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Institutional Power Relations and the Construction of Fear: Their Impact on Students' Critical Thinking in Higher Education

Relasi Kuasa Institusional dan Konstruksi Rasa Takut: Dampaknya terhadap Daya Pikir Kritis Mahasiswa di Perguruan Tinggi

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Abstract

Unequal power relations within higher education institutions may generate fear that restricts academic freedom and undermines students' critical thinking. This study aims to analyze how institutional power relations construct mechanisms of fear and influence students' willingness to express criticism toward university authorities. This study employed a qualitative approach using a library research design by analyzing scholarly journal articles, academic books, policy documents, and other relevant publications. The findings reveal that fear is not merely an individual psychological response but a socially constructed mechanism produced by unequal power relations, weak institutional protection, hierarchical organizational cultures, and limited trust in institutional reporting systems. These conditions foster *institutional silence*, increase *self-censorship*, reduce student participation in advocacy, and weaken the university's role as a space for academic dialogue and institutional *check and balance*. Therefore, strengthening transparent governance, establishing independent reporting mechanisms, and ensuring adequate protection for students are essential to fostering a democratic academic culture and promoting critical thinking in higher education.

Keywords: Power Relations; Campus Authority; Student Fear; Critical Thinking; Sexual Harassment

Abstrak

Hubungan kuasa yang tidak setara di dalam lembaga pendidikan tinggi dapat menimbulkan rasa takut yang membatasi kebebasan akademik dan melemahkan pemikiran kritis mahasiswa. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana hubungan kuasa institusional membentuk mekanisme rasa takut dan memengaruhi kesediaan mahasiswa untuk menyampaikan kritik terhadap pihak berwenang di universitas. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain penelitian perpustakaan, yaitu dengan menganalisis artikel jurnal ilmiah, buku akademik, dokumen kebijakan, dan publikasi relevan lainnya. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa rasa takut bukan sekadar respons psikologis individu, melainkan mekanisme yang dibangun secara sosial akibat hubungan kekuasaan yang tidak seimbang, perlindungan institusional yang lemah, budaya organisasi yang hierarkis, serta keterbatasan kepercayaan terhadap sistem pelaporan institusional. Kondisi-kondisi ini memicu kebisuan institusional, meningkatkan sensor diri, mengurangi partisipasi mahasiswa dalam advokasi, serta melemahkan peran universitas sebagai ruang dialog akademik dan sistem checks and balances institusional. Oleh karena itu, memperkuat tata kelola yang transparan, membangun mekanisme pelaporan yang independen, dan memastikan perlindungan yang memadai bagi mahasiswa sangatlah penting untuk menumbuhkan budaya akademik yang demokratis serta mendorong pemikiran kritis dalam perguruan tinggi.

Kata Kunci: Hubungan Kekuasaan; Otoritas Kampus; Ketakutan Mahasiswa; Berpikir Kritis; Pelecehan Seksual



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INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions serve as spaces for knowledge production, academic freedom, and the development of students' critical thinking.¹ Within the academic environment, students are expected to express opinions, critically evaluate institutional policies, and actively participate in promoting democratic university governance. However, practices in many higher education institutions indicate that power relations between lecturers and students, university authorities and students, as well as senior and junior students often operate within hierarchical structures.² These unequal relationships may restrict opportunities for open dialogue and reduce students' willingness to express criticism or report misconduct. The situation becomes more problematic when institutional regulations are implemented inconsistently or lack transparency, creating the perception that decision-making processes are influenced more by institutional authority than by principles of fairness, accountability, and academic integrity.

This phenomenon deserves serious attention because fear experienced by students is not merely a psychological response but is also shaped by academic, administrative, and social consequences. Students often worry about receiving unfair grades, encountering obstacles in academic supervision, losing scholarship opportunities, or facing social stigma after criticizing institutional policies or reporting misconduct.³ Such conditions encourage the emergence of a culture of silence (*institutional silence*), limiting students' participation in monitoring academic governance and institutional accountability. If this situation persists, higher education institutions risk losing their essential role as spaces for intellectual dialogue, academic freedom, and democratic participation.⁴ More importantly, the continuous suppression of students' voices may gradually weaken their critical thinking skills, reduce civic engagement, and diminish the university's function as a place where independent and reflective thinking is cultivated.

This phenomenon can be understood through the perspective of power relations, which views power as operating not only through formal regulations but also through mechanisms of surveillance, normalization, and the production of compliance in everyday institutional practices. Within higher education, these power relations shape patterns of interaction that encourage students to adjust their behavior to institutional authority, including limiting their willingness to express criticism or challenge existing policies.⁵ This condition becomes increasingly problematic when institutions fail to provide transparent, fair, and trustworthy protection mechanisms for individuals who report misconduct. Consequently, fear develops into a socially constructed mechanism reinforced by institutional structures, leading students to remain silent rather than confront risks that may threaten their academic progress, social relationships, or future professional opportunities.

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- 1 Maia Chankseliani, Ikboljon Qoraboyev, and Dilbar Gimranova, "Higher Education Contributing to Local, National, and Global Development: New Empirical and Conceptual Insights," *Higher Education* 81, no. 1 (January 22, 2021): 109–27, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00565-8>.
 - 2 Eloise Symonds, "Reframing Power Relationships between Undergraduates and Academics in the Current University Climate," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 42, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 127–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1861929>.
 - 3 Qinxu Jiang, Hugo Horta, and Mantak Yuen, "International Medical Students' Perspectives on Factors Affecting Their Academic Success in China: A Qualitative Study," *BMC Medical Education* 22, no. 1 (December 27, 2022): 574, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-022-03597-z>.
 - 4 Eve Darian-Smith, "Knowledge Production at a Crossroads: Rising Antidemocracy and Diminishing Academic Freedom," *Studies in Higher Education* 50, no. 3 (March 4, 2025): 600–614, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2347562>.
 - 5 Elizabeth Nixon, Richard Scullion, and Robert Hearn, "Her Majesty the Student: Marketised Higher Education and the Narcissistic (Dis)Satisfactions of the Student-Consumer," *Studies in Higher Education* 43, no. 6 (June 3, 2018): 927–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1196353>.

Previous studies have extensively examined power relations and institutional silence within higher education. Research has shown that unequal power relations contribute to students' reluctance to report misconduct, particularly when the alleged perpetrators occupy higher academic or institutional positions.⁶ Other studies have found that weak institutional protection and limited transparency in complaint-handling procedures undermine students' trust in existing reporting mechanisms.⁷ Furthermore, research indicates that hierarchical organizational cultures may normalize practices of silencing, thereby discouraging students from expressing criticism toward institutional authorities.⁸ Nevertheless, most existing studies primarily focus on sexual harassment reporting, institutional governance, or organizational culture in general. Limited attention has been given to examining how fear operates as a social mechanism that suppresses students' critical thinking when confronting institutional authority, particularly within the context of Indonesian higher education.

Based on this research gap, the present study aims to analyze how power relations within higher education institutions construct mechanisms of fear that influence students' willingness to express criticism toward institutional authorities. It also seeks to explain the relationship between unequal power structures, institutional silence, and the gradual erosion of students' critical thinking through a qualitative literature review and case analysis approach. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of scholarship on power relations and institutional silence in higher education while providing practical recommendations for universities to establish more transparent, accountable, and democratic governance systems that protect students' academic freedom and encourage them to express criticism and report misconduct without fear of retaliation.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using a library research design.⁹ This approach was selected because the study seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms of power relations, fear, and institutional silence within higher education based on existing scholarly literature. The research data were collected through document analysis of international and national peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy documents, official reports, and other scholarly publications relevant to the research topic. The literature was selected based on its relevance to the main focus of the study, including power relations in higher education, *institutional silence*, *institutional betrayal*, academic freedom, and various forms of abuse of authority that influence students' willingness to express criticism and report misconduct.

The data were analyzed using content analysis to identify, classify, and interpret the concepts, findings, and arguments presented in the selected literature. The analytical process consisted of several stages, including identifying relevant literature, selecting sources based on their relevance to the research objectives, categorizing the data into major themes, analyzing relationships

6 Erin R. Shannon and Anna Bull, "Unwilling Trust: Unpacking the Assumption of Trust between Sexual Misconduct Reporters and Their Institutions in UK Higher Education," *Sociology Compass* 18, no. 3 (March 2, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13197>.

7 Anna Bull and Tiffany Page, "The Governance of Complaints in UK Higher Education: Critically Examining 'Remedies' for Staff Sexual Misconduct," *Social & Legal Studies* 31, no. 1 (February 16, 2022): 27–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09646639211002243>.

8 Juliana Cristina Teixeira et al., "The Banalization of Sexual Harassment That Produces Silencing in the Brazilian Academic Context of Management," *Gender, Work & Organization* 33, no. 2 (March 8, 2026): 300–314, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.70022>.

9 Mestika Zed, *Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan* (Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2008).

among these themes, and drawing conclusions systematically.¹⁰ To enhance the credibility of the findings, source triangulation was employed by comparing evidence from multiple scholarly publications representing different perspectives. This approach enabled the study to develop a comprehensive understanding of how power relations construct mechanisms of fear and influence students' critical thinking when confronting institutional authority in higher education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Institutional Power Relations as the Construction of Student Fear

In recent years, higher education institutions in Indonesia have faced a range of issues that illustrate the persistence of unequal power relations within academic life. Allegations of sexual harassment involving a professor at the Faculty of Pharmacy of Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM),¹¹ allegations of sexual misconduct involving a lecturer at Universitas Riau, and numerous reports of bullying practices during student orientation programs demonstrate that the abuse of authority remains a significant challenge in higher education.¹² Although these incidents differ in form, they share a common pattern characterized by unequal relationships between individuals holding institutional authority and students as the more vulnerable group. These cases indicate that academic positions, structural authority, and seniority may create imbalanced relationships, placing students in situations where resisting, confronting, or reporting misconduct becomes considerably more difficult.

These phenomena indicate that power relations in higher education operate not only through formal authority but also through students' dependence on various academic processes. Course assessment, thesis supervision, academic recommendations, research opportunities, scholarships, and future employment prospects are all areas in which institutional authority directly influences students' academic trajectories. Such dependence encourages students to carefully weigh potential consequences before criticizing institutional policies or reporting misconduct committed by individuals occupying higher positions. Under these circumstances, fear does not necessarily emerge from explicit threats but rather from students' perceptions that expressing criticism may negatively affect their academic future and social relationships within the university. Consequently, fear develops through the interaction between institutional power structures and students' relatively weaker position within the academic system.

Power relations become even more complex when university governance fails to ensure transparency, accountability, and equal protection for all members of the academic community. Students are more likely to lose confidence in institutional mechanisms when they perceive inconsistent responses to cases involving individuals with higher academic or administrative status.¹³ Such conditions encourage the development of *institutional silence*, in which students deliberately refrain from expressing criticism or reporting misconduct because the perceived

10 Matthew B Miles and A Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Sage Publications, 1994).

11 Rizky Aulia Indah Sari et al., "Public Perceptions and Sentiments on Sexual Violence against Women by Educators and Healthcare Providers," *Martabat: Jurnal Perempuan Dan Anak* 9, no. 1 (September 19, 2025): 24–43, <https://doi.org/10.21274/martabat.2025.9.1.24-43>.

12 Akhmad Anwar Dani et al., "Challenges and Strategies in the Implementation of Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Task Forces in Religious Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia," *Khazanah Sosial* 7, no. 2 (August 16, 2025): 506–23, <https://doi.org/10.15575/ks.v7i2.46385>.

13 Ali Aslan Gümüşay, Michael Smets, and Timothy Morris, "'God at Work': Engaging Central and Incompatible Institutional Logics through Elastic Hybridity," *Academy of Management Journal* 63, no. 1 (February 2020): 124–54, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2016.0481>.

risks outweigh the potential benefits.¹⁴ As a result, fear gradually evolves into a social mechanism that regulates students' behavior without requiring explicit coercion. Table 1 summarizes the principal forms of institutional power relations that contribute to the construction of fear among university students.

Table 1. Institutional Power Relations in the Construction of Student Fear

Forms of Power Relations	Mechanisms of Fear Construction	Impact on Students
Academic authority of lecturers	Concerns over grades, supervision, and academic recommendations	Reduced willingness to express criticism
Administrative authority	Concerns over graduation, scholarships, and academic services	Reluctance to report misconduct
Student organizational hierarchy	Fear of exclusion or losing organizational positions	Declining student participation
Weak reporting mechanisms	Fear of exposure and retaliation	Development of <i>institutional silence</i>
Inconsistent policy enforcement	Fear of unequal treatment	Declining trust in institutional governance

Source: Developed by the authors based on a synthesis of the literature and analyses of higher education cases in Indonesia (2026)

Table 1 demonstrates that student fear does not arise from a single factor but rather from the interaction of academic relationships, bureaucratic mechanisms, organizational culture, and institutional governance, all of which reinforce one another and contribute to the development of a culture of silence within higher education.

Consistent with these phenomena, previous studies on power relations in higher education have identified similar patterns. Research has shown that unequal relationships between lecturers and students constitute one of the primary factors discouraging students from reporting misconduct, particularly when the alleged perpetrators occupy higher academic positions.¹⁵ Other studies have demonstrated that weak institutional protection mechanisms and non-transparent reporting procedures reduce students' trust in university complaint systems.¹⁶ Consequently, many students prefer to resolve problems informally or remain silent rather than expose themselves to academic or social risks perceived to be more detrimental. These findings suggest that fear is produced through the interaction between institutional power structures and inadequate governance rather than being merely an individual psychological response.

Similar patterns can also be observed in cases where students criticize university policies. At several higher education institutions, criticism regarding tuition fee increases, financial transparency, or administrative policies has often been accompanied by students' concerns about possible academic or social repercussions. Although not every act of criticism results in

14 Tamar Hager, Adi Moreno, and Rivi Gillis, "Breaking the Brick Wall of Silence: Witnessing Sexual Misconduct in Academia," *Higher Education* 90, no. 4 (October 6, 2025): 941–56, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01359-y>.

15 Tiffany Page, "Sexual Misconduct in UK Higher Education and the Precarity of Institutional Knowledge," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 43, no. 4 (May 19, 2022): 566–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2022.2057924>.

16 Jianchao Lai et al., "They Don't See Us': Asian Students' Perceptions of Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment on Three California Public University Campuses," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 39, no. 15–16 (August 12, 2024): 3619–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605241235912>.

direct retaliation, the perception of unequal power relations encourages many students to limit their opinions in public forums. Research has also shown that hierarchical organizational cultures reinforce *self-censorship*, whereby individuals consciously withhold or modify their views to avoid conflict with institutional authorities.¹⁷ Under these circumstances, fear functions indirectly through the internalization of perceived risks, leading students to remain silent even when they recognize policies or practices they consider unfair.

Drawing upon the above cases and previous research findings, it can be understood that power relations in higher education rarely operate through overt repression. Instead, they function through subtle and institutionalized mechanisms embedded within everyday academic life. Students' dependence on academic systems, inadequate institutional protection, and hierarchical organizational cultures collectively create an environment in which confronting institutional authority is perceived as highly risky. Consequently, fear develops into a social mechanism that shapes students' ways of thinking, behaving, and making decisions throughout their academic experiences. These findings reinforce the argument that the central issue lies not merely in the existence of power relations themselves but in the ways institutional structures, organizational culture, and governance practices continually reproduce a culture of silence within higher education. The following section discusses how these mechanisms of fear gradually undermine students' critical thinking and participation in academic life.

The Impact of Fear on Students' Critical Thinking

Fear constructed through institutional power relations not only influences students' willingness to report misconduct but also directly affects their capacity for critical thinking.¹⁸ Higher education institutions, which should function as spaces for intellectual exchange, may gradually become environments that prioritize conformity over academic dialogue. Students who perceive themselves as occupying vulnerable positions tend to avoid intellectual debates, hesitate to question institutional policies, and choose to align their opinions with those of individuals holding greater authority. This phenomenon can be observed in various student movements and public expressions of concern, where academic and administrative consequences are often perceived as potential risks. As a result, students' willingness to express reasoned criticism gradually declines, and the educational process no longer fully encourages the development of independent, reflective, and critical thinking.

This condition becomes increasingly evident when students respond to institutional issues such as tuition fee increases, financial transparency, the quality of academic services, or other internal university policies. Although universities generally provide formal channels through student organizations and discussion forums, many students do not perceive these spaces as entirely safe for expressing views that differ from institutional decisions.¹⁹ Some deliberately limit their opinions because they fear being labeled as troublesome students or experiencing obstacles in their academic progress. Under such circumstances, fear operates through *self-censorship*, a process in which individuals consciously filter or suppress their own opinions before expressing them publicly as a strategy to avoid anticipated academic or social consequences. Consequently, opportunities for constructive dialogue and institutional improvement become increasingly limited.

17 Abdelmalek El Kadoussi, "The Perception of Self-Censorship among Moroccan Journalists," *The Journal of North African Studies* 27, no. 2 (March 4, 2022): 231–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2020.1771310>.

18 Michel Foucault, "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (an Excerpt)," in *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy* (Routledge, 2021), 23–26.

19 Fitriatin Nadhifah, Sukarno, and Nurul Widiyawati Islami Rahayu, "Michel Foucault's Critical Discourse Analysis of Controversy News in Islamic Boarding Schools," *JIE (Journal of Islamic Education)* 9, no. 1 (May 3, 2024): 384–99, <https://doi.org/10.52615/jie.v9i1.409>.

Consistent with these phenomena, previous studies have demonstrated that academic environments characterized by strong power asymmetries tend to generate lower levels of student participation in institutional decision-making and policy criticism.²⁰ Research has also shown that hierarchical organizational cultures reinforce *self-censorship*, encouraging students to conform to prevailing institutional norms rather than articulate alternative perspectives.²¹ Other studies indicate that limited trust in reporting mechanisms and institutional complaint procedures discourages students from participating in advocacy because the perceived risks are considered greater than the likelihood of obtaining justice.²² These findings suggest that fear extends beyond individual behavior and gradually reshapes broader patterns of student participation within higher education, ultimately weakening the democratic character of academic institutions.

These conditions eventually undermine one of the fundamental missions of higher education, namely fostering critically engaged members of the academic community. As students become increasingly accustomed to withholding opinions and avoiding criticism, academic culture gradually shifts from a space of intellectual dialogue to one of institutional conformity. Consequently, many institutional problems remain insufficiently evaluated because fewer students are willing to question existing policies or propose alternative solutions. Over time, this situation may reduce the quality of institutional decision-making, as universities receive fewer diverse perspectives from their academic communities. Table 2 summarizes the major consequences of fear on the development of students' critical thinking within higher education institutions.

Table 2. The Impact of Fear on Students' Critical Thinking

Impact	Manifestation	Implication
Self-censorship	Students suppress criticism and opinions	Declining quality of academic discussions
Reduced participation	Reluctance to engage in advocacy or express aspirations	Weakening social oversight of university policies
Declining critical thinking	Hesitation to question problematic institutional decisions	Erosion of democratic academic culture
Student depoliticization	Prioritizing academic security over collective interests	Declining concern for public and institutional issues
Weakening of the <i>check-and-balance</i> function	Limited criticism of institutional authority	Reduced accountability in university governance

Source: Developed by the authors based on a synthesis of the reviewed literature (2026)

Table 2 demonstrates that the consequences of fear extend beyond individual students and influence the overall quality of academic life. The stronger the mechanisms of fear operating within higher education institutions, the greater the decline in student participation, the weaker the culture of academic dialogue, and the more limited the university's role as a space for cultivating critical thinking.

20 Ashley D. Domínguez, Valencia Clement, and Melanie Bertrand, "The Bind of Unilateral Power Dynamics and Youth Voice in School Politics," *Educational Policy* 36, no. 1 (January 6, 2022): 169–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048211059196>.

21 Joanna Joseph Jeyaraj and Navé Wald, "Students' Reflections on Barriers to Promoting Higher Education's Social Purposes in the Classroom," *Teaching in Higher Education* 25, no. 8 (November 16, 2020): 976–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1625320>.

22 Amanda Bell et al., "Why Do Few Medical Students Report Their Experiences of Mistreatment to Administration?," *Medical Education* 55, no. 4 (April 2, 2021): 462–70, <https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.14395>.

Based on the cases discussed and previous research findings, it can be understood that fear is both a consequence of unequal power relations and a mechanism that continuously reproduces a culture of silence within higher education institutions. As students become increasingly accustomed to limiting criticism in order to protect their academic and social security, their critical thinking gradually erodes because opportunities to question, evaluate, and challenge institutional policies become increasingly restricted. Therefore, the central issue lies not merely in the existence of institutional power relations but also in the capacity of universities to establish governance systems that guarantee academic freedom, transparency, and adequate protection for students. Strengthening reporting mechanisms, ensuring protection for whistleblowers, and fostering an open culture of academic dialogue are essential steps toward restoring higher education as a space that genuinely promotes critical inquiry, democratic participation, and intellectual independence.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that students' fear of confronting institutional authority is not merely an individual psychological response but a socially constructed mechanism shaped by institutional power relations. Unequal relationships between students and lecturers, university administrators, and institutional bureaucracies create conditions that indirectly discourage students from expressing criticism, reporting misconduct, and participating in academic decision-making. These conditions are reinforced by limited governance transparency, weak trust in institutional reporting mechanisms, and hierarchical organizational cultures, allowing fear to develop into a culture of *institutional silence*. Consequently, students' critical thinking is gradually weakened, as reflected in the increasing prevalence of *self-censorship*, declining participation in advocacy, and the erosion of the university's role as a space for intellectual dialogue and an effective mechanism of academic *check and balance*.

This study contributes theoretically by extending the literature on power relations in higher education through the integration of perspectives on power relations, *institutional silence*, and *institutional betrayal* to explain how fear is produced and reproduced within academic environments. From a practical perspective, the findings provide recommendations for higher education institutions to strengthen independent reporting mechanisms, enhance governance transparency, and foster a more democratic and supportive academic culture for students. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its use of a library research approach, meaning that its findings are not yet supported by direct empirical evidence collected from students or university administrators. Future research is therefore recommended to employ empirical approaches, such as surveys, in-depth interviews, or focus group discussions, to further examine the mechanisms through which institutional power relations and fear operate across different higher education contexts and to develop more comprehensive strategies for strengthening academic freedom and promoting students' critical thinking.

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