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Donning the "Slow Professor": A Feminist Action Research Project

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Introduction

An international groundswell of academic critique has focused on shifting foundational principles, values, and practices that affect academic work and learning cultures. These critiques are often framed in terms of the undesirable consequences of far-reaching changes to universities. Such critiques are diverse in terms of perspectives and analyses, relating to issues of university governance (Brown, 2015); creeping bureaucratization in Higher Education (HE), along with shifting rationales, premises, and practices (Collini, 2012; Furedi, 2017); the marginalization of women (Ashencaen and Shiel, 2018) and minority ethnic (ME) faculty (Gabriel and Tate, 2017); or the impact of speed and standardization upon pedagogy (Berg and Seeber, 2016). What unites these critiques are references to aspects of academic life connected to global trends in HE as a corporate, capitalist body subject to all the ills of "bureaupathology" (Kowalewski, 2012), together with a scrutiny of the resultant implications for academics and students.

This essay reports on a qualitative participatory action research (PAR) project undertaken by an interdisciplinary team of women academics at a modern, corporate university in England. We are all members of a feminist, cross-university but informal nexus, the Women's Academic Network (WAN), promoting the academic profiles of women faculty and lobbying on identified issues on their collective behalf. The focus of the study was to undertake a trial period of adoption of working strategies inspired by the "Slow Professor" movement as described by Berg and Seeber (2016). Our aim was to increase group and personal efficacy in challenging and resisting corporatized academic practices deemed as damaging to academic integrity and the well-being of staff and students.

Critiques of the Corporate Academy

Academic resistance manifested by the Slow Professor concept, along with other critiques, challenge contemporary HE trends. Corporatized universities have gained a rapid foothold in the academic landscape in much of the English-speaking world (Berg and Seeber, 2016); and from there are beginning to colonize other regions through the process of replication of perceived successful models, otherwise known as *isomorphic convergence* (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In employing the term "corporatization" with its obvious connotations of business enterprise, we include reconceptualization of academia such as the commodification of HE serving a profitable student "customer" base and operating in a potential or quasi-marketplace, exemplified by the UK where Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are classified as public charities.

Corporatization in education is viewed as having become more established in the UK than the USA; Holmwood (2014) explains that this is owing to infrastructural ability to impose systemic changes on HEI en masse by successive neo-liberal British governments, in contrast to the more gradual transition that has occurred across the US. Prominent critics, Collini (2012) and Frank Furedi (2017), explore the shifting terrain of UK HEI, along with the new values and practices of the corporate institution displacing shared understandings of what tertiary education has meant. Such attitudinal shifts can be traced in educational policy: the Robbins Report (1963) was the blueprint for UK academia, emphasizing the greater social utility of HE where economic growth was seen as only one of four major contributions academia made to society; by 2010, only fiscal benefits were recognised in the Browne Review Report (Holmwood, 2014). The rise of so-called "post-(19)92" universities deviated from established HE in focusing on industry-based vocational programmes for the mass student market (Blass, 2005).

Slow Academia

The polemics of the "Slow Professor Manifesto" (Berg and Seeber, 2016) draws comparison with other slow movements—for example, "slow food." In the "Manifesto," the notion of "slow" semantically conforms to ideas of "deliberate," "thoughtful," "in-depth," and "conscious," pedagogy, which is argued to be integrally relevant to academic life:

> While slowness has been celebrated in architecture, urban life and personal relations, it has not yet found its way into education. Yet, if there is one sector of society which should be cultivating deep thought, it is academic teachers. Corporatization has compromised academic life and sped up the clock. The administrative university is concerned above all with efficiency, resulting in a time crunch and making those of us subjected to it feel powerless. (Berg and Seeber, 2015: 2) Others have also studied the accelerated speed of HE and its impact on academic life. Vostal (2015: 72) focuses on the enforced acceleration of the work tempo that leads to academic "hurry sickness," substantially eroding personal control of academic time and resulting in demoralising, concomitant decisions of prioritization, referring to which tasks to skimp and who to let down. Gill (2009) challenges academics to turn critical scrutiny onto their working conditions using an intersectional analytical lens exploring, links between macro-organisation and institutional practices on the one hand, and experiences and affective states on the other, and open up an exploration of the ways in which these may be gendered, racialised and classed (Gill, 2009: 40).

In considering intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), we primarily consider the impact of gender and class, although ethnicity/nationality are not ignored. In respect to gender globally, women are entering HE in high numbers and the UK is no exception (OECD, 2014). For those remaining in HE, equal gendered numbers will enter academic careers (Ashencaen and Shiel, 2019; 2018), but will then confront an entrenched academic hierarchy where male colleagues are considerably more likely to advance their careers to full professorship in comparison with female peers, who comprise approximately only 22% (Grove, 2015). Yet ethnicity is closely implicated in aggregate figures, where of the total number of UK professors, there are a mere 85

people self-identifying as Black of which just 25 individuals are Black female (full) professors (Rollock, 2019). Addressing the predominantly White, male profile of British HE, the UK body AdvanceHE seeks to address marginalization of groups by pushing HEI to sign up to their Equality Charters (https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/). The Race Equality Charter challenges the continuation of under-representation of ME academics, while the Athena SWAN Charter addresses the marginal position of women academics in terms of representation and progression. Although numerically tiny, the experiences of Black British women academics has emerged strongly through two important new publications, the first being an edited volume of narratives by Gabriel and Tate (2017), while a comprehensive report on career strategies and experiences has been produced by Rollock (2019) for the main national academic trade union, the University College Union (UCU). Both describe the intertwined experiences of isolation and lonely singularity in the color-blind and racist cultures of British academia, in which the intersectional marginalization of gender and class are equally combined.

The dangers of an overwhelming, "hideous" Whiteness in British academia (Mirza, 2017: 39) can work to obscure and thus subordinate the experiences of White (and other non-Black) women academics as hegemonically complicit in White male privilege, as argued by Gabriel (2017), who in turn questions the solidarity of feminism in academia in speaking to Black women colleagues. Gabriel's point resonates with the low ethnic diversity evident in WAN in respect to academics of Afro-Caribbean heritage, where there is a worrying proportional scarcity at the institution.

A moot question relates to the connection between speed, academy, and ethnicity/"race." Rollock's report (2019) refers to the convoluted career paths experienced by Black women academics. Here the intersectional incongruities of being Black and female are heightened in a traditionally masculinized culture of White, male power, thus exacerbating the difficulties of managing the unrelenting pressure of academia. The invisibility of women academics in terms of rank, authority, and power (Ashencaen, et. Al., 2017) acts as a general gendered backdrop enveloping Black women academics, who because of their scarcity experience higher performance visibility that militates against individuals being able to pursue a slow scholarship pathway.

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Women collectively, irrespective of ethnicity, constitute gendered and marginalized anomalies in HE, given the inhospitable organizational environment of male priorities they must negotiate (O'Connor, 2015: 310). Pascall (2012) claims that such environments tacitly conform to a "masculinist," male model of work embracing compliance to a regime of absolute commitment to uninterrupted waged work; with the implication that domestic care duties are either non-existent in the private sphere or delegated to others. Thus slow progression rates among women point to a culture of institutional sexism where academic tasks are gendered (Morley, 2013), with women frequently occupying the less valorized pastoral "Mom's roles" (Eddy and Ward, 2015: 4); as well as "housekeeping" tasks such as teaching and programme management (Grove, 2013: Ashencaen and Shiel, 2019) that lead to slow-track progression rates (Ashencaen and Shiel, 2018).

In considering intersectionality, the issue of disability must also be mentioned here, where the expectation of academic speed disadvantages certain groups, particularly those with a hidden disability (such as mental health issues, HIV/AIDS, and epilepsy). Although institutions attempt to capture data regarding disability for equality and diversity reporting, many conditions are socially stigmatised and far more readily associated with students rather than academics, whose vulnerability is negated by corporate processes from the outset. Few academics would feel sufficiently confident and secure enough to publicize that they suffer from profound dyscalculia or dyslexia, for instance, when sound literacy and numeracy are assumed to be the least qualifications for an academic position; and where potentially public knowledge of such perceived deficits could injure professional reputations to an unknown degree.

The Impact upon Health

O'Neill, in reference to Gill (2009), notes that contemporary academia exemplifies neo-liberal principles in its demand for hard working, autonomous, self-motivated, and self-regulated workers, who are also continually engaged in the performance of self-checking against "metrics and measurement" (2014: 6). A pervasive and existential sense of shame, guilt, and insecurity among academics embodies the pathology of neo-liberal academia, as noted by Gill (2009), Vostal (2015), and O'Neill (2014). A previous study of faculty undertaken by WAN indicated that indeed high levels of anxiety and guilt were felt by most women participants, but until then had not been articulated as a collective experience (Ashencaen and Shiel, 2018).

Work is a key determinant of health universally, impacting on both physical and mental health through the quality of the working environment psychosocially and in terms of support. A UCU survey revealed that three quarters of academic staff suffer from stress and over half of these respondents experienced very high levels of stress leading to mental health problems (Kinman and Wray, 2013). According to a report by the UK Higher Education Policy Institute, excessive numbers of academic staff are seeking occupational health and counselling support (Morrish, 2019). The report notes, for example, that between 2009 and 2015 there was a 77% rise in counselling referrals with a 64% rise in occupational health referrals (Morrish, 2019).

A review of the evidence on workplace characteristics impacting on health and well-being (New Economics Foundation, 2014) indicates the following significant points:

- Management behavior is highly important, with some management styles more successful than others at strengthening well-being at work; with inspiration and motivation being the key characteristics of positive management.
- "Safe" working environments and a sense of the social value of the work of the organization may increase employees' feelings of job satisfaction.
- Good levels of job-fit and skill-use with opportunities to develop new skills, can create high levels of employee satisfaction.
- Helping employees to take greater control over their work can lead to better performance and greater job satisfaction.
- Taking steps to improve relationships at work – with a particular focus on relationships between staff and managers – and encouraging positive feelings can improve both job and life satisfaction.
- Organizations can enhance their employees' feelings of job security and enhance their sense that a job is achievable, creating higher levels of job satisfaction.
- Here we consider whether the current evidence on the enhancement or reduction of health and well-being at work resonates with this study's findings.

Methodological Approaches

Conceived of as a problem across academia, this study aimed to deconstruct the prevailing corporate discourse of output efficiency and to remedially experiment to moderate or calm an immoderate HE culture of continual demand and uncritically examined measurement and metrics. Earlier research among women academics at the study institution had provided valuable insights into the working culture, practices, and stressors that shaped and, arguably, deformed academics' experiences of work (Ashencaen and Shiel, 2018, 2019). In this study, amelioration and solution of identified issues were sought; and given that these equally affected the researchers, a participatory action research (PAR) methodology was deemed the most appropriate approach to explore the following research question: "What are the perceived benefits and barriers towards the adoption of Slow Professor principles for academic women in a post-92 corporate university following a period of trial adoption?"

The overall aim of the study was emancipatory: first, to find or (re)ignite engagement with conscious and committed deliberation that overtly served and respected in-depth scholarly approaches; next, to embed these as our unique working practices; finally, to share the fruit of our collaborative enterprise with other faculty colleagues as part of the PAR approach.

The methodological choice required participants to engage with the study as co-researchers enabling us to scrutinize the assumed social realities that current HE practice were a necessary, if social Darwinian, good. In view of the general gendered skewing of academic rewards, the focus of a study on academic issues of accelerated pressures in time-poor contexts was framed as a feminist investigation.

PAR involves a number of cycles where, in the first instance, the co-investigation of a specific problem is diagnosed within the group (Bryman, 2016). Solutions are consequently proposed and a plan of action undertaken by the group; this program is then monitored and evaluated by the co-researchers. Subsequent cycles continue to redefine the problem with new action planned, intervention undertaken and evaluated until eventual resolution has been achieved (Ashencaen, et. al., 2001).

PAR subverts the hierarchical distinctions between researcher and subject through a democratization of ownership of the research, its aims, and outcomes (Roose et al., 2014). Within this egalitarian forum of shared inquiry, intersectional differences and commonalities, embodied among the research team, led to new insights into our experiential knowledge, survival strategies, and resistance (Bondestam, 2011). Analysis was conducted by hand through a participatory and discursive but otherwise conventional coding exercise of the raw data, where the themes form the findings of the study (van Teijlingen and Pitchforth, 2006; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Participant recruitment was carried out through the existing WAN network of 146 members, achieving an excellent response. The research team was eventually comprised of eighteen members, although over time there was an attrition rate of two members.

In terms of ethical considerations, PAR approaches can constructively disrupt some of the conventions of research protocols, in that while team members were free to withdraw at any point, participants were elevated to co-researchers whose identities were not subject to anonymity. Principal Investigator (PI) access to WAN members related to our own active involvement in the organization, but given that this is a large, flourishing network there was no unintentional targeting of any particular individuals. Instead, the speed of recruitment suggests that the topic was viewed as one of genuine interest and concern to members, who were keen to participate in a study grounded in ethical considerations towards collegial well-being.

Our collaboration involved close attention to and analysis of our own practice as change agents for "slow scholarship." In so doing, we used logs and memos to chart these transitions over time. Planning and feedback meetings enabled us to track interventions over the PAR cycles. However, advances towards change were often felt to be imperceptible and necessitated extending the project into the second year. On reflection, it was evident that we had been absurdly blind to our case of Vostal's (2015) "hurry

sickness" to believe that a meaningful PAR study on corporate speed could be realistically undertaken and embedded into practice within a 12-month duration.

Intersectionality and the PAR Team

As a team, and irrespective of being an all female group, we represent diversity in terms of academic role and rank, discipline, length of service, nationality/ethnicity, family context, and originating class background. We are all "permanent" members of staff, the status of "tenure" having been phased out in the UK some decades past with different employment rights attached compared to the US. In the British HE system, only full professors carry this formal title; others use their professional or civil honorifics. Thus our rankings include a number of lecturers (approximating to Assistant Professors), Senior and Principal Academics (roughly equivalent to Associate Professor), and two full professors. Our discipline backgrounds embrace the health disciplines, the social sciences, environmental sciences, media, and journalism.

In terms of ethnicity, most co-researchers self-identify as White in keeping with HE institutional, and regional demographics, although one team member is South American and others of mixed European, migrant heritage. More variation is shown in terms of class, although academic national pay scales and work benefits are not widely dissimilar across the UK and therefore for the purposes of this article we consider class, as well as ethnicity, as self-identified in relation to how individual team members would define their original family background. Several team members claimed working-class roots, and even distinctly underprivileged backgrounds, as described below:

> **Lorraine**: I am from a White working-class background, my mother being a factory worker and then a cleaner and my father being a railway worker. I grew up in a slum area of Nottingham, UK, and lived for 12 years in a house with no bathroom or indoor toilet. At the age of 13, my parents divorced and a violent stepfather moved in. For four years my sister, mother and I were subject to emotional and physical abuse. When he finally left, my stepfather took all the contents of the house with him. Education was my sanctuary from a chaotic home life. I was the first in my neighborhood to gain entrance to a "grammar school" and the first in my family to pass onto further and then Higher Education. My upbringing has shaped my view of the world and of the good fortune of working in academia.

Given that most of the team would not view themselves as coming from bourgeois, educated backgrounds, class remains relevant as strongly influencing life expectations and aspirations, including access to HE and career opportunities, but where a Marxist analysis of management-worker relations premised upon exploitation remains valid in corporatized academia. Thus if gender and ethnicity offer anomalous characteristics to the norm of UK HE, then so too does class, where, although it has long been the case that some British academics have come from traditional lower socio-economic "blue collar" family backgrounds, the assumption has been that HE is the natural domain of the elite intelligentsia.

Accordingly, class discrepancies create the dynamics of actual or psychological precarity, as played out among faculty, seeking peer and institutional recognition of their worthiness, notwithstanding their less favourable personal backgrounds, as one co-researcher describes:

> this has often meant feeling fraudulent, not belonging, and consequently trying harder to feel accepted and approved of. This is all perception as I have, I think, never been disparaged because of my background.

Tertiary education typically represents an escape route to a hard-won, better life in many ways, but one that also takes its toll in terms of much reduced leisure and greatly increased stress, compared to most occupations. Nonetheless, academic jobs are highly valued by the co-researchers and have been described as sparked by inspirational women school teachers, to whom a feminist legacy and debt is owed and repaid in kind daily:

> **Vanessa**: I was brought up in a poor, working-class community from Southwest England where educational aspirations were typically low. Whilst at school I was in receipt of "free school meals" and we also received financial assistance for school uniforms. Because of this I remember feeling acutely different to other pupils. I have always had strong ideals about the world and what I perceived were social injustices but I never had any aspirations to go to university. This changed in English lesson when I was about 15; we were reading Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and the teacher asked us to perform a court room scene of what the trial may have been like. I was appointed to the role of defence lawyer and I remember really loving having a debate and being able to construct an argument, which led to a desire to go to university. However being first in family to go to HE was challenging, as I was entering a new work full of processes that were alien to me and to my family at home.

> **Anne**: I am a Principal Lecturer in my 60s and from a White British, working-class, northern family. I grew up in a rural area close to a large northern industrial conurbation. I was encouraged by women teachers passionate about the transformative potential of higher education and became the first in my extended family to attend university. My children have in turn attended university and lead lives that are unimaginable to northern family members.

Challenging a notion of easy privilege, nearly all teammates entered HE as a subsequent career where the trajectory into academia had not been an assumed destiny or indeed a straightforward goal. Only one member had taken a direct route through postgraduate studies into their first academic post and this occurred outside of the UK. Many of us had been recruited directly from industry onto vocational programmes in HE, with a couple additionally gaining a secure foothold in academia only after years of precarious, academic contract work in an HE sector characterised by the labour of poorly paid, part-time hourly casual labour (UCU, 2018). A minority had also experienced

marked ethnic and cultural marginalization in HE either in or beyond the UK.

In considering intersectionality, we explore how discrimination and oppression have played out in our lives, where gender and class are significant factors. This is particularly so for those with legacies of weaker social and cultural capital, further compounded by the marginal positions of women in academia (Morley, 2013; Eddy and Ward, 2015). Migrant legacies contribute to this, whereas first- or second-generation migrants some have experienced the struggle to claim a stake in the newly adopted country.

We deconstruct the term "radical" as etymologically related to "root." Here we attempt to peel back layers of neo-liberal ideology to construct our understanding of the roots of scholarship – that to which we aspire but experience as undermined. We position ourselves as radically opposed to this erosion and recognize the dangers of normalization and complicity in these alien and alienating processes (Gill, 2017). We challenge a monolithic and hegemonic understanding that marginalizes diverse views of what academics are, what knowledge is, and how it should be shared and disseminated.

Identifying and Testing Slow Professor Strategies

In the PAR cycles, the first task was to critically read Berg and Seeber's (2016) "Slow Professor Manifesto," which everyone found strongly echoed their sense of professional unease and dissatisfaction; this proved to be a highly cathartic exercise. We also considered the strategies they suggest, seeking to identify helpful ones of our own. A process of trial-and-adoption was undertaken as our first intervention, recorded in logs and fed back into the wider group for discussion. From the outset, we noted our bad habits that had become insidiously and unthinkingly engrained in our behavior, leading to a continuous sense of disruption and attention deficit-type "woolly thinking":

> **Luciana**: Start looking at emails only twice a day. Multitasking really affects my concentration.
>
> **Sue**: Stop charging through the day ticking tasks off never ending lists.
>
> **Sara**: Regularly taking myself away from Wi-Fi and start doubling the time it takes to meet a deadline. Saying "no" more often.

The idiosyncratic, individualistic ethos of academia has served to create flourishing intellectual cultures and that appealing aura of independent aloofness from prosaic preoccupations (the "ivory tower" fantasy). However, under corporatization, scholarly autonomy is reduced to atomized isolation where it is difficult to distinguish between the personal feeling of being "rushed off one's feet" and the deliberately accelerated conveyor belt enveloping the work culture, in which the momentum of individual tempo is artificially speeded up and tasks both multiplied and compressed. Our reflective discussions permitted us to discern external mechanisms creating a continual and exhausting sense of fragmented, "fire-fighting" urgency, facilitating insights into how our adaptive behaviour, often coming at cost to ourselves, reduced our capacity to resist – leading to further suggested Slow Professor strategies:

> **Lorraine**: Restricting the inner bully. Risking candor. Creating timelessness.
>
> **Ann**: Giving myself thinking time. Prioritizing supporting colleagues above artificial demands. People first!
>
> **Vanessa**: Time to care for yourself. Being more realistic. Putting in *Clear Days* in the diary. Starting working at home more.

The question of "timelessness" refers to Ylijoki and Mäntylä (2003)'s definition: that which is under autonomous control but which becomes irrelevant or invisible in comparison to the absorbing nature of the task engaging attention. Scholarly work ideally constitutes just such a total and joyful obliviousness, but in reality time is too often punctuated by interruptions or seemingly sabotaged by alternative organizational priorities. Omnipresent computer technology, which academics are virtually all obliged to use ubiquitously and competently (Gill 2017), commands open communication channels for an immediacy of institutional demand and individual response. Indeed, within our institution there is a student response protocol demanded of staff to ensure that they answer all student emails within three days. There are no protocols limiting email traffic to staff whatsoever, leading to no respite.

A number of strategies articulated by team members referred to care and well-being, an important point given candid admissions of anxiety and stress in the group and the significant number of cases of cancer and other serious health conditions among our colleagues. Prioritizing self-care as a female academic, however, was expressed as a courageously assertive and subversive stance challenging the feminized call to self-sacrificing duty in a pressurized work culture, where appeals to additional collegiality and team working were often experienced as managerial manipulative devices in contexts of stretched resources.

Reflecting on Speed, Conformity, and Pedagogy

"The norm is fast not slow—and *nothing* challenges it."

The truth of this comment within our team reminded us of the scale of the challenge we faced as a small group of female colleagues, critiquing powerful, top-down agendas exploiting staff time and goodwill. In terms of institutional profit motives, a conspicuous example is that contracted employment hours are openly acknowledged as bearing no resemblance to the long, unregulated hours ambitious academics are actually expected to put in to be viewed as serious players. Private time is open to encroachment by the institution, as one co-researcher noted angrily in her log:

> This *was* going to be the first weekend I have had off in months and I am totally exhausted. …Scholarship cannot survive in the face of bureaucratic corporate nonsense that degrades the very meaning of what we came into academia to do.

Alarmingly, even though we may acknowledge our own fatigue, the competitive work culture is adept at facilitating our self-regulation and conditioning towards excessive loads, as Jenny realizes:

> I therefore vow also not to judge others for their workload and not be guilty about protecting time to restore balance.

Yet, self-restorative time is far from encouraged in masculinized work cultures like the corporate academy (Pascall, 2012). Taking time for personal commitments is likely to be viewed as an issue peculiar to women, who are then viewed as the architects of their own failure to rise up the hierarchy (Ashencaen and Shiel, 2019).

Following through PAR cycles our consciousness developed and fully confronted how corporate speed affected our pedagogic approaches. We listed the ways in which haste had begun to infiltrate teaching and the student experience: the minimal time allocated in workload models for the development of teaching material, for instance.

For undergraduates, time pressures are found in strict deadlines, where uploading assignments to online platforms, as institutionally demanded, can result in students being heavily penalized for being literally moments overdue. Other examples include rigid time-controlled grading and moderating responses regardless of class size or teaching loads. Postgraduates now experience a loss of flexibility in terms of study duration, where UK HEI are financially penalized by governing educational bodies if enrolled doctoral students take longer than four years to complete a full-time doctorate, with some institutions interpreting this in a particularly draconian fashion. The classical PhD journey as an academic rite of passage, with all the picaresque ups-and-downs that conveys, has been exchanged for a technocratic, time-controlled process of deadlines, deliveries, and outcomes that fulfill institutional metrics of postgraduate success.

Additionally, we see an unshakeable institutional conviction that online systems offer the best learning experience to students and must necessarily be a boon to time-poor educators, even while advocates caution that they are not a panacea for solving educational issues (Hamdan et al. 2013; Hedberg 2006). While the list of daily examples seemed endless, a greater concern arose concerning teaching integrity where we identified an imposed posture of inauthenticity in ourselves:

> An obvious dissonance between the criticality (and reflectiveness) we try to encourage in our students and the lack of it in relation to what staff feel able to say in their Faculties

Gill (2009) exhorts us to analyse our own condition in academia. What kind of transformations would we make were we able to freely enact our understanding of pedagogic authenticity? (Gill, 2009). Generally, it would involve jettisoning many of the micro-managing controls typical of "bureaupathology" (Kowalewski, 2012), with its insufficiently rationalized obsession with standardization of knowledge "chunks," ridigification of dissemination formats, and fanatical detection of student cheating. A paradox of such managerialism is that uniformity and isomorphic convergence are highly valued (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983); and although it regularly purports to champion "innovation," in practice this is viewed with suspicion and often stifled:

> **PAR comment**:
>
> Risk averse - having to do ridiculous things because of the Uni's risk aversion.

Students imbibe such mixed messages leading to a vicious cycle where they learn to distrust pedagogic diversity and creativity and view teaching variations as problematic. This then reinforces a managerial appetite for ossified standardization and endless staff training on the assumption of general academic/pedagogic incompetence.

> **PAR comment**: As an academic only place to get validation is outside of Uni. The impression I get here is that there is no value to you: always malfunctioning.

Equally, students adapt their behaviour to an environment where increasingly disorientated academics can be openly exploited with impunity:

> **PAR comment**: What students learn from the dysfunctions of contemporary HEI is to expect abnormality, that the workforce is kept extraordinarily busy and pressurized and that there are no boundaries to their work—with the corollary that they are expected to be available to students round the clock and every day of the week.

Through such reflections, our pedagogic praxis is now evolving, albeit idiosyncratically and unevenly (rejecting a herd need for uniformity), but nonetheless reinforced by our raised consciousness of what skews our work and detracts us from experiencing and imparting teaching as pleasurably relational and life-enhancing. Liz now feels more comfortable covering less terrain with students but at a deeper level of inquiry. Sara feels affirmed in her practice as "creative, experimental, involving childlike fun, which for me is the best way to learn and impart knowledge."

Vanessa now builds into her diary a quiet hour to reflect on her work and regroup in preparation for the next week. Harnessing the notion that "many hands make light work" has also led to a re-emphasis of the benefits of team working in research and publications. While researching the issues besetting HE and writing about its ills has been emancipatory, it ironically meets the very institutional metrics and measurements that are the source of much academic distress.

Reflecting on Anxiety and Failure

> **PAR comment**: Realising I can't do anymore! And just remembering to breathe...

In the academy, stress and anxiety are cast as personal deficits arising from inefficient time management or lack of professional aptitude, which consequently must be shamefully concealed. The recent suicides of two British academics (Dr Malcolm Anderson of Cardiff University and Professor Stefan Grimm of Imperial College, London) owing to work-related stress issues have substantiated reports of

very high levels of academic stress in the UK (Kinman and Wray, 2013; Morrish, 2019),effectively undermining but not demolishing the personal deficit argument. Nonetheless, academics are still expected to deal with stress as a question of personal resilience, as we note:

> **PAR comment**: Humanization of Care – the blame culture needs challenging, which purports that your context makes no difference to your health, it's all about you – we know that this is simply not true.

Dehumanization of staff is demonstrated in neo-liberal language: where people are referred to as "resources" and treated as replaceable "units of labor"; where "contractual hours" are accepted as empty tokens to meet employment laws; and shifting terrains and measurements create psychoanalytic, Laingian paradoxical "double binds" (Laing, 1960). Where cultures of managerial bullying are normative, then mental and physical health problems are likely to be commonplace (New Economics Foundation, 2014). Comments offered in PAR discussions focused on how these messages became experientially embodied as powerlessness, belittling, and isolating.

- "Experiences rubbished in meetings—and I feel it is dangerous to rubbish women's experiences."
- "On an endless treadmill of meeting pointless demands"
- "Feeling like a disorganised failure. Who cares about the adulterated rubbish you are producing at the end of the academic sausage machine, because there is no time for scholarship."
- "Stop feeling guilty (I would love to learn how to do it) – I recognise this as a big issue, but also I seem to have very little control of it. I may go for a walk, but I'll be feeling guilty that I'm not doing whatever work is (always) to be done. Feeling guilty has obvious direct implications to breaks throughout the day, 'down time,' timelessness, *being* instead of *doing.*"

Many of us had experienced the blame and bullying culture first- or second-hand as arguably endemic across HE, where the dangers for the corporate academy lie in its allegiance to top-down, impersonalized, and bureaucratized systems that exclude and denigrate academic judgment and experience (Holmwood, 2016), fetishizing marketization in the form of "output," "key performance indicators," and "unique selling points":

> **PAR comments:**
>
> "Corporate quasi-business models permeate all aspects of academic life...We are colonized by the business model against out wills."
>
> "We are all kept in an uncertain, precarious space that we can't feel any belonging within. We all feel we don't fit."

Occupying a collective position of hierarchical disadvantage, traditional exclusion from elite professions, and gendered, marginalized perspectives and experiences, women academics who dare speak their disagreement with prevailing hegemonic and masculinist values and practices have the potential to build transformatory feminist power. This is particularly so given the evangelical mission of this study and, additionally, as linked to WAN, which is in itself a non-conformist vehicle for gendered policy change (working towards reduced gender pay gaps and improved working conditions); but also by how such messages are received. The negative and sexist reviews that Berg and Seeber's (2016) work attracted demonstrate how radically subversive the "slow professor" message has been (Charbonneau, 2018). To a lesser degree, we have already attracted unfavorable attention where one teammate was strongly discouraged from participating by a senior member of staff on the grounds that this study could be viewed as too radically subversive for career advancement.

Reflecting on Resistance

Although we often felt abject failures at trying to become Slow Professors, especially within the artificial construct of a time-limited duration (congruent with our academic conditioning), we did succeed in raising our consciousness of how HE had become falsely bounded by damaging beliefs and practices that undermined the very enterprise it claimed to serve: scholarship shaped and shared by us and with others. The frustration we experienced in not being able to achieve our objectives were eloquently expressed:

> I feel like Tantalus. I can *see* the grapes hanging there but can never quite *reach* them!

Nonetheless, this exasperation served a constructive purpose in developing insights into how complicit we had become in oppressive ways of thinking and doing (Gill, 2017). Moreover, it generated a pause in our automatic, often self-harming attitudes and behaviors, allowing the possibility for new habits to form or surprising decisions to be made. One of us having missed out on time spent with our teenage children decided to work part-time in order to fulfil an engaged grandparenting role that in turn helped these now adult children. Another took up a university trade union role in order to further challenge the exploitation of academic workers. A different strategy has been to "infiltrate the ranks," seeking election to university senate in order to shape slow professor policies from within.

Mastery over manipulative, harmful systems, beliefs, and practices still eludes us; and thus the distance we have travelled between illumination and liberation remains questionable. In a review of Berg and Seeber's "Manifesto" published in this journal, the question of how far the individual is able to change embedded Goliath systems was raised (Brady, 2017). While Berg and Seeber do counsel against the apathy of despair, the temptation to collude with the system can be strong in neoliberal contexts where the individual is encouraged to feel both diminished and alone. Accordingly, Vanessa reasons that perhaps resistance is a

mark of privilege, a criticism that was levied against Berg and Seeber (2015) as wallowing in their privilege.

> **Vanessa**: I wish could say I have one (resistance strategy) but I don't. I am striving towards wanting to have a (professorial) Chair in the next three years, so I find myself having to play the game. I wonder is it easier to take a stand when you have achieved a level of your career you are happy with. Until then I am conscious I have to play by *their* rules.

Others would comment that gaining the coveted Chair, however, can be a poisoned chalice through ever increasing expectations of continuous high performance accompanied by insatiable institutional demands. This is particularly so if professorial roles are equated with managerial leadership, as is so common in corporate universities, tying individuals even more tightly to experiencing and imposing the ills of bureaupathology (Kowalewski, 2012). Yet, responds Lu, these positions of power can represent another opportunity for ameliorating the worst effects of corporatization.

Academics must beware of divide-and-rule thinking, where by unconsciously assuming the legitimacy and privilege of alpha and beta difference, we may dehumanise the experiences of others, who are equally subject to harmful dynamics regardless of where they sit in the institution. In being mindful of this danger, we must also be politically conscious of power balances in institutional contexts, given the seductive pull towards collusion with oppression, our own and that of others, which leaves the status quo untouched. Accordingly, we urge awareness of how these dynamics can serve to undermine a sense of solidarity with colleagues, which may seem to offer short-term benefits to institutions, but result in long-term losses regarding staff engagement, group resilience, and ultimately productivity.

While we affirm the difficulties of embedding the "Slow Professor Manifesto" in our working lives through the PAR process, it has also revealed new understandings of how we can work in ways that are more authentic to our values and scholarly ambitions at a personal level, but also politically and professionally, as Lorraine comments:

> I think there's a third word, the "collective." This project started as a result of WAN's engagement with the Slow Professor book and movement. It followed up with the invitation to the authors to address WAN members. Therefore, the collective grouping of WAN members initiated this project of reflection, which has led to individual action. This then gets fed back into the collective, and the impact is cyclical and dynamic. I think it matters that the network is made up of women who understand the importance and impact of time pressures on well-being, and whose central ideology tends to challenge dominant discourse by the structure of the university. We have the power to influence each other and therefore the uni community. However, I'm not sure that the formal structure is amenable to change.

The so-called "system" conforms to a hierarchical, top-down structure controlled by a tiny minority, access to whom is formal, ritualised, and steeped in unequal power-based interactions, where university "workers" are expected to conform to the system's self-definitions and processes, rather than authentically creating, shaping, and influencing them. However, the system's apparent imperviousness to and distance from its workforce is an illusion. It cannot function or exist beyond the embodied staff comprising the collective whole.

The challenge for would-be Slow Professors needs reframing in consequence: becoming not so much a futile battle of trying to change an apparently obdurate, immutable system as about existentially and as change agents realising our own power within it. The system exists not beyond us but only through us and thus must be permeable to change.

The dynamics for change lie within us, as academic workers, therefore, and the tools and processes are in fact already readily available or can be made so. A WAN-type network is an example of an informal but effective solidarity; trade unions have traditionally offered another route. However, the processes of probity and national institutional kudos are also available to all academics where such exist globally: here one may think of any international equivalents of the Race Equality Charter and Athena SWAN or disability inclusion movements, all of which strongly promote diversity and equality. Furthermore, instruments by which to measure research or teaching and learning capabilities in institutions can be moulded to empower minority groups in academia. Such groups can be identified through under-representations numerically, such as BAME groups or in terms of disenfranchisement, in which one can include women academics, those from low socio-economic strata, or those with disabilities. What is of vital importance is that these processes are led and championed by minority and disenfranchised groups and not permitted to be controlled and thereby neutralised by the vested interests that maintain current inequalities.

Conclusion

Participation in the study was illuminating and liberating, enabling us as a group to take better control over our working lives at least in terms of our responses to events. The feelings expressed here are important as they reflect issues from the evidence base on work and health, particularly in relation to feelings of precariousness/insecurity and lack of control. Both of these feelings were highlighted earlier as possible causes of ill health in a work setting (New Economics Foundation, 2014). New forms of resistance have followed on from this reflective process and these, rather than dissipating over time, are becoming more pronounced, more strategized and adaptive to tackling circumstances that have shifted towards yet greater control since this study began.

For us, professional discontents need no longer be internalized as a personal dysfunction, but viewed as probable responses to structural and institutionalized problems; and arguably being collective issues, these require collective, politicized responses. We are (re)experiencing the power of being part of a group of articulate, feminist academics who feel connected in our

concerns, affirmed in our experiences, and able to use this new knowledge to help both ourselves and our colleagues. How we choose to demonstrate "slowness" varies widely but overall this has felt hugely energizing and empowering: leading some towards more creative published work; for others a strengthening of resolve working towards HE policy change; or a deepening commitment to identifying and practising authentic pedagogy; or simply claiming unashamedly more time for our needs. Insecurities and isolation borne from harassed, lonely perplexity has been largely exorcized as we engage with the exhilarating potential, articulated in the comments below.

"How do *we* define success as Slow Professors?"

"What is going to benefit me as an academic today? *My* priorities!"

"This approach is considered radical but should be the norm!"

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