

Sociological Reflections on the Mental Health of University Teachers from the Perspective of Environmental Justice: From Individual Dilemmas to Structural Ethics

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Abstract. The mental health issues of university teachers have evolved into a pervasive social phenomenon, with its roots extending beyond individual occupational burnout. These issues are deeply entrenched in the inequitable distribution of resources under academic capitalism, the rigid rules of evaluation systems, and the legitimacy crisis of the "slow academia" discourse. The prevailing paradigm of psychological assistance currently harbors an individualization fallacy, transforming structural pressures into individual responsibilities, thereby constituting institutional harm. The ethical distress within teachers' psychological distress arises from being forced to violate the value commitments of education's essence under institutional pressures, serving as an ethical signal of environmental injustice. This paper proposes a shift from mental health services to environmental justice practices, aiming to restore teachers' ethical possibility of maintaining personal integrity through institutional ecological restructuring.

Keywords: Environmental justice, University faculty, Mental health sociology, Moral injury, Institutional ethics

1. Introduction

The mental health of university teachers has continuously drawn extensive attention from academia and the public in recent years. Existing studies show that university teachers generally face high levels of occupational stress and burnout risk. A survey of early- and mid-career academics at two Australian universities found that 54.8% reported occupational burnout, 28.0% showed clinically significant depressive symptoms, and 21.7% had anxiety symptoms [1]. Abraham et al. conducted a university-wide mental health assessment of academic staff at a South African university, and found that 49% of faculty and staff presented severe psychological distress, while 27% reported high-level

burnout [2]. A survey by Rahman et al. covering 2,353 higher education staff from 16 countries showed that 29% perceived occupational burnout, and 73% experienced moderate to extremely high levels of psychological distress [3]. Research on Chinese universities indicates that nearly one-third of teachers work over 60 hours per week, with research pressure ranking first among all stress sources [4]. However, interpreting these data merely as excessive work intensity or insufficient individual adjustment may miss the deep structural roots of the problem. For years, the alienation of the "four-only" criteria — only papers, only professional titles, only academic degrees, and only awards — has formed an invisible "shackle". Teachers' psychological dilemmas are not isolated individual experiences, but products of specific institutional environments and resource allocation modes. Today, the "four-only" phenomenon has improved to some extent, but the deep-rooted problem remains.

The fundamental question worth exploring is: what kind of "environment" is systematically depleting teachers' psychological resources? This inquiry points to the sociological turn in mental health research. Traditional psychological approaches often anchor psychological distress within the individual: cognitive bias, insufficient emotion regulation ability, personality traits and other factors become core explanatory variables, and intervention programs accordingly focus on individual adjustment and empowerment. However, this paradigm has a methodological blind spot of individualism. It tends to translate structural pressure into statements of individual responsibility, and thus makes psychological assistance an unintended lubricant for maintaining unjust institutions. As critical psychology reveals, when institutional oppression is redefined as individual maladjustment, victims bear the cost of change that should be the responsibility of the system [5].

Against this background, environmental justice theory provides a highly promising analytical framework for re-examining the mental health of university teachers. Emerging in the United States in the 1980s, environmental justice initially focused on the disproportionate impact of toxic waste on communities of color and low-income communities. It later gradually developed into a three-dimensional framework covering distributive justice (fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens), recognitive justice (respect for the cultural identities and rights of marginalized groups), and procedural justice (substantive participation of affected groups in decision-making) [6]. In recent years, this framework has been extended to the psychological field. Researchers have begun to focus on the psychological costs caused by environmental injustice [7], and the possibility of ecological justice as a prerequisite for mental health [8]. More notably, the introduction of the concept of moral injury provides a new theoretical tool for understanding the psychological consequences of environmental injustice. When individuals are forced by systemic forces to engage in behaviors that violate their core values, the resulting guilt, shame and anger originate not from the individual, but from the institution.

2. Structural injustice in the academic environment

The working environment where university teachers stay is not a value-neutral space, but an institutional field composed of resource allocation mechanisms, evaluation rule systems and the politics of recognition. The core insight of the environmental justice perspective is that the disadvantaged situation of certain groups is not accidental, but the result of systematic bias in institutional arrangements. For university teachers, the operating logic of the current academic environment is creating a kind of structural injustice, which is manifested in three interrelated dimensions.

The first is distributive injustice at the level of resource allocation. The expansion of academic capitalism makes higher education operate increasingly in line with market logic, and the ability to

obtain research projects becomes the core basis for resource allocation. Under this mechanism, the performance principle of "more capable people get more" covers up a key fact: differences in initial resource endowments are transformed into output gaps, which in turn become the basis for the next round of resource allocation, forming a cumulative advantage of the Matthew effect. For young teachers, teachers from non-"Double First-Class" universities, and teachers in teaching-oriented positions, they are at a systematic disadvantage in project application, academic networks, research conditions and other aspects, yet they have to bear the same or even higher output expectations [9]. This "structural mismatch between requirements and resources" is the core institutional cause of burnout. If a teacher is required to produce high-level papers but cannot obtain corresponding research support, their psychological reactions such as anxiety, sense of powerlessness and self-doubt are precisely psychological manifestations of environmental injustice, rather than defects in individual ability.

The second is procedural injustice at the level of the evaluation system. The quantitative assessment system widely implemented in current universities takes journal ranking, project level and number of papers as main indicators, forming an evaluation technique that seems objective and fair. However, the procedural justice of this system is only superficial. Its rules apply equally to all participants, but it never questions whether the rules themselves are fair. Studies show that research pressure ranks first among the stressors of university teachers, and this problem is universal [10]. What is more alarming is that quantitative evaluation and resource allocation form a closed-loop logic: evaluation results determine resource acquisition, and resource acquisition in turn determines the performance of the next round of evaluation [11]. This makes it institutionally difficult for teachers to get rid of the vicious cycle of "publish or perish". The deep consequence of procedural injustice is that while teachers lose control over the evaluation process, they also gradually lose the right to interpret the meaning of their own academic work. They can no longer independently define "what is good research" or "what direction is worth investing in", but have to yield academic enthusiasm to external discipline.

The third is injustice at the level of recognition. Environmental justice theory points out that systemic inequality leads to unequal respect for the identity, experience and value of specific groups, and the lack of recognition itself is a source of deep psychological cost [12]. In the university field, injustice of recognition presents itself in multiple forms, including the implicit devaluation of teaching work making it a residual affair besides research, the marginalization of humanities and social sciences compared with science and engineering in resource allocation, and the lack of voice of young teachers in the academic community. These recognition deficits not only affect teachers' material benefits, but also erode their professional identity and sense of self-worth at a deeper level. When a teacher devotes a lot of effort to teaching work but fails to get corresponding institutional recognition, what they experience is not only unfairness, but also an existential negation — "the important work I do is not seen".

The above three dimensions reinforce each other and constitute the environmental matrix of university teachers' psychological dilemmas. It cannot be ignored that this structure has a tendency of self-legitimization. By attributing success to individual effort and dilemmas to individual inadequacy, it obscures the injustice of the institution itself, which is exactly the hidden operating mode of environmental injustice.

3. The ethical dilemma of "slow scholarship"

The dilemma of widespread burnout brought by accelerated academia has attracted increasing attention, and the slow scholarship movement has emerged as a result. This alternative discourse

originating from the humanities and social sciences advocates returning to the authentic values of academia — "contemplation, depth, cooperation and sustainability" — to counter the erosion of quantitative performance culture [13]. On the surface, slow scholarship constitutes an ethical response to the aforementioned environmental injustice. It attempts to rebuild teachers' control over the meaning of academic work and restore professional dignity alienated by the system. It reveals that the essence of academic work cannot be reduced to quantifiable output indicators, and real knowledge production requires time, leisure, dialogue and reflection. These are precisely what the acceleration culture systematically deprives people of. In this sense, slow scholarship acts as a discursive resource for ethical resistance. It allows teachers to reconfirm the value commitments that made them join academia in the first place, and maintain a normative imagination of "what academia should be like" beyond institutional pressure. For individual teachers, embracing slow scholarship may be a strategy of self-preservation. By reducing their obsession with quantitative indicators and refocusing on research issues they really care about, they can alleviate the psychological depletion caused by institutional pressure.

However, it is worth thinking about what practical effectiveness slow scholarship actually has in the current institutional environment. Is it a liberation strategy against environmental injustice, or just an elitist ethical gesture? Practicing slow scholarship requires specific institutional shelter: stable positions, sufficient research funds, low teaching load, and academic security without worrying about short-term output. These conditions may be attainable for senior professors and teachers at elite universities, but for young teachers who have not obtained tenure, or teachers working in universities with scarce resources, "slowing down" is itself a luxury. When a teacher faces the pressure of an "up-or-out" employment contract, the advice of slow scholarship is no different from asking a drowning person to "relax so as to float". In other words, if the slow scholarship discourse is not embedded with critical awareness of institutional differences, it may inadvertently become a new symbolic violence. It makes teachers who cannot slow down due to institutional constraints add a layer of self-condemnation for "not being calm enough" on top of the original work pressure, thus further damaging their mental health.

The deeper problem is that slow scholarship is essentially an individual coping strategy, not a structural reform plan. It can help individual teachers maintain psychological resilience, but cannot change the institutional logic that creates psychological dilemmas. As long as the evaluation system still takes quantitative indicators as the core, resource allocation still follows the project-oriented logic, and the value of teaching and service is still systematically underestimated, "slowing down" can only be a privilege for a few, not an option accessible to everyone. In this sense, if slow scholarship is not combined with critical analysis of the institutional environment, it may degenerate into a moralized individualism. It shifts the responsibility for change from the institution to the individual, and requires teachers to bear the injustice of the system with personal consciousness. Therefore, a dialectical attitude towards slow scholarship is needed. It is valuable as a symbolic resource for ethical resistance and a means of psychological self-help, but insufficient as a fundamental solution to teachers' mental health problems. The real problem is not whether teachers are slow enough, but why "slowness" has become an exceptional state that requires deliberate effort to fight for. This inquiry leads to a more fundamental issue: environmental justice requires not only fair distribution of resources, but also ethical restructuring of institutions, so that all teachers, regardless of their position, age and disciplinary background, can obtain conditions for sustainable work without sacrificing academic dignity.

4. Moral injury

One of the most profound contributions of the environmental justice perspective to mental health research is that it introduces the conceptual framework of moral injury. Researchers have found that when individuals realize that the system they belong to is causing environmental damage but are powerless to stop it, what they experience is not simple anxiety, but a deep ethical pain [14]. Teachers' anxiety, burnout and sense of meaninglessness are not simply overwork or insufficient stress resistance, but ethical pain generated when teachers are deprived of the conditions to work according to the authentic value of education under the system of academic capitalism. "Moral injury" provides a profound theoretical lens for this, allowing researchers to distinguish between general stress reactions and psychological consequences with ethical implications. Although the diagnosis of occupational burnout is effective, it tends to frame the problem within the binary relationship of "individual-work", obscuring its ethical dimension. University teachers often hold value commitments to knowledge, education and public well-being when they start their careers. However, the current institutional environment systematically makes these commitments difficult to fulfill, and even makes violating them a prerequisite for survival. The "up-or-out" system forces teachers to prioritize measurable output, sacrificing the depth of research and investment in teaching. In this situation, inaction itself is a kind of forced complicity. The psychological cost of choosing to cooperate with the system logic rather than resist it goes far beyond the category of "stress". What it erodes is the foundation of an individual's moral integrity and self-identity.

From the perspective of environmental justice, the essence of moral injury is the psychological manifestation of environmental injustice. When the operating logic of the institutional environment has a structural conflict with an individual's core values, and the individual lacks substantive power to change the environment, the resulting ethical pain is not a pathological abnormal reaction, but a normal reaction to an unjust environment. In other words, teachers' anxiety, depression and burnout do not stem from psychological vulnerability, but from the persistent tension of "keeping a conscience in a system that requires them to betray themselves". Pathologizing this pain and diagnosing it as a mental illness that needs treatment essentially constitutes secondary harm to the victim. It denies the ethical signaling function of these pains, and shifts the responsibility that should be borne by the institution to the individual. The policy implication of this analysis is far-reaching. If the core component of teachers' psychological dilemmas is moral injury rather than simple burnout, then current psychological assistance programs such as stress management training, mindfulness-based stress reduction and psychological counseling services can only provide relief at the symptom level, but cannot touch the root cause. Healing moral injury requires restorative justice rather than individual adjustment. It requires changes at the institutional level, so that teachers can carry out work in accordance with their own value commitments again, and restore moral integrity and professional dignity. In this sense, teachers' mental health status has become a sensitive indicator to measure the ethical health of the academic system, and widespread moral injury means that the institutional environment itself has structural failures.

5. Toward environmental justice

Reconceptualizing the mental health problem of university teachers as an environmental justice problem inevitably requires a fundamental reorientation of intervention strategies. The traditional intervention model follows the logical chain of "identifying individuals with problems — providing psychological services — helping individuals adapt to the environment". Its subtext is that environmental arrangements are established and reasonable, and it is the individual who needs to

change. The environmental justice perspective reverses this logic. It asks "why does the environment cause widespread suffering", and requires shifting the focus of intervention from repairing individuals to repairing the environment. This shift means that effective strategies to deal with teachers' mental health crisis must be upgraded from mental health services to environmental justice practices.

The environmental justice framework provides three interrelated action dimensions for institutional intervention. From the dimension of distributive justice, interventions should be committed to the fair allocation of academic resources and break the "winner-takes-all" Matthew effect. Specific measures include three aspects: reforming the project review system to avoid excessive concentration of resources on a few academic stars; setting up special support programs for young teachers; and balancing resource input between teaching and research. Its core logic is that not all teachers should be required to bear the same output pressure but face completely different resource constraints. When resources are extremely uneven, so-called fair competition is precisely the most unfair. From the dimension of procedural justice, the current governance model of "administration leading, teachers executing" is an important source of teachers' sense of powerlessness and alienation. Procedural justice requires establishing binding teacher participation mechanisms in matters such as assessment systems, professional title evaluation and workload calculation; safeguarding the professional autonomy of the academic community in academic evaluation; and providing smooth and effective appeal channels. Procedural justice is not only a means. The experience of being heard and respected is itself a positive resource for mental health. From the dimension of recognitive justice, core work such as teaching, student guidance and academic service is often undervalued in the current evaluation system. Recognitive justice includes three requirements: giving teaching achievements the same weight as research achievements in professional title evaluation; establishing multiple promotion channels so that teachers with different expertise (research-oriented, teaching-oriented, service-oriented) can all gain professional dignity; and providing institutional protection for the special working methods of humanities and social sciences (long-term thinking, slow writing). Its deep significance is to convey to teachers that "the work you value is important", which is a powerful antidote to moral injury.

The fundamental goal of intervention from the environmental justice perspective is not to improve teachers' mental health level — this statement still regards mental health as the sum of individual attributes. A more accurate statement of the goal should be that through the restructuring of institutional ecology, teachers can regain the ethical possibility of "engaging in academic work while maintaining personal integrity". When teachers are no longer forced to be torn between professional survival and value adherence, so-called mental health will emerge as a natural product of institutional health. This is not to deny the value of individual psychological support, but to adhere to a hierarchical understanding: individual-level assistance is a necessary hemostatic measure, but only the reconstruction of justice at the institutional level is the real fundamental solution.

6. Conclusion

The core proposition of this paper can be summarized as "the mental health crisis of university teachers is fundamentally an environmental justice issue". This proposition contains three progressive judgments: first, the structural cause of teachers' psychological dilemmas lies in the injustice of the academic environment, including imbalanced resource allocation, rigid evaluation rules and lack of recognition mechanisms; second, the core component of these dilemmas is moral injury — when teachers are forced to violate the value commitments of authentic education under

institutional pressure, the resulting ethical pain cannot be fully captured by the traditional concept of burnout; third, effective intervention must shift from helping teachers adapt to the environment to changing the environment that makes them uncomfortable, taking the restructuring of institutional ecology as the primary task.

Redefining mental health problems as environmental justice problems has theoretical significance in breaking the artificial barriers between psychology and sociology. It refuses to individualize teachers' suffering into psychological problems, and insists on finding the root of psychological dilemmas in institutional analysis; it also refuses to abstract social structure into an unchangeable fate, and insists on the ethical urgency and practical possibility of institutional reform. Under this framework, teachers' psychological symptoms are no longer abnormalities that need to be eliminated, but signals pointing to environmental injustice. Anxiety is saying "demands exceed the supply of resources", burnout is saying "the sense of meaning has been systematically deprived", and anger is saying "this is not the life I promised".

The implementation of environmental justice is to adopt an ethical action, and different roles bear unique missions. Researchers should shift their academic interest from measuring teachers' mental health level to revealing the institutional mechanisms that create psychological dilemmas; university managers should upgrade mental health services from marginal welfare programs to diagnostic tools for institutional reform; teachers themselves should re-understand individual painful experiences as manifestations of the collective situation, so as to gain solidarity beyond isolation and powerlessness in the process of jointly naming injustice. In a system that requires everyone to run faster, "stopping" is not only a strategy of self-preservation, but also an ethical act, a rejection of environmental injustice, and a declaration of the possibility of another kind of academic life.

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