“There’s no place for emotions in academia”: experiences of the neoliberal academy as a disabled scholar

Angharad Butler-Rees

Introduction

Through this chapter I intend to draw attention to some of the silences and secrets of academic life. Over the past few decades, we have observed the gradual neoliberalisation of the academy, with profound changes to the structures of higher education that have included growing corporatisation and privatisation (Graham, 2002; Evans, 2005; Marginson and Considine, 2000; Taylor and Lahad, 2018; Washburn, 2003). Such neoliberalisation has been accompanied by increasing pressures and workloads placed upon academics, with scholars expected to both work harder and faster (Archer, 2008; Clegg, 2010; Harris, 2005; Henderson, 2018; Morrissey, 2013; Read and Bradley, 2018). Academics as a result frequently experience anxiety, stress and shame about their failure to keep up and/or about receiving rejection (Harrowell et al, 2018); this is framed predominantly in an individualistic discourse.

In this chapter, I will draw upon my own experiences as a visually impaired PhD student, highlighting the challenges I face in keeping up with the increasing demands and speed of
academic life, along with how such intolerable demands may impede both my personal progress as a disabled scholar and my future career. This may be made even harder by the lack of space created within academia to talk through the emotions, such as feelings of anxiety, stress and personal failure. There are a number of potential reasons why academics may not discuss such feelings, including the potential for it to be professionally embarrassing; it may also leave the researcher feeling exposed or vulnerable (Harrowell et al, 2018). This chapter will be formulated as a political call for change; advocating for (i) recognition of the ways in which exclusions may be brought about through the intensification, ‘extensification’ (Jarvis and Pratt, 2006) and speeding up of academic life, and (ii) the need to create a safe ‘shared emotional space’ (Lacey, 2005: 289) in which academics may explore and work ‘vulnerably’ through the emotions brought about through their daily work.

The neoliberal academy

Over recent decades, neoliberalisation has come to both infiltrate and reshape most aspects of our society through the expansion of free-market logic (Mirowski, 2013). Brown (2015: 176) highlights the extent to which neoliberal logic has impacted upon our society in stating: ‘Neoliberalism does not merely privatise – turn over to the market for individual production and consumption – what was formerly publicly supported and valued. Rather, it formulates everything, everywhere, in terms of capital investment and appreciation, including and especially humans themselves.’

Neoliberal logic has increasingly come to permeate higher education. There has been growing critique of the neoliberalisation and structural transformations in higher education, focusing on how higher education has become marketised and transformed into a commodity (see, for example: Bok, 2003; Evans, 2005; Graham, 2002; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Shumar, 1997, 2004; Washburn, 2003). Such transformations have been accompanied by significant reductions in financial resources, wages and deteriorating working conditions, including the intensification of workloads.
and growing casualisation of employment (Murray, 2018). These changes have made both staying and progressing in academia an increasingly volatile venture. Perhaps surprisingly there has been relatively limited organised resistance until recently, from trade unions and other bodies, against such changes (Gill, 2009). However, 2018 saw a surge in visible resistance with a number of strikes and pickets organised by the University and College Union (UCU) around changes to staff pensions and the emergence of numerous online campaigns including ‘Anti-Precarity Cymru’ and #zinesagainstprecarity.

There appear to be very few articles on the neoliberal academy that explore the emotional impacts of rising pressure and expectations placed upon academics (Gill, 2009; Henderson, 2018). Recent decades have seen both the intensification and extensification of work (Jarvis and Pratt, 2006), along with an inflation of what is expected of academics (Gill, 2009). Academics appear to be expected to work ever harder and faster (keeping to restricted timescales), and to deal with increasing workloads, driven predominantly by the chronic underfunding of universities and the audit culture, which has become internalised (Henderson, 2018; Lynch, 2006; Morley, 2003; Shipley, 2018). Both success and failure have increasingly become monitored and analysed through impact evaluation assessments such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (Taylor, 2018). Gill (2009) suggests that we might draw upon Nigel Thrift’s (2000) concept of ‘fast management’, which builds upon the idea of ‘fast-capitalism’, to describe how academics are required to be increasingly fast and nimble – responding to new calls for papers, new sources of funding and the ever-changing demands of funders and stakeholders. In addition to the intensification of academics’ workloads, academic work has also, as noted by Jarvis and Pratt (2006), ‘extensified’ over time and space. As Gill (2009) notes, work in today’s universities may be regarded as ‘academia without walls’, this has been enabled through technological advances, which make it possible for academics to be ‘always on’ (Gregg, 2009); able to continue their work, regardless of location or time of day (Shipley, 2018). Gornall and Salisbury (2012: 151)
similarly note how, ‘there are not many professional jobs you can do in your dressing gown’, albeit this has radically changed with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This image unsettles the conventional spatial and temporal boundaries of home and work. The increasing use of shared offices, along with noise, interruptions (predominantly in the form of emails) and student demands, has meant that many academics feel unable to work while at work. As such, many academics now work evenings and weekends in order to keep up with their overloaded workloads (Gill, 2009).

While universities have sought to ‘help’ their employees to deal with the intensification of academic labour, this has largely been done through numerous training courses. These courses cover various topics that relate to stress and time management, and demand that academics improve themselves in order to keep up with increasing workloads and demands (Gill, 2009). Such approaches have served to silence complaints and resistance, with individuals seeing their inability to keep up as a personal failure, which may be overcome through self-discipline and self-governance. Academics present themselves as model neoliberal subjects through their engagement in practices of self-management and monitoring, often internalising new mechanisms of auditing (Henderson, 2018; Lovin, 2018; Shipley, 2018). Neoliberal forms of governmentality such as that produced through auditing have therefore been incredibly successful in bringing about surplus labour and value, with a much greater amount of time now being spent working than ever before (Gill, 2009; Gregg, 2009; Lovin, 2018; Schuurman, 2009).

Academics as a result frequently experience anxiety, stress and shame about their failure to keep up with such demands; this is framed predominantly in an individualistic discourse. These anxieties are privatised and deemed to reflect an individual’s self-worth (Gill, 2009). As a result, individuals are unlikely to share such experiences with fellow co-workers, if they are seen to be unsympathetic or competitive as opposed to being supportive and solidaristic. It is thought that the neoliberal university structures have been largely responsible for the reverberation, diffusion and internalisation of both competition and audit,
creating somewhat of an uneasy and competitive environment in which scholars are often directly pitted against one another (Lovin, 2018; Shipley, 2018), and thus potentially dismantling any previous sense of collective belonging. There are a number of reasons why individuals may not wish to discuss their sense of failure, these may include: the potential for it to be professionally embarrassing and uncomfortable; it might also present itself as a risk for scholars pursuing an increasingly precarious career in academia, leaving the researcher feeling exposed or vulnerable (Harrowell et al, 2018).

The limited resistance to the neoliberalisation of higher education and its increasing expectations of academics is therefore in part a consequence of these individualising processes and that individuals are too drained to resist. Moreover, academics, as Gill (2009) argues, are often unaware of what to resist or how they might do so. While there is a temptation to sanitise the realities of our work and to overlook our feelings of self-failure, this chapter would instead like to suggest that there is great value in both writing and speaking openly about our experiences. I would like to encourage scholars to ‘write vulnerably’ (Behar, 2014: 16) in their reflective scholarship, so as to build a more solidaristic and supportive community, in which individuals may feel more able to openly share their experiences and anxieties. In doing so, feelings of shame, self-blame and isolation could be reduced.

The emotional toll of being a disabled academic

As a disabled scholar, I have found the framing of an individual’s inability to keep up with the intolerable workload of academia as an individualised form of personal failure that may be overcome through self-discipline and self-governance (Breeze, 2018), rather than as a structural feature of the contemporary university, to be particularly troubling. This discourse places itself in complete opposition to the social model of disability, upon which the Disabled People’s Movement has traditionally been based. The social model of disability places responsibility for disablement with the structures and attitudes of society rather than with the individual, their body and their impairment (Brisenden, 1986 and Oliver, 1990). As such, a clear differentiation was
made between ‘impairment’ as the functional limitation of an individual and ‘disability’ as the limitation to take part in society on an equal footing with others, due to ableist oppression and exclusionary practices (Disability Awareness in Action, 2009), for example, attitudes, poor employment opportunities, inaccessible transport and design. This has been explained clearly by Rob Kitchin (2003: 8) who states, ‘at the core of the “social model of disability” is the notion that it is not impairment that disables people, it is society’.

In complete contrast to this, the prevailing individualistic, neoliberal discourses circulating academic institutions place the problem and the accompanying blame with the individual rather than on the operating structures of universities, which make unsustainable and intolerable demands of academics. If an academic is unable to keep up with their increasing workloads, it is thus deemed as being a direct result of a personal deficit or characteristic held by the individual, such as their assumed disorganisation, laziness or carelessness.

While the increased intensification and extensification of work (Jarvis and Pratt, 2006) will indeed have impacted upon all academics, I would argue here that such changes are particularly problematic for disabled scholars. This prevailing individualistic discourse suggests that one may simply overcome the barriers or challenges they face (that is, growing expectations and increasingly short deadlines/turnarounds) by simply working harder and – implicit within this – faster. Harris (2005), for example, draws upon the concept of ‘speed-up time’, while Read and Bradley (2018) notion towards ‘time squeezing’ (Southerton 2003), whereby academics seek to condense time through trying to complete as many tasks as possible within an increasingly constrained time period. Both of the above notion towards how time has sped up in the neoliberal university and academics must consequently seek to keep pace (do Mar Pereira, 2015). The individual is therefore conceptualised as the only person who has the means of alleviating their own situation.

I find this particularly concerning as a disabled academic, as I am not always necessarily able to work ‘harder’, that is for longer hours, due to migraines, exhaustion and reduced vision brought about as a direct result of eye strain from intensive reading and
writing. Similarly, regardless of how hard I work, I will never be able to work at the same pace as my fully sighted colleagues, because it simply takes me longer to access and process visual information. As such, it is likely that putting such pressures upon myself will lead to a deterioration in both my physical and mental health. There are also likely to be other disabled scholars who are, for example, unable to work for extended hours due to their restricted access to support such as personal assistants, whose hours are being increasingly cut back. The increasing workload and expectations of academics may therefore further exclude and marginalise disabled scholars, who are likely to find it near impossible to keep up with such demands. The concept of time can be experienced and negotiated differently in line with varying formations of identity and privilege and has for long been a significant disabling factor for people with impairments, spanning back to the Industrial Revolution, where many disabled people were excluded due to their inability to keep up with the increasing time pressures and intensification of labour. Not only am I forced to place myself at risk (through seeking to keep up with such demands), further I am not allowed to express any emotion about this, without being seen as moaning or incompetent.

Neoliberal discourses of individualised responsibility may also make disabled scholars such as myself even more acutely aware of our own impairments and to foster a negativity towards our impairments, causing disabled scholars to either feel inadequate or simply not good enough. Such internalised feelings of shame, failure and inadequacy are also intensified by the lack of place to talk about such feelings and emotions in academia. It can be incredibly difficult to externalise and gain emotional solidarity in an environment which is somewhat hostile to the expression of emotion, potentially leading to an increased sense of isolation among academics (Lovin, 2018). Academia and academic scholarship have long sought to distance themselves from both the emotional and the subjective, in an attempt to assert both their own objectivity and rationality (Jayaratne and Stewart, 1991; Oakley, 1981; Smith, 1974).

Despite feminist scholars emphasising the importance of emotions and the emotional in motivating and sustaining our
research, there still remains limited open and frank discussion around the everyday emotions and emotional labour involved in our everyday work (Bellas, 1999; Berg et al, 2016; Harrowell et al, 2018; Hochschild, 1985). Academics are frequently called upon to engage in emotional labour such as care-giving towards students and/or fellow colleagues; this may include demonstrations of empathy and sympathy, development of personal relationships, counselling and lifting of spirits. Meeting the pastoral needs of students may further involve extending office hours, being continuously contactable via email for emergencies, counselling those experiencing grief and radiating sincerity and approachability (Lawless, 2018). Studies show that women disproportionally take on emotional labour within academia; they are predominantly the ones listening to students’ personal struggles and trepidations, reassuring fellow colleagues of their capabilities and highlighting issues of equality, diversity and inclusion within their departments. This burden also appears to be disproportionally placed upon academics from minority backgrounds, who are often institutionally encouraged to stand out, disclose and make difference known (Taylor, 2018). Responsibility is often placed upon them to stand for diversity, widening participation or internationalisation (Taylor, 2018). Like Lawless (2018), I am not arguing here that we should not be undertaking this sort of work, but instead I would like to call upon individuals to both identify and make explicit the forms of work they are undertaking. Through identifying emotional labour as work, we may then start to reconsider discursive markers of professionalism, productivity and success (Lawless, 2018).

Both scientists and social scientists have traditionally been educated and trained to suppress and censor their emotions (Bellas, 1999). Such practices, as Bellas (1999) argues, are particularly visible within older textbooks such as The Practice of Social Research by Earle Babbie (1995). Babbie (1995) notes how, during interviews with respondents, interviewers should be a ‘neutral medium through which questions and answers are transmitted’ (264, italics in original). Impression management has therefore traditionally been regarded as essential within interviewing techniques. There has, however, been growing
recognition of the way in which an interviewer’s subjectivity may inadvertently impact upon the interview and the wider research process, preventing them from serving as a ‘neutral medium’ (Hill, 2002). Furthermore, such practices are perhaps neither feasible nor desirable within much social science research where there is a need to build rapport, empathy and understanding between the researcher and their informants. Despite the insistence on objectivity and emotional detachment, it is not uncommon for researchers to become emotionally entangled and/or invested in the lives of participants. This is particularly the case when there is continued contact between researcher and participant, beyond that of solely an individual interview (Bellas, 1999). Additionally, neutrality can be particularly challenging when the research topic relates to the personal lived experiences of the researcher and thus has the potential to cut very close to the bone (Bellas, 1999). To be open and honest about the everyday mental and emotional labour involved in academia can therefore be particularly challenging in such an environment.

The expression of emotion has been seen as synonymous with femininity and vulnerability, and as such, sharing one’s everyday mental and emotional struggles is seen to risk presenting oneself as vulnerable, incapable or simply out of one’s depth (Hacker, 2018; Harrowell et al., 2018). Consequently, many academics feel prevented from speaking openly about their personal experiences, instead confining such emotions and emotional anxieties to the private space of their homes or offices. Individuals must engage in emotional management while at work, continually restraining their emotions, seeking to appear as content or as what Murray (2018) describes as the ‘happy worker’ – the ideal neoliberal subject. Performing happiness, holding back anger and/or despair can be incredibly exhausting. Similarly, crying, as Hacker (2018) argues, has little place on campus with academics made to perform according to masculine standards of emotional detachment, objectivity and self-control (Bellas, 1999; Petersen, 2007). This silencing or policing of the emotions is evident across the vast majority of male-dominated academic institutions and is a practice which is very rarely challenged or resisted. It operates through the standardised professional expectations placed upon scholars and the traditional distancing of the academy from the
emotional and the emotive. Here, I would like to draw attention to the risks of such forms of emotional silencing and to suggest how we might resist such practices by creating a space which is more supportive and nurturing of the emotions.

**What the future holds**

As academics it is important that we become more aware of our own practices in excluding emotions, because not doing so jeopardises our emotional wellbeing and our ability to sustain an academic career. This may be achieved through, for example, creating a safe ‘shared emotional space’ (Lacey, 2005: 289) in which academics may explore the emotional nature of their work, perhaps through the form of online discussion forums, coffee breaks or informal meetings. Such spaces could encourage a form of shared vulnerability, in which disabled and non-disabled scholars alike could openly express the ways in which they may be struggling with the increasing and insurmountable demands of academic life. Such an approach would hopefully help to reduce feelings of isolation and self-blame, particularly among disabled colleagues, enabling individuals to see how they are not alone in facing such difficulties. Such practices may also have the potential to foster increased empathy, solidarity and a greater ‘ethic of care’ among the academic community (Tronto, 1998). Dickson-Swift and colleagues (2009) have similarly noted the importance of institutional and individual support in order to enable such practice.

Without the support of an empathetic academic community, it is likely that scholars will continue to individually internalise feelings of shame, self-blame and failure brought about as a direct result of their increasing workloads and pressures, rather than coming together to both recognise and resist the ways in which the very structures of academia are leading to increased hardship, deteriorating working conditions, poor mental health among academics and a less diverse workforce. Academia has ever since its inception been a highly gendered, class-based and racialised space that puts particular bodies at a distinct advantage. The conditions of the neoliberal higher education sector have,
however, served to both further capitalise upon and deepen existing inequalities.

I would encourage more academics to speak openly and ‘vulnerably’ about the daily challenges of neoliberal academia. It should, however, be recognised that there may be times in which individuals may choose not to challenge or ‘speak out’, in order to sustain oneself and one’s career. It may as such be easier for more permanent staff to ‘speak out’. Similarly, there is an imperative for more senior academics to listen, consider and speak up for their colleagues in more precarious employment.

There appears to be very little understanding among the wider academic community of how structural transformations in higher education and changes in working conditions, such as the intensification of workload and increasing precarity of academic careers, have (disproportionately) affected disabled people. I would encourage members of the academic community to take greater time to listen to the experiences and trepidations of disabled academics. It is hoped that, in doing this, individuals will become more aware of how they may best support fellow disabled colleagues in their daily work and resistance.

It can be easy to feel isolated and alone as a disabled scholar. I would encourage disabled academics to become members of national networks such as the National Association of Disabled Staff Networks and online support groups like Chronically Academic, and Disabled Women Academic Professionals #DWAP, in order to overcome feelings of isolation and support one another in attaining their rights. Alongside this, I would also encourage disabled academics to form peer support groups within their institutions, creating spaces in which disabled academics may more comfortably share their experiences, gain mutual support through building supportive relationships and learn from one another.

It has at times been difficult to gain support, solidarity and understanding from fellow non-disabled academics, who understandably have been very much focused on maintaining their own academic careers and getting by in an increasingly precarious and overworked sector (Murray, 2018). I would therefore advocate for the building of alliances between groups who have been disproportionately affected by recent structural
changes in higher education, for example female academics, scholars from overseas and parents/carers (Murray, 2018), in order to both draw attention to their increasing exclusion from the academy and to build a greater resistance.

Very little to date has been written about disabled academics experiences of working in the neoliberal academy. I would therefore encourage more disabled academics to study themselves and write about their own experiences, in order to both increase public understanding and inform policy and practice.

References


