, embedded common sense, and taken-for-granted assumptions, but on the way it produces and distributes regimes of recognitions and misrecognitions along the fault lines of race, gender, sexuality, class ethnicity, etc.

Using a case study of theological education, this article highlights how one institution attended to diversity within its institutional culture. It underlines the saliency of institutional culture; how an institutional culture maintains the *status quo* by resisting attempts to deconstruct its behaviour and thus “generates patterns of exclusion on the basis of a variety of discriminatory categories” (Jacobs 2014:204) which ultimately impacts on the institution’s change strategy.

2. The research project

A critical ethnographic study was conducted from 2013–2015 in two denominational Colleges to understand diversity management via the institutional culture (Naidoo 2016). Diversity management entails a “proactive, inclusive and relatively contemporary approach to dealing with cultural differences in organizations” (Fubara et al. 2011:114). The sample involved two private residential Protestant theological training

institutions; one college from the Independent tradition and one from the historic Main-line tradition. The theoretical framework for this study was built on culture (Geertz 1973) where the institutional culture, viewed as a ‘script,’ guides in powerful ways how the various actors – teaching staff, administrators, staff and students – play their roles.

Due to space limitations the full details of the research methodology used will not be repeated from a previous publication (Naidoo 2016), suffice to mention a summary of the findings. The two ethnographies revealed very “different institutional cultures shaped over time by its mission, history, context and location” (Naidoo 2016:7). In the Independent tradition there was a “disengaged stance towards diversity issues” with a “colour-blind theology perpetuating surface change” (Naidoo 2016:7). In the Mainline tradition there was an awareness of diversity as they see themselves “as agents in the transformation of society,” however this taken-for-granted stance or the rhetoric of diversity within the institution was not interrogated in practice. Here diversity initiatives were not structured or aligned throughout the life of the college, since there is little staff capacity to facilitate issues of diversity (Naidoo 2016). What was evident was that in both sampled Colleges “diversity was not linked positively to ministerial identity formation to make a significant difference” (Naidoo 2016:7). Ultimately, both institutions have not done much to develop in students the cultural competence required for ministry in different cultural settings. For the purpose of considering the formative role of institutional culture and to attend to it in a comprehensive manner only the case study of the Independent tradition is explored in greater detail.

3. Case study of an institutional culture

The College under investigation is from the broad Independent Church tradition which is made up of denominations and churches involving the Charismatic network, the Pentecostals denominations and the African Independent Churches. Generally churches in this tradition are recently established, can be loosely formed, mostly autonomous in their church governance and were “historically seen to be politically conservative” (Anderson 2005:58). In this case study the sampled College was the most prominent training institution in one of the Independent denominations. It was established in 2003 and was an amalgamation of previous training

centres that were racially and geographically divided. The College's mission involved "preparing students for ministry within the humanistic and secular world ... and is obedient to the absolute authority of the Scriptures." Students were completing a three-year accredited qualification and were recommended by sponsoring churches within the denomination. Students represented diversity in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, language, age, class, educational background and career stage. The student body was made up of 35 full-time residential students. 25 were males and 10 were females. Most of the students were black Africans with 4 coloured and 7 white students. The average age was 25 years.

Within the College there was no formal policy on diversity management or interventions in place, instead "there was an official stance of non-racialism, non-sexism and equal treatment of all in their constitution" (Naidoo 2016:3). Formally there were modules that focused on self and cultural awareness, informally there were community service activities, a mission outreach, and formation groups which were intentionally mixed, according to race and gender.

A good summary of the institution's approach towards diversity management was summarized by the statement of the principal, "we don't have a problem here – we are brothers and sisters in the Lord and we do not see colour" (Naidoo 2016:4). Lecturers at the College stated that racial integration should occur by itself; students during their studies will learn how to 'adjust' to other cultures. Even though the "management of this institution felt that in relation to the larger church denomination, where churches are mostly mono-cultural, the College had made great strides in unifying different training systems" (Naidoo 2016:3), there was a strong assimilation culture. With a predominantly white and male staff, there was no gender or race diversity, Smith and Schonfeld suggest that if the opposite was evident it would have contributed "to positive perceptions about institutional commitment and climate" (2000:17). Students, on the other hand, were alert to social inequalities. In interviews, they "spoke of incidents of racism in the residences, stereotyping, cultural misunderstandings, and verbalisations and of internalized oppression and domination" (Naidoo 2016). The interactions "between groups reflected very much a microcosm of South African society" (Steyn & Foster 2008:26). Evidenced at recreational activities, students socialised in

distinct race and language groups as a normal part of student life. Students also recounted incidents of racial micro-aggressions in the classroom, the use of harassment and humour in talking about cultural differences which contribute to the reinforcing and reproducing of inequalities. English and Afrikaans was the official language of the College; Afrikaans was found to be divisive as African students were not able to study in their mother-tongue language.

There was no well-thought out spiritual formation programme in the College although there was a module on ‘Spiritual Formation’ and formation groups (which were essentially prayer groups). The teaching staff felt they were always available to help students in their personal and spiritual development yet many of the interpersonal student issues were handled by the SRC who ensured ‘discipline’ was maintained amongst students within a strict and austere manner to community life, seen by the wearing of uniforms for students. Community life at best, was regulated with ‘rules’ and there was insufficient space to build trust. For example, student residences were allocated on a first-come-first-served-basis and “not used as a structure for racial and cultural integration” (Paredes-Collins 2013:132). If students were not able to live cross-culturally in residences, the College made it possible for students to complete their studies via ‘distance education’ offerings. What was evidenced was a lack of genuine community interaction – staff were not required to attend chapel services, nor did the lecture schedules and chapel services provide for tea breaks with staff and students. Students also socialised in their own race groups where a particular type of politeness and piety existed.

Bringing up the race issue was seen as intending to divide; white students were evasive while black students were forthcoming in interviews, as one student mentioned “things will continue because it has been happening for many times because when you come to a place with your own physical eyes you will see that this has been happening for such a long time. So when you try to bring something new, it is like you are the one who is bringing the division” (Naidoo 2016:5). Many black students interviewed could not find a way to speak about their experiences and hurt from racism or their ‘invisibility’ (Christerson et al 2005:134) without being labelled divisive or having their faith called into question and therefore been viewed as un-Christian. What was painful for them was that they had high expectations

of being accepted and supported at a Christian college. Steele suggest that “typically when institutions do not employ initiatives for diversity or engage in a passive role, negative reactions and misunderstandings among students are most likely to occur” (1995:180). Many students were reluctant to speak openly about the race issue, which they felt could influence their ordination negatively. This lack of openness breeds superficiality within formation as the real issues remain hidden.

Other issues of diversity, like gender, was contested because in spite of the fact that women were training theologically, many local churches do not ordain women or prefer not to so. “Even though the constitution of the College allowed for female ordination, there were limits to their leadership as women could not act as regional leaders” (Naidoo 2016:4). Nevertheless most women in this College experienced no challenge in community life which underscores the fact that that they have not developed a gendered-consciousness and they seem content to maintain the *status quo*. Issues of sexuality in the College were dealt with a clear perspective of non-acceptance; “being homosexual is viewed as sinful and in need of repentance or change” (Naidoo 2016:4). Most of the findings reflected on race and gender, the ‘absence of discourse on the other dimensions of diversity highlighted how little awareness there is of how entrenched the norms are, resulting in virtual invisibility of any contestation of identity’ (Steyn 2011:22).

What was evident in this College was how a conservative, biblical interpretation shaped their views on diversity. There was a strong sense of conformity to biblical truth where racism was viewed as personal sin. “In this theological worldview, the wrongs of racial discrimination are dealt with by looking inward, dealing with individual prejudice and can be solved by the repentance and conversion of the sinful individuals at fault” (Naidoo 2016:5). There was a strong focus on piety; hearts needs to be changed before structures can be changed. This individualistic focus comes partially from a theology known as pre-millennialism; where it is understood that the social world will decay and thus the focus should be on preparing people for God return. With this kind of fundamental theology, many issues of a social nature were not interrogated, rather spiritualised, with a certain level of indoctrination. This has had a significant impact on the way different aspects of diversity are understood and experienced.

Students were not helped to think for themselves about important questions about identity, and accepted uncritically the beliefs of their home communities and denomination.

Since the individual's relationship with God was given ultimate importance in this institutional culture, cultural difference in how people think and live out their faith was not emphasised and was seen as not relevant to advancing an understanding of the Christian life. As a result, emphasising diversity is seen as a "liberal political agenda" that has nothing to do with their faith (Perez 2013:32). "It would seem that there was a fear that embracing diversity would result in the College's atmosphere becoming opposite to the faith, becoming politicised" (Naidoo 2016:6).

4. Influence of institutional culture

An institutional culture reveals the 'stories we tell about it and ourselves and ourselves in relation to it – and indeed the stories that the institution itself...tells, authorises, negates, suppresses, circulates and propagates" (quoted in Keet 2015:13).

What we find in this study is that students are being *shaped by a particular institutional and denominational culture*. Students are being socialised by particular doctrinal teachings, denominational distinctives, shared behaviours and the common symbols. In this culture a dominant feature on campus was the individualistic interpretation to the Christian faith. This College promotes a Christian worldview where the priority is the individual's personal relationship with God and the ability of individuals to interpret the bible correctly is seen as the 'biblical' norm. There was a clear understanding that "our identity is 'in Christ' rather than in our ethnicity" (Naidoo 2016:4). When differences in expression of faith are noticed, they are not seen as rooted in culture but as rooted in absolutes. What we find here is incongruence between the student's communal cultural orientation and the institution's individualistic stance towards life in community (Kuh & Love 2000). An individualistic orientation with an emphasis on knowledge rather than experience and communal sharing can breed a contentious environment. Black students with a communal orientation may feel their faith is being questioned because they do not conform to the dominant culture's way of expressing it. Thus, the majority view of how

faith is to be understood is seen as the true or biblical way, and divergent views are seen as being grounded in error.

In this institutional culture racism is reduced to whether individuals have racist thoughts towards individuals (Wellman 1993:11). If white people are not behaving in a racist (prejudice) manner, then racism does not exist. Racism becomes a matter of whether whites are friendly towards black people. An understanding of racism as “a system of advantage based on race” (Wellman 1993:27) is ignored or rejected. Students feel afraid to highlight issues while staff may feel that racism is a personal rather than a systemic issue (Christerson et al 2005) which downplays racism’s institutional and cultural expressions. Thus attempting to address cultural differences or institutional inequality is seen as blame shifting from the individual to society and producing unnecessary divisions. Because of this divisive potential the principal rather suggests “we should focus on what we have in common, our faith, and not what makes us different’ (Naidoo 2016:3). This stance claims Christian unity. ‘We are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3:28) “becomes an expectation to conform, rather than a description of how the unifying work of Christ makes it possible to celebrate distinctions, yet transcend divisions” (Allison & Schreiner 2016:40). A ‘colour-blind’ approach simply sustains what has gone before and “does not address issues of power relations that are at play at the very core of the daily lives of institutions” (Naidoo 2016:5), nor does it provide for the opportunity of “equality of cultural trade” (Dancy 2010:3). The resistance in viewing ‘the way a social system operates on racial lines may support and maintain racially discriminatory practices’ (Reeves 1983:175).

The complex reality of institutional culture underlines the potential for shaping the beliefs and practices of those involved in the life of the institution, whether it is intentionally planned or unconscious. Vygotsky’s (1962) work on the social construction of learning highlights that learning is socially constructed in a reflective practicing community. The relationship between the faculty, staff and students communicates potent messages about the nature of leadership and community (Shaw 2014:88). When one student group is privileged over another, it will show that these groups are valued more over others. When unresolved interpersonal conflict exists in an institution, students will not take seriously lessons that urge the centrality of reconciliation. Students rapidly come to understand

power relationships within the theological community and subconsciously take that model into their work. Thus ‘social identities are learnt and are an outcome of social practices’ (Steyn 2011:12). ‘The problem is that there is a failure to see how all sorts of language and behaviour reinforce what continues to be an uneven playing field’ (Naidoo 2016:5). These “shared symbols, language practices and deeply embedded beliefs and values” (Newman 1995:21) becomes an invisible tapestry that exhibits a powerful influence on the behaviour of people.

From a diversity perspective, *institutions are sites for the creation, reproduction and enactment of multiple meanings and intersecting identities* (Newman 1995:11). For example, “the intersecting of patriarchal cultures and the practices of the Church serve to reinforce one another in the denial of the full dignity and worth of women” (Naidoo 2016:5). It is also an *important site for in which practices, meanings and power relations are sustained*. Here one can ask whether the traditionalist assumption of “shared beliefs and values” (Schein 2004:6) still holds true especially from a gender or racial perspective. There can hardly be any doubt that some groups in organisations are more powerful than others; leadership, management, staff and the dominant culture are able to manipulate the cultural signals and message which the institution projects both internally and externally (Newman 1995:20). This is how the espoused values of the dominant group come to be seen as the reality of the institutional culture. Thus interrogating diversity is about “the unrecognised ways in which power assumptions embedded in institutional culture might disenfranchise certain groups of students whether knowingly or unknowingly” (Riebe-Estrella 2009:19) and becomes disempowering in Christian service.

Within this institutional culture the link of attending to diversity within ministerial formation was not made due to the denomination’s teaching; the strong reliance on the Holy Spirit which downplayed human development, together with the lack of staff capacity in formation. This College did not fully engage in formative practices, as this would have provided an opportunity for the student to reflect on aspects of social location and how this informs the transition from College to ministry. Ministerial identity formation can serve as a resource in nurturing inclusiveness through facilitating conversations on identity and difference leading to greater authenticity. Formation as an approach is more consonant with

‘conscienticising’ (Freire 1970) involving a strong connection between theology and practice where the social location of the student informs how the student interprets the world or theological understanding. Tisdell and Tolliver (2003:367) argue for a “socially constructed nature of identity and that it is impossible to know one’s self outside the cultural and gender socialization that informs one’s life”. Authenticity refers to the idea of acting out of self and not the expectations of others. In the Independent tradition, where much of Christian ministry is focused on performance and how to behave as a minister (Anderson 2005:89) doing the inner work is critical to sustain ministry. And importantly, when we consider our wounded past and the psychological scarring of apartheid, formative practices can provide an occasion to deconstruct and transform prior socialisation (Tisdell & Tolliver 2003:368).

Understanding organisational culture involves the importance to “*minimize the occurrence and consequence of cultural conflict* to help foster the development of shared goals” (Tierney 1988:5). In our context where embedded inequalities exist, institutions must reflect on practices to ensure that social inequalities are not reproduced and that it is an inclusive learning environment for all. For example, the voice of the students within the institutional culture needs to be heard and their experience of oppression needs to be taken seriously. The reality is that the contextual issues and struggles of black people still remain invisible in teaching theology, where they are assimilated and accommodate a largely Eurocentric perspective of doing theology. “Equally important to recognise that the act of speaking in unchanged spaces is not always easy, and is itself influenced by the problems related to how one is perceived in racialized ways in these spaces” (Meyer & Hartell, 2009:180). Responding to racially motivated incidents requires intention and is critical in showing that it impacts all involved people. Allison and Schreiner (2016:40) state that “when the curriculum from the first year through graduation incorporates multiple cultural perspectives and includes the history, traditions, and intellectual contributions of people from all ethnic and racial groups in the society, feelings of ownership among students of colour are likely to be strengthened.”

What is underlined by the case study is that *education is not a neutral enterprise*. The design and application of institutional policy or lack thereof

is a particularly significant element of organizational culture that impacts on learning and formation. It also gives expression to the deeper underlying values and vision. What also appears to be missing in this institutional culture is a theological understanding of diversity to help guide their efforts (Perez 2012: 22). Despite the clear emphasis on justice and reconciliation in biblical texts (Acts 15:23, 26:2; 2 Cor 5:16–21; Jn 17:20–23), this institution has not been successful in linking these biblical ideas with present-day diversity issues. A study also showed that conservative theological institutions expressed the belief that “diversity initiatives must be firmly rooted in a more intentional, biblical framework” (Taylor 2013:65).

Whatever is done within the culture of the institution either supports oppression or works for its’ liberation. Institutional content and structures “do matter in the process of identity transformation and until institutions tackle the problem at a structural level, it becomes difficult to sustain that alignment” (Christerson et al 2005: 42). A way forward could be to recognise, as Allison and Schreiner state (2016:41), “that institutional policies may be culturally bound and may reflect the dominant culture” and may inadvertently privilege some groups. According to Christerson and others, the “transformation of identities are more likely to occur when people from society’s dominant social group are aware of their privileged position and willing to compromise” (2005:161). By awareness of the messaging and by engaging in difficult discussions, for example on white privilege and how it presents itself in the College and in the broader society, is to work towards inclusion.

Because *institutional culture is so complex and deeply embedded*, it is likely to prove difficult for management to understand and change as part of efforts to create more welcoming learning environments. A key component to accelerating change processes is for leaders to have an understanding of the saliency of institutional culture as it plays a major role in what kind of change is possible (Lumby & Foskett 2008:56). Hurtado and others (1988:296) state that “the success of efforts to achieve institutional change will rely on leadership, firm commitment, adequate resources, and collaboration, monitoring and long-range planning.” Diversity at the same time “should not be limited to an official space; it must be a part of ordinary conversations” (Speller & Seymour, 2002). It involves nurturing a sense of community that “encourages an interdependence, emotional connection,

and sense of ownership that is more reflective of Christian unity than an emphasis on tolerance or coexistence” (Allison & Schreiner 2016:43).

5. Conclusion

Institutional culture occurs “as if the institution were an interconnected web that cannot be understood unless one looks not only at the structure and natural laws of that web, but also at the actors’ interpretations of the web itself” (Tierney 2008:4). This ethnographic study revealed how learnt behaviour within the institutional culture shapes future social interactions, helps maintain the *status quo* by resisted appeals to diversity which ultimately forms future ministers in particular ways. Being aware of the powerful, shaping force of the institutional culture can provide critical insight towards implementing effective change processes within theological education which can “hold direct consequences for students, identity and transformation” (Naidoo 2016:7).

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