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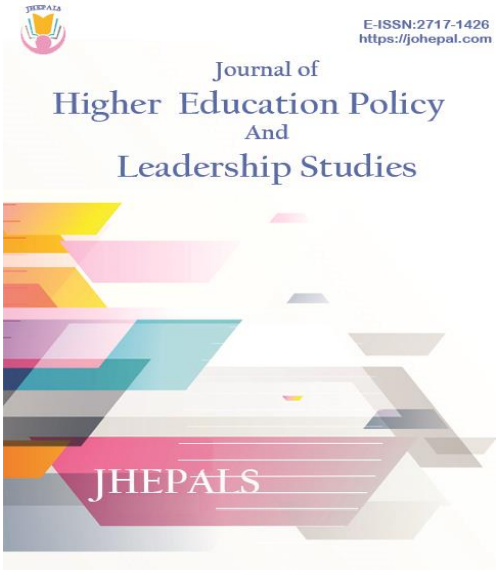
Pressure to Please: Adjunct Faculty Experiences with Grade Inflation



Danny E. Malone Jr.
Department of Sociology,
Coastal Carolina University, USA
Email: dmalone2@coastal.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6761-0474

Billy C. Johnson
Department of English, Florence-Darlington Technical College, USA
Email: billy.johnson@fdtc.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8035-6530

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Pressure to Please: Adjunct Faculty Experiences with Grade Inflation

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Danny E. Malone Jr. *
Billy C. Johnson

Abstract

This research explores adjunct faculty experiences navigating student and institutional pressures and lack of training regarding grade inflation. Given the increasing use of non-tenure-track faculty in higher education, there is a need to understand the experiences of adjunct faculty. Utilizing phenomenological methodology, twenty-three adjunct faculty members across the United States detail the challenges from the administration, students, parents, and even themselves when the issue of students' satisfaction with grades. Agency theory is a theoretical framework used to analyze the various pressures to help understand the relationship between adjunct faculty and their respective institutions. Data collected pointed to various types of pressures and responses to those pressures by the participants. Participants demonstrate agency when it comes to grade contestation but also express concern over reprimand and/or future employment. Findings suggest adjunct faculty need more training and support from their administration to ensure grade inflation pressures are not felt by adjunct faculty.

Keywords: Adjunct Faculty; Grade Inflation; Agency Theory; Higher Education; Training; Phenomenology

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* **Corresponding author's email:** dmalone2@coastal.edu

Introduction

Grade inflation in higher education continues to be a topic of interest. Chowdhury (2018) defines grade inflation as occurring when "students are given higher marks without demonstrating higher levels of mastery" (p. 86). This phenomenon is described as one of the oldest issues in higher education (Wasley & Bartlett, 2008) and this significant problem threatens the credibility of universities (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Zimmerman, 2002).

Alongside this issue of grade inflation, there has been a steady increase of contingent faculty, while the traditional tenure-track and tenured faculty lines are either stagnant or in decline. Kezar (2013) notes that while higher education touts the tenure-track model for its universities, over the past several decades, this model has had a seismic change where a majority of the faculty are adjunct faculty. An adjunct faculty member is a university or college instructor who is employed on a non-tenure track basis (Yakoboski, 2016). As of 2018, adjunct faculty made up around 73% of the instructional positions in US colleges and universities (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2018) and are considered 'the silent majority' (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). If grade inflation is in fact occurring, it is adjunct faculty who are shouldering the blame.

Adjunct faculty positions come with far fewer protections than tenure-track/tenured positions in higher education, but part-time faculty are free to work at multiple universities at greater ease compared to their tenure-track/tenured counterparts. Higher education's insistence on depending on the labor of adjuncts to instruct its courses has been termed by Fruscione (2014) as adjunctivits. Adjunctivitis contributes to negative work environments where adjunct faculty are subjected to small offices, limited faculty rights, limited opportunities for advancement within the professoriate ranks, and subpar compensation. Given these arduous conditions, adjunct faculty are frequently employed at several institutions to make ends meet while also managing pressures perform well in the form of teaching evaluations and other duties to maintain job security. Adjunctivits ultimately correlate with unsatisfactory adjunct experiences in higher education such as isolation (Dolan, 2011), being silenced/unheard (Fruscione, 2014), and a sense of being othered and ostracized from full-time faculty and administration.

If grade inflation does exist and this correlates with the increasing presence of adjunct faculty in higher education, then there should be research to shed light on the topic from the adjunct faculty's point of view. While Piscitello (2006) noted few researchers centered on adjunct faculty experiences, there have been some in recent years. Schultz's (2012) work directly addresses adjunct experiences in grade inflation and Schultz (2015) tackled adjunct and full-time faculty attitudes regarding grade inflation (Johnson and Malone, 2023). Johnson and Malone's (2023) study examined adjunct faculty's perceptions of grade inflation in their classrooms and institutions.

Purpose of Study

This study seeks to use the phenomenological research method to explore the experiences of adjunct faculty who face pressures to grade inflate. Specifically, this research aims to understand how external social forces such as administration or students can contribute to adjunct faculty's feelings of pressure to grade inflate and how they navigate through those

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experiences. Lastly, this study explores the lack of training of adjunct faculty and how that may influence grade inflation.

While there is some literature that addresses full-time and part-time faculty experiences with grade inflation, there is still a need to highlight the voices of the silent majority. Mantzoukas (2008) claims unequal attention is paid to full-time faculty compared to part-time faculty regarding grade inflation. The dearth of research on adjunct faculty was perplexing according to McCabe and Powell (2004). Finally, Johnson and Malone (2023) assert that given adjunct faculty are the "new majority" in higher education, it is puzzling that adjunct faculty are understudied compared to their full-time counterparts.

Hermanowicz and Woodering (2019) note that adjunct faculty have formed thoughts on grading as a part of their duties. Given the issues of grade inflation, and adjunctivitis of higher education, detailing adjunct faculty experiences with pressure to grade inflate helps contextualize the problem to highlight larger systemic issues in academia. The hope would be to render various remedies to address the issues. In this regard, the research question is:

- What are adjunct faculty experiences regarding pressure with grade inflation?

Literature Review

Grade Inflation: Causes and Consequences

The root cause, mechanism, and manifestation of grade inflation are still a great debate among scholars. There is quite a bit of various regarding the number of causes of grade inflation: Juola (1976) hypothesized over 20 substantive causes of grade inflation, Lackey and Lackey (2006) mention 18 causes, while Schutz et al. (2015) work notes 27 theoretical causes for grade inflation. Winzer (2000) captures this sentiment succinctly:

> Little data support the speculations about the root causes of grade inflation. Lack of unity of opinion reflects conflicting views regarding whether grade inflation (or compression) actually exists; whether reports are exaggerated; whether it is an issue of true concern; and the causes, implications, and solutions. (p. 4)

While there is little consensus on the number of root causes, these scholars have created an opportunity to develop a typology to distinguish the various causes. Finefter-Rosenbluh and Levinson (2015) created a three-category system that differentiates who performs the grade inflation and their respective motivations: teachers (an ethic of care), schools (an ethic of markets and fiduciary duty), and systems (an ethic of assets and self-preservation) (pp. 11-15).

The consequences of grade inflation are vast for students, faculty, and higher education institutions. For students, Babcock (2010) found that giving easy grades encourages them to not put effort into their work, while Klafter (2019) claims exceptional students actually suffer when grade inflation occurs as they only earn marginally better grades than average or below-average students. In short, grade inflation does not incentivize above-average students to challenge themselves while average or underperforming students are receiving improper signals regarding their performance (Hesseln and Jackson, 2000). For faculty, Collins (2020) argues that grade inflation, at minimum, is dishonest reporting to the student and institution and actually undermines grading. With respect to institutions, Yang and Yip (2003) argue that rampant grade inflation can harm a university's

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'collective reputation,' and this affects graduate studies because lenient grading practices at the undergraduate level can impact the quality of graduate programs.

Beyond the academy, grade inflation may exaggerate a student's competency in certain subject areas to employers, which employers use in decision-making matters regarding job applicants (Chowdhury, 2018). Moreover, Chowdhury (2018) claims since grades serve as a barometer of "a candidate's level of knowledge, skills, and achievement in a particular subject or field" (p. 89), grade inflation actually dilutes the value of a college education and discredits the credibility of using grades to signal competence (Wongsurawat, 2009). Ultimately, Kostal et al. (2016) asserts grade inflation plays a role in an increase of lower quality applicant pools.

The Adjunctification of Higher Education

Higher education, like many industries, create ways to be more flexible in an ever-changing market Yakoboski (2014) claims the use of adjuncts comes as a response to declining enrollment and government aid for colleges alongside rising costs of a college education. Halcrow and Olson (2008) say that it is simply less expensive for institutions to hire adjuncts, while Umbach (2008) notes that adjunct faculty offer greater flexibility to adjust as enrollment varies among course offerings. Davidson (2015) also details this flexibility extends to need of larger classes, high demand of undergraduate courses, and even the use of online courses. One approach that helps higher education be nimbler and save costs is to de-bundle full-time faculty tasks of teaching by hiring more part-time faculty to teach (Webb, 2007). This paradigm shift in higher education that replaces full-time faculty with adjunct faculty is noted by Burns et. al (2015) as a 'quiet revolution' while Jenkins (2014) expresses this change as the 'adjunctification of higher education'.

While flexibility can be posited as a positive attribute for both the institution and adjunct, this also cultivates the disposability condition of adjunctification in higher education. Traditionally, the idea of tenure was to protect the ideal of academic freedom of faculty and also ensure full-time lifetime employment at the institution. If an institution wants to remove a tenured faculty member, it is a prolonged process that could include ligation. Adjunct faculty do not have the same securities as tenured faculty, so if an institution wants to rid itself of an adjunct faculty, then they simply do not offer another contract. Institutions can see the move from full-time faculty to part-time faculty as a move to gain more control over their labor. As a result, Hensley (2016) describes this neoliberal approach to higher education labor creates an environment where adjuncts are not only more prone to being disposable but also, dehumanized in the process.

Agency Theory

With the adjunctification of higher education being influenced by the need to be flexible and cost-effective, both the institution and the adjunct faculty have mutual interests. Agency theory can help address how interest convergence works to sustain a relationship between all employees of an institution, who would be known as 'agents' and the institution would be the 'principal'. Eisenhardt (1989) notes agency theory has been applied to many fields such as economics, marketing, political science, organizational behavior, and sociology among others that all have an interest in individual and organizational behaviors toward rewards and risks. Mitchell and Meacheam (2011, p. 151) assert agency theory posits that

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"the knowledge worker (agent) is contracted by their employer to undertake action on the employer's (principal) behalf" and that the agent's actions render payoffs for the principal (Miller, 2005). Agency theory purports that when the principal deals with information asymmetry with an agent, this is noted as a moral hazard (Shapiro, 2005). Moral hazards arise occurs when the principal encounters difficulties whereby they can observe outcomes but not an agent's action and while a principal can monitor an agent's action, collecting comprehensive intel is cost-prohibitive (Miller, 2005).

Given that agency theory presumes an asymmetry in preferences with principal-agent relationships, Mitchell and Meacheam (2005) note that agents will engage in opportunistic ways, especially when their interests conflict with that of the principal. When interests conflict and/or diverge, both sides will act in their own self-interest. The agent is interested in receiving wages from the principal who pays these wages in exchange for the agent's services.

The Agency Problem and Grade Inflation

Agency theory sets up an interdependent relationship between the principal and agent: the activities and problems of identifying and providing services of 'acting for' (the agent side), and the activities and problems of guiding and correcting agent actions (the principal side)" (Mitnick 1998, p. 12). On the agent side, there is a distinction that complicates the relationship between the principal: captive and independent. These concepts are from the insurance industry but serve as a great analogy to differentiate full-time tenure-track/tenured faculty from adjunct faculty and connect their unique positions and commitments to their students and institutions. A captive agent is one whose services are only for one company in the primary interest of the loyal to their company, while an independent agent services several companies and is loyal to the customer, and works primarily in the customer's best interest (The Hanover Insurance Group, 2023). When this is applied to higher education, full-time faculty are captive agents whose services directly in the interests of their primary institution. Adjunct faculty, on the other hand, would be considered independent agents given their employment status as part-time does not make their commitment loyal to an institution, but to where work is available.

Agents have to deal with customers, which in this marketization of education context would be students. Students will have more influence on adjunct faculty than full-time faculty by nature of the position being more dependent upon favorable student evaluations which play a role in the renewal of contracts. Chowdhury (2018) and AAUP (2018) both noted that due to the non-permanent status of adjunct faculty that they are more susceptible to student complaints. With this in mind, if the customer/student is not satisfied with the adjunct in any form or fashion, they can make their dissatisfaction known in the form of complaints in student evaluation, and the institution, which is invested in customer satisfaction, can elect to not renew an adjunct faculty's part-time contract with ease.

The composite effect of the agency problem: the complex principal-agent relationship posited by agency theory, and the dependency of independent agents (adjunct faculty) on favorable student evaluations, create an environment for grade inflation. The agent/adjunct will offer these incentives regardless of what the principal prefers because the adjuncts often act in their own best interests when there is a conflict with the institution's interests. Institutions can use student evaluations to assess their agents, so there are incentives for

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agents to garner favor with students. It has been noted that adjunct faculty are more prone to assign higher grades, has more relaxed grading standards than full-time faculty, and are more favorable instructors among students when given the chance (Crumbley et al., 2012; Kirk & Spector, 2009; Moore & Trahan, 1998). These particular circumstances could be read as 'incentives' provided by adjunct faculty for student enrollment which may contribute to grade inflation with the hopes of favorable student evaluations and securing future employment.

Methodology and Methods

The phenomenological research methodology was best suited for this study's research question primarily due to the interest in adjunct faculty's lived experiences with pressure as it pertains to grade inflation. Teherani et al. (2015) asserts describing a phenomenon from the point of view of people experiencing the phenomenon also provides insights into how participant provide meaning for the phenomenon. Qualitative research creates a context for the content detailed by the participants' lived experiences which informs how they interpret and engage with the meanings of the phenomenon under research (Draper, 2004).

For this study, the researchers were interested in magnifying the perspectives and voices of adjunct faculty and if they experienced pressure to grade inflate and if so, by what actors and how did they navigate the pressure. This is of particular interest given that adjunct faculty are not as protected as tenure-track and tenured faculty so the use of the phenomenological method allows the researchers to highlight taken-for-granted meanings associated with experiences. Ashworth (2016) asserts phenomenological research seeks to address inquiries about the context of an experience (who, what, why, and how) and construct possible variables by which the experience would precipitate. This study seeks to unearth how various pressures in the higher education context impact how adjunct faculty provide meaning to the idea of grade inflation.

McConnell-Henry et al. (2009) note that Heidegger asserts a researcher plays a part in the research of the phenomenon as much as the participant experiences the phenomenon so the researcher's judgment has an impact on the interpretation of the phenomenon. Due to the possible involvement of the researcher in the phenomenon under study, Johnson and Malone (2023, p. 150) note "the use of bracketing where the researcher removes their own assumptions and positions and engages the participant's unique experiences fully". Moreover, Johnson and Malone (2023, p. 151) assert "a researcher can access the life world of others when the participant takes it for granted [themselves] is of [great] importance in descriptive phenomenology". The life world of this study is adjunct who experiences various pressures to grade inflate and to reduce conflation of their experiences onto that of their participants, the researchers must bracket their own suppositions.

Researcher Bias

Given the researchers have been adjuncts, it is natural to be concerned about researcher bias. All necessary measures were taken including bracketing of researchers' positions and presupposition. This study assumed participants would not be conscious of grade inflation and therefore minimal experience with the subject. Lastly, there are no competing interests to declare in this study.

Even so, both researchers note interpretation of the data could be impacted by unconscious bias in the following ways: selective presentation of adjuncts' takes, intentional

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directing of interviews, and researcher expertise on the topic could lend issues of compromising the bracketing method which aims to suppress the researchers' perspective of the phenomenon. Rest assured, both researchers were diligent at each junction of the research study to reduce as much bias as possible to ensure an uncompromising project. Finally, researchers gave the benefit of the doubt to participants regarding truthfulness in the information relayed during interviews primarily due to their unique interests in telling their stories.

Recruiting Participants

This research recruited participants on the social media platform, Facebook, using Individual In-Depth (IDI), and interviews were conducted on the website, FreeConference.com. Facebook is viewed as a cost-effective recruiting tool for research participants (Battistella et al., 2010) and it is convenient in an online public networking space where participants would be comfortable engaging (Barnes, 2014). IDI interviews are powerful tools that allow researchers to explore subjects in detail and craft an understanding of people (Carter et al., 2014). Johnson and Malone's (2023) research on adjunct faculty and perceptions of grade inflation noted that IDI interviews provided a lot of detail regarding the participants' understanding of their perceptions of grade inflation in their classrooms. This study models their approach to recruitment and interviewing.

Recruitment of research participants occurred in private Facebook groups: ABD (All But Dissertation) Group, the Adjunct Lounge, the Ed.D. (Doctor of Education) Network, Literature Review Resources, and the Dissertation Support Group. Prior to any solicitation, contact was made with each group's administrators to inform them about the research and request permission to advertise the study on their pages for recruitment.

The recruitment process included an introductory letter detailing the study and requirements for participation. This was followed by an informed consent form for those who responded to the initial invitation in their respective Facebook groups. Email correspondence was maintained between the researcher and potential participants until all forms were signed and times arranged for the interviews. Those who did not complete all the necessary steps were not a part of the study.

Among the five Facebook groups, there are about 11,500 members. This study successfully recruited 23 participants via purposive sampling, specifically, a snowball technique through research participants. Each participant submitted they were active adjunct faculty at a two or four-year higher education institution.

Confidentiality is of great importance for all parties involved and all necessary measures were done to ensure sensitive information was protected. Participants consented to have their answers published so to protect identities, gender-neutral pseudonyms were used for each interview. Only the researchers have access to the participant list, all personal identifiers and associated forms, and interview transcripts are on password-protected devices that are stored under lock and key. Each research participant received a pseudonym in this study.

Demographics of Participants

The research sample includes 23 adjunct faculty members currently employed at two and four-year U.S. higher education institutions. Of the 23 participants, 6 identified as male, and

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17 identified as female. The number of institutions where participants were employed ranged from one to as many as five simultaneously. The sample's age range varied from ages 25-67, but 61% of the sample was between the ages 34-54.

Procedures

These interviews for this study were by phone or online as an alternative due to the global pandemic from May 2020 to August 2020. While face-to-face interviews are most common in qualitative research, there are noted advantages to online and/or phone interviews. Phone interviews have a few advantages over face-to-face interviews including cost-effectiveness, less time-consuming efforts, and widening the geographic net for respondents (Oltmann, 2016). Moreover, interviewing over the phone offers each party their own private space where there is little chance of physical, mental, or other dangers presenting themselves in a face-to-face interview. Lastly, over-the-phone interviews can be less intimidating and awkward for addressing questions than face-to-face. Beyond phone interviews, online software was used to record and conduct virtual interviews on FreeConference.com. These were later downloaded and transcribed.

Each interview was prompted with a pre-determined script with demographic and interview questions. Qu and Dumay (2011) assert that interview questions should be asked in the same sequential order to maintain consistency. Along with preset questions, a respondent's answer could precipitate a question from the researcher to interrogate the topic further.

To build rapport with interviewees, the researcher introduced themselves and engaged in small talk to establish common ground. In particular, the researcher disclosed their position as an adjunct faculty member which cultivates a sense of understanding that can translate to trust and transparency throughout the interview.

Throughout the course of each interview, extensive and detailed field notes were taken. Field notes are vital to qualitative research because "they continue immediate and later perceptions and thoughts about the researcher's participants" (Tuckett, 2005, p. 31). Moreover, when conducting interviews and taking field notes, the researcher must recognize differences between what was viewed and perceived between the interviewer's interpretation of respondents' answers along with the interviewer's expectations (Mack et al., 2015). Working through these differences through constant note comparison contributes to the dependability and ultimately the creditability of the data Tuckett (2005). Given that, the interviewer employed field note techniques to parse out interview content within twenty hours of each interview to ensure the fullness of data (Mack et. al, 2015)

Data Analysis

Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological data analysis method was utilized for this study. This methodological approach involved a seven-step detailed process that allows for an exhaustive description of each participant's experiences with the research phenomenon of interest.

First, the interviewer familiarized themselves with the data with several read-throughs of the interview data to generate a deep understanding. Once the interviewer felt content with the data, the next step was to cultivate a coding of the data to make meaning of each participant's experiences. Following a round of data coding, a guiding storyline was crafted

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anchored by the research question around pressure with grade inflation. From here, data were categorized in a thematic fashion and some even into smaller, more specific categories to highlight participants' experiences with greater precision (Stuckey, 2015). Doing so, allowed for the triangulation of coding correspondence with the study's central research question. Johnson and Malone (2023) assert an effective way to track the logic and rationale behind data coding was through analytic memos. Those were used in this study to reflect on all coding choices and data codes.

After coding the data, statements involving any type of pressure associated with grade inflation were identified and assessed. Next, meaning from the data drawn after interview transcriptions were triangulated for consistency. Colaizzi (1978) notes that researchers maintaining consistent and sustained contact with the data can generate meanings into associated clusters to assist with a better grasp of research participants' experiences with the phenomenon under study. Moreover, these clusters, in isolation, mean little, but when in concert with each other can result in powerful themes in the data (Nowell et. al, 2017). For this study, clusters that rose from the data resulted in themes after going back to the data and finally connecting every meaning together to craft a comprehensive account of every theme found.

Results

Experiences with Pressure

Participants reported experiencing pressure at all levels (administration, students/parents, or no pressure) and most did report some variation of pressure to grade inflate. Table 1 includes each participant by type of pressure experienced as an adjunct faculty member.

Table 1.
Types of Grade Inflation Pressures Experienced

Administration Pressure	Student Pressure	No Pressure
Aiden	Cameron	Dallas
Alex	Carson	Emerson*
Dane	Casey	Gray
Emerson*	Dorian	Kendall
Harper	Marlow	Phoenix
Hunter	Quin†	Piper
Taylor†	Sidney	Quincy
Quin†	Taylor†	Reese
		Umber

Note: *Emerson reported no pressure and later reported tacit pressure.
†Taylor and Quin reported more than one kind of pressure.

Administrative Pressure

Dane, a first-semester adjunct faculty member, details experiencing grade inflation pressure from an administrator. Specifically, Dane notes how an administrator pressured them to pass a group of students whom Dane knew were not active in class, lacked in communicating with them regarding class matters, and failed to complete and submit assigned work. Alex experienced a comparable situation. The college at which they worked tended to micromanage the instructors and "stalk… [the adjunct] to pass students."

Taylor revealed that an administrator uses a manipulative tactic by playing on the sympathy of students to encourage grade inflation. Taylor was contacted by their college

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dean to "discuss increasing [a student's] grade". During the meeting, the Dean disclosed that the student was struggling and, thus, should be given an inflated grade. In response to their supervisor's pressure, Taylor "You're my boss, if you want me to do it, I will, but otherwise, I won't." The adjunct hastily added that they had not done so. This incident was "very frustrating and annoying" although the adjunct was not forced to increase the grade.

Emerson initially claimed to experience no pressure but then later recalled tacit pressure from an administrator:

> "[the administrators] never said anything outright to me but in reading some people's minds, I sorta got the … [idea that] maybe if a student doesn't pass… [the] class, … [they] might just determine to drop out."

Emerson felt the impression to grade to grade inflate through dialogue with the administration regarding student retention. Quin also details an experience with tacit administrative pressure that is similar to Emerson's comments:

> They [administrators] don't overtly say, 'You need to make sure all your kids pass.' But I have had one or two that kind of give you that indication, that if you're gonna be around long, they better pass and that kind of stuff.

The administrators in Quin's situation made it unmistakable to them without explicitly stating they were to grade inflate, it was implied that they were expected to aid the students in passing to ensure continued employed at their institution.

Similarly, to Quin, Harper had an experience with administration explicitly blocking them from turning in a graduate student who was caught plagiarizing. Harper believes the administration was financially motivated to keep the student enrolled:

> I talked to the higher-ups at the school and they told me since this was the first time she had done it, that I should let her turn in an original paper which was like a 2% Turnitin score and I didn't... And I graded it just like I would any other paper. I kinda felt like, the impression that I got was that they did not want to lose the tuition from this student because this was her first master's class

Harper was asked how they felt about the administration's move:

> I was (pause) disappointed that the school did not tell me to turn her in for dishonesty, academic dishonesty…I did not feel it was correct...They said just don't turn her in you know. "She told you the truth and so don't turn her in and let her write another paper and then grade that as you would any other student." I really wanted to mark it, I wanted to grade it but then mark it down so that her class grade would be like a C. She would pass but, you know, I didn't feel like she deserved to get an A minus in the class.

While adjunct faculty can be blamed for grade inflation, Harper's situation demonstrates how pressure from administrations can impact grades. Administrators overruled Harper, which undermined Harper's authority and resulted in a student who received an 'A-minus', even after they admitted to plagiarism.

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Student Pressure

Pressure to grade inflate from students were also experienced by various participants. The framing of this experience varied: advocating for change (Sidney), pleading their case (Taylor), and asking, begging, and arguing for higher grades (Casey). While Casey and Taylor do not describe their experience as "pressure", however, they noted these encounters did produce frustration and anxiety. Sidney, on the other hand, had an exceptional reaction to the student advocacy for a grade increase, explaining:

> I guess my immediate reaction would be I'm excited that they're engaging with me and interested in their outcome in my class. If they were apathetic, they don't care just so pass this class with a 'B', 'B minus' is good enough, "I don't care about a 'B plus' or something" then they take whatever grade I handed them as long as I didn't fail them…. So, I appreciated their engagement.

Cameron was reluctant to use the word *pressure* and preferred to characterize the experience as students who "sort of bellyache, not really pressure." Cameron explained that they will sometimes give out a "Mercy D" but did not classify this as a form of grade inflation, but rather, "it's really just giving them a break."

Quin navigated an emotional ordeal when a student who was performing poorly in their class. Specifically, Quin relays that once this student realized they were going to fail their class, they erupted with an outburst of dissatisfaction with screams and accused Quin of being the reason they were failing out of their academic program. Quin notes that the student did not take accountability for their lack of due diligence given a poor class attendance record along with not completing five assignments.

Marlow's student pressure experience came after Marlow submitted final grades to the university. Marlow discusses, "the student wanted me to, after the fact, bump up a couple of points or give work [otherwise they would have to retake the course]". Given this was not Marlow's first experience with this type of scenario so they had prior knowledge to "reflect on how... [to] lessen the situation." Marlow details student pressure was felt the greatest in face-to-face classes given the daily interactions with students when any of these three situations arise: "students having to complete my course as a part of… an overall graduation requirement," "where they have to complete it as a part of a program," or "a transfer kind of requirement." When Marlow steps back to think through the experience, they claim that student pressure to grade inflate as "it's typically not a lack of … an understanding piece or component, it's either a [lack of] work ethic or a procrastination issue."

No Pressure

Despite reporting no pressure of any kind to inflate a student's grade, the following adjuncts had varying perspectives about their experiences. Quincy expressed, "I don't think I ever felt that." The closest thing this adjunct experienced to pressure was being told by an administrator "not to fret too much over grading." Dallas and Piper similarly denied ever being pressured. *Pressure* was not Phoenix's preferred word for what had been experienced. Instead, this adjunct described the experience as *feedback*. Gray recalled a situation in which the administrators urged the instructors to give passing grades to the students because of a particularly negative situation that had occurred. The adjunct would only characterize this

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as being "encouraged" to do whatever possible to ensure that the students received passing grades.

Reese emphatically repudiated ever having been pressured by anyone to raise a student's grade, but noted that students often "question their grades without attempting to exert pressure." A fellow adjunct had experienced this same type of grade questioning and submitted the disputed work to Reese for grading without revealing the original grade. Reese graded the project "within one or two points of what the professor had scored it." For Reese, this event represented the evenhandedness of grading at their institution.

Kendall's response to the question about pressure was also negative. Like Reese, this adjunct was loath to refer to the experience explicitly as *pressure*. Kendall further explicated their view "I just kinda see it as that's a typical 18 to 22-year-old. To me that's not pressure …, I don't see that as pressure." This participant did not acknowledge the mere act of asking as pressure as long as the student did not approach it with an "I deserve a better grade than this" attitude and manner. This adjunct reckoned themselves fortunate in that some adjuncts they were acquainted with had experienced pressure to increase student grades.

Lack of Training with Grade Inflation

While there was variability regarding pressures with grade inflation among participants, they were unanimous around training regarding grade inflation. All fourteen adjunct faculty who directly address the question of training all discussed receiving no training in any regard about grade inflation. Alex remembered that nobody had "specifically mentioned" grade inflation. Dane, Hunter, Phoenix, Quincy, Taylor, Umber, and Wynne provided brief and similarly negative answers when queried about training about grade inflation. No participant named any program, onboarding session, or communication from full-time faculty or administration that touched on grade inflation.

Emerson explicitly states, "I've never had any training on grade inflation, never heard, can't recall of ever hearing that term on any of the four-year colleges I have worked at." Gray echoes similarly, "I don't recall hearing that once." The latter carries more significance given they have been an adjunct faculty member for years.

Similarly, Dorian said, "I have never got a lick of training about grading." Cameron stated in their training, "It was not mentioned." Harper expanded on the sentiments of Cameron by saying:

> There was no training at all three schools, I can't recall hearing that term used onboarding or like Zoom meetings or department meetings, whatever, I haven't ever heard that term used. I haven't heard it used by a student either.

These experiences led the participants to making meaning of their lack training on the subject of grade inflation. How they interpret and perceive grade inflation could, in part, be influence by this lack of training. However, this also provides understandings of their respective experiences and those around them. Given this is a phenomenological research study, each participant's responses are deemed as their 'truth'.

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Discussion

Experiences

Adjunct experiences with pressures with grade inflation consisted mainly of encounters with administration and students. There were several adjuncts who stated they did not feel any pressure to grade inflate. These 23 interviews with various adjunct faculty across the United States provide insights regarding making meaning of the pressure to grade inflate. The driving research question dealt with adjunct faculty experiences with pressure to grade inflate, from this question, three types of pressures came through the data: pressure from administrators, pressure from students, or no pressure. While most experienced one type of pressure, Taylor and Quin experienced pressure to grade inflate from both administration and students.

Administration Pressure

The patterns among respondents who noted administrative pressure are not pronounced. This category is evenly distributed among all gender, age ranges, and experience levels. The only pattern of note is that seven out of eight who had experienced administrative pressure were at the master's level or above, and five of those seven held master's degrees. The even distribution of administrative pressure calls into question the idea that the more experience or education an adjunct has will equate to less administrative pressure that will be exerted on the adjunct.

Student Pressure

The participants who cited student pressure were split almost evenly between male and female adjuncts as were those reporting pressure from the administration of the institution. The participants who related experiences of student pressure were nearly evenly split between those holding master's degrees and those with doctorates, while none of them held only a bachelor's degree. The experience levels of those who had encountered student pressure varied but most (7 out of 9) had served more than five years as an adjunct and three had served more than 10 years. Five of the nine respondents reporting student pressure were between 35 and 44 years old. Only one of the 25-to-34-year-old group reported pressure from students. These findings suggest that student pressure is either experienced more by adjuncts who are older than 35 years and among those who have more than five years of experience or that it is recognized more by persons in these age or experience groups.

No Pressure

The third category consisted of adjuncts who denied that they had ever received any type of pressure to inflate grades. 39% of the participants noted they did not feel any type of pressure to grade inflate, which Schutz et al. (2015) notes that faculty seldom feel they are influenced in assigning their students higher grades.

The group who reported no pressure to inflate grades consisted of participants from every age group, all experience levels (except for the above 20-year group), and all education levels. The group that was most reticent to indicate that they had experienced no pressure was male participants. Only one male adjunct of the nine who made up the category indicated no experience of pressure. Iris Franz (2010) found that if a professor is

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Pressure to Please

viewed as "lenient" and the students believe the reward for pressuring ("pestering") is worth the "cost," students are more likely to exert pressure (p. 420). This suggests one possible reason why these adjuncts have not been pressured. Merleau-Ponty (2012) notes that experiences enable individuals to craft perceptual outcomes in order to cope with their world. The reports of not experiencing pressure could have simply be a coping mechanism in an environment where there was pressure to grade inflate.

Training

None of the study's participant had training on grade inflation and more broadly, grading standards, during any part of on-the-job training after being hired. This finding was quite surprising given grades are important for students, faculty, and higher education institutions. Lack of training regarding grading and more specifically, grade inflation could reflect quality assurance issues among higher education institutions. Forbes et al. (2010) study in which 132 adjunct instructors revealed grading was an area which most felt inadequately prepared for.

Sonner (2000) asserts that adjunct faculty need training and support from [their universities] to align grading standards with that of full-time faculty. In particular, the nonexistence of upfront training at orientation was viewed as a problem among the respondents in this study. Instituting mandatory training programs for instructors could assist in curtailing grade inflation (Blum, 2017). The lack of training around grading and grade inflation allows adjunct faculty to be scapegoated while universities escape culpability regarding the issues as Murray (2019) and Schell and Armour-Hileman (2015) note some university leadership claim that grade inflation is not a huge issue. This incongruence between what is experienced and what is understood regarding grade inflation could all be addressed with more direct training to grading standards across all faculty.

A cynical take for the lack of training among adjunct faculty could be interest convergence among the principal (institution) and agent (adjuncts). The willful ignorance of grade inflation actually benefits both parties: principal keeps its students enrolled while adjunct faculty has satisfied students who can report positive student evaluations that can increase odds of that adjunct faculty's chances to be rehired. This implied understanding of this principal-agent relationship eases the agency problem because there is no incentive for the principal to micromanage the agent who is carrying out the objective of the institution which is to get students through agent's course. The agent will do quality control of their courses that does not compromise their ability to be gainful employed at their institution. It is a win-win situation.

Conclusion

Grade inflation as a phenomenon is something higher education will continue to grapple with as its adjunctification persists. Adjunct faculty are experiencing pressure to please from all sides: students, administration, and even themselves. Many are employed at institutions without proper training around grading, the concept of grade inflation, along with dealing with the effects of adjunctivitis that plagues many institutions. Agency theory provided a theoretical framework to understand how adjunct faculty experience pressure to grade inflate to please multiple principals (institutions and students). Without the training and the adjunct faculty's job status hanging in the balance over short periods of time amid various

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student and administration pressures to acquiesce to grade inflate, they are left to make decisions that have competing interests.

Student evaluations of adjunct faculty place students as another principal, aside from their employer, for adjunct faculty to satisfy. Consequentially, this places pressure on adjunct faculty to placate to students, who are viewed as customers and student evaluation serve as customer satisfaction surveys. Adjunct faculty are independent agents which means they operate in the best interest of their customers (students), which is advantageous for students because adjunct faculty employment status weighs more on student satisfaction. Higher education institutions cannot always watch their part-time agents so one way to assess them would be to monitor their teaching effectiveness in the form of student evaluations.

An area research that deserves more attention would be adjunct faculty training. This study highlights different pressures noted but these adjunct faculty also commented on how the lack of proper training in pre-service, onboarding, or in-service work regarding grading standards contributes to their lack of understanding of expectations. This lack of adequate training works further complicates the agency problem as the principal does not provide another method of surveillance to assess the quality of the adjunct faculty's course. Given the adjunctication of higher education, quality training of all faculty, specifically adjunct faculty, is critical to assure a quality education for students.

If grade inflation is a phenomenon that is highly correlated with adjunct faculty, research should ask two questions: are adjunct faculty aware of the phenomenon and if they are properly trained and socialized with their respective departments to be sure there is consistently in grading. Assuming higher education institutions are insistent on addressing grade inflation, there should be an emphasis on programmatic changes that focus on proper training and professional development opportunities upon hiring adjunct faculty. Ultimately, the adjunctification of higher education is not fading anytime soon so to ensure the quality education and experience of students are not in jeopardy, let's work on lifting up adjunct faculty as they are the silent majority holding up higher education in regards to classroom instruction.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Implications of this research are that grade inflation highlights the changing nature of higher education: the adjunctification of the academy, the marketization of education where student evaluations can impact how a professor teaches a class, and how higher education institutions are complicit in the negative adjunct faculty experiences with the lack of training and subpar compensation. Institutions should be mindful how they implement student evaluations as a measure of teaching effectiveness among all faculty. Grade inflation is present in higher education and the academia as a whole need to identify the root causes because the consequences are noted: continued exploitation of adjunct faculty by both students and administrations, who both depend on adjunct faculty for their own end goals. Adjunct faculty are not the cause of grade inflation, but a symptom of a larger issue with the corporatization of higher education.

Future research on grade inflation should review if full-time faculty and adjunct faculty are aware of grade inflation at their institution. There can be quantitative research that can

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help indicate how grade distributions look based on faculty status. Given the report of lack of training, there is an opportunity to explore how institutions onboard their adjunct faculty. This can be qualitative with researchers interviewing staff involved in the interviewing and onboarding process. Training of all faculty, and particular, adjunct faculty on campus (or virtual) alongside full-time faculty would create more inclusive for adjunct faculty into the department and institution. This, in turn, could increase morale for the silent majority and benefit the institution.

Limitations

With each research conducted, researchers must address their study's limitations. Given the qualitative phenomenological approach, Theofanidis & Fontouki (2018) note that a limitation that is imposed on qualitative research is generalizability as it is difficult to replicate, and consequently, verify findings. Relatedly, Qu & Dumay (2011) also note the generalizability issue but also detail another shortcoming of qualitative research, which creates a potential for research bias.

In relation to data collection, phone interviews can be viewed as a study limitation because there could be information through body language that could help interviewers (Novick, 2008; Oltmann, 2016). Given that, the advantages of using phone interviews included lower costs for both interviewer and interviewees because there is no travel involved, and interviewees may experience greater comfort speaking over the phone as opposed to face-to-face. Finally, phone interviews have served as an effective qualitative research methodology (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

The challenge of parsing out the participant's authentic voice from a researcher's encroaching thoughts regarding the phenomenon serves as another limitation. Phenomenological research is primarily funneled and filtered through the researcher, thus Shi (2011) notes the potential of conflation between the researcher's experiences in that of the researcher's participants. Researchers of this study took all precautions to mitigate this limitation.

A final limitation is self-reported data which is prone to an erroneous remembrance of events and experiences. Schacter (1999) notes that memory can have questionable reliability due to issues with bias, misattribution, and transience.

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Dr. Danny E. Malone Jr. is an Assistant Professor of Criminology in the Department of Sociology at Coastal Carolina University in the United States of America. His research interests are in criminological theory and sport, faculty experiences in academia, and K-12 IEP team experiences.

Dr. Billy C. Johnson is a full-time lecturer in English at Florence-Darlington Technical College in the United States of America. His research interests are in adjunct faculty experiences in higher education.

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