



Sabotage, silence, and siloed teaching: A case study on the effects of professional jealousy in university departments. A qualitative case study design.

Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa

Mangosuthu University of Technology P.O. Box 12363 Jacobs 4026 Durban, South Africa

Page | 1

Abstract

Background

Professional jealousy in academic institutions is a subtle yet destructive force that can compromise collaboration, erode morale, and ultimately affect teaching and learning quality. In university departments, it may manifest as sabotage, exclusion, or the withholding of knowledge, resulting in siloed teaching practices and fragmented academic cultures. This study investigates how professional jealousy affects interpersonal dynamics, teamwork, and academic productivity within a South African university department.

Methods

A qualitative case study design was employed, focusing on one academic department in a South African university. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 academic staff members, purposively selected for their experience in teaching and departmental administration. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns of professional jealousy and their impact on collegial relationships, curriculum delivery, and institutional culture.

Results

Three dominant themes emerged: (1) Sabotage and Undermining, where colleagues deliberately withheld resources or information to limit others' success; (2) Silence and Exclusion, involving non-participation in team teaching or refusal to collaborate; and (3) Siloed Academic Practice, where lecturers operated independently, resisting integration or interdisciplinary collaboration. Participants reported feeling emotionally drained, professionally isolated, and demotivated. These dynamics often disrupted curriculum coherence and discouraged innovation in teaching.

Conclusion

Professional jealousy within university departments fosters a toxic work environment that weakens academic cooperation and negatively impacts student learning. When unchecked, it perpetuates isolation and impedes institutional transformation goals.

Recommendations

Universities should implement structured conflict resolution and team-building programs, encourage transparent promotion and recognition systems, and establish departmental codes of conduct. Leadership should actively monitor interpersonal dynamics and promote a culture of shared success and academic integrity to mitigate the effects of professional jealousy.

Keywords: Professional jealousy; academic sabotage; exclusion; siloed teaching; higher education; collegiality; academic culture; university departments; qualitative research; South Africa.

Submitted: July 17, 2025 **Accepted:** August 28, 2025 **Published:** September 30, 2025

Corresponding Author: Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa

Email: mbanjwa.sibonelo@mut.ac.za

Mangosuthu University of Technology P.O. Box 12363 Jacobs 4026 Durban, South Africa

Background Information

In universities, collaboration, open communication, and mutual support are expected norms that define healthy academic cultures. However, these ideals are often disrupted

by underlying interpersonal tensions, particularly professional jealousy. Although typically underreported and difficult to measure, professional jealousy is a growing concern in higher education institutions, especially where



resource competition, performance-based recognition, and hierarchical power dynamics prevail. This emotional and behavioural phenomenon can erode trust, discourage innovation, and damage the collegial environment required for effective teaching, research, and mentorship. The present study explores how professional jealousy manifests within academic departments, focusing specifically on a South African university where transformation, inclusivity, and knowledge sharing are core strategic goals. Professional jealousy refers to feelings of resentment or competitiveness that arise when individuals perceive their colleagues as more successful, recognized, or connected (Stein, 2013). In academia, these feelings can manifest in harmful behaviours such as sabotaging colleagues' work, excluding others from collaboration or decision-making, or engaging in siloed teaching, where staff members operate in isolation rather than as a team (West, 2016; Khan et al., 2020). Such behaviours, though often subtle, create a toxic work environment that affects morale, disrupts departmental harmony, and weakens the quality of education delivered to students (Blackmore, 2004).

In the South African context, the legacy of apartheid and the ongoing need for institutional transformation add layers of complexity to university dynamics. Letseka (2012) argues that structural inequalities within universities, including disparities in promotion, recognition, and access to research funding, can fuel competitive and hostile academic cultures. Similarly, Jansen (2017) asserts that without trust and genuine collegiality, institutional transformation efforts, including curriculum decolonization and inclusivity, remain superficial. Previous studies (Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981; Khan et al., 2020) have shown that jealousy can lead to psychological strain among staff, including emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and decreased job satisfaction. Despite this, little empirical research has investigated how professional jealousy functions within academic departments or how it affects teaching, mentorship, and curriculum delivery. This study fills that gap by using a qualitative case study design to examine staff experiences and perceptions within a university department in South Africa.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To explore how professional jealousy manifests among academic staff, including acts of sabotage, exclusion from collaborative activities, and intentional obstruction of colleagues' success.

2. To examine the interpersonal and professional consequences of professional jealousy, including its effect on collegial relationships, staff morale, and knowledge sharing.
3. To assess how jealousy-driven behaviours impact teaching practices, especially through siloed work, reduced team-teaching, and the breakdown of curriculum coherence.
4. To investigate the role of institutional culture and leadership in either reinforcing or mitigating jealousy-related behaviours within departments.
5. To propose practical recommendations for fostering collaboration, transparency, and professional respect in academic departments.

Research Question

How does professional jealousy affect academic staff relationships, collaboration, and teaching practices within a university department in South Africa?

Methodology

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the effects of professional jealousy within a single academic department at a South African university. The case study approach enabled an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences and the complex interpersonal dynamics at play in a real-world academic environment.

Study Setting

The research was conducted in the Faculty of Humanities at a mid-sized public university in South Africa. The selected department was identified based on reported instances of internal conflict and division among staff, making it suitable for investigating professional jealousy. Data collection took place between October 2023 and February 2024.

Participants

Participants included 15 full-time academic staff members, ranging from junior lecturers to senior professors, who had been employed in the department for a minimum of one year. Eligibility criteria included:

- Current employment as an academic in the department
- Willingness to participate in an interview



- Experience of, or exposure to, inter-staff tensions or collaborative dynamics

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals likely to provide rich and relevant insights into the research question. Recruitment was facilitated through email invitations and personal referrals, and participation was voluntary.

Bias

To minimize bias:

- Interviews were conducted in private and confidential settings to encourage honest disclosure.
- The researcher used a semi-structured interview guide to maintain consistency across interviews.
- Reflexive journaling was used throughout data collection and analysis to monitor the researcher's own influence and assumptions.
- Member-checking was conducted with selected participants to validate the interpretation of key themes.

Study Size

A total of **15 participants** were interviewed. This sample size was deemed sufficient for a qualitative study using thematic analysis, as it enabled the generation of rich, detailed data while allowing for the identification of recurring patterns across participants. The number aligns with methodological guidance in qualitative research, where smaller, purposively selected samples are appropriate for achieving **thematic saturation**, the point at which no new themes emerge from additional data.

Data Measurement/Sources

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. An interview guide covered topics such as interpersonal relationships, collaboration, conflict, and perceptions of professional jealousy.

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized.

Secondary data were also reviewed, including departmental reports, meeting minutes, and internal communications, to provide contextual understanding.

Statistical Analysis

As a qualitative study, data analysis did not involve formal statistical tests. Instead, thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the final report

NVivo software was used to manage and organize the coding process. Missing data (e.g., incomplete interviews) were addressed by excluding them from analysis; however, all 15 participants completed their interviews in full.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Mangosuthu University of Technology Research Ethics Committee on 11 February 2022. Participants were fully informed about the study's objectives and procedures. Written consent was obtained before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

Results

- **Screened for eligibility:** 20 academic staff members were approached.
- **Excluded (n=5):** Did not meet inclusion criteria (3), declined to participate (2).
- **Eligible and consented:** 15 participants.
- **Completed interviews:** 15 (100%).
- **Included in thematic analysis:** 15.

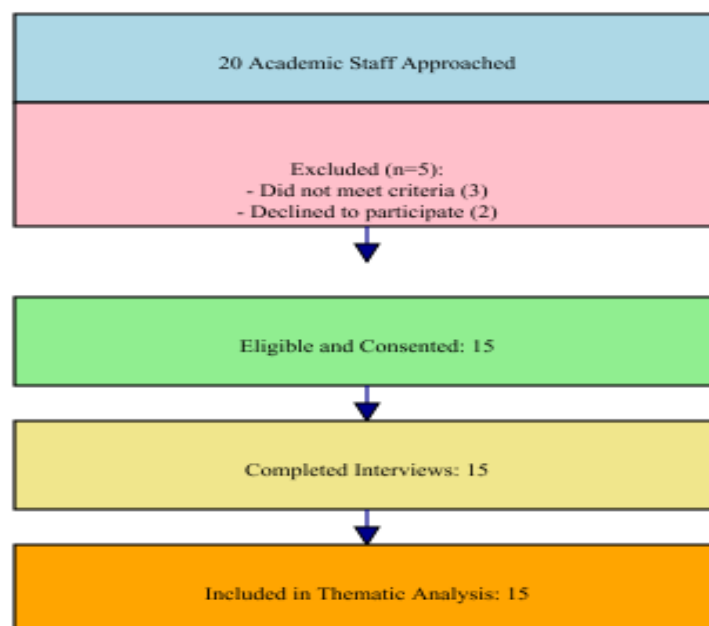


Figure 1: Participant Flow Diagram

Figure 2 results reveal that professional jealousy manifests in three dominant and interrelated ways within university departments. The most frequently reported issue was sabotage and undermining (13 mentions), where participants described colleagues intentionally withholding important resources, sharing misleading information, or creating administrative barriers to impede others' progress. This behaviour often stemmed from competitiveness and resentment over recognition, promotions, or leadership roles. The second major theme, silence and exclusion (11 mentions), highlighted how some staff members were

deliberately left out of collaborative projects, meetings, or departmental decisions, leading to professional isolation and diminished morale. Siloed academic practice (9 mentions) reflected a broader culture of individualism, where lecturers worked independently, avoided team teaching, and resisted curriculum integration. Together, these themes paint a picture of a fragmented academic environment where distrust and lack of collegiality undermine cooperation, innovation, and effective teaching. This toxic culture not only affects staff well-being but also disrupts student learning and departmental cohesion.

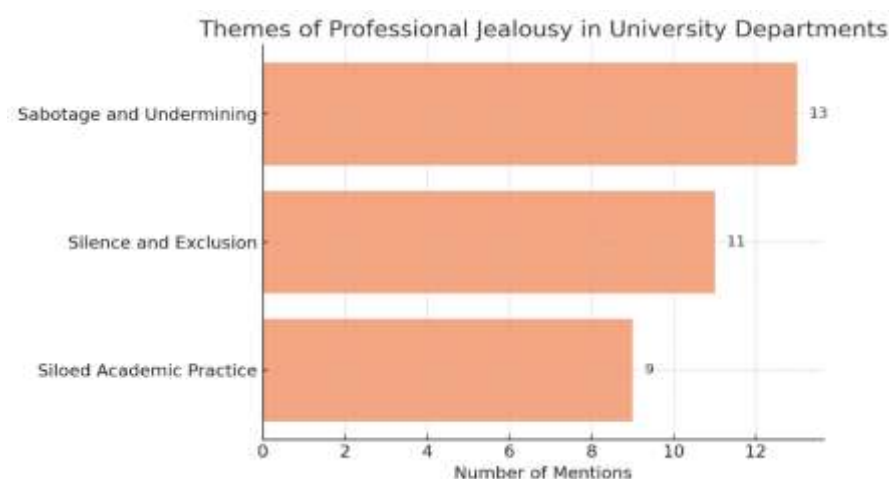


Figure 2: The graph visually presents the qualitative themes emerging from the study on professional jealousy in university departments.

Discussion

The findings of this qualitative case study reveal that professional jealousy in university departments has deep and detrimental impacts on collaboration, morale, and teaching quality. The three dominant themes, sabotage and undermining, silence and exclusion, and siloed academic practice, confirm that interpersonal rivalries and competitive behaviour among staff significantly hinder collegiality. Participants described acts of intentional obstruction, refusal to collaborate, and withholding of information as common tactics used to elevate oneself at the expense of others. This echoes Baldwin and Blackburn's (1981) early findings that intra-departmental jealousy often leads to destructive competition rather than cooperation in academic settings. Sabotage and undermining, the most frequently cited theme, aligns with Stein (2013), who argued that jealousy in professional settings often results in subtle acts of sabotage disguised as administrative oversight or academic critique. Similarly, Khan et al. (2020) found that academic staff in competitive environments are more prone to suppressing peer success through non-cooperation and gatekeeping. The theme of silence and exclusion resonates with West (2016), who described how professional jealousy manifests in passive-aggressive behaviours, such as ignoring colleagues' contributions, withholding mentorship, or excluding them from decision-making platforms. This form of emotional withdrawal isolates victims and leads to loss of departmental cohesion.

The theme of siloed academic practice reflects how departmental cultures shaped by professional jealousy can lead to compartmentalized teaching and disengagement from collaborative knowledge-sharing. This observation supports Blackmore's (2004) argument that neoliberal academic environments, where individual achievement is rewarded over collective contribution, promote competition and isolate academics from one another. Consequently, this fragmentation undermines interdisciplinary learning, curriculum integration, and institutional transformation, an issue particularly critical in South African universities seeking decolonized, collaborative academic cultures (Jansen, 2017).

Generalizability

Due to the case study design and small sample size, the findings are not broadly generalizable to all higher education institutions. However, the identified themes reflect common organizational behaviours observed in academic literature and may be transferable to similar university contexts where competitive work cultures exist.

Conclusion

This study highlights that professional jealousy, if unaddressed, breeds sabotage, exclusion, and academic isolation, all of which weaken departmental effectiveness and morale. These behaviours disrupt curriculum coherence, block opportunities for innovation, and negatively affect



staff and student experience. The persistence of such dynamics erodes trust and undermines the core values of academic collaboration and mentorship.

Limitations

This study was limited to one university department, which may not fully capture the complexity or prevalence of professional jealousy in other institutional contexts. Participant accounts may have been influenced by personal grievances or fear of reprisal, even with confidentiality assured. The absence of perspectives from university leadership or HR personnel may also limit the scope of interpretation.

Recommendations

To mitigate the effects of professional jealousy and foster healthier academic environments, institutions should implement targeted leadership training for Heads of Departments and senior staff to help them recognize and mediate jealousy-driven conflicts effectively. Establishing clear institutional codes of collegial conduct can guide professional behaviour and provide structured pathways for conflict resolution. Promoting team-building workshops and peer recognition platforms can further cultivate a culture of collaboration and mutual appreciation. Transparent promotion and reward systems are essential to reduce perceptions of favouritism and ensure fairness in recognition. Lastly, mentorship programs that pair junior and senior academics can foster trust, encourage knowledge-sharing, and create a supportive academic community.

Biography

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

Acknowledgements

The moral support and encouragement provided by the Deans and the Head of Department of Nature Conservation, Faculty of Natural Science, Mangosuthu University of Technology, are gratefully acknowledged.

Funding

This research did not receive any grant, financial assistance, or institutional support. No funds, grants, or other forms of support were obtained from companies or external organizations during the preparation of this manuscript.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that there are no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author Contributions

Study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis were undertaken by Mbanjwa S.T. The initial draft of the manuscript was prepared by Mbanjwa S.T.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. However, restrictions apply to the availability of these data, as they were obtained under license from various research publications and are therefore not publicly accessible.

References

1. Baldwin, R.G. and Blackburn, R.T., 1981. *The academic career as a developmental process: Implications for higher education*. The Journal of Higher Education, 52(6), pp.598–614. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.1981.11778133>
2. Blackmore, J., 2004. *Restructuring educational leadership in changing contexts: A narrative approach*. International Journal of Leadership in Education, 7(3), pp.285–299. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JEDU.0000041044.62626.99>
3. Jansen, J., 2017. *As by fire: The end of the South African university*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
4. Khan, S., Ahmad, R. and Khan, I., 2020. *Workplace jealousy and counterproductive behaviour among academics: Mediating role of*



Student's Journal of Health Research Africa

e-ISSN: 2709-9997, p-ISSN: 3006-1059

Vol.6 No. 9 (2025): September 2025 Issue

<https://doi.org/10.51168/sjhrafrica.v6i9.1952>

Original Article

- emotional exhaustion*. Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research, 35(2), pp.269–288.
5. Stein, J., 2013. *Professional envy in academia: A silent career killer*. Academic Leadership Journal, 21(1), pp.47–55.
6. West, C., 2016. *The silent treatment: Exclusion and its consequences in the workplace*. Organizational Dynamics, 45(1), pp.12–21

PUBLISHER DETAILS:

Student's Journal of Health Research (SJHR)

(ISSN 2709-9997) Online

(ISSN 3006-1059) Print

Category: Non-Governmental & Non-profit Organization

Email: studentsjournal2020@gmail.com

WhatsApp: +256 775 434 261

Location: Scholar's Summit Nakigalala, P. O. Box 701432,
Entebbe Uganda, East Africa

