ARTICLE

Austerity in the university

Ian Parker on increasing pressure and emotional labour at work for academics in times of crisis

The current economic crisis comes at a time of deregulation of public services and privatisation of the education sector. The dominant 'neoliberal' response to the crisis that seeks to place responsibility on individuals resonates with some forms of psychology but is contested by other more social, critical and feminist approaches. These alternative approaches are now focusing on the increasing pressures placed on university staff, in particular on lecturers faced with the National Student Survey. This article argues such methodologies intensify competitive behaviour and place pressure on women managers in particular to put in the 'emotional labour' required to implement increased workload in a neoliberal economy.

questions

Why do academics suffer increasing stress in times of austerity?

What role does gender play in responses to management demands?

resources

McGettigan, A. (2013). *The great university gamble: Money, markets and the future of higher education*. London: Pluto Books.

Hey, V. (2011). Affective asymmetries: Academics, austerity and the mis/recognition of emotion. *Contemporary Social Science, 6*(2), 207–222.

How do you view the individual? As a relational being, for which competitiveness is a painful aspect of capitalist society? Or as the naturally acquisitive and aggressive 'human animal'? Psychologists are divided on this question, but these intradisciplinary debates often find expression in theories of gender, where femininity and masculinity are either seen as socially constructed or as hard-wired. What is sometimes assumed to be underlying femininity changes over time, and as emotional labour becomes more important to capitalism, stereotypically feminine qualities are utilised by companies and government agencies to a greater degree to build rapport with customers. This turns femininity itself into a commodity, and does women themselves little favour as they are turned against each other to compete to sell themselves as embodying this valuable resource. Times of economic crisis and an austerity agenda put a renewed emphasis on competition and more pressure on women, and today the 'neoliberal' governmental and managerial responses to the crisis resonate with and reinforce the most extreme versions of individualism.

Studies of the consequences of competition between universities and the burden placed on female academics and managers, however, indicate that a more relational social-constructionist approach may help us understand better how 'austerity' works its way into the interpersonal and psychological levels of behaviour and experience.

Neoliberalism in higher education

One way of conceptualising the increased attention in research on the individual set against others in the market place is to be found in analyses of contemporary 'neoliberalism'. This economic doctrine, piloted by the Chicago School in Chile after the military coup in 1973 (Harvey, 2007), is in some respects a return to classical liberal political economy of the 19th century. However, its attempt to remove what is viewed as restrictive state interference in the free market is undermined by its need to ensure security of private property ownership and, in the public sector, the ability of management to enforce discipline. It is understandable that neoliberalism as a latest form of capitalist governance should have been challenged by 'critical' psychologists and feminist researchers (Gill, 2010; Parker, 2007).

Caption

references

Ashcraft, K. (2006). Feminist-bureaucratic control and other adversarial allies: Extending organised dissonance to the practice of 'new' forms. *Communication Monographs, 73*(1), 55–86.

Brook, P. (2009). The alienated heart: Hochschild's 'emotional labour' thesis and the anticapitalist politics of alienation. *Capital & Class, 33*(7), 7–31.

Burman, E. (2009). Beyond 'emotional literacy' in feminist and educational research. *British Educational Research Journal, 35*(1), 137–155.

Chafer, S. (2013). A refreshing outlook. *The Psychologist, 26*(9), 646–647.

Gill, R. (2010). Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of the neoliberal university. In R. Flood & R. Gill (Eds.) *Secrecy and silence in the research process: Feminist reflections* (pp.228–244). London: Routledge.

Harvey, D. (2007). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hey, V. (2011). Affective asymmetries: Academics, austerity and the mis/recognition of emotion. *Contemporary Social Science, 6*(2), 207–222.

Hochschild, A. (1979). Emotion work, feeling rules and social structure. *American Journal of Sociology, 85*(3), 551–575.

Hochschild, A.R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialisation of human feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Leadbeater, C. (2000). *Living on thin air: The new economy*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Lorenz, C. (2012). If you're so smart, why are you under surveillance?

The background context and key fault-lines for the unrelenting pressure on academics in times of austerity lies in the process of 'marketisation' of higher education, driven by the rapid increases in student fees and the introduction of a student loans system (McGettigan, 2013). Here we see the invidious effects of a neoliberal agenda at work inside teaching and research institutions, and the specific impact on women. In higher education 'the executive positions are overwhelmingly occupied by men, whilst middle management is more the domain of women', and this power structure 'splits the male decision-makers from the tier of people who implement them' (Hey, 2011, p.216). The emotional as well as intellectual labour of women is harnessed to the task of maintaining the efficiency of the institutions and of attempting to ensure that discontent among those who suffer most is soothed. Women teachers and researchers suffer under these conditions as relationships are undermined and competition intensified, and women managers are put in the front line as often reluctant agents of this process (Hey, 2011).

1

This is another crucial dimension of the argument that psychology has been 'feminised' and that this needs to be addressed in feminist approaches to austerity (Chafer, 2013); psychology needs to be situated in the context of management strategies that make the lives of women more difficult when they are subjected to the logic of the marketplace. Deregulation of the university sector, introduced by the previous government and accelerated by the present one, has necessarily entailed as part of its political-economic logic the introduction of an internal market into universities and the entry of private providers encouraged and rewarded to compete on equal terms with public higher education (Lynch, 2006).

2

The impact of the demand for work intensification is already being felt by individual lecturers and researchers, with reports of stress, breakdown and staff leaving the university sector, in some cases with no other employment to go to. This impact has been referred to by some feminist researchers who have conducted qualitative interview studies as 'the hidden injuries of the neoliberal university' (Gill, 2010). Other researchers have shown how the demand that university staff conceal the personal effects of pressure from management and maintain a happy appearance to reassure the students operates as a form of 'emotional labour', which they define as 'the effort which is required to display that which are perceived to be the expected emotions' (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004, p.1189).

3

"3-line drop-in quote"

Hey (2011) notes that under these conditions there is a 'punitive psycho-social logic' which can be 'routinely and expansively stimulated by threat and inducement' (p.209), and she continues with this indictment of current conditions:

> ...the political and moral economy of UK austerity discourse is being deliberately formed through appeals to particular emotional identifications shaping an 'us'. There are, behind this inducement, economic and social reprisals, if we do not 'adjust' by 'sharing the pain, taking the hit'. (p.209)

These studies, and other critical social research into the logic of marketisation applied to the university sector (Lorenz, 2012), draw attention to two important mechanisms that work against relational and social responses to the economic crisis and in favour of competitive and aggressive managerial responses. One is the role of dubious methodologies to evaluate teaching, which encourage managers to marginalise research in their attempt to conform to what these methodologies demand of them. The other is the role of gender in management, as 'emotional labour' is put to work in order to increase workload and marginalise those who will not or cannot play the game.

National student survey

The National Student Survey (NSS) has, since 2005, been conducted by a private market research company (Ipsos MORI) for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The government now intends to give the results of the survey more weight in decisions about the future of courses, and is to encourage prospective students to use the data to make their own decisions about which courses to take. This is in line with the neoliberal agenda in education, and it places impossible burdens on staff. One of the consequences is that because research is not directly visible to the student, teaching and learning resources are given priority in order to enhance the 'student experience' and to position the student as a 'customer' (McGettigan, 2013).

It is not only qualitative and critical researchers who have serious misgivings about the NSS methodology. It makes a mockery of academic standards to tell students (and their parents who are now often having to pay for the courses) that they should base their 'experience' and 'satisfaction' on a distorted evidence base (Sabri, 2011). The NSS, for example, employs an attitude rating scale which gives a partial account and which amplifies the effect of aggrieved responses from those who are dissatisfied with lower marks. A low response rate exaggerates this skewed message even more (and this has often been a factor in the fate of low-rated courses). There is then pressure to inflate grades across the sector.

The NSS is being used to devalue the work of teachers and researchers in higher education, with claims in some newspaper headlines that 10 per cent of students are 'dissatisfied' with their degree. Given the spread of marks across a normal distribution in most departments, this is hardly surprising. The survey is also being used to put the pressure on courses that have failed to please students within the terms now set by HEFCE, and to warrant course closures. The genuine complaints that lecturers deal with from students in course committees (which are also partially reflected in the NSS

Universities, neoliberalism, and new public management. *Critical Inquiry, 38*(3), 599–629.

Lynch, K. (2006). Neo-liberalism and marketisation: The implications for higher education. *European Educational Research Journal, 5*(1), 1–17.

McGettigan, A. (2013). *The great university gamble: Money, markets and the future of higher education*. London: Pluto Books.

Ogbonna, E. & Harris, L.C. (2004). Work intensification and emotional labour among UK university lecturers: An exploratory study. *Organization Studies, 25*(7), 1185–1203.

Parker, I. (2007). *Revolution in psychology: Alienation to emancipation*. London: Pluto Books.

Sabri, D. (2011). What's wrong with 'the student experience'? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 32*(5), 657–667.

Stevenson, J. & Clegg, S. (2010). Possible selves: Students orientating themselves towards the future through extracurricular activity. *British Educational Research Journal, 37*(2), 1–16.

results) actually concern deteriorating conditions of buildings and lack of support staff, while other aspects of student life are also obscured (Stevenson & Clegg, 2010).

These are problems in education now that call for a collective response, but this departs from the agenda that is being implemented in the NSS, an agenda that makes it increasingly difficult to find other ways of giving voice to those affected by austerity in higher education.

Gendered middle-management

The drive for higher NSS scores also puts middle-managers, such as heads of department, in a difficult position, for they are forced to be obedient to a methodology that they know to be unsound and to coerce staff who are also sceptical about the process to conform to it. Such bad, and at times plainly dishonest, management practice does not bode well for a good research atmosphere in the university. It is difficult to impose such measures by force alone, and this is where the role of 'emotional labour' comes into play. Along with the expectation that staff and students be 'emotionally literate' and so merely learn to speak as they are expected to by those in power, this represents a 'feminisation' of the workplace in the turn to emotion which is both a betrayal of and cruel parody of feminist arguments (Burman, 2009).

Studies of 'emotional labour' have shown how the ability of women to show commitment to a product and to the customer in the service sector and public sector can reap dividends (Hochschild, 1983). The stereotypical caring and intuitive qualities of women are utilised in 'emotional labour' through which, in higher education, staff are expected to enthuse about their work and to conceal any organisational shortcomings, for that would be to show disloyalty as well as unhappiness (Hochschild, 1979).

The increase in importance of emotional labour also means that a quite traditional distribution of power in management is kept in place. The hopes of women who rise to a junior managerial position, hopes that they will break through the glass ceiling and really be able to participate in higher-level decision making, are frustrated. In the meantime there is pressure on them and difficult choices to be made about where their loyalties lie while they are waiting for promotion, pressure to exercise their power on those subordinate to them. While 'emotional labour' can be satisfying, it intensifies levels of alienation at work (Brook, 2009).

This situation, combined with the traditionally gendered management structure of higher education, raises the spectre of a particular form of bureaucratic control that employs feminist rhetoric (Ashcraft, 2006), and then of reaction to this control by men who attempt to assert their own masculinity which they feel to be under threat, or are positioned as doing this if they question their managers. The dangerous prospect here is that stereotypical gender roles are reinforced, and the contribution of social, critical and feminist psychologists who have tried to show that such roles are socially constructed are marginalised. Austerity thus breeds a regressive approach to psychology with respect to gender in particular and with respect to our human nature in general.

Conclusions

The critical perspectives on the impact of austerity described here draw attention to the malign effects of neoliberal responses to the economic crisis, which ratchet up competition between academics and researchers in different university departments and present this state of affairs as normal and natural. In the process a particular version of 'psychology' is reinforced, and, as in other times of social pressure, it is women who pay the highest price.

In some ways the situation today is worse for women, as feminist researchers have pointed out, for their stereotypical nurturing qualities are, with the 'feminisation' of the workplace, exploited by higher management. They are made to implement neoliberal policies that increase pressure on all their staff. Their 'emotional labour' as a middle manager is harnessed to intensify academic and administrative workloads, and lower-level female staff are induced to engage in a higher degree of emotional labour to satisfy student demand to comply with what will produce higher NSS assessment scores.

A former adviser to the last Labour administration that pioneered so many of the recent neoliberal 'reforms' in UK higher education put the aim of government like this: 'Universities should become not just centres of teaching and research but hubs for innovation networks in local economies, helping spin off companies for universities, for example'. He continued with this phrase: 'Universities should be the open-cast mines of the knowledge economy' (Leadbeater, 2000, p.114). It is against this background that we need to appreciate the importance of strong management as an inevitable complement of neoliberal conceptions of individual freedom in the market place.

Austerity thus pits us all against each other, it undermines genuine scholarship, and it leads to increased stress. It also leads to bad old psychology, which good critical research in the discipline now has the responsibility to explore and challenge.

Ian Parker
is Professor of Management at the University of Leicester
ip101@leicester.ac.uk