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Reflexive Account: Power, Control, and Forced Exit in Academic Supervision — A Fictionalized Teaching Case

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Disclaimer:

This case is entirely fictional and created solely for educational discussion. Any resemblance to actual people, institutions, or events is purely coincidental. The purpose of this case is to foster analysis of leadership behavior, ethics, and workplace culture in academic organizations. This case is a fictional teaching scenario created for educational use only. Any resemblance to real persons or institutions is purely coincidental

Abstract

This fictionalized mini teaching case explores the subtle dynamics of power and control within academic supervision. Through the experience of Dr. Zahid Sikdar, a senior faculty member navigating institutional micromanagement, linguistic bias, and coerced retirement, the case highlights how abusive supervision can manifest through routine administrative practices. Designed for use in organizational behavior and leadership courses, it encourages reflection on ethical decision-making, academic integrity, and institutional accountability. Discussion questions and teaching objectives support critical engagement with theories of workplace abuse and organizational justice. Any resemblance to real persons or events is purely coincidental.

Keywords: *Abusive supervision, academic leadership, micromanagement, ethics, organizational behavior, higher education*

Background:

Dr. Zahid Sikdar, a senior professor with more than twenty years of service at a mid-sized university in the Northeastern United States, had long been respected for his teaching and scholarship. When Dr. Jane Roberts became department chair, the culture began to change. Over time, Dr. Sikdar described experiencing “a slow erosion of trust, autonomy, and dignity.” His reflections illustrate how abusive supervision can emerge gradually in academic settings—through micromanagement, exclusion, and neglect—ultimately leading to what he felt was a pressured retirement. This aligns with Tepper’s (2000) definition of abusive supervision as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors” (p. 178).

Micromanagement and Surveillance

The abuse began subtly through heightened oversight and unannounced classroom visits for official observation. The department chair appeared in the faculty members’ classes without notice, sometimes remaining for extended periods. Students grew visibly uneasy, often requesting her departure after a few minutes. These repeated intrusions disrupted instructional flow and undermined pedagogical autonomy—a hallmark of micromanagement in higher education (Hutchinson et al., 2018).

Frequent unsolicited evaluations also conveyed distrust. Observation reports contained generic remarks, ignoring teaching innovations. Over time, the faculty member perceived these practices not as developmental but punitive, consistent with findings that abusive supervision erodes professional confidence and autonomy (Harvey et al., 2007).

Accent-Based Discrimination

Accent bias soon followed. Although trained in both British and American institutions and fluent in English, the faculty member's regional inflection became a target of ridicule. The supervisor further engaged in discriminatory practices by criticizing the faculty's accent in a separate, unsigned note—an act that violated professional norms and reflected bias and favoritism, eroding confidence and collegial respect (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016). Anonymous notes described his speech as “unclear” or “unrefined,” despite official evaluations rating his performance as excellent stating, however, students consistently engaged with and understood him very well. Accent-based microaggressions have been documented as a form of linguistic discrimination that delegitimizes professional competence (Ng, 2021; Subtirelu, 2017). Such contradictions between formal evaluations and informal prejudice illustrate how discrimination can persist covertly under the guise of “communication standards” (Flores & Rosa, 2019).

Consistent Pressure and Psychological Distress

Since 2023, rumors circulated about Dr. Sikdar's retirement, often traced to informal comments by the chair. These suggestions created an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear. Following a 7-day hospitalization, the pressure intensified, with renewed gossip implying he was “no longer fit to continue. Such persistent stress contributed to emotional exhaustion and psychological distress, violating norms of workplace compassion

Using Students as Informants

The faculty member experienced a form of abusive supervision in which his supervisor used students as informants to support her personal political aims within the institution. Abusive supervisors often manipulate relationships and exploit power imbalances to maintain control or advance their own interests, creating climates of fear, uncertainty, and professional vulnerability (Tepper, 2000). By recruiting students—individuals dependent on faculty and supervisors for evaluation and guidance, the supervisor's behavior crossed ethical boundaries and placed both the faculty member and the students in compromised positions. Such actions not only damage the targeted individual but also reflect broader patterns of institutional betrayal, in which institutions or their representatives harm those who depend on them for safety and fair treatment (Smith & Freyd, 2014). This misuse of authority undermines trust, distorts academic relationships, and represents a serious breach of supervisory responsibility.

Linguistic Microaggressions

Although fluent in English, Dr. Sikdar's South Asian accent occasionally became a source of subtle criticism. In one evaluation, he was rated “excellent” across all categories, yet in unsigned note the supervisor advised him to “neutralize [his] speech for clarity.” This remark targeted his accent rather than his teaching ability. Research shows that comments about speech patterns can function as linguistic bias, often referred to as accent-based microaggressions (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; Ng, 2021). Such experiences demonstrate how cultural and linguistic differences can be framed as professional shortcomings, undermining belonging and confidence (Subtirelu, 2017; Flores & Rosa, 2019).

Integrity Challenges and Ethical Pressure

At one point, Dr. Sikdar was asked to use externally generated test materials without proper citation or verification. When he resisted, citing academic integrity, his stance was labeled “non-cooperative.” This reflects

how ethical pressures can arise when managerial convenience conflicts with professional conscience (Eshet & Margaliot, 2022; Macfarlane et al., 2014).

Unequal Recognition and Professional Erasure

Despite being published in peer-reviewed journals, Dr. Sikdar's work was rarely acknowledged in departmental communications (for example Sikdar's recognition as faculty of the year at graduate program), while less rigorous publications by colleagues were celebrated. This selective recognition, sometimes described as "academic erasure," symbolically communicates who is valued within institutional hierarchies (Carter, 2019). As Galloway and Linton (2023) argue, disparities in acknowledgment can serve as subtle mechanisms of control.

Intimidation and Boundary Violations

The chair's office was located next to Dr. Sikdar's, and she was frequently present in the corridor during his student meetings. Though possibly coincidental, the constant visibility created an atmosphere of surveillance. Research on workplace bullying shows that intimidation through observation fosters anxiety and undermines psychological safety (Hutchinson et al., 2010; Edmondson, 1999).

Workload Inequity and Opportunity Denial

As conflict escalated, Dr. Sikdar received last-minute schedule changes and additional assignments avoided by others. Requests for research leave and conference travel were denied. Unequal workload distribution and restricted opportunities are common features of abusive supervision, reinforcing dependency and discouraging dissent (Tepper et al., 2017; Misra et al., 2021).

Racialized Dynamics and Institutional Inaction

Dr. Sikdar perceived racial patterns in mentorship and promotion. Faculty from dominant cultural groups advanced quickly, while his applications stalled despite strong records. When he raised concerns, administrators dismissed them as "misunderstandings." This reflects what Smith and Freyd (2014) call *institutional betrayal*—when organizations minimize or ignore credible reports of bias (see also Hurtado et al., 2012).

Coerced Retirement and Emotional Consequences

Ultimately, the accumulation of hostility, surveillance, and neglect led Dr. Sikdar to retire early. Although formally voluntary, he described the decision as coerced, shaped by exhaustion and diminished belonging. Studies show that prolonged exposure to academic bullying contributes to burnout, disengagement, and loss of professional identity (Hutchinson & Hurley, 2013; Giorgi et al., 2020).

Discussion Questions

1. How does this case illustrate the gradual nature of abusive supervision in professional environments?
2. In what ways do micromanagement and surveillance undermine autonomy and trust in academia?
3. What mechanisms can institutions implement to prevent or address linguistic and cultural bias in evaluation?
4. How can faculty members protect academic integrity when faced with unethical directives?
5. What role does institutional culture play in enabling or mitigating coercive practices like forced retirement?
6. How might bystanders and colleagues act as allies when witnessing such behavior?

Teaching Note (For Instructors)

Learning Objectives:

- To explore the intersection of power, control, and professional ethics in academic settings.
- To identify manifestations of abusive supervision and organizational silence.
- To discuss strategies for fostering equitable, respectful, and psychologically safe workplaces.

Appropriate Courses:

- Organizational Behavior
- Leadership and Ethics
- Human Resource Management
- Higher Education Administration

□ Key Features Ensuring Legal and Ethical Safety

- All characters, institutions, and contexts are fictional.
- The case is presented as a *generalized reflection* on power dynamics in academia.
- Includes an explicit disclaimer and educational framing.
- Avoids any identifiable or real-life references.

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