



A **toolkit** for **diversifying knowledge** and **tackling discrimination** through **civil society participation** in universities.

NEOLIBERAL COMPLIANCE



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DEFINITION / DESCRIPTION



In order to understand compliance in the context of education, it is important to understand the space that education produces and where educational practice takes place. Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are shaped by multiple systems of oppression and inequality. These systems are interlocked and set in relation to dominant perceptions such as Eurocentrism (see concept) or ways of governing such as Neoliberal Governmentality. Set within this context, individuals and social groups encounter multiple forms of discrimination in HEI, resulting in individual and collective experiences of HEI as an unhealthy and often hostile environment. The repetitious nature of everyday violence produces intersectional fatigue - an exhaustion triggered by the daily struggle with organizational and interpersonal barriers in HEI. Some students feel that compliance is the best strategy to overcome these barriers and the most protective against harm. Consequently, we call this strategy of dealing with and navigating ambivalent demands and rewards in the context of institutional racism in HEI neoliberal compliance. It implies to individualize, minimize, and/or “laugh off” discriminatory experiences and to attempt to adjust to the normative expectations. Neoliberal compliance relies on the conviction that individual copying can reduce racist violence. This view complicates a liberatory and emancipatory praxis that relies on political organizing, see Migra*BPOC Resistance (see tool), and collective responses as well as actions against racism in HEI.

NEOLIBERAL COMPLIANCE PROCESS

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

JLU and an.gekommen e.V. organized two participatory and interactive place-based workshops in January and February 2020, engaging with local pathways to education. The participants were Migra*/BPOC students (B.A. and M.A.), doctoral students and post-docs, as well as persons in the process of applying for asylum and international exchange students.

All were enrolled as regular or guest students at Higher Education institutions in Giessen. About half of the participants are regular attendees at an.ge.kommen e.V. In the workshops, they shared different stories regarding access to education and experiences with discrimination based on gendered, racialized, and economic inequalities, religious beliefs and geographical belongings.

The first workshop was held on January 30th, under the title «How do you feel about your academic experience in Germany?». Here, the group was invited to make a collage with the question «How do I feel about my university/my academic experience in Germany?». The second workshop, on February 27th, aimed at fostering empowering dynamics that deindividualize discrimination experiences and rather identify possibilities for institutional change. This workshop had the title «What gives you energy?»

Both workshops addressed two dimensions: first, creating awareness (concientizar) about the interplay of everyday individual experiences of discrimination; second, sharing strategies of self- and collective care as well as support structures of empowerment, on the other. For this, in a first step, an individual reflection of everyday situations and the feelings attached to it took place. Methods used here were a combination of visual, creative individual work and a collective reflection on these individual experiences. The latter included an analysis of these situations on the collective and structural levels in order to understand the underlying causes and structural processes leading to moments of discrimination (problemposing). The last part focused on the structural changes that need to happen in order to stop racism in the university.

After each of the workshops, a smaller group met in order to reflect on the main observations, analysis and assumptions made in the workshop. A mind-map connecting the different examples was elaborated and final theoretical elaborations were made.

FINDING THE CONCEPT

The concept of neoliberal compliance emerged from two group dialogues with Migra*BPoC students, PhDs and postdocs in Giessen, Germany. After the first workshop, there was an overall feeling that many students were reluctant to talk about exclusion mechanisms they were subjected to at HEI because this was a mood killer. The smaller group felt that it was important to acknowledge and respect this wish, but also to understand where it comes from. The second workshop offered this different approach and participants felt comfortable to share their feeling of being alone and overwhelmed and explained their wish to not cause any trouble in a system that alienates them. Based on the enunciations of the participants in the two workshops, they identified the most crucial aspects for migrant students in Giessen by relating them to each other and grasping their conceptual implication through a mind-map exercise. Five topics were identified: (a) fatigue; (b) fear of not passing; (c) insecurity towards expectations; (d) dissatisfaction regarding double standards at university; and (e) disillusionment regarding the lack of change of the institution and its personal interactions. Migra*BPoC students situated themselves at the interplay of these elements and developed strategies of copying, challenging, contesting and resisting accordingly. In particular, the strategy of neoliberal compliance resulted as a way of navigating these different levels by focusing on self-care.

Thus, neoliberal compliance emerges as a term that defines individual strategies of Migra*BPoC students and teachers of confirming to the given structures and dynamics in place. As such they are not directed at changing or denouncing discriminatory practices. Rather, they are prescribed by a commitment to the institutional rules and expectations in order to prevent or diminish the negative effects of discrimination on the personal well-being level. In this sense, the focus on neoliberal compliance uncovers the agency of Migra*BPoC at HEI as active agents seeking to survive on an individual level the institutional constraints. As such neoliberal compliance can be understood as a psychosocial mechanism of protection of personal well-being.

Compliance in the context of education is shaped by power relations and their everyday practices. Higher Education Institution (HEI) are sites of interlocking systems of oppression (Combahee River Collective 1977) and configured by social inequalities such as sexism, racism, ableism, classism, trans- and homophobia. Further, in HEI in Europe a Eurocentric (see tool Eurocentrims) perspective and neoliberal forms of governing, in the sense of *Neoliberal Governmentality* predominate. Coupled to **racialized, gendered and economic inequalities** and an institutional praxis and culture of self-profiling, HEI becomes a site, where (a) competition and individualization over cooperation; (b) cost-effectiveness (reflected by term of *bulimic learning* or *educational bulimia* in Germany and other countries¹) over transitional and qualitative learning, and (c) quantitative oriented learning over emotional and physical well-being is prioritized. Set within this context, individuals and social groups encounter multiple forms of discrimination in HEI, resulting in individual and collective experiences of HEI as an unhealthy and often hostile environment. As a consequence, many Migra*BPoC students and teachers avoid open resistance and instead engage in neoliberal compliance, employing a double consciousness about what is expected from them and how to increase their acceptance and academic recognition. It is in this situation, that many Migra*BPoC students feel the need to make pragmatic decisions about how they spend their time and energy during their life as students.

This everyday struggle against discrimination makes racialized students fatigued. Within this context the strategy of compliance is developed. The story of "the elephant in the room" told in one of the workshops illustrate the relationship between fatigue and neoliberal compliance.

The expression *elephant in the room* is a metaphorical idiom indicating towards the inadequacy on a person in a space. In the case of racialized students in the university it is related to (a) they "don't want to be seen as someone who came to Germany to cause trouble in a country which is not *theirs*"; (b) they do not like to stand out as outsiders; and (c) they do not like to be the ones that everybody refers to, when the topic of discrimination is raised. In other words, they do not like to be treated as *intruders, outsiders* and *trouble-makers*.

Thus, one of the most relevant dimensions of neoliberal compliance are emotional protection and well-being. One participant stressed that, because she is an immigrant, she will face discrimination

¹ *Bulimic learning can be explained as follows: "for the purpose of "making the grade", it is easier to ingest information through memorization rather than actually increase awareness and understanding. Once the memorized information is recalled during an exam, it is no longer needed and can be purged from the mind."* See also: Bensley, Robert J., and Thomas Ellsworth. "Bulimic learning: a philosophical view of teaching and learning." *Journal of School Health*, vol. 62, no. 8, 1992, p. 386+. Accessed 23 June 2020.

anyway, therefore it will not be really productive to keep talking about it. She also said that right after her arrival in Germany she would feel more anger concerning discriminatory acts against her, but that currently she somehow understood that it would be part of her life. Moreover, they "don't have time to focus on it", although it was stressed that actions of everyday discrimination bother. From an individual perspective, this strategy was supported by most of the students as a fruitful strategy of self-care, to protect oneself against negative energy and therefore as a strategy of protecting one's own mental health. However, this does not mean that students "obey", rather, that they actively decide to emotionally disengage with everyday discrimination directed against them as a way of self-protection and as a result of the fatigue they are facing due to intersectional discriminations based on race/racism, class, gender, religion, amongst others and the lack of trust they have in institutional change. They feel that compliance to this environment is the best strategy available to survive or even thrive in academia. This may imply to individualize, minimize, and/or 'laugh off' discriminatory experiences and some may even reproduce neoliberal practices that force others to comply as well, in a sought for distributional justice by asking for an equalization of the pain suffered.

This may complicate further a liberatory and emancipatory praxis of higher education. However, after a process of joint problem-posing, students also felt this *neoliberal compliance* could contribute in fact to the normalization of the practices that *othered* them and that it felt good to become aware that oneself was not the problem. This conversation also uncovered inherent contradictions, driving them to question how it does come that though, "I try to do everything, yet still, I always fear to be the elephant in the room." In this sense, one student voiced at the end of the workshop that she felt very relieved to have had a space to talk about the hardships. She felt not alone and understood. This led her to the observation that it would be good to have this kind of conversations on a regular basis. The creation of a safe space in the workshops became a valuable experience for the participants. This safe space allowed them to share their coping strategies to Migra*BPoC students and teachers without fearing to be disciplined. Migra*BPoC spaces of encounter allow to expand awareness, reflection and resistance in regard to how to navigate in HEI. This is also in line with Mai-Anh Boger and Nina Simon (2016), who stress the relevance for safe spaces composed by people sharing a common experience. In their case, the focus lies on the reflection of discrimination in a trauma-informed and resourceful way. In this sense, the creation of trauma-informed and resourceful safe spaces for Migra*BPoC would enable respecting and acknowledging that persons have "individual educational paths in collective processes whilst simultaneously depending from collective positions" (ibid)¹.

¹ For an overview of their university seminar which combines critical whiteness and empowerment, see: Boger, Mai-Anh and Nina Simon. 2016. Zusammen – Getrennt – Gemeinsam Rassismuskritische Seminare Zwischen Nivellierung Und Essentialisierung von Differenz. *Movements* 2:163-175.

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- Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain)
- Sindihogar. Sindicato independiente de Trabajadoras del Hogar y los Cuidados (Spain)
- Justus-Liebig-University Giessen (Germany)
- an.ge.kommen e.V. (Germany)
- Feminist Autonomous Centre for Research (Greece)
- Zaatar (Greece)
- Office of Displaced Designers. Prism the Gift Fund (United Kingdom)
- University of Brighton (United Kingdom)

Colaborators:

Catalina Álvarez, Blanca Callén, Marisela Montenegro, Francina Planas, Álvaro Ramírez and Sandra Tejada (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)

Rocío Echevarría, Eugenia D'Ermoggine, Norma Falconi, Lisette Fernández, Karina Fulladosa, Alesandra Tatić, and Jacqueline Varas (Sindillar-Sindihogar. Sindicato independiente de Trabajadoras del Hogar y los Cuidados)

María Cárdenas, Encarnación Gutiérrez and Douglas Neander Sambati (Justus-Liebig-University Giessen)

Marina Faherty and Emilia Carnetto (an.ge.kommen e.V.)

Anna Carastathis, Aila Spathopoulou and Myrto Tsilimpounidi (Feminist Autonomous Centre for Research)

Marleno Nika, Marine Liakis and Aude Sathoud (Zaatar)

Shareen Elnaschie and Lazaros Kouzelis (Office of Displaced Designers. Prism the Gift Fund)

Deanna Dadusc (University of Brighton)

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