

Navigating tricky terrain: Early career academics charting a research trajectory in the neo-liberal university [Pre-print copy]

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Introduction

The neo-liberal university continues to be a subject of critique (Ball, 2012; Bottrell & Manathunga, 2019a; Cupples & Pawson, 2012; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Shore & Davidson, 2014; Smeltzer & Hearn, 2015). It has been variously described as toxic (Smyth, 2017), feudal (Bergami, 2019), dystopic (Roberts, 2013) and schizophrenic (Shore, 2007; 2010). In finding ways to express feelings of anxiety and frustration with how their roles have changed under a neoliberal regime (Roberts, 2013), academics have turned to more creative forms of expression to enable these emotions to be recognised (see, for example, Grant, 2019). Firstly, such expression is a cry to be heard, where the emotions are raw, powerful and cathartic (see, for example, Andrew, 2019). Secondly, it is a self-protective move as the academic comes to understand the mechanisms of the neo-liberal university for what they are and how they have reshaped academic identity (see, for example, Vicars, 2019). Thirdly, it provides an opportunity for an overt challenge to the system – now that the mechanisms have been recognised, they can potentially be dismantled (Cupples & Pawson, 2012). While experienced academics are finding spaces to air their concerns and plan their strategies to subvert the system they find so oppressive, early career academics are often left in limbo. They have come into academia with high expectations and yet find the reality of the neo-liberal university a hard and bewildering place. As Bottrell and Manathunga (2019b) state, “Early career academics tend to be more vulnerable to exploitation and may find they need to be ‘super-heroes’ to meet institutional expectations” (p.8). This chapter gives voice to two early career academics who were part of an emerging scholars’ discussion group. Their wish to join the wider academic conversation on constructing an academic identity within the neo-liberal university was the genesis of this chapter. Autoethnography gave them the means by which to begin their narrative journey.

This chapter begins by synthesising some of the literature on the neo-liberal university before outlining a theoretical framework, drawn from that literature, that will later be used to examine the early career academics' joint narrative. The section that follows the literature review outlines the autoethnographic methodology undertaken and the way in which the co-constructed narrative emerged. The findings section of the chapter shares the early career academics' joint narrative, written in first person and arranged in three themes: (1) Bifurcations and hierarchies; (2) Identities: Harmonies and clashes; and, Game of thrones: Tyrants, gate keepers, and legends. The chapter concludes with a discussion that draws on Shore and Davidson's (2014) three theoretical concepts – conscious complicity, unwitting complicity, and coercive complicity to place the early career academics' story of navigating the neo-liberal university into an explanatory theoretical framework.

Literature review

Neoliberalism is a contested, fluid and contradictory term that “reinvents itself in startlingly new and innovative ways” (Cupples and Pawson, 2012, p.20). For the purposes of this chapter, neoliberalism is seen as a trend in higher education policy and decision making towards individualism, competitiveness, commodification and managerialism. Neoliberal ideology reinscribes the university as a corporate enterprise where individual customers (students) make choices of products (course, qualifications or credentials) in order to secure their own and the country's economic security. Because the state provides less financial support to the business of higher education, the products need to be of high quality to compete in a free market environment. This requires efficient and cost-effective production through the commodification of academic labour. Universities develop a brand and market their niche products, in order to attract fee-paying international students. Leadership styles became hierarchical and corporate. Vice Chancellors became CEOs. A divide occurs between managers and academics; unions are weakened and labour is casualised. Research turns its focus to innovation, entrepreneurialism and commercialisation through patents and consultancies. Higher education moves from a public good to a private investment (Authors, 2017; Andrew, 2019; Ball, 2012; Bergami, 2019; Bottrell & Manathunga, 2019a, b; Cupples

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& Pawson, 2012; Mountz et al., 2015; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Shore & Davidson, 2014; Smeltzer and Hearn, 2015). Shore and Davidson (2014, p.13) note:

From institutions that were geared to higher learning, the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, public good research and nation building, public universities have been refashioned increasingly to resemble transnational business corporations operating in a global knowledge economy.

The competitive, low-trust neo-liberal corporate culture encourages an audit mentality “with its perpetual measurement and evaluation of teaching ‘outputs’ and research ‘inputs’, and the displacement of academic values and faculty members’ scholarly judgement” (Smeltzer and Hearn, 2015, p.354) and an increased focus on measurement through “strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures and academic audits” (Olssen and Peters, 2005, p.313). Time is compressed, which, when combined with the audit culture, “is designed to elicit compliance without resistance” (Mountz et al., (2015) p.1242). Smeltzer and Hearn’s description (2015, p.354) resonates with the experience at our university:

Demands to produce research with monetizable results, the unceasing mantra of innovation, the preoccupation with techno-science, the administrative use of information and communication technologies for the integration of faculty into client-self-service systems, the casualization and increasing tiering of academic labour, the erosion of faculty self-governance, the growth of branch campuses overseas and the overt courting of lucrative international students and their lucrative international fees are other symptoms of the neoliberal university

In the literature, authors use a range of theoretical frameworks to explain how neo-liberalism operates within higher education. Foucault’s concepts of governmentality, surveillance, power and subjection are often called upon. Olssen and Peters (2005), for example, discuss the difference between *liberal* governmentality which encourages the autonomous professional and *neo-liberal* governmentality which favours line management chains and hierarchical structures designed to do the very opposite. Ball (2012) uses Lyotard’s notion of

performativity to highlight, “a powerful and insidious policy technology that is now at work at all levels and in all kinds of education and public service” (p.19). Olssen and Peters (2005) also use Lyotard’s notion of performativity. They claim that the traditional academic culture of open intellectual debate has been replaced with “an institutional stress on performativity, as evidenced by the emergence of on measured outputs: on strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures and academic audits” (p.313).

We, however, were taken by Shore and Davidson’s (2014) claim that, “Many academics express concern that despite their intellectual critiques of neoliberalism, when neoliberal practices reach their own workplace, they can find themselves as *accomplices* [our emphasis] in various ways.” Shore and Davidson discuss this idea using three descriptors – *conscious complicity*, which pertains especially to those who willingly buy in to the subjugation and subjectification of their colleagues; *unwitting complicity* which describes those who fail to see “the structural violence and webs of domination in which they are suspended” (p.14); and *coercive complicity*, which is where the system puts their employment or advancement at risk if they show any act of defiance or resistance. We will return to these descriptors in the discussion section.

Methodology

This chapter is deliberately subjective. The purpose is to share the experiences of two early career academics in a co-constructed narrative. The narrative was forged through personal journaling and recorded conversations, interspersed with outpourings of frustration and bursts of laughter. The data gathering process was iterative and emergent drawing on two main qualitative approaches – autoethnography and narrative inquiry.

Autoethnography is more than autobiography. The term itself gives an indication of its purpose – auto (self) + ethno (culture) + graphy (writing) – writing one’s own story in order to illuminate social, political or cultural issues (Denshire, 2014; Ellington & Ellis, 2008). It is

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described as both a process (the crafting) and a product (the narrative) (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). It borrows from literary traditions of storytelling with setting, plot, characters, action and dénouement but illuminates the problem being explored within the wider context in which the problem exists (Denshire, 2014; Ellis, 1999; 2004; Ellington & Ellis, 2008). Autoethnography is deliberately self-conscious but not self-indulgent. Autoethnography approaches research as a construction arising out of a researcher's personal history and current position. It has its own internal discipline – part of which is to challenge the objective, positivist stance that is privileged in much research and draws instead on post-modern, interpretivist and/or social constructionist theories (Wall, 2006). It does not purport to be a truth, as Ellis (1999, p. 673) states, “The truth is that we can never capture experience... [it is] one selective story about what happened from a particular point in time for a particular purpose.” Autoethnography seeks “verisimilitude” rather than truth: “it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable and possible” (Ellis, 1999, p.674). Anderson describes this as “narrative fidelity” (2006, p. 386) in which the writer aims to give insight into a broader understanding of a social phenomenon that is greater than the narrative itself. It enables the researcher to be more reflexive about who they are, why they are recording their experience and for what purpose (Wall, 2006). By challenging conventions, engaging the reader and holding society up to scrutiny, autoethnography provides an evocative entrée into an authentic lived experience (Author, 2013; Andrew, 2019; Denshire, 2014; Ellis, 1999; 2004; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011; Ellington & Ellis, 2008; Wall, 2006).

Narrative inquiry is a related field. Narrative researchers use stories, narratives and descriptions as their object of study as well as their data gathering, sense making and sharing techniques (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Both autoethnography and narrative inquiry use a range of narrative techniques. Ellis (1999), for example, lists internal monologue, dialogue, dramatic recall, imagery and flashback. Denshire (2014) includes testimony, diary excerpts, reflective writing and poetry. The initial strategy employed by the two early career scholars in this chapter was to journal their own experiences. This way they could record their thoughts and feelings freely, delving into the past and adding more recent commentary. Ellis (1999) supports this approach:

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Memory doesn't work in a linear way, nor does life either, for that matter. Instead, thoughts and feelings circle around us, flash back, then forward; the topical is interwoven with the chronological; thoughts and feelings merge, drop from our grasp, the reappear in another context. In real life we don't know when we know something. Events in the past are always interpreted from our current position. (p. 675)

From their original journal entries, the early career researchers were able to construct, reconstruct and deconstruct vignettes that they were willing to share with each other through a series of focused conversations. In these conversations, they were struck by the similarities of their experiences and yet the different opportunities that these experiences afforded each of them. In autoethnographic terms, their individual vignettes would have been sufficient to fully engage the reader in the lived reality of an early career researcher. This approach is known as “evocative autoethnography” (Anderson, 2006; Ellington & Ellis, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Anderson (2006), however, makes an argument for more use of “analytic autoethnography”. He discusses the factors that make autoethnography *analytic*, including the researcher's membership of the group being researched, analytic reflexivity, narrative visibility, dialogue beyond oneself and commitment to theoretical analysis.

The process that began with the early career academics sharing their vignettes took an analytic turn and the result fits neatly with Anderson's (2006) criteria for analytic autoethnography. The autoethnography writers are members of the group they are researching (early career academics); they engaged in reflexivity through each stage of the process – both individually and collaboratively; their product (the findings section of this chapter) is visibly in narrative form; they engaged in dialogue with each other (and their co-author); and they committed to theoretical analysis.

In their analysis, the early career academics conducted a thematic analysis (Author, 2013) of their vignettes and the resulting conversations before reconstructing collaborative narratives under the following themes: *Bifurcations and hierarchies*; *Identities: harmonies and clashes*;

and, finally, *Game of thrones: Tyrants, gate keepers, and legends*. Later, they returned to the theoretical framework discussed by Shore and Davidson (2014) to attend to the last of Anderson's criteria and undertake "theoretical development, refinement and extension" (2006, p. 387). The findings section that follows is told in their joint narrative voice.

Findings

Theme 1: Bifurcations and Hierarchies

There are so many systemic, structural barriers within academia that force difficult choices in time sensitive situations. The systems of recognition, participation and what "counts" are age-old within a monolithically slow moving pace of the university. These systems directly contribute to the bifurcation of research and teaching. Being an academic in our university requires staff to spend 40% of their time on research, 40% on teaching, and 20% on service and leadership. Being judged as an academic in my university, therefore, is done holistically on the assumption that a person can excel in all three areas and is able to switch between teaching tasks, research activities, and leadership roles in any given semester, month, week, or day.

The implicit privilege of research over teaching however is firmly entrenched. It is often staff who are described as excellent researchers who are supported to travel abroad, work with colleagues overseas, share their research insights and establish further research collaborations to advance their academic trajectories. At our institution, as with most others globally, there is an entire office dedicated to supporting academics to secure research grants. The administrative support includes assisting with budgets, grant writing and seeking external funders, amongst others. I experienced the above first hand in numerous occasions, the unspoken privileges of research. The more I excelled in my research, the more funding I attracted which, in turn, gave me access to assistants to support my research, invitations to join other research teams to contribute with my data analytical expertise, invitations to review manuscripts in top journals in my field, requests to join advisory groups, invited

presentations and workshops in other faculties, as well as funding opportunities to buy me out of my teaching (which I equally enjoyed) and focus more on my research.

In contrast, teaching simply does not hold the same value or status in the academy. It is rarely excellent tertiary teachers who receive similar opportunities and support from the same institution to travel abroad, work with tertiary teaching colleagues overseas, share their practice and establish further communities of tertiary practice. Instead, staff who spend a substantial amount of time perfecting their teaching, supporting their students, and enhancing the teaching and learning environment, are often assumed to not be good researchers by virtue of the time, passion, and resources that they pour into their teaching. There is also no comparable institutional support for teaching. While many institutions do have teaching and learning centres, their support largely comes from limited spaces in ad-hoc workshops on a variety of topics. In contrast with research support, teaching and learning centres do not employ professional staff to help academics with daily teaching activities like developing courses and lecture preparation, course administration and set up, nor do they assist with applying for teaching grants or offer support for writing applications to support teaching buy out, if that option exists at all. Teaching awards similarly do not bring the same status or career propelling outcomes of a major grant. While we may be seeing further attention placed on teaching in academia (see the U21 Teaching Standards Framework, and UK based Teaching Excellence Framework), strong teaching evaluations do not build a career narrative in the same way research grants do. It's an internal problem perpetuated by universities (coercive complicity). There are clear indications and explicit messages from middle and senior leadership teams that academics are judged holistically, yet it is hard not to believe otherwise. I have had numerous conversations with staff who told me that being good at teaching will not take me far in academia, and that research brings in profit, prestige, and increased rankings, which in turn brings in more students. Despite my excellent record in teaching, I am rarely offered a teaching assistant to support the long hours of marking, dealing with student queries, and tracking their progress both online and in person. I am rarely invited to co-teach in other teams, almost never invited to talk about my tertiary practice locally or internationally, and never receive funding opportunities to improve my teaching practice. In fact, there is no professional development time factored in

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my workload to improve my teaching capabilities, as these opportunities are seen as add-ons; yet another thing to do on top of an already busy 40-hour week.

Institutions have also helped to create strong research-teaching hierarchies. These hierarchies operate in official and informal capacities. The most visible hierarchy related to the bifurcation of research and teaching are academic titles. Academic titles vary globally. Our institution follows UK conventions with traditional academics moving from Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor and Full Professor. All academics holding one of these titles has research, teaching and service components to their positions. Meanwhile, a current global trend of research only and teaching only academic pathways extend the bifurcation of research and teaching. At our institution, Research Assistant and Research Fellow positions are purely research based. Teaching Fellows are teaching only positions with these academics holding very high teaching workloads and often work exclusively in the university's professional programs. While it can be argued that these two different pathways recognise particular expertise, they offer little potential to address the aforementioned bifurcation of research and teaching. At the same time they also contribute to hierarchical conversations about the value of research and teaching. Emerging scholars entering academia must also be aware of the challenges of changing pathways. Unless actively (and successfully) pursuing opportunities in the other track, jumping back into a traditional research, teaching and service position or the opposite track is often difficult.

Theme 2: Identities: Harmonies and clashes

Being a new and emerging academic staff has always attracted certain colleagues, typically senior in terms of career progression and generation, to talk to me about my future plans, what I need to focus on as well as who I should be. Being identified as a 'newbie', 'post-doc', or simply 'young' had always contained negative connotations and indirect judgements on my professional capabilities and academic skills. Despite receiving excellent teaching evaluations, and producing a range of research outputs every year, it is messages such as the ones below that are often prevalent in my communication with senior academics:

“Don’t worry about your teaching, it’s the research that matters”

“It’s okay, one day you won’t be as optimistic”

“You’re young, you will learn how to play the game properly soon”

“Focus on research, teach when you have to, and to engage in one service element as a new academic staff member”

There is no comparable emphasis on teaching. The following quote exemplifies the pressure to develop a research-based identity, he advised me to:

“Just get through teaching without terrible [teaching] evaluations, and you will be fine. Focus on getting grants instead.”

Service is even less valued and thus often omitted from the list as there is no ‘value’ in it. I am often left in an internal clash between how I want to carve an academic career path for me, and how influential senior academics see that path carved for me. In a way, I did not have a real academic identity till I resolved this clash as I forcefully transitioned out of a ‘junior academic’ state that saw me as fragile, prone to judgements, individual. Interestingly, professors tend to give advice to new staff more so than their own fellow professors.

Working in a largely professional Faculty further amplifies the tensions between different academic identities. The chasm between those who identify as researchers are often the ones who come from academic and professional backgrounds outside of the traditional education or professional fields. I have found that this group is the most likely to advise to steer away from being pigeon holed as a teacher in favour of being more favourably seen as researchers who “bring in the money.” Meanwhile, the other tension comes from those proud of their professional identity as a teacher or social worker. Those operating within teacher preparation circles often hold comparable aversion for the researchers and colleagues who do not contribute to professional fields. I have regularly been directly advised to forget that I am a teacher, and even refrain from identifying as a teacher in my lectures.

Several questions arise from the tension between various contrasting identities. First, what opportunities for change exist within academia to value different types of knowledge and expertise? I have personally experienced the difference between researchers who conduct research in schools and educational settings more broadly who lack the knowledge and understanding of the complexity of schools, teaching and learning. This has led to numerous blunders amongst colliding worlds with competing interests. More specifically, those who research **on** schools, educators and learners versus those who research **with** and **for** the same three groups. As one school Principal explained, he accepted my research invitation over the 10+ he receives each week because I am a teacher who knows about how schools work, I have connections to the Deputy Principal and teachers, and I made the time to personally meet his full staff at a morning staff meeting to explain my research and answer any questions about the project. Further, I offered to come back and present my findings to his senior leadership team and full staff upon request. In contrast, in this Principal's experience, the majority of researchers "take" from schools, teachers and learners. Take meaning taking up time, space, energy and disruption. He went on to describe how most researchers come and go without any feedback to those that make the research possible: the participants—or the schools, teachers and learners. The second question I ask is, does the divide need to exist? While acknowledging institutional pressures, is it possible to merge these identities into a broad understanding of academics as educators? This tension between the self-perceived and perpetuated academic versus professional identity is unlikely to abate any time soon due to conflicting institutional messages about this divide. On one hand, our Faculty promotes itself as teaching and learning focussed in its vision statement. However, the Faculty has also developed and supports a system of 'comfortable' silos where some staff have little, if any, engagement with undergraduate students and those preparing for a specific profession. Instead teaching has been conceptualised by some as working exclusively with postgraduate students and teaching on inter-Faculty programs outside of our two main professional programmes on different campuses. A second contradiction is the promotion of the University's identity as a leading "research intensive" institution. The strategic plan, vision and other similar strategy documentation makes explicit the orientation and emphasis on research. The outcome of contrasting messaging about the Faculty and University priorities underscores the division between teaching and research.

I quickly learned that you need to decide very early on what kind of academic you wish to be. It's a hard question because you really don't have much experience to go on except for what you've observed. The classic trope of the career building, career hungry academic who climbs to the rank of Professor as quickly as possible does exist. There are always a few of these touting their own praises in every department. However, the career driven academic is partly the outcome of the intense pressures of being an academic that we all feel. The "publish or perish" mantra is real. So is the increasing need for "evidence" of all aspects of our work that is inseparable from processes like continuation, promotion and tenure. The "Professor fast track," as I fondly refer to it, is certainly promoted within particular academic circles but...at what cost?

On the other hand, I have also attracted a number of academic staff who identified with my journey, early career achievements, and aspirations. Indeed, I enjoyed their positivity, support, and intellectual conversations on the state of academia. It is people like them who I prefer to identify with, and it is their insights that made me reflect on who I want to be as an academic in five or even ten years' time:

"Don't worry, we've all been there, just stand your ground"

"It's okay, you should hear what they've done to me when I started"

"Just avoid the backstabbers, all they care about is their careers"

I gained solace listening to their stories, which made me feel like I was not alone in how I experienced my first three years in academia. And yet, I became even more frustrated at the recurring theme: a never-ending vicious cycle of the powerful senior academic 'handing over' an identity, a mentality, a pre-determined path to follow; a recipe for producing another ruthless academic.

Theme 3: Game of thrones: Tyrants, gate keepers, and legends

Institutional power, status and privilege flourish in academia built on the bifurcation of research and teaching, academic rank hierarchies, and institutional systems that support different academic identities. Add in the neoliberal pressures of competition, choice, and privatisation that are present within many public and private institutions, and some academics become tyrants and gate keepers. This can lead to the hoarding and denial of opportunities. In everyday academic life this can mean shoulder-tapping instead of widely disseminating positions, inviting certain individuals to meetings while leaving others uninformed leading to the absence of multiple voices on committees; however, there is no better example than selection committees. I have often thought of myself and other new and emerging staff as people with great potential, fresh perspectives, creative ideas, and different ways of problem solving. And so, I assumed that by virtue of being fresh out of college, that I would be given the opportunity to serve on university committees, and use my experience of studying in the same college to make a difference from within to other students' (and potentially upcoming academics') professional trajectories. Engaging in leadership opportunities have often given me a sense of pride, challenge, and purpose – all of which are crucial for my sense of self-worth and personal satisfaction. Yet, I was often shocked to find that, despite being confident in my capabilities, that opportunities to lead, impact policy and change are often predicated on seniority not merit. I needed a few more promotions, a few more publications, and a few more grey hairs, before my expression of interest would be considered for a challenge that I am well-qualified, well-suited, and well-commended, to tackle. All of a sudden, achievements that are irrelevant to opportunities I want to rise to, are now paramount to my survival as an academic. I began worrying that by the time I am given an opportunity to make a difference to any strategic initiatives in my institution, my ideas and arguments might no longer be current, useful, or important to consider. But then, this is how it always has been. It often appears as though academic staff are more concerned with upholding a status quo which has always served them well, more so than one that opens up opportunities and pathways for new practices, initiatives, and new colleagues like us.

Let us be clear- the myth of meritocracy extends to academia. Opportunities and career progressions can be made or broken by individual tyrants and gate keepers. Academic snobbery is often central to such decisions. Here we come back to the issue of what is valued

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in academia. Even as an emerging scholar I have sat on selection committees for grants and observed rules become guidelines, exceptions made and academic snobbery at its finest become apparent in personal agendas and vendettas take centre stage. “This person is a very low level academic” is an example of a comment made about a colleague that still rings in my ears. Weaving in another previous thread is how gate keeping is often tied to academic rank. Academia is interesting in that many selection processes are governed and facilitated by our colleagues. Senior academics are often over-represented on promotion and selection committees as are those who identify as researchers. This can lead to limited understanding of “generational” understanding of the changing climate of academia for emerging scholars. For example, a well-intentioned yet out of touch senior colleague advised me to “finish your PhD and then publish a paper or two.” In contrast, most institutions require 3-5 peer reviewed publications to even apply for an entry level position. In the same vein the absence of multiple academic identities including professionally oriented academics may lead to blind spots on promotion committees. After speaking with a mentor I became aware of how some “top” researchers may have limited knowledge of other fields. Commentary from a peer review of a promotion application offers the perfect example of how academic snobbery and the limitation of certain expertise can have long-term career advancement implications. The comment, “well this person has no A star publications or national grants. Clearly this application cannot go forward” ignored how the applicant’s emerging (and innovative) field is so new there are no A star publications to publish in. Similarly, the applicant’s work is interdisciplinary creating some challenges of ‘fitting’ into traditional academic disciplines and grants.

But what of the legends? Thankfully there are some true legends who use their power, status and privilege to create space for others. These academic heroes support colleagues formally, and personally. They are the ones sitting on the committees who point out the systemic advantages and disadvantages to minority scholars. They create opportunities for their postgraduate students to work on their projects, and insist on mentoring emerging scholars in their research and teaching teams. At conferences they attend colleagues’ presentations and if the presenter is attacked or asked a question that they need more time to think through, they offer an insightful comment. Perhaps, a tertiary environment in which new staff could

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flourish may benefit from leaders and professors with a pathway-enabling, people-focused, approach that opens up the door for colleagues with potential to grow academically, as opposed to those with a gate keeping, system-oriented, approach that rewards eliteness over potential, proficiency over growth, and profit over people. If someone had told me this about academia before joining, I would have probably chosen another career pathway. Legends bring us back to a previous question of academic identity... what kind of academic do you want to be?

Anomalies: Two academics, similar paths, same qualifications, different opportunities?

In the process of identifying common themes and experiences, one strong anomaly became apparent: How is it that two friends and colleagues, who started their academic careers within three years of each other, with identical qualifications and similar teaching and research records, end up receiving different opportunities to advance their careers?

Author 1

One on hand, I noticed that I am offered more opportunities to collaborate with others on my teaching (both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels) and research because I'm both the "smart and a nice guy." I have often felt proud that people thought of me that way, until I realised that other colleagues' initial judgments and expectations of me were not based on my merits and expertise, but instead my doctoral supervisor's merits and expertise, as well as their existing relationships with other colleagues. I have come to realise that the more enemies my doctoral supervisors had (e.g., those who disagreed with their work, had poor working relationships, or simply did not get along with my supervisor), the more enemies I picked up even before meeting any of those so-called enemies. In contrast, those who cherished my supervisors, admired their work, or simply had invested interest, had welcomed me with open arms even before knowing about my skills or knowledge.

I realised that all of the staff who had been condescending, telling me that I would not make it in academia because I am too young or I am not ready yet, have had some issues or turbulence with my supervisors. Conversely, those who no longer saw me as a doctoral student, invited me to work with them, or asked for my expertise on research or teaching

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matters, are staff who approached my supervisor and valued them in the same areas above. In a way, being supervised by a prolific, well-established professors and supervisors had its blessings and curses. I am now blessed to be thought of highly by some, but cursed by others as that one person who was 'lucky' to get an academic post because of who he knew, as opposed to what he knew, as one senior tutor attacked me once with these words.

I cannot emphasise enough how political the relationships between one's mentor, supervisor or advisor and their colleagues can be, including the impact of such relationships on the doctoral student or junior academic being supervised or advised by that staff member. At times, I do wonder whether I am lucky enough to have been surrounded by my previous supervisor's research groups and colleagues who have nurtured me into becoming the academic I am today. At other times, I equally wonder what would have happened to my career if I was supervised by excellent supervisors who were either selfish, disconnected from any professional network, or had many disagreements with colleagues at the same institution.

Author 2

My friend and colleague's story is similar to mine. I too, experienced the double edged sword of being employed in my first academic position at the same institution where I completed my PhD. One of my former supervisors was in a senior leadership position when I was hired which has drawn many disdainful looks and snide comments from colleagues who felt I got my job out of nepotism. The reality couldn't be farther than the truth. The position was internationally advertised and I successfully won the position against several well-qualified candidates based on the decision of eight selection committee members. Luckily, I am fortunate to have other colleagues who choose to see my skills and abilities as assets and are champions of my employment and work.

Invitations to teach on postgraduate courses and be involved in other research project are where our stories diverge. Unlike my colleague, in six years, I have yet to be given the opportunity to teach postgraduate research courses. Politics again. I have been told I already "get too many opportunities," that I "have to wait my turn," or that "I'm unqualified" despite having a PhD and all the required skills to teach a postgraduate research course.

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Again, the legends stepped up and created opportunities to teach on complex undergraduate programmes that have advanced my career and university profile. I'm still hopeful that I will teach on a postgraduate research course in the near future. Academic identity returns here as a second contributing factor. As a registered teacher with full time teaching experience in three global contexts I primarily teach on our professional undergraduate and diploma programmes. I have also not been invited onto colleagues' research projects. Different expertise and areas of interest are relevant reasons yet tyrants and gate keepers could have opened the door. It would be remiss to omit how marginalised academic groups within the academy (i.e. ethnic and cultural groups, women and others) are often further marginalised through inequitable access to professional development opportunities and formal recognition systems like teaching evaluations (Matthews, 2016), and are often given extra service and "invisible" work (Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Group, 2016). Mentoring support of legends and hard work have progressively led from smaller to more significant solo grants and research I strongly value.

Authors 1 & 2

Upon enrolment in any doctoral programme, we were told to choose a supervisor whose research area and expertise aligns with ours. No one told us that we also needed to look for someone who is respected, liked, and well-connected in the research community. For one of us, had we known what we know now back then, the same supervisors would have been chosen, but one of us would have opted to work somewhere where the supervisor isn't well-known. For the other, the importance of greater awareness of how academic politics work well beyond the PhD would have led to more strategic teaching and research choices from day one.

Discussion

The manner in which the two early career academics recall their experiences in the neo-liberal university resonates with the words of Darder (2019) as they found themselves,

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“ensconced in the dehumanizing ethos of free market supremacy, social surveillance, and community shattering individualism...”(p.5).

While there might be many theoretical frameworks through which the early career academics’ narratives could be interpreted, we have chosen Shore and Davidson’s (2014) notions of complicity. Shore and Davidson explain that neo-liberal assumptions and ways of operating have become so entrenched in the higher education system that the idea of “collusion loses its intentional, scheming character and becomes a more passive yet willing acceptance of immoral action” (p.17). Viewed this way, neo-liberalism is taken for granted, unquestioned and unchallenged. Yet, academics can, and many do, benefit from the new affordances. To understand how they might achieve this, Shore and Davidson instead use the term *complicity* and see this concept as playing out in nuanced ways – *conscious complicity* – those who willingly buy in to the subjugation and subjectification of their colleagues; *unwitting complicity* – those who fail to see the dehumanizing ethos Darder describes; and *coercive complicity* – where academics dare not risk any act of defiance or resistance.

The strongest of the complicities that the early career academics experienced was that of *conscious complicity*. The stories they tell of their senior colleagues (except for those they title “legends”) were of conscious buying into the system for their own ends. The joint narrative talked of “career hungry academics” who used their titles to further their own status and recognition, using tactics such as “academic snobbery” and “hoarding and denial of opportunities.” Such academics claim their right to choose the courses they will teach, selectively invite others onto research projects or committees, and overtly deride those who do not meet their narrow criteria for appointment or promotion. Shore and Davidson (2007, pp.17-18) describe this conscious complicity as:

... forms of collusion where individuals are aware of the consequences of neoliberal policies but nevertheless support them. This may be for reasons of apathy or cynicism, but often involves ideological motivations, through which actors might be convinced of the ethics of their position.

These senior academics act as gatekeepers who let in (or keep out) those they deem worthy (or unworthy) of the privileges that they have already amassed. Shore and Davidson continue: “This class might include the many academics who, attracted by the higher salaries and status

(or pushed by the incessant pressures to be ‘research active’), have joined the ranks of the expanding academic administration.” They become the academic or administrative *elite* who broker new ways of operating and, through their roles in the academic or administrative hierarchies, oversee the ensuing policies and procedures that advantage them and disadvantage those who do not know how “to play the game”. There are also academics within the system who do not see the managerialist system for what it is but who willingly support the drive for clear delineation, efficiencies and accountabilities because it plays into their hands.

One of the outcomes of these new hierarchies is “what counts”. The faculty in which the early career academics’ work describes itself as “teaching and learning focussed”, yet research is more highly regarded, and rewarded, than teaching or service. Shore and Davidson explain that this separation (or “bifurcation”) between research and teaching leads to “the shrinking scope of academic autonomy and de-professionalisation of academics” (p.23). Because building a research portfolio takes time, established academics stand to benefit and early career academics, such as the two in this chapter, are forced into roles that limit their opportunities. Academics with research track records get the full weight of the university machinery behind them in the form of dedicated support staff, recognition and rewards. Those burdened with heavy teaching portfolios are not supported in the same manner. Casualisation of academic staff and new career tracks, such as professional teaching fellows or research fellows, further inhibit early career academics from gaining a foothold or from speedy career advancement.

The second type of complicity that Shore and Davidson raise is *unwitting complicity*. The two early career academics provided multiple examples of the career advice that they had been given by well-meaning senior academics: “Don’t worry about your teaching, it’s the research that matters”; “Focus on getting grants instead.” Did these senior academics not seem to realise that their advice would only perpetuate an inequitable system? Shore and Davidson state, “Unwitting complicity occurs when the strength of neoliberal norms means that individuals’ actions become aligned with the intentions of management” (p.18). Even though they were all employed in a faculty whose main focus was preparing teachers and

social workers, one of the early career academics was told not to mention their earlier career as a teacher. Such comments deny academics from professional fields the opportunity to be recognised as having knowledge and skill from their applied fields. This constricting advice blocks the recognition of multiple pathways into academia. The early career academics were also given well-meaning but inappropriate advice from academics who did not see that the system had changed before their very eyes.

The third of Shore and Davidson's complicities is *coercive complicity*, which "refers to those situations where individuals are either compelled to comply or do so reluctantly when resistance is clearly futile" (p.19). The dictates of "publish or perish", the fear of "speaking out" and the need to accept "invisible work", such as extra teaching or service without complaint were among the examples the early career researchers gave. The fact that various layers of committees in the hierarchical system did not seem willing to engage with early career voices or alternative perspectives also coerced the early career academics into silence by default. Paradoxically, senior academics who find themselves in managerial positions also can find themselves coerced by the neoliberal machinery into acting in ways where non-compliance would find them in breach of their contracts. Thus, Darder's "dehumanising ethos" becomes self-perpetuating.

However, it is in the very notion of complicity that early career academics can find a safe space to speak back. They can form their own notion of *resistant complicity*, whereby they collude in ways that reject individualism and support compassionate, collective resistance. Ball and Olmedo (2013) suggest that they can act "irresponsibly" as a method of resistance: "This is not a struggle in the normal political sense. Rather it is a process of struggle against mundane, quotidian neoliberalisms, that creates the possibility of thinking about education and ourselves differently" (p.85). In the production of this chapter, two early career academics and one of their supportive mentors have shown that turning the neo-liberal story back on itself is a liberating act of defiance. Autoethnography and narrative have been used as Andrew (2019, p.63) suggests, as a method of resistance "using memory to construct stories of resilience. It enables individual lived experience to be inscribed within a collective

critical debate” and through this to empower other early career academics to recognise and take up the challenge.

Final words

Unravelling complexities, de-glorifying academia and the unfiltered daily life as an emerging academic

Too often, doctoral students (as we once were), think of academia as the golden standard, or a tick-box, that suggests they have “made it.” Academia, therefore, is often romanticised as a ‘post-struggle’ utopia for intellectuals. Throughout the chapter we have spoken about the complexities of being an emerging academic through our personal career journeys. We have intentionally offered an honest approach to what we see as the tricky terrain of early career academics. Our aim in writing this chapter is to offer some advice that we would have found helpful in our PhD and early days in the academy. In sharing our experience with the politics and challenging career choices we have made we hope to create a much needed space to be realistic about the pressures of a competitive environment places on new academics. Although fraught with complexities, we conclude on a hopeful note that some of our choices offer insight into ways to persist and resist a system that encourages/fosters individualism. By presenting a model of collegiality, even through virtue of co-authoring this chapter, we present an alternative and realistic narrative of early career researchers. We conclude this chapter by coming back to the research and teaching that brought us both to academia—it’s work that fuels us. When it gets a bit dark in the battles with tyrants, gate keepers and inequitable institutional systems, remember the passion that brought you to this place called academia.

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